

Unforgettable Revolutionary Martyr Baikuntha Shukla

“ Babuji, I have seen many big heroes and warriors (*Surmas*), but never I have seen such a lion-hearted fellow. During the last war I took part in the battles of Jordan and Mesopotemia (Iraq), I had seen many body to kill and also to die but never had I seen such a valiant hero, never had I thought that anyone could possess such valour...The day in which his sentence for hanging became final, since that day his body started to shine like a colourful rose... it started to bloom like a rose, a red rose. Babuji I used to be perplexed seeing his appearance; I never have seen in my life such a smiling appearance. I had no idea how could a man be so broad-minded and how could he have so much joy in him. I can't think how such a sober boy can be so brave!”

The above comment is of a constable of Gaya Jail, regarding the great revolutionary martyr Baikuntha Shukla. This was nothing but the expression of heartfelt respect towards the broadness of mind and the death defying qualities of character of the great martyr who dedicated his life for the freedom struggle of India, and sacrificed his life on the gallows on 14th May 1934, in Gaya Central Jail, Bihar.

Childhood and Participation in Freedom Struggle

Baikuntha Shukla was born in 1910 in the Jalalpur village of Lalgange Police Station, which was within the erstwhile undivided Muzaffarpur District (Now in Baishali District) of north Bihar. His education was in the primary school of the village. He could continue his study not very far. Afterwards he became a teacher in the lower primary school in Mathurapur village situated 4 Km away from Jalalpur. In those days he was a typical village Brahmin and seeing him it was impossible for anyone to guess that he was going to be the valiant revolutionary fighter in future. During the first half of the year 1930, Baikuntha Shukla got acquainted with the renowned freedom fighter and patriot, Kishori Prasanna Singh. At that time Kishori Prasanna and his wife Suniti Devi were moving, with a team of volunteers, from village to village and campaigning for the Salt Satyagraha movement by Gandhiji, in those areas. Baikuntha, being impressed by Kishori Prasanna Singh, expressed his desire to join his team go along with them for campaigning. As the usual rural custom of those days Baikuntha was married at very young age and his wife Radhika Devi was an ordinary rural lady involved in domestic chores only. It was very difficult for him to convince her to go along with them. Under Baikuntha's request Suniti Devi convinced his wife and taken her to stay in the Gandhi Ashram in Hazipur along with other ladies. There, from an ordinary housewife, she turned into a volunteer of boycott movement and that helped Baikuntha also to become a devoted volunteer in the freedom movement.

During this campaigning, Baikuntha was arrested and sent to Patna Camp Jail for the first time. There he met the renowned revolutionary freedom fighter cum writer Bibhuti Bhusan Das, who was serving term of imprisonment. From him he used to listen to the revolutionary stories and spirited poems of Rabindranath Tagore. He had left a deep imprint in him. When by dint of Gandhi-Irwin Pact, a large number of arrested volunteers was released, Baikunth Shukla also got released from jail.

A Satyagraha Volunteer Turned A Revolutionary

Meanwhile, Kishori Prasanna Singha and his wife Suniti Devi, although earlier they had been in Gandhite trend, but changed their mind and became inclined uncompromising revolutionary movement only. They had developed a link with the organisation HSRA built by Chandrasekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh, and others. Particularly Suniti Devi did play a very important role in introducing Baikuntha to the revolutionaries. In the jail already Baikuntha was influenced by the spirited revolutionary Bibhutibhusan Das, now this brought a basic change in his approach and outlook towards freedom movement. He felt that freedom couldn't be achieved by bargaining and begging, rather that should be won by uncompromising revolutionary struggle. Particularly, he was deeply impressed by the boldness and valiance with which Bhagat Singh upheld the revolutionary views during their trial and the valiance with which on 23rd March of 1931, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru became martyrs on the gallows. It became well known that Gandhiji could have saved their lives by dint of Gandhi-Irwin pact, but he refused to do that. This created a strong grievance among the younger generations regarding policies of the compromising trend. These events left a deep imprint in Baikunth Shukla's mind and he became converted into a devoted revolutionary activist. He developed a strong irritation particularly against the Indian population, who due to their lack of consciousness or sheer opportunism, acted at the behest of imperialism. Kishori Prasanna Singh, in his autobiography mentioned one incident in which, while they were Satyagrahis, he and Baikuntha Shukla, had been returning to Gandhi Ashram in Hazipur passing by some government quarters or houses in which a few CID officers of British Government used to stay. While near the house, Baikuntha told him at a low voice, "can you give me a revolver then I shall teach them a lesson?"

Revolutionary activities started to spread in these parts of Bihar also. During that period an attempt was made in the model of Kakori Train Robbery in Hazipur. Within 500 yds of the Gandhi Ashram there was a railway station in which a train coming from Barauni was looted. This action was conducted by revolutionary activist Ramdeni Singh, along with Chandrama Singh and others. Ramdeni Singha, Chandrama Singh and Kishori Prasanna Singha were arrested in connexion with this case. Ramdeni Singh was hanged but other two could not be proved guilty. Baikuntha Shukla was not involved in this action but he had the knowledge of the entire episode.

The Betrayal By Phanindranath Ghosh

At the end of third decade of 20th century, after formation of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), under the leadership of Chandrasekhar Azad and Bhagat Singh, the activities of the organisation was spreading. Already the leadership of the organisation were influenced by the Soviet revolution and the ideology of scientific socialism. They felt that individual episodes of heroism, isolated attacks and secret revolutionary organisations cannot help accomplish the objective of revolutionary movement. Open mass movement and open political organisation was the need of the hour. The HSRA decided to register its vehement protest against two black bills had been being discussed in the Assembly in Delhi. During the session Bhagat Singh and Batukeswar Dutta threw bomb in the Assembly in order to draw attention of the people of whole country and distributed leaflets containing their views. After throwing the bomb they voluntarily courted arrest and tried to utilize the trial court as a platform to propagate their views. But soon in Punjab Sukhdev, Rajguru and other revolutionary fighters were arrested and the murder case of Saunders in Lahore Garden started. Saunders was the deputy Commissioner of Police who carried the order of Police Commissioner Scott and conducted the brutal lathicharge on highly revered leader Lala Lajpat Rai, which caused his death. While the trial of Assembly Bomb Case was going on Bhagat Singh's involvement in the murder of Saunders was discovered and his trial started. During the police raids, among other revolutionaries Phanindranath Ghosh was also arrested. He was a member of the Central Committee of the HSRA. During the formation of HSRA he was the representative of Bihar in its Central Committee. But, while in police custody, out of sheer cowardice and greed he became main government approver in that case. After the conclusion of 'Lahore Conspiracy Case' in which death sentence was awarded to Bhagat Singh Sukhdev and Rajguru, Phanindranath Ghosh returned to his home town Betia in Bihar. Being government approver he received a large amount of money as 'reward' of his betrayal and with that he started a business in Meena Bazar of Betia. This was a black spot and matter of shame for other revolutionary activists in Bihar.

The Death Sentence in Revolutionary Court

Chandrasekhar Azad and Jogendra Shukla a senior revolutionary leader of Bihar, discussing with other leaders of the revolutionary organisation passed death sentence to the betrayer Phanindranath Ghosh. First attempt to execute that order was made by Bhagwan Das and Sadashib Rao Malpurkar. But Phanindranath eventually escaped this attempt unhurt. Meanwhile, on 27th February, 1931 Chandrasekhar Azad died a martyr's death after encounter with police in Allahabad. Jogendra Shukla also were arrested. In September or October of 1932, the revolutionaries of Punjab sent a message to the revolutionaries of Bihar with a question whether they should continue to carry this shameful black spot or obliterate it? The revolutionaries of Bihar called a meeting with this agenda in which Kishori Prasanna Singh, Akhsaybat Roy, Suniti devi, Baikuntha Shukla and others were present. Suniti Devi volunteered to execute the punishment order. But some other revolutionaries opposed it as she was the only

lady in the leadership of the organisation and her absence will cost it dearly. Then Baikuntha Shukla took the opportunity to stake his claim. Others also volunteered for the same responsibility. So a lottery was conducted and Baikuntha's name evolved through it.

When Phanindranath Ghosh first returned to Betia always there used to be police guard to protect him. But after a few months the guard was withdrawn and he himself and the administration became assured of his safety. In such a time, on 9th October 1932 Baikuntha Shukla and Chandrama Singh executed the penalty of death to the betrayer Phanindranath Ghosh who at that time was seating in his shop in Meena Bazaar, Betia. Although Chandrama Singh was not directly involved in the revolutionary organisation and he was not supposed to go, but he was a very close friend of Baikuntha and he voluntarily accompanied him in the dangerous action. Unfortunately another innocent person who was present there at that time tried to protect Phanindranath, and sustained unintended but severe injury, to which he succumbed a few days later.

Indifferent to Own Safety

Both Baikuntha and Chandrama Singh escaped from Betia on foot, then crossing the Gondak river by swimming they moved to Malkhachak of Chhapra District and took shelter at Rambinod Singh's house. This house was a regular shelter of the revolutionaries because Rambinod Singha was a close friend of Bhagat Singh and strong well-wisher of revolutionary activities. The fearlessness and indifference of both of them towards their own life was expressed in many remarkable incidents. During the action they left the cycles and clothes at a nearby place of Meenabazar, which they could not collect in the hurry to leave the spot. While staying in Rambinod Singh's house when Baikuntha mentioned that they avenged the betrayal of Phanindranath but due the untoward situation could not collect the cycles and clothes, Rambinod became very anxious for their safety. They instantly said 'What will happen? At best we will be arrested and hanged. We are prepared for that' But Baikuntha said 'we must see that only one of us be arrested and face hanging and that should be me. Chandrama should be saved for the sake of his family.' Chandrama claimed just the reverse. Then Rambinod resolved the dispute by lottery and Baikuntha was chosen as the person to face trial if needed. Chandrama left the place and Baikuntha stayed there. But he didn't use to stay in hiding. He openly moved in markets, roads and even in some occasions he went to visit jail. Renowned freedom fighter Basawan Singh wrote in his autobiography that while he was interned in Gaya Jail and admitted to jail hospital one young boy came to visit him who was none but Baikuntha Shukla, absconding for the murder of government approver Phanindranath Ghosh. He admitted that seeing Baikuntha within jail premises he himself was trembling but Baikuntha was serene and smiling. Tracing the link of cycle and clothes Baikuntha was arrested on 6th July 1933 near Hazipur Bridge. Meanwhile Chandrama Singh was also arrested in Kanpur following an encounter with police on 5th January 1933.

Fearless in Face of Death

After arrest Baikuntha was sent to Patna Camp Jail. Their trial was conducted in Muzaffarpur. Apart from the Judge there had been four Assessors. Due to lack of any evidence Chandrama could not be convicted in the murder case. In case of Baikuntha three of the Assesors found him not guilty. The Trial Judge, picked up the opinion of the fourth Assessor only and adjudged Baikuntha guilty of murder of Phanindranath Ghosh and the other person.

After being convicted Baikuntha was sent to Gaya Central Jail. There even in the condemned cell he was always kept handcuffed and chained, such was the stricture of authorities regarding him. One intern of the jail, revolutionary Bibhuti Bhusan Das, told in his autobiography that Baikuntha was so simple naïve and easy that even the jail guards were deeply impressed by his character. One Pathan Havildar once asked him if it was possible to get Baikuntha released by appealing to the Queen or the authorities in England higher than even the Governor of India! He said he was ready to sacrifice his own life to save the life of Baikuntha. Bibhutibhusan Das further wrote that Baikuntha often, again and again, requested him to sing the song on Kshudiram. On the day before the day of hanging Baikuntha from his own cell requested Bibhutibhusan to sing the song of Kshudiram, then Rabindranath Tagore' poems and the 'Vande Mataram'.

On 14th May 1934, the day of hanging, when he finally came out of his cell, he shouted to all 'Brothers I am going. I also shall return again (like the song of Kshudiram), because India is still enslaved. Vande Mataram'. He requested him that when he is released (Bibhutibhusan Das), he must fight out the curse of child marriage in the backward society of Bihar. The jail warder present at the time of his hanging told that when on the gallows his face had been being covered with black cloth, he requested not to do that. Jail Suprintendent Pereira also granted that request. When he passed final order, the henchman was hesitating to pull the lever. Baikuntha shouted 'Why are you waiting?' Then the lever was pulled and the end came.

Baikuntha Shukla was one of the very rare and lofty characters which the uncompromising trend of freedom movement has produced. The ruling class of our country, the ruling parties describe him and others of this trend as 'terrorists', but the qualities of his character show that he was soft, simple and highly emotional, having deep feeling for the people and the society. On the other hand, in the question of discharging duties, his readiness, valiance and determination is of rare brand. Question of family, career, comfort nothing could prevent him from discharging his duty towards the freedom movement. Today, amid the intense social crisis all around, the students' organisation AIDS0 feels that the cultivation of the qualities of the lofty character of this death-defying martyr is essential. Except the attempts of AIDS0 and other like minded mass organisation his martyr's day the 14 May has passed almost silently. There was no attempt on the part of the government or power greedy parliamentary political parties to uphold this character. We appeal to all to observe the Martyrs' Day and cultivate his life in a befitting manner and take lessons from his life.