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Bhagat Singh

A Shared Revolutionary Legacy

Between India and Pakistan

It was indeed heartening to know that Pakistan called Bhagat Singh a shared hero of both the countries. Zahid Saeed, the Chief Secretary of Punjab government proclaimed that 'Bhagat Singh was the Independence movement hero of both India and Pakistan. The people of the country have the right to know about his (Singh) and his comrades' great struggle to get freedom from the British Raj.'¹ I am not surprised by the decision as I have personally experienced the love and veneration for Bhagat Singh and his ideals during my few visits to Lahore. However, it may be one of the rare acknowledgements from a high government official of Pakistan. Let us talk about his vision, which makes him acceptable to both the countries simultaneously, a vision which he envisaged for an independent India and which remains relevant for both the countries even now. It was not a narrow jingoistic vision but an internationalist one, where Bhagat Singh spoke for the oppressed and colonized societies beyond South Asia.

Bhagat Singh is valorized for his martyrdom, and rightly so, but in the ensuing enthusiasm most of us forget, or consciously ignore his contributions as an intellectual and a thinker. He not only sacrificed his life, like many did before him and also after him, but he also had an idea of independent India. During the past few years, it has almost become a routine to appropriate Bhagat Singh as a nationalist icon, while not much is talked about his nationalist vision.

Bhagat Singh is probably the only one from amongst our freedom struggle heroes, who can be celebrated by both-India and Pakistan. It is possible because he stood for a non-sectarian and egalitarian world. He never espoused any divisive idea in his short life. And it is possible to make sense of his politics because he left behind a substantial written legacy to engage with. It is rare to find a young man in his early twenties conceiving an idea of universal brotherhood and articulating it in a detailed article. May be he was the only one among our freedom struggle heroes who had this vision.

Bhagat Singh was not just a patriot, with a passionate commitment to his nation, he was a visionary, with a pluralist and egalitarian perception of independent India. He visualized an India where 98 percent will rule instead of elite 2 percent.² His *azaadi* was not limited to the leaving of the British, instead he desired *azaadi* from poverty, *azaadi* from untouchability, *azaadi* from communal strife and *azaadi* from any other discrimination/exploitation. Just twenty days before his martyrdom on 3 March 1931 Bhagat Singh sent out an explicit message to the youth saying:

. . . the struggle in India would continue so long as a handful of exploiters go on exploiting the labour of the common people for their own ends. It matters little whether these exploiters are purely British capitalists, or British and Indians in alliance, or even purely Indians.

Bhagat Singh was committed to *Inquilab* or revolution but it was not merely a political revolution he aimed at. He wanted a social revolution to break the age old discriminatory practices. This *Inquilab Zindabad* was not merely an emotional war cry for the revolutionaries but had a lofty ideal which was explained by the HSRA thus:

The Revolution will ring the death knell of capitalism and class distinction and privileges . . . It will give birth to a new state –

¹ *Indian Express*, March 27, 2018.

² Cited in S. Irfan Habib, *To Make the Deaf Hear*, 2007, New Delhi.

a new social order.³

Bhagat Singh was even more definitive in his statement in the court on June 6, 1929. He said: Revolution is not a culture of bomb and pistol. Our meaning of revolution is to change the present conditions, which are based on manifest injustice.⁴

Bhagat Singh agrees with a quote he cites in his prison diary, which says a radical revolution is not utopian, 'What is utopian is the idea of a partial, an exclusively political revolution, which would leave the pillars of the house standing.'⁵ The HSRA aimed at such a revolution which would usher in a new era, demolishing the existing socio-economic and political structure of the Indian society. Their revolution was not for anarchy or lawlessness but for social justice.

However, most of the eulogies have ignored this radical social programme of Bhagat Singh and his comrades, projecting them merely as passionate anti-colonialists and nationalists, which is not inaccurate, but incomplete. Bhagat Singh went to the gallows as a nationalist is not something exclusive to him alone, two others were hanged with him and many more were hanged before him as nationalists. He is different because he left behind an intellectual legacy, a huge collection of political and social writings on burning issues of even contemporary importance like caste, communalism, language, and politics. In his short life, Bhagat Singh had grown as an intellectual about whom his close comrade Jaidev Kapoor said that he regarded Karl Marx and Lenin as his political gurus and guides. He had unshakable faith in socialism.⁶

Bhagat Singh not only set high standards as a great martyr, he also left behind a rich legacy as a journalist who worked for *Kirti*, *Arjun* and *Pratap*, well known papers of their times. We know a little about his vocation as a scribe and the issues he dealt with in his articles. These focused on the various aspects of the nationalist struggle, combating communalism, untouchability, students and politics, world brotherhood etc.

Bhagat Singh did not merely wish to free India from colonial bondage but dreamt of independent India, which would be egalitarian and secular. This was reflected in his revolutionary activities as well as in his commitment as a sensitive journalist. I will refer briefly to both his vocations and intellectual commitments. We also need to know that Bhagat Singh was a voracious reader, who devoured anything new which was published on poverty, religion, society and global struggles against imperialism. He seriously debated and discussed what he read and also wrote extensively on issues of caste, communalism and conditions of the working class and peasantry.

The profundity of his ideas on some of the above mentioned issues is visible in his regular columns in *Kirti*, *Pratap* and other papers. In an article on 'Religion and our freedom struggle' published in *Kirti* in May 1928, Bhagat Singh grappled with the role of religion in politics, an issue that haunts us even today. He talked of Tolstoy's division of religion into three parts: essentials of religion, philosophy of religion and rituals of religion. He concluded that if religion means blind faith by mixing rituals with philosophy then it should be blown away immediately but if we can combine essentials with some philosophy then religion may be a meaningful idea. He felt that ritualism of religions had divided us into touchables and untouchables and these narrow and divisive religions cannot bring about actual unity among people. For us freedom should not mean mere end of British colonialism, our complete freedom implies living together happily without caste and religious barriers. Bhagat Singh needs to be invoked even today to bring about changes he yearned for. Expressing his anguish in the second article, he held some of the political leaders and the press responsible for inciting communalism. He believed that 'there were a few sincere leaders, but their voice is easily swept away by the rising wave of communalism. In terms of political leadership, India had gone totally bankrupt'.

Bhagat Singh felt that journalism used to be a noble profession, which had now fallen from grace. Now they give bold and sensational headlines to incite people to kill each other in the name of religion. There were riots at several places simply because the local press behaved irresponsibly and indulged in rabble-rousing through their articles.

³ The Philosophy of the Bomb.

⁴ Suresh, *Krantikari Bhagat Singh*, Delhi, 1971, pp. 91-92.

⁵ Quoted in the *Jail Notebook of Bhagat Singh*, LeftWord Books, 2007.

⁶ Jaidev Kapoor, 'Amar Balidani Bhagwati Bhai', in Himanshu Joshi, ed, *Utsarg*, Lucknow, 1980, p. 65.

Not much seems to have changed since Bhagat Singh wrote these lines. He categorically spelt out the duties of journalists and then also accused them of dereliction of this duty. He wrote that:

the real duty of the newspapers is to educate, to cleanse the minds of people, to save them from narrow sectarian divisiveness, and to eradicate communal feelings to promote the idea of common nationalism. Instead, their main objective seems to be spreading ignorance, preaching and propagating sectarianism and chauvinism, communalizing people's minds leading to the destruction of our composite culture and shared heritage.

In the June 1928 issue of the *Kirti*, Bhagat Singh wrote two articles titled *Achoot ka Sawaal (On Untouchability)* and *Sampradayik Dangeaurunka Ilaj (Communal riots and their solutions)*. What Bhagat Singh wrote in 1928 looks relevant even today, which unfortunately proves how precious little has been done to resolve these questions. In the first piece, Bhagat Singh starts by saying that:

our country is unique where six crore citizens are called untouchables and their mere touch defiles the upper castes. Gods get enraged if they enter the temples. It is shameful that such things are being practised in the twentieth century. We claim to be a spiritual country but hesitate to accept equality of all human beings while materialist Europe is talking of revolution since centuries. They had proclaimed equality during the American and French revolutions. However, we are still debating whether the untouchable is entitled for the sacred thread or can he read the Vedas or not. We are chagrined about discrimination against Indians in foreign lands, and whine that the English do not give us equal rights in India.

Given our conduct, Bhagat Singh wondered, do we really have any right to complain about such matters? He also seriously engaged with the possible solutions to this malaise. The first decision for all of us should be:

that we start believing that we all are born equal and our vocation, as well, need not divide us. If someone is born in a sweeper's family that does not mean that he/she has to continue in the family profession cleaning shit all his life, with no right to participate in any developmental work.

For him, this discrimination was directly responsible for conversions, which was a burning issue even in the 1920s. Despite his anti-colonialist fervour, he did not just condemn the missionaries nor did he instigate Hindus to kill and burn all those who had accepted the new faith. He wrote self-critically:

If you treat them worse than animals then they will surely join other religions where they will get more rights and will be treated like human beings. In this situation it will be futile to accuse Christianity and Islam of harming Hinduism.

Bhagat Singh was convinced that 'no one would be forced or tempted to change faith if the age old inequalities are removed and we sincerely start believing that we are all equal and none is different either due to birth or vocation'.

Bhagat Singh institutionalised his thinking, when he founded the Naujawan Bharat Sabha in 1926 in Lahore, which was also a public platform for the otherwise secret group of revolutionaries. He saw to it that the Sabha remains above petty religious politics of the times. It is all the more important because the 1920s saw the emergence of the RSS, which exacerbated the intense communal polarisation. But here was a group of young men who were thinking differently. They asked the member before enrolment 'to sign a pledge that he would place the interests of his country above those of his community'. Even Lala Lajpat Rai, the eminent pillar of extremist nationalism in India could not escape from the scathing criticism of the Sabha when he joined hands with the Hindu Mahasabha leaders. Rai was dubbed as a traitor by Kedar Nath Sehgal in a pamphlet 'An Appeal to Young Punjab' while Lajpat Rai responded by calling Bhagat Singh a Russian agent who wanted to make him into a Lenin.

Bhagat Singh and his Sabha regarded communal amity as central to their political agenda but like the Congress, it did not believe either in the appeasement of all religions or in raising such slogans as *Allah o Akbar*, *Sat Sri Akal* and *Bande Mataram* to prove their secularism. On the contrary, they raised just two slogans, *Inquilab Zindabad* and *Hindustan Zindabad*, hailing the revolution and the country. Bhagat Singh questioned the policy of encouraging competing communalisms, which ultimately led to the partition of the country in 1947. He stands out in bold relief as a modern national leader and thinker emphasizing the separation of religion from politics and state as true secularism.

Bhagat Singh matured as a political thinker while in prison during the two years he spent there before he was hanged on 23 March, 1931. His prison diary clearly reveals the trajectory of his political evolution. It brings into light

his reading habits and the wide range of the selection of authors including Marx, Engels, Bertrand Russell, T. Paine, Upton Sinclair, V. I. Lenin, William Wordsworth, Tennyson, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Bukharin, Trotsky, among others. One of the most profound articles by him called 'Why I am an Atheist' was written while he was in jail. The article was tinged with a strong rebuttal of blind faith and a zealous defence of reason. Before dealing with his own views about religion, Bhagat Singh first deals with the religiosity of his predecessors. He points out that in the absence of a scientific understanding of their own political activity; they needed irrational religious beliefs and mysticism to sustain them spiritually, to fight against personal temptation, to overcome depression, to be able to sacrifice their physical comforts, and even life. For this a person requires deep sources of inspiration. This requirement was, in the case of early revolutionaries, met by mysticism and religion.⁷

He made clear that the revolutionaries now need no religious inspiration as they have an advanced revolutionary ideology, based on reason instead of blind faith. About God, Bhagat Singh writes:

He (God) was to serve as a father, mother, sister and brother, friend and helper . . . so that when man be in great distress having been betrayed and deserted by all friends, he may find consolation in the idea that an ever true friend was still there to help him, to support him and that He was Almighty and could do anything. Really that was useful to a society in the primitive age. The idea of God is helpful to man in distress.⁸

Bhagat Singh was convinced that religion is a tool in the hands of exploiters who keep the masses in constant fear of God for their own interests.⁹ The revolutionaries of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) realized that all moral ideals and religions were useless for an empty stomach and for him only food was God. He aptly quoted Horace Greeley in his prison diary saying 'Morality and religion are but words to him who fishes in gutters for the means of sustaining life, and crouches behind barrels in the street for shelter from the cutting blasts of a winter night.'¹⁰

This scientific approach of the HSRA leaders matured with the passage of time. The majority of them came close to the ideals of socialism or even communism, which believed in mass action instead of individual acts of terrorism.

We should remember Bhagat Singh with pride and reflect on the alternative framework of governance he had in mind where social and economic justice – and not terrorism or violence – would be supreme. Many of us may not find his commitment to socialism very attractive in the changing era of globalization, yet his concern for the socio-economically deprived sections still commands attention. Moreover, his passionate desire to rise above narrow caste and religious considerations was never as crucial as it is today.

Bhagat Singh's revolutionary legacy needs to be remembered in these rancorous times, both in India and Pakistan. He fought most of his battles, intellectual as well as otherwise, in Lahore, till he was hanged on the outskirts of the city. Singh's intellectual inheritance is our collective memory and should not be divided by political borders.

⁷ *The People*, Lahore, September 27, 1931.

⁸ Bhagat Singh, 'Why I am an atheist'.

⁹ Interview with Manmathnath Gupta, close associate of Bhagat Singh, who died few years ago.

¹⁰ *The Jail Notebook of Bhagat Singh*.