

MADAME BHIKAIJI RUSTOM CAMA: A BUILDER OF MODERN INDIA

Late Khorshed Adi Sethna

It was August 22, 1907. Nearly a thousand delegates from different countries had gathered at Stuttgart for the Second International Socialist Congress. In the course of its deliberations, a woman delegate rose to speak, dressed in an exotic flowing garment with an exquisite border of delicate embroidery, its edge draped demurely over her head. However, there was nothing demure or delicate about the lady, or her speech as she hurled defiance at the mighty British empire. She had captivated the audience by her very presence and personality. She now held them spellbound by her logic, as she pointed out the iniquities and atrocities of British imperialism and appealed to all those gathered there “to cooperate in freeing from slavery the one-fifth of the whole human race inhabiting that oppressed country”. At the end of her brilliant speech, in a dramatic gesture, she unfurled a tri-colour flag of green, saffron and red, passionately declaiming:

“This flag is of Indian independence. Behold it is born. It is already sanctioned by the blood of martyred Indian youths. I call upon you, gentlemen, to rise and salute this flag of Indian independence. In the name of this flag, I appeal to lovers of freedom all over the world to cooperate with this flag in freeing one-fifth of the human race.”

That lady, who dared to defy the might of an empire, who made history by unfurling India’s first national flag on

foreign soil and thus succeeded in focusing world attention of India’s plight and problems was an Indian- a Parsi Lady from Bombay, Bhikhaiji Rustom Cama.

This valiant daughter of India was born on September 24, 1861, in an affluent Parsi family in Bombay. Her father was Sorabji Framji Patel, a prosperous businessman, her mother Jijibai. Little could the fond parents have foreseen that she would grow up to a firebrand revolutionary in the cause of India’s freedom; go overseas, far from the confines of a well-to-do Parsi home in Bombay to spend nearly half her life in a small pension (boarding-house) in Paris.

Bhikhaiji was born into a community, which was progressive and forward looking and in which women’s education and emancipation were espoused and encouraged. The Parsis were generally considered pro-British. The Westernization of the community had led in some cases to a conscious Anglicization of the women; copying English manners and way of living had become one of the main goals of Parsi society....Many thinking people of the community were alive however to the danger of this ‘anglicization’ process. A.S. Ginwala writing in ‘The Times of India’ April 19, 1884 warned: “Especially the Parsi girl would, under the conditions of education common at the time, run the danger of only becoming a parody upon her English sister.”

FACING PAGE
MADAME BHIKAIJI RUSTOM
CAMA, COURTESY: PARLIAMENT
HOUSE MUSEUM, NEW DELHI



Though fluent in English and European languages, fashionable in dress, mingling freely in society both native and English, there was no danger of Bhikhoo becoming a 'parody' of any Englishwoman. Young as she was, her individuality and passionate love for her Motherland, and pride in India's culture, heritage, languages; and her awareness of what the English had done to her country, could never have permitted her to be anything but a true Indian at heart, unaffected by the outward trappings of westernization.

That she was selfwilled, strong-headed, spirited and unconventional even from her early years, was well known. In 1896, at the time of the plague epidemic, in Bombay, she was to don a white apron and nurse the patients in a public hospital run by the Parsi Panchayat. It was an unheard thing, for a woman of her family background to nurse the sick in a public hospital. Both her own family and her in-laws were shocked and scandalized and, unlike the courageous Bhikhaiji, afraid perhaps for their own safety.

The atmosphere around in which this young woman was brought up was far from placid. She was born only four years after the Mutiny of 1857. In the years she grew to young woman-hood a new spirit of defiance and independence was in the air. Repression fanned the flames of revolutionary ardour and secret societies sprang up under the leadership of Tilak in Maharashtra and Aurobindo Ghosh in Bengal. For a young person of her spirit and temperament this new upsurge of defiance and patriotic fervour found instant appeal and became a strong influence in moulding her future. It was to change, radically, the course of her life.

The social standing of her own family can be judged from the fact that her father was able to arrange a match for his favourite daughter with the scion of one of Bombay's wealthiest and best-known Parsee families. Rustom Cama, only a year older than his prospective bride, was all that any girl could have hoped for; good-looking, wealthy, educated, a barrister from a prominent and progressive family. Her father-in-law was the renowned Orientalist Prof. Khurshedji Rustomji Cama. He was liberal minded, an illustrious scholar and affectionate in his personal relationships. She greatly admired him and always evinced great respect for his knowledge and scholarship.

The year 1885 was an important landmark in her life. It

encompassed two important events; her marriage on August 3, and the first session of the Indian National Congress, presided over by Woomesh Chandra Bonnerji in December. For most women especially in those days, marriage would have been the more significant event, perhaps the most important landmark in their lives. However, for her it was not destined to be so. The young bride, keenly and enthusiastically followed the proceedings and deliberations of the Congress. It was indeed an epoch-making event and she was one of the first Indian women to have grasped its importance, its historic significance. To her it was a moment, which could awaken not only political consciousness but also social and economic awareness. From its beginning the Congress afforded the women of India a great opportunity to participate as equals in the task of nation building. It would mean emancipation from the foreign yoke. It could also mean emancipation for women, who had been oppressed for centuries. So she thought in 1885.

She was wedded to an 'ideal' husband. But, she was 'wedded' also, as she herself used to say, "to the uplift of my countrymen, both social and political." Ultimately, this side of her gained the upper hand. She became a woman with a mission, with a vision; the vision of an independent India free from foreign yoke.

Impatient with her husband who held views that were more conservative, had little interest in public life, and who believed in the 'benevolence' of British rule, she gradually drifted away from him. The marriage, never a happy one, broke up, and within a few years they were separated, though never actually divorced. She however was fair-minded and realistic enough to recognize and acknowledge that it was more her fault and she never spoke ill of her husband. He outlived her and was so embittered perhaps, that when she died, he refused even to attend her last rites.

All her life, her indomitable spirit was willing; quite often though the flesh was weak. Ill health was to dodge her footsteps all through life. In 1902 gravely ill, she had to go abroad for treatment and an operation. Little could she have realized, as the ship sailed away from her native shores, that it was the beginning of an exile, that was to last thirty-five years, during the course of which she was to carve for herself an honoured niche in the annals of her country's struggle for freedom.....

The conflagration of 1857 had died down but its embers still smouldered. The ruthless suppression of the Mutiny had spread terror among the people who felt it was not easy to drive the British out. Nevertheless, the feeling of revolt and the faith in revolution never died in their hearts. Yes, the embers still smouldered – waiting only for an opportune wind to fan them again into raging flames.

Meanwhile by the first half of the 19th century, another form of resistance had come into existence and was rapidly gaining ground. Its western educated leaders under the impact of English education and western ideas of liberty and equality had placed their faith in Constitutional agitation.

This English educated minority of Indians had come to believe the myth perpetrated by the British, that it was the benevolent foreigners, who had brought law and justice, peace and prosperity, to a land that was practically barbaric and strife-torn before their arrival.

It only remained to appeal to the British people and Parliament to rectify whatever wrongs existed and all would be well. So firm and deeply entrenched was this belief in British benevolence that it was to take many rude shocks to dislodge it.

This picture of the reality – the actual events and conditions in India – could not quite fit into this rosy frame. Import of British goods spelt ruin for old indigenous industries, poverty was increasing, taxes were mounting while the spectre of famine and disease stalked the land. Theoretically, justice and equality were advocated, but the Imperial pageant of the Delhi Durbar sharply exposed the glaring inequality between the rulers and the ruled. Even the haughty ‘native’ princes were humbled and humiliated. Indians had become exiles in their own land, slaves in their own country. The Mutiny had resulted in a hardening of the British attitude towards Indians. They had become socially more aloof and arrogant, politically more unsympathetic, while their economic policies resulted in an ever-increasing ‘drain of wealth’.

While the Indian masses, crushed by burdens of poverty, famine and disease were being driven to despair, some of the intellectuals, well versed in western political theory and history, resenting this arrogant attitude and unfair treatment, were awakening to the reality that no nation in the world had ever won its freedom without stress, strain

and struggle. In the 1880’s, ruined and degraded, politically, socially and economically, India had reached her lowest ebb.

Leaders, who were imbued with a deeply religious spirit and pride in India’s old traditions and heritage, and who possessed courage, patriotism and a spirit of self-sacrifice, came to the fore. The growth of the new nationalist spirit was influenced by the teachings of religious reformers like Swami Dayanand, Swami Vivekanand and social workers like Ranade who were to herald spiritual awakening and social reformation.

Western educated Indians had formed political associations culminating in the birth of the Indian National Congress in 1885 to bring the grievances and the aspirations of the people to the attention of the British rulers, pledging loyalty and demanding a share in the administration. This petitioning did not make much headway yet they patiently and hopefully carried on. However, the rising tide of the new defiant nationalism could not be rolled back.

Tilak, Father of Indian Unrest, appeared on the scene, a scholar patriot from the rugged soil of Maharashtra, a born leader of men. The ‘*Kesari*’ and ‘*Mahratta*’ were to be the mouthpieces of his radical political views. While Congress politicians pleaded for concessions and a share in the administration, Tilak demanded self-government, to him self-government meant absolute sovereignty of the people. With his keen native shrewdness and ability to win over the people, he found suitable vehicles for enthusing the masses; the cult of Ganapati worship, of celebrations, and processions where voices were raised in public protest, and popularization of physical fitness and training in gymnasiums. In 1895, he gathered the patriotic and national forces around the figure of Shivaji, upholding this brave warrior as a symbol of unity and courage. He imbued people with self-reliance, turning them away from the policy of fruitless appeals to the British to the realization that only a strong and self-reliant India would be able to achieve its own emancipation.

The Congress at its annual meetings, continued to pass resolutions and put their demands — preceded of course by ‘pledges of loyalty’ to the benevolent British, demands which went unheeded. However, it is only fair to admit that the labour of these well-meaning pioneers was not all

in vain – for public opinion was being formed and moulded. More and more Indians took an interest in public affairs and the spirit of nationalism was spreading. However, new groups impatient for more speedy results were coming to the fore. Even within the Congress itself the Extremist movement had started. The Calcutta session of the Congress in 1906 was faced with the momentous choice – Naoroji or Tilak? Dadabhai Naoroji, Father of Reformist Party, or Tilak, the towering young leader of the new nationalists. These new nationalists boldly demanded a campaign of Direct Action and Passive Resistance to compel the foreigners to abdicate their Raj...

Lord Curzon's repressive measures had left educated Indians seething with bitterness, frustration and helplessness, while his crowning folly of partitioning Bengal hit both the educated and the masses alike and united them in opposition to British misrule. The agitation for reversal of partition – when cries of Swadeshi and Boycott rent the air, bonfires were made of foreign goods, and imprisonment courted – brought back into the Indian arena the violent spirit, which had lain dormant since the Mutiny.

Secret societies and schools for promotion of physical culture rang up, the name of Kali, Goddess of Strength was invoked, and an era of organized conspiracies of bombs, revolvers and dacoities had dawned on the Indian scene.

The Extremists or Nationalists and the Revolutionary terrorists, shared a common aim but their methods differed. The former under the tutelage of leaders like Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, B.C. Pal, and Aurobindo Ghosh, believed in political agitation, boycott of British goods and institutions and the cult of self-help and self-reliance. Acquainted with the histories of the French Revolution and Italian Renaissance and the American War of Independence, influenced by the Irish Sinn Fienn Movement and Russian Revolution, they trusted in the efficacy of western revolutionary methods. Their defiant writings and speeches were to inculcate a new spirit of boldness and self-confidence in the hitherto emasculated Indian masses. The revolutionary terrorists under leaders like Barindra Kumar Ghosh and Bhupindra Nath Dutta aimed to overthrow the British Government by adopting violent means; leading upto an armed revolt when practicable.

This rapid growth of revolutionary activities called forth

draconian measures to contain it by way of Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act, Explosive Substances Act, Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act and the Press Act. However, these Acts only succeeded in driving the revolutionary societies underground. Many revolutionaries escaped to foreign countries to carry on their activities more openly. Revolutionary centres had been set up in London and Paris by 1905.

The Indian Revolutionary movement was spreading its tentacles and widening the sphere of its activities and influence abroad – under the herculean efforts of tireless, inspired leaders like Shyamji, Savarkar, Madame Bhikhaji Cama, Har Dayal, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya and others. Indian revolutionaries established international contacts and a network of worldwide organisations received encouragement and sympathy from Irish, Egyptian and Russian revolutionaries.

But such suppressive measures met with only limited success. Realizing belatedly that ruthless repression could defeat its own ends, the government announced the Morley-Minto Reforms. Though considered deceptive, disappointing and insulting by the London revolutionaries they were undoubtedly a surrender to revolutionary agitation in India and abroad – Savarkar himself, from London, was to edge the Indian revolutionaries on, through the outpourings of his mighty pen.

All the writings, other activities, and the founding of societies, fellowships and of India House had not gone unnoticed in India. Tilak wrote to congratulate them and hoped that the free atmosphere of England would give them a scope which they could never hope to get in India.

Among Englishmen there were some humanists and intellectuals who were aware of the damage done to India by their countrymen. Herbert Spencer and Congreve, whom Shyamji was to quote often, Annie Besant and Sister Nivedita; A.O. Hume who started the Indian National Congress, and C.F. Andrews, devoted companion of Gandhiji, the venerable socialist leader H.M. Hyndman who was to inspire and guide the revolutionaries of India House and a young Briton, Guy A. Aldred, printer of 'Indian Sociologist' – the first Briton to be imprisoned for India's cause – fearlessly devoted themselves heart and soul to the cause of freedom of the land ruled and exploited by their own people.

It was H.M. Hyndman who had sponsored and fought for the inclusion of Madame Bhikhaiji Cama and Sardar Singhji Rana as delegates to the International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart and succeeded. He himself had prepared a paper for this conference on the 'Ruin of India by British Rule' in which he was to expose in masterly fashion the conditions prevailing in India and to claim that India had a heritage, culture and civilization in no way inferior to that of the west. Pleading India's cause he had said, "The International Socialist Congress should thoroughly understand what has been done and how baneful the temporary success of the foreign despotism enforced by a set of islanders whose little starting point and headquarters lay thousands of miles away from their conquered possessions, has been to a population of at least 300 million people". He explained how the conquest of India had been achieved:

"India was conquered for the Empire not by the English themselves but by Indians under the English and by taking advantages of Indian disputes".

Regarding the people of India he informed the international audience:

"If civilization is to be gauged by the standards in science, art, architecture, agriculture, industry, medicine, laws, philosophy and religion, then the state of India at that period was well worthy of comparison with the most enlightened and cultured parts of Europe. No European monarch could be reckoned in any way superior to Akbar, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb or Shivaji; while it would be hard to name any European Minister of Finance equal to the Hindu Rajahs: Todar Mal and Nana Furnavis".

From her role as a Florence Nightingale, serving in a hospital during the plague epidemic to a militant nationalist was a far cry. Prof. Satyavrata Ghosh aptly describes this tremendous transformation:

"From her upbringing Madame Cama was a peace-loving lady of the peace-loving Parsee community. However, the environmental impact of her days was so great that she soon became the most active revolutionary woman of India and appropriately earned the epithet 'Mother of the Revolution'. The earlier liberal influence of Dadabhai Naoroji yielded place to a revolutionary ardour, an almost unparalleled mental metamorphosis. Her life that follows reads like a romantic story."

The story starts with her arrival in England. Its beginning was innocuous enough. After medical treatment and a successful operation, she regained her health and found lodgings as a paying guest with a respectable family in London's Holborn District. Happiness in a conventional marriage had eluded her. She was groping for direction, seeking an avenue for service, having known before the happiness of selfless work for a cause.

At this juncture, she came in contact with Dadabhai Naoroji, a venerable man of her own community, the Grand Old Man of India. Eager to do something for her Motherland she enthusiastically aligned herself with his work on behalf of the Indian National Congress. Among the great men who shaped the life of this remarkable woman, Dadabhai Naoroji was the first. Her political aspirations received immense impetus from this association as she actively helped with his campaign, canvassing votes for his election to the British House of Commons. She became virtually his unofficial 'secretary'. With Naoroji's wide contacts, this afforded her the opportunity of meeting many eminent Indians who later became legendary figures in their country's freedom struggle.

Instead of returning to India as she had originally planned she now spent nearly a year each in several countries—Germany, Scotland, and France before settling down in London. These wandering which enlarged her vision and contacts were to be a prelude and preparation for her subsequent political career. Back in London, she embarked on a crusading campaign for India's cause giving public speeches at Hyde Park, that traditional bastion of England's zealously guarded democratic right of freedom of speech. Here Madame Cama could often be seen, young and stately holding the audience spellbound by her charges—and she never was one to mince words—against the British; and recounting their misdeeds in India. Hearing such a fiery orator, from a woman of a subject nation, their concepts of 'native' women, meek, mild and submissive and 'in purdah', were rudely shaken.

It was Dadabhai Naoroji who introduced her to Sardar Singh Rana then studying in the Inner Temple of the Inns of Court. Through him, she met Shyamji Krishna Varma and came under his influence. If Dadabhai Naoroji encouraged her as a companion in his political campaigns, it was Shyamji and later the fiery Savarkar who brought

pragmatic direction into her life. She became a regular writer and contributor to his publication the *'Indian Sociologist'* and an active member of the Home Rule Society and the India House founded by him. Patriots like Shyamji had already laid the foundation stone of the Revolutionary Party in England but it was left to Madame Cama and Savarkar to raise it brick by brick into a mighty edifice. Bhikhaji's contact with this early revolutionary work through Shyamji, her realization that the Congress policy of petitioning was making no headway and her own impatient nature turned her away from the constitutional agitation and methods of Dadabhai Naoroji. Thus, Bhikhaji the militant nationalist was born.

Besides Shyamji, some of the notable people of Madame Cama's immediate group were Har Dayal, M.T.P. Acharya, a Tamil scholar, journalist and patriot; Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, gifted brother of Sarojini Naidu who spurned the many avenues his talents laid open before him and preferred political exile in the revolutionary cause. There was Sardar Singh Rana, of a princely Rajput family of Kathiawar called to the Bar in London, who later had a jewellery business and was known as 'the Pearl Prince' and made generous contributions to the cause. And of course, Savarkar, the most brilliant and inspired of them all, the undisputed leader in the English circle.

Savarkar, leader of India House, possessed courage and vision, combined with incisive intellect and a formidable will. To inspire people with a burning desire to rise again and wage a second successful war to liberate their Motherland, Savarkar wrote his 'First War of Indian Independence.'

The decisive Madame Cama was very clear in her mind as regards both her aims and her methods. She was convinced now that revolutionary methods alone could achieve India's freedom. She still pointed out that Indians were and had always been peace-loving people but the condition for her people left her in no doubt about the methods she should adopt to achieve freedom.

India house had adopted Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's 'Bande Mataram' (Hail Motherland) as the National Hymn. The stirring strains of his song was frequently heard through the halls of India House and invariably used at the opening of every meeting and conference.

Madame Cama and Har Dayal started *'Bande Mataram'*

in September 1909. They issued this journal with the object of continuing and commemorating the good work and to perpetuate the name of the paper founded by Bipin Chandra Pal and later edited by Aurobindo Ghosh, *'Bande Mataram'* of Calcutta. This paper had been forced to cease publication under the Newspapers Act of 1908.

The ideals and creed of the revolutionaries have been beautifully described in immortal words in *'Bande Mataram'* – *'A Message to the People of India'*, 1908, (a leaflet) from the Mother of the Revolution herself.

The opening paragraphs convey her love and concern for her Motherland:

"Countrymen! lend me your ears, I will not take up your time; only five minutes. I fully understand the responsibility of what I say. I have, come prepared for everything. I have but one life to give one Avtar to sacrifice. I want to speak on Methods, as I cannot keep quiet, since such tyranny is going on in our country, and so many deportations are cabled every day, and all peaceful means are denied to us.

"Some of you say that as a woman I should object to violence. Well, Sirs, I had that feeling at one time. Three years ago, it was repugnant to me even to talk of violence as a subject of discussion, but owing to the heartlessness, the hypocrisy, the rascality of the Liberals, that feeling is gone. Why should we deplore the use of violence when our enemies drive us to it? If we use force, it is because we are forced to use force. Tyranny is tyranny and torture is torture wherever applied. Success justifies any action. The Struggle for freedom calls for exceptional measures. Successful rebellion against the foreign rule is patriotism. What is life without Freedom?"

"My only hope in life is to see our country free and united. I beg of you young men to march on. March forward, Friends, and lead our helpless, dying, downtrodden children of our Motherland to the goal of Swaraj in its right sense. Let our motto be: "We are all for India, India for Indians."

Madame Cama's crowded hour of glory was at the Stuttgart Conference (1907). She had made her mark in history and the ages to come would remember her. Without doubt it was the most significant single act of her entire career. To expose the atrocities of the British, to raise the rebel flag and voice the demand for complete

independence in front of an international gathering required defiant courage of a high order.

She had been the cynosure of all eyes, as she stood, proud, tall and erect, dressed in a long-sleeved blouse and the traditional Parsee sari. She spoke with bitterness, she spoke with vehemence, she was out for vengeance, she was not going to mince matters. India spoke through her, an India enslaved, impoverished, and humiliated. At the end of her speech she proudly unfurled the tricolor, which she had kept concealed and to the thunderous cheers of the delegates, demanded justice for India. One has to remember that this was as far back as 1907, when India was still slumbering under an alien yoke, when Gandhiji and Nehru had not yet appeared on the Indian scene.

That tricolour unfurled at Stuttgart is, with some subsequent modification – the rallying point for millions of people today. But few of us Indians who proudly watch it fluttering in our independent skies, remember, and still fewer even know, that it was a woman, a young exile, Madame Cama who first devised and unfurled the tricolour in a foreign land in August 1907. A flag is far from a mere piece of cloth. It symbolizes the hopes and aspirations of a nation – inspires its people as Madame Cama's tricolour was to inspire countless revolutionaries during India's long struggle for freedom and its modified version, adopted later, inspires and thrills every Indian today. In Gandhiji's words:

“A flag is a necessity for all nations. Millions have died for it. It is no doubt a kind of idolatry, which it would be a sin to destroy. For a flag represents an ideal. The unfurling of the Union Jack evokes in the English breast sentiments whose strength it is difficult to measure: the Stars and Stripes mean a world to the Americans, the Star and the Crescent will call forth the best bravery in Islam.

“It will be necessary for us Indians – Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Parsis and others to whom India is their home to recognise a common flag to live and to die for...”.

Madame Cama is perhaps best known for having raised the first Indian national flag at the Seventh International Congress in August of 1907 at Stuttgart, Germany. The flag which she unfurled had three broad stripes. The top one was green, the sacred colour of the Muslims; the centre band was saffron or golden, the sacred colour of both the Buddhists and the Sikhs, and the lower stripe was the Hindu red. There was a line of eight stars on the top green stripe, emblematic of the eight provinces of India; the words, *Bande Mataram* were embroidered in Sanskrit on the centre gold band, and on the bottom red stripe there was an orb on the side toward the staff and near the outer edge, the crescent of Islam. No symbol of the disparate elements, which make up India's diverse population, was ignored. The flag was obviously carefully planned and was most probably designed by her jointly with Savarkar. It is interesting to trace the subsequent history of the actual flag Madame Cama displayed at Stuttgart.

According to Dr Minocher K Contractor, this flag was smuggled into India, along with other records of the revolutionary patriots, by the well-known Gujarati Socialist leader Shri Indulal Yajnik and kept in a hiding place in Bombay. When he was in Yervada Jail in Poona in 1939, he took the opportunity to invite Shri G.V. Ketkar, grandson of Lokmanya Tilak and former editor of '*Kesari*' and '*Tarun Bharat*' and gave him a small piece of paper. With this piece of paper Shri Ketkar could secure the whole bundle of papers and the records of the revolutionaries. This bundle contained Madame Cama's original flag. On August 18, 1937, Vir Savarkar unveiled the flag, which was neatly put in an ornamental frame and it was taken out in a procession at Poona. Today this framed flag is hung in the Library Hall of the '*Kesari*' and '*Mahratta*' in Poona and is shown to every distinguished visitor.

Courtesy: *Madame Bhikaiji Rustom Cama: Builder of Modern India Series*, Indian Book Trust.