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Post-Independence *Bharat* by Bhagat Singh

Abstract

It has been a century since Bhagat Singh was executed by the British government in India and almost sixty years since India's Independence. Bhagat Singh was executed or rather murdered by the British on 23 March, 1931. Though it was termed as a capital punishment that was a result of lawsuit for his alleged conspiracies of murder, it was a farce run by the Britishers in their own law courts. But the whole period, Bhagat Singh remained in jail was an awakening for the population of India as well as Bhagat Singh himself. He exposed the farce practices of British government and the attitude of then the only body of representation of Indian people, the Congress. It was an awakening for Bhagat Singh as he got an opportunity to read the intelligent scholars from around the world in order to prepare for his proceedings in the court. It was an awakening of the Indian masses as they got aware of the forms of exploitation they were being subjected to on the hands of British colonizers and how the then members of Congress were not doing enough to put the national interests forward. Bhagat Singh during his trial and after his execution emerged out to be the shining star of Indian Independence movement and a factor that united the masses of India for their liberation. Through these decades various political parties and fringe groups of the independent India have reproduced the ideologies of him in multiple ways according to their

interests and utilities. The following paper will plunge into the history of the popular ideologies and affiliations of Bhagat Singh and its appropriations by the political blocks in India. The paper will briefly discuss the ideologies of contemporary leading political groups of India and how their doctrines coincide and dissent from that of Bhagat Singh. It will try to comprehend the complexities associated with the till now ambiguous thoughts of the revolutionary and the caricature of India that he had in his head. It is immensely imperative in the light of contemporary political milieu to understand the idea of *Bharat* that Bhagat Singh envisaged and comprehend its values to be applied in today's chaos that Indian political science has become.

Introduction

Bhagat Singh, one of the most revered personalities of India was born in the most tumultuous times of the Indian struggle for Independence. Due to his short term life span he had a very brief tangent in the freedom movement of India, but a very palpable one. Even though his actual years of contribution to the struggle are very few in comparison to other freedom fighters of India, his limited actions have left a rich legacy to be pondered and acted upon. His abridged number of years have also kind of created an ambiguity and have given space to the shams to mold his doings in their own ways to retain benefit. Since the data available in regard to Bhagat Singh had till now been under covers and much of his heritage was continuing on hearsay. His writings that contain his preaching and political leanings were not available to the common public for the very long time that lead to his legacy being appropriated and exhibited by various political groups in their own suitable ways. In today's circumstances it is all the more important to throw light on the ideological lineage of Bhagat Singh. This can be done in two ways. One is by looking into his writings and his statements given in the British court during his trial that ultimately resulted in a capital punishment and his execution. These documents are now available in the public domain by the efforts of some intelligentsia of India and Pakistan, those who knew the values of these records. The other way is to look into his family lineage as family is an environment that has a deep stamp on the emotional and political makeover of any individual.

Family Patronage

Being witness to the era of early twentieth century when the Indian movement of freedom was on its apex to drive away the British colonizers, Singh was born into the family of high values and freedom movement stalwarts. His ancestors had already been the patrons in

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army, which fought against the alien forces. His great grandfather Sardar Fateh Singh commanded principle over property. During the Punjab uprising against the East India Company in 1849, British Government offered him land and award in exchange for his services. He out rightly declared that he was a follower of Guru Gobind Singh¹ and would stand with the people rather than going with the traitors, which will be a treason to his Guru's teachings. He chose principles over property and thus formed a value system of character and integrity for his future generations.²

Bhagat Singh's grandfather Sardar Arjun Singh was an arch defender of Sikhism in the times of Rana ranjit Singh but his philosophies took a turn when he met Swami Dayanand Saraswati.³ He became an *Arya Samaji*⁴, abandoning Sikhism which was an extreme step in those times. That era after 1857, that is the First war of Independence in India, was unique in the terms of the Indian freedom struggle when everything on the outside seemed peaceful but inside was boiling. The single party of India, Congress was founded by Dada Bhai Naoroji with an initial aim to voice the demands of native Indians. Another estuary that emerged in the time was of *Arya Samaj*, a reformist movement whose foundation was kept by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. Congress methods were of alluring the British rulers and put in the demands of the Indian population, while *Arya Samaj* worked on the reforms of the supernatural beliefs of the Indian population. *Arya Samaj* was a mirror of knowledge that spread in the people the love for fellow human beings rather than beliefs in the externalisms of religion. This was troubling the British as their kingdom in India which was kept on the foundation of superstitious beliefs of Indian population and the differences among them on the basis of religion caste and creed could diminish in future. Sardar Arjun Singh having a revolutionary character could not stop himself to align with this Hindu reformist movement and became a staunch *Arya Samajist* leaving beside Sikhism which has been so close to his heart. He brought many reforms in his village regarding untouchability, and tried his best to shun differences among the religions. It is not a coincidence that Bhagat Singh read the books of Karl Marx and Lenin later in his short life span and was attracted towards those pieces of literature. The seeds of progressive thinking and revolutionary actions had been sprouting in his family environment even before his birth; those were rightfully ingrained in him since his childhood. Sardar Arjun Singh before sacrificing his final belonging, which is his grandson, Bhagat Singh, had proudly offered all his three sons Kishan Singh, Ajit Singh and Swarn Singh to the cause of India's Independence from the foreign rule.

The scenario for revolutionaries or the radical freedom fighters of India from 1900 onwards was at variance with that of tranquil and composed lives of Indian Congress members. For the revolutionaries it was an era of facing the harshest sight of British colonizers, who were leaving no stone unturned to redeem their control over their colony. They were the five decades of melancholy, tolerating fake lawsuits, arrests, jail mongering, capital punishments, starvation, mental and physical tortures and epidemics. Among the people who survived through this ordeal was one Sardar Kishan Singh, Bhagat Singh's father. Kishan Singh was an active member of Ghaddar Party, an international organization of Indians living outside India that aimed to oust the British from their nation. Though he never supported the outrageous methods used by the members of Ghadar party, he helped them in ways that no other could do at that time. The British government had a stinging eye on him, but most of the times he was able to dodge the police and smuggle the weapons for the revolution from other countries. He along with other comrades started a publication '*Sahayak*' of which he was the editor. The papers published in the publication instigated the youth of the country and spat spew against the British Raj. He like his son knew, how important it is to inspire the youth of the nation to fight against these British colonizers. As Bhagat Singh outrageously opposed the Simon commission and its 'Public Safety Bill' and 'Traders bill', likewise his father had done it a great time before. British Government had imposed a new tax on water called *Abiyana* that had instilled a great agony in the already poor farmers. Kishan Singh decided to use this agitation of the farmers and constituted *Zamindar League*, a body to protest against the unethical tax. The processions taken out in protest of the tax were a huge success and British had to oblige to the League's demands. The tax was withdrawn.⁵

In similar instances of Bhagat Singh's struggle, Kishan Singh too was a stalwart in molding the cruel living conditions of prisoners in Lahore jail. Once when Kishan Singh was arrested, he unflinchingly refused to stay in the prisoner cell that was a kind of attic where leave alone standing one could not even sit properly with a raised head. This retraction of Kishan Singh however had physically agonizing effects on Kishan Singh but all the tortures of British could not break down his will. The British jailer had to ultimately concede to the demands of Kishan Singh and the jail conditions improved a little. The iron will and steel nerves were inherited by his son, whereby he could too tolerate the physical and mental abuses of the British in prison but did not accede to their methods.

Kishan Singh's ability to balance his emotional side in the situations that could bring a normal human to the verge of collapse, made him unique. His life was an album with burning

caricatures, shrieking canvases, sobbing spectacles and life battling experiences that made him shine and pass this radiance to his son, Bhagat Singh. He was one of the founders of the radical revolutionary movement in India. He went to jail several times for his rebellious acts against the British Government. He forsakes many offers to serve in the government at eminent designations and could not accede to the ways of tolerant, lackadaisical and sycophant Congress leaders.

Bhagat Singh, as his writings are to be believed, drew close resemblance to his Uncle Sardar Ajit Singh's ideology and action modules. He was violent and straightforward like his uncle and had a boiling blood that gave jitters to the British Empire. Ajit Singh was another shining star in the Singh clan, who was at the forefront in inhibiting the British. Ajit Singh along with his brother Kishan Singh and other members had started the *Bharat Mata Society*. The aim of Ajit Singh's life was to revive the upsurge of 1857, the First War of Indian Independence', with accentuated force and drive away the British from his country. Sardar Ajit Singh had a voice of fire as he spoke in the public meetings and drove the listeners towards his cause, towards their own cause, towards the cause of their nation. He used to sprat poison for the British in his speeches, the masses boiled with him and cried with him. He had become the voice of the people, their distress and their agony. He established a contact with the left royal entities of India and tried to collude and convince them to come to the rescue of their nation as one entity. He was the pillar of Indian history who kept the foundation of radical revolution. He defied all norms, all established phenomenon that came in his way and gave Indian revolution the international wings. He was the beacon of the *Pagdi Sambhaal Jatta* movement in India.

Bhagat Singh with no other infusion of a family patronage like mentioned above could not have streamed out on a paltry path. He was bound, by his making, by the air he breathed throughout his childhood, and by the acquaintances he had in his life, to choose the most challenging passage. It was his decent that flared the fire of radical revolution against the exploiters and an intelligence to dream of carving a future for his nation based on socialist foundation. He had inherited the grit for not backing out in extreme situations, no matter how painful the situations emerge.

Though his Uncle Ajit Singh had ignited the fire of peasant uprising in India against the illegal laws proposed by the colonizers, it was Bhagat Singh who sacrificed his life to remind each and every person of the country, that they are bound in chains. He was the one who

ignited every soul of Indian origin against the tyranny of exploitation, against the oppression of slavery, the reign of terror which would doom India and its inhabitants.

It is not a miracle that the persona of the man, whose ideology and political vision has been tried to tarnish by so many powerful fringe groups and established political set ups, still emerges out to be victorious and alive in the memories of the minds of his country. Bhagat Singh's ideology is being tried to be saved by the research scholars, by spreading his writings among people, so that his contribution in the National freedom struggle does not go in vain. Bhagat Singh is being isolated in the manner that his appeal does not fade away, while many freedom fighters of the time have been forgotten. His legend still lives on.

Popular Political Spectrum

The coinage of the terminology 'left political views' and 'right political views' is believed to be initiated from the historical 'Meeting of the Estates' called by the monarch of France Louis XVI. In the meeting, the nobility and clergy that comprised the three per cent of the total population sat at the right side of the King and the remaining 97 per cent who comprised the peasants and the destitute traders. The peasants and poor people demanded for radical changes in the system of governance while the noblemen and clergy wanted the status quo. From their emerged the Left wing and the Right wing ideologies. Over the time, with numerous revolutions in countries and various political setups the range of Left and Right expanded and a whole Political Spectrum was designed by the people belonging to the study of Political Science. The spectrum now has a wider range which can further be dissected, but for the sake of convenience only a few mains have been specified over here. The political line ranges from extreme left i.e., 'radical' to center left i.e. 'liberal' to center i.e. 'moderate' to center right i.e. 'conservative' to extreme right i.e. reactionary. The spectrum cannot be confounded here and has a large scope of expansion. Especially in all the countries other than the United States, there is a broad range of ideological leanings followed by various political groups.

So by convention, Left and Right symbolize the social and economic stands. Though in India most of the political groups revolve around only one locus, and that is Religion. The Left and Right affiliations of any party are recognized by the religion or a sub community that it supports.

Now let us look at the leading political groups of India and how they have tried to interpret Bhagat Singh's ideology through their respective lenses in order to appease the public and its vote.

The Right Wing

It is due to his charisma and appeal that every political party in today's time tries to ascertain his political views according to their own needs. The right wing that includes fringe groups, the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayam Sewak*), and VHP (*Vishva Hindu Parishad*) and are essentially a big support to the BJP (*Bhartiya Janata Party*), create his pseudo ideologies in the manner that Bhagat Singh was anti Congress, so he is essentially pro Hinduism. Chaman Lal in his introduction to *The Jail Notebook* writes:

“Far greater injustice is done to Bhagat Singh by the Hindu Right – RSS and its affiliates – who are also out to appropriate the revolutionary’s legacy. In an effort that can only be termed obscene, the Hindu Right would have us believe that Bhagat Singh was a votary of a greater Hindu homeland and a devotee of Bharat Mata (Indian Motherland).”⁶

Bhagat Singh was a true radical revolutionary who had formed his ideologies by reading Marxist literature and being in the company of communist leaders of those times, when communism was not just a word of appropriation. To go by his available writings, he was tilted towards Marxism, especially inside the jail while serving the capital punishment. His *Jail Notebooks* unconditionally throws the light on his socialist views. In fact, the last book that he was reading and had to leave in the middle for he was being taken for execution, was the biography of Vladimir Lenin. His spectacular essay titled “Why I am an Atheist” combusts all the false associations that the right wing with the pseudo Hinduism vendetta tries to align with Bhagat Singh.

“The BJP website informs the nation of its discovery that a copy of the Bhagwatgita can be found in the museum at his native village Khatkarkala! But, quite understandably, it is careful not to mention his atheism-rationalism, Marxism or socialism.”⁷

Besides belonging to Sikhism by birth and following *Arya Samaj* to a certain age, he categorically denounced religion and its practices in his last days. His views expressed in this essay will be a huge hit to today's sentinels of communal politics, for whom religion remains the basis of soliciting votes.

The Center

The congress Party in India was the only political entity that got a chance to represent the Indian people in the colonial era. Congressmen have always, since the time of its conception, have tried to associate the term 'liberal' that is Left of the Center, with them. They have always been seen taking a moderate path that does not hurt the feelings of anyone uprightly. During the reign of the first Prime Minister of independent India Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru, the party implemented socialist ideas and maintained a closed economy, while it was in the party's tenure that the markets were opened and FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) was welcomed.

Coming to its religious inclinations, like any other party of India it has been changing sides regionally to appease the local public. In certain states it behaves more leftist while in others it is pro Hindu or Pro Muslim. Even Congressmen have catered to the attributes associated with extreme Right wing like, protests, rebellion and mass action as the initial leaders in Congress were Pro Hindu and conservatives. They have been essentially Pro elite and don't want to make things difficult for the upper strata. Though on the face it maintains a minority pleasing and pro poor strategy, trying to include people belonging to every social strata within its party cadres. But it has been kind of ruled by one dynasty since independence that is the Nehru clan and that points the finger at its democratic nature.

Even in those times, Bhagat Singh along with his family members, barring a few that had no influence on Bhagat Singh, could not have a linear alliance with the methods of the party. In fact, their tallest functionary, Gandhi could not look Bhagat Singh eye to eye and had termed these martyrs as just an overexcited youth. Still the modern membership of All India Congress in the dooming days of the party tries to acclaim the legacy of Bhagat Singh. Chamanlal explicitly calls the Congress people liars and says

“The mainstream nationalist historiography, and its concomitant political current, the Congress, hold him (Bhagat Singh) up as a selfless patriot, but totally ignore his anti-congress stance. In particular, the Congress elides Bhagat Singh's Marxist ideology.”⁸

Bhagat Singh was very clear on his anti-capitalist agenda and extremely against the favours being given and taken from the elite class in those times by the Congress. It is a well-known fact that the fund for the congress party came from the big business tycoons of those times. While addressing a letter 'To Young Political Workers', where he states the incomplete efforts

of the Congress party to attain a quasi-independence which has no meaning for the peasants and the working class:

“What difference does it make to them, whether Lord Reading is the head of the Indian government or Sir Purshotamdas Thakordas? What difference for a peasant if Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru replaces Lord Irwin! It is useless to appeal to his national sentiment. You can't “use” him (the peasants) for your purpose; you shall have to mean seriously and to make him understand that the revolution is going to be his and for his good. The revolution of the proletariat and for the proletariat.....”⁹

Bhagat Singh's path to contentment went through serving the whole humanity and not just a class of people. His happiness laid in liberating the poor masses from sufferings and distress. His idea of freedom was the emancipation of the human kind from exploitation, poverty and slavery and not just liberty from the British. He wanted to work towards creating a nation where poverty and inequality on the basis of economy or caste and creed do not exist.

It is not wrong to say that though British had executed Bhagat Singh's body, the leaders of independent India are leaving no stone upturned to kill his ideology. A group of people with a lack of knowledge have compared Gandhi and Bhagat Singh only on the basis of their methods that is one used the path of non-violence while other was a believer of violent revolution. However this is such a trivialization of the immense differences that the two had.

“In fact, the British killed Bhagat Singh physically, but their successor - the Indian rulers, did everything they could to kill his ideas. A popular myth was manufactured that reduced the whole debate between Gandhian Congress and Bhagat Singh to a difference of ‘paths’ and ‘methods’, i.e., ‘non-violent’ and ‘violent’. Gandhi himself and the entire official historiography reinforced this myth. Behind this smokescreen, the debate, which was essentially between two alternative models of national liberation movement, was pushed to the background.”¹⁰

The Left

In India the Left wing party, The Communist Party of India (CPI), which was established in 1925, that is during the British regime. Later many groups emerged with different ideologies and political agendas. So now, the Left Front comprises the CPI, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) and their youth wings operating in the leading Indian universities. Though Bhagat Singh's ideologies through his writings are

observed as being Marxist and communist, there is another very known fact that Bhagat Singh never joined the Communist front of India, The 'Communist Party of India' which had already been established in 1925. In an article written by Bhagat Singh '*Naye Netaao ke Alag Alag Vichaar*' (Different Views of New Leaders), he compares the ideologies of Subhash Chandra Bose, a radical leader and thus associated with the Left thought (though he was the member and president of the Indian National Congress in 1938, but had radical action theory as opposed to the then Congress manifesto and more inclined towards the Left stream of politics) and Jawaharlal Nehru, who was associated with the mainstream Indian Congress party. Singh termed Subhash Chandra Bose as the leader who believed in the status quo and wanted to free his motherland but not the governance model, while he considered Jawaharlal Nehru a much sensible leader who urged the youth of India to rebel, to question the existing models of governance and bring about a change that could prove to be the real freedom for the general masses. Subhash Chandra Bose though associated with the rebellious line of thought, he was conventional and emotional about his mother India and not active to bring about the necessary changes in it that had been the cause of being colonized. A noted reporter describes the stand of Bhagat Singh between the two leaders, Subhash Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru in the following lines in one of his articles:

“Bhagat Singh underlines Nehru's observation that we should not accept tales from religious books, if they do not stand the test of reason. To Bhagat Singh, Nehru was radical and desired reformation in the society, while Subhas Babu wanted the status quo and believed in everything ancient, whereas Nehru wanted a revolt against it. Nehru said those who believe that they could revive whatever existed a hundred years back, Nehru said, “I want to tell them that it was impossible. The world in our imagination might be still but the real world is not still”¹¹

Bhagat Singh was a free thinker and fought for the people and not to appropriate his own personal means. He was a free man who did not join the Communist Party of India and endured as an independent voice of the nation dissociated of the political powers vested with personal interests. The forged idealism of today's supposedly Left parties can never match the purity of actions of Bhagat Singh and thus should not tarnish his legacy by associating him from their respective groups, whether CPI, CPI (M), CPI (M-L) or others.

So, with a diverse country like India and due to its historical vivacity, India has its own characterization of Left, Right and Center. These demarcations have too dynamic lines that

alter frequently based on the political ambiance the whole nation or a region is experiencing. But on a experiential basis, India's definition of Right and Left have never been on the basis of economic principles, but they are rooted very deeply in the pit of social and religious conservatism. This division of humans is fueled by the popular parties by ascertaining the legacies of popular leaders whom the people admire, therefore Bhagat Singh being the favored target.

Conclusion

Bhagat Singh was an arrant socialist who believed in changing the status quo. He wanted to weave an India with the threads of secularism, democracy and socialism, where exploitation of one man by another in the name of status, religion and caste will be impossible. He believed in acting upon things rather than talking. Bhagat Singh quotes the verses by James Russell Lowell and exclaims it to be the determinants of freedom. The verses are

“..... True freedom is to share

All the chains our brothers wear;

And, with heart and hand, to be

Earnest to make others free.

They rae slaves who fear to speak

For the fallen and the weak;

They are slaves who will not choose

Hatred, scoffing and abuse,

Rather than in silence shrinks.

From the truth they need must think;

They are slaves who dare not be

In the right with two or three...”¹²

Today, when capitalism has enguslfed our country and love and care for others has been reduced to another commodity acquired in exchange of monetary value, when people just care about themselves, the free *Bharat* of Bhagat Singh seems lost. The charm for Bhagat Singh in people's mind lives and grows not because he picked up a gun or he sacrificed his

life for the nation but the way he ignited the spirits of the Indian youth from the slumber and taught the nation the true value of Independence. Bhagat Singh belonged to an affluent family of *Zamindars* and if wanted could have chosen an easy way of life for himself. His family has lost his uncles and he too had everything to lose when he jumped into the fire of freedom struggle, but he chose the righteous way as his father and grandfather. Nor he was an illiterate who can be instigated without facts. He chose to do what he did by his own will. He did not become a hero when he shot the British officer Saunders but left his imprint on the minds of people when he got arrested. He fought with the British Raj not just with the power of the gun but with the power of his ideas of truth, equality and liberty.

“The catalyst of change – or at any rate, its most visible and charismatic representative was Bhagat Singh, who had reached the conclusion that it is not enough to simply 'free mother India from the chains of slavery', it was important to understand and fight, the larger system that produces slavery in the first place.”¹³

For Bhagat Singh today's *Bharat* which is persistent to drive backwards to the ancient era by practicing externalisms of religion, is certainly not his caricature. For Bahgat Singh today's *Bharat* which is being again divided on the basis of religion and culture is not the one he imagined. For Bhagat Singh today's *Bharat* which is privatizing everything and allowing foreign investments in the minutest industry is not the one he envisaged. For Bhagat Singh the *Bharat* of today, where the poor is becoming poorer and rich is becoming richer, where the farmers are committing suicides and affluent are wasting food, is not the one Singh died for. Kuldeep Singh Nayar states in his book:

“To Bhagat Singh the struggle for Independence in India was basically a struggle for economic betterment. Freedom would provide an opportunity for improvement. An independent India without removing poverty would be free only in name. He did not want to substitute one status quo with another.”¹⁴

Bhagat Singh defined freedom as the termination of exploitation of man, whether it be through foreign forces or domestic forces. His revolution aimed to build an egalitarian society where there will be the government of the peasants and toiling masses. His leadership was not based on merely his attractive personality or the sacrifice he made for the country, but due to his intellect. His actions were a manifestation of his intellectual honesty. He was well versed with the most modern pieces of literature of the world and thus was aware of the extreme sufferings of the humankind. His heart bled for the laborers and the peasants and it is for the

sake of this population he lived and died. His heart would have ached to see the communal discontent persistent in his dream motherland and would have cried incessantly looking at the efforts being made by the contemporary leaders to tear the country apart into segments and classes.

Today the need of Bhagat Singh, his ideals, his intellect and his commitment is even more than the colonial times. Though development is taking place, but this development is being put on the carcasses of the poor, the peasants, the general masses that benefit the few. Today's youth is disillusioned, lost in the crowd of unemployment, drugs, and communal instigation politics. We need a pure voice which could end the blame game of politicians and reach out to the youth to understand them, love them, nurture them and make them understand the importance of their lives. Though this is certainly not the Bharat that Bhagat Singh dreamt of, it is now upon us to make it as he imagined it to be.

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Arya Samaj is an Indian Hindu reform movement that promotes values and practices based on the belief in the infallible authority of the Vedas. The samaj was founded by the sanyasi (ascetic) Dayananda Saraswati on 7 April 1875. Members of the Arya Samaj believe in one God and reject the worship of idols.

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