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Rebel Bhagat Singh: In the Eyes of British Raj

Abstract

Paper sets out to expose the original face of British Raj which was revealed by revolutionaries and their own policies. Proposed study shows the utility of violence which becomes a key figure against colonialism and oppressive Laws. Subsequently bringing into focus the compelling role of young Sardar Bhagat Singh Sandhu that became the symbol of nationalism and anti-British sentiments. Paper raises a few questions such as; if British policies were satisfactory then why were there uprising and uncontrolled agitations and aggressiveness against Raj? Why did Bhagat turn to revolt and violence? What mistakes were done by the British in the Bhagat case? Available sources bring north-Indian freedom appendage under the spotlight. Paper depicts the confrontation between oppressed and oppressor. British repressive attempts led to Punjab's anarchical behaviors, agitations, rebellions, riots, judicial injustices and executions.

Keywords: Rational Laws, Extremism, Revolutionaries, Movements, Transparency of trial, Violations, Suppression, Fearful horrendous circumstances, Tumult agitation

Abbreviations/Acronyms:

PALA (Punjab Alienation Land Act), WW1 (World War 1), KKP (Kirti Kisan Party), NC (National College), PCB (Punjab Colonization Bill), LA (Legislative Assembly). NJBS (Naujawan Bharat Sabha), HSRA (Hindustan Socialist Republican Association), HRA (Hindustan Republican Association), CID (Criminal Investigation Department), KCC (Kakori Conspiracy Case), PSB (Public Safety Bill), TDB (Trade Dispute Bill), LCC (Lahore Conspiracy Case), CLA (Central Legislative Assembly), M. A. Jinnah (Muhammad Ali Jinnah)

Introduction

“Next to the battlefields, it is in the court-room that some of the greatest acts of injustice of the history of the world would have been taken place”¹

History witnessed the list of dreadful injustices of the courts of law such as; Jesus Christ, Socrates, great Florentine martyr, Galileo, Rome, Middle Ages is long one and ‘Bhagat Singh* Case’ is the same elegy of them. On the contrary, the politics and people of colonial Punjab didn't accept Gandhi's mode of non-

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violation and *Satyagraha* nor the slogans of communism which were raised by several [pre-partition] Punjab political groups.²

The British portrayed Bhagat as an extremist and criminal and formally called him anarchist but there is a difference between extremist and revolutionary. Extremists always have a negative and harmful image while a revolutionary means a paragon of innovative, energetic and positive thoughts which are established on high principles for a noble cause. So Bhagat was a revolutionary paragon because ‘his hanging further galvanized a radical and militant nationalist politics that was already in a state of ferment from the mid-1920s onwards’.³

He was the son of a revolutionary family and born in a time of resistance. His father Kishan Singh was a Congress worker and uncle Ajit Singh was a peasant organizer and founder of ‘*Bharat Mata Society*’.⁴ Being a son of a politically active family, “Bhagat’s entry into the sphere of anti-colonial politics should be understood.”⁵ Kishan Singh was already confronting with colonial regime⁶ and being an active Congress worker spent his time in jail.⁷ A revolutionary like Bhagat on the political landscape, during the most crucial years of colonial Punjab, strengthened the anti-colonial front.

The story of British occupation on Punjab actually begun from 1849⁸ when the British annexed Punjab and planned to design modern Punjab boundaries which was an acceptable demarcation for everyone. Punjab was the last Indian territory to be annexed by the British in 1849.⁹ Punjab had obtained the most crucial strategic importance for *Raj* to control the waters of the rivers of Punjab and its topographic and demographic patterns. Punjab was also providing the manpower for the British Indian army.¹⁰

Sikhs and British both were irresistibly urged forward ways to their diverse ends: Sikhs as the leaders of congenial mental change while British as the promoters of rational laws and material wealth and power.¹¹ Sikhs had the seal of Brahma and Muslims. Due to fresh conversion to a new religion, grabbing profound teachings of *Guru Nanak* (Prophet of Sikhism) and active and living principles of Sikhism, Sikhs deserved the British attention both as a genteel nation and as a paramount of government.¹²

British ungenerous and unjust treatment with the inhabitants carved the irremovable impacts on the vision of Punjab people which led to the partition of *Hindustan*. Although British policies were reclassified the society but Punjab was not justly treated and compensated as per other provinces. British selfishness and interest was involved in every reform and policy. Punjab was a non-Regulation province; this only meant that the Regulations passed before 1833 were not applicable here.¹³ In 1857 few Muslims of Punjab wanted to set up a political association but [Sir] Sayyad Ahmad Khan* was opposed to it.¹⁴ The 1857 revolt was the most dramatic example of India’s struggle against British rule but it was not a sudden occurrence.¹⁵ Other parts of the country were also rising revolts: Cawnpore, Lucknow, Banaras, Allahabad, Bareilly, Jhansi etc. These revolts and rebellions were highly marked by anti-British feelings. For instance, in Bihar Kunwar Singh played a pivotal role to nurse a grudge against the British. In Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai was the most outstanding leader of Sepoys’ mutiny who led the revolt.¹⁶

Canonic Reasons of Uprising and Fermentation of Punjab

“Punjab Alienation Land Act-1900” (PALA-1900) was designed to end the agitation of rural areas and was given peasantry class a relief from the economics exploitation, famines and epidemics.¹⁷ But among many controversial Laws associated to Sir William Hutt Curzon Wylie’s** viceroyalty (1899-1905), this Act was also one of those.¹⁸ PALA-1900 was a powerful instrument of social engineering.¹⁹ This Bill was not acceptable for political leaders and the Punjab press because this Bill was the cancellation of Zamindars’ right to sell their lands but, in spite of all opposition, the Bill became Law.²⁰ “In 1907, agitation against water rates led by urban leaders Lala Lajpat Rai*** and Ajit Singh.”²¹ “The agitation against the discriminatory clauses of PALA-1900 continued onwards until 1907.”²² Punjabi Hindus were also criticizing and blaming the Congress because it was flunked to speak for their interests.²³

‘*Swadeshi* Movement’ was started in 1903 and had its genesis against the decision of the partition of Bengal and colonialism. Its proposals were quickly accepted by the public but beside widespread protest and agitation, the British however remained unmoved.²⁴ Ajit and Lala Lajpat succeeded in spreading the messages of the *Swadeshi* Movement to India and other parts of Northern India.²⁵ “In Punjab, *Swadeshi* lead was given by *Arya Samaj*, vernacular press, and local influential men at various levels.²⁶ *Swadeshi* spread rapidly within an incredibly short period. This movement also created unrest in Punjab and this unrest linked to the termination of Curzon’s viceroyalty. Curzon was always criticized for his administrative measures in Punjab because he had embittered the educated class from all across the country.”²⁷

“Total population of Punjab in 1901 was 26,842,611.”²⁸ Agricultural lands had become a great source of power and honor for Punjab because technical skills were scarcely generated at that time. In fact land of five rivers possibly kept deprived from all powers which they were owners of.

In 1907, when Punjab peasantry class was at its havoc because ‘Punjab Colonization Bill’ and ‘Punjab Alienation Amendment Bill’ had already started fermentation and unrest in Punjab. Bills generated a political discontent in Punjab and bounced like a rolling stone. Ajit Singh was considered the most dangerous and seditious by the British because he was strongly opposed to this Bill.²⁹ “His speeches at Lyallpur and Rawalpindi, delivered in March/April 1907, were considered dangerous by authorities.”³⁰ Due to these hateful speeches in which he incited to murder and agitation against Bills, in 1907, he was deported to Mandalay.³¹

Due to active participation in the freedom movement, Bhagat’s uncle and father faced prison and exile. In the rebellious atmosphere and crucial juncture of the history of Punjab, various strands of the freedom movement were expressed in different ways: particularly a popular lyrical song ‘*Pagri Sambhal O Jatta*’ (“Take Care of Your Turban, O Jat”) by Lala Bankay Dayal* gained massive popularity³² and helped tremendously to spread awareness. After the 50 years of the ‘War of Independence’, Minto confessed that ‘Punjab Colonization Bill’ and plague epidemics were the root cause of this unrest.³³ Resistance brought its colors and the British had to withdraw the increase of water rates and Colonization Bill both.³⁴ This was evidence of Punjabis’ success.

Punjab's agitation and anarchical circumstances were the outcome of British injustices and slow constitutional reforms. An uttermost wave of sedition had started ebbing and flowing from this year. The political unrest in 1907 was partly due to the activities of *Arya Samaj*, *Singh Sabha* and *Ahmadiyya* sect and partly due to the economic conditions prevailing in Punjab.³⁵

'*Singh Sabha*' movement formed in 1873 by Guru Singh Sabha and it stirred up the people till early 20th century. It was one of the most powerful and active organizations who had a vital influence in the awakening of Sikh community. "Due to the efforts of *Singh Sabha* the translation of *Adi Granth* was made by Max Arthur Macauliffe in 1909."³⁶

28 September 1907 was the birth year of Bhagat, [at Lyallpur**] town 105 R.B, named *Bunga*. His grandmother, Jaykaur, graciously called him '*Bhaga'n Aala*'. Bhagat was born in extremely unfavorable circumstances. Once Mehta Anand Kishore* saw [about] four years old Bhagat who was sowing seeds in his field and asked him,

"What are you doing?" Bhagat replied, "I'm sowing the seeds of Gun so that I could be able to free my country from the apprehension of the British".³⁷

In 1916, at the age of nine, Bhagat moved to Lahore to attend *Arya Samaj-run Dayanand Anglo Vedic School* (DAV) and started earning his early education and stayed there until his execution till 1931 at Lahore central jail.³⁸ During the period of 1921 to 1924, Bhagat was also associated with *Tilak School*.³⁹ This *Tilak School* had a brawny historical setting. In August 1920, on returning to Hindustan, Lala Lajpat established a school of politics on the line of New York based Rand School. But due to Lajpat's best friend and a Congressman B.G. After *Tilak's* death, it was renamed as *Tilak School*.⁴⁰ After completing his 9th standard he was admitted to the National College (NC) directly. At the age of sixteen he passed his intermediate examination and started to prepare for his graduation exams.⁴¹ "*Tilak School's* impact on the politics in Punjab was intense but short-lived."⁴²

Heat and Height of Resistance

Although "the British had been involved in this region since 1830s",⁴³ when the idea of the 'Great Game' was about to set in, the first decade of 20th c. proved the height of revolutionaries' resistance. The 1st World War (WW1 1914-1918) and the Bolshevik Revolution (1917-1923) against the Russian monarch had a profound impact on the Indian revolutionary movements abroad.⁴⁴ Due to the stage of WW1 and Bolshevik Revolution, the region became more cardinal for imperialistic mind set.⁴⁵ Stormy ripples of Russian Bolshevik Revolution had already touched the Punjab. "With the combined threat of Pan-Islamism and Bolshevik, the British were facing a severe crisis on its western frontiers."⁴⁶

Ghadar was an international political movement launched in America in 1913 by the expatriate Indians to overthrow British rule. These revolutionaries and rebels scattered across the western sea boards of Canada and the United States.⁴⁷ When WW1 broke out, new hopes were awakened for the nationalists which had been dormant since the judicious days of *Swadeshi* movement. North American based *Ghadar* revolutionaries began a violent overthrow of British throne⁴⁸ under the leadership of *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna*. Lala Har Dayal Rai Mathur* was the leading force behind *Ghadar*.⁴⁹ Bhagat's father gave the donation of one thousand

to *Ghadar*.⁵⁰ “The party had been formed by Indians, especially Punjabis, laborers, intellectuals, and students who were settled across the sea boards of Canada and the United States. Fundamentally *Ghadar* launched at San Francisco and proved the mortal enemy of British rule.”⁵¹ The British believed by the recent seen that masses had become more critical and agitated for their rule so they adopted all suppressive measures for revolutionaries even for their friends and sympathizers because this is the only way to save British rule.⁵² This growing failure was not only confined to punish them through prisons and courts but also to weaken them financially and deprive them of all fundamental sources.⁵³ The best example of destructive justice and liberty was ‘a popular slogan of ‘No appeal, No *Vakil*, No *Dalil*’, that was an appropriate description of the whole situation.”⁵⁴

British *Raj* was also setback a huge example of their ruthless rule on 13 April, 1919, by the hands of notorious Governor-General of Punjab Michael O’Dwyer* when unarmed and innocent people were gathered in a meeting in *Jillianwala Bagh*.⁵⁵ It was called a ‘Bloody *Baisakhi Day*’. 1650 rounds were mercilessly fired, 350 lost their lives and 1200 were badly injured.⁵⁶

In the mid-1927, when colonial Punjab was stepping into the fragile atmosphere with the formation of ‘*Kirti Kisan Party*’ (KKP), sixty-five extremist Sikhs started to intent on forming a communist group in Punjab. That time Punjab was echoing the sounds of Marx’s manifesto and in the grip of communists.⁵⁷ KKP was founded at that time when uncertainty, discontent and agitation was at its peak.⁵⁸ “KKP styled itself as an ‘all India’ organization.”⁵⁹ This party had a deep-rooted presence in rural areas of central Punjab including districts of Amritsar, Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, Lyallpur and Lahore.⁶⁰

Sikhs who were the challenge to the provincial government since 1849, ‘*Akali Dal*’, which formed during 1920-25, was the height of resistance.⁶¹ *Akali* Movement developed on religious issues and safeguards of Sikhs’ interests because the basic aim of this movement was to free the *Gurdwaras* from the control of ignorant *Mahants* (priests).⁶² The British gave full weaponry support to *Mahants*.⁶³ On 20 February 1920, When *Akali jathas* entered *Gurdwaras* to pray⁶⁴ Corrupt *Mahant*’s men were brutally attacked on *Nankana Sahib Gurdawara* with the collaboration of the British government and assassinated 150 devoted Sikhs. Going through the brutal circumstances of the British *Raj*, *Akali* movement reached its peak and secured a full strength of resistance. In 1922, the districts of Lyallpur, Ludhiana, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Sheikupura and Hoshiarpur supplied a bulk of recruits.⁶⁵ *Akali Jathedar* Kishan Singh was the person who promoted the Babbar *Akali* movement. *Babbar Akali Dal* (force) was raised during 1914-15 to continue the aim of revolutionaries and to take revenge on Akalis.⁶⁶ Government had already planned to crush these *Akalis* by governmental machinery.⁶⁷ Bhagat was shocked by this act of terrorism⁶⁸ and was immensely disturbed by the *Jallianwala Bagh* Massacre and *Khilafat* Movement. These incidents proved a setback for him and inclined him strongly towards rebellion. “The abrupt end of the non-cooperation movement in 1922 after the *Chaura Chauri* incident had left Indian nationalists and political radicals in a state of disarray. Those years were often viewed as in time in the wilderness for mainstream nationalist politics.”⁶⁹ In NC, Bhagat met his life-time political comrades Sukhdev, Chandra Shekhar and

Jatinder Das. Jaichandra Vidyalkanker* It was noted that ‘Bhagat and Sukhdev had an immense love for each other’.⁷⁰

Bhagat was already criticized for being the ‘nephew of notorious Ajit Singh’. “Another significant British rival *Naujawan Bharat Sabha* (NJBS) (Indian Young Men’s Association), was founded in 1926”.⁷¹ Like his uncle, Bhagat had also several connections with leftists youth movement NJBS⁷² because NJBS emerged from student society.⁷³ NJBS was an organization composed of student and faculty members, many of whom go on to feed radical political movements in Punjab.⁷⁴ In 1922, after the ‘*Chaura Chauri*’ incident, when Gandhi unexpectedly called off the *Satyagraha*, Bhagat became even more aggressive in support of the freedom movement. Due to all these flooded revolts, movements, pressure, and riots how could it be possible that the British wouldn’t be perturbed? But the question lies here that how did the government react to the growth of political consciousness. So repressive measures adopted by British authorities to control the situation may be listed as prohibitions on papers, pamphlets, books, circulars, public meetings, banning literature and most importantly prosecution on the press. As Dorothy Norman stated in her account *Nehru: The First Sixty Years* (1965)*:

“So the Government indulged in repression and sent the people to prison and curbed the newspapers and let loose a crowd of secret policemen and the spies to the shadow they did not like.”

Bhagat was extremely attached to Kartar Singh Sarabha, who was an illustrious and impatient activist *Ghadarite*, arrested in a conspiracy case in 1929⁷⁵ and later executed at the age of 19 by authorities.⁷⁶ As a mark of devotion he always used to keep Sarabha’s photo in his pocket.⁷⁷ Deeply perturbed by Sarabha’s execution, Bhagat decided to follow in his footsteps. Interesting similarities between both: Bhagat would be charged the same as Sarabha, both sentenced to death and both were very young.⁷⁸

Bhagat’s revolutionary life lasted for only eight brief years; however, it could be easily compared to the life of Nikolay Alexandrovich Dobrolyubov**.⁷⁹ Bhagat was highly impressed by the works and thoughts of Karl Marx, Trotsky and Lenin. That’s why he chose the way of socialism.⁸⁰ Bhagat was mostly compared to guerilla leader Chi Guevara* because both were involved in a similar endeavor even Bhagat’s life was shorter than Guevara.⁸¹

‘Hindustan Socialist Republican Association’ (HSRA) emerged in North India in the late 1920s, a time when Congress organization was dormant.⁸² To establish a Federated Republic of United States in India by an organized and armed revolution, ‘Hindustan Republican Association [Army](HRA)’ was formed in 1923.⁸³ “The NJBS was an affiliated body of HSRA and Bhagat had become its prominent member. His life epitomized the political journey of many disaffected youths who took to revolutionary and militant activism.”⁸⁴ Bhagat and his comrades formed NJBS to take up the unfulfilled missions of HRA. Ram Krishan was its president: Bhagat, its Secretary.⁸⁵

NJBS organization mainly established for anti-communalism and Lala Lajpat and Dr. Satyapal** contributed to its formation. Bhagat emerged as tremendously charismatic.⁸⁶ Unlike Congress, NJBS had a clear target and

ideology and had a focus on secularism and socialism.⁸⁷ “Bhagat was counted as both a member of *Kirti* group and NJBS.”⁸⁸

To uncover the barbarous face of *Raj* he wrote various articles in the magazines ‘*Kirti*’ [an organ of KKP] and ‘*Partab*’ (Urdu/Gurmukhi Magazines) with his pseudonym such as ‘*Vidrohi*’ (rebel), ‘*Agyat*’ (unknown), and ‘*Sainik*’ (soldier).⁸⁹ According to Chhabil Das Ram* ‘He was unable to see any moment that Bhagat didn’t have any book in his hand’. Novels ‘*Cry for Justice*’, ‘*God and the State*’ and ‘*My Fight for Irish Freedom*’ were his favorite books to read.⁹⁰ In 1926, Bhagat had also suspected his connection with HRA by the Criminal Intelligence Department (CID). In 1927, he was accused of being involved in violation of a bombing on a crowd celebrating ‘*Dussehra Festival*’ and arrested for the first time.⁹¹ CID tried to connect these suspects to the Kakori Conspiracy Case (KCC). But they released them after a five week investigation because CID couldn’t prove anything on him. He continued his organizational activities forming HSRA.⁹² He visited many cities including Lyallpur, Lahore, Ferozepur, Mianwali, Calcutta, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Delhi, Cawnpore, Agra, Allahabad, Patna, Saharanpur, Gwalior, Aligarh, Jhansi, [but the list is still incomplete].⁹³

His initial and sensational action took place in November 1928. Non-violent protests had started against the arrival of the Simon Commission in Lahore, on 7 November. A Senior Superintendent J.A. Scott had ordered John Saunders a *lathi*-charge on the mob. Due to this *lathi*-charge Lala Lajpat gravely injured and passed away after one month. Bhagat and his revolutionary companions, Rajguru and Sukhdev began to plot to avenge Lala ji’s death.⁹⁴ HSRA had marked Lajpat’s death as symptomatic of institutional cruelty and absolute antagonism.⁹⁵ On 17 December 1928, Bhagat and Rajguru fatally assassinated a high profile Assistant Superintendent Police officer John Saunders in Lahore, with a revolver after which Bhagat escaped to Lahore but didn’t relent in their political acts. The announcement of HSRA that they had retaliated against this killing only provoked a revolt. Their words ‘Saunders is dead, Lajpat has been avenged’ had proven their revolt. Bhagat hid himself in Cawnpore for a long period.⁹⁶ HSRA dispersed; Bhagat disguised and boarded a train for Calcutta.⁹⁷ HSRA had reorganized to set up a bomb factory, which plotted to target: first Simon Commission and second bombing on Legislative Assembly (LA). The Lahore police started a massive crackdown on NJBS to pursue Saunders’ murder. National papers were widely criticized this Police action.⁹⁸

On 8 April 1929, Bhagat and Kishwar Dutt were involved in plot bombing but they were arrested before the plot was put into operation.⁹⁹ According to Raja Ram, Bhagat had found the technology of bomb-making from the encyclopedia Britannic.¹⁰⁰ They threw two low-intensity bombs, fired two shots, and scattered leaflets into the legislative chamber before his arrest.¹⁰¹ No one was seriously injured.¹⁰² Bhagat and his friend conspirator Dutt only wanted to interrupt in passing two bills ‘Public Safety Bill’ (PSB) and ‘Trade Dispute Bill’ (TDB). These two bills had become the subject of a large debate by media circles.¹⁰³ “They were courted arrest against the passing of the draconian PSB and TDB by throwing a bomb inside the Central Legislative Assembly (CLA).”¹⁰⁴

Mainline Congress leader Nehru applauded Bhagat’s action.¹⁰⁵ Controversial TDB was considered to be a measure against workers’ organization

and a direct attack on workers' activities.¹⁰⁶ By firing, throwing bombs and leaflets was an explicit message 'to make a loud noise'. On 8 April 1929, when Bhagat and Dutt were surrendering to police, they were appearing very satisfied and confident because they thought this arrest would provide them a platform for anti-colonial publicity.¹⁰⁷

Obstructions during the Hour of Trial

On the first day of trial the court was shouting these powerful slogans '*Inquilab Zindabad*', 'Down with Imperialism', 'Long Live the Proletariat' by revolutionaries. In this stubbornly resistant attitude, loud condemnation of government advocate C.H. Carden Noad, abuses on witnesses, and susurrus of newspapers, it was extremely difficult to proceed.¹⁰⁸

On 15 June 1929, Bhagat and Dutt defied to take food and started their hunger-strike only in defense of political prisoners' rights.¹⁰⁹ This hunger strike had created a sensational situation in the Punjab because *Ghadarites*, old prisoners and other revolutionary people participated in his hunger-strike courageously.¹¹⁰ It was true that hunger-strike made these imprisoned revolutionaries popularized and at the same time made it clear for the British that this evolution was not going to stop even in prison.

Newspapers started to report on their declining health. The national leaders especially Moti Lal Nehru, Jawahir Lal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Madan Mohan Malvia, Genish Shanker Vidyarthi, Chandra Bhanav Gupta who made speeches against Bhagat's 'Assembly Bomb-shelling Case', now the same leaders dramatically began to speak in Bhagat's favor. The enquiry committee announced that if the hunger-strike called off, the government would release Jatinder Das because of his declining health. But the government refused to release him. The government advocate Noad was opposed by this application to release him. He argued that the statement about the alleged ill-health of the accused, was not supported by any affidavit'.¹¹¹ 'The government instigated an amendment to amend the Criminal Procedure Code, in order to provide for trial in absence of the accused and then set up a Special Tribunal to kick out the regular Session Court to try the case by invoking Governor-Generals special powers.'¹¹² Government tried all sorts of tactics to spoil the trials.

Hunger-strike sounded like a roar in assembly even around the country. On September 12, when the health of revolutionaries deteriorated, M.A. Jinnah slammed the government bluntly. On May 1, 1930, the Governor, using the special powers, issued an Ordinance of three special tribunal judges for the assembly bomb blast case, which opened the dirty politics of the British government. Bhagat's hand written letters show the hollowness of this action.¹¹³

The Decision

On May 12, 1930, the accused were also beaten inside the court with punches, sticks and fists. On October 6, armed forces were deployed around the prison. On October 7, 68-page tribunal's verdicts were announced in jail, in which Bhagat, SukhDev and Rajguru sentenced to death, Kamal Nath Tiwari, Vijay Kumhar Sinha, Jay Dev Kapoor sentenced to life imprisonment and Kundan and Prem Dutt 5 and 7 years imprisonment, respectively.¹¹⁴

Bhagat didn't expect a reprieve but he agreed on it that this case should be taken to the Privy Council, in London because it would popularize this case internationally and especially destroy the British reputation for Impartiality and rule of law. An appeal was lodged in the Privy Council on Bhagat's advice on questioning the legitimacy of the Special Tribunal which was dismissed on 12th February, 1931.¹¹⁵ Gandhi-Irwin talks were round to corner and its first session began in New Delhi on 17 February 1931: just six days after the Privy Council rejected Bhagat's appeal¹¹⁶ and it continued till 5th of March. Gandhi entered into talk without making Bhagat's issue a prerequisite. Unfortunately Gandhi failed to secure Bhagat commutation. Lord Irwin himself was not in favor of Bhagat's execution but British officials had threatened him to refuse Bhagat's commutation.¹¹⁷ Gandhi had a strong faith in the futility of violence and the efficacy of non-violence. He had written to the Viceroy and strongly criticized him for the creation of the Special Tribunal in LCC. Gandhi said that 'is it any wonder if I say all these official activities are a veiled form of Martial Law?'.¹¹⁸ On 30 March 1931, when the game was over; Irwin wrote to the Secretary of the State and admired de Montmorency on his adroit handling of the execution.

Bhagat was opposed to Gandhi because of his Non-Cooperation Movement but was an admirer of Jinnah, because during hunger-strike in jail, Jinnah fully supported Bhagat and his accused fellow. Jinnah also tried to pass a bill on the rights of prisoners and raised his voice in the right way. Jinnah defended Bhagat in all perspectives and created a profound impression in which he argued the case. Bhagat was not in favor of appeal for mercy. Bhagat's lawyers Pran Nath Mehta and Asaf Ali* were forced to persuade on it but till execution it was Bhagat's core and constant desire to expose the actual face of British imperialism.¹¹⁹

Gandhi raised Bhagat's issue with Viceroy. Even on March 20, Gandhi had a long conversation with the Home Secretary Herbert Emerson but the government was not serious in reviewing this execution. The Gandhi-Irwin pact ended in failure. Three sureties in the death Cell waiting for their death. So on March 20, the British closed all the doors to stop raising questions and more inquiries. In San Francisco, *Ghadar* threatened that if Bhagat was executed then they would be killed by the upcoming Viceroy Lord Wallingdon before landed in India.¹²⁰

"The farcical characters of the trial were not studied attentively by the British because Bhagat culpability in Saunders' murder was not in question. Lahore Conspiracy Case (LCC) was for its own sake indeed rather than a merit case. It was a classic case of abuse of judicial process for their political end".¹²¹ Mishandling of the dead bodies was actually their frustration. The British were experienced in martyr-making. KCC prisoners after executions given to their families, jail authorities, Bhagat friend and HSRA member Jatinder Das dead body (during hunger-strike) handed over to his family¹²², then why are these executioners treated in such frustrated manners?

Nationwide Aftermath of Bhagat's Death

When the news of the execution broke out, the political temperature was charged. It became the headline of all newspapers. On the appeal of *Lok Sabha* and Lahore Student Federation, schools and colleges strike has begun in several parts of Punjab and Lahore. Karachi Congress and all small and big leaders expressed their grief and sorrow over this execution and desecration of corpses.

From Peshawar to Dhaka and Dhaka to Karachi, banners of Bhagat could be seen clearly. “There were men of all creeds, all persuasions, all classes, professions, sects, joined to urge their lives be spared. Sympathy for them was voiced even from foreign countries. Innumerable appeals daily poured in from part of the subcontinent.”¹²³ Roads were blocked on that day and a massive crackdown was launched against Protestants.

Several high ranked officials attended the executions.¹²⁴ At the time of their hanging, jail officers were almost shivering with fear. After the execution was done, the dead bodies were not handed over to their families. They were secreted out of prison and disposed of as per prearranged plan. Dead bodies were being taken to the bank of Sutlej near Firozabad, at night. Representatives of Hindus, Sikhs, *Aryan* faiths were present at that time. At 5 am, bodies were completely burnt and the ashes were thrown away in the Sutlej.¹²⁵

Bhagat’s long-life friend Jai Dev Gupta, who was with the crowd of mourning when bodies were being cremated, found a hot spot on sand, strong smell of Kerosene, and long bone cut in a diagonal form at the wrist, at the bank of Sutlej. It was evidence that bodies had been mutilated.¹²⁶ On 24 March, Vidyavati* travelled to Sutlej via Firozabad to locate the embers of their bodies near *Qaiser-i-Hind* bridge. Vidyavati also collected whatever ashes and a few pieces of bone from there.¹²⁷ Final rituals were performed in Lahore, at the banks of River Ravi.¹²⁸

Panic of British Government and Their Impossible Challenges

The stories of cruelties inflicted on the Bhagat and his friend were spreading among masses and their hearts filled with fierce, helplessness and hatred towards the government. The Tribune front page shouted ‘was Bhagat Singh’s body mutilated?’¹²⁹ Many newspapers such as *Milap*, *Kirti*, *Bande Matarum*, *Tufan* took the act of hangings as an act of provocation to violence.¹³⁰

It’s an undeniable fact that the British played their own role in making Bhagat ‘A Martyr’.¹³¹ They were aware that Bhagat was not as simple as previous martyrs and his execution would create ripples across the country yet they sent him to the gallows and gave him a perpetual life.¹³² A fascist regime was treating forcible Punjabis who had lived there for centuries. The Punjab Government did not break the news of the execution until the following morning because they knew, in Punjab, NJBS members had controlled the protests to swan the executions and threatening various politicians who possessed any responsibility.¹³³

Indifferences to the proceeding in the Court failed to defend government reasoning. Government arrested many leaders and people who contributed to these protests and riots. The British were confused that the depression didn’t spare the freedom movement as a whole. Response of the press to the execution was very blunt particularly in Punjab. “Meanwhile Geoffrey de Montmorency left Punjab to deal with a difficult province.”¹³⁴ “Lahore was home of the largest print and publishing industry in Punjab.”¹³⁵ British attempts to control the violence undermined their own analysis. City [Lahore] observed a complete shut-down on that day.

The British imposed a press emergency, introduced fistful legislative measures, detention on suspects without evidence just to control the riots. On

March 24, condolence meetings on the execution had been started in the entire country. On March 24, Diwan Bahadur registered a protest and ensured the government carried out the execution. On March 24, Nehru said, 'I have remained completely silent during their last days, lest a word of mine may injure their prospect of commutation. I remained silent though I felt like bursting and now all is over'.¹³⁶

A common sense force to raise some questions such as;

- ✓ If execution time was secretly fixed 7 p.m. as per judgment then why mandated 8 '0 clock am?¹³⁷
- ✓ Why was it announced to the public on March 24 instead on 23rd March when execution was carried out?
- ✓ Why do jail authorities refuse to hand over their dead bodies' ash after rituals?
- ✓ Why do jail authorities refuse to have their final meeting after reaching their families on March 23 along with a large extended crowd?¹³⁸
- ✓ Why did the British banned newspapers and pamphlets and the Press Ordinance which was issued after execution?
- ✓ Why were revolutionaries and nationalists arrested if their act was right?
- ✓ Why was the government unable to stop protests and riots?
- ✓ Was the Government unable to distinguish the difference between a common murderer and a political worker?

Some Views on Bhagat's Stature and British Judicial Process

Bhagat's intensity was not in the question, in fact this was a war between social rights and British fascism. Everyone felt that Bhagat and his comrades' execution was a barbarous action and Punjab administration agents murdered Bhagat like a ferocious dacoit.¹³⁹ Maulana Zafar Ali seconded this fact that 'Bhagat was an institution even next to Gandhiji, who had drawn the attention of the whole *Hindustan* towards himself'.¹⁴⁰

When the British tried to amend the law in absentia, Jinnah made a powerful and effective speech on September 12 and 14/1929 in CLA, in defense of Bhagat and his comrades.¹⁴¹ Jinnah raised the questions as to why the Punjab government didn't provide the treatment which they were entitled for. 'If the government of Punjab has any brain, they would have found the solution to this question'.¹⁴² Jinnah also gave opposed remarks to Bill and was not satisfied with the version which the government placed. Jinnah raised three controversial points against Bill: first was view of criminal jurisprudence, second policy of the Bill and third under trial treatment of the accused.¹⁴³

Nehru recalled these words, 'Bhagat didn't become popular because of his act of terrorism but because he seemed to vindicate the honor of Lala Lajpat and through him to the nation. He became a symbol; his act was forgotten and the symbol remained.....'.¹⁴⁴ Nehru interpreted executions in these strong words "an act of wanton vengeance and a deliberate flouting of unanimous demand for commutation".¹⁴⁵

On 20 March 1931, Subhas Chandra Bose* stated in a meeting at Delhi;

“Bhagat Singh is today not a person but a symbol. He symbolizes the spirit of revolt, which has taken possession of [the] country.”¹⁴⁶

Subhas Chandra Bose also stated that ‘Gandhi did try his very best’ while we were on our way to Karachi from Calcutta, Gandhi heard this news, it was the most painful and unexpected surprise for him.¹⁴⁷ Gandhi was anxious and considered that these executions are a breach of settlements. Although, demi-God like, Mr. Gandhi could have alone intervened to save Bhagat’s life but he didn’t. Later he criticized a lot on his failure.

After watching the popularity of young Bhagat, a Congress member Sitya Ramyah had to acknowledge that ‘across the subcontinent the popularity of Bhagat was never less than Great Gandhi; perhaps it could be increased’.¹⁴⁸ The Indian government was showing the dilatory attitude and continuation of vindictive treatment to others prisoners of KCC, LCC, political prisoners and has not carried into effect any final recommendations.

Conclusion

The story of the politics of Punjab cannot be written without Bhagat. Anarchy and violence allows a form of resistance to tyranny. Bhagat was a man of intense feelings and remarkable intellectual and pedagogical qualities. A fearless, bold and defiant young boy used martyrdom as a weapon to fight the psyche of mighty British imperialism and fueled a passion for freedom in colonial Punjab. The occurrence of Injustice leads to violence and Bhagat case explains this very well. The above historical events map-out the foreign aggression and the way of government consequently fell into Bhagat’s revolt, extremism and even embracement of death. After a panoramic view of colonial Punjab it could be easily judged that British *Raj* was not only a series of their hostility and aggression but also a brutal and unlawful regime. In all these repressive and discontented circumstances, emergence of revolts, revolutionaries and a history like Bhagat Singh was obvious. Those who considered Bhagat an extremist and murderer are looking at one side of history.

History witnessed injustices that lead to violence and repressive measures always become the cause of war, anarchy and aggression. The British *Raj* was actually the result of an intricate relationship between interests and systemic modalities of violence. So Punjab under imperialism was marked as a confrontation between action and reaction, between government intricacies and revolutionaries’ freedom-spirit.

‘PALA 1900’ swirled around the extensive heinous activities against Government Law enforcement. LCC was the classic case of abuse of British judicial merit which quickly provoked the idea of violence as a weapon. The Government had already determined to hang the accused as ‘terrorists’. The *Jallianwala Bagh* Massacre was the perfect example of terrorism and brutality by the British which led to revenge. Moreover Martial Law in Punjab, Rowlatt Bills, *Ghadar* persuasion, notion of communists in Punjab were all part and parcel of a reaction and made Punjab a risk for *Raj*.

Bhagat was already a part of ‘Rebel Blood’.¹⁴⁹ Lawlessness breeds violence, same happened with Bhagat case. “There was a distinction between ‘terrorism’ and ‘revolutionary violence’.”¹⁵⁰ In fact, imperialism in Punjab was a bitter history

that Britain couldn't swallow until now. A common man like Bhagat gave terrorizing signals to British atrocities.

Bhagat Singh extensively stood for non-sectarian and egalitarian world. His every attempt gave a clear message to British usurp. Bhagat's execution was a step towards the end of Britain's rule. If the murder of Saunders was an act of terror then executions of these were also the outcome of British fear to prevail terror. The enactment of Bills and ordinance by imperialism, sowed the seeds that had been germinated in the form of Bhagat. Nehru described the 'Public Safety Bill as a direct attack on Indian nationalism'.¹⁵¹

Government powers can kill or imprison a person forcefully by the state machinery but can never suppress his philosophy, thoughts, patriotism, and freedom of speech. Empires come and go but ideologies live forever. In colonial Punjab Bhagat's immortal saga of sacrifice paved the beginning of the downfall of mountainous British *Raj*. It was the actual face of British *Raj* that was exposed by Bhagat's revolt and this revolt was a prelude to the partition of 1947 and the culmination of British imperialism. Even after a century, Bhagat's philosophy and British ruling style are still under discussion and criticism.

Bhagat's philosophy cannot be freezy, glaciated and unthawed. Every imperialistic era needed a threat and warning like Bhagat which proved a dynamite that could be exploded at any time. Bhagat's contribution in colonial Punjab is regarded as the soul spirit of freedom even today every Punjabi wants to reborn Bhagat. Dr. Satyapal rightly predicted in a Lahore meeting, 'if Bhagat were executed there would be no chance of peace in future'.¹⁵² The 'Great Gamer' cannot understand Bhagat's philosophy that was knocking at the door of the *Hindustan* partition.

Zulm Rahe Aur Amn Bhi Ho

Kya Mumkin Hai Tum Hi Kaho

(Habib Jalib)

"Explosions are needed to tell the Deaf"

Auguste Vaillant (French Revolutionary)¹⁵³

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