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Bhagat Singh and Fascism

Hartosh Singh Bal, JNU

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POLtge7ONXo>

Transcript of Bhagat Singh and Fascism, a lecture given at JNU.
I've done my best to recreate this accurately, but a few errors may remain. I left out filler phrases and fixed areas where I think he may have spoken incorrectly.

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So, I'm glad to be here. It's a pleasant evening, some mosquitoes, and a talk that has preceded me which I'm thankful for because I told Aparna that I will draw off a little from what she says. She has laid out the entire span of utopian ideas and the connections with Bhagat Singh.

I want to suggest, in terms of the topic that you've kept before us of Bhagat Singh and fascism that I think all of us have our own Bhagat Singhs and that depends on who we are. We must be clear on this. There is no one Bhagat Singh that we will all agree on and I think we draw on different parts, different ideas, some from the reality of Bhagat Singh, some from the myth of Bhagat Singh, and both exist to a great degree.

I want to just locate myself in this framework. Who am I? What do I take away from Bhagat Singh? Where does it fit in with the idea of fascism? Fascism itself is a big word, and particularly the Indian organized left, the CPI(M), etc., love to fight over whether 'this is fascist or not'. Why Prakash Karat chose again to write that, I have no idea, but sometimes I'm puzzled by the directions they jump in.

Fascism in the current context, to me, broadly, what it connects with is that we are not just faced with the threat but we are living in what the RSS calls a Hindu rashtra. This is a de facto Hindu rashtra. How does it connect up with the other ideas of fascism? There is no one fascism, and the term itself is flexible enough to allow many interpretations, but the idea of a glorious past... of blood, war, fatherland and an outgroup, I think are common to many of these and certainly all these exist in India today. This is what we face.

Where does Bhagat Singh come into this? and where do I take Bhagat Singh and place him in this context? It comes from my own location. Who, after all, am I? I am from Punjab. Like Bhagat Singh, I come from a Jatt Sikh farming background... down the generations. Also, because of this background, I can lay claim to a certain strain of subcontinental and international ideas.

I'm speaking to you in English and I deliberately choose to. I can speak in Hindi but I prefer not to speak in Hindi. I think Hindi is a subnational language. It should remain there unless we are forced otherwise to utter it. Because I speak English, I draw from a past that includes Europe, It includes the Renaissance and It includes the origins of the English language.

As somebody who is of Sikh origin, I'm not a believer. I draw upon both certain strains of thinking that we today term Hindu, in terms of Vedantic thought. I draw upon Islam. If anybody has any doubt about how Islam has fed into Sikhism, they should just look at the shape of a gurdwara and take away from it themselves what it means. The idea of the langar, Sufi influences, all that is very apparent.

And so for me, to have any part of any conversation that says we regret this part of our past would be to regret myself. And this is something that the present does not realize: that to actually do away with bits of your past is to tear yourself inside out. Our language, our ways of thinking, everything is informed by the various influences that have fed into it.

Given this background, what does it mean to be Indian today? To me, the idea of India is not an idea that goes back. Historians locate it in many places. I don't think it's an idea that has anything to do with history. I do not see 1857 as a national rebellion. I see it as a mutiny, and I can discuss that later.

To me, India gets formed in '47 or '50 on a constitutional republican idea, as a political unit. I don't think it has ever existed before, and any attempt to locate it through history as a nation is a deception practiced as much by national historians as well as by right-wing historians, though the right historians are far more stupid in what they do, far less informed in their own scholarship, but the mistake is the same in both cases.

In Punjab, in 1847, the Sikh Empire is coming to an end. After Ranjit Singh, there is a battle with the British. The British are aided by the same set of soldiers that ten years later go to form the core of the Mutiny, but they are part of the army that is destroying whatever the last subcontinental kingdom that exists.

At the end of it, a Muslim poet of Punjab writes, this is Jang Muhammad, in the history of the war, recounts it. He says that, "In Punjab we have never seen this division. Who are these people from outside? These Hindustanis, Dakhnis, Purbiyas, who have come to our door to take away Punjab from us."

It is very possible on this basis to argue for a past where India consisted of Punjabis and Dakhnis and Purbiyas and Hindustanis, to make of this as this one political unit. This idea did not exist in 1847 or 1857 and certainly did not create it. It was an uprising of Awadh and the Hindi belt. It did not consist of anything more than that, in

my opinion, and I certainly do not think it forms an idea for India as we see it today.

This is the Punjab in which Bhagat Singh is born, and I'm locating Bhagat Singh specifically because, in the entire framework of revolutionary thought, no other figure appeals to me, simply because of the reading he did or the kind of viewpoint he had. Perhaps it is my own Sikh origin that places me in a position where I think it is the one framework of thought which is this-worldly.

In Sikhism there is no renunciation, there is no asceticism and there is no fasting. So I have little sympathy, admiration yes, but somebody like Azad leaves me cold. I do not understand him. I do not understand the Bengali revolutionaries who go back to Bankim, which to me, reading *Vande Mataram* or reading the book that gives rise to it, I think Hindu communalism is already sitting in that book. To take inspiration from that leaves me gobsmacked: how can you even begin to look at this as the place from which you draw?

I cannot interact with Vivekanand and take away anything that makes sense to me. Yeah, so, in that sense, Bhagat Singh is located at a place where I am comfortable. He reads things I understand. I can disagree with him.

What are the things that are shaping Bhagat Singh? His uncle Ajit Singh, the Pagdi Sambhal Jatta movement. Aparna, you mentioned the Narodniks; that is important because the debate with the later communists was whether the peasants or labor would be the revolutionary class.

In Punjab, in a certain way, the idea of the peasants as a revolutionary class has survived up to the farmers movement, but remember that it is still a misleading idea. The peasantry of Punjab is not the peasantry of Russia. This is a dominant-caste landowning peasantry. There are gradations and levels below this peasantry who get ignored in all the talk of revolution that Bhagat Singh and his compatriots carry out.

Caste is a missing word from the entire framework of this thought, and it is a big absence, and if you have to pick out points where not just Bhagat Singh but a huge part of the Indian movement did not realize Indian reality, you must begin with this.

The Pagdi Sambhal Jatta movement itself is about the Jatt Sikhs, the ownerships of the land. A huge number of people are left out of it. But it is Bhagat Singh's uncle. Lala Lajpat Rai takes part in

a people or a culture, lies at the heart of this whole project, where you have to reinvent a past, where you have to create a history, where you have to denigrate others, where you have to be selective.

He says the reason to support Nehru and subsequent events can bring us to many criticisms on Nehru but he says that he's looking ahead. He wants to create a nation or a republic starting from here. He is not looking to the past greatness of some Hindu civilization that should shape us today.

These to me are the four aspects that I think are necessary today in shaping any kind of intellectual counterpoint to what is happening in the country. This intellectual counterpoint today cannot be sought by seeking lessons in Bhagat Singh and what he did at that time. They cannot be sought by looking at lessons in the Soviet Union, but the possibilities of thought, or the ability to think independently, question and push back and criticize what clearly is the tyranny of the present I think those are the things that we can draw away from Bhagat Singh, or at least I can.

I think everybody here has to find their own way around it, tackle Bhagat Singh, disagree with him, criticize him, but I think that engagement is very positive. And that engagement, I think, is necessary if we have to take terms like fascism and say why we oppose them.

I think we have to define for ourselves what we are opposing. I do not think we are opposing it today necessarily to go back to the India of 2014 that existed before. That India is not going to come back. Neither was it a great place to begin with. It required huge changes.

So, if we have to look forward beyond what is happening now, the idea that there was some secular utopia where the media was free and where the country was going to great places is another kind of idiocy. It was not. What maybe today is worse, but going back is not going to change anything.

So how do you go forward? I think you have to do it by a certain independence of thought. That, to me, is what I take away in this context.

Thank you.

this movement. Ajit Singh is deported, but Singh's father, who is a compatriot of his passes on many lessons that relate to that movement on to Bhagat Singh.

Bhagat Singh is also the last sort of ember of a strange combination in Punjab, which dies out after that, of the coming together of two antagonistic streams in Punjab, and these are the streams of the Arya Samaj and newly revivalistic Sikhism, which are totally antagonistic to each other. This largely begins with the express entry of Dayanand Saraswati.

The Gujaratis have their own particular predilections, but in this case I don't think we have texts which are as derogatory towards other religions as we get with the Arya Samaj entering Punjab, but it also lays down the groundwork for a large number of institutions. It also, to some degree, creates the prevalence of Hindi in urban Punjab that still exists.

The division between the Arya Samaj and the Sikh movement that comes in opposition and in contest with the Arya Samaj is prevalent right through the history of Punjab. It is what drives the divisions in the Punjabi Sabha movement, where the Hindus largely are on one side espousing Hindi, the Sikhs on the other side espousing Punjabi. It is the era of militancy where there's a split in the newspapers themselves between Hindi and Punjabi, and these are communal splits.

So, in all the appropriation of Bhagat Singh across streams from the RSS onwards, the one stream that does not appropriate Bhagat Singh, though it will not openly criticize him, is that of Sikh communalism, the same communalism that claimed Punjab. They will not have Bhagat Singh's posters in the SGPC or the gurdwara movement in terms of the large heroes. Bhagat Singh has no place, though they will not directly criticize Bhagat Singh.

It is against this background that I want to take away four important things from Bhagat Singh that, personally, to me, matter.

The first, most important thing is that it is often cited that Lala Lajpat Rai... the injury to Lala Lajpat Rai... leads Bhagat Singh to take revenge. But I think he also had a clear understanding of the communalism of Lala Lajpat Rai and a part of the Congress. He brought out a pamphlet which was critical of Lala Lajpat Rai. I'm just drawing on the parts of Bhagat Singh that I think can be directly ascribed to him, and you can correct me where I'm wrong.

So the most important point here for me is that he strictly stands up and takes a stand against Lala Lajpat Rai, despite the huge difference in seniority and public popularity at that time. He does remain anonymous in the pamphlet that attacks Lala Lajpat Rai; he is still a young man, but he takes a position.

This division in Punjab, of the kind of communalism that was being stoked, leads to huge problems through the history of Punjab.

The second point I find interesting about Bhagat Singh was his ability to actually take positions which you can agree or disagree with but are not compromised. Very early on there is an essay of his in school where he actually writes, and this is something that can be rightly criticized, but he comes up with the hypothesis that Devanagari should be the script for all North Indian languages, very early on, because it would allow mutual intelligibility among various North Indian languages. I find it an interesting idea, not one I agree with. I've spoken about what I think of Hindi and what has happened with Hindi in this country.

The third important thing about Bhagat Singh is that he directly, personally, writes this piece on "Why I am an Atheist". It is at this point, I think, he manages to radically reject both the influences which shape him. Both the Arya Samaj and the Sikh ethos that have shaped him are rejected in this clear, categorical statement of "Why I am an Atheist".

It requires, in the India of that time, in the Punjab of that time, a great amount of courage to take a position which may not be so difficult today, and to take it publicly, in a way that few other people managed to do so at that point of time. Again, to me, it holds important lessons because it is possible to be engaged in active Indian public life, and that should be possible today also with this categorical statement.

One of the strange things that we see in India's politics today is the inability of any political party with support to be able to stand away from religion and talk about a common humanity on the basis of which we can conduct our politics. Certainly the Congress is incapable of that. That Rahul Gandhi has to stand up with a photo of Shiva in Parliament, and we have to accept it as a necessity of our times, just tells you how stupid our politics has become, or how much we have degraded ourselves in trying to support ideas that make no sense at all.

The last point, and this I think is an even more fundamental point for somebody from the Sikhs: when he is on the run, he finally shears his hair. That renunciation of Sikh identity, when necessary, is also, to me, an act of courage because we are tied up with collective identities. This idea to challenge what has been passed on, to invent yourself anew, to define your politics in terms that make sense to you, not in terms of others, also leads me to believe and this is pure speculation that the placement of Bhagat Singh entirely in the context of Marxist communism is, to me, wrong.

There is nothing to suggest that he would have stayed there or he had reached there. If you look at the constitution of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, what it is aspiring for is a federated United States of India. The idea is being borrowed from the Constitution of the United States rather than from the Soviet Union at that time.

What it is looking for is universal suffrage at that point of time, and it is envisaging the construction of a constitution when India becomes free. None of them seems to suggest direct influence from the Soviet Union. There are statements that are attributed over and over again to him that he has talked of revolution. Indeed, he has. He has talked of revolution, of armed rebellion, but whether he was a traditional Marxist in the sense we have to understand today, I don't think we have any evidence for that.

And I say that because I think the possibilities lie in exploring what lies outside these labels and defining our politics. That remains true, as true today here as it was in the past then.

And this last fact is brought out in a piece, I think, which is in *Kirti*, so I think it is directly Bhagat Singh's piece, where he writes about the difference between Bose and Nehru. And the difference between Bose and Nehru, he says, is, he's writing to the young "do not support Bose, support Nehru".

The reason for supporting Nehru is important, because I think that gets to the heart of why I find Bhagat Singh interesting. He says that Bose's problem is that he looks back to a glorious Indian past for inspiration. This glorious Indian past is what defines, over and over again, whether you look at the RSS, whether you look at Vivekanand, whether you look at Bose, whether you look at the Arya Samaj... going back to the Vedic past. This need to go back to the past, or it defines the BJP today, to claim some glory for yourself as