

Bhagat Singh As Reflected in his Autobiographical Works

Abstract

Prefixing 'Shaheed-i-azam' sobriquet for Bhagat Singh has been so impacting that allied aspects of his personality is virtually overshadowed. During his brief span of life, the flow of pain ceaselessly continued. Bhagat Singh candidly dealt with his convictions, revolutionary zeal, opinion about fellow colleagues, this is why his autobiographical literature merits proportional attention. Bhagat Singh was a born and committed rebel with the most exceptional patriotic vision and fervour. Further he had a very firm foundation of intellectual wisdom tagged with most outstanding calibre that belied his age and supreme sacrifice. Amongst the 'inputs' that ignited revolutionary spark is Bhagat Singh's wide range of studies of choices reading material and the noteworthy manner in which he digested and churned them to produce his own band of fine literary output are the best source of reaching into the innermost recess of his mindset.

Bhagat Singh's autobiographical literature includes, books, articles, letters, jail notebook, pamphlets etc. Bhagat Singh went on churning his thoughts and proceeded more and more towards a better understanding of the Marxist stand on the issues facing the country. A.G. Noorani concludes in his book, 'The Trial of Bhagat Singh Politics of Justice' with, 'What distinguishes Bhagat Singh from all others besides his courage patriotism and commitment to moral values was his intellectual strength. A voracious reader he was also willing to rethink.'

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Introduction

Along with Revolutionary activism, Bhagat Singh had the noteworthy knack of reading, reflecting and updating brief and painted notes. Reading writing and incorporation of ideas was almost a passion for him. Although, a substantial part of his autobiographical writing is unfortunately missing or is unavailable, whatever he penned down himself adds to his intellectual calibre.

It is usually inferred that during his last years of incarceration till attainment of martyrdom, he authored four books namely;

1. The Idea of socialism
2. Autobiography
3. History of Revolutionary Movement in India.
4. At the Door of Death.¹

Bhagat Singh studied a lot since his childhood days. Bhagat Singh was associated with contemporary journals like '*kirti*', '*Phatap*', '*Vir Arjun*...' as columnist constitutes a remarkable saga of his multidimensional personality. In 1924-25 he wrote two essays in *Matwala*: one on '*loving the world*' (*Vishwa prem*) and another on the '*youth*' (*Yuvak*). Bhagat Singh's first essay on the Punjabi language and script, written in 1924 at the age of 16, reveals his deep thinking and commitment to communal harmony. These articles, columns focused on various aspects of the nationalist struggle combating communalism, untouchability, students and politics, world brotherhood etc. Most of Bhagat Singh's earlier writings are on the freedom fighters and their struggles. In the June 1928 issue of the *Kirti*, Bhagat Singh wrote two articles titled '*Achoot Ka Sawaal*' (*On Untouchability*) and '*Sampradayik Dange aur unka Ilaj*' (*Communal riots and their solutions*).

Even during his days of imprisonment his passion for reading, writing continued. Spending two years in jail, waiting to be executed he kept a note book full of notes and jotting from what he was reading. He was in jail for 714 days, out of which 167 days were as prisoner sentenced to death. During his imprisonment, according to some estimate, he read nearly 300 books. His prison notebook brings to light his reading habits and

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the wide range of his selection of authors. Bhagat Singh's jail notebook during give us a deep insight into his rapidly growing maturity as Marxist. A mere perusal of his prison notebook is an indicator of his amazing choice, which ranged from poetry, fiction, philosophy, history and politics to economics. It was his intense reading that he concluded:



"The sword of revolution is sharpened at the whetstone of thought."² The first books which find mention in his notebook are socialism : Utopian and scientific and *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* by Frederick Engels. He has also studied, during this first flush, works of Thomas Paine and Upton Sinclair, Kropotkin and Bakunin, Vera N. Figner and N.A. Morozov, Lenin and Trostsky. He has taken notes from the works of Irish and early American democrats, including Eugene V. Debs and Jack London. He has learnt from the Kautsky, Bukhanin and other socialism theoreticians were writings at that time. He has studied Lenin's *State and Revolution* and *Proletarian Revolution* and Renegade Kautsky as well as the *Communist Manifesto* and extracts from Marx's *Capital*.

At Lahore, Bhagat Singh along with Bhagwati Charan Vohra, Sukhdev and Ram Krishan took the lead in forming a militant youth organizations called the Navjawan Bharat Sabha (NBS) in March 1926. Two of the six rules of the NBS drafted by Bhagat Singh were:

"To have nothing to do with communal bodies or other parties which disseminate communal ideas and to create the spirit of general toleration among the public considering religion as a matter of personal belief of man and to act upon the same fully. Secularism was, indeed, an article of faith with Bhagat Singh all his life"³. The HSRA leadership decided to throw bombs in the central Assembly to protest against the passage of the two draconian Bills and also against the arrests of the communists and labour leaders.

On June 6, 1929, Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt in the Central Assembly explained what they meant by the word 'Revolution'. It is quoted here in full:

Revolution does not necessarily involve sanguinary strife, nor is there any place in it for individual vendetta.

It is not the cult of the bomb and the pistol. 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 and his children's bodies; masons, smiths and carpenters who raise magnificent places, live like pariahs in the slums. The capitalists and exploiters, the parasites of society, squander millions on their whims. These terrible inequalities and forced disparity of chances are bound to lead to chaos. This state of affairs cannot last long, and it is obvious that the present order of society in merry-making is on the brink of a volcano. The whole edifice of this civilization, if not saved in time, shall crumble. A radical change, therefore, is necessary and it is the duty of those who realize it to reorganize society on the socialistic basic. Unless this thing is done and the exploitation of man by man and of national by nations is brought to an end, suffering and carnage with which humanity is threatened today, cannot be prevented. All talk of ending war and ushering in an era of universal peace in undisguised hypocrisy. By 'Revolution', we mean the ultimate establishment of an order of society which may not be threatened by such breakdown, and in which the sovereignty of the proletariat should be recognized and a world federation should redeem humanity from the bondage of capitalism and misery of imperial wars. This is our ideal and, with this ideology as our inspiration, we have given a fair and loud enough warning. It, however, goes unheeded and the present system of government continues to be an impediment in the way of the natural forces that are swelling up, a grim struggle will ensue involving the overthrow of all obstacles and the establishment of dictatorship of the proletariat to pave the way for the consummation of the ideal of revolution. Revolution is an inalienable right of mankind. Freedom is an imperishable birthright of all. Labour is

the real sustainers of society. The sovereignty of the people is the ultimate destiny of the workers. For these ideals, and for this faith, we shall welcome any suffering to which we may be condemned. At the altar of this revolution we have brought out youth as an incense, for no sacrifice is too great for so magnificent a cause. We are content, we await the advent of Revolution. Long Live Revolution.⁴

Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt on June 12 1929 was sentenced to transportation for life in the Assembly Bomb Case. But meanwhile Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev and several others were tried in the historic second Lahore Conspiracy Case as police had uncovered the details of Saunders assassination. Bhagat Singh spent the last two years of his life in Jail, awaiting execution Bhagat Singh and his comrades turned the court into a forum for revolutionary propaganda. Bhagat Singh and his comrades had decided that they would not defend themselves in the British Colonial court, but plead guilty and use the trial to broadcast their message and philosophy.

On October 19, 1929, the second Punjab Students' Conference was held at Lahore under the presidentship of Subhash Chandra Bose. From Jail, Bhagat Singh sent a short message to the Conference which was read out and it received thunderous response. In this message Bhagat Singh said:

"Comrades, Today, we cannot ask the youth to take to pistols and bombs. Today, students are confronted with a far more important assignment. In the coming Lahore Session the Congress is to give a call for a fierce fight for the independence of the country. The youth will have to bear a great burden in this difficult time in the history of the nation.....The youth will have to spread this revolutionary message to the far corners of the country. They have to awaken the crores of slum-dwellers of the industrial areas and villagers living in worn-out cottages, so that we can become independent and the exploitation of man by man will become an impossibility."⁵

When the case was in this final stage, on September 20, 1930 Bhagat Singh's father Kishan Singh made a written request to the Tribunal, saying that there were many facts to prove this son was innocent of Saunder's murder and that his son be given an opportunity to prove his innocence. Bhagat Singh was infuriated and wrote an open letter to his father on October 4, 1930, which was printed in *The Tribune*. The letter is historic and throws light on Bhagat Singh's revolutionary character.

"My life is not so precious, at least to me, as you may probably think it to be. It is not at all worth buying at the cost of my principles. There are other comrades of mine whose

case is as serious as that of mine. We had adopted a common policy and we shall stand to the last, no matter how dearly we have to pay individually for it. Father, I am quite perplexed. I fear I might overlook the ordinary principles of etiquette and my language may become a little bit harsh while criticizing or censuring this move on your part. Let me be candid. I feel as though I have been stabbed in the back. Had any other person done, it, I would have considered it to be nothing short of treachery. But in your case, let me say that it has been a weakness - a weakness of the worst type. This was the time when everybody's mettle was being tested. Let me say, father, that you have failed. I know you are as sincere a patriot as one can be. I know you have devoted your life to the cause of Indian independence, but why, at this moment, have you displayed such a weakness? I cannot understand. In the end, I would like to inform you and my other friends and all the people interested in my case, that I have not approved of your move. I want that the public should know all the details about this complication, and therefore, I request you to publish this letter. Your loving son, Bhagat Singh."⁶

There are also several meaningful letters by him. For instance, he wrote a letter reprimanding Sukhdev who had said that if he did not get the death sentence, he would rather commit suicide than face life imprisonment. He wrote letter to Jaidev Gupta from jail demanding some books from Dwarkadas library. The secret supply by the Dwarkadas Library (Lahore) could not keep pace with his speed of reading. He requisitioned books so frequently that it was a problem for the jail authorities to scrutinize them. So, before and after the judgement, Bhagat Singh's reading and writing in jail continued unabated. His available writings show a wide sophistication on a variety of topics. A month after he was given death sentence, in November 1930 he wrote a letter to BK Dutt in which he gave an idea of what he expected from Comrades who had escaped capital punishment. He wrote that in these cells, besides him, there are many others prisoners who are waiting to be hanged. The only prayer of these people is that somehow or other they may escape the noose. Perhaps he is the only man amongst them who is anxiously waiting for the day when he will be fortunate enough to embrace the gallows for his ideal. He continued saying to BK Dutt, that those revolutionaries who have by chance escaped the gallows, should live and show to the world that cannot only embrace gallows for the ideal but also bear

the worst type of calamities in the dark dingy prison cells."⁷

Bhagat Singh ideological rise was accompanied by a diverse reading list. He was well-versed in Marx, Levier and other radical literary but also studied people such as Paine, Kames Mile, Dostoevsky, Sinclair and a host of other authors. His available writings show a wide sophistication on a wide variety of topics. 'Why I am An Atheist' and 'Introduction to Dreamland', he wrote that in the political field dreamland occupies a very important place. We much make it clear that revolution does not merely mean an upheaval or a sanguinary strife. Revolution necessarily implies the programme of systematic reconstruction of society on new and better adapted basis, after complete destruction of the existing state of affairs. He continued writing that amongst the revolutionaries, they had always been in favour of extreme methods with one idea, i.e. of overthrowing the foreign domination. Bhagat Singh's war was against the system of imperialism and capitalism and in this war there was no place for individual revenge. His love for humanity is enshrined by his statement:

"We love human life as a most sacred thing and have a strong conviction for its illuminating future where every person will get complete peace and independence."⁸

Bhagat Singh was very clear that a critical and scientific bent of mind was very much needed to clear the much accumulated over the ages. The best way to sum up this discussion is to present here his testimony in his own words:

Renouncing terrorism, he wrote:

"Apparently I have acted like a terrorist. But I am not a terrorist. I am a revolutionary who has got such definite ideas of a lengthy programme as is being discussed here.... Let me announce with all the strength at my command, that 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 those methods."⁹

On March 22, the day before Bhagat Singh's execution, his comrades in jail sent him a slip asking if he would like to live. He wrote back:

"The desire to live is natural. It is in me also. I do not want to conceal it. But it is conditional. I don't want to live as a prisoner or under restrictions. My name has become a symbol of the Indian revolution. The ideals and the sacrifice of the revolutionary party have elevated me to a height beyond which I will never be able to rise if I live..... Yes, one thing pricks me even today. My heart nurtured some ambition for doing something for humanity and for my country. I have not been able to fulfill even one thousandth part of those ambitions. If I live I might perhaps get a chance to fulfill them. If

ever it came to my mind that I should not die, it came from this end only. I am proud of myself these days and I am anxiously waiting for the final test. I wish the day may come nearer soon. You comrade, Bhagat Singh."¹⁰

Manmathnath Gupta, who was sentenced in the Kakori case, has reconstructed the events of March 23, 1931, the last day in the life of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev. The whole day, Bhagat Singh was reading biography of Lenin that had been sent to him at his express wish. When, at around seven in the evening, a jail official came to take him to the gallows, Bhagat Singh, still engrossed in reading Lenin's biography said, 'Wait a minute, one revolutionary is busy meeting another'. After reading for a while, he got up and embarked on his final journey. Amidst slogans of 'Down With Imperialism' and 'Long Live Revolution', the three martyrs- Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev - attained revolutionary immortality. The final song on their lips was:

Dil Se niklegi na marker bhi watan ki ulfat.
Meri mitti se bhi khushbu-e-watan aaege.
Love for the motherland will not leave me heart even after death, its fragrance will still be there in my dusty remains."¹¹

Objective of the Study

The aim of study is to highlight the less known fact that Bhagat Singh was an intellectual par excellence. Bhagat Singh had been valorised for his martyrdom, and rightly so, but in the ensuing enthusiasm most of us forget, or consciously ignore his contributions as an intellectual and a thinker. He not only scarified his life, as many did before him and also after him, but he also had a vision of independent India.

Bhagat Singh was a voracious reader, devouring books on a variety of themes. In the 1920's Bhagat Singh may be singled out as most widely read person. It was his love for books that shaped his ideas, thoughts and that is visible in his writings, and his contributions as an intellectual and thinker. It was his voracious reading habit since his childhood days that led him to have deep insight over various topics like nationalist struggle, communalism, socialism, politics and religion, problems of untouchabilities, secularism, Marxism understanding of society and change.

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

Bhagat Singh developed a better understanding of Marxism because of his constant study of Marxist literature. His writings on various topics and his letters to his colleagues reveal his growing reliance on the Marxist outlook. Bhagat Singh's jail diary gives us a deep insight into his rapidly growing maturity as a Marxist. He has left

behind elaborate quotations from the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Bakunin, Prince Kropotkin, and even Darwin, Bertrand Russell and several others.

Bhagat Singh was not merely a trigger happy adventurous patriot who sacrificed his life for the country. More importantly he was political thinker, committed to a revolutionary ideology. Bhagat Singh did not merely wish to free India from colonial bondage but dreamt of independent India, which would be egalitarian and secular.

Conclusion

Bhagat Singh's intellectual height was a towering one; Reading, writing extensively was forte for Bhagat Singh churning of ideas that Bhagat Singh kept on as an instinct made him a steady and frothy right ideologist with activism blended together. Bhagat Singh was not only a martyr of the first rate, but a great ideologue of the day too. Having gone through the pages of the literature of the East and the West alike, he had developed his own views on different problems of the world, especially India. He was perhaps the only example in the history of the world who critically wrote and studied the works of the great thinkers and philosophers till the moment of hanging.

Endnotes

1. Shiv Verma; "Selected Writings of Bhagat Singh", (Delhi, 1986) page no. 89

2. Shiv Verma, *op.cit*, New Delhi, 1986, p. 95.
3. *Ibid*, p.g. 31, 33
4. *Ibid* pg 45.
5. Ashok Dhawala Article, 'Biographical Profile', Published in *The Marxist*, April-September 2006 (Delhi) p.43-82. Its Author is the CPI(M) Maharashtra State Committee Secretary.
6. *Ibid*
7. Chaman Lal, "Bhagat Singh, The Jail Notebook and Other Writing", *left words Book*, New Delhi, 2007, p. 149.
8. Jagmohan Singh article Written on 'Shaheed Bhagat Singh' titled, "A Lover of Humanism", MM Juneja Book, *op.cit*, New Delhi, 2006, p. 173. Jagmohan Singh is the nephew of Bhagat Singh
9. Bipin Chandra Article, "Bhagat Singh's Contribution To Freedom Struggle". P.185
10. Bhagat Singh's last letter, written a day before his execution, Shiv Verma's annotation: "On March 22, the Second Lahore Conspiracy case Convicts, who were locked up in ward number 14 (near condemned cells), sent a slip to Bhagat Singh asking if would like to live". This letter was in reply to that slip. Bhagat Singh wrote this in Urdu.
11. Ashok Dhawale article titled, "Biographical Profile", MM Juneja, *op.cit*, p. 54.