

CHAPTER - V

BHAGAT SINGH'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IDEAS :

A CRITICAL STUDY

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In the preceeding two chapters, we have dealt with Bhagat Singh's social and political ideas which were expressed in different writings, messages, party leaflets, statements etc. In this chapter, we will attempt the critical appraisal of his different ideas.

Beginning with the 1920s a powerful left wing group developed in India contributing to the radicalization of the national movement. The goal of political independence acquired a clearer and sharper social and economic content. "The stream of national struggle for independence and the struggle for social and economic emancipation of the suppressed and exploited began to come together. Socialist ideas acquired roots in the Indian soil; and socialism became the accepted creed of Indian youth".¹ Bhagat Singh and his ideas represented in general many revolutionary terrorists of late 1920s who made the turn to socialism. Moreover, Bhagat Singh made the ideological advance over the previous terrorists revolutionaries. He played significant role in freeing the revolutionary movement of nationalism and religious mystecism.²

He shared the challenge posed seriously by communists and left working youths to the bourgeois developmental perspective of the national movement. Insertion of new word ' Socialism ' in the changed objectives of the Army indicated that Bhagat Singh and his associates did not have faith in vague objectives. The manifesto of HSRA said : " The hope of the proletariat is therefore, now centered on socialism which alone can lead to the establishment of complete independence and the removal of social distinction and privileges",³ In the philosophy of Bombay' they declared that they stood for independence - social, political and economic' They further, want to declare that they stood for the revolution which will ring the death knell of capitalism and class distinctions and privileges".⁴ The manifesto of NBS pointed out that " the future programme of preparing the country will begin with the Motto : Revolution by the masses and for the masses ".⁶ Thus, on the basis of different documents it can be said that Bhagat Singh played prominent role in the transformation of terrorist revolutionary movement into the Communist revolutionary movement.

It should be noted here that as a Marxist Bhagat Singh grasped that socialism was a product of the historical process and that, therefore, as a system it was the product of the conditions of social existence and social forces. He showed

remarkable understanding of the on going historical process when he said in a letter written to the Punjab Governer, that " The days of capitalist and imperialist exploitation are numbered. The war neither began with us nor is it going to end with our lives. It is inevitable consequence of the historical events and the existing environments."

CONTRIBUTIONS OF BHAGAT SINGH :

Bhagat Singh was the synthesiser of the three ideological trends - an anti-imperial Nationalism, Principles and ideas of Arya Samaj, and Socialism. As a rational, secular and socialist revolutionary thinker he had contributed in the following important respects.

- 1) Correct understanding of the problem, Language, religion, caste and untouchability :

A significant aspect of Bhagat Singh's ideas lay in the fact that he was above the sectarian and communal outlook. Unlike the former revolutionaries he discarded the religious and traditional social outlook and looked forward to modern ideas. Bhagat Singh did not allow the religion to have precedence over the secular and nationalistic outlook. To overcome the sectarian and socially prejudicial caste outlook and thereby to develop healthy secular nationalist feelings in

the minds of the people the Naujawan Bharat Sabha used to arrange social gatherings. People belonging to all creeds, castes were invited to participate and take their meals together. As Dr. Sukhbir Choudhari had pointed out their "revolutionary brotherhood had reached a stage where there was no caste even religion, no untouchability or even separate identity".⁷ To remove the communal feeling based on superstition and dogmatism the members of the Sabha also organised series of public lectures and discussed Socio-political affairs. Much prominence was attached to inculcation of spirit and interest in the superiority of the scientific materialism over the mystical metaphysics.

Thus Bhagat Singh and his associates tried to replace the reliance on God, immortality of soul and other junk of spiritual fraud liberation of the nation was now to be understood in terms of democracy, freedom and abolition of exploitation of man by man. Mazini was replaced by Marx".⁸

He held that whoever sided with progress should question, criticise and even challenge the each and every aspect of old faith. including God and religion. In spite of being critical of religion, he had shown rich understanding of the complicated role of the religion which it played at social level. He held that it was not sufficient to say that religion was the the instrument in the hands of the ruling class for keeping the

people under their control. No doubt it was so but along with that, he wrote that it was the result of our ancestor's inability to understand the existing situation in its totality, and also their inability to understand the real nature and establish control over the social institutions. In such a situation, God became a useful myth for hopeless exploited people. But then he emphasised that when we are living in modern period where the exploited masses have started struggle for unslaving themselves now. It was no more necessary to have artificial support of the God. Bipan Chandra had pointed out that Bhagat Singh's ideas on God coincided with those of young Marx of 1844.⁹

Bhagat Singh saw the importance of freeing the people from the mental bondage of religion and superstition. Bhagat Singh was also fully aware that social prejudices were great hindrances in the way of advancement and were to be broken off mercilessly. He revealed the correct understanding of the social problems like religion, caste, untouchability and language. Bhagat Singh realised that even the issue of the language was communalised. Bhagat Singh went to the extent of suggesting that Devanagari (Hindi) script should be accepted for Punjabi language. He realised that the real cause behind the communal riots was economic. He held that the real remedy for the communal and other problems that divided the Indian people was in improvement of the economic conditions of the masses.¹⁰ Further he held that it

was not possible so far as they were governed by alien government. He also made it clear that Indian arm-chair politicians were creating a false issue and screening the real one". He also explained that Indian and alien enemies were using the disabilities of Indian people like religion, caste, creed etc. to exploit them.¹¹

Writing on the basic programme of the party Bhagat Singh warned the revolutionaries that they should place the definite programme before the people while organising and leading them. But, he stressed, the fact that they should not play with the religions and communal feelings, and superstitions and other emotions of the people.¹²

In one of his articles published in ' Kirti ' he went much ahead and stated that if they continued to treat the untouchables like beasts then they would be willingly converted into other religions. And we would not have the right to complaint about it. He even reminded the untouchables and oppressed people to understand well the real nature of capitalist bureaucracy. It is here highly noteworthy that Bhagat Singh suggested them to be organised independently and asked them to revolt against the entire present system.¹³

Thus Bhagat Singh and his associates contributed significantly in secularising and radicalising the revolutionary movement. Bhagat Singh understood more clearly than may contemporaries the danger of communalism posed to the nation and national movement. Now they came to more correct understanding of the social forces and the position of the oppressed masses in a social upheaval.

2) Appreciation of the Role of the Congress and Gandhi :

Bhagat Singh's understanding of the role of the Congress and Gandhi is highly appreciable. He was of the firm opinion that in India, the capitalists and the upper classes had developed sympathy with foreign power and might abandon the freedom struggle half-way through. He wrote " This is a struggle dependent upon the middle class shopkeepers and a few capitalists. Both these, and particularly the latter, can never dare to risk its property or possessions in any struggle."¹⁴ He was highly critical of Gandhi's obsession with non-violence and Gandhi's compromise mentality. He held that this mentality had brought about the disruption in revolutionary activities of popular forces. Bhagat Singh explained that the Congress leaders could not dare to take the sleeping lion ' the proletariat ' because it once awakened would not remain contented even after

throwing away the yoke of imperialists but also shake off the yoke of the Indian capitalists and landlords. Therefore, he stated that the Congress leaders preferred a surrender to the British than to the peasantry.¹⁵

Bhagat Singh had also criticised the Congress and Gandhi for hesitating to accept the goal of complete freedom. He held that Gandhi did stand for 'dominion status'. The Congress leaders were forced to adopt the Independence resolution, otherwise they did not mean it. Gandhi had kept the door open for compromise even after the resolution. Bhagat Singh did not like this half-heartedness.

Bhagat Singh emphatically disapproved Gandhi's non-violent method for country's emancipation. But at the same time he did not fail to 'salute him' for bringing the immense awakening in the country by bringing the masses into the non-cooperation movement. He considered the Mahatma as 'an impossible visionary' and Non-violence as useless for the masses and a thing of the future. Bhagat Singh said 'Gandhi is a kind hearted philanthropist and what was needed but a dynamic scientific social force'. The immediate suspension of non-cooperation movement after Chauri-chaura incident led to the disappointment and shattering of their faith in Gandhian leadership to an alarming proportion.

Bhagat Singh appreciated that the Gandhian congress movement was based on the mass. But he further held that the movement was not meant for the masses.¹⁶ Here it should be noted that the congress had started the civil disobedience movement without an agrarian programme, without the formulation of the economic demands for the peasantry and without any proper organization of the peasantry as class. The Congress knew the importance of the peasantry and workers but they considered it to be highly inflammable material. Thus the limitations of the Congress were correctly understood by Bhagat Singh. Here it should also be remembered that in the 1930s learning from the experience of the 1920s Gandhi did not make the incidents of violence here and there as the sole determining factor to call off the movement. But Bhagat Singh was rightly convinced that the Congress movement would not lead to the complete economic freedom of the masses.

With regard to the method Bhagat Singh posed a challenge to Gandhian and congress method. He also contributed significantly by providing economic content to the revolutionary movement. Bhagat Singh and his associates sincerely accepted and advocated more radical programme meant for the upliftment of the peasants and workers than that of the Congress. They

were also at advanced stage than Congress or Gandhi with regard to the acceptance of 'complete freedom' as a goal of the movement.

CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF REVOLUTION :

Bhagat Singh's ideas on revolution reveal his matured understanding. Bhagat Singh defined the revolution as " the complete overthrow of the existing social order and its replacement with socialist order", and ' the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat '. He correctly understood the oppressive exploitative nature of the government and the role of the political power in the establishment of the Socialist State. He wrote " the government machinery is just a weapon in the hands of the ruling class to further and safeguard its interests. And he wanted to snatch and handle it to utilise for the social reconstruction on new Marxist basis.¹⁷

Further Bhagat Singh correctly realised that the revolution was two fold. It was anti-imperial as well as anti-capitalist. Further Bhagat Singh tried to provide the anti-communal base to the national struggle. He had realised that the revolution would mean more than a change of masters. He wanted to bring to an end the exploitation of man by man and of nation by nation. He emphasised that the nation could wage a

a successful struggle only on the strength of real armies i.e. organised workers and peasants. He also held that these were to be organised by the iron disciplined communist party of the professional revolutionaries. He also made it clear that "revolution meant a change brought about deliberately by an organised and systematic work, as opposed to sudden and unorganised or spontaneous change or breakdown".¹⁸

Bhagat Singh pointed out that the emancipation of Indian masses could be brought about not merely by political freedom but it could only be brought about by economic freedom Indian capitalists. He has very often stressed that the clear cut goal of the revolution should be "the revolution of the proletariat and for the proletariat".¹⁹ Thus the entire socialist ideology of Bhagat Singh was based on class analysis of society. He was firmly convinced that only socialism would emancipate the exploited classes of the society from the clutches of the imperialists and capitalists. Bhagat Singh made a major advance in broadening the scope and definition of revolution. Revolution was no longer equated with mere violence. The first objective of revolution was national liberation and second establishment of socialist order. He held that revolution meant the development and organization of a mass movement of the exploited and suppressed section of society by the revolutionary intelligentsion.

WEAKNESSES OF BHAGAT SINGH'S IDEAS :

Bhagat Singh with his sacrifices became a legendary hero, to guide many young revolutionaries and ' crusader for the socialist cause '. Theoretically, the concept of revolution was well understood by Bhagat Singh. But its practical aspects were neglected by him. It was mainly due to the lack of historical experience of mass revolutionary movement like that of Russia and China. etc. Therefore, Bhagat Singh could not develop his ideas on revolutionary tactics.

In spite of the fact that they established rapport with the ' Kirti Kisan Party ' of Punjab, and could succeed in giving greater respectability to the socialism and Marxism in general and to the Kirti Kisan Party in particular. They lacked the experience of mass movement and mass participation. The Indian communist movement began in 1925 and the different groups started working in different parts of the country among the workers and peasants. The British government did not allow the communist movement to take roots and it let loose repression them. Bhagat Singh and his associates could not establish major rapport with the communist party or the communist movement and because of that they lacked the experience of mass movement.



There was no proper harmony between their ideology and their work. As pointed out by Bipan Chandra " while in theory they were committed to socialism, in practice they could not go beyond nationalism. While in theory they wanted to base their movement on the masses - the peasants and workers in practice they could only appeal to the urban lower middle class or petty bourgeois youths."²⁰

Bhagat Singh during the last days of his career had come to abandon the terrorism. The socialist within him had finally overcome the terrorist. But at least to some extent emotional thinking and reliance on terrorism still pervaded his thinking. He tried to understand the limitations of terrorism in a true revolutionary or communist movement. " But a certain conflict always remained in his mind - the conflict between the immediate demands of an advanced revolutionary ideology and the keen personal desire for immediate militant action and self-immolation".²¹ He held that " It was not necessary to cut off all the relations with terrorism. But it was necessary to have reevaluation of it from the point of its usefulness for the proletarian revolution".²²

Thus Bhagat Singh could not transcend the limitations of emotional thinking, limitations of self-sacrifice and the

limitation of terrorism. But as pointed out by Singh & Singh
 " Bhagat Singh desperately tried to convey this change (in him)
 without abandoning the sense of heroic sacrifices which ultimately
 made him a martyr".²³

Bhagat Singh and his associates realised the
 importance of mass based revolutionary organisation of workers
 and peasants. But in practice they did not concentrate on it,
 holding that, in addition to propaganda, the acts of terrorism
 were needed to rouse the people. Thus Bhagat Singh relied on
 the strategy of ' propaganda by deeds '. Indulgence in
 terrorism greatly harmed the movement to organise the working
 people. " It was no accident that in the areas where terrorism
 was most widespread, such as Bengal and the Punjab, revolutionary
 peasant unions were formed much more slowly than in other parts
 of India."²⁴

Thus inspite of their sacrifices and heroic deeds,
 hardships, sufferings, it should be noted that the revolutionary
 terrorist movement did not succeed much. In fact, it virtually
 came to an end after the death of Chandrashekhar Azad and after
 the execution of Bhagat Singh and his associates.

The strong points in Gandhian movement were not taken note of completely by them. Their understanding of the Congress and Gandhi was imperfect one. We should notice that their strategy of 'propaganda by deed' failed to provide an alternative leadership to Gandhi. Even after the withdrawal of the mass struggle in 1922 the national bourgeoisie still continued to hold an anti-imperialist attitude. No doubt they feared mass popular action and inclined towards compromise. Yet it did not give up its anti-imperialist attitude. They adopted the strategy of pressure compromise - pressure or P - C - P.²⁵ But as pointed out by Dr. Kumar "There was no question of its rejecting further struggles against colonialism which held back the development of capitalism in the country".²⁶ Under the leadership of Gandhi the national bourgeoisie continued to fight against imperialism, as it was truly reflected in 1930 1942 and 1945.²⁷

In fact, Indian national movement was basically the result of a fundamental contradiction between the interests of the Indian people and that of British. And it was undoubtedly one of the biggest mass movements. As Bipan Chandra had shown "In the colonial situation the anti-imperialist struggle was primary and the social - class and caste - struggles within were secondary, and, therefore, struggles within Indian society were to be initiated and then compromised rather than carried

to an extreme, with all mutually hostile classes and castes making concessions".²⁸ It can be said that Bhagat Singh could not understand the primary and secondary contradiction in an integrated way and so his understanding of the Congress and Gandhi was imperfect.

It should be noted that Bhagat Singh's understanding of Gandhi and the Congress party was influenced by the contemporary socialist understanding of the situation. Bhagat Singh was perhaps influenced by M.N. Roy and other Indian communists who characterised Gandhi as a supporter of capitalists. The comintern also during that period adopted sectarian attitude and advised Indian communists not to take part in civil disobedience movement of 1930. Bhagat Singh was influenced by this general leftist perception. It would be wrong to blame Bhagat Singh alone because many other communist leader and theoreticians of this period also failed to understand the correct relationship between primary and secondary struggle in the colonial situation. Consequently their understanding of the Congress and Gandhi remained imperfect.

In spite of their sacrifices they failed to provide and alternative leadership to Gandhi and Congress. It should be noted here that after the process of thinking in jails a large number of the revolutionaries turned to Marxism and joined

the communist party, Revolutionary Socialist party and other Left parties. Many others joined the Gandhian Congress.

Bhagat Singh was revolutionary leader and he made an abiding contribution to the national freedom movement. He was Revolutionary leader but not a statesman in the company of Lenin, Trotsky, Mao and others. This fact is amply proved by the decision of Bhagat Singh and his associates to throw the bomb in Assembly and to sacrifice two of its most promising revolutionaries. This decision was responsible for the loss of Bhagat Singh to the progressive movement in India. It was emotional decision. And a true revolutionary party would never have taken recourse to such a step.

It should be noted that ~~if~~ if he was not a great scholar of Marxism or Socialism but he was no more novice either. In fact he was a great critical appraiser of the situation and existing problems and a leader with great promises. But the promises could not be fulfilled because of peculiar historical situations. Bhagat Singh and his associates were changing very rapidly. They had to "traverse decades within a few years. Further they were faced with a classic dilemma of recruiting the party to work among the masses. 'The answer appeared to be to appeal to the youth through "propaganda by deed," to recruit the initial cadres of a mass revolutionary party".²⁹

Thus, it can be said that Bhagat Singh represented his times and the advanced ideology of that period with the limitations of the particular situation. The real tragedy of the situation was that he did not live to implement his mature ideas because the British imperialists did not allow him to do that. But one can not miss the fact that he was perhaps one of the first Indian revolutionaries with roots in the indigenous social and political movements who far broadly understood the theory and practice of revolution in a colonial society.

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