

BHLAGAT SINGH AS 'SATYAGRAHI': THE LIMITS TO NON-VIOLENCE IN LATE COLONIAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT: *Bhagat Singh and M.K., among the anti-colonial nationalists, Gandhi is seen as exemplifying entirely opposite resistance tactics. Whereas Gandhi is the embodiment of non-violence, Bhagat Singh is considered a militant revolutionary. This paper argues that not after their murder of a police inspector in Lahore or after throwing explosives at the New Delhi Legislative Assembly, but during their practice of hunger strikes and non-violent civil disobedience inside the walls of Lahore's prisons in 1929-30, Bhagat Singh and his comrades became national heroes. In fact, the resistance tactics used by both Gandhi and Bhagat Singh had much in common. The British tried to discredit their non-violent requests for rights as 'political prisoners' by calling these revolutionaries' killers 'and' terrorists'. Gandhi and his followers accepted the same names. The quality of anti-colonial nationalism embodied by Bhagat Singh, however, was central to the resolution of many of the pre-partition Punjab divisions.*

KEYWORDS: *Bhagatsingh, satyagrahi, colonial India, non –violence.*

INTRODUCTION

This manifesto of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association entitled the Philosophy of the Bomb, drafted in January 1930, related the limits of satyagraha, the pursuit of truth as described by Gandhi, to Bhagat Singh's thinking and action, at this time easily the most influential revolutionary in northern India. Bhagat Singh and his colleagues, far from being proponents of unconstitutional violence, aimed at causing a change in the "national" program of Congress through a variety of steps[1], most powerfully the hunger strike. While they failed in their final aim, I reflect on a moment when, barring Gandhi, the 'conflict of principles' that demanded their death by hanging brought together almost all parts of the country's extremist and moderate opinion.

In the name of the country, this phase of developing and affirming new priorities is important because it recognised and accommodated real differences of opinion and system. Likewise, the ultimate defeat of Bhagat Singh and the concomitant triumph of Gandhian nationalism in forming the form of Punjabi politics indicate that as early as 1931, the equilibrium between centre and area had begun to change towards the centre. Bhagat Singh's life is hard to distinguish from that of anti-colonial activity in the Punjab. In the early 1920s, Bhagat Singh engaged in the Sikh movement as a teenager to establish influence over gurdwaras[2]. Singh was affiliated with two of the key anti-colonial institutions formed that year in 1925: he entered the National College in Lahore established by the leading anti-colonial Punjabi leader Lajpat Rai, and was

closely associated with the new Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NJBS) aimed at re-energizing the Punjab in the lull after the non-cooperation movement collapsed.

PHILOSOPHY OF NAUJAWAN BHARAT SABHA

The NJBS staff arranged seminars on moral, literary and social subjects: they were primarily concerned with bringing together Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and for this reason organised inter-communal dinners. While their radical views on religion and agrarian reform meant that they had limited scope,⁴ they were perspicuous in organising public meetings on matters of common interest, such as a public meeting to condemn the Berlin Zoo Indian exhibition: a matter of considerable indignation in the colony[2]. It is also disclosed in an incident in 1926 that the young men of the NJBS were critical of the form and tenor of Punjab politics. Copies of Robert Browning's poem 'The Lost King' were printed and circulated by NJBS members to Lajpat Rai and Pt Madan Mohan Malaviya, who, angered by their turning away from the Indian National Congress, thought they were guiding Punjab politics in the wrong direction

Along with the progressive Chandrasekhar Azad in Kanpur, Bhagat Singh was also active in rebuilding the Hindustan Republic Association (HRA). This revolutionary party believed in creating, through an organised and armed revolution, a federated republic of the United States of India. Its public goals included the formation of labour unions and peasant associations; it aimed to raise funds privately and send men abroad for military and scientific training. During the Kakori Train Dacoity of 1925, when most of its leaders were captured, imprisoned and hanged, the Association suffered tremendous losses in persons[3].

Some common ground existed between the extreme anti-colonial sentiments endorsed in the Punjab by the NJBS and other moderate political parties. The late 1920s was a time of extreme and continuous political transition, to the relief of members of the NJBS and HRA. Even as the British started to participate in the process of forming a Commission to look at the next step of constitutional change, as the final aim of Congress, a younger generation of Congressmen forced Gandhi to demand purnaswaraj or full independence. Within the Punjab, however, on submitting evidence to the all-white Simon Commission, parts of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were divided.

PUNJAB ROLE IN MOVEMENT

Influential Punjabi Hindus such as Raja Narendra Nath, Gokul Chand Narang and Bhai Parmanand, a Mahomed Shafi-led division of the Muslim League, and Sikhs belonging to the Central Sikh League have chosen to provide the Commission with facts, thereby lending weight to the unfortunate appellation used to characterise the Punjab: 'The Ulster of India.' But the Congressional Working Committee's decision to boycott the all-white Simon Commission helped to bring together in the Punjab Congress all the dominant factions: Satyapal, Mohammad Alam, Gopi Chand Bhargava, and Lala Duni Chand of Ambala, all of whom rallied in favour of the boycott. Crucially, this concerted boycott of the Simon Commission has now been led by the Punjab Lala Lajpat Rai Lion, who split with his former congressional colleagues in the mid-1920s over the question of boycott and walk-outs from the Legislative Councils.

The young men of the NJBS poured their political energy into this thrilling discussion about the short-and long-term aims of the anti-colonial movement in the Punjab. In April 1928, they invited Jawaharlal Nehru to chair the Punjab Provincial Political Conference. The most controversial resolution adopted by the Conference was a proposal to change the Congress' constitution in order to legitimize the achievement of full freedom, including aggression,' by all possible means.' The bill, opposed by some senior lawmakers, was approved by a margin of 75 to 56 votes. The Tribune condemned those who endorsed the resolution's arguments: it was not 'terror, much less mere talk of violence' that would frighten the government[4]. Indeed, without leading to a more successful means of resistance, the proposed reform in the creed of the Congress would undermine its moral authority and discredit the national movement in India.

The resolution resulted in some major resignations from the Provincial Congress and threatened to expose the cracks thinly papered over by the boycott before another Congressional meeting later repudiated it. Apart from, and yet part of the wave of anti-colonialism spreading across Northern India, members of the HRA from the United Provinces[5], Bihar, Rajputana and Punjab met at FerozshahKotla in Delhi in September 1928 to frame a separate action programme and form a central co-ordinating committee. The plan of Bhagat Singh to bomb the members of the Simon Commission was approved, as was his decision to end the practice of robbing rich people's homes.

HEROIC ACTION OF BHAGAT SINGH

This type of prosecution witness was the one that most harmed the accused Kakori. The name of the party was changed to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, representing the ideological growth and persuasive forces of Bhagat Singh (or Army; hereafter HSRA). The demonstrations organised against the all-white Simon Commission by the HSRA, NJBS and the newly united Punjab Congress represent another instance of the willingness of a number of Punjab parties to collaborate in the political field[6]. The crowd that greeted the Simon Commission on 30 October 1928 with black flags and loud slogans was attacked by lathi outside the railway station in Lahore. Just two weeks later, LajpatRai, who was hit by the police, died. The mental if not physical shock he had undergone during the lathi-charge was commonly attributed to his death.

The HSRA wanted to avenge his death: three revolutionaries, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev, killed J.P Saunders, the assistant police superintendent, and Chanan Singh, the head inspector, a month later. They wanted to kill Police Superintendent J.A. Scott, assumed to be the police officer whose blows struck LajpatRai, but it was too late by the time they realised their mistake and instead decided to kill Saunders. Chanan Singh's death was unplanned: upon hearing the shots, he rushed to the location. Although the three revolutionaries escaped from inside a college campus and there were several witnesses, until much later, the murder case of Saunders remained unsolved[7].

Contemporary accounts say that there was not much support for this act of terror. While Mrs C.R Das' appeal was printed by The Tribune to young men to avenge the death of LajpatRai in late November 1928, an editorial comment averred that the use of violence would make the struggle

for national independence, which was 'essentially spiritual, degenerate into a physical struggle': the strongest weapon of India was non-violence.' Punjab representatives and all India Congress demanded that the indiscriminate fight. The President of the Conference, Satyapal, deplored the murders at the Punjab Political Conference held in March 1929, reaffirmed that the faith of the Congress was non-violence and mocked the notion that the death of Lajpat Rai could be avenged by the killing of a police officer. As a political instrument, he repudiated terrorism.

The opening words of the leaflets that were thrown alongside these explosives that were deliberately built not to destroy were: 'It takes a loud voice to make the deaf understand.' The leaflet, signed by 'Balraj, HSRA's Commander-in-Chief, protested against increasingly oppressive laws and the 'crumbs of reforms' anticipated from the Simon Commission and said, unusually for those punished as violent: 'it is easy to kill people, but you can not kill ideas.' They claimed to hold 'great holiness' for human life, but they found it appropriate to sacrifice lives for the greater revolution often. The young men handed their revolvers in quietly and permitted themselves to be arrested[8].

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the claims of Christopher Pinney, who focuses on the depiction of Singh's mimicry of an Englishman at a Lahore Railway station in 1928 as a symbol of his immense and mobile modernity and emphasises his 'structural negation of Gandhi's corporeal practices,'¹⁰⁰ Bhagat Singh and his fellow accused prisoners' incredible popularity stemmed from their choice of a cause. Hunger fast was the means used to fight this war of principles: a means at once vibrant, emotional, intense and exacting, a toll on the human spirit as well as the body. ¹⁰ The immediate images that raced through the minds of Punjabis in the late 1920s and early 1930s were not of the trilby hat but of the painful ordeal that the young men had suffered for the sake of all political prisoners. The columns of newspapers were graced by the declining health of the hunger-striking inmates. The myth of the violent (and therefore popular) Bhagat Singh does not confront the contemporary historical record with a detailed review.

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