

Bhagat Singh and Today's India

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[Following is a slightly shortened version of a speech delivered by the author at a commemorative centenary seminar on Bhagat Singh organised by Biplabi Pustakalaya at Godargaon in Begusarai, Bihar, on 8 October, 2006]

The birth centenary of Bhagat Singh should inspire the country, especially today's youth and all engaged in the communist movement, to develop a deeper intimacy with his ideas. For today's generation of young Indians, Bhagat Singh will be of great help and inspiration in finding their moorings in today's changing times, especially on their voyage into the India of tomorrow.

The first thing that Bhagat Singh did in the course of his brief but one of the most intense lives ever lived was to give a new meaning to patriotism. Revolutionary patriots before him were all fired with the zeal to liberate "mother India" from the shackles of colonial slavery. It was not in terms of zeal and courage that Bhagat Singh blazed a new trail of patriotism, he gave it a new meaning and content.

The country till then was equated to mother, the patriotic songs either sang the glory of mother India or depicted her beauty and pain. Look at the first two stanzas of *Vande Mataram* for instance. It is all about mother India's lush green fields and soothing cool breeze—"sujalam-sufalam, malayaja sheetalam, shashya shyamalam mataram". Take Jana-Gana-Mana, the National Anthem - it describes the map and topography of undivided India, complete with Punjab-Sindhu-Gujarat-Maratha-Dravida-Utkal-Banga and Vindhya-Himachal-Yamuna-Ganga, and the turbulent seas and oceans (it's of course another matter that many regions feel left out from this description).

Conspicuously absent or ignored in most of the old patriotic songs were the people of India, the living and loving, labouring and fighting men and women and children who made up this whole country. Bhagat Singh's patriotism placed the people firmly at the centre of the country; love for the country was redefined as love for the people. From being a grand entity of history and geography, the country came alive in all its glory with its real people. The people who had already taken up arms against the colonial rulers in the Great Rebellion of 1857, those who subsequently carried forward this legacy through the Gadar party that challenged the British rulers from outside India, the people who had begun to rise in numerous local and national struggles, and had been massacred barbarically by British bullets and bayonets at Jallianwalla-bagh, heroes like Kartar Singh Sarabha who had kissed the gallows of death at the tender age of twenty—all these real characters began adding new colour and passion to the concept of patriotism.

One may well argue that Bhagat Singh was not alone or the first in bringing this distinction to the fore. Gandhi had already arrived on the stage of Indian

history and he had started leading big mass movements in this country. The Congress, which was designed and intended to serve as a safety valve to prevent the colossal pressure cooker of colonial India from exploding had metamorphosed into a mass-based party and movement. While granting this fact, one must not lose sight of the crucial difference between Gandhi's concept of 'people' and Bhagat Singh's approach on this score.

Gandhi's framework of 'people' appeared to be all embracing, but it began essentially with the Birlas and Bajajs while also going down to the peasants and other sections of the common masses. But he did not want factories and fields to emerge as centres of struggle. In the early phase of his movement when workers and peasants displayed considerable enthusiasm and initiative transcending the narrow limits of Gandhian action, he even went to the extent of calling off the agitation. And thereafter he remained absolutely cautious on this score and made sure that no room was left for mass militancy or popular political imagination or creative initiative of the workers and peasants. He did reach out to the socially oppressed, but he had to conceptually consecrate the oppressed as 'harijans' before including them in his scheme of things.

Bhagat Singh, on the other hand, began with students and the youth and increasingly insisted that they go deep among the masses, to the colonies of workers and hamlets of the rural poor. He keenly followed the struggles of workers and peasants, wrote enthusiastically about the 'no-rent' movement of peasants and economic as well as political strikes of workers. He was especially delighted to learn about the strikes of scavengers. His call to the untouchables was direct: "You are the real proletariat. ... Sleeping tigers, arise and rebel against the oppressing old order." While placing the toiling and oppressed masses at the centre of his definition of the people, he laid particular stress on establishing worker-peasant domination in the national movement for he could clearly see that the propertied sections of Indian society, capitalists, traders, princes and big landlords were only capable of striking a deal with imperialism and hence they could only be treated as unreliable friends, if not sworn enemies, of Indian independence.

Gandhi relied a lot on Hindu religious idioms and it played no little role in alienating considerable sections of the Muslim community from the Congress. As communal polarisation intensified and the British colonialists began stoking the communal fire, Gandhi became virtually helpless and he could do little more than appeal for harmony on the basis of religious values. By contrast, Bhagat Singh took class solidarity and class struggle as the basis of people's harmony, and developed a secular discourse shorn of religious imageries and idioms but firmly rooted in India's composite cultural heritage. While in personal life he completed his transition from active religious belief to rationalism and atheism, he respected everybody's right to choose and practise his or her own religion in private life, but in public life he insisted on strict separation of religion from the state and politics. His nationalism was thus explicitly non-religious and anti-

communal and hence more inclusive for multi-religious India than Gandhi's religion-inspired or religion-intensive nationalism.

Bhagat Singh and his co-activists also distinguished themselves from the beginning with their clear goal of complete independence. It was not for them to juggle with half-baked concepts of different legal variants of colonial domination. Complete independence from imperialist subjugation became the obvious bottom line for Bhagat Singh and his followers. And to be sure, with their people-centric concept of patriotism, they could not remain content with an abstract notion of national independence. Liberation of the country for them was inseparably connected with liberation of the working people. Hindustan Republican Association thus grew naturally into Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. The old battlecry of *Vande Mataram* gave way to the new slogan of liberation – “*Inquilab Zindabad*” (Long Live Revolution), the slogan that has since become the most emphatic expression of the fighting determination of the Indian people in all their struggles.

As the notion of independence led to the goal of inquilab or revolution, in conceptualising this revolution Bhagat Singh also completed his ideological transition from shades of terrorism, anarchism and nihilism to Marxism-Leninism. With Marxism-Leninism as his guide to action, Bhagat Singh began paying close attention to the task of developing a programmatic blueprint for the Indian revolution. In his last writings he makes it repeatedly clear that revolution cannot be accomplished without a revolutionary programme and a revolutionary party. While he used the word socialism to indicate the direction of India's revolutionary journey, he was quite alive to the fact that India was still overwhelmingly feudal and that Indian capitalists were developing organic ties of collaboration and compromise with foreign capital. Elimination of feudalism figured on top of the programmatic tasks highlighted in his draft revolutionary programme. Just as Lenin and Mao had developed revolutionary programmes for Russia and China by applying Marxism to the concrete socio-economic and historical conditions obtaining in their countries, Bhagat Singh too was working in a similar direction in colonial India.

Along with the revolutionary programme, Bhagat Singh also paid detailed attention to the tactical and organisational aspects of revolutionary preparation. He was remarkably free from dogmatism or sectarianism and displayed a highly rational and analytical mind while remaining absolutely firm in purpose and in strategic commitment to the revolutionary goal. He was convinced about the necessity of armed struggle and having an underground organisational apparatus, but increasingly he laid overwhelming emphasis on extensive revolutionary preparation through open mass work.

While not harbouring any illusion regarding the class character of the Congress, he even talked about utilising the Congress platform and the available trade union organisations in the interest of advancing the revolutionary work. He was hopeful that with the expansion and intensification of the revolutionary

movement, a sharp polarisation could also be effected inside the Congress mounting a powerful challenge to the Gandhian leadership. The hope was surely not misplaced as Bhagat Singh clearly pointed out how the resolution denouncing the attempt to blow away the Special Train of Viceroy on 23 December, 1929 could just scrape through with a tiny margin of only 31 votes in a house of 1913 at the Lahore session of the Congress in spite of the fact that the resolution was pushed by Gandhi with all his might. Patabhi Sitaramaiyya, the official historian of the Congress, had to admit that at the time of his martyrdom Bhagat Singh's popularity had been no less than that of Gandhi. Bhagat Singh and his followers, most notably Bhagwati Charan Bohra, demolished Gandhi's tirade against the revolutionaries with powerful rational arguments and sharp ideological debate; yet they never denounced Gandhi as a person or never hesitated to acknowledge his contribution.

In short, one can surely acknowledge Bhagat Singh as a communist pioneer in India who produced the first effective blueprint of a revolutionary programme and vision of a comprehensive revolutionary party and movement.

He was not one to equate independence with a dream future full of rivers of milk and lakes of honey. Nor was he one to romanticise the past and promise a restoration of 'Ram Rajya'. On the contrary he was the one; who had warned the country that mere replacement of the British rulers by Indian 'brown sahibs' would hardly make any difference. He was the one who exclaimed that in order to demolish the domestic basis of foreign rule—feudal forces and capitalist collaborators, the desi props of colonial raj and imperialist domination must be demolished. He was the one to warn against the disastrous potential of communal politics and call for complete elimination of the sordid historical reality of social oppression and untouchability.

How true and contemporary Bhagat Singh sounds even today more than seventy-five years since his martyrdom! The contributions of many other leaders of Indian national movement have by now been more or less exhausted. For instance, Gandhi is remembered as a great communicator who spoke the language of rural India. But he has little to say to today's unemployed and starving rural poor or for that matter to the farmers being driven by debt to suicides or dispossessed of their land in the name of SEZs. He was, an apostle of peace, non-violence and communal harmony. But he has little to offer in *today's India* by way of explanation as to why people have been seeing so much of communal violence in recent years, let alone in terms of the wherewithal to resist and defeat the producers and sellers of communal and jingoistic frenzy.

In his days Nehru was projected as a harbinger of socialism. He built many big projects and big industries, called them the temples of modern India and created a notion that he was building a socialistic pattern of society. But today he will be hard-pressed to answer why and how his socialistic pattern has been swept away by the storm of liberalisation and privatisation. At a time when all his temples are being subjected to disinvestment and privatisation, Nehru cannot carry any

particular message of hope to the workers who are losing their jobs and rights or to the growing army of the unemployed. The ongoing disinvestment in public sector units also signifies a disinvestment in Nehru's politics and economics. Even the Congress hardly remembers him except garlanding his statues on November 14.

In sharp contrast to Gandhi and Nehru, there is a growing countrywide interest to know more about Bhagat Singh and his ideas.

India is of course no longer a British colony and the sun has long set on the British Empire. But in a different way Washington is trying to colonise the whole world, especially the resource-rich but weak and poor countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. India is very much among these countries but the rulers are busy appeasing the biggest imperialist power of the world. They have entered into a strategic partnership with the US and all policies are now being designed according to the requirements of this partnership. The Indian ruling elites have mortgaged the independence, they have mortgaged the nation. They are also weakening and fragmenting the nation from within, they are perpetuating the colonial policy of divide-and-rule.

For every young Indian who wants to free the country from the American stranglehold, Bhagat Singh is the face of that freedom. For every revolutionary fighter who wants to consign all feudal and obscurantist ideas, practices and forces to the dustbin of history, the name of that courage and energy, that initiative and inspiration is Bhagat Singh.

The communist movement in the country must introspect and examine if it is really upholding the legacy of Bhagat Singh. At a time when *Indian people* are faced with such an acute agrarian crisis, when imperialism and its local collaborators and all the feudal and communal fascist forces are intensifying their daily attack on the toilers some on the left are busy becoming ever more responsible to the maintenance of this order. They are increasingly limiting themselves to minimum programmes, that too not of their own, but of the rulers who are anyway busy pocketing maximum possible profits for their classes while heaping the maximum possible misery on the toiling masses. Would Bhagat Singh have behaved in this fashion? Could he possibly limit himself to this policy of minimum programme and minimum protests, in the face of maximum assaults of the enemy and maximum plight of the people? He would have surely rejected this defeatist line and set out to mobilise and lead the people towards maximum possible resistance.

And as for anarchist friends who have accumulated enough arms, funds and revolutionary phrases but continue to suffer from the poverty of politics and mass initiative, remaining trapped in their own schemes away from the people and the real political world, he would have perhaps repeated the words he had used for his young activists seventy-five years ago. He would have asked them to overcome their anarchist ideas, transcend their narrow limits of practice and

devote themselves to the most urgent and multifarious work of large-scale revolutionary propaganda and mobilisation among the masses.

Some Left leaders say that it is not possible to think of any effective resistant because the Left is still quite weak. The most visible expression of this weakness lies in the Hindi-speaking heartland of the country. And why is the Left weak in the Hindi belt? Because this region is 'socially so backward'. These friends forget that successful revolutions in the world so far have all happened in backward countries. They forget that precisely because these regions are backward, there is so much more urge in these regions for social progress.

And some friends again say that social reform holds the key to the expansion of the Left movement in the Hindi belt. They forget that behind the current strength of the Left in certain states there lies primarily the history of powerful peasant movements and rural uprisings. Any meaningful and lasting social progress has been achieved only on the basis of powerful currents of class struggle. And when a communist party gives up this struggle, or does not wage this struggle in a consistent and thoroughgoing manner, it too becomes a victim of all kinds of backward ideas and practice

Some communist ideologues seem to have lately woken up to the reality of social oppression in the country. They say they will now concentrate on social issues. If they have been oblivious of this reality all these years, if they have understood and practised class struggle only within a narrow economic framework, it is of course their problem. In fact, when inspired by Naxalbari the oppressed rural poor of Bhojpur revolted in the 1970s, turning into reality Bhagat Singh's dream of the sleeping tigers waking up from their slumber and challenging the whole social order of oppression, this revolutionary communist awakening was sought to be dismissed by many of veteran and classical communists as a casteist deviation or just a *caste war*. These are the same people who in 1990 hailed VP Singh's Mandal move as a social revolution and have ever since been playing the role of a political appendage to the parties of the rural neo-rich parading as the: custodians of social justice. While the old communist leadership may have ridiculed the Bhojpur movement, one cannot forget that the great communist people's poet Nagarjun had jumped in joy to hail Bhojpur as the new battleground, home to reincarnated Bhagat Singhs of present times.

The ideological offensive of the politics of 'Mandal and Kamandal' has probably made some weak-hearted communists who have anyway long moved away from the vibrancy of class struggle feel more and more vulnerable. If one looks at the society through the prism of caste and religion and hope to expand the communist movement with the help of this acquired vision, one could only be in for more shocks and setbacks.

Let Bhagat Singh's centenary fill the Indian communist movement with greater ideological strength and revolutionary vigour!

Let the centenary celebrations inspire more and more young Indians to rally around the revolutionary communist banner of Bhagat Singh and join the fighting contingent of workers and peasants to win real freedom from imperialist domination and all kinds of exploitation and oppression!

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