

BHAGAT SINGH

Pages from the Life
of a Martyr



ALL INDIA YOUTH FEDERATION

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of a Martyr**

by

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PREFACE

It has become a tradition with the All India Youth Federation to observe the anniversary of Bhagat Singh's martyrdom. This is an apt and proper practice, since it helps to remind the youth of today that they have to be the inheritors of Bhagat Singh's mantle, and have therefore to prove worthy of it.

This time, the leaders of the AIYF asked me to prepare a small booklet on Bhagat Singh for the approaching occasion.

It came as an opportunity to pay homage to the glorious memory of this immortal martyr, and to recall his vision of a Free and Socialist India. What was he, and whither was he bound? The present is as much an appropriate occasion as any other to answer this question.

Every Indian has of course a right to claim him as his own, for in a sense, he belongs to all of us. But for that reason should the knights of reaction in India be allowed to consign the sum-total of his views to oblivion, and so to say, smother them under a 'conspiracy of silence'? More than at any other time, youths committed to scientific socialism have to take up the challenge and rebuff the efforts of all brands of reactionaries to distort his true image.

In this booklet while narrating the evolution of Bhagat Singh's thoughts, I have, wherever possible, let Bhagat Singh speak for himself, rather than attribute anything to him. This, I believe, gives them greater credence and authenticity. I hope the booklet will prove useful to the AIYF activists and members.

Ajoy Bhavan
Delhi, 8.3.84

A. B. Bardhan

I

JUST A FEW MILESTONES IN HIS LIFE

Their names are legion. But one among them shines forth with the steady brilliance of the Polar Star—the name of Bhagat Singh.

The name of Bhagat Singh,—the indomitable hero, the undying martyr, has fired the imagination of generations of Indian youth. The halo of his martyrdom has ever since, illumined the path of countless young Indian revolutionaries. It is like an eternal flame burning in their breasts.

Along with his comrades, Bhagat Singh is the hero of many a legend. This is a story about him. It is a story that has been told a thousand times before. But it is one, that does not suffer for being retold over again. It is a story about what he was, and what he was becoming up to the last moment of his all too brief, but eventful life, cut short by the hangman's noose.

Bhagat Singh was born on September 27, 1907 in a family of revolutionary freedom fighters. As he came into the world, his two uncles incarcerated for years, came out of jail. He grew up, as India's Freedom Movement started gathering mass momentum, and the Motherland was on the threshold of great events.

The 1920s were momentous years in our country's life. 1920-22 saw the first great wave of struggle under Gandhiji's leadership—the Non-Cooperation Movement. It raised great hopes in the minds of all people, especially the youth. It fired their patriotic imagination and fervour. Boys in their teens, like Bhagat Singh and Chandra-shekhar Azad, participated in it with enthusiasm. But

right when the tempo of the Movement was at its height, Gandhiji withdrew it on the plea of the Chauri Chaura violence. This was an indication of how the national leadership symbolised by Gandhiji was henceforth determined to bridle the movement and hold the masses in leash, in the name of non-violence. Gandhiji's action plunged the youth into a morass of frustration and demoralisation. It shook their faith in the national leadership, and spurred them on to seek other paths.

Bhagat Singh joined the revolutionary ranks in 1924, while pursuing his studies in the Punjab National College. In 1925, the **Naujawan Bharat Sabha** was formed in Lahore, and Bhagat Singh, the shy, soft-spoken lad of 18, became its general secretary. He jumped into organisational activities, travelling far and wide, contacting like-minded youths and setting up branches. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha came into existence and developed in the course of political awakening among the Indian youth during the mid-twenties. It propagated general socialist ideas, and advocated the necessity of direct militant action against imperialism. It became the recruiting ground, and also the core of the **Hindusthan Republican Army**—an organisation of Indian revolutionaries.

In September 1928, Bhagat Singh and his comrades reorganised the HRA into the **Hindusthan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA)**. This was symptomatic of the ideas they had already imbibed from the Russian Revolution, and the socialist transformation that was taking place in that vast country. It indicated the direction they had adopted and wished to follow for the political and social transformation in India itself, though they had yet to understand and accept Marxism-Leninism.

By this time, the working class movement in India had assumed wide dimensions, witnessed in the great Bombay textile strike of 1928, and in similar strikes in other parts of the country. From these actions emerged militant class organisations of workers like the Girni Kamgar Union.

Socialist ideas had not only found a fruitful soil, but were also getting intimately connected with the class organisations and struggles of the workers and other toiling masses.

These developments seriously disturbed the imperialist masters. They therefore resolved to sow constitutional illusions among a section of our people by sending the Simon Commission. At the same time they decided to intensify repression, and to strike at the rising mass movement.

The visit of the Simon Commission to India in 1928 became the signal for a new resurgence of the Freedom Movement, which had been smothered by the Congress leadership in 1922. The call went out to 'Boycott the Simon Commission'. Workers greeted the Commission with black flags, when it landed in Bombay.

On October 30, 1928, thousands of people led by the great patriot Lala Lajpat Rai turned out in Lahore and marched towards the railway station to demonstrate against the Commission. They shouted slogans like, "Simon Commission Go Back", "We Want Complete Independence", and so on. At the head of the procession were the volunteers of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. Unnerved by this mass protest, the British authorities ordered a brutal lathi charge. Among the seriously injured was Lalaji, who never flinched from his position in the front rank.

A few days later, on November 17, Lajpat Rai succumbed to his injuries. A wave of indignation, and a desire to avenge his death, swept the minds and hearts of the youth. Retribution was not late in coming. On December 17, police officer Saunders was shot dead as he emerged from his office. A leaflet broadcast by the HSRA, declared:

"We regret to have had to kill a person but he was part and parcel of that inhuman and unjust order which has to be destroyed.... Shedding of human blood grieves us, but bloodshed at the altar of revolution is unavoidable... Our

objective is to work for a revolution which would end exploitation of man by man”.

After Saunders' murder, Bhagat Singh left Lahore. The next major action had to be planned.

In March 1929, the British imperialists struck hard at the working class movement by carrying out countrywide arrest of Communist and workers' leaders. They launched the famous Meerut Conspiracy Case. This was an attempt to behead the growing working class movement, and smash its radical leadership. Simultaneously, the government sought to push through two repressive measures—the Trades Dispute Bill and the Public Safety Bill. These Bills, which were the forerunners of similar enactments that have persisted to this day, had been rejected by the Central Assembly. On April 8, 1929, the Viceroy's Proclamation enacting the two bills, in exercise of his special powers, was to be read out in the Assembly.

Precisely on that day, Bhagat Singh and his comrades decided to strike, to explode a bomb inside the Assembly, so as to register the popular disapproval of these measures. Both,—the background and the occasion, show that the choice of the time and place, was not fortuitous. It was a demonstration of their sympathy and identity with the workers' movement, and their total opposition to the draconian repression pursued against it by the imperialists.

The two bombs which Bhagat Singh and his colleague, Batukeshwar Dutt hurled, were not lethal. The spot aimed at was also deliberately chosen. It was not their intention to hurt or kill anyone, but to raise a voice of protest that would reverberate throughout the country. And true enough, no thunderbolt hurled from high above, could have caused greater commotion in the country, and consternation among the alien rulers.

As the two young men threw the bombs, they raised the slogans, "Inquilab Zindabad". "Down With British Imperialism", and "Workers of the World Unite"!

There was time and scope enough for Bhagat Singh and

B. K. Dutt to escape. But that was not part of the plan of operation. Rather, they permitted themselves to be arrested and led away. It was their intention to use the Court as a forum to expose the British rule, and address themselves to the Indian people, so as to rouse them to action.

The leaflet they rained in the Assembly premises, read in parts,

"...We see that this time again, while the people expecting some more crumbs of reforms from the Simon Commission are even quarelling over the distribution of the expected bones, the Government is thrusting upon us repressive measures like the Public Safety and Trades Disputes Bills while reserving the Press Sediton Bill for the next session. The indiscriminate arrest of labour leaders working in the open clearly indicates whither the wind blows....

"...Let the Government know that while protesting against the Public Safety and the Trades Disputes Bills and the callous murder of Lala Lajpat Rai on behalf of the helpless Indian masses, we want to emphasise the lesson often repeated by history...

"We are sorry to admit that we who attach so great a sanctity to human life, we who dream of a glorious future, when man will be enjoying perfect peace and full liberty, have been forced to shed human blood. But the sacrifice of individuals at the altar of the great revolution that will bring freedom to all, rendering the exploitation of man by man impossible, is inevitable.

"Long Live Revolution"!

A countrywide hunt of revolutionaries was launched after this bomb incident. Very soon a number of them were rounded up and put in jail.

The Lahore Conspiracy Case opened in jail on July 10, 1929. The country became witness, as it were, to two historic trials in two far-off places—the Meerut trial and the

Lahore trial. Separated from each other, and different in their details, there was nevertheless, one single objective in the two trials, as far as the imperialists were concerned. As for the political figures involved, there was a bond of sympathy and of similar aims. It was as if the two turbulent streams were moving purposefully towards a confluence,—thereafter to become one mighty river flowing home to the sea. As days passed, the further self-cultivation of the revolutionaries, many of whom landed in jail at the same time as the Meerut prisoners, broke down the low wall that divided them, on the question of tactics and a scientific materialist world-outlook. Among them all, Bhagat Singh was a stern and sober political figure, not given to utopian dreams, but engaged in a persistent quest for a rational, scientific explanation of world developments, and looking at the struggle for freedom and a new social order in India as a part of these developments. He described himself and his colleagues as, "no more than serious students of history and conditions of our country". The period of which he was a product, was one of disillusionment with the bourgeois leadership of the National Movement, and at the same time, of critical reflection, which opened the door of scientific socialism, of Marxism-Leninism, for many amongst them.

The Trial dragged on till the end of April 1930. Bhagat Singh and his comrades fully utilised the open forum of the imperialist court to expose their prosecutors, helping thereby to rouse and organise public opinion against the alien rule, just as in a different setting the great Georgi Dimitrov, utilised the fascist tribunal to turn the tables against his accusers, or Fidel Castro who told the court the prophetic words: "History Will Absolve Me"!

Imprisonment and trial was not the end of the road for revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh. They were only the beginning of a series of heroic episodes in our Freedom Movement. One has only to recall the epic hungerstrike in jail, launched with a view to assert human dignity and rights of political prisoners in the hell holes which were

the British jails After 63 soul-stirring days, the hunger strike took the toll of Jatin Das's life. Bhagat Singh's humanism, his compassion and concern for his comrades, was vividly seen at this time. He, who was so harsh and exacting in respect of everything that concerned himself, stood up in the court on September 12, and pleaded, "Could not the government release Jatin Das unconditionally to save his life? He could be rearrested when he would regain his health". Jatin's younger brother had earlier rejected the offer of the government to get his brother out on bail.

As expected. Bhagat Singh's plea went unheeded. The next day, September 13, 1929, Jatin Das expired. This shook the country to the very depths. Tens of thousands turned up along the route to have a last 'darshan' of the intrepid hero, as his body was being taken to its last destination.

Seeing that the forum of the open court was doing them no good, the cynical British authorities set up a Special Tribunal, a complete mockery of justice, to pass the verdict, which they had already decided upon. The revolutionaries naturally boycotted the farcical tribunal proceedings. On October 7, 1930, the tribunal sentenced Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukh Dev to death.

There began a country-wide agitation for commutation of the brutal sentence. The names of the three became household words. But the attitude of the bourgeois leadership was characteristically ambivalent. Gandhiji tried to get the sentence commuted, in the course of his negotiations with Viceroy Irwin, during one phase of intermission of the Civil Disobedience Movement. But as he himself said, he could not make it one of the preconditions of his Agreement with Irwin. In the event, he only wanted that the sentence should be carried out before the Karachi Congress met. And that is what happened.

On March 23, 1931, the death sentence was carried out in the early hours of the night. The cowards who ordered

the execution, were anxious to hide their dastardly action, to hurry on and be done with it. With firm tread, chanting the slogans, "Inquilab Zindabad". "Down with Imperialism", the brave three kissed the gallows and joyously bade good-bye to their countrymen. The slogans were picked up by others in the jail, and the walls echoed and re-echoed with the sound. Afraid to hand over the bodies to the people, the imperialist jackals slunked away with their booty, poured kerosene over the bodies, and threw them half-burnt into the waters of the Sutlej. The spot is consecrated by a memorial to the martyrs, who had indeed conquered Death, and well-deserved the appellation of 'Mrityunjais'. Bhagat Singh had not completed 24, when he was executed.

Soon afterwards, the Congress convened at Karachi. After this sacrifice at the altar of the Motherland, it was as if the decks had been cleared for the ratification of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact.

II

THE TWO APPROACHES: KARACHI AND MEERUT

Let the official Congress history speak for itself about this event:

"The Karachi Congress which should have met under the radiance of universal joy met really under the gloom cast by the news of the execution of the three youths, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukh Dev. The ghosts of these three departed young men were casting a shadow over the assembly. It is no exaggeration to say that at the moment Bhagat Singh's name was as widely known all over India and was as popular as Gandhi's. Gandhi, in spite of his best efforts, had not been able to get the sentence of these three youths commuted. That was not all. They who were praising Gandhi for his strenuous efforts to save their

lives began to pour forth volleys of wrath over the language to be adopted in regard to the resolution to be moved for the three martyrs. It is really a point of doubt, even at this distance of time, as to which resolution was the more arresting one at Karachi—that relating to Bhagat Singh or that relating to the ratification of the Gandhi-Irwin Agreement. The resolution relating to Bhagat Singh was taken virtually as the first on the agenda.... The point at issue on the Bhagat Singh resolution was, whether the phrase 'while dissociating itself from and disapproving of political violence in any shape or form', should be incorporated in recording the admiration of the bravery and sacrifice of himself and his comrades. We give the resolution below:

"This Congress, while dissociating itself from and disapproving of political violence in any shape or form, places on record its admiration of the bravery and sacrifice of the late Bhagat Singh and his comrades Sjts. Rajguru and Sukh Dev, and mourns with the bereaved families the loss of these lives. The Congress is of opinion that this triple execution is an act of wanton vengeance and is a deliberate flouting of the unanimous demand of the Nation for commutation. This Congress is further of opinion that Government have lost the golden opportunity of promoting goodwill between the two nations, admittedly held to be essential at this juncture, and of winning over to the method of peace the Party which, being driven to despair, resorts to political violence'.

"The reservation made by the Congress was but the minimum that Congress could have made consistently with its cult of non-violence, but it must be remarked that the phrase gave occasion for the younger section, inclined unfavourably to Gandhism, to move amendments for its omission. The Volunteers' Conference passed the resolution with the phrase omitted, and the phrase became the bone of contention subsequently at Provincial Conferences....".

At another place, hundreds of kilometres away, the

Meerut prisoners, on hearing the news of the execution, stood up in the court on March 24, 1931, and read out the following statement:

"We are attending the Court today under the grim shadow of a dastardly execution. The execution of Coms. Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukh Dev has been a cold-blooded murder—a most gruesome piece of imperialist justice—and a cowardly act of the white terror. These valiant men have been the victims of the barbarous domination of British imperialism against which they had the daring and courage to revolt.

"We honour them as martyrs to the cause of national revolution in India.

"We admire their daring and sacrifice.

"We join in the deep sorrow of their comrades, friends and relations".

The 32 Meerut prisoners came to the court determined not to allow the proceedings to continue. After the telegram was read, they started singing revolutionary songs. The court was compelled to suspend its work.

It is worth noting the two approaches. No further comment is necessary.

While the trial of Bhagat Singh and his comrades was on, and the prisoners were in the midst of their epic hunger strike, Jawaharlal Nehru spoke, feelingly and with deep anguish, at a meeting in Lahore on August 9, 1929. His words deserve to be reproduced:

"The sacrifice of these young men has roused us to a new consciousness of political life and once more made all of us yearn for the liberty of our country. We should realise the great value of the struggle that these brave young men are carrying on inside the jails. They are not struggling to get honours from the people or laurels from the crowd for this sacrifice. What a contrast this is, compared with the unfortunate wrangles among congressmen and the fighting for securing position in the Congress and the reception committee! I am ashamed to hear of these internecine differences amongst the Congressmen. But my

heart is equally delighted by witnessing the sacrifice of the young men who are determined to die for the sake of the country.... Bhagat Singh, Dutt and Das have been showing us every day by their suffering on what path we should be moving."

A year and a half later, he was assigned the onerous and painful task of moving the resolution on condolence (reproduced above), at the Karachi session in March 1931. His words on that occasion were:

"He (Bhagat Singh) was a clean fighter who faced his enemy in the open field. He was a young boy full of burning zeal for the country. He was like a spark which became a flame in a short time and spread from one end of the country to the other dispelling the prevailing darkness everywhere. Will not the execution of Bhagat Singh cause tumult in the country and hamper our work which we have resolved to carry on by peaceful means?"

"We have always rejected violent means and we shall continue to do so... We have nothing to do with their methods. Our way is not Bhagat Singh's way... Mahatma Gandhi has shown us the path of non-violence. We have progressed considerably along that path..."

The two speeches, the thoughts enshrined in them, only underline the inner conflict, the split personality that characterised Nehru, and dogged his words and deeds till the very last, due to which, in spite of the sensitiveness, the transparent sincerity and radicalness of his views, qualities which made him the idol of the masses, he never could break out of bourgeois limitations.

III

THE ROAD BHAGAT SINGH TRAVERSED

Bhagat Singh and his comrades have been described as 'revolutionaries'—'revolutionary terrosits' if you will. But what did he exactly mean by 'Revolution'—a concept

which he sanctified by the slogan, 'Inquilab Zindabad'? To answer this question, it is best to fall back on his own words. There are a number of manifestoes, leaflets, and letters, or notes in his diary, which testify to his belief. But it is enough to quote just a few, especially those which he wrote in prison, when he engaged himself in a deep ideological quest, and found the time to formulate his views.

In the very first statement before the Sessions Judge, Delhi, he wrote:

"I, Bhagat Singh, was asked in the Lower Court as to what we meant by the word 'Revolution'. In answer to that question, I would say that Revolution does not necessarily involve a sanguinary strife, nor is there any place in it for individual vendetta. It is not the cult of the bomb and the pistol. By Revolution we mean that the present order of things which is based on manifest injustice must change. The producers or the labourers, in spite of being the most necessary element of society are robbed by their exploiters of the fruits of their labour and deprived of their elementary right. On the one hand the peasant who grows corn for all starves with his family; the weaver who supplies world market with textile fabrics cannot find enough to cover his own children's bodies; the masons, smiths and carpenters who rear magnificent palaces live and perish in slums; and on the other the capitalist exploiters, the parasites of society, squander millions on their whims. These terrible inequalities, and forced disparity of changes are heading towards chaos. This state of affairs cannot last and it is obvious that the present order of society is merry-making on the brink of a volcano and the innocent children of the exploiters of no less than millions of the exploited are walking on the edge of a dangerous precipice. The whole edifice of this civilisation, if not saved in time, shall crumble. A radical change, therefore, is necessary; and it is the duty of those who realise this to reorganise society on the socialistic basis. Unless this is done and the exploitation of man by man and of na-

tions by nations which goes as Imperialism, is brought to an end, the sufferings and carnage with which humanity is threatened today cannot be prevented and all talks of ending wars and ushering in an era of universal peace is undisguised hypocrisy. By Revolution we mean the ultimate establishment of an order of society which may not be threatened by such break-down, and in which the sovereignty of the Proletariat should be recognised, and as the result of which a world federation should redeem humanity from the bondage of capitalism and the misery of imperial wars."

As his own study and self-development proceeded in jail, his thoughts further crystalised and he could succinctly explain his concept of 'Revolution' in the following message sent from prison to his comrades:

"We mean by Revolution the uprooting of the present social order. For this, capture of state power is necessary. The state apparatus is now in the hands of the privileged class. The protection of the interests of the masses, the translation of our ideal into reality that is, the laying of the foundation society in accordance with the principles of Karl Marx, demand our seizure of this apparatus".

The distance which he had travelled, and the maturity which he had attained, is further reflected in another letter, wherein he stated:

"It is my firm belief that we we will not profit by bombs and pistols. This is clear from the history of the HSRA. The throwing of bombs is not only futile but often it is harmful, although it may be permissible in certain circumstances. Our main objective should be to organise workers and kisans".

This statement clears up the fact that Bhagat Singh had not elevated 'violence' to one of the principle, to a sort of 'cult of the bomb'. His divergence from the Congress led by Gandhiji was not so much on the question of 'violence' versus 'non-violence', as on the very conception of Independence, and the tactics of the mass movement. He, who

was no bloodthirsty terrorist, who long before the Assembly bomb incident, put his signature to the Naujawan Bharat Sabha manifesto declaring that, "a revolutionary does not necessarily mean a man of bombs and revolvers," was however not repared that 'non-violence should be raised from one of tactics to a veritable cult, in the name of which the many-sided development and the breadth and sweep of the mass struggle could be curbed. Moreover, for him Independence was inseparable from the complete emancipation of the exploited mass.

His writings also show that with gathering experience and study his concept of 'revolutionary action' had also undergone a transformation. It was no longer understood as an 'action' by a few bold individuals, or a small group of dedicated heroes, but 'action' by the masses, the workers and the peasants, led according to a strategic plan, with a clear goal and ideology.

In a letter to Sukh Dev, before the two mounted the gallows. He stated,

"You and I may not live but our people will survive. The cause of Marxism and Communism is sure to win."

Faith in the people. Faith in the cause and its ultimate triumph. Commitment to Marxist ideology!—these are the sentiments expressed in the above words.

IV

IMPACT ON THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The later half of the twenties, and the beginning of the thirties were of tremendous significance for the course of our National Movement. These were the years when the goal of Complete Independence was formally adopted. They were years during which the National Movement expanded to an unprecedented extent among the toiling

masses and the latter began to increasingly assert themselves; when the Movement assumed a radical character and defined the content of Independence, though its bourgeois leadership remained firmly in the saddle.

It was in these years, that the building of socialism in the Soviet Union, following the October Revolution and the victory against imperialist intervention and in the Civil War, attracted the attention of all oppressed peoples. They saw how the former tsarist empire, which was a 'prison of nations' had been replaced by a free 'Union of Socialist Soviet Republics', welding together peoples of different nationalities, overcoming age-old hostilities. They saw how it eliminated illiteracy, unemployment and backwardness, and undertook planned development.

Breaking through the wall of imperialist slander and censorship, socialist literature, the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin found their way among our intellectuals. They were avidly read, published and circulated. They lighted the path in the struggle against imperialism and for radical social transformation. The ideology of scientific socialism took root in our soil. The Communist Party of India was founded.

In this very period, the working class movement spread in dimensions and took on a militant character. Prolonged and bitterly fought strikes broke out in many important centres and in major industries. Tens of thousands of workers went through the school of class struggle. The ground was prepared for the emergence of mass organisations of peasants, students, and other sections.

Disillusioned with the national leadership, revolutionary groups sprang up among the youth, which preached the necessity of direct action against imperialism, and showed marvels of heroism and sacrifice in undertaking such actions. Such daring examples as the Kakori and the Assembly Bomb incidents, the Chittagong Armoury Raid, and similar other actions, and the subsequent trials electrified all sections of the people.

The workers' and peasants' organisations, as also the revolutionary groups repudiated the demand for 'dominion status' and called for 'Complete Independence'. Typical of this was the massive march of workers and peasants to the venue of the Congress Session in Calcutta, demanding that the Congress should call for 'Complete Independence'.

The impact of all these factors on the political scene brought about a qualitative change in mass consciousness. The transition from 'Bande Mataram' to 'Inquilab Zindabad', as the dominant and central slogan of the National Movement, itself marked a significant advance. It invested the national struggle with a deeper content. It signified that the struggle for national liberation was not to be a mere change of masters, a change over from alien to native exploiters but the end of all exploitation, and advance towards a socialist future. It found appropriate expression for that time, in the "Declaration of Rights" adopted at the Karachi Congress.

Who can deny that the activities of the emerging Left in Indian politics—the working class movement, the growth of socialist ideas and forces, the birth of the Communist Party, the widespread actions of revolutionaries in different parts of India, influenced the Indian National Congress to change its objective of 'dominion status' to 'Complete Independence'? Is it only coincidental, that it was the Lahore Session of the Congress in December, 1929, which adopted this goal? The interaction of the various trends in the National Movement was reflected within the INC, which had emerged as the broad national platform of our liberation struggle.

We have mentioned only a few of these factors, for the benefit of those who are today arrogantly claiming that the Congress *alone* fought for Freedom and brought it to our country, and who do not hesitate to distort history, by only selectively presenting facts from our past, to prove their thesis. Proceeding from this, their aim of course is to arrogate to themselves the sole right to continue their rule

over the country. Let those among them who are humble enough, ponder over these and many other episodes of our long and eventful struggle for freedom, and render unto each, what is its due! Should they do so, the contribution of each will find its proper recognition, and our Movement itself will appear as a powerful amalgam of several elements, rather than a single element.

We shall close this brief section, by pointing to the present validity of the statement written by Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdeo, a few days before their execution,

“India’s struggle shall continue as long as a handful of men in power continue to exploit the labour of the common people for their own ends. Whether the exploiters are Indian or British, or both in alliance, nothing shall halt the struggle.”

V.

“MEETING” WITH LENIN

As Bhagat Singh rapidly advanced along his path of self-cultivation and reflected over world developments and the future of his enslaved countrymen, there grew in him a deep and abiding love for the great leader of the World Revolution, Com. Lenin. He ardently wished to “meet” and “get acquainted” with that revolutionary genius. But they were born in different times. Therefore the only way was to read and study Lenin, to imbibe his thoughts. He looked out for information about books by Lenin and on Lenin, and the moment he heard about any, he would request his friends outside to procure a copy for him. Every letter from jail contained a list of books, and an urgent request that they be supplied. It is on record, that in this way, he procured and read Marx’s ‘Capital’ Vol. 1, ‘Civil War in France’, the ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’, Engel’s ‘Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany’, Lenin’s ‘Proletarian Revolution and Kautsky

the Renegade', 'Left Wing Communism', the 'Collapse of the II International', John Reed's 'Ten days that shook the World', and perhaps also "State and Revolution", among others.

His emotional and ideological attachment to the Russian Revolution and its leader Lenin was vividly demonstrated, when on the anniversary of Lenin's death,—January 21, 1930, Bhagat Singh and his comrades marched into the court with red scarves round their necks, raising the slogans: "Long Live the Socialist Revolution", "Long Live the Communist International", "Lenin is Immortal", "Down with Imperialism".

Bhagat Singh then read and handed over to the Court a telegram to be sent to the Communist International. The text of the telegram said,

"On Lenin Day, we send hearty greetings to all who are doing something for carrying forward the ideas of great Lenin. We wish success to the great experiment Russia is carrying out. We join our voice to that of the international working-class movement. Proletariat will win, capitalism will be defeated. Down with Imperialism".

One of the last wish that he expressed, while the date of execution drew near, was, "I am reading Lenin's biography. I want to complete it".

It is said, that as the hour of that fateful night on 23rd March advanced, and the jailor came to summon Bhagat Singh, he found him absorbed in reading Lenin's book, delivered only a few hours before by a friend. Intent on the page, Bhagat Singh held up his hand, and told the officer: "Wait! A revolutionary is meeting a revolutionary".

Shortly after, he stood up and said, "Let us go"!

In her book, "Yugdrashtra Bhagat Singh", his niece Virendra Sindhu, observes, "He was eager to meet him (Lenin) before his death, and for him the reading of Lenin's biography meant a meeting with Lenin". She then goes on to remark: "And who was closer to Bhagat Singh than Lenin?"

VI.

MATURING INTO A 'MARXIST'

The man of action, Bhagat Singh, was at the same time a man, who knew the need for, and therefore engaged himself in, deep study. He himself wrote in his pamphlet, "Why I am an Atheist", "'Study' was the cry that reverberated in the corridors of my mind. Study to enable yourself to face the arguments advanced by opposition. Study to arm yourself with arguments in favour of your cult. I began to study. My previous faith and convictions underwent a remarkable modification..."

And it is to study and self-cultivation, that Bhagat Singh devoted most of his time in prison, even while facing a soul-testing trial, going through a gruelling hunger strike and innumerable other struggles besides, which is the lot of all political prisoners. It was as if he was engaged in a race with Death, which he knew would very soon overtake him. It was as if he was feverishly making up for the years that would be denied to him. It never occurred to him to say, "What is the use of it all. Is not death imminent?"

The breadth and scope of his study embraced classical Marxist literature, books on politics, economics, biography, progressive fiction, poetry and so on. And as he devoured each book that he could lay his hands on, he wrote to his friends outside, for more. Thus, in a letter to Shri Jai Dev Prasad Gupta, on 24-7-30, he writes,

Please get the following books issued for me from the Dwarka Das Library and send them with Kulbir on Saturday:

- (1) Militarism
- (2) Why Men Fight
- (3) Soviets at Work
- (4) Collapse of IInd International
- (5) Left Wing Communism
- (6) Mutual Aid

- (7) Fields, Factories and Workshops
- (8) Civil War in France
- (9) Land Revolution in Russia, and
'Spy' by Upton Sinclair

Also please see if you can get me the book "Theory of Historical Materialism" by Bukharin from the Punjab Public Library, and please enquire from the librarian if any books have been sent to the Borstal Jail people....." Earlier, in another letter, he had asked him to "arrange to send one Persian Primer with Urdu translation". As we see, he not only asked for books for himself, but also for other colleagues in different jails. He was keen that they should study.

The names of all the authors and the titles of books, which he managed to acquaint himself with, read like a bibliography. They include Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kropotkin, Rousseau, Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Dostoevsky, Gorky, Victor Hugo, Dickens, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Upton Sinclair, Byron, Whitman, Wordsworth, and also Omar Khayyam, among others—too numerous to be listed. It is really amazing that he could compress so much study, within such a short period of time and in such incredibly difficult circumstances. After all, he never could complete 24 years. Not one in a million will be called upon to go through a similar experience, or even anything approaching it, but everyone among the youth, can surely display the same avid interest in study, in self-cultivation, in a neverending ideological quest.

Evidently Bhagat Singh fully appreciated that for true self-cultivation, it is not enough to study only one narrow branch of knowledge, but it is necessary to delve into wider spheres. Only that can ensure the all-round development of a truly cultured personality. It is this that accounts for his wide interest in books on different subjects.

In what direction did Bhagat Singh's "faith and conviction undergo a remarkable modification", as a result of

"study"? As we know, it was in the direction of becoming a "Marxist". What was it that he grasped from the works of Marx and Lenin, and other books on socialism? One does not have to speculate on that, for the evidence is clearly spelt out in the extracts that he took down in this diary. We can mention a few:

After a study of Marx's and Lenin's works, he noted in his diary, that no revolution was possible without the organisation of the proletariat, led by its vanguard party. He also took note of the proposition that the proletarian vanguard had to win over the majority of the toiling masses and overcome the influence of bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideas of class collaboration in their minds.

Earlier, he had put down the following:

"The question is not whether the present civilisation should be changed, but one of how it will be changed".

Studying Lenin's thesis on the state, he wrote in his diary, "Democracy under capitalism was not a universal abstract democracy but a specifically bourgeois one, or, as Lenin had called it, a democracy for the bourgeoisie..... Democracy is theoretically a system of political and legal equality. But in concrete and practical operation it is false, for there can be no equality, not even in politics and before the law, so long as there is glaring inequality in economic power....In a capitalist regime the whole machinery of democracy operates to keep the ruling class minority in power through the suffrage of the working class majority...."

In the diary, he goes ahead, making copious extracts from the "Manifesto of the Communist Party", "Revolution and Counter-revolution", on such questions as, the art of insurrection, the proletariat's struggle for becoming the ruling class, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. He puts down the socialist principle: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs", and so on.

His philosophical evolution as a materialist, as a rational, scientific thinker, is summed up in the essay that he wrote: "Why I am an atheist". Unlike the early revolutionaries,

who drew spiritual strength from God and religion. Bhagat Singh relied upon a scientific, materialist outlook. He admitted that, "In God man can find very strong consolation and support. The idea of God is helpful to man in distress", whereas, "to stand upon one's own legs amidst storms and hurricanes is not a child's play". While writing an introduction to a book by another revolutionary colleague whose views were deeply tinged by religion, Bhagat Singh observed, "His interpretation of the universe is theological and metaphysical; while I am a materialist and my interpretation of the phenomenon would be causal".

In declaring himself an atheist, he observed,

"I know in the present circumstances my faith in God would have made my life easier, my burden lighter and my disbelief in Him has turned all the circumstances too dry and the situation may assume too harsh a shape. A little bit of mysticism can make it political. But I do not want the help of any intoxication to meet my fate. I am a realist. I have been trying to overpower the instinct in me by the help of reason...."

Bhagat Singh pointed out that, "Criticism and independent thinking are the two indispensable qualities of a revolutionary", and concluded his essay with the declaration that he was "trying to stand like a man with an erect head to the last; even on the gallows".

History is witness to the fact, that, that is precisely how he embraced death on the gallows!

It is significant that in his diary, he took down that particular excerpt from Marx's writing, which showed that he had grasped the essence of the Marxist view on religion, viz. the following:

"Man makes religion, religion does not make man... Man is the work of man. the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an inverted world-consciousness, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of the world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form... The struggle against

religion is therefore indirectly a fight against the world of which religion is the spiritual aroma... It is the opium of the people”.

From all these, it is more than evident that Bhagat Singh was steadfastly evolving from a 'revolutionary terrorist' to a 'Marxist'. Fate did not provide him with the opportunity to demonstrate his maturing into a Marxist-Leninist. But the course along which he had set his ship of life would assuredly have brought him into the Communist Movement, as it did to most of his colleagues, had not his life been cut short in its prime by the British hangman's noose.

Though each one of them had to undergo the individual transformation from revolutionary terrorism to communism, based on his own study and experience, yet it can be said, that it was considerably due to Bhagat Singh's influence and persuasion, that almost all his colleagues, who did not have to share his fate on the gallows, turned to Marxism-Leninism, set up the 'Communist Consolidation' while still in the Andamans, and later on, found themselves in the ranks of the Communist Party. The seed had grown into a tree, and blossomed forth. Among Bhagat Singh's outstanding colleagues, Ajoy Ghosh was later on to become the general secretary of the CPI for more than a decade, till his untimely death in 1962.

THE PRICE OF LIFE

“सरफरोशी की तमन्ना आज हमारे दिल में है।
देखना है जोर कितना बाजू-ए-कातिल में है।”

(Ramprasad 'Bismil')

“And when thy sons to fetters are consigned—
To fetters, and the damp vault's dayless gloom,
Their country conquers with their martyrdom,
And freedom's fame finds wings on every wind”.

(Byron)

Only he can lay claim to immortality, who is willing cheerfully to give up his mortal existence for his people, for a noble cause. Bhagat Singh appeared eager to face death, because by that he thought, he would serve his country and the cause of revolution best. He was convinced that only his supreme sacrifice, would call forth the national awakening and stir the people to action. Therefore he was anxious not to be bulked of the honour of offering his life at the altar of the country. Yet, he was boundlessly in love with life. That is precisely why he was prepared to pay the highest price.

In a letter written to his younger brother, he, in a way, addresses a message to all people,

“Dear friends, the days of life have come to an end. Like the flame of a candle in the morning, I disappear before the light of the dawn. Our faith and our ideas will illumine the whole world like a flash of lightning. What harm if this handful of dust is destroyed?”

His friend B. K. Sinha recalls an incident which took place only a week before the Assembly Bomb incident. The two were watching a group of young boys and girls playing happily in a park, and Bhagat Singh pensively remarked, “What a tragedy, that we young men who are so conscious of the beautiful things of individual human life have, under an unjust social system today, to choose to die than to live”.

After the sentence of death was pronounced by the Tribunal, his friends and relatives wished to move a petition, so as to get the sentence commuted. But Bhagat Singh was indifferent and unmoved. His father, without the knowledge and consent of his son, had submitted a petition to the Tribunal (which the accused had already boycotted), seeking permission to prove that Bhagat Singh was not in Lahore on the day Saunders was killed. The news very much upset Bhagat Singh. With every sign of filial respect, but in pained and dignified tone, he firmly

pulled up the heavy-hearted man, trying hard to save his son from the gallows. Among other things he wrote,

"My life is not so precious—at least to me—as you may probably think it to be. It is not at all worth buying at the cost of my principles".

Since the father's letter was a matter of open knowledge, Bhagat Singh requested that his letter should also be published, so that the simple dignity of his sacrifice should not be sullied by subterfuges or appeals for clemency. Had he not noted in his diary, the following quotation from Patrick Henry, an 18th Century American politician?

"Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery. Forbid it, almighty God!"

VIII

37 years after freedom, we find ourselves at the crossroads. Our country has made great advances. The voice of Free India, a country of 700 millions, counts in international forum. As one of the initiators, and currently the head of the Non-Aligned Movement, India is helping to safeguard peace, uphold the rights and sovereignty of all peoples, and thwart imperialist aggressive designs. It has developed its national economy, with the public sector as a major element. Democratic institutions have taken root among our people, who are conscious of their rights and liberties.

But the path of capitalist development pursued has inevitably brought the country to a state of acute and chronic crisis. Unemployment, rising prices, inflation, widening disparities, and all the other accompaniments of capitalist development, have assumed diabolical proportions. More and more, the bourgeois ruling circles are trying to shift the burden of crisis on the shoulders of the toiling people. This naturally goes along with repressive measures in order to curb and contain the rising popular discontent.

Not only in the economic sphere, but also in other spheres, the crisis of bourgeois rule is seen in growing political instability, factional squabbles for seats of power within the ruling party, and authoritarian trends. The cancer of corruption is corroding all levels of administration, and eroding moral values. Money power and muscle power are playing an increasing role in elections and in general political activity.

Divisive forces are raising their ugly heads, threatening the very unity and integrity of the country. Imperialism and internal reaction are exploiting the situation. The security of the country is in danger.

Welcome signs are the coming together of the left and democratic forces, and the united and joint actions of the working class and other sections of the masses.

Should the youth sit back and allow frustration and cynicism to overwhelm them, or should the revolutionary youth along with other progressive forces roll back all the dark forces of reaction, strike hard at the capitalist system which is at the root of the crisis, and thus open the road for new advance?

In undertaking this task, let the life and deeds of Bhagat Singh, the road which he pointed out, inspire our youth and urge them forward to intensified revolutionary activity.

Revolutionary elan, high ideals born out of a scientific world-outlook, humanism, deep love for the country and its long-suffering people, firmness in matters of principle and willingness for sacrifice when the occasion so demands, a driving urge for study and self-cultivation, these are the ingredients of which Bhagat Singh was made. To imbibe all these qualities is not easy, but one can certainly strive in that direction.

The challenge of the times, enjoins upon the youth, and all of us, to uphold the high ideals which Bhagat Singh cherished.

It enjoins upon us, the need for study and self-cultivation, such as **Bhagat Singh** undertook, unto the last.

It enjoins upon us, the marshalling of revolutionary energy, such as **Bhagat Singh** possessed.

It enjoins upon us, the readiness to sacrifice, such as **Bhagat Singh** displayed.

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