

Bhagat Singh Reigns in the Hearts of Indian People

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Pattabhi Sitaramayya, official historian of the Congress had noted that there was a time during the freedom struggle when “Bhagat Singh’s name was as widely known all over India and was as popular as Gandhi’s.” In the 60 years since Independence, India’s ruling class has done its best to erode that popularity and efface Bhagat Singh’s spirit, if not his name, from public memory. ‘Official’ memory recorded Gandhi-Nehru as the architects of Indian independence, and Bhagat Singh and his revolutionary comrades, as well as other figures of militant nationalism like Subhas Chandra Bose, were represented as ‘fringe’ elements of the mainstream nationalist pantheon. But it’s now apparent that despite the lack of official neglect in the textbooks and other forms of recognition, it is Bhagat Singh’s memory that has triumphed in the hearts and minds of Indian people.

The Left, of course, has always spoken of the tremendous goodwill and love commanded by Bhagat Singh. But this time, it’s not any Left leaflet, but respondents to a poll conducted by a mainstream weekly, India Today, through its website and SMS, who overwhelmingly voted for Bhagat Singh as the ‘Greatest Indian’.

The poll, which ran for three weeks, asked respondents to make a choice amongst ten shortlisted ‘greats’. India Today informs us that a total of 18,928 votes came in, and Bhagat Singh is far ahead with 6,982 votes (37% of the votes), Subhas Bose second with 5,193 votes (27%). Gandhi is a distant third with 2457 votes (13%); Patel with 8%; JRD Tata, 4%; Indira Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, 3%; Homi Bhabha and Nehru, 2%; and JP Narayan, 1%.

It must be said that India Today’s shortlist itself had its biases and omissions: a glaring instance is the omission of Ambedkar. Within the available choices, however, the results are quite revealing. Bhagat Singh and Bose together account for 64% of the votes; all the rest put together are confined to just 36%. While such a poll is no scientific study, and we know little about the social or economic profile of those who chose to respond, still, it does seem to indicate a trend. Apparently, for the respondents, the appeal of the shades of revolutionary and militant nationalism represented by Bhagat Singh and Bose is far greater than that of those who are ‘official’ India’s heroes. When people think of ‘greatness’, of a vision for change, the Sangh Parivar has not a single figure that comes to mind, and the ruling class-approved figures are left far behind: only figures on the Left, like Bhagat Singh and Bose, fit the bill.

What accounts for this enduring appeal? It appears that radical nationalist figures answer the burning questions in people’s minds, and are more in tune with their aspirations, than those more favoured by the ruling class. It is no doubt an awareness of Bhagat Singh’s rising attraction and popularity that accounts for the fact that Hindi cinema has so often returned to this figure in the past few years. It is this, too, which probably has impelled Indian Parliament, finally, to decide to install a statue of Bhagat Singh in Parliament.

But even while they accede to this popular demand, India’s ruling class is trying its best to rob Bhagat Singh’s legacy of its true revolutionary content, and of his identity as a Marxist and communist.

While Left MPs who had mooted the idea of the statue suggested that Bhagat Singh be depicted in a hat, Congress MP and Minister M S Gill insisted that he be represented in a turban. Parliament is now said to have decided to depict Bhagat Singh in a turban. Behind the hat-turban debate is a deeper debate: will Bhagat Singh be remembered by the religion of his birth, or by his beliefs and his actions as a declared atheist, a committed communist revolutionary, whose writings proclaim his having given up religious beliefs, rituals and symbols? Rather than recognizing Bhagat Singh as a revolutionary, M S Gill declared that he was a “Sikh martyr”. Gill is said to have fumed, “There is a sudden attempt to appropriate Bhagat Singh. If the statue was of Subhas Chandra Bose, would we ask whether he should be in uniform or not?” Precisely, Mr. Gill. Bose would and should be depicted, not in Bengali dhoti, but in uniform in keeping not with the identity of his birth, but with his chosen political role as a leader of the INS. By the same token, Bhagat Singh ought to be depicted in keeping with his political beliefs and revolutionary actions: disguising himself in a hat to escape the colonial police; flinging a voice bomb in the Central Legislative Assembly along with Batukeshwar Dutt in order to “make the deaf (the elected representatives) hear” the voices of protest against draconian laws.

Gill, by accusing the Left of trying to “appropriate” Bhagat Singh, is actually revealing his own politics of appropriation. M S Gill and the Congress wish to curry favour with the Sikh community by claiming credit for installing a “Sikh icon’s” statue in Parliament. The RSS, too, not so long ago, proposed Bhagat Singh for the Bharat Ratna – they too sought to appropriate Bhagat Singh for their own politics. Both Congress and Sangh Parivar vigorously attempt to deny Bhagat Singh’s revolutionary ideology and politics, and in the process they try to distort his memory and his legacy. But these ruling class representatives, and Parliamentarians, can be sure that however much they try to stop their ears, Bhagat Singh’s legacy will resound in their ears “make the deaf hear”!

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