

Profiling Bhagat Singh: An Overview
Divya

*Research Scholar, Post Graduate Department of History, L.S. College, Muzaffarpur, B.R.A.
Bihar University, Muzaffarpur, (Bihar) India*

Abstract

Bhagat Singh, the martyr par excellence, has the singular distinction to be crowned with unique and exclusive accreditation, “Shaheed-i-Azam”. One of the most logically and rationally justifiable argument that is advanced that Bhagat Singh was a profile writer, thinker that reflected his profound conviction and commitment. Bhagat Singh, rebel and revolutionary, one of the finest ever sons of the Indian people, was one such individual. His life and martyrdom shone like a blazing star on the banner of the Indian National liberation struggle and inspired generations fight for liberty and justice. He died at the age of 23 years at the hands of the colonial enslavers of India. Bhat Singh’s vision of a resurgent India in the post independent period also with sustained revolutionary anti imperial campaigns put him into top of self sacrificing youth without undermining praiseworthy contributions of contemporary martyrs.

Key Words: Bhagat Singh, Rebel, Struggle, Liberty, Justice

Bhagat Singh was born to Vidyavati and Kishan Singh on September 28, 1907, in the village Banga in Lyallpur district, now in Pakistan. His original village Khatkar Kalan was then in Jalandhar district but now in Nawanshahar. He hailed from a patriotic family. His uncle Ajit Singh, along with Lala Lajpat Rai, was exiled to Mandalay jail in Burma by the British for leading a powerful peasant agitation against the hike in land revenue and canal taxes. At the time of Bhagat Singh's birth, his father Kishan Singh and his other uncle Swam Singh, were also in jail due to their nationalist activities, and were released soon after. In such an atmosphere, Bhagat Singh naturally imbibed patriotic sentiments. He especially adored his exiled uncle Ajit Singh.¹

While Bhagat Singh was in School, Punjab was rocked by the hanging of seven Ghadar martyrs by the British on November 16 and 17, 1916 in the First Lahore Conspiracy Case. Father and uncles of Bhagat Singh were members of the Ghadar Party, led by Kartar Singh Sarabha and Har Dayal. The young Bhagat Singh was deeply moved by the heroic saga and sacrifice of Kartar Singh Sarabha, who was just 19 years old when he was hanged.

In 1919, at the age of 12, Singh visited the site of the Jalianwala Bagh massacre hours after thousand of unarmed people gathered at a public meeting had been killed. At the age of 14, he was among those in his village who welcomed protestors against the killing of a large number of unarmed people at Gurudwara Nankana Sahib on

20 February 1921. Singh became disillusioned with Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence after Gandhi called off the non-cooperation movement.

In 1923, Singh joined the National College in Lahore, where he was also involved in extra-curricular activities such as the dramatics Society. In 1923, Singh won an essay competition set by the Punjab Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, writing on the problems in the Punjab. He founded the Indian nationalist youth organization Naujawan Bharat Sabha ("Youth Society of India)" in March 1926. He also joined the Hindustan Republican Association, which had prominent leaders, such as Rafi'ul Prasad Bismil, Chandrashekhar Azad and Ashfaqulla Khan. The name of the organization was changed to Hindustan Socialist Republican Association at Singh's insistence. A year later, to avoid getting married by his family, Singh ran away from his house to Cawnpore. In a letter he left behind, he stated:

My life has been dedicated to the noblest cause, that of the freedom of the country. Therefore, there is no rest or worldly desires that can lure me now.

Police became concerned with Singh's influence on youths and in May 1927 they arrested him on the pretext of having been involved in a bombing that had taken place at Lahore in October of the previous year. He was released on a surety of Rs. 60,000 five weeks after his arrest. He wrote for an edited Urdu and Punjabi newspapers,

published from Amritsar, as well as contributing to low-priced pamphlets published by the Naujawan Bharat Sabha that infuriated the British. He also wrote briefly for the 'Veer Arjun' newspaper, published in Delhi, and for 'Kirti', the journal of the Kirti Kisan Party ("Workers and Peasants Party"). He often used pseudonyms, including names such as Balwant, Ranjit and Vidhrohi.²

Secularism was, indeed, an article of faith with Bhagat Singh all his life. Bipan Chandra describes 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".

In 1928, the all-white Simon Commission came to India to provide the question of further constitutional reforms. The Congress decided to boycott the Commission and to hold protest demonstrations against it. The HSRA decided to actively participate in these actions. The Commission came to Lahore on October 30, 1928, less than two months after the formation of the HSRA. A huge demonstration, led by

Lala Lajpat Rai, was held. Bhagat Singh and his comrades were part of it. The police ordered a lathi charge and the Superintendent of Police named J.A. Scott rained lathi blows on Lajpat Rai's head. He died on November 17. The nation was stunned and infuriated.

The HSRA decided to avenge the death of Lajpat Rai and the insult to the nation by killing Scott. On December 17, 1928, exactly a month after Lajpat Rai's death, Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhra Azad and Rajguru shot dead J.P. Saunders, another police officer who was also involved in the lathi charge, mistaking him for Scott.

The Same night, handwritten posters in pink were pasted on the walls of Lahore issued by the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, Which claimed responsibility for the killing.

After assassination of Saunders, Bhagat Singh immediately escaped to Calcutta along with Rajguru and Bhagwati Charan's wife Durga Bhabhi, who was a dedicated revolutionary in her own right. All three were in disguise.

Bhagat Singh had for sometime been exploiting the power of drama as a mean to inspire revolt against the British, purchasing a magic lantern to show slides that enlivened his talks about revolutionaries who had died as a result of the Kakori Conspiracy, such as Ram Prasad Bismil. In 1929, he proposed a dramatic act to the HSRA with the intention of gaining massive publicity for their aims. Influenced by Auguste Vaillant, a French anarchist who had bombed the Chamber of

Deputies in Paris, Singh's plan was to explode a bomb inside the Central Legislative Assembly. The nominal intention was to protest against the Public Safety Bill and the Trade Dispute Act. Which had been rejected by the Assembly but were being enacted by the Viceroy using his special powers; the actual intention was for the perpetrators to get themselves arrested so that they could use appearances in court as a stage to publicize their cause.

The HSRA leadership was initially opposed to Singh participating in the bombing because they were certain that his prior involvement in the Saunders shooting would mean that his arrest on his occasion would ultimately result in his execution. However, they eventually determined that he was their most suitable candidate. On 8 April 1929, Singh, accompanied by Batukeshwar Dutt, threw two bombs into the Assembly chamber from its public gallery while it was in session. In accordance with the plan, no-one was killed by the explosions, although some members were injured, including George Ernest Schuster, the finance member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. The smoke from the bomb filled the Assembly and if they had chosen then they probably could have escaped in the confusion; instead they stayed, shouting slogans of 'Inquilab Zindabad!' ("Long Live the Revolution") and showered leaflets. The two men were arrested and subsequently moved through a series of jails in the Delhi area. Gandhi, once again, issued strong words of

disapproval for their deed.

Both the actions, the assassination of Saunders and the hurling of bombs in the central Assembly- made Bhagat Singh and his comrade's legendary heroes.

Singh was elated with the success of the bombing and referred to it and the forthcoming legal proceedings as a "drama". On June 12, 1929, the court sentenced Bhagat Singh and Betukeshwar Dutt in the Assembly bomb case to transportation for life in the Andaman. But in the meanwhile the police had uncovered the details of Saundar's assassination. Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev and several others were tried in the historic second Lahore conspiracy case. The trial started on July 10, 1929 and continued for over a Year uPtoOchoer7, 1930. Bhagat Singh and his comrades turned the court into a forum for revolutionary propaganda.

The revolutionaries began a prolonged hunger strike in jail to protest against the terrible jail conditions to demand that they be treated not as ordinary criminals but as political Prisoners, for necessities like proper diet, supply of books and newspapers and against forced labour. Jawaharlal Nehru met Singh and the other strikers in Mainsail Jail. After the meeting, he stated:

"I was very much pained to see the distress of the heroes. They have staked their lives in this Struggle. They want that political prisoners should be treated as political prisoners. I am

quite hopeful that their sacrifice would be crowned with success".

The Government tried to break the strike by placing different food items in the prison cells to test the hungry prisoners' resolve. Water pitchers were filled with milk so that either the prisoners remained thirsty or broke their strike but nobody faltered and the impasse continued. The authorities then attempted forcing food using feeding tubes into the prisoners, but were resisted.⁵

By now, the condition of another hunger striker, Jatindra Nath Das, lodged in the same jail had deteriorated considerably. The jail committee recommended his unconditional release, but the government rejected the suggestion and offered to release him on bail. On 13 September 1929, Das died after a 63-day hunger strike. Almost all the nationalist leaders in the country paid tribute to Das's death. Singh finally heeded a resolution of the Congress party and the request of his father, ending his 116-day hunger strike on 5 October 1929. During this period, Singh's popularity among common Indians extended beyond Punjab. Singh made optimum utilization of court and trials to propagate their revolutionary messages.

On 7 October 1930, the special Tribunal in the Lahore conspiracy case delivered judgment. Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were sentenced to death. The nation was stunned. It reverberated with the demand for the commutation of the

death sentence on the heroic youth.

Before and after the judgment, Bhagat Singh's reading and writing in jail continued unabated. As he declared before the Lahore court, "The sword of revolution is sharpened on the Whetstone of ideas.'Why I am An Atheist' and 'Introduction to Dream land' were two seminal tracts written by him in jail. It is the greatest of misfortunes that four other books written by Bhagat Singh in jail, viz. The ideal of socialism, Autobiography, History of revolutionary Movement in India and At the Door of Death, although they were smuggled out of jail, were later destroyed.⁷

From May to September 1928, Singh published a series of articles on anarchism in Kirti. He was concerned that the public misunderstood the concept of anarchism, writing that "The people are scared of the word anarchism. The word anarchism has been abused so much that even in India revolutionaries have been called anarchist to make them unpopular. "In his opinion, anarchism refers to absence of ruler and abolition of state, not absence of order, and "I think in India the idea of universal brotherhood, the Sanskrit sentence Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam etc., has the same meaning." He believed that the ultimate goal of Anarchism is complete independence, according to which no one will be obsessed with God or religion, nor will anybody be crazy for money or other worldly desires. There will be no chains on the body or control by the state. This means that

they want to eliminate: the Church, God and Religion; the state: Private property.⁸

This history of this case, of which we do not come across any example in relation to the political cases, reflects the symptoms of callousness and cruelty which is the outcome of bloated desire of the imperialist government of Britain so that fear can be instilled in the hearts of the repressed people.

A plan to rescue Singh and fellow HSRA inmates from the jail failed. HSRA member Durga Devi's husband, Bhagwati Charan Vohra, attempted to manufacture bombs for the purpose, but died when they exploded accidentally.⁹

Singh Raju and Sukhdev were sentenced to death in the Lahore conspiracy case and ordered to be hanged on 24 March 1931. That schedule was moved forward by 11 hours and he was hanged on 23 March 1931 at 7:30 pm in Lahore jail with his comrades Rajguru and Sukhdev. It is reported that no magistrate of the time was willing to supervise their hanging as was required by law. The execution was supervised by an honorary judge, who also signed the three death warrants as their original warrants had expired. The jail authorities then broke the rear wall of the jail and secretly cremated the three martyrs under cover of darkness outside Ganda Singh Wala Village, and then threw the ashes into the Sutlej river, about 10 kilometers (6.2 mil from Ferozepore.

Front page of The Tribune announcing Bhagat Singh's

execution

The execution of Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev was reported widely by the press, especially as they were on the eve of the annual convention of the Congress party at Karachi. Gandhi faced black flag demonstrations by angry youths who shouted "Down with Gandhi". The New York Times reported:

A region of terror in the city of Cawnpore in the United Provinces and an attack on Mahatma Gandhi by a youth outside Karachi were among the answers of the Indian extremists today to the hanging of Bhagat Singh and two fellow-associates.

Hartals and strikes of mourning were called. The Congress party, during the Karachi session, declared:

The greater point of Singh's legacy has to be the emphasis that a leader should provide a long term vision of a nation which something Singh does quite

aptly through his writings. In this sense, he was far ahead of his time, dreaming of a reconstructing society in a way which a status few ruling elite does not dominate the political system. His views on economics, religion and society provide a greater insight into the long aberrations of feudal system and class domination in the subcontinent.

Conclusion

At the time, when leaders and politicians talk about change, the relevance of this discussion is uncanny. Today, the one constant feature has been that most progressive forces continue to be stifled and suffocated. Revolutionary and radical thought's as a result has been neglected by status quo that is bent upon providing compromised solutions. As a result, the legacy of Bhagat Singh should not be limited to being simply revolutionary but also an intellectual par excellence.

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