

Bhagat Singh and the Revolutionary Movement

Niraja Rao

April 1997

Contents

Bhagat Singh: Biographical Profile	4
Ideology: The Revolutionary Terrorist Tradition	8
Anarchism:	10
Marxism:	11
The Indian Congress and Non-Violence:	11
Organisation and strategy	13
Conclusion	15

Bhagat Singh was an outstanding revolutionary and martyr of the Indian anti-colonial movement. He represented the youth who were dissatisfied with Gandhian politics and groped for revolutionary alternatives. Bhagat Singh studied the European revolutionary movement and was attracted to anarchism and communism. He became a confirmed atheist, socialist and communist. He realised that the overthrow of British rule should be accompanied by the socialist reconstruction of Indian society and for this political power must be seized by the workers. Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt enunciated their understanding of revolution in a statement made in connection with the Assembly Bomb case on 6th June, 1929:

'By *Revolution* we mean that the present order of things, which is based on manifest injustice must change. Producers or labourers, in spite of being the most necessary element of society, are robbed by their exploiters of their labour and deprived of their elementary rights. The peasant who grows corn for all, starves with his family; the weaver who supplies the world market with textile fabrics, has not enough to cover his own and his children's bodies; masons, smiths and carpenters who raise magnificent palaces, live like pariahs in the slums. The capitalists and exploiters, the parasites of society, squander millions on their whims.'

They argued that a 'radical change' was necessary 'and it is the duty of those who realise it to reorganise society on the socialistic basis'. For this purpose the 'establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat' was necessary (*ed. Shiv Verma, Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 74-75*).

That Bhagat Singh and his comrades had passed over to the positions of Communism is also apparent from their actions and slogans in the Lahore Conspiracy Case on January 21, 1930. The accused appeared in court wearing red scarves. As soon as the magistrate took the chair they raised the following slogans: 'Long Live Socialist Revolution', 'Long Live the Communist International', 'Long live the people', 'Lenin's name will never die', and 'Down with Imperialism.' Bhagat Singh then read the text of the following telegram in the court and asked the Magistrate to transmit it to the Third International:

'On Lenin Day we send hearty greetings to all who are doing something for carrying forward the ideas of the great Lenin, we wish success to the great experiment Russia is carrying out. We join our voice to that of the International working class movement. The proletariat will win. Capitalism will be defeated. Death to Imperialism'. (*Ibid.*, p. 82)

Bhagat Singh was critical of the individual terrorism which was prevalent among the revolutionary youth of his time and realised the need for mass mobilisation by the Communist Party. In his final writings he argued that the party had to organise the workers and the peasantry. The fight around the small economic demands through the labour unions were the best means to educate the masses for a final struggle to conquer political power. Apart from this work it was necessary for the Communist Party to organise a military department. He stated: 'I am not a terrorist and I never was, except perhaps in the beginning of my revolutionary career. And I am convinced that we cannot gain anything through these methods. One can easily judge it from the history of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. All our activities were directed towards an aim, i.e., identifying ourselves with the great movement as its military wing. If anybody has misunderstood me, let him amend his ideas. I do not mean that bombs and pistols are useless, rather the contrary. But I mean to say that mere bomb throwing is not only useless but sometimes harmful. The military department of the party should always keep ready all the war-material it can command for any emergency. It should back the political work of the party. It cannot and should not work independently' (*Ibid.* p. 138).

Bhagat Singh: Biographical Profile

Born as Bhaganwala on the 26th September, 1907, Bhagat Singh grew up in a petty-bourgeois family of Sandhu Jats settled in the Jullunder Doab district of the Punjab. He belonged to a generation that was to intervene between two decisive phases of the Indian national movement - the phase of the 'Extremism' of Lal-Bal-Pal and the Gandhian phase of non-violent mass action.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the Punjab had a broad spectrum of popular leaders working in the state. Two such leaders were Sardar Ajit Singh and Sardar Kishen Singh, Bhagat Singh's paternal uncle and father. Interestingly, although middle class, both leaders were in great opposition to the mainstream leadership of the Indian National Congress and particularly Lala Lajpat Rai. Both brothers were consistently radical in attempting to mobilise the masses to oppose the British at every opportunity that arose.

In an article called 'Emergence of the Punjab in the freedom movement',¹ Bhagat Singh traces their inspiration to the extremist leader, Bal Gangadhar Tilak. 'Having seen their enthusiasm at the 1906 Congress Convention in Calcutta, Lokmanya was pleased and in bidding them adieu, gave them the responsibility of strengthening the movement in the Punjab.' On returning to Lahore, both brothers 'started a monthly newspaper called *Bharat Mata* to propagate their ideas'. Since they had no money and no influence among the rich, says Bhagat Singh, they had to collect everything necessary for propaganda work themselves. This they did by attracting a crowd in the market by ringing a bell and giving a lecture 'on how foreigners had destroyed India's industry and commerce'. This was followed by an announcement that an important meeting would be held within the week at the *Bharat Mata* office. After the first two meetings held on two consecutive Sundays, a decision was taken to hold a meeting every Sunday. Many people joined the group including Lala Lalchand 'Phalak', the 'national poet' of the Punjab, Lala Pindidas, Dr. Ishwari Prasad and Sufi Amba Prasad. Sardar Ajit Singh and Mahant Nandkishore were elected the President and Secretary of the group now organised as the 'Bharat Mata Society'.

In 1887, the Punjab government created the Chenab Colony, by diverting the Chenab river into a system of perennial canals rapidly turning the barren wasteland of the central Punjab into fertile farmland.² The colony was to be a model for the rest of Punjab, supervised by a paternalistic administration. 'Healthy agricultural communities of the "best Punjabi type" would be established... (which would) in turn demonstrate to other Punjabis how proper sanitation, careful economic planning and co-operation with the government could result in a higher standard of living'.³

In October 1906 the government introduced the Punjab Colonisation of Land Bill in the local Legislative Council. This Bill established retroactive conditions concerning sanitation, tree planting and construction in the Chenab Colony. In case of breach of the conditions, fines would be collected in the same fashion as revenue. Section 31 ruled that courts would have no jurisdiction in the Colony. In November, the government announced a drastic increase in the occupier rate (charge on canal water). In the Bari Doab canal area running through the districts of Am-

¹ Bhagat Singh 'Emergence of the Punjab in the Freedom Movement', written in Urdu. Published in the 1931 weekly *Bandematram*. Reprinted in Jagmohan Singh and Chaman Lal eds. 'Bhagat Singh Aur Unke Sathion Ke Dastavez', Ludhiana, 1987.

² N. Gerald Barrier; 'The Punjab Disturbances of 1907: The Response of the British Government in India to Agrarian Unrest', in David Hardiman ed, 'Peasant Resistance and the Raj', New Delhi, 1992.

³ *Ibid.*

ritsar, Gurdaspur and Lahore, rates had been lower because the government had hoped that a leniency in revenue would ensure the loyalty of the Sikh Jats who supplied recruits for the Indian Army.⁴ The yeomen farmers of the Colony were already discontented over the maladministration in the Colony and opposed the extra legal fees that the Bill sought to legitimise. Graft and corruption had galvanised the whole Colony into opposition to the entire system of interference and paternalism. From 1903, Sifaj-ud Din Ahmed, a retired postal officer, started the *Zamindar*, a newspaper, to publicise the colonists' plight. It was only a matter of time for discontent to turn into political opposition.

Bhagat Singh's grandfather, Sardar Arjan Singh, had migrated to the canal area and settled at Banga, Lyallpur. It is therefore not surprising that Sardar Ajit Singh was able to articulate so clearly the problems of the colonists and the objection to the Bill.

On 22nd and 23rd March, 1907, the *Zamindar* held a public meeting to protest against the bill. Although this was a platform for the rich yeomanry, Ajit Singh sent delegates from the 'Bharat Mata Society' to launch an agitation against the British. Lala Lajpat Rai was asked by the newspaper to give a speech. Bhagat Singh in his article on the national movement in the Punjab, shows how Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh differed on this issue.

'Before leaving (for Lyallpur) Lalaji sent a message to Sardar Ajit Singh saying that the government should be thanked for (a previous) amendment and then asked to repeat the law'. To this Ajit Singh is said to have replied 'we shall prepare the masses for a no revenue campaign. Also we can never thank the government'.

The meeting itself is described by Bhagat Singh thus, 'Lalaji was received by a large rally and consequently reached the *pandal* two hours late... In the meanwhile, Sardar Ajit Singh gave a speech. He was an impressive speaker. His tireless style of speech made the audience enthusiastic and by the end he had a large following of people. By the time Lalaji reached the *pandal*, the masses were with the Bharat Mata Society;... Lalaji was Punjab's finest orator but the style, the fearlessness and determination with which he spoke was something else. He received an ovation after every line. After the meeting many people dedicated their lives to the motherland'.⁵ This account is also corroborated by N. Gerald Barrier, 'Lajpat Rai attempted to be moderate, but as happened frequently with his speech making, the crowds' frenzy drove him to use phrases and ideas verging on what the British termed 'sedition'. After the meeting, Lajpat Rai went on a lecture tour in the United Provinces, while Ajit Singh began to organise the farmers of Amritsar and Lahore. Under Ajit Singh's leadership the colonists passed a resolution supporting a boycott of British goods and started a campaign to ensure that nobody paid the new water rate. The price of disobedience was social ostracism by the offender's caste or a fine of Rs. 500.⁶ The Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab, Denzil Ibbetson believed sedition in the province to be taking two directions. First Ajit Singh was trying to spread disaffection among the troops and the students and secondly the 'fomenters of unrest' were corrupting the yeomanry. He asked the Government of India for permission to deport Ajit Singh and Lajpat Rai so as to be able to 'strike terror into the minds of those concerned'. Ajit Singh was deported to Mandalay. Sardar Kishen Singh though less prominent than his brother was also part of this agitation and was put into jail.

⁴ *Ibid.* Approximately 30,000 Sikhs (23% of the Army) and 18,000 Punjab Muslims (13% of the Army) were in the Army, p. 245.

⁵ Bhagat Singh, *op. cit.*

⁶ N. Gerald Barrier, *op. cit.*

In 1907 the Bill was repealed and soon Ajit Singh and Kishen Singh were released. Bhagat Singh, born in September that year, was called Bhaganwala (the child of God) by his grandmother. Bhagat Singh began his primary education at the District Board Primary School in Banga. In 1916-17, his father moved to Lahore to be able to organise relief work for the victims of a severe earthquake in Kangra. Bhagat Singh was now shifted to the D.A.V. High School, Lahore. Writing about these years, Bhagat Singh said, 'It was through his (father's) teachings that I aspired to devote my life to the cause of freedom'.⁷

In his first letter, written to his grandfather at the age of 12, Bhagat Singh reassures him that he has passed his school exam comfortably and the latter need not worry on that count. Two years later he wrote again to tell his grandfather that 'railway men are planning to go on strike. Hopefully they will start by the next week'. This letter is dated the 12th of November 1921 and shows that he was aware of the Non Co-operation Movement that Gandhi had launched. Both letters are in fluent Urdu.

In 1923, Bhagat Singh joined the National College, Lahore. It was affiliated to the Punjab Quami Vidya Pith and was founded and managed by Lala Lajpat Rai and Bhai Parmanand. The College was set up as an alternative to the institutions run by the Government, bringing to the field of education the idea of *Swadeshi*. The philosophy behind the establishment of such a College was to produce 'self reliant, aggressive (in order to be progressive) men and women that new India wants'.⁸

Bhagat Singh seems to have had an impressive academic record in College. The Principal of the College, Chhibil Das wrote in his memoirs, 'There were no books at hand. So it was for the teachers to select books from the libraries and give the relevant portions to the students... in our National College, we used to talk about Mazzini and Garibaldi. We used to talk about Ireland, about Sinn Fein movement of De Valln February, 1928, Bhagat Singh (under the pseudonym *Vidrohi*) wrote a number of life sketches of prominent Punjabi revolutionaries, in the *Phansi* issue of the *Chanera* and other movements and about the Russian revolution'.⁹ The Russian Narodniks seem to have been discussed with the history professor, Jai Chandra Vidyalankar.

Bhagat Singh was also a member of the College dramatics society and seemed to have 'gained much prominence amongst the students and teachers, not only of his own college but other local colleges'.¹⁰ 'He was particularly impressive because of his youthful physique and commanding voice', one of his biographers, S.R. Bakshi tells us. Bhagat Singh was fluent in Urdu, Hindi, Gurmukhi, English and Sanskrit. In the pamphlet, 'Why I am an Atheist' Bhagat Singh writes about his days in college. 'Though a favourite with some professors and disliked by certain others, I was never an industrious or studious boy. I could not get any chance of indulging in such feelings as vanity. I was rather a boy with a shy nature, who had certain pessimistic dispositions about (my) future career'.

By the age of 16, Bhagat Singh was completely dedicated to the cause of national liberation. Nothing illustrates this better than his attitude to marriage. In 1924, Bhagat Singh was pressurised to get married. Unable to convince his parents of his determination not to marry, Bhagat Singh left his house in Lahore and reached Kanpur armed with an introduction by Jai Chandra Vidyalankar for Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. In the note left behind for his father Bhagat Singh said, 'my life

⁷ Bhagat Singh, 'Why I Am an Atheist', 5th-6th October, 1930.

⁸ Lala Lajpat Rai, 'The Problem of the Education in India', New York, 1920.

⁹ S.R. Bakshi, 'Bhagat Singh and His Ideology', New Delhi, 1981.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

has been dedicated to the noblest cause, that of the freedom of the country. Therefore there is no rest or worldly desire that can lure me now. If you remember, when I was small, Bapuji (Arjun Singh) declared at my thread ceremony that I had been dedicated to the service of my country. I am, thus waiting to fulfil that commitment. I hope you will forgive me'. On being asked why he did not want to get married, Bhagat Singh told Jaidev Gupta, his classmate and friend, that he had chosen a path which was full of many possibilities. His two uncles had gone that way and they had left two widows. Should he also leave another widow?¹¹ Chhabil Das has left us an account of how when he was to get married, Bhagat Singh came and reproached him on getting married. 'Besides them being my students we had good personal relations too... when Bhagat Singh heard that I was going to be married... he insisted that I should not marry. I said, if I could get a really good life companion who, instead of retarding my activities, would invigorate them, what would be your view? In the same breadth I quoted three concrete examples of Mrs. Sun Yat Sen,... wife of Lenin and... companion of Karl Marx. (At this) Bhagat Singh replied "Guruji who can vanquish you in any argument". So he yielded.'

From 1923-24, Bhagat Singh worked with Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi in Kanpur. Vidyarthi brought out a weekly nationalist newspaper called the *Pratap*. Here Bhagat Singh worked under the alias, Balwant. It was here that he met people like B.K. Dutt, Shiv Venna, B.K. Sinha etc. with whom he would share a close camaraderie. Ajoy Ghosh who was fifteen at the time wrote about his first meeting with Bhagat Singh thus, 'I believe it was sometime in 1923 that I met Bhagat Singh... he was introduced to me by B.K. Dutt in Cawnpore. Tall and thin, rather shabbily dressed, very quiet, he seemed a typical village lad lacking smartness and self confidence. I did not think very highly of him and told Dutt so when he was one'.¹² This was the first time that Bhagat Singh had left his house and the Punjab for a new city and new people.

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi attempted to get Bhagat Singh a job as a headmaster of a National school near Aligarh, a post he did eventually accept.

1924 was perhaps the most important year in Bhagat Singh's life. In Kanpur he became a member of the Hindustan Republican Association, started by Sachindranath Sanyal a year earlier. The main organiser of the Association was Chandra Shekhar Azad and Bhagat Singh became very close to him. It was as a member of the HRA that Bhagat Singh began to take seriously the philosophy of the Bomb. Armed revolution was understood to be the only weapon with which to fight British imperialism. Bhagat Singh went from village to village recruiting people and to activate the villages in the United Provinces. Propaganda attracted police work but it had now become easy to escape unnoticed.

In 1925, Bhagat Singh returned to Lahore and within the next year he and his colleagues started a militant youth organisation called the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. In April 1926, Bhagat Singh established contact with Sohan Singh Josh and through him the 'Workers and Peasants Party' which brought out the monthly magazine *Kirti* in Punjabi. For the next year Bhagat Singh worked with Josh and joined the editorial board of *Kirti*. In 1927, he was first arrested on charges of association with the Kakori Case accused for an article written under the pseudonym *Vidrohi* (Rebel). He was also accused of being responsible for a bomb explosion at Lahore during the Dussehra fair. He was let off for good behaviour against a heavy security of Rs. 60,000.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ajoy Ghosh, 'Bhagat Singh and His Comrades', Bombay, 1945.

In 1928, Bhagat Singh and Chandra Shekhar Azad were the sole absconders of the Kakori case and the other leaders being put behind bars meant that they were the leaders of the Hindustan Republican Association. 'One day in 1928 I was surprised when a young man walked into my room' Ajoy Ghosh remembers, 'and greeted me. It was Bhagat Singh but not the Bhagat Singh that I had met... before. Tall and magnificently proportioned, with a keen, intelligent face and gleaming eyes, he looked a different man altogether. And as he talked I realised that he had grown not merely in years... All those who met Bhagat Singh then and afterwards have testified to his remarkable intelligence and to the powerful impression he made when talking. Not that he was a brilliant speaker. But he spoke with such force, passion and earnestness that one could not help being impressed. We talked the whole night and as we went out for a stroll... it seemed to me that a new era was dawning for our party. We knew what we wanted and we knew how to reach our goal'.

Ideology: The Revolutionary Terrorist Tradition

Bhagat Singh spent the years from 1927 to 1928 in studying the history of the revolutionary movement in India. His articles, mostly written for *Kirti*, deal with the Babbar Akali Movement, the Kakori case, the Delhi Bomb Case, individual revolutionaries, the necessity for young people to come forward and join the revolutionary movement and the need to evolve an alternative to the mainstream leadership of the Congress and particularly, Lala Lajpat Rai.¹³

The first article Bhagat Singh wrote on the Babbar Akali movement for the *Pratap*. It was published on the 15th of March, 1926. The Babbar Akali movement was an attempt by Sikhs to liberate the country from the British and to free their Gurudwaras from the corrupt Mahants by an armed insurrection. It was confined to the Bist Doab and its membership was primarily rural. The leaders of this movement were mainly soldiers who had left the army to join the Non Co-operation Movement. In 1921 it was decided to murder Sunder Singh Majitha, Bedi Kartar Singh, Mahant Devdas of Nankana, C.M. Bowring, the Superintendent of Police and C.M. King, Commissioner, Jullunder. This was a retaliation for the massacre of 140 Sikhs that Mahant Narayandas organised in Nankana Sahib on the 21st of February. The Babbar Akali group however did not succeed in killing anybody but the attempt to assassinate Bowring got them into jail. This is known as the Akali Conspiracy Case of 1921.¹⁴ Bhagat Singh was very impressed by this movement, in fact he started learning Gurmukhi only after the Nankana Sahib massacre. In the article Bhagat Singh carefully delineates the contribution of the individuals who participated in the movement. What impresses him the most is the fearlessness with which these men are ready to embrace death (six of the leaders were sentenced to death and executed on the 27th of February, 1926). Bhagat Singh urges the reader to visualise how these men must have taken the pledge to forsake their families and sacrifice their life for the country, 'What a beautiful, bewitching and pure vision it must have been. What are the heights of self sacrifice? Where are the limits to courage and fearlessness? Were there no boundaries to this commitment to their ideals?'¹⁵

¹³ Jagmohan Singh and Chaman Lal *eds.*, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Kamlesh Mohan, 'Militant Nationalism in the Punjab 1919-35', New Delhi, 1985.

¹⁵ 'Holi ke Din Rakt Ke Chinte: Babbar Akali Phansi Par', *Ek Punjabi Yuvak* in Jagmohan Singh and Chaman Lal *eds.*, *op. cit.*

The next article is written in May, 1927 for *Kirti*, under the pseudonym *Vidrohi*. On the 9th of August, 1925, Ramprasad Bismil, Ashfaqullah and other members of the Hindustan Republican Association stopped (and subsequently looted) the tram carrying the government treasury at Kakori, near Lucknow. On 6th April, 1927, the main accused were sentenced to death. This article is interesting because it describes vividly the camaraderie that the accused had with each other and the happiness that they expressed on hearing their death sentence. It ends with a comment on those who have no sympathy for the accused, 'We sigh and think we have done our duty. We do not have that fire, we do not suffer, for we have become corpses. Today they are sitting on a Hunger-Strike and suffering and we are silently watching the show. May God grant them the strength and courage they need in their last few days'.¹⁶

In February, 1928, Bhagat Singh (under the pseudonym *Vidrohi*) wrote a number of life sketches of prominent Punjabi revolutionaries, in the *Phansi* issue of the *Chand*.¹⁷ The man who Bhagat Singh was to idealise and consider his 'mentor, friend and brother', Kartar Singh Sarabha was born in 1896 in Ludhiana. Having finished his college education, Sarabha went to America in 1912, where racial discrimination made him sensitive to the condition of Indians abroad. He organised Indian workers in San Francisco and they all readily agreed to sacrifice their life and wealth to the cause of the liberation of India. In 1913 the *Gadr*, a newspaper was started and Sarabha joined its editorial board. Bhagat Singh was particularly inspired by a song that Sarabha used to sing, 'To serve the country is very difficult. To talk about it is easy. Those who have chosen to serve the country face a million problems'. Sarabha returned to India in 1914 and within the year contacted the revolutionary leaders of India. In February 1915, Sarabha and Rash Behari Bose planned to infiltrate the army and attempt to spark off a revolt. This did not however happen because a member of their group turned approver and Sarabha was arrested and sentenced to death. On 16th November, 1915, Sarabha was executed. In concluding this brief biographical sketch, Bhagat Singh asks rhetorically, 'What was the purpose of his death? Why did Kartar Singh Sarabha die? The answer is absolutely clear, he died for the country and he did not want more than to die fighting for his country'.

The May 1928 issue of *Kirti* reprinted an article published in the Bombay newspaper *Shradhanand* on the true meaning of terrorism. Since Bhagat Singh was a member of the editorial board of *Kirti*, it is interesting to see how he and his comrades participated in the contemporary ideological debate of terrorism. The article sought to defend terrorism by rejecting the current definition of terrorism as the destructive, coercive and unjust use of force.

'Some mischievous individuals have attempted to set up terrorism in opposition to non-violence and that has led to a great misunderstanding'. The ideals of 'bravery, courage, martyrdom, the ability to use weapons, generosity, duty etc., dependent on the application of force are now considered base and unqualified'. A comparison is then made to the West, where 'every country is attempting to increase the arms at its disposal. On the other hand, here in India, it is considered a sin to take up arms'. The article asks its readers not to equate violence with crime, for 'when patriots take up arms for the sake of their country and its safety, when they eliminate exploitation and oppression or when they avenge the injustice done to the oppressed and go to the gallows, they use violence but they do not spread terror'. The distinction between crime and terrorism, although both use violence, is based on the intention of those who use it.

¹⁶ 'Kakori Ke Viron Se Parichay', *Vidrohi*, *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

In 1930, Bhagat Singh wrote the (now famous) pamphlet called 'Why I am an Atheist'. This pamphlet is important because of the autobiographical details that form part of the narrative. 'When I joined the revolutionary party (HRA), the first leader I came in contact with was not confident of rejecting the presence of God even though he was not a firm believer... The second leader (Sachindranath Sanyal) was a great devotee... What I want to say is that atheism has still not been established as a creed within the revolutionary party. All four accused in the Kakori case went to the gallows praying..'

Bhagat Singh while aware of the revolutionary terrorist tradition that had existed in the country as a mode of protest against the British, especially in the Punjab, distanced himself from his predecessors on two counts. First, revolutionary leaders had not been able to accept the logic of atheism and much less to publicly proclaim it. Second there had been no conception of a post-independence society. The immediate goal being the destruction of the British Empire there had been no inclination to work out a political alternative. For Bhagat Singh the decisive break came in the post-1926 period when the Hindustan Republican Association leadership fell on his shoulders. He lost no time in articulating the necessity of having a political ideology and that was to be Marxism. 'The romance of violence that was dominant in our predecessors was replaced by a serious ideology. There was no place for Romanticism and superstition any longer. We rooted ourselves in the present'.

From 1926, Bhagat Singh began to 'study in order to be able to counter criticism from opponents and sharpen (his) own arguments'. The most important requirement was to articulate clearly the ideals for which they were fighting. The fact that there had been no real agitation in 1926 meant that there was time to devote to studying. 'I studied the (writings of) the anarchist leader Bakunin, some (thing of) the father of communism Marx, but more (of) Lenin, Trotsky and others who had succeeded in bringing about a revolution in their country.'

Anarchism:

From May to September, 1928, *Kirti* serialised Bhagat Singh's article on Anarchism. 'The people are scared of the word anarchism', declared Bhagat Singh. 'The word anarchism has been abused so much that even in India revolutionaries have been called anarchist to make them unpopular'. The word Anarchism is defined as the absence of any kind of rule. 'I think in India the idea of universal brotherhood, the Sanskrit sentence *vasudev kutumbakam* etc., have the same meaning.' The 'first man to explicitly propagate the theory of Anarchism was Proudhon and that is why he is called the founder of Anarchism. After him a Russian, Bakunin worked hard to spread the doctrine. He was followed by Prince Kropotkin etc'.

The article goes on to explain why Bhagat Singh was so attracted to Anarchism. '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'. There is a brief history of the Anarchist movement and the article concludes with Valliant's attempt to throw a bomb in the Assembly. On being arrested, 'he said in a bold and clear voice, it takes a loud voice to make the deaf hear...'

Although there appear to be many similarities in the way the revolutionaries and the Anarchists functioned, Bhagat Singh brought about a qualitative change in the Indian revolutionary

movement. The adherence to Marxism meant that the revolutionaries did not deny or fight for the elimination of the State. The role of the state was seen in Marxist terms. The diary Bhagat Singh left behind in jail has a number of extracts from Engels' classic *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. After studying Marx and Engels' work there is a clear understanding of the stages of society, their corresponding family relations and the Marxist theory of the State as an 'institution that lent the character of perpetuity not only to the newly rising into classes, but also to the right of the possessing classes to exploit and rule the non-possessing classes'.¹⁸

Marxism:

Bhagat Singh became a revolutionary after he came to Kanpur and it is no coincidence that Kanpur was an important industrial city (created by the British to manufacture the cloth and leather articles needed by the army) with a large urban proletariat. From 1926, Bhagat Singh had also come into contact with Sohan Singh Josh and the Workers and Peasants Party. This marked the turning phase in his life.

From 1926 as Bhagat Singh began to study the history of the revolutionary movement in India and the world, He came to better appreciate the necessity of fighting imperialism through a broad-based people's movement. This was also reflected in his quotations from Lenin (on imperialism being the highest stage of capitalism) and Trotsky on revolution written in his Prison Notebooks. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Bhagat Singh located the following paragraph, 'The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle of democracy, to wrest by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state, that is of the proletariat organised as the ruling class, and to increase the total of the productive forces as rapidly as possible'. It was therefore clear that a bourgeois revolution would not succeed in a country where capitalism had oppressed the masses.

The perception of the existence of class cleavages in society also led to the understanding that violence would be imperative to bring about a change in the social structure. It was a violence that destroyed to build.

The Communist Party of India was formed in 1925-26 and had to almost immediately go underground. Within the next six years Bhagat Singh was executed and it remains one of the big ifs of history whether he would have joined the party as his companions did.

The Indian Congress and Non-Violence:

The most prominent Congressman in the Punjab was Lala Lajpat Rai. He had been part of the trinity of Extremists known as *Lal-Bal-Pal*. Through the years, however, Lajpat Rai had become a wily politician who no longer wished to remain in politics but to retire instead. In November 1927, the editorial team of *Kirti* published an open letter to Lala Lajpat Rai with the following introduction, 'Those gentlemen who are familiar with Lala Lajpat Rai's political life know that

¹⁸ Suneet Chopra, 'Bhagat Singh's Prison Notebook', *Student Struggle*, Vol. V, No. 7, March, 1985.

he is only interested in leadership and talking without wanting to do anything... Lalaji's recent behaviour has led to a loss of confidence in his politics'. In another article written in August 1928, Lajpat Rai is asked rhetorically if he desires to fight the British so that the country can be handed over to Indian capitalists. 'Should we wait till thousands have been destroyed or killed to begin our struggle to oust the capitalists? This would be sheer stupidity'. The same article foresees the political eclipse of Lala Lajpat Rai. 'Lalaji and other leaders like him who support the capitalists are slowly being eliminated, like the earlier leaders, Surendranath Banerji, Sapru and Chintamani. In the end the Workers struggle will be victorious. Long live Socialism. Long live Revolution'.

From 1921-22, Gandhi became the ideologue of the Congress and it was under his leadership that the first Non Co-operation movement was launched. When Gandhi abruptly ended the movement the revolutionaries became disillusioned with the creed of non-violence espoused by him. During 1924-25 Gandhi became involved in an extended polemical argument on the use of violence. The brunt of Gandhi's arguments lay in what he called the ineffectiveness of violence, the added expenditure it cost the government to curb it and the insane pressure of anger and ill-will that started it in the first place. In fact so opposed was he to the revolutionaries that when the Viceroy Lord Irwin missed a narrow escape on his life, Gandhi wrote an article called the 'Cult of the Bomb' where he thanked god for the Viceroy's escape and condemned his *bete noire*, the revolutionaries. In 1925 Sachindanand Sanyal sent an open letter to Gandhi¹⁹ in which he said, '(the) Non-Violent non-cooperation movement failed not because there was (a) sporadic outburst of suppressed feelings here and there but because the movement was lacking in a worthy ideal. The ideal that you preached was not in keeping with Indian culture and traditions. It savoured of imitation. Your philosophy of non-violence... was a philosophy arising out of despair'. By 1929 the revolutionary movement in India had developed and in December of that year, Bhagwati Charan and Chandra Shekhar Azad wrote an article defending the Delhi Bomb Case revolutionaries from Gandhi's scathing criticism. 'The revolutionaries believe that the deliverance of their country will come through revolution... (This) revolution will not only express itself in the form of an armed conflict between the foreign government and its supporters and the people, it will also usher in a new social order. The revolution will ring the death knell of Capitalism and class distinctions and privileges. It will bring joy and prosperity to the starving millions who are seething under the terrible yoke of both foreign and Indian exploitation'. In 1931 in a note to the party, Bhagat Singh wrote about Gandhism as the dominant ideology in the Congress, 'which is unable to take a stand against the British and instead wants to become a partner in power... (the Congress) is working as a centrist party and has always been so. It is embarrassed to face reality. The leaders who run it are those people whose interests are associated with the party... If revolutionary blood does not succeed in giving it a new lease of life... it will be necessary to save it (the party) from its allies.'²⁰

Interestingly although Gandhi insisted on the acceptance of non-violence dogmatically, younger members were not so averse or critical of the revolutionaries. Subhas Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru were the two prominent Congressmen who supported the revolutionaries. Chandra Shekhar Azad used to receive money regularly from Motilal Nehru. Money to the revolutionaries was also supplied by Puroshattamdas Tandon and Shiv Prasad Gupta. Even leaders like Maulana Shaukat Ali and Krishna Kant Malviya supplied revolvers to Sanyal. 'The

¹⁹ Published in *Young India*, Ahmedabad, 1925.

²⁰ Jagmohan Singh and Chaman Lal eds., *op. cit.*

non-violence of the Mahatma was by-passed by the Congressmen and they were not found wanting in their moral, financial and other support to the revolutionaries', say Irfan Habib and S.K. Mittal.²¹ That there was public sympathy for the revolutionaries and support from within the Congress must have been known to Gandhi. It may well have been a fact that Gandhi, sensing a threat to his leadership through this chink in his hegemonic control over the Congress became increasingly bitter towards the revolutionaries and when he could have negotiated a release for some of them he chose not to.

Organisation and strategy

The first organisation Bhagat Singh joined was the Hindustan Republican Association in 1924. As an active member of this organisation he learnt two things essential for a political organisation. First, to establish strong ties of camaraderie with like-minded individuals so that despite a small organisational base the party can function smoothly. Secondly the necessity of bringing out a newspaper, besides notices and pamphlets, so as to put across to the people the ideas and activities of the revolutionaries.

After Bhagat Singh started working with Sohan Singh Josh and the 'Workers and Peasants Party' (as a member of the editorial board of *Kirti* in Lahore), he realised the importance of setting up an organisation that could function as a revolutionary party in the Punjab and recruit new people to the cause of revolution. Ajoy Ghosh has written that 'Bhagat Singh was active in the Punjab and he and his comrades formed the Naujawan Bharat Sabha'.²² There is however no clear record establishing who Bhagat Singh's comrades were or what role he actually played in its foundation.²³ In a statement, in the Meerut Conspiracy case trial,²⁴ Sohan Singh Josh said, 'I was one of those who took a prominent part in building up this organisation, I went to various places to deliver lectures to form local Naujawan Bharat Sabhas'. He describes the Sabha as, 'a revolt of the petty bourgeoisie against the Congress leadership'. He emphatically denied that it was a communist party and insisted that it was 'an organisation of the middle class who are oppressed by British imperialism and who want to free themselves economically and politically from the imperialist yoke'. Abdul Majid in his statement in the Meerut conspiracy case says, 'The Naujawan Bharat Sabha emerged sometime in 1926 but remained a "debating society" until 1928'.²⁵ It held its first conference on 12th, 13th, 14th April, 1928.

In 1928, Bhagat Singh also had the responsibility of the Hindustan Republican Association with Chandra Shekhar Azad, other leaders having been sent to the gallows or given a life sentence. The first thing he did was to change its name to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. The party was 'recognised with a central committee and with provincial and district committees

²¹ S.K. Mittal and Irfan Habib, 'The Congress and the Revolutionaries in the 1920s', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 10, No. 6, June, 1982.

²² Ajoy Ghosh, *op. cit.*

²³ Kamlesh Mohan, *op. cit.* Kamlesh Mohan seems to believe that the Naujawan Bharat Sabha was organised by the collective efforts of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Bhagwati Charan and Comrade Ramkishan, p. 80.

²⁴ G. Adhikari *ed.*, 'Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India', Vol. III, 1928, New Delhi, 1982.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

under it. All decisions were to be taken in these committees, majority decisions were to be binding on all'.²⁶

By 1930 when Azad was shot dead, the HSRA just collapsed. Members of the organisation turned approver, 'personal squabbles, charges and counter charges vitiated the atmosphere. Police spies and degenerate elements that had managed to sneak their way in made most of this situation... corroded from within, unable to withstand the blows from outside the party that Azad and Bhagat Singh had built up by years of selfless work and with their precious blood lay in ruins'.

The link between the 'Workers and Peasants Party' and Naujawan Bharat Sabha meant that the latter survived the collapse of the HSRA and was soon able to replace it in the Punjab.

The Naujawan Bharat Sabha was open to any man and woman between the age of 18 and 35 years old who accepted its aims and objects. These were to establish a complete independent Republic of labourers and peasants throughout India. The organisation was divided into the following: The Naujawan Bharat Sabha Conference; the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Punjab; the NBS according to districts; according to tehsils and police stations; and the reception committee of the NBS. A central body was created in 1928. Within a year branches were opened in different parts of the Punjab and even in Peshawar.

The best indication of the organisational ability of the leadership of such a party is its strategy and the attempts to deal with a lack of funds, arms and manpower. The first prerequisite of any party that has vowed to use violence to change the existing social and political order, is to build a close-knit unit that can take leadership decisions and prevent espionage and infiltration. Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru, Bhagwaticharan Vobra, Kedarnath Sehgal and Chandra Shekhar Azad formed the nucleus of the leadership.

In October, 1928, the British government of India appointed the Simon Commission to enquire into the possibility of granting India the chance to rule itself. That this Commission had no Indian representative made it the focus of popular attack in Lahore. Lajpat Rai was at the head of a demonstration that was asking the Simon Commission to go back to England. The police in retaliation lathicharged the crowd and Lajpat Rai enfeebled by age, died subsequently. The revolutionary terrorists although great critics of Lajpat Rai and his politics, were determined to avenge his death. The Assistant Superintendent of Police, J.P. Saunders who is believed to have hit Lala Lajpat Rai directly, was assassinated by Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru and Azad, who then went underground. On the next day in Lahore, there were public notices put up in the name of the Indian Socialist Democratic Army. One such notice declared, 'We regret having killed a human being but this man was a part of that unmerciful and unjust system that must be destroyed... Sometimes it is important to shed blood for a Revolution. The Revolution we envisage is one where the exploitation of man by man will finish... *Inquilab Zindabad*.'²⁷

This kind of activity made it imperative for the leaders to generate what publicity they could. In the late 1920s and early 1930s there were no television sets and the radio and newspapers were the main source for disseminating information. The 'deaf had to be made to hear'.

The earliest method of spreading information was by publishing pamphlets that were ideological, polemical and/or rhetorical. Since these would have only a limited audience, a better way of garnering popular support was by courting arrest and then carrying on propaganda daring

²⁶ Ajoy Ghosh, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Jagmohan Singh and Chaman Lal eds., *op. cit.*

the trial. Once inside there was also the possibility of fomenting an agitation amongst the native policemen. When Bhagat Singh was first arrested in the Dussehra bomb case, a photograph of him was taken. This photograph immortalised the image of Bhagat Singh in jail sitting on a cot, his feet crossed, handcuffed, head tilted, a smile on his face.

The nature of colonial oppression implied an infringement of the rights of prisoners, especially political prisoners, and here arose another opportunity of confrontation with the British regime. The development of the Press ensured that any confrontation would be reported to the public.

Finally, there was the ultimate sacrifice, death was a powerful symbol and it was hoped that martyrdom would inspire young people to join the revolutionary movement and prevent it from being appropriated by the mainstream national movement.

In March 1928, the government introduced the Public Safety Bill in the Legislative Assembly. The Indian members rejected the Bill and in 1929, the Viceroy attempted to pass it as an ordinance. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha passed resolutions opposing this and the Trade Dispute Bill and it finally decided to intervene directly. On 8th April, 1929, Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt threw a small explosive in the Assembly and stayed in the visitors' gallery till they were arrested. On 7th May, Bhagat Singh's trial began and in the statement made in court on 6th June, Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt, representing the HSRA declared, 'we dropped the bomb on the floor of the Assembly Chamber to register our protest on behalf of those who had no other means left to give expression to their heart-rending agony. Our sole purpose was to make the deaf hear and to give the heedless a timely warning... from under the seeming stillness of the sea of humanity, a veritable storm is about to break out'.²⁸ On the 12th June, Bhagat Singh was sentenced to transportation in the Assembly Bomb case. On the 15th of June he launched a hunger strike for jail reforms. On 10th July, 1929 the trial of the Lahore Conspiracy Case started and ended on the 7th of October, 1930 with a death sentence. Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were hanged on the 23rd of March, 1931.

Conclusion

The nature of the Revolutionary Terrorist movement in India restricted the size of the organisations or Parties. The larger the group the less effective would have been the course of action. This did not however mean that this movement had no contribution. It had an impact on the people, the Congress and the British Government.

If we are to locate the role Bhagat Singh played within this movement, it is necessary to understand that 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 the British. A clarity of vision and determination of purpose distinguished Bhagat Singh from other leaders of the National Movement. He was the only alternative to Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, especially for the youth.

In a letter to Sukhdev, dated the 11th of April, 1929, Bhagat Singh wrote, 'I can say with all my might that I am immersed in the hopes and doubts that give life a meaning. But when the time comes, I will sacrifice everything. In the true sense this is sacrifice... you will realise this soon'.

²⁸ The text of Statement of Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt in the Assembly Bomb Case appeared in G.S. Deol, 'Shaheed-e-Azam, Bhagat Singh'. Patiala, 1978.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Niraja Rao
Bhagat Singh and the Revolutionary Movement
April 1997

<https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv3n1/bsingh.htm>

theanarchistlibrary.org