

BHAGAT SINGH: BEYOND A REVOLUTIONARY

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Abstract

Bhagat Singh is popularly celebrated as one of the major leaders of the Indian anti-colonial movement. He represents the character of Indian Revolutionaries in the third decade of this century. His rejection of Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, his antipathy towards the reformist attitude of the Congress, his belief in Marxian Communism, his atheism, his belief in terrorism as a mode to uphold the dignity of a suppressed and humiliated people, his claim of revolution as a Birth right, were all ideas that influenced the Indian youth in the twenties and the thirties. The Conspiracy Case not only made the Indians aware of the unjust and repressive character of the British rule but also popularized the ideas and activities of the revolutionaries. Bhagat Singh's importance lies in the fact that he represented the character and temper of the revolutionaries of his times. He was both an activist and a thinker. His ideas are no less important than his death as a martyr.

Keywords: Independence, Violence, Revolution, Religion, National.

In the mainstream historiography of India's freedom struggle, which concentrates a lot on the Gandhi-Nehru-Congress narrative, not much has been written about the revolutionaries and their lives, apart from a few hagiographic tales of violent acts or suffering in Port Blair's Cellular jail. And this absence of detailed and well-structured writings has had its effect on the popular discourse about revolutionaries. The revolutionaries contributed a great deal in their own way towards the freedom of the country. Although they could not penetrate deeply into the hearts of

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the masses they certainly infused in them a sense of patriotism and a determination to drive out foreigners from their soil. This spirit alarmed the British bureaucrats. Even those who were opposed to their ideology and methods praised them for their love of motherland and the heroic way in which they faced the gallows and an extremely hard life in the jails. While denouncing their cult of violence, even Mahatma Gandhi, an apostle of non-violence, unhesitatingly appreciated their feelings of intense patriotism and their willingness to sacrifice their all for the emancipation of their country from foreign yoke. Among martyrs who willingly treaded the thorny path with courage and faced the gallows with fortitude, the name of Bhagat Singh shines as a star. He is rightly called 'Prince of Martyrs'.

¹ In Gandhi's words, "Bhagat Singh was not a devotee of non-violence, but he did not subscribe to the religion of violence. He took to violence due to helplessness and to defend his homeland. These heroes had conquered the fear of death. Let us bow to them a thousand times for their heroism."² In the nationalistic rhetoric of politicians across parties, mainstream cinema, various self-proclaimed patriotic websites and posts on social media, Bhagat Singh is often portrayed as a macho gun-toting freedom fighter who believed that violence is more effective a way of achieving independence from British rule than Gandhi's non-violent means. That Bhagat Singh picked up the gun to kill a British police officer to avenge Lala Lajpat Rai's death, and he threw bombs at Englishmen are emphasized a lot more than the thoughts and ideas guiding him. Such recurrent shallow descriptions completely overlook how mature a political thinker Bhagat Singh was.³ A closer introspection into the life of Bhagat Singh reveals that there exists a narrative that is completely different from what mainstream historiography tells us about the revolutionist and his acts. A study of Bhagat Singh's jail notebooks, letters written by him, statements he issued in the court, his essay on atheism, Why I am an atheist, reveal that there is a lot more to Bhagat Singh than his acts of murdering someone or throwing a bomb.

A Revolutionary

The revolutionaries discovered their fount of inspiration in the trio of –B.G.Tilak, B.C. Pal and Lala Lajpat Rai. Almost all the revolutionary groups joined the Congress while maintaining and endeavouring to strengthen their secret organization. Many of their leaders obtained responsible positions in district congress committees and used their positions to consolidate their followers. This penetration of the congress had a very important consequence for it helped the

revolutionaries internally in the matter of recruitment and organization, and externally in the matter of public sympathy. During 1920-22 no major extremist activities were planned. Early in 1922 the failure of the Non-Cooperation movement led to the controversy over the means-non-violent or violent to be employed. The revolutionaries got disillusioned with Gandhian techniques. The revolutionaries discarded the "Philosophy of nonviolence as a philosophy arising out of despair." Bhagat Singh played a dominant role in revolutionary activities in the post noncooperation movement. Earlier he was drawn to Gandhi's peaceful movement when he got disturbed by the Jalianwala Bagh massacre. But due to the sudden cancellation of the movement after Chauri Chaura incident, he lost faith on Gandhi and his technique, along with other revolutionaries.⁴ Bhagat Singh was asked in the lower court what he meant by the word "revolution". In his joint statement, he answered this question and demolished all the stereotypes about revolution. First and foremost he clarified that "revolution" is not the cult of the bomb and the pistol. Rather he regarded revolution as an inalienable right of mankind".⁵

A Marxist

Bhagat Singh was not only one of India's greatest freedom fighters and revolutionary socialists, but also one of its early Marxist thinkers and ideologues. He slammed capitalists and imperialists and advocated the reorganization of society on a socialist basis. "The peasant, who grows corn for all, starves with his family, the weaver who supplies the world market with textile fabrics, has not enough to cover his own and his children's bodies, masons, smiths and carpenters who raise magnificent palaces, live like pariahs in the slums."⁶ Bhagat Singh's political thought evolved gradually from Gandhian nationalism to revolutionary Marxism. By the end of 1928 he and his comrades renamed their organization the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. He had read the teachings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin and believed that with such large and diverse population, India could only survive properly under a socialist regime. These ideals had been introduced to him during his time at the National College at Lahore and he believed that India should reenact the Russian revolution. In the case that Indians were not socialist, he believed that the rich would only get richer and poor would only get poorer. His aggressive stance of violence put him at odds with Gandhi and members of the congress. Socialist leaders sometimes refer back to him as the founder of Indian Socialism.⁷ Bhagat Singh always believed in freedom in which human being is free from the oppression of another human

being. He just did not believe in transferring the power from British people to elite class of the Indian society. In the process of trial Bhagat Singh made it clear that he did not believe in violence as an integral part of revolution. By revolution he understood a change in the social order based on justice. The producers whether labourers or peasants should get their rights restored. Inequalities and disparities must come to an end. Without reorganizing the social structure any talk of ending war seemed to him absurd. Universal peace under exploiting society was unimaginable and hypocritical. Such a society would necessarily be socialistic. He also considered revolution, like freedom, the birth right of people. He believed in the establishment of egalitarian society, which favors equality for all irrespective of caste, gender, religion. He was always against the orthodox caste system of the nation and always condemned the system in which people are divided on the basis of hierarchy. He always question the legitimacy of the caste system on which the society has been divided. In his writings, he had warned against roots of communalism which started to grow during that time. He condemned the people who were engaging in the communal politics, he warned the evils of communalism which could destroy the roots of our nation.⁸ Justice Medilton, who transported Bhagat Singh and BK Dutt for life in the Assembly Bomb Case, wrote in his judgment: “These persons used to enter the court with the cries of ‘Long Live Revolution’ and ‘Long Live Proletariat’ which shows clearly what sort of political ideology they cherish. In order to put a check in propagating these ideas, transport them for life”.

At his insistence, the name of Hindustan Republican Association was changed to Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. Jitendra Nath Sanyal, a co-prisoner in the Lahore Conspiracy case wrote: “Bhagat Singh was an extremely well-read man and his special sphere of study was socialism... very few in India could be compared to him in the knowledge of this special subject”.⁹

Atheist

Bhagat Singh was accused of vanity for denying the existence of god. Not only did he expose the fallacy of such arguments, but also offered his own logical arguments for his disbelief. His classical works Why I am an Atheist, Religion and Our Freedom Struggle, Communal Riots and their Solution, The Problem of untouchability are extremely mature and forthright exposition of secularism and social justice. He also reflected upon the origin of god. He believed that man

created god in his imagination when he realized his weaknesses, limitations and shortcomings. He recognized two functions of belief in god: social control and hope for depressed. Bipan Chandra described it thus: “More than any other contemporary leader, with the exception of Gandhiji, he understood the danger that communalism posed to Indian society and Indian nationalism. He often warned his comrades and followers that communalism was as big an enemy as colonialism...Religion, said Bhagat Singh, was the private concern of a person, but it had to be fought as an enemy when it intruded into politics and took the form of communalism. Bhagat Singh also believed that people must free themselves from the mental bondage of religion and superstition.”¹⁰ He wanted to criticize every tenet of old beliefs, to challenge the efficacy of old faith. Giving utmost importance to reason he wrote, “If after rigorous reasoning, one is led to believe in any theory of philosophy, his faith is appreciated. His reasoning may be mistaken and even fallacious. But there is chance that he will be corrected because Reason is the guiding principle of his life. But belief, I should say blind belief is disastrous. It deprives a man of his understanding power and makes him reactionary.” He wanted society to fight against the belief in god as it fought against idol worship and other narrow conceptions of religion.¹¹

Gandhi and Bhagat Singh

The paths Gandhi and Bhagat Singh followed in their struggle against British rule were both competitive as well as complementary. The Gandhian path was focused on only the transfer of political power but Bhagat Singh's vision was to transform independent India into a socialist and egalitarian society. It is worth imagining that the polarizations in the country would not have been Congress vs Muslim League, Hindu vs Muslim and Gandhi vs Jinnah but would have been Gandhi vs Bhagat Singh, capitalism vs socialism and mere transfer of power vs socio-economic revolution. Bhagat Singh's 'last message' explains the differences the revolutionaries had with the Congress leadership. The withdrawal of non-cooperation movement after the Chauri Chaura incident, where a police station with policemen inside was burnt by an angry mob, was greatly resented as a betrayal. Similarly, the postponement of Civil Disobedience Movement and the so called Gandhi-Irwin Pact was also considered a great mistake. Even the declaration by the Congress of its goal as Purna Swaraj was considered a half hearted attempt to wrest some concessions from the British. According to Gandhi, use of force would only get us what the British got. It will not result in ‘Swaraj’. Unlike the revolutionaries, Gandhi did not believe that

mere physical expulsion of the British was necessary to gain Swaraj for India. Gandhi's concept of Swaraj had a much higher connotation than the Swaraj of the revolutionaries. He also attacked the view of the revolutionaries that there was 'no connection between the means and the end'. For him, ends and means were equally important. Bhagat Singh criticized the political methods used by the Congress under the leadership of Gandhi, though he accepted that it was Gandhi who aroused political consciousness in the masses, started a mass movement and trained them to fight against injustice. As Bhagat Singh felt the withdrawal of the Non-cooperation movement without a sufficiently important reason clearly showed that Gandhi and the Congress were in not favour of 'revolution' and were inclined towards 'conciliation' with the British. To Bhagat Singh, the Congress was a party of the middle classes, white collared people and small traders; it did not represent the peasants and the workers. In his opinion, the Congress could never provide revolutionary leadership until it broadens its base to include the peasants and workers.

Gandhi clarified his stand on the activities of the revolutionaries in many of his writings. He admired their courage, commitment and sacrifice but not their use of violence, as violence is counterproductive and harmful and was a wrong course to achieve Swaraj. Gandhi and Bhagat Singh were opposed to each other in approach; Bhagat Singh believed in violence, and did not shy away from using it to achieve independence. Gandhi believed that only complete adherence to non-violence would free the country. Gandhi and Bhagat Singh represented two different strands of India's struggle for independence.¹²

There is also much to learn from the magnificent qualities of character that Bhagat Singh displayed through his short life of 23 years. His courage, sacrifice, integrity, determination, studiousness, humility and comradeship have been described in the memoirs written by his comrades and by other contemporaries. In the current scenario, in which, the nation is facing the rise of communalism, fundamentalist ideology, atrocities against the oppressed, where the certain section of people are being looked by suspicion and asked to chant a slogan to prove their patriotism, in the era where atrocities are rising against the marginalized section, his ideas and his sacrifice, that he made for the nation has a strength to bring up the hope of million of people. Bhagat Singh's jail diary contains many more topical ideas relevant to the times now. It is the

right time in the new millennium to pay obeisance to the martyrs and reiterate their socio-political philosophy.

¹ Naren Jain Sharma, “ Mahatma Ghandi and Bhagat Singh: A Clash of Ideology”, Gandhi Marg, Vol.33, Number 4, January-March 2012, pp.427-439

² The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume XIV, pp. 315-316, also see: Anthony Parel (ed.), **Hind Swaraj and Other Writings**, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1997.

³ Abhishek Saha, “ A Revolutionary Life: The Bhagat Singh you did not know”, **Hindustan Times**, 23 March 2015, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/a-revolutionary-life-the-bhagat-singh-you-didn-t-know/story-svk7wUDbaqTtxGVGmQW7KN.html> , Accessed on 20/1/2018.

⁴ Smruti Ranjan Mishra, “ Bhagat Singh: Revolutionary With a Difference”, in **Orissa Review**, August, 2007.

⁵ Kuldeep Naiyar, **Without Fear, The Life and Trails of Bhagat Singh**, Harper Collins Pub. 2002.

⁶ Gandhi, op.cit. n.2.

⁷ Saha,op.cit.n.3.

⁸ Anurag Kumar, “The Idea of Bhagat Singh in Contemporary Era” September 28, 2016 , at <http://www.indiaresists.com/idea-bhagat-singh-contemporary-era/> ,Accessed on 20/1/2018.

⁹ Irfan Habib, **To Make the Deaf Hear**, Three Essays Collective, 2010, P.112. Also see: D.N. Gupta (ed.), **Bhagat Singh Select Speeches & Writings**, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2007.

¹⁰ Bipin Chandra (eds.), **India’s Struggle for Independence: 1857-1947**, Penguin Books, Delhi, 2016, 135-146.

¹¹ **Ibid.**

¹² Bipin Chandra., **History of Modern India**, Orient Black Swan, Hyderabad, 2009.