

~ The Revolutionary-Who-Waits ~



This book takes you on a journey on an old steam train billowing smoke and chugging across northern India with revolutionaries as co-passengers. Set in British India of the 1920s, we follow the cadence and tempo of the lives of the intrepid revolutionaries of the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) and the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) who challenged the British Raj. Through this book, we listen to the revolutionaries' conversations and observe them bantering, quarrelling and horsing around as they travel across northern India. We get off the train and continue to walk with them as they plot and plan their next move in their dens spread across *maths*, *akharas*, universities, forests, villages and towns of northern India. We join their ranks as they prepare to conduct robberies, assassinate British officials, buy guns and ammunition, and feverishly make bombs. We read the newspapers and journals that have the revolutionaries crossing swords with other nationalists over ideology and strategy. Journeying with them we retrieve the details of their everyday life – the trivial, the ordinary, the random, the anomalous and the atypical – and the different scales of interpersonal relationships: between the leaders of the movement between the leaders and the members, and between the members of the movement.¹ We will hear the revolutionaries at their raucous, unrestrained and voluble best in these pages. Given how intense their desire to be heard was, being able to speak up was crucial to these revolutionaries until the time they chose to be silent or were silenced by the state. 'Listening' to the revolutionaries therefore is a vital cognitive tool for understanding their lives lest we write with the 'enormous condescension of posterity'. This book narrates the history of the revolutionaries' lives and worlds as much as possible through their words.²

Waiting for Swaraj seeks to comprehend the revolutionaries' self-conception: When does a person say, 'I am a revolutionary'? What makes a revolutionary? What did it mean to be a revolutionary? Is it when the nebulous conception of an armed revolution begins to fire their imagination, keeping them up at night, and turning their days into a furious haze, or when the revolutionary finds himself awaiting the revolution? How did the revolutionaries live out the vision of revolution, what was their everyday like, did life in revolution transform an individual, what was their truth and how was it different from that of the others? What did they do when not thinking about the revolution? The concern here is to understand not only what the revolutionaries agreed about but also what they disagreed about; and what made them hold together despite their disagreements, differences in backgrounds, and variance in sources of inspiration. What were the common set of shared perceptions, views and feelings unifying them all?

This book abandons the skyscraper view that makes the 'revolutionary movement' appear like a moving behemoth of collectivities, homogenous and indistinguishable, where only the individual leaders stand out as beacons. Instead, we take a street-level view that allows access into the underground revolutionary lives.³ The book modulates between close-ups and long-shots as it enables us to imagine the historical actor as a social being while keeping in sight the wider historical picture. Listening to revolutionaries in dialogue with each other, *Waiting for Swaraj* examines the history of Indian revolutionism as a lived vision. It is an exploration of the rich, variegated and intimate history of revolution as praxis. It locates the essence of being a revolutionary not just in the spectacular moments of 'doing the revolution' when the revolutionaries threw a bomb or carried out a political assassination but in the everyday conversations, banter and anecdotes, and in the stray fragments of the life in underground as they 'waited for the revolution'. The revolutionary ontology (that is, nature of self/being), it demonstrates, had a deep connection with time.

~ The Intrepid *Baburupiya* ~

Harishankar lived in a small Hanuman temple in a village called Dhimarapura near the princely state of Orcha in the Central Provinces. He used to survive on *madbukari* – collecting food that was just enough

for him to survive, from the *grihasta*, or householders. In those days it was a tradition to feed any *sadhu* or *sanyasi* who turned up at your doorstep. With time, Harishankar took to narrating the *Ramayana* in the village. He also started a small *pathshala*, a village school, for little kids outside the Hanuman temple. Everyone had a good word for Harishankar Brahmchari. Convinced of Harishankar's repute as an ascetic, Thakur Malkhan Singh, a village local and a rich man who was also an employee in the Forest Department, made arrangement for Harishankar to run his *pathshala* and to do his *Ramayana* session on the *chaupal*, community place, in front of his house. Malkhan Singh made sure that the *brahmchari* got his daily meals in his kitchen. He used to enjoy Harishankar's company and they would oftentimes talk into the night. Malkhan Singh grew to implicitly trust Harishankar, so much so that he would leave behind the key of the family coffer and the armoury with him when away on Forest Department work. Harishankar did not let the comforts of the Thakur's household keep him from his daily physical regimen. He would wake up early morning and bathe in the Satar river and exercise in the temple's *akhara*. In the daytime he would teach the kids and his evenings were devoted to reciting *Tulsi Ramayana*.⁴

Harishankar was also a surprisingly good marksman and would hunt with Malkhan Singh. These hunting expeditions brought him into the circle of local rajas and *zamindars*. The *naresh*, or king, of the principality of Orcha was particularly fond of Harishankar and sought his company for hunting. Once when they were out hunting, the Orcha *naresh* shot at an animal and missed. So did his retainers. Harishankar took out his pistol, took aim and shot at the animal. The bullet found its mark. This stunned the Orcha *naresh*, who began to suspect that Harishankar was not simply any old *sanyasi*.⁵ Incidents of dacoity and murder were not uncommon in the ravines of Bundelkhand bordering the states of Orcha and Jhansi. There were several small *riyasats*, principalities, in the area who were exempted from the British government's Arms Act. The local *zamindars* and rajas kept arms and would sometimes sell them for money. These *riyasats* were preyed on by dacoits (armed robbers) and were also a refuge for absconding *krantikaris* (revolutionaries) active in the region.⁶ The Orcha *naresh* conjectured that Harishankar had to be one of the two. Harishankar indeed led a double life. As he began to feel secure in his *sanyasi* personation, he gradually began to meet his gang members. He

used the ravines of Bundelkhand to give his friends from Jhansi practice in target shooting. He would make use of his unfettered access to Thakur Malkhan Singh's armour.⁷ In the initial days his crew were careful to visit him occasionally. They would deliver the newspaper clippings that helped him keep abreast of a court case that he was deeply interested in unfolding in the city of Lucknow and also send him information about the police arrests and activities related to the case.⁸ His ragged crew consisted of about 10–12 people at the time.

Once the court case in Lucknow got fully underway, police activities in the region began to cool off as most people associated with the case were assumed arrested. Harishankar took the opportunity to begin reorganising his gang. He gradually changed his *brahmchari* appearance. Instead of wrapping a blanket on his torso, he started wearing a *kurta* and his loincloth gave way to a *dhobi*. He also acquired a bicycle that he used for moving between Jhansi and Orchha. He also went to the cities of Kanpur and Banaras and met with old members who began to visit him in the village of Dhimarpara.⁹ An incident involving another *sadhu* living in the Hanuman temple who had murdered a local *palki*-bearer cut short Harishankar's stay in Dhimarpara. By this time he decided to give up the life of an impostor *sanyasi* and quit the village lest he got caught up in police investigations.¹⁰

From Dhimarpara, Harishankar went straight to the city of Jhansi and took up apprenticeship in the Bundelkhand Motor Company to learn motor driving and repairing. Harishankar spent nearly three years living in this manner. He continued to evade detection and police arrest. In the guise of a motor mechanic or a wise astrologer or a *thakur*, Harishankar swiftly altered his garb, language and demeanour according to the context and the people he was with. However, a life of subterfuge where he was constantly on the run was filled with financial difficulties. He barely had enough money to eat. While living in Jhansi, Harishankar many a time ate only once a day and that too just raw grams. A good day was one when he got a chance to eat at the home of a friend or an acquaintance. Despite not having enough to eat, Harishankar was lucky enough not to develop any serious illness except for once when he had bloody dysentery.¹¹

At the end of the case unfolding in Lucknow, five of the leaders were hanged and the rest were in jail.¹² As one of the few surviving members

who were not dead or in jail, Harishankar took it upon himself to build back the organisation. He used his time as a fugitive in Bundelkhand to collect arms from surrounding principalities, especially the Datiya and Khaniadhana *riyasats*, whose rajas he had befriended. The raja of Khaniadhana *riyasat* deeply respected him and knew of his real identity. The raja would encourage Harishankar to take part in the royal shooting competitions as he delighted in seeing him hit impossible targets. Hari would accept donations of arms and ammunition from the Khaniadhana raja who, smarting under the British government's high-handedness, harboured nationalist sentiments. The raja also opened up his forests and surrounding ravines for hunting, target practising and bomb testing.¹³ The support of the *riyasats* in the Central Provinces (now Madhya Pradesh) was crucial in obtaining arms supplies. Hari and his men bought arms and ammunition from not just the ruling class and the *sardars* but the hangers-on and servants as well. They also got weapons from the Russians and from the *fakirs* and *kabaylis* in the northern frontier areas, who were supposed to be sworn enemies of the British and operated illegal arms factories.¹⁴ French Chandernagore, where the Arms Act was not in force, was also a regional centre of arms traffic.¹⁵

Harishankar alias Panditji alias Mahashayji alias No. 2 alias Chandrashekhar Tiwari alias Chandrashekhar Azad was the only active member of the HRA who had managed to deceive the police and evade arrest.¹⁶ He was an intrepid *baburupiya*, an audacious impersonator. He could don a *janeyu*, the scared thread, a *dhoti* and a topknot with a copy of the *Bhagwat* in his hand to become a *kathavachak*, the traditional bard; or wear a simple cap on a *dhoti kurta* and transform into a regular well-to-do *baniya*; or put on a dirty undershirt with a thick *dhoti* to masquerade as a domestic servant; or even better, dress in a khaki uniform to pass off as a police constable.¹⁷ He was, however, not the only one known for his ability to change guises. Bhagat Singh (1907–1931), the HSRA revolutionary, donned a felt hat and Englishman's clothes to escape from Lahore after the political assassination of a British police officer. Surya Sen (1894–1934), who led the Chittagong armoury raid in 1930, was also famous for appearing as an old gardener or as a *sanyasi* and some believed that he could vanish into thin air.¹⁸ They were all revolutionaries who plotted and planned as they waited for *swaraj*.

~ Waiting as a Crucible ~

The lives in revolution present an interesting interplay of visibility and invisibility, a kaleidoscope of the performance of violence and underground subterfuge. The secret nature of the revolutionaries' organisations and operations meant that they remained absent in the colonial archives or in the contemporary newspapers except when they threw a bomb, carried out an assassination, were caught by the police or were on a trial.¹⁹ The popular and historiographical characterisation of the revolutionaries is premised on the spectacular moments at which they came into full public view when they shot someone or dropped a bomb or undertook a heist or stood trial or when the newspapers reported their arrest and hanging. Or it is based on their political writings – essays, pamphlets and books they wrote outlining their political ideas. Although significant, the moments of visibility provided only a partial view of their lives and fuelled a general characterisation of the revolutionaries as 'impatient' men who were 'in haste' – unwilling to compromise and negotiate – of people who forced history forward before its due time.²⁰

Jaichandra Vidyalankar, a teacher at the National College, Lahore, wrote about his pupils Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev (who were members of the revolutionary outfit HSRA): 'Their short-lived lives and actions betray their great impatience.... These young men could not control their impatience and made efforts, right or wrong, to gain independence.'²¹ While Vidyalankar saw their haste as being in service of the nation, in the eyes of their detractors, the haste was a consequence of being 'misguided' or 'adventurists' or 'politically immature and historically ignorant'.²² The revolutionaries' impatience was thus either used to valorise and romanticise their heroism or to condemn their radical politics as illegitimate, unlawful and unacceptable. The *Sedition Committee Report*, for instance, presented the revolutionaries as a 'small clique of fanatics', lowly criminals, a rag-tag bunch, misguided youth, enemies of society, volatile and unreasonable men, and people wishing to replace rule of law with 'unrestrained will of the individual'.²³ Either way, 'being in haste' became a neat explanatory model for their supposed historical 'failure'.²⁴ How else does one coagulate their bravery, courage and willingness to lay down their life with the apparent historical failure of their politics to liberate India? The simplistic characterisation of revolutionaries as 'being in haste' – where the

revolutionary was in a tearing hurry to arrest the speeding wheels of history or recklessly straining the calm tandem of unfolding history – provided a satisfactory explanation for admirers and critics alike. The imagery of lack of self-control and restraint also thrived on their apparent youth and the image of a sexualised masculinity that it evoked.

Interestingly, ‘being in haste’ was also the revolutionaries’ self-characterisation, what they saw as a definitive aspect of the revolutionary ontology. When asked to sit quietly, the young men would often recite the lines from the Bengali poet Nazrul Islam’s poem ‘Bidrohi’ (The Rebel) that captured their state of being: ‘Aami bidrohi chiro oshanto’ (I, the rebel with a restless heart).²⁵ Bhagat Singh was believed to have said: ‘Our young hot blood cannot wait for that long.’²⁶ Chandrashekhar Azad would often ask people around him not to do ‘luk luk’ (a word describing impatience, eagerness, nervous excitement) as it could cost them weapons, resources and lives. He once reprimanded Rajguru as they were lying in wait outside the police *chowki* in Lahore: ‘Luk luk na kiya kar, luk luk karna hai to ghar ja.’²⁷ Rajguru was raring to go and wanted to go inside the police officer’s room to shoot him instead of waiting for him to come out. Another time Azad refused to continue with a planned action: ‘Yadi uttejana mein aa kar main wahan sahasa kuch kar daalta to idhar tum logon ki halat kharab ho jaati... Yoon hi uttejana mein aa kar kuch nahi kiya jata’ (Had I done anything there out of excitement you would have all gotten into trouble... One should never do anything on an impulse).²⁸ The key word here was ‘uttejana’, excitement or impulsiveness. These anecdotes go to show that restlessness, excitement, impatience were indeed part of revolutionary selves.

With time, this characterisation has also made its way into the historiography on the revolutionaries. For instance, Kama Maclean calls revolutionaries’ politics ‘a politics of impatience’ and Durba Ghosh also discusses how this temporal disjuncture was a significant element of revolutionary narratives.²⁹ The image of the revolutionaries-in-haste, however, obscures the image of the revolutionary-who-waits, who lived out his life away from public gaze. The revolutionaries’ safety and power, all things considered, lay in their ability to remain concealed from the public gaze and that of the colonial police. Much of their active revolutionary life was spent underground and thus remained invisible. This life was spent waiting: waiting out the heat of arrests, holding their fire, being on the run,

waiting for the action to take place, waiting for the court to pass judgment, waiting to finish their jail sentence, or waiting to be hanged. It is 'waiting' that these revolutionaries did for most of their days although, if asked, they would say they were just being revolutionaries.

Life spent 'waiting' for *swaraj*, or self-rule, was far more immediate for the revolutionaries than the yet-to-be-actualised dream of political independence.³⁰ As we saw earlier, the wait was when they planned, plotted, organised, worked, dreamed, debated and struggled with the deprivations that came with the underground life of a secret organisation. This is where 'action' was. This was their everyday life. This everyday that encompassed the revolutionaries' days *and* nights was a space that the revolutionaries resided in. This everyday was not a circadian rhythm of triviality, banality and habit that separated one's subjectivity from one's identity. It was not about the alienation that one experiences between the body and the mind as a result of insufferable repetitiveness. Instead, it was a space where bodily privations were interleaved with a mental cognition of those privations as being an element of one's revolutionary existence. This everyday was one where an intimate awareness of one's subjectivity was challenging, pushing and informing the revolutionaries' consciousness and, in turn, constituting them as revolutionaries.

At the heart of the revolutionaries' everyday was the daily practice of ascetic renunciation and discipline. Practising to be a renunciate (a *yogi*, *sanyasi* or a *brahmchari*) – a person leading a life of principled denigration of materialism by observing voluntary adoption of poverty, fasting, chastity, performance of daily physical exercises, meditation (*dand-dhyan*), along with clothing and dietary injunctions – provided a conceptual and didactic framework for the revolutionaries' everyday underground existence that came with its attendant material deprivations. It was not the lack of self-restraint and control that defined the revolutionaries' inner lives, but a deep desire for it and the struggle to attain and live by it. Their struggle to achieve self-control and restraint was their *tapas* or *tap* (penance or performance of austerities) that helped them soar nearer to self-rule (*swarajya* and *swadhinata*) as individuals and as nationalists. The transformation of the young men into revolutionaries, thus, occurred as they 'waited' every day. Waiting was the crucible that forged a revolutionary and it did so not by robbing the young men of the romance of resistance but by coddling, nurturing and emboldening it.

~ Finding the Everyday ~

The political writings and the propaganda materials the revolutionaries produced while 'waiting' were meant to give their ideas public visibility, and to explain and to provide context for their ideas and 'actions'. These materials remain invaluable for understanding their political inspirations, programme, vision and method. These included: the constitution of the HRA, 1924; the leader of HRA Sachindranath Sanyal's pamphlet titled 'The Revolutionary' (1924) and his open letters to Mahatma Gandhi (1925); the political essays written by Bhagat Singh and Shiv Verma that were published in *Chand, Kirti, Abhyudaya, Pratap, Prabha, Maharathi*; the HSRA posters pasted on the walls of the city of Lahore following the assassination of John Saunders, a British officer, in December 1928; the leaflets that Bhagat Singh and Batukehsvar Dutt, members of the HSRA, hurled in the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi after bombing it in April 1929; the court statements the HRA and HSRA revolutionaries gave during the Kakori Conspiracy Case (1926–1927), the Delhi Assembly Bomb Case (April–June 1929) and the Lahore Conspiracy Case (1929–1931); and the HSRA pamphlet 'Philosophy of Bomb' that followed the bombing of the Viceroy's train in December 1930. These revolutionaries spoke for themselves, represented themselves and sought to define themselves. Being able to speak up was important to them, as evident from a statement used in the handbills they threw in the well of the Central Legislative Assembly: 'It takes a loud voice to make the deaf hear.'³¹ For these revolutionaries, being a revolutionary was an act of bold and defiant self-definition.

This literature, however, gives little insight into their underground existence, neither do the plethora of popular visual and oral materials such as prints, posters, paintings, poems, songs and plays about the revolutionaries that were circulating since the late 1920s.³² So where does one go for the information about their everyday lives? My journey with this book did not start with a desire to find and write about the revolutionaries' everyday while their everyday life was right there in each memoir they wrote and every interview they gave. They continued to write even after their organisations were decimated by the colonial police and the judiciary. The outcome was an array of memoirs, biographies, personal diaries, commemorative volumes, essays, journal articles, letters and interviews. The range of their writings goes to show how these revolutionaries were loquacious, eager to

be heard and not forgotten by later generations. It is in this literature that one finds the details of the lives they lived away from public gaze.

On most occasions I set the details of their everyday life aside as unimportant because the focus was to extract the information about the ideology (the intellectual as opposed to the mundane) and the revolutionary 'actions' (assassinations, bomb throwing, and so on). This disregard for the revolutionaries' quotidian lives was also a consequence of subtle but deeply gendered presumptions regarding their inner lives – lives that were led in familial spaces and therefore presumed to be feminine, and thereby believed to be politically inconsequential.³³ In contrast were their sensational revolutionary actions – heroic and awe-inspiring, that is, masculinised, and therefore believed to be 'events' worthy of scholarly attention. Scholarship on communist and labour movements also attests the exclusion of the personal or the private in political writings and, in turn, in the academic scholarship.³⁴ When studying male revolutionaries, the scholarship tends to focus on 'ideology', that is, the search is for the intellectual, the extraordinary and the exceptional as opposed to the mundane and the everyday. The fact that active revolutionaries gave up their homes and families reinforced these binaries and led to the neglect of the study of their quotidian existence unless one studied female revolutionaries.³⁵ As I read the memoirs I had a serendipitous realisation that altered my research journey. The revolutionaries were really 'visible' in their banter, ruminations and in everything else that appeared as having no bearing on their revolutionary self but, in effect, had everything to do with it. This illuminated the everyday life of the revolutionaries that had initially appeared as being irrelevant to writing their political history.

The word 'memoir' here includes biographies, interviews, reminiscences and commemorative volumes. One can argue that they all belong to different genres. However, here they are all performing the function of a memoir. A memoir can be understood as a text that recounts a phase of life of the author or the narrator in which he or she played an important role or was involved in some measure. A memoir seeks to record one's involvement in and experience of the public events or the movement or a relationship with a person or a group. It is self-referential and autobiographical but narrower in focus.³⁶ A memoir also draws on recollection of others. As a first-hand account, a memoir reveals much about the writer's or raconteur's

‘experience’, subjectivities, emotional worlds, individual rationales and consciousness.³⁷

While most of the revolutionary memoirs were written in post-Independence India, a few were written before 1947. These include Jatindranath Sanyal’s biography of Bhagat Singh that was published following his hanging in 1931, Yashpal’s journal *Viplav* (1939–1941) that he brought out after being released from jail, Bijoy Kumar Sinha’s *In Andamans: The Indian Bastille* (1939), a memoir of the time he spent exiled in the Andamans, and Manmathnath Gupta’s jail diary that he wrote while serving a sentence in Naini Central Prison in Allahabad in 1945. The ones written post-Independence include several biographical writings, commemorative volumes and collections brought out by the surviving revolutionaries and the families of the revolutionaries as part of golden jubilee celebrations of their deaths and hangings that carry reminiscences, documents and the letters of the revolutionaries written to their family members and to their associates.³⁸

Another vital remnant that gives us access to their daily lives are the Hindi and English ‘archived oral history transcripts’ of the surviving revolutionaries and several of their associates. These are transcripts of interviews conducted by S. L. Manchanda and Hari Dev Sharma from the late 1960s and through the early 1980s as part of the Nehru Memorial and Museum Library’s (NMML) oral history project. All the NMML transcripts begin with the interviewer asking for the details of the interviewee’s childhood, family and the milieu they grew up in, followed by the sowing of the seed of political consciousness, their mobilisation and participation in the national movement. The transcripts open up a vast world of the inner lives of the revolutionaries with copious details of the interviewee’s interactions and conversations with their associates and their personal journeys.³⁹ Similar to the NMML oral history interviews, the University of Cambridge’s Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS) also conducted interviews of a plethora of British, Anglo-Indian and Indian folk who had lived in India during the days of the Raj. Some of the interviewees, such as Lala Feroz Chand, Bimal Prasad Jain and Nand Kishore Nigam, were associated with the HSRA revolutionaries. The sound recordings and transcripts of their interviews are available in English on the CSAS website.⁴⁰

Ploughing through the revolutionary memoirs, diaries, correspondence, interviews and reminiscences, what does one find about the revolutionaries and their everyday? As the reader shall see, these writings showcase the revolutionary-in-waiting. They dwell the longest and most fondly on the period the revolutionaries spent living together, that is, on their everyday togetherness. When staying collectively in their dens in different cities, the young men spent their time reconnoitring possible action spots, arranging arms, ammunition and chemicals for carrying out action, discussing strategies for escape if arrested, target practising, and learning to handle and maintain arms. They debated amongst themselves, had intense discussions about nationalist politics, socialist ideology, revolutionary methods, capitalism and colonialism, and together wrote propaganda materials. Or, like Rajguru (a member of the HSRA who was later hanged), who slept it off in different positions – on the cot, on the floor, in the den, at the railway station, in the open fields, splayed, curled up or even standing up – at all times of the day. Once running away from the police, he got very sleepy and spent the night sleeping in wet fields.⁴¹ The tedium of their days was at times broken when they had money to afford a few indulgences such as extra or nicer food or to watch a movie show if one got luckier. Bhagat is said to have never missed a show of Charlie Chaplin and loved the movie versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the *Three Musketeers*.⁴² These men did not wait in stillness or in a state of stagnation, immobility, stasis or torpor – all the imageries associated with waiting.

~ Reading Memoir, Writing History ~

The revolutionaries' memoirs go beyond simple recollections of life in revolution. They are self-conscious political acts of inscribing oneself into history. They recall the past in the present for the purpose of securing it for posterity, in the service of an imagined future. In this much, the act of writing memoirs was a manifestation of the revolutionaries' deep relationship with time – the framing idea of this book. In many instances, the later editions of the memoirs published by newer publication houses do not carry the original publication date, imposing on these texts a historical immutability. Perhaps this strategy is a referent to the continued relevance of the texts, or their being suspended in time and their timelessness mimicking, as we shall see, the revolutionaries' conception of their lives. This is also reflected

in the manner in which the memoirs are titled either after a person in a leadership position or a person the author reveres and was reminiscing about – Ram Prasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla, Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhar Azad – or the titles have adjectives for the person or for revolutionism such as ‘Yug ke Devta’ (Gods of an Age), ‘Desh ke Nirmata’ (Builders of the Country), ‘Yugdrashta’ (Witness of an Age), ‘Agnipunj’ (Fire Collective), ‘Kranti ka Sakshya’ (Witness of Revolution) and ‘Amar Shaheed’ (Undead Martyrs). The repeated use of the terms ‘witnesses’ (*sakshi*), ‘an eon’ or ‘time’ (*yug*) and ‘being ever-living’/‘timeless’ (*amar*) imagines the revolutionaries and their memorialists as ever-present witnesses of the times they lived in and of their experience of time – all gesturing to the profound connection the revolutionary ontology had with time.⁴³

Durba Ghosh in her work on Bengali revolutionaries demonstrates how they took control of history and the pace of historical change by ‘writing’ their memoirs.⁴⁴ Written right after the First World War, the memoirs of the first generation of *bhadralok* Bengali revolutionaries sought to revive the radical movement that was perceived to have been repressed by the colonial state during the War. In ideological contention with the growing might of non-violence as a political ideology, these memoirs wanted to inspire the youth to join the revolutionary secret societies. Even the officials of the Government of Bengal noted the ‘publication of articles relating to experiences of the old revolutionaries. Many of these have been written in the first person and purport to be personal reminiscences, others, with different degrees of frankness, express admiration of these heroes of the former days’.⁴⁵ Notable amongst these, for our purpose, was the HRA founder Sachindranath Sanyal’s *Bandi Jivan*. Written in three parts, its first part was published in 1922. *Bandi Jivan*, written in Bengali and translated into Hindi and Punjabi, would become a bible for that generation of revolutionaries and the ones who came after. The second wave of Bengali revolutionary memoirs were written right after India’s independence. These memoirs carried several emotions – an urgency to record the revolutionaries’ lives for posterity; resentment at the marginalisation of the revolutionaries’ contribution to the anti-colonial resistance; perplexity with the novel independence and it not being what they had imagined; and a bewilderment at their location in the new milieu.⁴⁶

A similar anxiety to preserve the past for posterity drove the penning of memoirs of the HRA and HSRA revolutionaries. Written or narrated

retrospectively in the first person singular, the tenor of these memoirs was markedly different from their political and propaganda materials that was at times collectively authored.⁴⁷ These memoirs consistently exhibit an urgency to record the story of their participation in, and their contribution to, the nationalist struggle. Most of the surviving revolutionaries and their associates felt that they were waging a losing battle against time. Following the hanging of HSRA members Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru in March 1931 and of Surya Sen and Tarakeswar Dastidar (the leaders of the Chittagong armoury raid) in January 1934, the mood and tenor of militant dissent shifted in the Indian subcontinent. While the revolutionaries continued to be active and carried out several actions, they were not able to regroup in the way they had during the 1920s. Most revolutionaries in northern India were either shot, hung or jailed or had gone into hiding.

The revolutionaries' memoirs were also responding to what they perceived as a shift in the attitude of the Congress leaders towards militant resistance from the 1930s onwards. Until the early 1930s, many Congress leaders had given open or covert support to the militant nationalists of all shades. Govind Vallabh Pant (1887–1961), who became the Chief Minister of the United Provinces in 1935 and served as the Home Minister in independent India, had represented the HRA revolutionaries when they were embroiled in the Kakori Conspiracy Case Trial. The editors of the newspaper *Aaj*, Babu Shivprasad Gupta and Baburao Prarkar, were inclined towards the Congress but had implicit faith in Sachindranath Sanyal and generously helped him with funds.⁴⁸ Motilal Nehru until his death in February 1931 remained in communication with the HRA and HSRA revolutionaries, supported them with funds on occasion and also made arrangements for their defence in the Lahore Conspiracy Case Trial (1929–1931).⁴⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru also openly supported militant radicalism and released political prisoners in Madras, Bombay, the United Provinces and Bihar following the formation of Congress ministries in 1935. The memoirs, however, note a growing ambivalence and reluctance in Jawaharlal Nehru's attitude from the time he began campaigning for the 1935 Assembly elections.⁵⁰ They insist that it took relentless pursuit and a hunger strike (by the political prisoners in Naini Jail) to make the Congress government release the political prisoners. It was not an outcome of Congress' political largesse.⁵¹ Within a few years of the formation of the Congress ministries, even the Congress Working Committee had begun to

display ambivalence and, in some quarters, active hostility to the cause of the imprisoned revolutionaries. They were censorious of the revolutionaries who, on their release, began to give 'inflammatory' speeches or went on hunger strikes while still in jail.⁵²

This hostility towards the revolutionaries, according to the memoirs, continued into independent India. Many claimed to have received short shrift especially at the hands of Jawaharlal Nehru once he became the Prime Minister of India.⁵³ They particularly took exception to Nehru's representation of Azad as a fascist and a misguided leader in his autobiography *Towards Freedom* and to Nehru's statement: 'Terrorism is always a sign of political immaturity.'⁵⁴ Many of the revolutionaries who embraced communism say that they received flak because the Communist Party of India did not support the Indian National Congress in its anti-British struggle during the Second World War. Post-Independence they suffered because of Nehru's ideological persecution of the communists and for their opposition to the Congress' anti-people policies. Shiv Verma, for instance, went into hiding for several years after Independence and was jailed during the Indo-China war in 1962.⁵⁵ From the violence that marked the coming of Independence, the state repression of Naxalism in the early 1970s, to the suspension of civil rights during the Emergency (1975), and the right- and left-wing appropriation of different shades of revolutionaries, the history of independent India as it unfolded further contributed to the setting aside of the revolutionaries' legacy or it was reconfigured (and/or appropriated) to further contemporary political agendas.⁵⁶ Many revolutionaries felt that between Gandhi's non-violence and Nehru's nationalist-Marxism, their contribution to India's struggle for independence was written out of the post-Independence accounts of Indian history. Their memoirs were thus seeking to correct the balance of history and reclaim their past.

Some memoirs were also seeking to correct the balance in other ways. The family members and friends of some of the revolutionaries such as Sukhdev (he was hanged at the end of the Lahore Conspiracy Trial along with Bhagat Singh and Rajguru) and Yashpal (he went on to become a famous Hindi novelist) believed that their revolutionary legacy had been overshadowed by that of Bhagat Singh – a reason being that their reputation in the revolutionary cohort carried the suspicious taint of having colluded with the British. On being arrested, Sukhdev had given the police the

details of the revolutionary action and had accompanied them to their hideouts. While Sukhdev's hanging seemed to have expiated him in the eyes of his fellow revolutionaries of the taint of betrayal, it nevertheless broke the organisation and kept the surviving revolutionaries from talking about him in laudatory terms.⁵⁷ Sukhdev's brother Mathura Das, while writing his biography, wished to cleanse his brother of any wrongdoing and to restore his legacy vis-à-vis Bhagat Singh.⁵⁸

On the other hand, Yashpal was rumoured to have served as a police informer.⁵⁹ It is said that Azad had been upset with Yashpal for getting married without his, the party leader's, permission and had, therefore, ordered Durga Das Khanna to shoot Yashpal. While Azad and Yashpal were known to have reconciled later, Yashpal was believed to have nursed a grudge against Azad for having given the shooting order. Some memoirs allege that Yashpal played a role in the bomb blast that killed Bhagwati Charan Vohra and in passing on the information of Azad's location to the police which ultimately led to his death in the encounter that followed.⁶⁰ Yashpal tried to extricate himself out of all these allegations in his journal *Viplav* and in the Hindi magazine *Dharmayug* and later went on to write a book, *Simhavalokana*, on his time as a revolutionary. His wife, Prakashvati Pal (née Kapur), in her NMML oral history transcript claimed that a few of the revolutionaries disliked Yashpal and continued to malign his name.⁶¹ Notwithstanding Yashpal's later fame as a foremost Hindi litterateur, it seems that his HSRA associates did not entirely absolve him. There was a general feeling that Yashpal overstated his role in the HSRA. He portrayed himself as being at the centre stage during the period when most of the HSRA revolutionaries were on trial (1929–1931) and he was in hiding with his associates Chandrashekar Azad and Bhagwati Charan Vohra, both of whom soon died within a few months of each other.⁶²

The fact that many of the HSRA revolutionaries gravitated towards the Communist Party of India in the years following India's independence impacted their writings. For most of them, the time they spent in jail gave them an opportunity to read more deeply than they had done while living underground and this made them appreciate communism.⁶³ Bhagwandas Mahour was one such associate of Azad to turn to communism during the time he spent in Sabarmati Central Jail, where he read extensively. After Independence, he briefly worked as a journalist and then devoted himself to completing his education and became a lecturer of Hindi in

Bundelkhand College in Jhansi. He parted ways with the Communist Party over electoral politics in 1952 but remained committed to the ideology.⁶⁴ Manmathnath Gupta, a member of the HRA, spent several years in jail following his sentencing in the Kakori train robbery case in 1925 and, after Independence, joined the Communist Party and made his mark in the Hindi literary world. Besides short stories, novellas and Hindi literary criticism, he also wrote several books on the history of the revolutionary movement.⁶⁵ In his earliest work he presents a searing critique of Gandhian non-violence and 'the universal conspiracy of silence' in obliterating the role of the revolutionaries in India's independence.⁶⁶ His books held out the hope of 'scientific socialism' delivering India from its enslavement. Ajoy Ghosh, Dhanwantri and Shiv Verma also turned towards communism and joined the Communist Party of India. Verma's writings presume that had Bhagat Singh survived, he would have embraced communism for sure.⁶⁷ Satyabhakt, one of the founders of the Communist Party of India, in his biography of Bhagat Singh (written in 1981) uses the word *samyavadi*, or communist, instead of *samajvadi*, or socialist, to describe Bhagat's political ideology.⁶⁸ The inevitability that they presuppose in Bhagat's metamorphosis was clearly a projection of their own ideological position but one also premised on Bhagat Singh's last essay, written on 2 February 1931, 'An Appeal to the Young Political Workers', where he urged the young people to read Marx and Lenin and undertake mass propaganda, and elucidated the meaning of revolution as freedom from bondage of capitalism and imperial wars.⁶⁹

Yashpal and his associate Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayana, known as 'Agyeya', famous Hindi writers, also turned towards communism but they did not join left organisations or the Communist Party.⁷⁰ Agyeya was a late entrant in the HSRA. He joined after the Lahore Conspiracy Case Trial had started and when Azad and others were hatching plans to rescue Bhagat Singh from jail.⁷¹ Agyeya's and Yashpal's disillusionment with the conditions of post-Independence India translated into a refusal to attach themselves to any socialist, progressive or new politico-cultural movements, and this eventually led them to put aside their pre-Independence revolutionary lives. The later generations knew them primarily for their contribution to Hindi poetry, novels and literary culture than for the time they spent in the revolutionary movement. Agyeya was the revolutionary who waited too long and whose romance of resistance soured into despair.

The wait had turned into frustration, dejection and dystopia. This is reflected in his novel *Shekhar: Ek Jivani* (1941–1942) where Agyeya paints a picture of ‘incompleteness’, an unfinished process of becoming a revolutionary, and of a failed revolution.⁷² From this also stems Agyeya’s imagination of a *yayavar*, wanderer or gypsy, with no itinerary or end to his journey.⁷³ Interestingly, despite the despondent tenor of their writings, the literary revolutionary characters in Yashpal’s *Dada Kamrad* and his short story ‘Saag’ fearlessly critiqued caste oppression, heterosexuality and patriarchy, and, in doing so, superseded the radicalism of real-life revolutionaries. Similar was the case of the literary revolutionaries of Jainendra Kumar’s *Sunita*, Kedarnath Pandey’s *Jine ke Liye* and Bhagwati Charan Varma’s *Tedhe-Medhe Raste*.⁷⁴ Their authors’ radical selves now lived on through their literature.

There were also those revolutionaries who never wrote and ones who chose to fade into oblivion. Kundan Lal was one such revolutionary. He also embraced communism during the time he spent in the Cellular Jail on the Andaman Islands. Like many others, the prison cell became a university where, for the first time, he immersed himself in reading and engaging with Marxist ideas.⁷⁵ He took up journalism after his release and continued in the profession post-Independence. His life took an interesting turn when he moved to Nagpur where Vinayak Damodar Savarkar’s elder brother Baba Rao Savarkar assisted Kundan Lal with his medical treatment and he eventually found employment with the right-wing journal *Yugdharma*, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s mouthpiece.⁷⁶ Kundan Lal worked there all his life despite being a communist and with the full support of its editor, Satyapal Patait. The anti-British struggle bonded them despite their divergent political ideologies. He spent his life on a meagre salary, shunned public glare, refused government salary and lived in a garage-like tenement.⁷⁷ Batukeshwar Dutt was also exiled to the Andamans and on his return joined the Navyuvak Sangh that worked to mobilise the communist cadres and the *kisan sabhas*. He organised a massive congregation of armed peasants and labourers and the old revolutionaries of the HSRA and the Ghadar Party in 1939. After Independence he moved to Patna and got married. Despite settling down into domestic life, Dutt remained ill at ease with the world around him. He stayed home while his wife worked as a school teacher and the couple faced endless financial struggles. Dutt refused to participate in parliamentary politics

which would have secured him financially and given him political clout. The time spent in the Andamans had broken Dutt's health and he finally succumbed to cancer. He was taken to Ferozepur for cremation where the dead bodies of his HSRA friends Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev had been burnt. In the last years of his life, Dutt had moved away from atheism and journeyed back to believing in the divine.⁷⁸ Durga Das Khanna also talks about recovery of faith in the jail cell while under trial in the Lahore Conspiracy Case:

I had such a vivid vision of the child Krishna with his flute... I began my day with silent prayers. It was revealing that in spite of my Marxist studies earlier, God had not completely slipped out of my heart. At the first opportunity He came out in all his glory and splendour and possessed me so ardently. My cell became for me a sample of God verily.⁷⁹

Similar was Sukhdev Raj's turnaround, who became a Buddhist monk and then gave up the ochre robes to serve in a lepers' village.⁸⁰ Kundan Lal, Batukeshwar and Sukhdev Raj were not the only ones who died in poor health, poverty and unsung. So did Dr Gaya Prasad, Dhanwantri, Sadashiv Malkapurkar, Kishori Lal, Surendranath Pandey, Jaidev Kapur, Kashi Ram, Mukundi Lal and Sushila Mohan. It was to memorialise the lives of such friends-in-arms that many revolutionary comrades penned their memoirs.

These memoirs carry the messiness that comes with memory.⁸¹ Written with the intent to put the 'record straight', the memoirs present themselves as repositories of remembrance; however, it is the dialectics of remembering and forgetting that informs the writing of these texts. They are not straightforward and faithful retrievals but reconfigurations. In places, the authors quibble over details that are otherwise small but acquire significance when one is seeking to preserve one's family legacy. One instance of this is Sukhdev's brother Mathura Das' insistence that it was his mother and not Durga Devi Vohra (also known as Durga Bhabhi), wife of Bhagwati Charan Vohra, who accompanied Bhagat Singh when he was escaping Lahore after Saunders' murder.⁸² According to Jaidev Kapur, however, Bhagat Singh was accompanied by Durga Bhabhi and Azad was accompanied by Sukhdev's sister.⁸³ Reading the memoirs together, the discrepancies and disagreements in narratives coming from the different vantage points of the raconteurs create the proverbial 'Rashomon-effect'. However, the clarity and distortions of memory both reveal much that

is useful to a historian in mining the interpersonal relationships of the revolutionaries.

These memoirs are also fundamentally polyphonic. Although authored by individuals, they swivel between using 'I' and 'We' when talking about the life in revolution. The secret nature of the revolutionary organisations meant that no one person knew everything and neither could they record everything as they witnessed it.⁸⁴ This slippage between I and We can be read as a reflection of their subjectivity – the moments when they were speaking for themselves, when they resonated the collective, when the 'We' became a subterfuge for not having to say what 'I' felt, or when 'I' as it was experienced in relation to the others. The spaces in between I and We provide a pathway into their motley and fissured inner world where the differences in socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, ideas and attitudes and what revolutionism and independence meant to them become visible.

Insistent in their emotional intimacy, and refreshing in their lack of any pretence to neutrality, these materials provide a surprisingly candid view of lives in revolution, the unsanitised and messy backyard of revolutionary existence – young men still figuring out the world around themselves; assessing, disagreeing and arguing with each other; and struggling with the disjuncture between their burgeoning revolutionary consciousness and their lived reality. They unabashedly talk about the heterogeneous character of their organisations, internal debates and dissensions, their likes and dislikes, the revolutionaries' struggle with old ways of being and thinking, variations in what they understood as revolution, how to bring about revolution, the nature and meaning of socialism, whether to remain a secret organisation or become a mass organisation, whether to be atheists or continue practising the religion of one's forefathers, the inner workings of the organisation, and the intense emotional lives of the revolutionaries marked by deep friendships and betrayals. These memoirs and reminiscences sway between profound nostalgia, near-hagiographical appreciation of their associates and sharp critical analysis that comes with the benefit of hindsight. They are objective but not necessarily neutral.⁸⁵

~ An Intimate 'Anti-narrative' ~

In recent years, the significant political role the revolutionaries played during the inter-war years has attracted scholarly attention and several

recent works have opened up the field of the revolutionary history of this period in novel and original ways. Kama Maclean, Chris Moffat, Daniel J. Elam, Simona Sawhney, Neeti Nair, Kuldeep Nayar, S. Irfan Habib and Ishwar Dayal Gaur use Bhagat Singh, his writings, his understanding of revolutionism, his legacy and popular narratives about him as points of entry into the history of revolutionism.⁸⁶ While these writings are invaluable in their contribution to our knowledge of history of revolutionism, they have given rise to an understanding of revolutionary ontology that is premised on Bhagat Singh and elements of his persona and his life. In this framework, the acts of reading and writing coupled with a belief in socialism become essential elements of the revolutionary ontology, similar to the Bengali revolutionaries that Durba Ghosh studies.⁸⁷ This historiographical frame with a singular focus on the 'revolutionary-who-reads-and-writes' imposes a unitary consciousness on the revolutionary as the subject of the study by constructing a binary – the individual who makes choices (and who writes) and thereby changes his life and that of others versus the individual whose life is determined by the structure (the socio-cultural context they find themselves in). In this schema, the former is the revolutionary – the individualistic and individualised rebel and, more often than not, a male.

The co-relation between reading and becoming a revolutionary is an idea that even the revolutionaries subscribed to. This is borne out by the recruitment policy of most of the revolutionary organisations that required the new recruits to first read certain books before they were considered worthy or ready for action. Durga Devi Vohra, wife of Bhagwati Charan Vohra, says in one place: 'First phase is an emotional one and after reading one becomes a revolutionary.'⁸⁸ A fundamental binary between emotions and immaturity on one side and reading, rationality and maturity on the other is drawn in several instances in the revolutionary memoirs. For example, Bhagwandas Mahour confesses how he had to 'overrule the emotions' in order to commit dacoities and how 'conflict between emotions and intellect would disbalance him'.⁸⁹ This hydraulic view of emotions as elements of our being that need to be kept reined in lest they take over, and reading being the best mode of regulating them, is, however, contradicted in the next instant in these reminiscences when the narration slips into describing the revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh as *deewana*, crazed, or *utavala*, impatient, and how they saw their being revolutionaries as an emotional commitment. These narrative slippages make classifying the

revolutionaries as one or the other difficult. The questions for a historian then are: How do we analyse these textual slippages? What do they offer to our understanding of the revolutionaries as an affective community?⁹⁰

Waiting for Swaraj challenges the above historiographical portraiture of the revolutionaries. The book dislodges the historical narratives that study the Indian revolutionary movement primarily through the lens of Bhagat Singh – his persona, actions and writings. It questions the presumed significance of socialism as a cementing philosophy or as a telos that revolutionary history was moving towards, and problematises the notion that ideology overrides, and is separate from, praxis. It does so by widening the canvas of the history of revolutionism by bringing in other leaders and members of the HRA and HSRA, many of whom had a sensibility sharply at variance with Bhagat Singh and yet saw themselves as revolutionaries. This book captures an alternative revolutionary ontology (and its inviolable connection with time) by focussing on the life experiences of the less visible members of the HRA and the HSRA. It contends that the fount of ontology and ideology lie in praxis, that is, the inner life, the quotidian existence, and in the practices of everyday life of the revolutionaries.

The life story of Chandrashekhar Azad (1906–1931), a member of the HRA and the leader of the HSRA, serves as the narrative spindle that binds the different chapters of the book. Azad's life journey drives us to imagine the 'invisible' revolutionary life beyond the prison or the courtroom (which are common frames for writing revolutionary histories) as he was an exception in having evaded police arrest and thereby never spending any time in jail or being put on a trial.⁹¹ Azad was one of the rare revolutionaries to have had an active political life of about a decade as a member of the HRA (1924–1927) and the HSRA (1928–1931) – two different revolutionary organisations in terms of their members, ideas, orientation and functioning. Azad was involved in running both the organisations on the ground: setting up dens, overseeing bomb-making, guarding hideouts, managing the finances, arranging and buying firearms, cleaning and maintaining them, and planning the actions – recceing the site, deciding the number of members required, choosing who will shoot, who will stand guard, which exit will they use, who will tackle the policeman, who will give cover, and so on. His life journey thus widens the canvas of historical inquiry by bringing together the lives, relationships

and literature of the members of the HRA and the HSRA in the same frame and anchoring them in the longer history of revolutionism.

In the chapters that follow, the literature on the HRA and the writings of revolutionaries associated with it (Sachindranath Sanyal, Ram Prasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan, Ram Prasad Khatri, Manmathnath Gupta, Vishnu Sharan Dublith, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee) appear in conversation with each other and with that of the HSRA (Bhagat Singh, Jaidev Kapur, Yashpal, Bijoy Kumar Sinha, Durga Devi Vohra). The HRA has received short shrift in Indian revolutionary history. Research on the HRA has been superseded by its more well-known successor, the HSRA, with the HRA receiving stray mentions in the latter's history. Ram Prasad Bismil and Ashfaqulla, for instance, were prolific writers and poets and have left behind a body of work, especially in Urdu, that awaits academic attention.⁹² Ram Prasad's adoption of the Urdu pen name 'Bismil' along with his deep devotion to Arya Samaj was a referent to a way of being that escapes analysis when using the present-day political binary of left and right wing. Examining the significant borrowings and departures between the two organisations helps locate the HSRA in a more *longue durée* history of Indian revolutionism. The memoirs of revolutionaries hitherto ignored or considered marginal in studying the history of revolutionism, such as Bhagwandas Mahour, Sadashiv Malkapurkar, Ram Prasad Khatri and Vishwanath Vaishampayan, also acquire greater significance when one is trying to piece together the lives, roles and contribution of the rank-and-file members.⁹³ Bringing these diverse sets of writings into focus also recalibrates the significance of the revolutionary memoirs and the historical works singularly focussing on the political materials of the HSRA, Bhagat Singh and the works of his Lahore associates, such as Yashpal and Ajoy Ghosh.⁹⁴

The challenges in using Azad's life as the narrative mandrel were twofold. The first major challenge is that it unveiled shades of revolutionism that otherwise get subsumed in the dominant narratives. Here was a revolutionary who was neither like Bhagat Singh nor like the Bengali revolutionary leaders. Chandrashekhar Azad was a revolutionary whose radicalisation was neither a product of education nor a consequence of radical socio-familial background. He did not care for intellectual minutiae and neither did he 'write' himself into 'history' by penning essays, pamphlets and memoirs. Nor did Azad care to be memorialised in the manner he was

after his death. Once he severely admonished Bhagat Singh for wanting to know the details of his family in order to assist them in the event of Azad's death. He retorted angrily: 'Dekho Ranjit (Bhagat Singh ka dal ka naam), is baar puccha, to puccha, ab phir kabhi mat pucchna. Na gharwalon ko tumhari sahayata se matlab hai aur na mujhe apna jeevan charitra hi likhna hai' (See, Ranjit [Bhagat Singh's party name], this time you asked so you asked, now never ask me again. Neither do my family members care for your assistance nor do I want to write my memoirs).⁹⁵ It was Azad's unshakeable belief in the might of arms in bringing about *swaraj* that kept him going. Given that his persona does not fit easily in the extant frames made me directly confront the question regarding how to configure the revolutionary ontology when it comes to people such as Azad. Evidently, in writing about Azad, and especially the inner lives of the revolutionaries, one was swimming against the tide of dominant historiographical frames without a conceptual buoy to hold it in place.

The second challenge was regarding crafting the historical narrative. How not to write a romantic and celebratory history of revolutionary lives, given the near-hagiographical manner in which Azad's associates, who respected and cherished him immensely, write about him; and how to compose a narrative out of diverse non-archival, oral and biographical sources that spoke in different and at times contradictory voices? In order to address these concerns and to deal with the complexities of crafting a narrative, I had to dive into a diverse range of historical and anthropological works relating to practice theory and cultural 'thick description'; the importance of 'everyday', 'experience' and the 'small voice of history'; the relevance of microhistorical scale and vantage point of historical writing; the ones theorising oral histories and using autobiographies as historical evidence; and, finally, the ones delving into the history of emotions – all of which went into parsing through the primary material and crafting the narrative.⁹⁶

Moving forward, in the next chapter I dive into the social world of Azad to map the young man's early journey as he gradually acquires a revolutionary consciousness and begins to identify as a revolutionary. I examine the antecedents of his radical imagination, the emotional and ideational resources available to a person like him and others, and the circumstances that propelled the young men onto the path of revolutionism in the 1920s. The chapter further undertakes a detailed discussion of

the life of the HRA revolutionaries, their struggle with new ideas, their religious beliefs and their underground life. What comes to the fore is the production of revolutionaries through social practice in the world and, in turn, production of the world through social practice.⁹⁷ That is, how structure (in this case colonialism) impacts, moulds and constitutes the subjectivities of ordinary people; the manner in which actions of people constitute their reality and the world around them; and how these actions, in turn, rupture, transform and contest the people's earlier ways of being. In studying these elements this chapter disrupts the neat essentialisms in which the lives of the revolutionaries come wrapped, one of them being that revolutionism was an inevitable choice foretold in the early life of these young men.

The reader is acquainted with the next stage of Azad's life after the decimation of the HRA and his rise as the leader of the HSRA in Chapter 3. It focusses on the everyday conversations, debates and disagreements of the HSRA members, particularly regarding the importance of religion, the value and meaning of socialist ideas, how best to organise a revolutionary struggle and what revolution meant to them. Their memoirs show how their responses to different issues varied from indifference, bafflement, complete rejection and selective dismissal to theoretical cherry-picking to grudging agreement. Their disparate socio-cultural, class and educational backgrounds played into their conversations and responses to new ideas. The revolutionaries' memoirs occasion a pause in our understanding regarding the ideological consensus that appears in the revolutionaries' political tracts produced for propaganda purposes. The gaps between the two sets of writings make it hard to see the HSRA revolutionaries simply as socialists or internationalists and question the degree to which internationalism and socialism constituted their consciousness. The questions it bring up are: Did they see themselves as portents of a global phenomenon or is it the historians who have located them in this framework? Or were they simply nationalist revolutionaries? These questions are important because they unsettle a tidy complementarity hitherto presumed in several historical writings between Indian revolutionism and globally circulating anti-authoritarian thought in the aftermath of the First World War. They also challenge the presumed atheism of the HSRA revolutionaries and force us to re-examine the importance of religion and its place in the lives of these revolutionaries. And, finally, it pushes us to ask what held the

revolutionaries together, given that they were such a disparate bunch – was it just revolutionary ideology or was there more?

The final chapter weaves together the narrative of Azad's initiation into the revolutionary movement on the Manikarnika Ghat in the city of Banaras and his assassination in a police encounter in Allahabad to explore the intimate inter-relationship between death, time and revolutionary ontology. For the revolutionaries, their death actually rendered them ever-living or timeless (*amar*). It was the fulfilment of their destiny as a link in the long unbroken chain of warriors going way back in history and which would continue until the time India became independent. The chapter demonstrates how the revolutionaries had a dialectical relationship with time, which was reflected in their observance of political asceticism in their daily life (the invisible) and in their embrace of violence as a political tool (the visible). Focussing on their quotidian lives, the chapter examines how the twin ideals – asceticism and violence – allowed the revolutionaries 'temporal mobility', that is, they were able to transcend what they saw as an imperfect present and thereby shorten the time-distance to their political utopia – *poorna swaraj* (complete independence). Detaching themselves from the imperfections of their time – the rhythms of industrial time and giving up their lifestyles as upper-caste men or at least questioning their socio-cultural upbringing – was their attempt at experiencing *swaraj* (self-rule).

Finally, what does focusing on intimate political lives – the inter-relationships between different revolutionaries, their thoughts and conversations, and the inner workings of the revolutionary organisation – offer to our understanding of revolution? In asking this question, this book, much like Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, presents an 'antinarrative' of the popular understanding of revolution that is associated with the imagery of seismic convulsions, mobs baying for murder, army men with guns and bayonets stamping through streets, gunshots and cannonball explosions, utter chaos, and the world up in flames. Revolutions are generally studied as 'events' bound by space and time, with a beginning, middle and an end.⁹⁸ Perhaps revolutions are not just world-transforming events but, as Daniel Elam persuasively argues, a process – a slow accretion of human actions and happenings.⁹⁹ Seeing revolution as a process enables us to understand the histories of people who saw themselves as revolutionaries but were ones without a 'classic'

revolution and were thus written out of history as 'failures'. Their presence indicates that there is more to the history of revolutions than 'events' that either failed or succeeded. Their presence also redefines the way we understand failure. These revolutionaries' utopia was the attainment of *swaraj*, and many survived to see India attaining *swaraj*, but not the one they had dreamt of. In this much, the morning they wished to awaken to never came and it was not they who failed but, in their view, time (in this case represented as history) that had failed them.

