

Builders of the Socialist Movement

Yusuf Meherally-Freedom Fighter Par Excellence

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Lord Byron said that he got up one morning and found himself great. Though Meherally is too modest to put forth any such claim, he too overnight shot into prominence. One single day, February 8, 1928, put him on the pinnacle of popularity; his name was on the lips of everybody; his reputation reached the four corners of the country. Not that there was spade work before it but, as in the case of Byron's lyrical genius, the recognition was so sudden and complete.

On that day, he had not only dared to shout "go back, Simon!" (a slogan of his own creation, which echoed in every nook and corner of India) to the face of the all-mighty, British plenipotentiary, but had also defied the injunctions of his political superiors who counselled inaction. His impetuosity and dare-devilry, the extreme originality of his ideas, struck even Gandhiji, who complimented him. In a primitive world, he would have become a legend, an Ajax defying the lightning of despotism. Poets would have made of his heroic songs for a nation. The tale of his perils and patriotism would have been the model to inspire and inform children.

Born in late 1903, Meherally was only twenty-four at the time of the Simon Commission's visit. His father, Jaffer Meherally, was a prosperous businessman and the children were brought up in the typical, aristocratic way. Fifty years earlier, his great grandfather, built India's first textile mill in Bombay and laid the foundation stone for the country's light industry. The transition from feudal to capitalist economy was fairly set; factories and slums were multiplying in the urban areas.

Their family was traditionally pro-British and all the upper class prejudices were handed down from generation to generation, as a part of ancestral bequest. When Yusuf went to jail in 1930, several of his elders said it was a disgrace to the family that one of its members was a "law-breaker".

The first nine years of his life were spent in Calcutta, then the storm-centre of Vande Mataram and anti-Bengal-partition agitations. But only after Gandhiji arrived on the Indian political scene and took the country spell-bound, did he enter active politics. At the age of ten, Yusuf returned to Bombay, his birth place. He then joined the St. Xavier's High School. While still in the high school, he studied the revolutionary movements of the different countries and was impressed by the role youth had played in them. He read Mazzini and Garibaldi and closely followed the Russian and Chinese (Sun-Yat-sen's) revolutions. The successful boycott of the Milner Mission in Egypt and the birth and growth of the Sinn Fein Movement in Ireland, interested him deeply.

In Gandhiji's Non-Cooperation Movement, he found a parallel to these liberation struggles, but its abrupt and inconclusive end on grounds of alleged excesses at Chauri Chaura, dismayed and puzzled him. He shared the depression which set in among the youth after the calling-off of the movement. He thought that if a group of young people, intellectually well-equipped and properly trained, dedicated themselves to the cause of the country, the revolution could be led to a successful conclusion. This idea found fruition in the Bombay Provincial Youth League which was inaugurated in February 1928.

The Youth Conference opened a new era in the country's political history; for the first time, youth was canalised for national action. About 1700 delegates from all over the province attended the conference, which was presided over by K. F. Nariman. Meherally was the moving spirit behind the organisation.

The most important decision of the conference was to organise an effective boycott of the Simon Commission and a detailed, though ambitious, programme was chalked out for the same. Though this decision was in consonance with the principle of the Congress decision, yet in the matter of procedure, it went a long way ahead. And here lay the rub.

The Congress, the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Liberal Party were all united on the principle of boycott of the Commission. At that time, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu was the President of the Bombay Congress, Jinnah the President of the League, Jayakar was in charge of the Mahasabha and Setalvad was guiding the destinies of the Liberals. These luminaries met and formed a joint committee to conduct the boycott, which, according to them, should merely mean a public meeting where speeches would be delivered and resolutions passed. To the Youth League, with Meherally at its helm, this seemed the most ineffectual way of boycott. The Government, with their sycophants, had planned receptions to Simon and his colleagues, and such inaction on the part of the public would lend colour to the got-up shows.

February 3, 1928, dawned a decisive day in the history of Bombay. The Youth Leaguers planned an ambitious expedition on boats to meet the Commission on the sea itself, but it leaked out and the police took precautions to scotch it. They also wanted a hartal in the city but without Congress sanction it would not materialise. But undaunted, a band of 400 resolute young men led by Yusuf, formed into a procession and marched to the harbour, before day-break. It was another Charge of the Light Brigade except for the fact that the commander as well as the followers consciously believed in what they were doing. There, they staged one of the most heroic and resolute demonstrations the country had ever witnessed. They were thrice lathi-charged but did not budge an inch. Meherally himself was cruelly manhandled by an over-zealous police sergeant. None of the Congress leaders, who later claimed kudos and voters for the incident, cared to attend it. The news of the demonstration and the lathi-charge, exaggerated as usual, spread like wild fire and shops and establishments observed spontaneous hartal. The bulk of the students were with the Youth League and so naturally abstained from classes. Thus, a good part of the Youth League's boycott programme came to be implemented in spite of the non-association of the Congress with it.

Meherally was the hero of the day. The following incident speaks of the popular esteem he had won that morning. After the lathi-charge, Yusuf was returning home, his bruised, bandaged hand in a sling when he was accosted on the way by a youthful passer-by. "Were you hurt in the morning's lathi-charge?" he asked. "Yes", Yusuf replied. "Our leader, Meherally, was also badly injured. He is in the hospital", the stranger informed Yusuf. Suppressing his laughter, Yusuf retorted: "That is all exaggeration; he was not so much hurt." The man got angry and cursed the apostasy of Yusuf. Later, in the evening's public meeting, when he was revealed as Meherally himself, the confounded stranger came to him and apologised.

That year, Yusuf lost his father and as the eldest of the four children, he had to take up the family responsibility. His father originally wanted him to be a barrister and arranged with Mr. Jinnah to take him as his apprentice. But Yusuf's ambition was from the beginning to be a full-time political worker. The sudden death of his father created difficulties. As the head of the family he had to start earning to maintain the old family standards. But he did not want to give up politics, especially at that time and so brought about a revolutionary change in the domestic standards so that they could live within their means.

He had by that time qualified himself for the Bar. Relations and friends like Nariman were pressing him to apply for the advocate's sanad. He was reluctant but at last gave in. Here again, his anti-Simon demon-stration came in the way. At the instance of Nariman, Yusuf launched prosecution against the police sergeant who assaulted him on February 3, 1928. The case lasted nine months and the lower court fined the sergeant. On appeal, the High Court quashed the conviction and acquitted him. But, because he launched proceedings against a police officer, Yusuf was refused enrolment as an advocate. His is the only case in the whole of India, where a qualified lawyer was refused sanad by the High Court for political reasons.

When acquainted of this, Jinnah was very angry that disregarding his advice, Meherally, participated in politics. "Young man, your life is ruined", shouted Jinnah at him. "No, Mr. Jinnah a life is not so easily ruined". Yusuf retorted with his characteristic optimism. He actually welcomed the refusal because it supplied him with an excuse for full-time political work. The history of the two subsequent decades has vindicated Meherally! After all, there is an aspect of life which Mr. Jinnah and his like cannot appreciate.

During the 1930 Civil Disobedience Movement, when processions and public meetings were disallowed, as today, these volunteers did marvellous work in keeping up the morale of the people. During the Salt Satyagraha, Yusuf and his associates gave a terrible fight to the bureaucracy. The local Congress higher-ups courted imprisonment and went to jail. The whole movement was run by him. He also saw Gandhiji twice during the Dandi March and got his sanction for his plan of work. At that time, he published in his Vanguard, which was suppressed just after that, an interview with Gandhiji which proved unique.

He was first arrested in 1930 and sentenced to four months' imprisonment. Again in 1932, he was charged with conspiracy and sentenced to two years. It was then, inside the 'C' class of Nasik prison, that he established close contacts with his Socialist colleagues. He is one of the founder-members of the Congress Socialist Party.

He was again arrested in connection with the Individual Satyagraha in 1940, and was released the next year. That year, he presided over the All India Students' Conference at Patna. Later, during a tour of Punjab, he was again arrested on a charge of having defied a prohibitory order. In this connection, he was in Lahore jail for nearly a year where he wrote his satirical masterpiece My Trip to Pakistan. Politics and personalities of Punjab were dealt with in such great detail that even long residents of the province had something to learn from it.

While still in Lahore jail, he was elected the Mayor of Bombay. His mayoralty again was unique not for got-up receptions and publicity stunts but for real constructive work and civic service. He was at that time the General Secretary of the Congress Socialist Party and accepted the mayoral office, only on the express condition that he would be allowed to devote himself to Party work as usual. He created a new precedent by personally attending to citizen's complaints on civic matters; he initiated the system of quick despatch of files and put down official slackness with an iron hand. On the question of A.R.P. finances he literally made history. His predecessor in office, with the support of the majority Congress party, sanctioned 24 lakhs of Municipal money towards the Government A.R.P. scheme. But Meherally, as Mayor, refused to pay even a pie. He met the Governor in this connection and frankly told him that the people had no faith in the Government and that they were afraid the British would withdraw from India also, as they did from Burma and Malaya. So, he argued, the defence organisation of the people should be in the hands of those who would remain on the scene whoever might come. This led to the organisation of the People's Volunteer Brigade. Bombay is the only city in India where the Municipality was allowed to run the A.R.P.

Just before August 8, 1942, Meherally conducted a C.S.P. camp at Poona, where was discussed a comprehensive plan of revolt. But, somehow, the police got the whole information in advanced and wrecked the plan. On August 9, 1942, he was arrested and detained. It was during this period, that he got the heart attack, which finally claimed his life. The authorities offered to give special facilities for treatment at St. George Hospital, but he demanded that two other ailing colleagues of his should also get the same facilities. They refused and he remained in prison. In 1943, when he was released, he was already collapsing and the doctors gave up all hope. For seven days, he was lying unconscious in the general ward of the J. J. Hospital, this darling of Bombay's thousands. In 1947, he left for America for treatment and returned in November 1948, considerably improved. This was his second visit to U.S. Earlier in 1938 he toured Europe, America and Mexico. He attended several international conferences, including the World Youth Congress at New York and the World Cultural Conference in Mexico.

Among his acquaintance are world renowned artists, sculptors, writers and politicians. He possesses a rare collection of art works and is considered a top-rank art critic. His house is a warehouse of books and magazines which he is never tired of poring over. Even in sickness, books are his companions. He claims that they make him bear the bodily pain. The Indian National Exhibition, a portrayal in drawings of our national struggle from the 1857 revolt is one of his brain-children and is the only one of its kind in this country.

Among his publications, the two volumes of "Leaders of India" (biographical sketches of national leaders) have run into six editions. As a biographer, he is unsurpassed. Study of personalities and their impact on history has come to him naturally. Yusuf Meherally is no more. He has literally given his life-blood for the country's cause. (November, 1949)