

Bhagat Singh and the spark of revolt in India

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Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh, born 100 years ago this week, was a young radical who fought British rule and rejected non-violence. Yuri Prasad looks at his life.

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The struggle for freedom from British colonial rule in India is usually presented as the result of the leadership of one man - Mahatma (meaning "great soul") Gandhi, whose non-violence strategy set him apart from those who have fought colonial oppression since.

This view has always been convenient for those who want to play down the role of radicals and revolutionaries in the struggle for India's freedom, and denounce those who use violence in the fight against imperialism today.

India's rich were torn between wanting the British to cede greater power to them - realising that this required a fight - and fear that rousing the masses into action could lead to a struggle that would not be limited to removing the yoke of imperialism, but would challenge the entire system.

Groups of Indian radicals, who coalesced in the early years of the last century, grasped this central contradiction. Among them was pioneering revolutionary socialist Bhagat Singh, born 100 years ago this week.

On 6 April 1919 the British Raj, fearing uprisings and "terrorism", enacted laws that gave the police and army powers to imprison Indians without the need for trials or evidence.

A few days later British troops opened fire on an unarmed protest gathering in Amritsar, killing up to 1,000 people.

In response Gandhi organised a non-cooperation movement that drew hundreds of thousands of young activists into a campaign that closed factories and offices, shut down transport, and led to the burning of British-made goods.

Gandhi insisted that if protesters were attacked by the police - as they often were - they should take the blows.

Shock

The revolt was a massive shock to the British. There was a near total boycott of government services and millions flocked out of British-sponsored schools and colleges - with many joining the nationalist

movement.

The 12 year old Bhagat Singh was among them. As the revolt spread from the towns and cities to the countryside, India's rulers responded with killings, beatings and jailings.

After two years of struggle, the brutality of the state made many question the non-violence strategy. They sensed the possibility of the movement inflicting a great defeat upon the British, but worried that the movement could be snuffed out if people were beaten into a retreat.

In February 1922 police confronted 2,000 protesters in Chauri Chaura, firing shots and killing three people - two Hindu, one Muslim.

The town rose in response, locking the police in their station and burning it to the ground. Twenty three Indian policemen were burnt alive.

Gandhi immediately called an end to the movement, but many of the activists were furious with him for doing so. Congress, the main nationalist party of which Gandhi was a leader, split - with many deserting to form more radical anti-colonial groups.

Singh joined one such group, the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA), while at college in Lahore.

The group was primarily made up of teenagers who had been part of the non-cooperation movement but who now wanted to be part of something more radical. In 1925 they robbed a train and carried off government money. As a result four leading members were hanged, and widespread repression followed.

Initially the HRA wanted India to become a federal republic like the US, but the impact of the 1917 Russian Revolution was beginning to have a radicalising effect on it.

Singh began reading widely, including writings by socialists such as Lenin and Trotsky. He started to believe that a successful revolution in India would need to be socialist and radical enough to appeal to workers and peasants.

In 1928 he changed the name of his group to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, and organised a congress in Delhi of other revolutionary groups with a view to developing a joint strategy for defeating the Raj.

The British meanwhile were looking for ways of cementing their rule in the face of a growing belief in Indian freedom.

A commission, set up under Sir John Simon, was a clumsy attempt to enlist a section of India's middle class as supporters of the occupation. It failed miserably, offering so little to the Indians that Congress decided that it would not participate.

When the commission visited Lahore, protests against it were organised by veteran activist and trade union leader Lala Lajpat Rai.

Rai stood at the head of a silent non-violent march as it was violently assaulted by armed police.

He was picked out by police chief JA Scott and badly beaten. Later that evening he staggered to address a rally, saying, "Every blow aimed at me is a nail in the coffin of British imperialism." But he had been terribly injured, and within a few weeks was dead.

Singh, who had been an eyewitness to the attack, vowed to avenge Rai's death by killing the chief of police. On 17 December 1928 Singh and his group shot and killed a policeman they believed to be Scott.

The next day they issued a proclamation that read, "Inquilab zindabad! [long live the revolution] We don't enjoy killing an individual, but this individual was ruthless, mean and part of an unjust system... This man has been killed because he was a cog in the wheel of British rule."

Unfortunately they had misidentified their target, and killed a junior policeman instead.

Throughout 1928 and 1929 a strike wave spread across Indian railways, iron and steel plants and the textiles industry - there were 31 million strike days in 1928 alone. Trade unions were growing rapidly.

The British, fearing that Communists and radicals stood behind the unions, enacted a series of draconian laws.

In March 1929 police rounded up a group of trade union leaders who were suspected Communists and put them on trial in a case that became known as the Meerut conspiracy.

The following month Singh's HSRA went to the Central Assembly in Delhi to protest at the passing of tyrannical legislation and threw small bombs from the public gallery.

Deaf

As the smoke cleared below there was panic and pandemonium. Singh shouted "Inquilab zindabad! Down with imperialism", and dropped leaflets on the crowd below that read, "It needs a loud voice for the deaf to hear".

Both Singh and his accomplice were immediately arrested and charged with the bombing - Singh was later also charged, along with two others, with the killing of the policeman in Lahore.

The group decided to use the trial and the courtroom to make propaganda against the British and for revolution.

Singh also embarked on a 63 day hunger strike to demand better conditions for political prisoners.

News of the hunger strike spread across the country, and soon 23 year old Singh was one of the best known figures in the Indian freedom movement.

While in prison he read voraciously and wrote many articles.

In an article titled To Young Political Workers he attacked leaders of Congress for their unwillingness to appeal to the working class to join the struggle.

Labourers

Gandhi had written, "We must not tamper with the labourers. It is dangerous to make use of the factory proletariat."

Singh's rebuke was stinging, "You say that you are for the national revolution, and the aim of your

struggle is an Indian republic... I ask you on what forces you rely that will help bring about that revolution.

“The real revolutionary armies are in the villages and in the factories, the peasantry and the labourers. But our bourgeois leaders do not and cannot dare to tackle them. The sleeping lion once awakened from its slumber shall become irresistible.”

Singh concluded that if the struggle for India’s national liberation was to be successful, it must become fused with the class struggle:

“If you say you are going to approach the peasants and labourers to enlist their active support, let me tell you that they are not going to be fooled by any sentimental talk.

“They will ask you candidly, what are they going to gain by your revolution for which you demand their sacrifices... you shall have to make him understand that the revolution is going to be his... the revolution of the proletariat and for the proletariat.”

A few weeks after writing those lines, on 23 March 1931, Bhagat Singh, Hari Shivaram Rajguru and Sukhdev Thapar were hanged in Lahore prison.

The execution was deliberately brought forward so that the public would not know when it would occur.

According to superintendent VN Smith, “At about 7pm shouts of ‘Inquilab Zindabad’ were heard from inside the jail. This was correctly interpreted as signal [to the crowds outside the jail] that the final curtain was about to drop.”

As news of the judicial killing spread, riots broke out across India.

Bhagat Singh’s rebellion was one of many acts of resistance that made India increasingly ungovernable for the British, forcing them to leave in 1947. The authorities had extinguished one spark of revolution, but there would be many more to come.

P.S.

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