

Bhagat Singh: An Erudite Scholar, Prolific Writer and Thinker

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Abstract

Bhagat Singh was a born and committed rebel with the most exceptional patriotic vision and fervour. Further he had a very firm foundation of intellectual wisdom tagged with most outstanding calibre that belied his age and supreme sacrifice. Usually, the martyrdom dimensions of Bhagat Singh is so overwhelmingly pronounced that other equally noteworthy aspects, pertaining to Bhagat Singh, don't get proportional attention. Hence, a meticulous and comprehensive study of cumulative moderating influence that contributed to the remarkable clarity of perception merits an in-depth intellectual probing.

Amongst the 'inputs' that ignited revolutionary spark is Bhagat Singh's wide range of studies of choicest reading material and the noteworthy manner in which he digested and churned them to produce his own band of fine literary output are the best source of reaching into the innermost recess of his mindset. Bhagat Singh being the perfect action oriented person backed by a firmly and chord sense of conviction attributed to peerless legend of Bhagat Singh. Behind the saga of martyrdom Bhagat Singh had virtually quest for acquiring knowledge. His acceptability as the chieftain of revolutionary think-tank presents him as most widely read and balanced revolutionary of his age.

Bhagat Singh went on churning his thoughts his thoughts and proceeded more and more towards a better understanding of the Marxist stand on the issues facing the country. It may be stated without contradiction that his estimation of the national leadership and its weakness were more or less in conformity with the views and opinions of the leaders of the communist movement who were building their strength among the workers. His writings on various topics and his letters to his various colleagues reveal his growing reliance on Marxist outlook. His study of communist literature of Lenin led him to understand that India's struggle for freedom was part of the international working class struggle for socialism. A.G. Noorani concludes in his book, 'The Trial of Bhagat Singh Politics of Justice' with the words: What distinguishes Bhagat Singh from all others besides his courage patriotism and commitment to moral values was his intellectual strength. A voracious reader he was also willing to rethink. He was only 23 when he was hanged. On his death, Indian leaders vied with one another in lavishing praise on him, one wonders how many of them knew that they had lost a man who had been allowed to live, might have had an incalculable impact on the course of India's politics.

Key Words:-Marxist, Communalism, Jail Notebook, Dwarka Dass Library, India

Introduction:

Bhagat Singh was a reader by instinct. It was, probably, an inborn quality. His appetite for reading was amazing. Perhaps, his reading and writing and its vast range distinguishes him from all his contemporary revolutionaries. Right from childhood and till he embraced gallows, reading remained coterminous. His qualities as an avid reader has been attested by many of his contemporary writers like Shiv Verma, Ajoy Ghosh, Bejoy Kumar Sinha, Jitendra Nath Sanayal, Manmath Nath Gupta, Prem Bhatia, Sohan Singh Josh and many others.

Bhagat Singh was a voracious reader, devouring books on a variety of themes. However, it must be acknowledged that procuring books on revolutionary and allied subjects was a difficult task.

In the 1920's Bhagat Singh may be singled out as most widely read person. Further, Bhagat Singh also tried to promote thinking and reading among his close associates. He stated on the eve of his trial before Lahore High Court that the 'Sword of revolution is sharpened at the whetstone of thought'.

Bhagat Singh was a voracious reader, who read anything new which was published on poverty, religion, society and global struggle against imperialism. He seriously debated on issues of caste, communalism, conditions of the working class and peasantry. It was his love for books that shaped his ideas, thoughts and that is visible in his writings, and his contributions as an intellectual and thinker. It was his voracious reading habit since his childhood days that led him to have deep insight over various topics like nationalist struggle, communalism,

socialism, politics and religion, problems of untouchabilities, secularism, Marxism understanding of society and change.

By September 1928, Bhagat Singh and his band have been able to construct a sound organisational framework for launching their struggle for freedom. A few revolutionary actions and the throwing of the bomb in the Legislative Assembly saw most of the members of his group in jail with a conspiracy case slapped on them. Though many of them were sure of the fate awaiting them, they were neither discouraged nor dismayed. In the jail, Bhagat Singh embarked upon a course of study which would further clarify his thoughts and take him to his ultimate destination of becoming socialist revolutionaries, discarding in the process, the earlier infatuation with the romance of revolution.¹

Though Bhagat Singh lived a life of intensity and was strong in his revolutionary views, still he had love for music, fine-arts and literature. He was a student of human psychology along with History and scientific temper of enquiry. If we say that he had a strong love for books, it would not be wrong. Any new book concerning human struggle and freedom would be immediately procured by him and read, followed by discussions with his friends. Thus they could observe the lesions in themselves. He wrote, read, discussed and then made his views, which gave him support all his life through thick and thin. Actually, the questions, which shadowed his mind about the future of the country and establishing a beautiful future of humanity, were resolved in this way. Any question which would come into his sensitive mind about the existing

conditions of his people and any doubts about establishing it, the only way adopted by him was to search answers to these questions by study in depth and strengthening his views. Further he would eagerly look for an opportunity to implement those principles. That is why in such a short period, he could develop a strong view point.

On September 2, 1929, Bhagat Singh received a note Book containing 404 pages. He utilized his notebook to take down extracts from his reading and organise these extracts into a meaningful manual for future reference. He asked his friend Jaidev Gupta to borrow Books from Dwaraka Dass Library and the Lahore Public Library. As the editor has noted, “Almost all these related to what may be called the Socialist /Marxist stream of thoughts”. As Bhagat Singh’s Jail Notebook testifies, there was a common set of ideas that inspired the Ghadarites, Bhagat Singh’s comrades and the Chittagong revolutionaries: the idea of Liberty, Equality and socialism. In other word, the best ideas of French and Russian Revolutions. It is for this reason that we find Bhagat Singh reading thinkers like Rousseau, Marx and Lenin so closely in jail. The man was a prolific reader and was well-versed with a spectrum of genres and authors. These are just a few of the books mentioned in the jail Notebook and other writings by Bhagat Singh. Iron Heel, Jack London; Emile Jean-Jacques Rousseau; Crime and Punishment, Fyodor Dostoevsky; The Rights of Man, Thomas Paine; State and Revolution, Vladimir Lenin. On March 23, 1931, Singh met his lawyer, Pran Mehta, while he was in jail awaiting his execution.

He had asked Mehta to bring him a copy of State and Revolution. Knowing full well that he only had a few hours to live, Singh began devouring the book as fast as he could. Even as he stood on the scaffolding of the executioner’s noose, it is claimed that he continued to read and said: “Wait a while; A revolutionary is talking to another revolutionary.” After a few more moments of feverish reading, he threw the book up into the air and said, “Let’s go”. What a man.

Bhagat Singh studied a lot since his childhood days, even during his days of imprisonment. His prison notebook brings to light his reading habits and the wide range of his selection of authors including Karl Marx, Fredrick Engels, Bertrand Russell, Thomas Paine, Upton Sinclair, Lenin, W Wordsworth, Alfred Tennyson, Umar Khayyam, Rabindranath Tagore, Mikhail Bakunin, Hobbes, John Locke, Spinoza, Mark Twain, Leon Trotsky and several others. A mere perusal of his prison notebook is an indicator of his amazing choice which ranged from poetry, fiction, philosophy, history and politics to economics. It was after his intense reading that he concluded “Sword of Revolution is sharpened at the whetstone of thoughts”.

One of his co-prisoners of Lahore Central Jail, Shiv Verma, says; “ Though we all had a passion for reading, Bhagat Singh was a class by himself. Despite having a soft corner for Socialism, he always clung to his passion for reading novels, particularly with political and economic themes. Dickens, Uton Sinclair, Hall Cane, Victor Hugo, Gorky, Stepanik, Oscar Wilde and Leonardo Andrew were among his favourites. He

frequently got emotionally involved with some particular characters in novels to the extent that he wept and laughed with them.”². It was not easy to get hold of these books in prison because many of them were proscribed. Whenever his friends went to see him in jail, Singh handed over a list of books he needed.³

He not only gave a concrete view point for the future of India in terms of a model of Socialism but his model is applicable for the future of Humanity. This is the heritage he has left with us. Bhagat Singh was very much interested into intricacies of human nature and these were reflected under various circumstances. This made him have a sympathetic and friendly and understandable assessment of his colleagues and other people with whom he interacted, be they rigid police officers, silent judges or jail mates. He will discuss various novels with his friends, from this humane point of view. Some of the per novels read by him were Ninety Three By Victor Hugo, Eternal City by Hall Caine, Oil Boston by Upton Sinclair, various plays by G.B. Shaw, novels by Charles Dickens and so on. These were mostly Revolutionaries who wanted to establish republic of man and is fully dedicated to this cause and continuously struggles for it.

Bhagat Singh love for books is legendary like him. An important factor in his intellectual and political growth was his access of the Dwarka Dass Library, Lahore, which had started acquiring Marxist literature in the mid-1920. He was clearly groping for a comprehensive philosophy of human liberation. This led him to Marxism. As per some estimates, he read nearly 50

books during his schooling (1913-21), about 200 from his college days to the day of his arrest in 1921, and approximately 300 during his imprisonment of 716 days from April 8 1929 to March 23, 1931. He was exactly 23 years, 5 months and 25 days old at the time of his execution and by then had studies hundred of books –a record of sorts. ‘Study’, Bhagat Singh is reported to have said, “ so that you understand the real force of change. Study so that you may be able to answer the arguments of questions of your opponents.” J.N. Saynal regarded him as an extremely well read man. It was a classic case of man performing “actions” and regarding and later re-examining his activities in the light of his reading. Any good book that came his way would be ‘devoured’ by him. Here was a man in whom practice and precept met in equal measure.⁴

Throwing some light on Bhagat Singh’s thrust for books, a well-known librarian of Dwarka Das Library (Lahore, now in Chandigarh), Raja Ram Shastri once told Shiv Verma, “ Bhagat Singh literally used to devour books. He would read books, make notes, discuss with his friends and critically examine his own understanding in the light of new knowledge, rectifying the mistakes that come to be discovered.” One of his intimate comrade, Shiv Verma states: “ Bhagat Singh always moved with a small portable library. I don’t remember even a single occasion when Bhagat Singh was not carrying some books. I have seen him ill-clad and almost in rags, but even then he carried some book in his pocket”⁵. According to his nephew, Professor Jagmohan Singh, “ Bhagat Singh established

a library of 175 books by around 70 authors at Agra where Assembly Bomb plan was finalised”.

Bhagat Singh was arrested on 8 April, 1929, sentenced to death on 7 October 1930 and he kissed the gallows on 23rd March 1931. He was thus in jail for 714 days, out of which 167 days were as a prisoner sentenced to death. During his imprisonment, according to some estimates, he read nearly 300 books. The secret supply by the Dwarka Dass Library (Lahore) could not keep pace with the speed of reading. He requested books so frequently that it was a problem for the jail authorities to scrutinize them.⁶

Let us now cite the most touching example for his passion for books. His love for books endured till the very end. Pran Mehta, Bhagat Singh’s lawyer was allowed to meet him on 23rd March, 1931 just a few hours before hanging. Bhagat Singh was then pacing up and down in the condemned cell like a lion in a big cage. He welcomed Mr. Mehta with a broad smile and asked him whether he had brought his book, The Revolutionary Lenin. When Mr. Mehta gave the book, he was very happy and began reading it as if he was conscious that he had not had much time left. Soon after Mr. Mehta’s departure, the jail authorities told Bhagat Singh that the time of hanging had been advanced by eleven hours. By then, Bhagat Singh had hardly finished a few pages of book.

References:

1. Cited in M.M.Juneja’s Article ‘Selected Collections of Bhagat Singh’ titled, ‘Erudite Profile of Bhagat Singh by N.K Joshi, New Delhi 2007, p.289
2. Shiv Verma, Editor, Selected Writings of Bhagat Singh, New Delhi,1986, p.95

Manmathnath Gupta, a close associate of Bhagat Singh, writes about those moments.

“When called upon to mount the scaffold, Bhagat Singh was reading a book by Lenin. He continued his reading and said, “Wait a while, A Revolutionary is talking to another revolutionary.”

There was something in his voice Which made the executionaries pause. Bhagat Singh continued to read. After a few moments, he flung the book towards ceiling and Said, “let us go”.⁷

He was perhaps the only example in the history of the world who critically studied the works of the great thinkers and philosophers till the moment of hanging. Bhagat Singh was young man who because of his interest in studying and his keen sense of history gave to the revolutionary tradition a goal beyond the elimination of British.

To sum up, we can say that Bhagat Singh ideological rise was accompanied by a diverse list. He was well-versed, in Marx, Lenin and other radical literature but also studied people such as Tom Paine, James Mill, Dostoevsky, Sinclair and a host of other authors. His available writings show a wide variety of topics. The legacy of Bhagat Singh should not be limited to being simply revolutionary but also an intellectual par excellence.

- 3.M.M. Juneja, Blog titled, 'Bhagat Singh used to literally devour books, set a record of sorts', March 23,2011, Times of India.
4. Published in Tribune, dated 17 September 1995
5. Shiv Verma, 'Selected Writings of Bhagat Singh' Delhi 1986
6. M.M Juneja Article 'Selected Collections of Bhagat Singh' titled, 'was Bhagat Singh satisfied with his sacrifice', p.300
7. Ibid, p.302