

## Recalling Bhagat Singh

Atheist, Internationalist and Marxist  
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Bhagat Singh had a number of political choices before him but the fact that he consciously abjured them in favour of a fiery independence, atheism and internationalism is worthy of introspection, if not emulation.

On the evening of 23 March 1931, three young socialist revolutionaries Bhagat Singh (b 1907), Sukhdev Thapar (b 1907) and Shivaram Rajguru (b 1908) of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, a revolutionary organisation dedicated to the armed overthrow of the British Raj, were hung in the Lahore jail by the British. Their bodies were smuggled out at night and cremated secretly by the police. The convicts' request for a firing squad, considered appropriate for the execution of prisoners of war, was turned down by the authorities because it was important for the government to not recognise the revolutionaries as political prisoners.

### Introducing Marxism

This year Indians across the world will observe the 85th anniversary of this momentous event in a context marked by serious questions of the self and nationhood in our globalised consumerist lives. In this season of delicate hysterical nationalism a re-examination of Bhagat Singh's political legacy, to sift the grain from the chaff in the story of the *Shahid-e-Azam* told innumerable times in the media, academia and Hindi cinema becomes necessary. Let us begin this non Bollywoodisation of the revolutionary with what the late Bipan Chandra, in 1979, wrote in the introduction to Bhagat Singh's remarkable essay *Why I am an Atheist*,

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. Unfortunately, this last aspect is relatively unknown with the result that all sorts of reactionaries, obscurantists and communalists have been wrongly and dishonestly trying to utilise for their own politics and ideologies the name and fame of Bhagat Singh and his comrades such as Chandra Shekhar Azad. (Shahid Bhagat Singh Research Committee 1979)

Every year people and politicians of all shades remember Bhagat Singh and his comrades as a matter of annual ritual on 23 March. Eighty five years after his execution, the year 2016 may not turn out to be unusual in this respect—he will be remembered only to be forgotten and betrayed the very next day. Going by what is happening in India these days, I suspect his memory will be celebrated with a shrill vehemence this year in all political quarters. But, this short essay asserts, the legacy of Bhagat Singh can *rightfully* be claimed only by the followers of Lenin, Trotsky, rationalism, internationalism and atheism—characters who risk being labeled anti-national by the powers that be and media controlled by them.

Anyway, a list of his true heirs would exclude both the Stalinists and the legatees of Mussolini and Hitler because no adversary of freedom, introspection and criticism can claim to understand, leave alone appropriate, the work, evolution and ideas of that remarkable young man.

## **Internationalism Early On**

In many ways Bhagat Singh was a born revolutionary. His family was connected with the Ghadar movement which needs no introduction to the students of anti-colonial Indian nationalism. While the Ghadar fervour ran in his blood, the boy Bhagat Singh was impressed by the history of Giuseppe Mazzini's Young Italy movement. This influence of the youthful movements of the Italian *Risorgimento* on the psyche of Bhagat Singh seems to have converted him to an abiding internationalism quite early in life besides making him a revolutionary patriot. The 1918-19 revolt in the Punjab, especially the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, turned the 12-year-old into an anti-imperialist warrior. However, the young man's restive mind swiftly outgrew the confines of a theistic middle class nationalism woven around the symbols of Non-Cooperation and Khilafat.

In sum, his enthusiasm for Gandhian nationalism was short lived. He swiftly grew out of nationalism and moved towards a revolutionary movement which had a history stretching back, at least, to the Swadeshi Movement of 1905. Sometime in 1925-26, he would later confess, being a "romantic idealist revolutionary" no longer satisfied him.

Disillusioned by the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation movement by Gandhi in 1922, and the outbreak of serious communal riots, Bhagat Singh joined the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) founded in 1924 by firebrands like Sachindra Nath Sanyal and Ramprasad Bismil—both god fearing *Anushilan* type revolutionaries. After 1924, and also because of the successful Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, numerous Indian revolutionaries were transformed into Marxist patriots. Several of them, including Bhagat Singh, gathered at the Feroz Shah Kotla in Delhi to rename the HRA the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) in 1928.

Prior to this Bhagat Singh had read a number of books and articles on the October Revolution and Lenin became his ideal. Familiar with the writings of Marx and Bakunin, he critiqued nationalism, anarchism, non-violence, terrorism, religion, theism and

communalism relentlessly. In his view “criticism” and “independent thinking” were the “indispensable qualities of a revolutionary.” Thus, at an early age, he realised that it is difficult to live as a rational person in a society where the majority is afflicted by the disease of “mental stagnation.” Thus the majoritarian political nonsense of our day, that the majority is correct and must prevail at any cost to civil society, would have invited Bhagat Singh’s ridicule and refutation.

## **Philosophical Influences**

It would be wrong to view Bhagat Singh’s appeal to reason and his conversion to an incorrigible atheism as movements of an intellect influenced only by Marxism and Anarchism. Before his critics accuse him of being influenced by occidental ideas they should examine his perspective on the rational element in Indian philosophy. He referred to Charvak, the ancient Indian materialist philosopher who had “challenged the authority of God.” He was aware of the need to use the “experiments and expressions of the ancient Savants and thinkers” in the “struggle against ignorance.” The tradition of questioning orthodoxy handed down to us by the critics of the past and not the “hue and cry of faith” was important to the young revolutionary. Those who pin the badge of nationalism on their chest and display not the slightest hesitation in demonising any view contrary to theirs’ must read the following words penned by Bhagat Singh,

Any man who stands for progress has to criticize, disbelieve and challenge every item of the old faith. Item by item he has to reason out every nook and corner of the prevailing faith. If after considerable reasoning one is led to believe in any theory or philosophy, his faith is welcomed. His reasoning can be mistaken, wrong, misled and sometimes fallacious. But he is liable to correction because reason is the guiding star of his life. But mere faith and blind faith is dangerous: it dulls the brain, and makes a man reactionary.  
(Shahid Bhagat Singh Research Committee 1979)

Bhagat Singh became an atheist at a time when most Indian revolutionaries were deeply religious. Sachindra Nath Sanyal, transported to the Andaman Islands for life by the British, was his early idol and Sanyal’s theistic *Bandi Jeevan* inspired him in the beginning. Ramprasad Bismil, he noted, “was an orthodox Arya Samajist.” Another comrade Rajen Lahiri “could not suppress his desire of reciting hymns of the Upanishads and the Gita.” All four famous Kakori “martyrs...passed their last day in prayers.”

Bhagat Singh rejected this “mysticism” in favour of dialectical materialism and a dialogical approach to knowledge. In Bhagat Singh’s considered opinion his atheism and revolutionary socialism were not symptoms of his vanity. When accused of vanity by a friend who asked him to pray while awaiting death, he chose to write *Why I am an Atheist* as a response to the charge.

This remarkable tract demonstrates the true revolutionary's ability to self-interrogate and arrive at rational solutions to the problems of belief and ideology. Bhagat Singh had recited the Gayatri Mantra "for hours and hours" in addition to the morning and evening prayers as a school student in Lahore as a "perfect devotee." He evolved from that Arya Samaj state of devotion to God into a radical nationalist. Very soon thereafter he transformed into an idealist revolutionary and, finally, he became a Marxist, atheistic revolutionary committed to a world free of injustice and dogma.

The numerous critics of Marx among us who do not understand the difference between Stalinism and Marxism can never truly appreciate the reverence Bhagat Singh developed for Marx, Trotsky and Lenin. The country was important to him but this country was not the abstract geographical or iconic entity of a thin skinned xenophobic paranoid nationalism. Bhagat Singh loved India and its people but his idea of India was different from the idea of India entertained by the nationalists and communalists.

His India comprised the "millions upon millions of human beings in slums and huts" whose blood is sucked by the "capitalist vampires." God, to Bhagat Singh, was Nero and the nation or country its poor exploited people whose hope lay *only* in scientific socialism. He realised that the road to reason, science and socialism had to run through the heavily mined fields of faith, superstition, capital and Godliness but this was the only road, he came to argue with the help of reason, worth taking for the true revolutionary.

Finally Bhagat Singh must be placed in the social context of the 1920s when Fascism and Communism both were becoming world movements. In the early 1920s the Soviet Union had emerged as the first socialist state in human history under Lenin's overall direction. Twelve years before Singh was hanged, Mussolini laid down the foundation of a Fascist movement which would cause the rise of ultra-nationalism in many countries on 23 March 1919 in Milan. His *Fasci Italiani da Combattimento* metamorphosed into the Fascist Party which inspired the rise of National Socialism (*Nazism*) in Germany—an ideology much admired by the Hindu Right till date.

Bhagat Singh was a teen when the All India Hindu Mahasabha came into existence in 1921 and the RSS was established in 1925. The Communist Party of India (CPI) was formally established in December, 1925. It is well known that many Hindu Nationalists and Communists had old connections with the revolutionary groups like the *Anushilan* and *Yugantar*. In sum, as a young revolutionary patriot alive to national and international developments in the 1920s, Bhagat Singh had a number of political choices but the fact that he *consciously* abjured them in favour of a fiery independence evident in each word of *Why I am an Atheist* is worthy of more introspection and, if possible, emulation.

## References

Shahid Bhagat Singh Research Committee (1979): *Why I am an Atheist*, Delhi: Mayur Press.