Bhagat Singh and the Ghadar Movement

Harish K. Puri

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I

It is well known that from his young age Bhagat Singh was deeply impressed by the Ghadar Movement and that he regarded Kartar Singh Sarabha as his hero. Bandi Jeewan by Sachindranath Sanyal, which included the first historical account of the movement by an insider, was "a basic textbook" which he and his friends at the National School at Lahore read and discussed. The Rowlatt Committee Report of 1918, containing the British Government's secret intelligence version of the Ghadar movement, was another. Bhagat Singh had personally met some of the leaders of the Ghadar Party such as Bhai Santokh Singh, the founder and editor of the Kirti monthly, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, whom he met in Lahore Central Jail, Lala Ram Saran Das and Bhai Randhir Singh. Bhagat Singh was overwhelmed by their individual heroism and the sacrifices made by them. Until the beginning of 1928, his fascination for the Ghadar spirit centred on these aspects, particularly the audacious challenge of the Ghadarites to the British rulers. The political goal of the Hindustan Republican Army founded by Sachindranath Sanyal was, like that of the Ghadarites, the founding of a federal republic of the United States of India. The revival of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha in April 1928 by the Kirti organisation in collaboration with him provided for closer association of Bhagat Singh with the former Ghadarites. The impact of the Russian Revolution and the contact with Kirti Ghadarites led him and his comrades towards a fresh thinking on their objectives and methods. A mature thinking is reflected in the three significant writings of Bhagat Singh during the last six months of his life in jail. An attempt is made here to situate Bhagat Singh in the Ghadar movement—the different stages and levels of rethinking among the Ghadarites on the one hand and Bhagat Singh and his comrades on the other. That may help us to understand how Bhagat Singh attempted to deal with the problems and contradictions he faced in the process.

The Ghadar movement launched among the Indian immigrants on the Pacific coast of the USA looked to the 1857 Rebellion as its source of inspiration. A series of chapters from V. D. Savarkar's The Indian War of Independence 1857 were included in the Ghadar weekly. Lala Har Dayal's anarchist nationalist exhortations through the Ghadar started from November 1, 1913. These were more prominently displayed in his pamphlet Philosophy of the Bomb circulated by the Ghadar Party. In a lyrical celebration of the bomb thrown at Lord Harding in 1912, in another pamphlet named Yugantar Circular, he exhorted his admirers:

Hail! Hail! Hail! the Bomb of 23 December, 1912... Harbinger of hope and courage, dear re-awakener of slumbering souls... concentrated moral dynamite... the esperanto of revolution.[1]

Imaginations of a popular armed uprising in India with the support of the rebellious soldiers of the British Indian Army moved many of them emotionally. When the First World War erupted, it was considered the most opportune moment for thousands of Ghadarites to go to India to launch a war against British rule. Practically all of them were Punjabis; predominantly Sikhs from the then central Punjab districts. The rebellion was to start from there and the focus was on contacts in Sikh regiments stationed in Punjab. They had little knowledge of the political situation in Punjab and there was little preparation. But the passions were high. Many were ready to sacrifice their lives. They could not wait. The Ghadar paper invited the patriots with a typical call:

> WANTED : Fearless, Courageous Soldiers for launching Ghadar (Mutiny) in India
> SALARY : Death
> AWARD : Martyrdom and Freedom
> PLACE : The Battlefield of India

Within two-to-three months hordes of them started arriving in India in ships. Many leaders were arrested or detained on arrival in India or ordered to be confined to their villages. Kartar Singh Sarabha

[1] cf. Harish K. Puri, Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organisation and Strategy, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1993, p. 67.

was prominent in organising the scattered groups, building contacts in the regiments, collecting funds and arms. The uprising was foiled by the alertness of the British authorities followed by arrests on a large scale. Over 275 were tried in a series of eight conspiracy trials and another eight arms dacoity and murder trials. Forty six of the convicts were executed; the youngest of them was Kartar Singh Sarabha. Seventy Ghadarites were imprisoned and transported for life and 125 were punished to other varying terms of imprisonment. A large number of the rebellious sepoys were executed following court-martial. The price paid for the patriotic passion was terribly high. It was likely that Bhagat Singh was familiar with subsequent sufferings of the families and children of these "desh-bhagats" and with their amazing steadfastness in the midst of exceptional tribulations.

BHAGAT SINGH and his comrades regarded the Ghadar struggle as the first genuinely revolutionary struggle for the freedom of India. It may be helpful to go over a few specimens of the ideas of the Ghadar patriots in their simple poetical compositions, such as,

Sade paise naal sada sir kuttade
Zalam farangi lai gaye des lutt ke
[Cruel foreigners have looted away our country
Using our wealth they hit us hard]

Kha kha golian raj nun kaim keeta
Zalam Nazar Aaya daghedar sanoon
[Suffering bullets on our bodies we established the Empire
The Tyrant appeared a cheat to us]

Nawan roop rachan hind de samaj da
Tukham Udaona zalaman de raj da
[To give a new shape (social, political order) to Indian society
The seed of the rule of the Tyrant has to be exterminated]

Deson kadheeaiy chall ke gorian noon
Dekho pher hunde malla-maal kyon nahin
[Returning (to the country) let's expel the Whites from our land
Then you will see how we become rich and prosperous]

Pehlaan Ghadar Party sare des vich parchar kare
Khullam-khulla parja taayyien choran thein hushiar kare
[First the Ghadar Party should propagate the ideas in the whole country
Openly telling the people to beware of the thieves]
Pindaan vich parchar di lor sanoon
Pher tope bandook di lor sanoon
[We need propaganda in the villages (first)
Then we would need rifles and guns]

Mil ke sabh ghariban ne ghadar karna,
Aas rakhani na sahukar wali.
[All the poor would together fight,
no false hopes *of support* from the rich.]

Pindan waloe mamle band kar deo
[O' village folks, stop paying land revenue]

Miloogi azadi kaum sukh paaoogi
[Freedom will come; the nation will live in comfort]

Vidya batheri vadh jawegi azad hoyaan
[Once freedom comes, education will spread fast]

Door tadon hone gharan dian tangian [Then all the household difficulties will be over]

Howegi tarrakki pichhon bahut hi sukhali saadi
Kar lao tayari pehlan ghadar machaun di.
[Making progress will be much easier thereafter;
First let us make preparation for launching the rebellion.]

There were in these simple-to-understand exhortations all the intimations of a revolutionary struggle in an impossible situation. The Ghadar spirit of secularism was, to Bhagat Singh, a distinctly valuable trait, compared to the religious and mystical orientation of the other groups of revolutionaries of India at that time.

Sanoon lor na Pandatan Kazian di;
Nahin shauq hai bera dubawne da.
[No Pandits or Mullahs do we need;
We are not for the sinking of our boat.]

There were a total of 54 articles on the martyrs published in the Phansi Ank (Executions Special Edition) of the Hindi magazine Chaand (February 1928); 27 of these were on the Ghadar martyrs. There is evidence available that Bhagat Singh and Shiv Verma took very keen interest in that publication. Many of these articles were believed to have been written by Bhagat Singh himself. These provide a fairly good idea of what was upto that time considered inspiring and central to the activities of these Ghadarite martyrs. We may look a little closely at one of these on Kartar Singh Sarabha.[2]

Writing on Kartar Singh, Bhagat Singh described how, like most other Punjabi immigrants on the Pacific coast of the USA and Canada, the young 17-year-old Kartar Singh became a revolutionary. He arrived at San Francisco in 1912 for the purpose of study, but his tender heart was badly bruised by the White Man's racial insults. He would grow "mad" on hearing abuses such as 'Damn Hindu' and 'Black Man'. On thinking about his homeland, he was distressed by "the image of a hapless India bound in chains". There could be no respect for subjects of a foreign rule. He could no more think of studying or making a career. Gradually an organisation of immigrant Indian labourers was formed and a passion for India's freedom was roused. The Indian workers pledged to sacrifice their tan, man dhan (body, mind and wealth) to liberate their country. The Ghadar newspaper was started and Kartar Singh worked very hard in its editorial staff. When he was tired while working at the hand-operated printing machine, he would start reciting his favourite song:

Jinhan des sewa vich pair paya
Ohnan lakh musivataan jhallian ne.
[Those who stepped into service of the country
Faced a hundred thousand pangs.]

More meetings followed and cash donations poured in. Josh vadhda gaya (zeal went on increasing). The Ghadar Party was composed of those who "offered their heads" at the altar of the "goddess of freedom". The manner in which the Ghadarites arrived in India in hordes and worked passionately to launch an armed rebellion with the help of the Indian soldiers of the British Army was amazing. "Like a hurricane they came from somewhere, stoked the fire... of rebellion and were ultimately themselves consumed by it."

YOUNG Bhagat Singh seemed mesmerised by stories of the courage, dedication and organisational abilities of Kartar Singh Sarabha, whom he lovingly described as his guru, a friend, and a comrade. As

[2] "Shri Karatar Singh Sarabha", Chaand Phaansi Ank, Punjabi (Translated reprint of articles) Lokgeet Prakashan, Chandigarh, 2006, p. 117. (Articles by Bhagat Singh were written under different pseudonyms. All quotes are from the above source.)

he stated: One is amazed to think of what he at the age of 19 was able to do ... Such courage! Such self-confidence! So much of self-denial and passionate commitment has been rarely seen earlier. There have not been many people born in India who could be, in real terms, described as baghi (rebels). But among those few leaders Kartar Singh's name is on top of the list.

Bhagat Singh recognised the fact that there was "deficiency of organisation", but appreciated that an attempt was made to overcome that deficiency. More significant, to him, however, was their self-sacrificing passion. He seemed to be fond of mentioning that when Kartar Singh was told he would be awarded death sentence—'phansi', Kartar Singh laughed at it in the court and stated that he would give preference to phansi over life imprisonment, so that by taking birth again I could offer myself for 'death sentence' again. Taking birth again I will be executed again until India gains freedom. That is my last wish.

And it was further mentioned for needed effect that his bravery impressed the judges very much.

Another quality that impressed Bhagat Singh was Kartar Singh's deep sensitivity to the suffering of the people and his sense of compassion. He relates the story of a dacoity where the old lady of the house placed the jewellery—all the dowry she had made for the marriage of her daughter—in front of Kartar Singh and others, asking them to take whatever they required for their cause. Kartar Singh explained to her their lofty cause, expressing regret that they had to adopt such an unbecoming and mean course (of dacoity), and then offered some of the ornaments back to the lady for her daughter's wedding. Bhagat Singh impressed the point that Even while participating in a dacoity-like horrible action, how sensitive and emotional was the heart of Kartar Singh! How sublime!! How great!!!

At the end of the article, the readers were reminded:

> Today again the question is raised as to what was the advantage of their dying? To what purpose did they die? Its answer is straight forward. (He) died for the country.
>
> Ohnan de rag rag vich inquilabi jazba smaya hoya si.
> [Revolutionary sentiment ran in every vein of theirs.]
> Paa laieye shaheedi sher gajj ke Bani sir sheran de kee jana bhajj ke!
> [Let's attain martyrdom, roaring like a lion
> (when) Lions are challenged, why run away (from the field!]

Writing in a similar vein in another article on "Shaheed Dr Mathura Singh" Bhagat Singh concluded with a couplet,

> Hon farishtey bhi fida jin pey
> Yeh who insaan hain.
> (For whom even angels would love to sacrifice
> Such human beings are these.)

As Sohan Singh Josh recalled, Kartar Singh Sarabha was, for all young men of that time, "the model of death-defying audacity, fearlessness and burning hatred against the British Raj". Bhagat Singh's lectures on 'Sarabha Day' celebrations and at other occasions at the conferences of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and the Student Union inspired the youth. "I literally worshipped him," wrote Ajoy Ghosh later, and "to hear someone talk inspiringly about my hero was a great pleasure. I began to feel a liking for Bhagat Singh."[3]

Writing about that phase in Bhagat Singh's thinking, Shiv Verma recalled Bhagat Singh's fascination for anarchist ideas. He found that "Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev in particular were more influenced by the

[3] cf. Sohan Singh Josh, My Meetings with Bhagat Singh and on Other Early Revolutionaries, Communist Party Publication, 1976, p. 16.

Russian anarchist Bakunin".[4] Similar was the observation of Principal Chhabildas. The Ghadarites, as was mentioned above, were also inspired by anarchist writings of Lala Har Dayal in the Ghadar weekly. "Anarchist ideas had a dominant place in the thinking of Har Dayal," observed Harnam Singh Tundilat. "He had a special fascination for Bakunin and his ideas"[5] and that had influenced the thinking of the Ghadarites.

II

THE beginnings of a new way of looking at things may be traced from Bhagat Singh's contact with the Kirti and the revival of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha in April 1928 with the efforts of Sohan Singh Josh. The Kirti, as Josh observed, "represented the continuation of the Ghadar Movement in a new way".[6] The historical conditions in the late 1920s were very different from those of the First Great War. Given the new political orientation towards socialism, it seemed appropriate to go into the weaknesses in the Ghadar project and the reasons of its failure and to draw necessary lessons. With experience and extensive study of available literature, his ideas and objectives seemed to have undergone a change. It was becoming clear that individual heroism or terrorist action could not bring about a revolution. They needed to work among peasants and workers for a long time and to organise them.

Shiv Verma described it as "a shift from anarchism to socialism". Given a degree of new political orientation and training at Moscow, the Kirti Ghadarites were themselves looking at their earlier ideas and strategy in a critical manner.. Ideologically committed to proletarian revolution for the ultimate objective of socialism, they wanted now to awaken and organise the peasants and workers by rejecting the path of individual heroism and terrorist action. Shiv Verma recollected later that "the credit to bring Bhagat Singh from anarchism to socialism goes to two persons— Comrade Sohan Singh Josh and Lala Chhabildas". Josh impressed upon Bhagat Singh the futility of violent or terrorist methods and their counter- revolutionary impact.

The shift at the level of ideas at the meeting of the Hindustan Republican Army held in September 1928 was symbolised by the addition of the word "Socialist" to the existing name. Appreciating that "criticism and independent thinking are the two indispensable qualities of a revolutionary", they came to review the weaknesses which contributed to the failure of the Ghadar movement. Besides lack of a proper organisation and absence of required secrecy in the working of the Ghadarites, Bhagat Singh pointed in his "Letter to the Young Political Workers" to something even more important. That was "the ignorance, apathy and sometimes active opposition of the masses". So he advised "the party should start with the work of mass propaganda. It is very essential."[7]

Two of the most important tasks, Bhagat Singh told Shiv Verma and other comrades in an intimate meeting at Kanpur, were to connect with the people and to organise them: "Sangathan ka Janavaadikaran"—that was an objective he placed before them. However, as we notice in the choice of their activities and preparations, the hold of the ideas of dramatic militant action, individual heroism and self-sacrifice remained strong.

Josh wrote about his meetings and discussions with Bhagat Singh during those days. According to him,

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[4] Shiv Verma, "The Ideological Development of the Revolutionary Movement—From Chapekars to Bhagat Singh", in Bhupendra Hooja (ed.), A Martyr's Notebook, Indian Book Chronicle, Jaipur, 1994, Annexure II, p. 27.

[5] cf. Puri, op. cit., p. 171.

[6] Josh, op. cit. p. 13.

[7] "Letter To The Young Political Workers". Full text in C.E.S. Fairweather 's SECRET Note on the Development of the United Front Movement in Bengal dated Calcutta November 1, 1933, p. 49.

> After a few months of functioning of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha two main trends emerged in the body. One trend was represented by Bhagat Singh and his comrades. It was a minority trend as it became very clear after my discussion with him. Bhagat Singh wanted to do something quick, through the use of bombs and pistols in order to politically awaken the slumbering youth and students... something spectacular that would make them sit up and do something...
>
> The second trend was of organising peasants and workers, and when the revolutionary situation would become mature a call would come to start the revolution.
>
> He could not wait that long... 'Our young hot blood cannot wait for that long,' he would assert. His main line of argument was that 'a single deed makes more propaganda in a few days than a thousand pamphlets'.[8]

Principal Chhabildas made a similar observation. In the ideologically divided Naujawan Bharat Sabha, as he observed, one group favoured the Soviet path. Bhagat Singh belonged to the group that supported the path of the Irish revolution which focused on collection of weapons. He and his comrades believed that no revolution was possible without the use of weapons and bomb explosions.[9]

Josh admitted that he could not oppose Bhagat Singh's line of thought and action because he was not yet well-versed in Marxism.

> I too was raw and immature. I did not know so much of Marxism then as to differentiate between terrorism and Marxism ... Secondly, the Ghadar Party ideology of armed struggle and Ghadar heroes' unprecedented sacrifices had a firm hold on my thinking.[10]

Bhagat Singh's comrades, Yash Pal and Shiv Verma, observed separately that though socialism was accepted as the ideology of the HSRA, that did not mean they had come to understand Marxism or historical materialism. In practice we stuck to our old individual style of actions. Our decision to organise the peasants and workers remained only a pious wish.[11]

Indeed, during his stay at Calcutta during December 1928, Bhagat Singh's major effort was focused on persuading Jatindranath Das to help the HSRA in training his men in bomb-making and setting up factories for that purpose. By February 1929 Agra had become a centre for the manufacture of bombs. The raiding police party which arrested Sukhdev, his comrade and chief organiser of activities of the HSRA for Punjab, in April 1929 from their bomb-making house at Lahore, found bombs they had prepared and also bomb-making material. Bomb factories were also established at Saharanpur and Rohtak.

It seemed that two conflicting imperatives continued to jostle in their minds for attention. The message that Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt sent to the Punjab Students Conference on October 19, 1929 symbolised one. It stated categorically:

> Today we cannot ask the youth to take to pistols and bombs... In the coming Lahore Session the Congress is to give a call for a fierce fight for the independence of the country. The youth will have to bear a great burden in this difficult time in the history of the nation...

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[8] Josh, op. cit., pp. 16–17.

[9] Manorama Dewan, Inquilabi Yatra—Sita Devi aur Principal Chhabildas ki Jeevani (Hindi), National Book Trust, India, New Delhi, 2006, p. 40.

[10] Josh, op. cit., p. 17. See also Sohan Singh Josh, My Tryst With Secularism—An Autobiography, Patriot Publishers, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 110–12 and 133–34

[11] Shiv Verma, op. cit., Annexure II, p. 33.

> They have to awaken the crores of slum-dwellers of the industrial areas and villagers living in worn-out cottages...[12]

The other imperative was reflected in the opening words of the 'Manifesto' of HSRA circulated at the December 1929 Congress Session: "The food on which the tender plant of liberty thrives is the blood of the martyr." On December 23 at attempt was made to blow up the special train of Viceroy Lord Irwin. Gandhi's criticism of that action ("Cult of the Bomb") was followed by a cogently argued defence of the action in a pamphlet The Philosophy of the Bomb. It concluded with the words:

> We shall have our revenge—a people's righteous revenge on the tyrant. Let cowards fall back and cringe for compromise and peace. We ask not for mercy and we give no quarter. Ours is a war to the end—to Victory or Death.[13]

It is believed that Bhagwati Charan's draft had been shown to Bhagat Singh in jail. Vaishampayan's eye-witness account of the death of Bhagwati Charan Vohra while testing a bomb on May 28, 1930 pointed to a vigorous activity by Bhagat Singh's comrades to attempt a jail-break for the release of Bhagat Singh from jail. Preparation for bomb-making was required for that action.[14]

Meanwhile two of the prominent Kabul-based Kirti Ghadarites, Harjap Singh and Gurmukh Singh, had in a special article in the Kirti monthly squarely condemned the continuing fascination of the Indian youth for the terrorist movement. The intent clearly was to caution Bhagat Singh and his radical comrades. Making a critical review of the history of militant movements in India starting from the revolt against the Partition of Bengal in 1905, including the experience of the failed Ghadar Rebellion of 1915, they emphasised on the futility of terror creating methods of killing British officers. A few years earlier we ourselves were supporters of that path. The lesson we learn from the revolutions in other parts of the world is that terrorism, instead of helping towards revolution, had proved to be harmful.[15]

In a somewhat similar vein, Sukhdev, in his last letter to Bhagat Singh, dated October 9, 1930, questioned the sense and utility of the bomb outrages by their comrades after the arrest of both of them.[16]

IT appeared that a more concentrated and serious study and reflection by Bhagat Singh on the correct path for revolution followed in the solitude of the prison cell after his conviction in the Saunders' murder case. And we notice an impressive churning in Bhagat Singh's mind. It may be helpful to go through some of the very astute observations made in his writings such as Why I am an Atheist, his "Introduction" to The Dreamland written by Ram Saran Das, and his "Letter to the Young Worker" dated February 2, 1931.

Talking about the turning point in his revolutionary career, Bhagat Singh wrote candidly:

> I began to study. My previous faith and convictions underwent a remarkable modification. The romance of the violent methods alone which was so prominent among our predecessors, was replaced by serious ideas. No more mysticism, no more blind faith. Realism became our cult. Use of force justifiable when resorted to as a terrible necessity; non-violence as policy indispensable for all mass movements. (Why I am an Atheist)

[12] D.N. Gupta, (ed.), Bhagat Singh—Select Speeches and Writings, National Book Trust, India, New Delhi, 2007, p. 36.

[13] Text in Gupta, op. cit., p. 152.

[14] Cited by Shiv Verma, Sansmritiyan (Hindi), Lok Prakashan Graha, Delhi, 5th Edition, 1967, pp. 165–67.

[15] Harjap Singh and Gurmukh Singh, "Hindustani Naujawan ate Terrorist Tehreek" The Kirti (Punjab) February 1930, pp. 9–13.

[16] Text in Malvinderjit Singh Waraich and Dr Gurdev Singh, The Hanging of Bhagat Singh: Complete Judgement and Other Documents, Unistar Books, Chandigarh, pp. 205–207.

> The revolutionaries know better than anybody else that the socialist society cannot be brought about by violent means. ("Introduction" to The Dreamland)

The message addressed "To the Young Political Worker", written less than 50 days before his death, draws attention to the fact that "our movement is passing through a very important phase at present". The reference was to the national political constitutional struggle which he described as "our movement". Gandhi was released from Jail on January 26, 1931 and reference was made to the points relating to constitutional reforms on which the Congress was likely to make a compromise. Bhagat Singh tended to educate "the Young Political Workers", that compromise was not a bad thing; in fact it was a step forward in the struggle. After supporting his contention with references to two of the steps taken by Lenin, he reiterated: Tilak's policy, quite apart from the ideal, i.e., his strategy, was the best. You are fighting to get sixteen annas from your enemy, you get one anna. Pocket it and fight for the rest.

Revolutionaries may feel disgusted, he cautioned, but that would be wrong. "Leave sentimentalism aside," he says. "Be prepared to face the facts... Revolution is a very difficult task. It is beyond the power of any man to make a revolution."[17]

He then went on to explain:

> Apparently I have acted like a terrorist. But I am not a terrorist. I am a revolutionary who has got such definite ideas of a lengthy programme... Here I warn my readers to be careful while reading my words. They should not try to read between the lines. Let me announce with all the strength at my command that I am not a terrorist and I never was, except perhaps in the beginning of my revolutionary career. And I am convinced that we cannot gain anything through those methods.

And he went further:

> Terrorism is a confession that the Revolutionary mentality has not penetrated down to the masses. It is thus a confession of our failure... Its history is a history of failures in every land—in France, in Russia, in the Balkan countries, in Germany, in Spain, everywhere. It bears the germs of defeat within itself... It is aloof from the life of the masses and once installed on the throne runs the risk of being petrified into tyranny.
>
> The inspiring ideal for all and sundry workers should not be that of dying for the cause but of living for the cause and living usefully and worthily. You shall have to be very sober. The programme requires at least twenty years for its fulfillment. Cast aside your youthful dreams of a revolution within ten years or Gandhi's utopian promises of Swaraj within one year. It requires neither the emotion nor the death, but the life of constant struggle, suffering and sacrifice. Crush your individuality first.[18]

Perhaps through that letter written in the solitude of the prison cell, Bhagat Singh was trying to settle scores with his own erstwhile fixations. That is what Noorani referred to when he observed that Bhagat Singh "had the capacity to brood and to torment his soul over the past".[19]

During his last days, however, Bhagat Singh seemed to feel a sense of fulfilment.

My name has become a symbol of revolution. The ideals and sacrifices of the revolutionary party have raised me very high. So exalted is my place that in case I continued to live I can in no case rise higher than this... Who could be luckier than me? I am proud of myself these days.

[17] "To The Young Political Workers", op. cit., p. 49.

[18] Ibid., p. 50. (Emphasis added)

[19] A. G. Noorani, The Trial of Bhagat Singh: Politics of Justice, Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, 2005, p. 258.

That is what he reportedly wrote in a note to his comrades on March 22, 1931, a day before he was executed.[20] Was it enough that his countrymen had given him unexpected amount of love and admiration; that he and his name had become a 'talisman of revolution'? Did he feel assured that his martyrdom would promote a Leninist path of revolution? Practically all of his leading comrades were either dead or in jails. After their impending execution there would be hardly any leading comrade left behind who could provide the kind of leadership that he himself was capable of? His passionate admirers would celebrate the sacrifice of the martyr as glorious in itself, but regret the absence of a possibility of organising themselves for revolution. Ajoy Ghosh referred to the factional split and betrayal by erstwhile comrades that led to a virtual collapse of the HSRA. "In the aftermath," as Noorani observed, "there was depression all around. The Lahore Conspiracy Case dealt a death blow to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association."[21]

Shiv Verma reflected upon the inherent contradictions in their thinking at that time. According to him,

Our understanding of Marxism was faulty... We hoped to combine violent activities, which included murder of tyrannical government officials and sporadic insurrections, with the building of mass organisation of workers, peasants, youth, and students. But, in practice, our main emphasis remained on preparations for violent activities and armed actions.[22]

One suspected an irony in the fact that after that kind of candid analysis, Verma also underlined his appreciation for individual heroism and readiness to lay down one's life. The hold of "sar faroshi ki tamanna" on their imagination seemed to define what they stood for and lived for.

The worldview and ideas of Bhagat Singh and his close comrades represented a great advance over those of the Ghadar patriots. The Ghadarites were not thinkers. They were not tormented by conflicting ideas of revolution or appropriate goals and methods, as Bhagat Singh was. The Ghadarites could not wait. A leading Ghadar patriot, Prithvi Singh Azad, put it candidly: "Our passions were our leaders." Bhagat Singh, on the other hand, was professedly a man of reason. He appeared to reject terrorism and felt that living for a cause was more important the dying for a cause. He expressed his reasoned preference for the Marxian thought process and the Leninist path of revolution. He also recognised the strengths and weaknesses of the Gandhian struggle for freedom and wanted his organisation to work as a militant wing of the mainstream national movement in order to save it from the vested interests. However, the spell of his model, Kartar Singh Sarabha, his dauntless courage and the moral grandeur of laying down his life was overwhelming. It seemed to be rationalised in the view that "Bhagat Singh dead will be more dangerous to the British enslavers than Bhagat Singh alive".[23] Like he admitted to Sohan Singh Josh, and like the choice made by the Ghadarites at the beginning of the First Great War, he and his comrades seemed to be in a hurry, not yet prepared for long time work and preparation among peasants and workers to bring about a revolution. It appeared that in spite of greater clarity about the right objectives and methods, the romance of the violent methods and of the grandeur of self-sacrifice could not be restrained; not in the face of tremendous difficulties of rousing and organising the slumbering masses. He seemed convinced, however, that his sacrifice would do far more in awakening and rousing the people for political action than the earlier sacrifices of a very large number of Ghadarites could do.

[20] Virendra Sandhu (ed.), Sardar Bhagat Singh: Pattar aur Dastavez (Hindi), Rajpal & Sons, Delhi, 1977, pp. 97–98.

[21] Noorani, op. cit., p. 254.

[22] Shiv Verma, "From Chapekars to Bhagat Singh", op. cit., pp. II 33–39.

[23] Ibid., p. 41.

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