



E-ISSN: 2706-9117

P-ISSN: 2706-9109

www.historyjournal.net

IJH 2023; 5(1): 178-181

Received: 21-03-2023

Accepted: 25-04-2023

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Bhagat Singh and his (Non) mystical religiosity

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Abstract

Bhagat Singh, a prominent figure in India's struggle for independence during the early 20th century, is often celebrated for his fearless and revolutionary spirit. While Bhagat Singh's commitment to socialism and anti-colonial activism is widely acknowledged, his stance on religious beliefs and spirituality is a topic that sparks curiosity and debate. Bhagat Singh's non-mystical religiosity was also evident in his strong support for communal harmony and his condemnation of religious fanaticism. He saw religious unity as a means to achieve a just and inclusive society devoid of caste, class, or religious discrimination. This article focuses on his skepticism towards religious dogma while drawing attention towards diverse historical perspectives which explore their views within the framework of the Non-mystical religiosity of Bhagat Singh.

Keywords: Bhagat Singh, rationality, religious worldview, ideological influences, communal harmony, atheism

Introduction

23rd March 1931.

It has been 92 years since Rajguru, Sukhdev, and Bhagat Singh were martyred. Today, we all know about Shaheed Bhagat Singh, popularly known as Shaheed-e-Azam. But I believe he is one of our country's most misunderstood and misrepresented freedom fighters. When you hear the name 'Shaheed Bhagat Singh', many associate it with words like weapons and violence, many people put his photo as their profile picture, and if you ask someone to act like Shaheed Bhagat Singh, they will play with their moustaches and fire finger guns. But hardly any of them have tried to understand his opinions, ideas, and ideologies. Shaheed Bhagat Singh was considered a fierce intellectual of his time. However, some of his excerpts summarise the nature of his ideology which is opposite to what the world summarises him to be: "Bombs and pistols cannot bring revolution. Revolution's sword is sharpened on thoughts".^[1] But when do people talk about ideas and ideologies today? People are happy to project an intellectual revolutionary as a trigger-happy rebel.

Observing the ideology of Karl Marx, Trotsky, and Lenin's ideology influenced Shaheed Bhagat Singh's philosophy. He subsequently spent the majority of his time exploring and analysing the history of various groups and revolutionaries. The way he divides religion into its three aspects of religious philosophy, religion, and rituals of religion—was another characteristic predictor of his internalised belief about the role of religion in society.

Great historians have observed Shaheed Bhagat Singh's belief in religion through the lens of popularised ideas that were seemingly occupied and deeply rooted in a deep sense of social and political understanding of religion in many ways. However, here, the article will try to provide an outlook relating to the ideas of Shaheed Bhagat Singh from the perspective of historians, such as Dr Dinesh Kumar, S. Irfan Habib, and many others who sought not to indulge in the caricature of a violent revolutionary but instead to define Bhagat Singh's emergence as a symbol of a youth icon and revolutionary who built a totally different form of "the cult of freedom fighters"^[2] during the national movements. The analysis will also address Shaheed Bhagat Singh's depicted religious ideology in "Why I'm an Atheist?"

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¹. A.M. *et al.* (2022) A visionary way ahead of his time, Tehelka. <http://tehelka.com/a-visionary-way-ahead-of-his-time/>

². Kumar, D.D. (2020) Religious philosophy of Bhagat Singh, International Journal of Humanities and Education Development (IJHED)

(Non) Mystical Religiosity

“If you oppose a prevailing belief, if you criticize a great person who is considered to be an incarnation, you will find that your criticism will be answered by calling you vain and egoist.”^[3]

- Bhagat Singh (Why I am an atheist)

One of India's most renowned revolutionary socialists and independence fighters, Shaheed Bhagat Singh, was also one of the country's first philosophers and adherents of Marxism. Unfortunately, due to that latter factor's relative ignorance, a wide range of reactionaries, obscurantists, and communalists have mistakenly and dishonestly attempted to use the names of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and his allies, including Chandra Shekhar Azad, for their own politics and philosophies.

The way he defines and provides a rationale for the divine figure and religion in his writing named “Why I am an Atheist?” portrays a young, revolutionary intellect tormented by questions. Witnessing the imperialist's intolerable cruelty towards his countrymen makes Shaheed Bhagat Singh assert, “God did not create man. It is the man that created God.” This excerpt from Shaheed Bhagat Singh's essay on atheism reveals the young revolutionary's intellectual strength even in death.

In this essay's prologue, he elucidated that his atheism is not the result of vanity. In response to what he witnessed in his milieu and the community, he rebuffs the existence of the all-mighty God. He asserts that atheism cannot result from vanity because the notions contradict one another. In the grip of vanity, a person might declare himself to be a deity or believe that he possesses godlike qualities. According to Shaheed Bhagat Singh, none of these two individuals was an atheist. They are theists who believe in supernatural powers that control the universe.

According to him, 'This is my own, and that a stranger' is the calculation of the narrow-minded. For the magnanimous hearts, however, the entire earth is a family. There is a famous couplet in Mahaupanishad, and Rig Veda called Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. The whole world is one family. Internationalism is an ideology in which Shaheed Bhagat Singh strongly believed. He wrote an article titled Vishwa Prem^[4] (Love the World) published in a magazine from Calcutta, 'Matwala' in 1924. How great is the idea 'Let everyone be your own, and no one is a stranger'? How beautiful will that time be when unfamiliarity does not remain in the world? In this article, he praises the poet who envisioned the world as one family.

In June 1927, Shaheed Bhagat Singh wrote an article on Religious Riots and their Solutions,^[5] where he talked about Egalitarianism. The world's poor people, irrespective of ethnicity, race, religion or country, should have the same rights, discrimination based on religion, colour, race, and origin should stop, where the power of the government is with people. This brings us to yet another strong ideology of Shaheed Bhagat Singh, Secularism and

Atheism.

In India, the perspective was seemingly dichotomised between the two extremists. On the one hand, Mahatma Gandhi was promoting the Indian version of secularism, where the government would promote religion but would be impartial to it. The government will remain impartial to all religions. On the other hand, Shaheed Bhagat Singh believed in the French version of secularism, where there needs to be a distance between the Government and religion, mentioning this is the original definition of Secularism. The government should not have any stake in any religion because religion is a personal affair of an individual.

As mentioned in Dr. Dinesh Kumar's Religious Philosophy of Bhagat Singh. In one Naujawan Bharat Sabha meeting in 1926 at Lahore, Bhagat Singh and his fellow revolutionaries openly voiced their opposition to any appeasement of all religions and brushed aside slogans like Allah o Akbar, Sat Sri Akal, and Bande Mataram to exemplify their secular values. As Nirmal Singh quotes his ideology here, “For him, religion was a private affair of a person, which had nothing to do with his political activities”, depicting their socialist perspective towards religion.

Furthermore, in “Religious Philosophy of Bhagat Singh,” Dr. Dinesh Kumar describes Shaheed Bhagat Singh's journey as a recognised national hero due to his intellectuality. The author also includes that his (Bhagat Singh) ideas are deeply rooted in a deep sense of social and political understanding in many ways, leading to his fame and becoming revolutionary not only on the political front but also on social and religious fronts. Thus, according to him (the author), the fame attained by Bhagat Singh increased due to his revolutionary beliefs while accumulating with violence.

Here, the criticism of this article can be two-fold, firstly, the violence he meant to perform, i.e., Central Assembly Bombing and Saunderson's murder case were altruistic in nature, and the motive of the act was not to encourage people to be violent.

On April 8, 1929, along with B.K. Dutt and Bhagat Singh threw two bombs in the Central Legislative Assembly “to make the deaf hear”, as written on the tracts they distributed in the assembly after their lightning coup. However, Bhagat Singh indicated that this deed was part of a broader strategy. If passed, the Public Safety and Trade Disputes Bill would have penalised Indian labourers, which was the campaign's initial goal. Second, it was intended to criticise how this so-called Indian parliament presented itself, portraying itself as a British accomplice. Finally, it sought revenge for Lajpat Rai's passing, leading to Saunderson's death, where he had been mistakenly killed as part of a plot to kill the police chief responsible for the death of Lala Lajpat Rai. All of these justifications link this behaviour to socialist and anarchist ideologies equally. The other side of the coin demonstrates Bhagat Singh's aversion to violence's ascendancy.

Saunders.

Moreover, Bhagat Singh's popularity did not surge until the hunger strike reform in 1929. Instead, the contemporary reaction to the killing differs substantially from the adulation that later surfaced. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha, which had organised the Lahore protest march along with the HSRA, found that attendance at its subsequent public meetings dropped sharply. Moreover, here, it's difficult to

³ Singh, B. (1930) Why I am an Atheist, Why I am an atheist. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bhagat-singh/1930/10/05.htm>

⁴ Singh, B. (1924) 4.1 Vishav Prem an article written in Hindi under pen name of Balwant Singh published in Matwala (calcutta) in Nov 1924., Shaheed Bhagat Singh authentic information. <https://www.shaheedbhagatsingh.in/hindi/vishav.html>

⁵ Singh, B. (1927) Religious riots and their solutions, LEAFLET. <https://leafletldh.wordpress.com/communal-riots-and-their-solutions-%E2%80%A2bhagat-singh/>

answer whether the fame he got was through his own actions or because of following Gandhi's romanticised approach to Satyagraha or Non-violence, but Neeti Nair's "Bhagat Singh as 'Satyagrahi': The Limits to Non-violence in Late Colonial India"^[6] argues that Bhagat Singh and his comrades became national heroes, not after their murder of a police inspector in Lahore or after throwing bombs in the Legislative Assembly in New Delhi but during their practice of hunger strikes and non-violent civil disobedience within the walls of Lahore's prisons in 1929-30.

Secondly, the religious perspective can be argued through the ideology of S. Irfan Habib, Nirmal Singh and the article written by Pankaj Srivastava, "Religious freedom: Unreasonable Attack on Reason"^[7], which asks the question, "Is it possible to be an atheist in a country which blindly worships religion?"

Shaheed Bhagat Singh was a real progressive thinker who brought up several societal and communal concerns through his in-depth comprehension and analysis and revolutionized the entire scope of the freedom movements. The ideology of his religion is seemingly depicted through his own written article 'Why I am an Atheist', where he provided a glimpse of the thought of Enlightenment from Emmanuel Kant that people should be rational while practising religion. As he mentions, "Any man who stands for progress has to criticise, disbelieve, and challenge every article of the old faith," he said, making it clear that the lack of scientific knowledge had led to the development of irrational religious beliefs and that as a result, people needed to recognise their procedural religiosity and endorse it.

Nirmal Singh's 'Bhagat Singh and his Ideas'^[8] mentions that Bhagat Singh's way of intellect and sacrifice changed the face of the romantic revolutionary movement to the realistic one. His intellect and vision can be seen in his ideas on revolution, socialism, violence, religion and way of life. His image never got eclipsed by the propaganda of imperialists and their followers, who projected him as a terrorist and anarchist. Bhagat Singh's rejection of religion, which alienates the masses, complimented his socialist criticism of two systems of oppression – capitalism and casteism. Before that, Indian revolutionaries had only targeted capitalism and colonialism.

Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Bhagwati Charan Bohra focused on this while writing the Manifesto of Naujawan Bharat Sabha^[9] (Young India Association) and questioned We Indians; What are we doing? Hindu religious sentiments are hurt when a branch of a tree is cut. If the paper Taaziya's corner is broken, Allah is infuriated. Shouldn't humans be more valuable than animals? But still, in India, people are killing each other in the name of 'holy animals'.

He believed that if God made this world, why is there so much injustice, pain, and suffering? According to him, the theory of jurisprudence, where people are punished for the crimes of their past lives, revenge as justice is a very

outdated idea. On the other hand, the Theory of Punishment, where someone is punished for their wrongdoings, is also an ideology that is slowly eradicated from the world. However, the Reformatory theory is gradually being accepted in the world now. It is necessary for human progress. The reformatory theory says that if someone has wronged someone, he should be reformed and converted into a peace-loving citizen. Shaheed Bhagat Singh asks that if God converts a person into a cow, cat, or dog in his next life, how will the person be able to reform himself? Or if he is born into a low-income family in the next life, how can he stop his oppression? To have been born into a low-income family, he would become ruthless.

Shaheed Bhagat Singh contends, as indicated by S Irfan Habib in "Inquilab: Bhagat Singh on Religion and Revolution,"^[10] that if religion entails blind trust by fusing rituals and philosophy, it must be abandoned without hesitation for the benefit of society. On the other hand, if religion is integrated with philosophy and the fundamentals, it might have relevance for humanity.

The ways he opted for forming a ritualistic part of any religion, where the religious lines have always been a dividing factor and used as a tool by foreign rulers, he focused more on uniting the same. And nowhere can it be argued that the religious ideology of Shaheed-e-Azam was contrary to society's social construction ideology, the social construction here refers to the place where "all of us being one and none is the other".

Conclusion

In today's world, where people call themselves nationalists, they have fallen to the level of Jingoism. Jingoism is a word that depicts the extreme form of nationalism, where one stops trying to improve one's country and is instead focused on humiliating others. The hostility between India and Pakistan now is nothing compared to the animosity between France and Germany. And between America and Japan when Shaheed Bhagat Singh was alive.

Shaheed Bhagat Singh dreamt of a day when France and Germany would not fight each other. Instead, trade with each other. That day would be called the Zenith of Progress. A day when America and Japan will both exist but not fight each other, a day when Britishers and Indians will live, but neither will rule over the other.

Trying to ensure that the country's institutions uphold democratic values and averting majority authoritarianism are the two significant hurdles currently confronting the world. The group that creates laws ultimately has the authority to disobey the same. Fear of social and cultural tyranny, with an attempt to muzzle minority voices and impose regimentation of ideas and values, coexists with the apprehension of political despotism by the majority. In his view, religion is not the solution to our problems, and we cannot achieve our life aim. In many senses, one has to think against religion to overcome or break the illogical chain. He always advocated keeping religion separate from politics and other philosophies of life. The practice of different religious ideas will lead to differences among people that will culminate in infractions in the people's thoughts, where he believed that the fight for social change

⁶ Nair, N. (2009) Bhagat Singh as 'Satyagrahi': The Limits to Non-Violence in Late Colonial India. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20488099.pdf?ab_segments=

⁷ Srivastava, P. (2015) Religious freedom: Unreasonable attack on reason, Governance Now. <https://www.governancenow.com/news/regular-story/unreasonable-attack-on-reason>

⁸ Singh, N. (2009) Bhagat Singh and his ideas. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42744024>

⁹ Vohra, B.C. (1928) Manifesto of naujawan Bharat Sabha, Punjab, The Anarchist Library. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/bhagawati-charan-vohra-manifesto-of-naujawan-bharat-sabha-punjab>

¹⁰ Habib, I. (no date) Book review: Irfan Habib (ed.), Inquilab: Bhagat Singh on religion and revolution <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0038022920923243>

in India would continue not only till the 'white masters' were removed from power, but 'brown masters' were also removed from the throne.

Thus, here to conclude the same, we can consider that the Left celebrates his socialist ideology, the Right his patriotism and nationalism, where Shaheed Bhagat Singh symbolises something for everyone.

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