

Bhagat Singh: his times and ours

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The 23rd of March 2017 was the 86th death anniversary of Bhagat Singh, one of the most revered figures of the anti-colonial movement. In India, his life and death will be commemorated by a right-wing government which, after the nomination of an outright anti-Muslim bigot as the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, has given up even on any pretence of justice or inclusivity. And in Pakistan, apart from a few civil society and Left activists, the day will either be ignored or consciously repressed. With a nationalism premised on the obliteration of all traces of a shared past between Muslims and non-Muslims, the story of a young Sikh man's struggle for freedom becomes a source of collective embarrassment.

It is a form of historical violence to restrict a person to specific identitarian markers when his/her entire life was a formidable effort to overcome all limitations of race, caste and religion that structured the world he inhabited. Bhagat's internationalist and cosmopolitan outlook (despite having never travelled abroad) can be gauged from the inspirations he cites in his letters from prison – German communists, English philosophers, Russian anarchists and novelists, and leaders of the National Congress and the Caliphate movement. Categorising a man who called for total communal harmony and identified with global revolutionary movements of the era as only an Indian, Sikh or even Punjabi does not diminish the universal potential of his life and struggle. It only indicts us, demonstrating how alienated we are from universalism, from our own past and, eventually, from our own humanity.

Yet a compelling question often posed is: if Bhagat is to be considered an icon to the youth today, how do we explain some of his actions, including the murder of a police constable and a bomb attack at the legislative assembly (purposely thrown in an empty area to avoid casualties)? This is a pertinent question, particularly at a moment of rising communal, religious and ethnic violence in our region, not to mention the spiralling financial and human costs of the 'war on terror'. Do we then need to emulate a man who was condemned as a terrorist, and who immediately accepted responsibility for his actions?

The question of violence, however, is presented today in an ahistorical manner in the debates on the subject. In such frameworks, one can equate the military occupation of foreign lands to the resistance against that same occupation, or the deaths of four million Bengali peasants due to a British-created famine to the violence of the Tebagha Peasant Movement against such lethal exploitation of the peasantry. One should not forget that even Gandhi's 'non-violent' movements were regularly accused of instigating riots, resulting in imprisonment, torture and death sentences handed out to many 'peaceful' anti-colonial activists by the colonial state.

Therefore, one cannot mimic the language of the state to collapse disparate political projects into the awkwardly woven categories of 'violence', 'fanaticism' or 'totalitarianism' without regard to their specific historical development. And it is pertinent to remember that the context that produced the possibility of a Bhagat Singh was an outright assault on the lives, property and dignity of the Indian population.

In 1919, a Punjab-wide agitation began against the growing economic crisis in the province, often led by soldiers who had loyally served the British during the First World War but now faced precarious conditions due to the demobilisation of soldiers at the end of the war effort. Tensions reached a crescendo when hundreds of people celebrating the Baisakhi festival at the Jallianwala Bagh were massacred by Colonel Dyer's troops for allegedly violating a curfew.

This was also a time when imposing humiliating conditions on the general public was meant to, in the words of a British official, "teach them obedience". For example, it was made compulsory for all locals in Gujranwala to salute a European every time they saw one, while natives were forced to crawl through a street in Amritsar where a British woman had been harassed. The Punjab of the 1920s was littered with examples of such forms of collective punishment and humiliation meted out to the locals. Regardless of all the rhetoric of a civilising mission, colonial rule was established and secured through pain imposed on the bodies of individuals refusing to accept colonial sovereignty, and the fear such procedures induced in bystanders. Yet, pain and fear remain remarkable omissions in the history of political thought, particularly in their centrality to the experience of colonial modernity.

It is here that we witness what is unique about Bhagat's actions – his absolutely breathtaking indifference to the machinations of power. If fear of the colonial state's reprisals hindered the development of public opposition to the Raj, the young man's voluntary surrender to police authorities signalled his determination to face the worst excesses of colonial power in its notorious dungeons for political prisoners.

One can assess his steadfastness from his writings and actions while in prison. Bhagat and his comrades refused to offer any defence in the case, using the trial instead to highlight their opposition to colonial rule. In fact, he castigated his father for displaying "weakness" when the latter submitted a review petition in an attempt to save Bhagat from the impending death sentence; Bhagat reminded his father that his son's life was not worth compromising the principles of the freedom movement. In another letter written to an imprisoned comrade who was contemplating suicide, he emphasised that the process of enduring pain and suffering was a necessary component of the fight against colonial power, and ending one's own life would be tantamount to surrender.

The hunger strikes led by Bhagat and his comrades against ill-treatment in jail captured the imagination of the country, and were met by solidarity events and hunger-strikes throughout the country. The appeal of his persona can be judged by Muhammad Ali Jinnah's response to the news of the hunger strike, as he stood in the Legislative Assembly to declare his sympathy with the young men, boldly declaring that "the man who goes on hunger strike has a soul. He is moved by that soul, and he believes in the justice of his cause. He is no ordinary criminal who is guilty of cold blooded, sordid wicked crime".

If colonial sovereignty was secured through its inscription on the tortured bodies of the colonial subjects, Bhagat Singh's decision to voluntarily undergo suffering and turn it into a national spectacle became a major embarrassment for the British. In overcoming the fear induced by pain, it demonstrated the limits, and eventually, the fragility of colonial power.

What further propelled him into the national imaginary was his subversive tactics in the courtroom, a platform he used not for his own defence, but to mock the Empire and its judicial system in front of the national media. Poetry, jokes, and slogans substituted legal reasoning in the courtrooms, with the accused questioning the right of an occupying power to judge their case. One can imagine the appeal of such tactics for ordinary Indians, who were caught in the perpetual drudgery of facing humiliation at the hands of colonial institutions. An Empire that seemed eternal and was built upon rituals of obedience suddenly appeared contingent, vulnerable and fragile, opening up possibilities

of a post-imperial world, an idea that occupied Indians in the 1930s and 1940s.

Therefore, Bhagat Singh's singularity was not an unrestrained penchant for violence. In fact, in his famous letter to 'Young Political Workers', he explicitly denounced the cult of the bomb, and encouraged the youth to educate themselves and work patiently with the masses. It was his tactical genius in opening up political imagination beyond the colonial present that was truly remarkable. Even more impressive was his readiness to face the consequences of his commitments, which eventually took him and his comrades, Sukh Dev and Raj Guru, to the gallows in Lahore on the 23rd of March, 1931.

What concrete lessons we draw from these episodes and how we fight our collective amnesia about heroic figures from our past depends on us. In either case, all those who sacrificed their lives for the cause of freedom and human dignity – like Bhagat Singh – live eternally and are in no need of acknowledgement from those holding onto their privileges and fears in a mediocre present. Instead, we should reverse the question and ask whether 'we' are dead or alive in their eyes. This simple reversal will have immeasurable consequences on how we view history, ethics and, eventually, life itself.

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P.S.

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