

India: Punjab's battles over Bhagat Singh

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Controversies over the anti-colonial revolutionary expose Punjab's political fissures, with the farmers' protest movement, Communists, Khalistanis, the AAP and other parties all having staked their own claims

In July 2022, Simranjit Singh Mann, a member of the Indian Parliament from Punjab and a vocal backer of Khalistan – a separate Sikh state – made a controversial remark about Bhagat Singh, the iconic Indian revolutionary. Mann dubbed him a terrorist arguing that he had killed “innocent” police officers, one of whom was an *Amritdhari*, or baptised Sikh. In 1928, after the death of the Congress leader Lala Lajpat Rai, Bhagat Singh and his comrades assassinated British police officer John Saunders. While they were being chased by the police, it was Singh's associate Chandrashekhar Azad who shot the Sikh policeman. Mann also condemned Bhagat Singh's action of throwing bombs at the Delhi Legislative Assembly. Following his comments, Mann's supporters quoted and misquoted Bhagat Singh's writings to try and delegitimise him. They simultaneously launched an attack on Marxist and Communist thought by critiquing Bhagat Singh's ideas. In response, various leftist factions tried to defend Singh and launched an attack on Mann.

At present, Punjab is experiencing an economic crisis accompanied by political quandary. The agrarian sector is in a deplorable state, with an ever-increasing debt burden on farmers and agricultural labourers, resulting in alarmingly high rates of suicides over the last two decades. Simultaneously, Punjab, which already suffered due to a lack of proper industrial planning, is witnessing further decline in this sector. Youth who are finding no avenues here are migrating abroad in very large numbers. Notably, two ideological groups are responding to the prevailing crises to try and rally people for their respective causes – Communists and Khalistanis, each promising in their different ways to deliver the emancipation of the masses.

The tension between the two groups has intensified over recent years, and the present debate on Bhagat Singh reflects the prevailing antagonism. Their struggle for the Punjabi mind intensified with the recent farmers' protests against the Modi government's new agricultural laws in 2020 and 2021, and is rooted in the local political tensions of the latter half of the twentieth century. However, the present crisis cannot be contextualised without understanding how Bhagat Singh is appropriated, represented and misrepresented by a spectrum of political factions and ideologies.

The political ghosts of Bhagat Singh

While Bhagat Singh and his comrades were alive and active in the struggle for freedom from British rule, leaders of the Congress and various Hindu organisations never celebrated his ideas. Rather, the revolutionary Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (previously known as Hindustan Republican Association) and its actions were objects of ridicule and condemnation among leaders like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Lala Lajpat Rai. After the execution of Bhagat Singh and his comrades by British authorities in 1931, Gandhi, who faced public rage for not making sufficient efforts to save them, hailed their sacrifice for the country while simultaneously condemning their ideas and methods.

A deep sense of resentment against the current state of affairs is apparent among the people of Punjab, but there seems to be no political force capable of leading them to social and political change.

The independent Indian state, as well as various ruling classes and electoral parties, projected Bhagat Singh as a “nationalist” hero in a limited sense after 1947. His ideas about how the foundations of a free India should be laid were brushed under the carpet, thus concealing his vision of a socialist republic. His aim was not just to gain independence from the British but to secure the liberation of the toiling masses from foreign or native exploiters. A glorified but diminished image of a self-sacrificing Bhagat Singh was projected instead. While the Congress started celebrating this anodyne image of Singh and his comrades after their deaths, the Hindu right went a step further. It attempted to associate Bhagat Singh with the Hindu reformist organisation Arya Samaj by highlighting his family’s association with them, obscuring the fact that Singh was a vocal atheist. The Hindu right also exploited the fact that two of his younger siblings had contested elections from the Jan Sangh, a right-wing political outfit.

There was a time the Aam Aadmi Party, with an anti-establishment and anti-corruption ethos in its early days fighting local elections in Delhi, projected Gandhi as one of its icons. When the AAP vied for power in Punjab, it used the jargon of transformative politics and deployed the imagery of Bhagat Singh and went on to sweep the 2022 state elections. The popular sentiment among people, however, was to oust the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and Congress which have been ruling in Punjab over years. Bhagwant Singh Mann, the AAP leader and present chief minister of Punjab, sports a basanti turban in public, just like Bhagat Singh is portrayed wearing in many images, to exhibit a semblance with the revolutionary.

A portrait of Bhagat Singh was to be made mandatory in all public offices in Punjab after the AAP’s victory, as was one of B R Ambedkar. But while using both figures for symbolic effect in Punjab, the party’s behaviours in Gujarat flew in the face of their legacies. Arvind Kejriwal, the party’s national convenor, projected himself as a Hindu leader while campaigning for Gujarat elections, heedless of Bhagat Singh’s strident atheism and Ambedkar’s denunciations of Hinduism to achieve the annihilation of caste. Kejriwal visited temples, stated that the deities Lakshmi and Ganesh should be displayed on the Indian rupee to address its falling value, and claimed that since he was born on Krishna Janmashtami, celebrated as the birth anniversary of Krishna, he too had been sent to vanquish evil, just like the deity himself. Meanwhile, Kejriwal remained silent when one of his ministers in Delhi was hounded by the Hindu right after he appeared at an anti-caste event where attendees recited Ambedkar’s 22 vows, which include a refusal to worship Hindu gods. Kejriwal was satisfied to accept the minister’s resignation.

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With Bhagat Singh moving progressively towards Marxist ideas in his lifetime, the communists would appear to have the best claim to his legacy. Whether or not they have done justice to it remains open to debate, but they have made major contributions to promoting the ideas of Bhagat Singh and his fellows. Bhagat Singh’s comrades Shiv Verma and Yashpal highlighted in their memoirs how they engaged with the problems of Indian society and envisioned not just an independent country but also a country free from all forms of exploitation – a society based on socialist ideals. The Shaheed Bhagat Singh Khoj Committee played a crucial role in compiling and bringing to light these writings and ideas, and in 1985 published *Shaheed Bhagat Singh Ate Ohna*

De Sathiya Dian Likhtan (Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and his Comrades).

In the past, Khalistan sympathisers revered Bhagat Singh as a martyr and a Sikh. The Khalistani radicals Harjinder Singh “Jinda” and Sukhdev Singh “Sukha” hailed Bhagat Singh and his methods in a letter to the president of India before their execution for the assassination of General Arun Shridhar Vaidya, who commanded the Indian armed forces that attacked the Akal Takht at the Golden Temple in Amritsar in 1984. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the Khalistani militant leader killed in that operation, had also acknowledged Bhagat Singh as a martyr.

A section of Khalistanis has defended such appropriation of Bhagat Singh by claiming that he embraced Sikhism in his final days. A photograph of Bhagat Singh sitting alongside a Sikh man in jail was presented as key evidence, but this was later shown to have been taken when the revolutionary was imprisoned years earlier, and the man with him was a police officer rather than a Ghadari leader as claimed.

Afterlives of revolutionary thought

A deep sense of resentment against the current state of affairs is apparent among the people of Punjab, but there seems to be no political force capable of leading them to social and political change. Time and again, they pin their hopes on some new figure or force, only to come away still frustrated. In the farmers’ protests, it was the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), a joint front of farmers’ unions of various political hues. The protests successfully saw the Modi government withdraw the offending farm laws, but hopes that the ethos and organisation of the protests could be translated into political movement have not been fulfilled. In the last Punjab assembly elections, to oust the dominant Congress and SAD, people overwhelmingly voted for the AAP and showed little support for the Sanyukt Samaj Morcha, a political outfit floated by some leading factions of the SKM. Then, as people did not see the AAP delivering on the changes it had promised, they were quick to oust it in parliamentary by-elections of Sangrur, earlier a stronghold of the party. Instead, they elected Simranjit Singh Mann, who had performed poorly in Punjab’s assembly elections earlier.

During the farmers’ movement, Deep Sidhu, an actor turned activist and politician gained in prominence while presenting himself as a Khalistani sympathiser and advocate of the rights of Punjab versus the central government. He even publicly raised doubts over the SKM leaders’ capability to head the protests. The SKM held him responsible for the Republic Day ‘fiasco’, when protestors forced their way into Delhi and stormed the Red Fort, and dubbed him an agent of the government. The Khalistani forces on the other hand would accuse the leadership of being too incompetent to lead the masses. But after his demise in a road accident, a huge gathering was seen at his Bhog ceremony at Fatehgarh Sahib, an important Sikh centre. Similarly, after the killing of the singer Sidhu Moose Wala, there was a large gathering for his last rites, and people built a mausoleum in his village. Sidhu Moose Wala was not known for any radical anti-government stances and had only lately started engaging with politics in his music, but after his death and owing to his popularity, he came to appeal to a kind of Sikh chauvinism replete with guns and feudal pride. More recently, the Khalistani separatist Amritpal Singh has emerged as a figure of influence among Punjab’s Sikh youth. All of these are signs of lingering turmoil, of deep frustration in search of leadership and outlet.

In contemporary times, a new section of Khalistanis has emerged to delegitimise Bhagat Singh by arguing that he did not contribute to the cause of the Sikhs, and to allege that the Indian state deliberately established him as a hero in order to push the martyrdom of other Sikh freedom fighters into the shadows. Like the Hindu right, these sections also highlight Bhagat Singh’s Arya Samaj background and allege that he operated under its influence, even that he followed Lala Lajpat Rai, the Congress leader and champion of Hindu interests.

In their own way, these efforts make a kind of sense: Bhagat Singh's determined atheism doesn't sit well with the Khalistani project, and if that atheism cannot be disproved, the alternative is to subvert his significance.

Bhagat Singh and his comrades openly critiqued the Congress and Hindu leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai. Further, Bhagat Singh's article "Why I am an Atheist" makes his stance on religion very clear, leaving no question of him being an adherent of any sect or religion, be it the Arya Samaj or Sikhism. But that doesn't imply that he had issues with people practising religion – many among his organisation were theists. He also published many articles about the Kuka movement, the Babbar Akali movement, the Ghadar movement and many others, some of which sought inspiration from religion in their endeavours.

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Beyond this, Bhagat Singh has also been questioned on the issue of language. Some Khalistanis cite Bhagat Singh's essay "Problem of Punjab's Language and Script" to portray him as an opponent of Punjabi, comparing him with the likes of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and contemporary Hindu nationalists who strive to impose Hindi as the single language for all of India. But Bhagat Singh's arguments in the article centre on how the Punjabi language needs to be saved. At that time, there was a debate on the use of Urdu as the official language in Punjab. At the age of 16, Bhagat Singh argued in favour of a language of the masses – Punjabi. He gave various examples of how an emotion born and thought in Punjabi cannot be expressed in any other language. When it came to the script, he saw wide usage of Nagari, rather than the Gurmukhi still preferred to write Punjabi today, as a way to expand the reach of the Punjabi tongue. This is a controversial position, but Bhagat Singh's goal of helping the language is clear.

It would be misleading to term Bhagat Singh and his comrades "nationalists" in the sense of the term propagated by India's current Hindu nationalist government, with its authoritarian tendencies and ill-will towards various Indian nationalities and cultures that do not ascribe to its notion of "One Nation". The manifesto of the Hindustan Republican Association made it amply clear that "The immediate object of the revolutionary party in the domain of politics is to establish a Federal Republic of United States of India by an organised and armed revolution."

When Bhagat Singh and his comrades were to be hanged, there was outrage among the masses. Even Gandhi was compelled to negotiate for their lives and, when he failed, had to face the public's anger for not trying enough. He was 'welcomed' with slogans of *Gandhi Murdabad!* (Gandhi Down Down!) at the Karachi railway station. Protests erupted all over India. Markets remained closed in many cities, and in Kolkata alone, some 140 were killed, well over 500 injured and around 300 people were arrested. So it is dishonest to suggest that Bhagat Singh was not popular among the masses and that the Indian state conspired to make him a hero. Rather, the state and many reactionary forces have done what they always do in appropriating people's heroes in order to gain legitimacy for themselves. It is for the same purpose that the Indian state symbolically celebrates historical figures like the Sikh gurus, the Sikh military leader Banda Singh Bahadur, B R Ambedkar and many more.

Khalistani versus Communist

There were many diverse Khalistani factions involved in the militancy in Punjab in the 1980s and

1990s. Their tactics included targeted killings of police officers, army personnel, politicians and other servants of the Indian state after the attack on Akal Takht and killings of Sikhs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the prime minister at the time. Many incidents targeting Hindu civilians also surfaced in Punjab. Although various leftist factions condemned the attack on the Akal Takht and the massacre of Sikhs, they put violence by the state and by Khalistani factions on the same level and resolved to fight against both. Amid tension between communist and Khalistani groups, incidents surfaced of adherents of one ideological stream killing activists of the other. The revolutionary poet Pash was killed in one such case. It is known that some left factions procured arms licences from the state in large numbers with the understanding that this was to fight Khalistani militants. The Khalistani factions condemned this as an act of collaboration between the communists and the state against the Sikhs. Leftist sections, meanwhile, claimed that it was necessary as an act of self-defence since they feared becoming victims of Khalistani fundamentalism. The antagonism between the Khalistanis and the Communists can be situated in this political conflict.

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A section of leftists fails to place the question of Punjabi nationality in the right context and also underplays the issues faced by Sikhs as a religious minority in India. On the other hand, Khalistanis articulate the question of Punjabi identity and nationality in a very different manner and demand a theocratic Sikh state. Given the history described above, insecurity prevails among the non-Sikh people of Punjab – especially Punjabi Hindus, who make up around 40 percent of the population.

This underlying antagonism between Khalistanis and Communists finds reflection in moments of political tension in Punjab. However, it seems futile in the grand scheme of things. It is easier to critique and delegitimise each other's revered figures than to dwell upon the roots of the crisis in Punjab and find ways to overcome it. Until the emphasis shifts to finding concrete solutions to prevailing problems, the battles over icons like Bhagat Singh may well continue.

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