



Russian Revolution and Indian Nationalism: An assessment of impact of Russian literature on Bhagat Singh and its legacy

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Abstract

The present article seeks to examine the impact of Russian revolution on Bhagat Singh. It analyses the influence of Russian revolutionary literature on Bhagat Singh's ideas and methods of confrontation against the colonial regime. Further, the article evaluates its impact on the Indian National Movement. It seeks to understand the legacy of Bhagat Singh through the vernacular literature produced in India after his martyrdom. It has been found that after the hanging of Bhagat Singh, a large number of literatures dealing with his life and activities were published at various places in the country. This literature exhorted the common masses to follow the path of Bhagat Singh and sacrifice their lives for the cause of motherland.

Keywords: Russian Revolution, Bhagat Singh, vernacular literature, Indian National Movement

Introduction

The Russian revolution (1917) had a profound impact on Indian national movement as it radicalized the anti-colonial struggle and encouraged mass mobilization. The spread of socialist/Marxist ideas and the foundation of political outfits like Communist Party of India tried to make the Indian national movement more inclusive in nature by taking up the cause of peasants and workers. Incidents like Chauri Chaura (1922) during the Gandhian Non-Cooperation movement highlighted the fact that 'there is just as much inflammable material in rural India as there was in Russia' [1]. Important Indian nationalist leaders like J. L. Nehru, S. C. Bose, Bhagat Singh and many more were influenced by the ideals of the Russian revolution. Indian intelligentsia too appealed to take inspiration from the revolution in leading the anti-colonial struggle [2]. The print media glorified the revolution and hailed it as a victory of masses for their rights [3]. These developments had its impact on the Indian national movement as it instilled enthusiasm in leadership as well as the common masses. This article attempts to examine the influence of Russian revolution on Bhagat Singh. It also highlights the enduring legacy of Bhagat Singh that inspired Indian national movement after his martyrdom.

Bhagat Singh's thought on freedom, political power, poverty and social justice are clearly visible in his jail diary. It also contains his thoughts on Russian political thinkers and intellectuals like Lenin, Trotsky, Dostoevsky etc. A number of Russian revolutionaries like Vera Figner and Nicolai Morozov had also been quoted by him in his diary. It is interesting to note that a number of these quotes are related to prison and captivity. He quotes Figner discussing about the thoughts of a prisoner who is sentenced to death. In the same entry, he quotes Morozov talking about the suffocating condition of a prisoner in captivity [4]. Further, he quotes Figner writing about the 'frame of mind of a revolutionary' [5]. The influence of Russian revolution is also manifested in his socialist leanings and emphasis on economic empowerment of the masses.

Bhagat Singh used the court trial as a platform to propagate his idea among the masses by attracting media attention. Whether it was his own perception or did he borrow it from

elsewhere, say for example from Russian revolutionaries is a question to ponder upon. A Russian revolutionary Mary Sapidonoka was prosecuted and tried by Court Martial for some political crime. She used the trial as a medium to disseminate her ideas and delivered a forcible speech in the Court. She said that she was doomed to suffer capital punishment but she firmly believed that a time will come when justice and virtue would become victorious and when the reign of liberty, equality and unity would be established there. Is it not a matter of great joy, she asked, if one life be sacrificed for such a bright future? [6] Revolutionaries like Mary Sapidonoka definitely influenced Bhagat Singh to use the platform of court to attract the attention of media towards his ideology and spread it among the Indian masses. Bhagat Singh advised the youth of the country to adopt Marxism and organize workers and peasants against the colonial rule. While referring to the Round Table Conference held at London he wrote 'the present movement is bound to end some sort of compromise...an indispensable factor in the political strategy' [7]. He elaborated by giving example from the Russian revolution to highlight that 'compromise is an essential weapon which has to be wielded every now and then as the struggle develops. But the thing that we must keep always before us is the idea of the movement' [8]. He advocated to study life work of Lenin to get a clear idea on the subject of compromise. He believed that 'the present movement i.e. the present struggle (Civil Disobedience), is bound to end in some sort of compromise or complete failure...because in my opinion, this time the real revolutionary forces have not been invited into the arena [9].' He was referring to the Indian masses, the peasants and workers, whom he considered the 'real revolutionary armies' [10]. He made it clear that it is necessary to capture government machinery and use it to eliminate social inequality. Along with that educating 'the masses and to create a favourable atmosphere for our (socialist) social programme' was equally important [11]. The emphasis of Bhagat Singh on the importance of training and educating the masses had an enduring impact on the Indian national movement. As he used the court trial sessions to propagate his ideas, he eventually became a household name in India. It became more evident after his

martyrdom. In such a volatile and aggrieved atmosphere, some wrote biography of Bhagat Singh while others lauded him through poems and songs. Chandravati Devi ^[12] from Bihar, started writing Bhagat Singh's biography soon after his execution. However, it was confiscated by the British authorities. The impact of the trial and execution of Bhagat Singh and his comrades on the Indian nationalism can be glimpsed from the literatures relating to Bhagat Singh available in the archives which were proscribed by the colonial government. For this article, we have chosen some proscribed Urdu literature, to analyze popular perception of the people for Bhagat Singh. In the absence of original text, we have to depend on the English translation of the texts made by the Government officials and the report prepared on them about the contents and its response in Indian society. Some texts relating to Bhagat Singh have been taken into account by the scholars of Indian nationalism but still many of them have not been explored so far ^[13].

Urdu Literature Eulogizing Bhagat Singh in the Nationalist Perspectives

The Urdu pamphlet "Watan Ke Ashiq Ka Begunah Khun" ^[14] was written before the execution of Bhagat Singh. It narrates 'the offering of a national devotee at the altar of mother Bharat on his death bed'. The writer of the pamphlet argues that he was ready to sacrifice his life at the feet of Bharat Mata and become 'immortal'. He was psychologically preparing the people for a greater cause. He also contends that the position of India had become bad to worst under the British rule. He highlights that earlier India was so rich that it fed many countries of the world but now it itself is starving. He cites the examples of China, Russia, America, Australia and Japan that after becoming independent, they all are very happy and self-sufficient in fulfilling the needs and aspirations of their people. The poem goes as follows

"You will find me saying on the day of resurrection
(That) I am a servant of the Indians and India is mine
O Bharat! May my head and my life be sacrificed at these feet,
I will, then, regard such a death as immortality
Whenever we look, we find that each and every person is
crying for bread,
When they cannot get one sufficient meal to satisfy their
stomach
How can they get their second meal?
China, Russia, America, Australia and Japan are getting
their bread comfortably,
India which was feeding other countries is now begging
for bread ^[15]."

The Urdu pamphlet, *Lutf-i-Shahadat ya tin Shahid* (The enjoyment of martyrdom or the three martyrs) ^[16] starts with the slogan: Inqilab Zindabad (long live revolution), Bande Mataram and it has designated Bhagat Singh as 'Indian Napoleon'. According to the official reports the poem purports to be a national song. The poet suggests the countrymen that whenever they get an opportunity to sacrifice their life for the cause of motherland, they should sing Bande Matram and sacrifice their life for the motherland with pleasure. The poem says

"O gems of my Bharat! If you are awarded the punishment of death (lit. Punishment of hanging)
You should sing "Bande Matram" after ascending the gallows.

If for the sake of country any one applies the sword to your throat
Bow your neck laughing after uttering the word "Bande Matram"
When, after you have sacrificed yourselves for the country, you meet mother Bharat
Shout Bande Matram by throwing yourself at her feet ^[17]."

The writer further asks the colonial regime, 'O tyrant! Why are you sending people to gallows?' The writer asks the British about their atrocities and says thus:

"The mothers on whose children you fired bullets are all crying for redress in the presence of God.
(O God)! Do thou uproot the plant of dishonest person?
Many young women who were widowed (by you)
Have passed today their nights with intense grief (lit. have passed dark nights)
No means of support have been left to them.
Those who ask for their rights are thrown by you into jail,
You threaten us with Police bludgeons,
We fear no danger to our life.
The whole population (lit Subjects) of India is putting up with the trouble you are giving.
Just as the blowing of the bellows melts the iron" ^[18].

The writer further motivates youths by saying that they had no fear of execution and they would sacrifice their life for the cause of motherland like Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukhdev. The verses are as follows

"After ascending the gallows, we will sing the song of the country, Inqilab,
We will ascend the gallows like Sukhdev, Bhagat Singh and Rajguru, Inqilab" ^[19].

In the same pamphlet, a poem titled *Lutf-i-Shahadat* (enjoyment of martyrdom) narrates about the pleasure one gets after sacrificing his life for the freedom of his country. It raises a number of questions to the British government namely

"O Britain what hast thou gained by dismembering the dead body
Thou shouldst have allowed some visible relic of my Sardar to remain ^[20].

Further, it appeals to the youth of the country to stop having any expectation of goodwill from the colonial regime and to stand against the atrocities of the government with sternness and bravery. It says

O young men! Why are you waiting for the kindness of the Sirkar?
A non-violent cry for redress does not ever get a hearing,
You should also bring your courage and bravery into play,
You have so far ruined your lives in cowardliness" ^[21].

The Urdu pamphlet, "Piyara Bhagat Singh" (Darling Bhagat Singh) began with the slogans Bhagat Singh Zindabad (long live Bhagat Singh); Inqilab Zindabad (long live revolution), Bol Bharat Mata Ki Jai (victory to the mother Bharat). It also highlights Bhagat Singh's love for the country due to which he played 'Holi with his own blood'. The poem goes as follows

"He played Holi with his own blood
By falling in love with the country darling Bhagat Singh
Was not in the least disobedient

(He) ascended the gallows after speaking the truth
 He did not refuse to die –darling Bhagat Singh
 He did not at all fear death
 He ascended the gallows for the sake of the country
 The whole world said: “darling Bhagat Singh”
 The fleet of freedom was in the ocean
 It was surrounded by whirlpool on all four sides
 (But) darling Bhagat Singh did not take it ashore [22]”

The Urdu pamphlet *Qatl-i- Begunah Urf Shahidan-i-Watan* (The murder of Innocent, or Martyrs of the country) [23] on its title page bears a picture showing Bhagat Singh seated on a table with his arms over a burning candle in presence of a person who is standing. As reported by the intelligence department, the picture depicts the busts of Raj Guru, Sukh Dev, Batukeshwar Dutt and Jatin Das on the four corners. Between the busts of Raj Guru and Sukh Dev are seen a sword and a gun crossing each other. Below them are seen a pistol and a shield. The pamphlet also contains the picture of Lala Lajpat Rai. The pamphlet opens with the remarks that it was an offering to the patriots, political leaders, true sons of mother India, devotees of the nation, true worshipper of self sacrifice and freedom and the worker of Naujawan Bharat Sabha. After the hanging of Bhagat Singh and his comrades, a new hope has been expressed from the young generation that every true servant and son of Mother India would reach the minaret of freedom by understanding the real picture of the British rule in India. It contains an appeal to the true sons and young men of India. It says that ‘The movement of freedom is now being vigorously pushed on in India. The “uncrowned king” and the youths of India want to make the country free like all other countries. From the work which is being done at present and from the work of the youths, who are bent upon getting themselves slaughtered with a blunt knife for the sake of country, it appears that the drum of freedom will now be beaten in India provided the fuel of the sacrifice of young men continues to be put into the oven of nationality. Therefore the youths, who are longing to serve India and wish to see everybody happy, enjoy comfort like foreign countries, be counted as free nation in the comity of other nations, wear dress like the white-skinned people, lead a happy life and remove shamelessness and slavery from India should once obey the order of these gods of the gallows and make room for the workmen, labourers and peasants in their hearts and, in order to liberate India, await the order, of the “uncrowned king” of the country [24].’ ‘An appeal to the resident of India’ says:

“If the mother does not love the country,
 Who can beget devotee of the country
 See where other nations have reached.
 Our name and vestige are about to be affected.
 No nation can make progress
 Until it has the support of young men
 When the youths guide the country,
 We shall say openly:
 What?
 We are of India (and) India is ours [25]”.

In a note, Ram Prashad gives a life sketch of Lala Lajpat Rai, and narrates how his death due to injury inflicted by lathi charge during protest against Simon commission aroused the masses. *Hartals* and mourning meetings were held in every city. His bier was accompanied by lakhs of people in Lahore. The same day while cremating his dead

body the young men of the Republican Army took the oath that they would not rest until they put to death the shameless person who showered *lathi* on him. The author writes:

“O young men! If you consider death a bride for you,
 We too, though widowers, consider ourselves married persons.
 We consider handcuffs as bangles of marriage.
 We always play Holi with the colour of blood.
 We thought it (the month of) Phagan [26] to die for Bharat [27]”.

Ram Prashad narrates the history of the British rule in India and highlights how India lost its power and glory after their arrival on Indian soil. He appealed to the people more particularly to the young men to become volunteers even after the attainment of Swaraj through Satyagraha. They should, therefore, join ‘Azad Fauj’ (Swadeshi Fauj) and serve the country [28].

Ram Prashad raises questions on the British system of justice and argues that ‘It has never been heard that any one sentenced to death has been executed at night. The present Government executed these three young men (Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukh Dev) by spurning the voice of the whole country. This scene cannot disappear from the heart of any person. Nay, the halter round their necks will continue to appear before the eyes of the people for thousands of years, nay, as long as earth and heaven exist. These three young men executed secretly at 7 pm in a very strange manner and through queer move of the Government.’ However, it concludes with the ‘last prayer’ with the request that the young generation will give a practical shape to it [29].

Criticizing the British policy Ram Prashad draw a sketch of the blessing of the British as stated by the admirers. He contradicts all that and according to him all the blessings were useless when a human being cannot find bread to eat. Appreciating the works of revolutionary nationalist Ram Prasad says ‘O martyrs of the country! O national gems! You did not commit sins.’ Criticising the British policies he says that the British wants to make us extinct with the tyrannical sword of Ordinance. ‘We will therefore have to either commit suicide or change the present system of Government. My dear brethren! Even a most cowardly person does not like to lose his life in vain. This being so there is no alternative except that all young men should unite and become prepared to lay down their lives like the martyrs of the country and change the present system of Government [30].’

M. S. Kavi Panchhi Ji of Sialkot writes that Bhagat Singh was ‘Anmulle Lal’ (priceless gem) for the country who taught us lesson of freedom. He also writes how people got inspired with Bhagat Singh and became ready to sacrifice for the cause of nation. The poem says

“Bhagat Singh has taught us the lesson of freedom.
 O Indians! Do not fear death (but) run and ascend the gallows.
 Raj Guru and Sukh Dev have become the darling of the country.
 They (Government) killed them by hanging them on the gallows after making the rope tight
 Hear the story of Hari Kishan who played a wonderful game
 He was the gem of mother bharat and ascended the gallows laughing

We have to liberate India, have no fear of death, O Indians
Ascend the gallows gladly after telling the tyrant! O my
Indian brethren! Hear, become Hari Kishan all of you do
not delay in the least (and) ascend the gallows laughing
[31].”

Pandit Shiv Lal ‘Bismil’ in his Urdu pamphlet *Insaf ka Khun (Murder of Justice)* [32] raises question on the British system of Justice. He writes that thieves, swindlers, dacoits, adulterers, cheats and liars frequently escape punishment but innocent men were hanged on the gallows. This was the injustice which makes hollow the foundation of Government. A government becomes automatically extinct when the devotees of the country, for their patriotism, were considered liable to severest punishments. Courts are no more than a theatrical stage where law and justice are interpreted according to requirements with the object of shedding the blood of the highest ethical principles of humanity. This pamphlet contains a number of interesting and instructive instances of the so-called British love of justice and it is hoped that the public will benefit by reading those instances of history.

Nazar Ahmad narrates the events in the form of story of the activities of Bhagat Singh and his party from the arrival of Simon Commission up to the execution of Bhagat Singh and his comrades. It admits that Bhagat Singh and his party murdered Saunders to revenge Lala Lajpat Rai’s death [33]. At other place it examines the judgment of the court that ‘Bhagat Singh and Dutt were sentenced to transportation for life in the Assembly Bomb Case. ... When their case was pending before the special Magistrate they went on hunger strike as a protest against the bad treatment of the jail authorities. At last their demands were conceded. But their companion Jatinder Nath Das died of this hunger strike... A Special Tribunal was appointed by Government. It awarded various sentences to the accused [34]. When magistrate visited the jail on the evening of 23rd March Sardar Bhagat Singh addressed him thus. Mr. Magistrate! We will tell you how gladly the martyrs of the country ascended the gallows [35].”

The Nara-e-Jung criticizes the English way of life and talks about Hindu Muslim Unity [36]. Bansi Dhar Sharma in the front page of his Urdu pamphlet *Bharti Shahide Nauratan wa Hangama-i-Cownpore* (Nine Martyred gems of Bharat and the Cownpore incident), had portraits of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru, Chandra Shekhar Azad and five others. In the first two poems the poet describes the Cownpore riot and mourns the loss of Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. The next poem is in praise of Bhagat Singh. Some of the verses may be rendered thus:

“Heroic Bhagat Singh was the crown of the youths.
Bhagat Singh was mad for freedom.
This lion-hearted person was a resident of Lahore.
Brave Bhagat Singh loved freedom.
He threw a bomb while meeting of the Assembly was taking place (and) was arrested in the bomb case.
He sent red letters to the police stations at Lahore.
Bhagat Singh used to say ‘Be on your guard’.
Taking with him his two companions, Raj Guru and Sukhdev, Bhagat Singh ascended the gallows with dignity.
First of all, Sukhdev stepped forward shouting.
Seeing this Bhagat Singh got up saying, ‘Get aside, let me go first’. Raj Guru also said, no first let me go’.
At last the matter was settled and Sukhdev ascended the gallows (and) bowing his head before mother Bharat, he sacrificed himself on the gallows.

When Sukhdev’s body was removed Bhagat Singh came forward with his chest expanded.

He looked at the gallows with eyes full of love, kissed it and bowed down his head before it.

He utters the shouts of ‘Down down with the Union Jack,’ ‘Destroy the British flag’, so loudly that the sky resounded with these shouts [37].”

It is evident from the above discussion that soon after the execution of Bhagat Singh and his comrades Rajguru and Sukhdev, there was a wave of nationalist sentiments in the country against the British. The nationalist literature produced during the period tried to awaken people towards national goal and prepared people to sacrifice their lives like Bhagat Singh for the liberation of the motherland. These writings not only mourned the execution of Bhagat Singh, rather they also emphasized on how India lost its culture and civilization under the so called ‘civilized nation’. Literatures relating to Bhagat Singh played a substantial role in mobilizing masses towards the national cause.

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