

They Too Fought For Freedom: A Look at *The Legend of Bhagat*

***Singh* (2002)**

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Abstract

Bhagat Singh, perhaps India's best known revolutionary, has been the subject of a number of biopics. More often than not, these films have presented Singh as a romantic revolutionary, full of patriotism but short of intellectual vigour. However, Raj Kumar Santoshi's 2002 film, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, highlighted the intellect and ideas of Bhagat Singh and his Comrades. In the paper, I discuss the intellectual development of Bhagat Singh and his Comrades as depicted in the movie and the role of the Revolutionaries in the freedom struggle of India.

Keywords: Agency, Bhagat Singh, Biopics, Books to Films, Cinema, Indian Freedom Struggle, Revolutionaries, Sukhdev, Violence.

“Bhagat Singh...became a symbol; the act was forgotten, the symbol remained, and within a few months each town and village of the Punjab and to a lesser extent in the rest of northern India, resounded with his name. Innumerable songs grew up around him and the popularity that the man achieved was something amazing.” Thus wrote Jawaharlal Nehru in his autobiography while reflecting on the popularity of Bhagat Singh, a few years after the latter’s death (134). It was a popularity that had perplexed Nehru even in the wake of the hanging of Bhagat Singh along with his two comrades, Sukhdev and Rajguru, on 23rd March, 1931. At that time, speaking at the Karachi Congress, Nehru had “wondered aloud how it was that a ‘mere chit of a boy suddenly leapt to fame” (Maclean 47).

Perhaps Pt. Nehru would have been further amazed to know that more than eight decades after his martyrdom, Bhagat Singh still enjoys a popularity that none of the other revolutionary has either been able to gain or to sustain with his name becoming synonymous with India’s revolutionary struggle for freedom and his portrait with the hat becoming one of the most iconic images of all time. More than any other person involved in the freedom struggle, it is his life that has repeatedly been shown on celluloid, with several Hindi movies being made based either on his life and/or inspired by his ideology: *Shaheed-e-Azam* (1954), *Shaheed Bhagat Singh*(1963), *Shaheed* (1965), *Amar Shahid Bhagat Singh* (1974), *23rd March 1931: Shaheed* (2002),*AbKeBaras* (2002), *Ansh* (2002), *Shaheed-e-Azam* (2002), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), and *Rang De Basanti* (2006).

2002, in fact, seems to have been the year that India rediscovered the revolutionary with as many as five movies related to Bhagat Singh being released. Besides the biopics: *23rd March 1931: Shaheed*, *Shaheed-e-Azam*, and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, there were also the little known *Ansh* where Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, and Rajguru were presented in neo-avatars while in the reincarnation drama *AbKeBaras*, the lead actor went back to a previous life to play a character modelled on Bhagat Singh. Another biopic, *Shaheed Bhagat Singh*, with Punjabi singer Harbhajan Singh

Mann in the lead role, was never released after the disappointing box-office runs of these movies.

Among this slew of movies, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, stood out however because of the powerful performances of the actors, a taut screenplay by AnjumRajabali, rousing dialogues by Piyush Mishra, and some inspired direction by Raj Kumar Santoshi. It also won two national awards: one for the best feature film in Hindi and the second for its lead actor Ajay Devgan who played the eponymous hero. In this paper, I will discuss this movie as it presented a different picture from the movies that preceded it though it also bowed to box-office diktats by presenting a love angle and getting Bhagat Singh and his supposed betrothed singing a song in the mustard fields. However, the song “CheereWalya” is a *ghori* (wedding song) of Bhagat Singh that is sung in Punjab till date and thus shows that certainly some research had gone into the making of the film. At the same time, it makes you wonder why the reigning monarch of the British Empire is referred to as a queen throughout the movie when it was King George V who was ruling at that time!

These anomalies apart, what gives the movie its edge is that its presentation of Bhagat Singh is neither that of a gun-toting super-hero (in one of the other movies, he virtually flies in the air) nor that of a romantic-idealizer bursting out into a song at the drop of his hat. Partly based on Piyush Mishra’s play *GaganDhamamaBajoyo*, the film showcases not only Bhagat Singh but also his comrades: BhagwatiCharanVohra, Sukhdev, Rajguru, Bejoy Kumar Sinha, Jatin Das, Shiv Verma, JaidevKapur (who have usually been sidelined even in revolutionary history which has concentrated on Bhagat Singh to the exclusion of all others) not as all-powerful heroes but as young men trying to find a way forward through debates and discussions. Pitted not only against the formidable British Raj but also against the dominant political ideology of the Congress which saw the use of violence as reprehensible, these handful of young men were still able to convince a people that there were more than one way to win freedom. In the paper thus I would like to discuss how the freedom struggle of India was not a homogenized affair but rather incorporated various thoughts and methods of struggle

The film traces the journey of Singh from a young child who visited the Jallianwallah Bagh after the gruesome tragedy to collect the blood-splattered soil from the site and his initial idealization of Gandhi: “He cannot bear one word against Gandhi,” his doting father, Kishan Singh, informs one of his friends. Indeed, Gandhi’s promise of delivering *Swaraj* within a year had thrilled many young boys who left their schools at the call of Gandhi. Singh was no exception. His class mate at the DAV school, Lahore, Jai Dev Gupta, later recalled that both of them left school without even asking for permission from “ ‘Sardar Kishan Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai and plunged deep into the movement’ ” (qtd in Shankar 81). The withdrawal of students from state-run or state-sponsored educational institutions was one of the major bones of contention between Gandhi and other leaders like Rabindranath Tagore and Lala Lajpat Rai who while approving of the non-cooperation did not want young men to give up on their education. Educated men, they felt, were what the country needed. However, the student community not only responded to the clarion call of Gandhi but also participated with great fervor in the non-cooperation movement. The withdrawal of the movement abruptly after the massacre of the policemen at Chauri-Chaura by an enraged mob “was not well-received by many leaders who reacted strongly, wrote letters of protest and felt greatly betrayed” (Shankar 75). Lala Lajpat Rai, not only sent a strong letter of protest to Gandhi calling the withdrawal a “Himalayan blunder” but also wrote later that:

The decision about Bardoli and the Bardoli resolutions which were the outcome of it, burst upon a confiding, expectant and hopeful country like a bombshell. The shock was too sudden, cataclysmic and unexpected. It bewildered, and to a certain extent, surprised and angered the people. About twenty thousand of the rank and file were in jails. About ten million rupees had been collected. The provinces had been depleted of most of their prominent workers. The people had kept their cool under the greatest provocation given by the Government and its agents. Thousands had suffered cruelties at the hands of the police and in jails, without any retaliation. All this had been done in the expectation of the millennium at Bardoli. All of a sudden came the collapse. Disappointment, resentment and anger was bound to follow, as a reaction. (qtd. in Chand 387)

Rai might have added ‘disenchantment’ to the reaction. Almost all the members of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Party (HSRA) - the revolutionary organization

that grew out of the earlier Hindustan Republican Association and formally came into existence in August 1928 at the Kotla grounds in Delhi through the combined efforts of Singh, Sukhdev, Chandrashekhar Azad, Shiv Verma, and Bejoy Kumar Sinha, and joined the various revolutionary groups of different provinces into one body - had been students at the time of the non-cooperation who had left their educational institutions at the clarion call of Gandhi and now suddenly found themselves in a dead-end street. A dialogue in Mishra's play, which finds an echo in the movie, captures well the plight of the students:

What enthusiasm was there! We were part of the movement. Gandhi ji proclaimed we don't want the knowledge imparted by these Britishers. The children threw away their bags. They made a bonfire of their books and pencils. Instead they went about distributing pamphlets. And then suddenly they came to know that the movement had been withdrawn. Astounded the children gaped towards the (darkening) sky. The gates of the government schools are closed for them. No hope for admission in the government colleges. Where to go?...What to do?...Whom to appeal to?...Nobody to hear their pleas. Nobody concerned about them. (Ellipses in the original. Translation mine 54)

"It is good that Lalaji (Lala Lajpat Rai) opened this National College otherwise we would have been out on the streets," Sukhdev (Sushant Singh, in a career-defining role that makes one wonder why he did not pick up a national award too) answers Bhagat's question. The National College, formally known as the Tilak School of Politics, was established in 1920 in Lahore, under the aegis of Lajpat Rai's Servants of the People Society and was part of a number of such educational institutions opened all over India. With an Andaman-returned revolutionary, BhaiParmanand, as its Vice-Chancellor, the College was a breeding ground for political workers who would participate in the national movement. The fervor was revolutionary with an emphasis on armed struggle for freedom. Class-room lectures would often become a debate regarding the various issues of the day. Recalling those debates, Hindi writer Yashpal, who was also a student of the college, wrote "Jaichandraji (Professor JaichandraVidyalankar) used to encourage questioning and reasoning among his students...His subject was Ancient Indian History but often we would start discussing the 1920-21 Satyagraha Movement and the reasons for its failure. For those students, who were passionate about liberating the country, these discussions had only one

agenda and that was to find another way out of the political quagmire...” (Translation mine.70, 75).

This long-forgotten teacher features in the movie as he guides his students: Vohra, Singh, and Sukhdev towards a more organized form of rebellion rather than dissipating their energies in useless skirmishes with the British. In real life too, it was Vidyalkar who had organized a revolutionary network in the Punjab after his meeting with Revolutionary Sachindranath Sanyal. Sanyal - who holds the distinction of being awarded life-imprisonment twice by the colonial authorities and whose memoirs *Bandi Jeevan* (Life in Captivity) was cited by a British secret report as “one of the best known gems of terrorist literature” with its author having “sent more young men to the gallows or to prison for terrorism than any man who has lived in India” was amongst the first revolutionaries to enter into a dialogue with Gandhi (Hale 69). After the collapse of the Non-Cooperation Movement, Sanyal had written a letter to Gandhi, stating that his conception of Non-Violence was half-baked. “The non-violence that India preaches is not non-violence for the sake of non-violence, but non-violence for the good of humanity, and when this good for humanity will demand violence and bloodshed, India will not hesitate to shed blood...” (Shankar 201). What Sanyal seems to be suggesting over here is that the Gandhian message of “*Ahimsa Parmodharma*” (Non-violence is the ultimate Dharma) is only the half-truth both literally and figuratively as the entire *shloka* from the *Mahabharata* reads: “*Ahimsa Parmodharma, Dharma Himsatathaiva cha*” which has been translated as Non-Violence is the ultimate Dharma but so is Righteous Violence. In his manifesto of the Hindustan Republican Association, a revolutionary party that he had founded in 1924, Sanyal had demarcated between “official terrorism” of the state and the “counter-terrorism” of the revolutionaries, which was, as he was quick to point out, something that had been forced on them: “The Indian revolutionaries are neither terrorists nor anarchists...Terrorism is never their object and they cannot be called terrorists. They do not believe that terrorism alone can bring independence and they do not want terrorism for terrorism’s sake although they may at times resort to this method as a very effective means of retaliation” (Gupta 118).

The violence/ Non-Violence debate, in fact, runs throughout the movie right from the time when a seething Sukhdev says to a college-mate that “You will remember Chauri-Chaura but forget Jallianwallah Bagh.” This pitting of a retaliatory violent act by the Indians against a brutal show of power by the state underscores the point of the revolutionaries who always emphasized that their acts of violence were a response to the atrocities committed by the British . “What is violence?” Bhagat Singh asks point-blank to Jatin Das when the latter tries to convince him to join the Congress and a moment later latches on to him. As the hapless Jatin tries to defend himself by attacking in turn, Bhagat stops him by saying that what he was doing was violence but what Jatin is doing is simply self-defence and this defence did not – for the revolutionaries – meant turning the other cheek but giving it back as hard as getting it. Rather cheekily (the pun is intended), Sukhdev is shown as being slapped soundly by a police-officer. He, however, keeps his cool and doesn’t retaliate. The man slaps him once again and now there is no holding back as Sukhdev pounces on the man and gives him a sound thrashing.

For Gandhi, however, there could be no two ways about violence. The only difference between the “violent force of the British and the violent force of the (as he put it) growing party of violence” was that while the former was “organized” while the latter was “unorganized” (CWMG Vol. XLVIII 499). Even before coming to India, Gandhi had denounced the killing of Sir William Curzon Wylie, Aide-de-Camp to the Secretary of State, Lord Morley, by MadanLalDhingra, on 1st July 1909 in the Institute of Imperial study, London. At that time Gandhi had called Dhingra a ‘misguided youth’ and had severely criticized the use of violence, expounding that “One of the accepted and time-bound methods to attain the end is that of violence. The assassination of Sir Curzon Wylie was an illustration in its worst and most detestable form of that method (of violence)” (Parel 136). Dhingra had, of course, defended his action by stating during his trial that ,”I believe that a nation held down by a foreign bayonet is in a perpetual state of war. Since open battle is rendered impossible to disarmed races, I attacked by surprise, since guns were denied to me I drew forth my pistol and fired” (qtd in Singh and Lal 142).

Unlike Gandhi who denounced Dhingra and his action, Bhagat was all praise for Dhingra. In an article on the revolutionary published in the newspaper *Kirti* in March 1928, Singh had praised Dhingra's bravery and firm resolve, calling him "an invaluable gem of a dead nation" (Translation mine. Singh and Lal 144). This write-up on Dhingra was part of a series on little known martyrs that Bhagat Singh wrote in the Punjabi/Urdu newspaper *Kirti* from March to October 1928. However, if *Kirti* was willing to publish such articles, it really wasn't the case with more mainstream newspapers most of which shied away from giving adequate coverage to the revolutionaries.

"Why is it so?" asks an important woman revolutionary, Durga Vohra, agitatedly in one of the scenes as the revolutionaries discuss the lack of space given to them to put forth their views in national press. "The entire country wanted Lalaji's death to be avenged. We did it, risking our lives." "This is what you say," Bhagat replies. "But a few posters in Lahore, a couple of news items do not make the whole of India. The fact is we haven't been able to connect with the masses." "You are right, Bhagat," Durga's husband Bhagwati now puts in. "I have been in Calcutta for quite some time now but there is hardly anybody who has heard about our party and even less who know about its aims." As the revolutionaries look at each other despondently, a Congress procession marches by. "Here we are," Chandrashekhar Azad, now joins the conversation "who are ready to kill and die and yet nobody is bothered about us while these people, even if they sneeze, the whole world comes to know about it."

Desirous of finding a platform to air their views, the revolutionaries decided to create a *loud voice to make the deaf hear*. The bombs in the assembly on 8th April 1929 were not only a challenge to the British Raj but also to the Congress. The pamphlets thrown by Batukeshwar Dutt and Singh associated the political parties of the day as dogs "ever quarrelling over the distribution of the expected bones" and thrust their own party to the forefront: "The Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, in all seriousness, realizing the full responsibility, had decided and ordered its army to do

this particular action, so that a stop be put to this humiliating farce..." (Gupta 12-13)' The pamphlets were signed by Commander-in-Chief, Balraj.

Gandhi was, of course, not impressed by this and denounced "the bomb throwers (as having) discredited the cause of freedom in whose name they threw the bomb" (CMWG Vol. XI 26). Motilal Nehru's response was more circumspect: "It is wise statesmanship alone which can, by strengthening the forces of non-violence, meet the forces of violence...The choice lies between Gandhi and 'Balraj'" (qtd in MacLean 122).

Gandhi and Balraj: the debate between non-violence and violence was now centre-stage. And from the platform thus provided by the Colonial government, the statements thundered out, detailing their vision of a socialist society:

Revolution does not necessarily involve sanguinary strife nor is there any place in it for individual vendetta. It is not the cult of the bomb and the pistol. By "Revolution" we mean that the present order of things, which is based on manifest injustice, must change. Producers or laborers, in spite of being the most necessary elements of society, are robbed by their exploiters of their labour and deprived of their elementary rights. The peasant who grows corn for all, starves with his family; the weaver who supplies the world market with textile fabrics, has not enough to cover his own and his children's bodies; masons, smiths and carpenters who raise magnificent palaces, live like pariahs in the slums. The capitalists and exploiters, the parasites of society, squander millions on their whims. These terrible inequalities and forced disparity of chances are bound to lead to chaos. This state of affairs cannot last long, and it is obvious, that the present order of society in merry-making is on the brink of a volcano...A radical change, therefore, is necessary and it is the duty of those who realize it to reorganize society on the socialistic basis. Unless this thing is done and the exploitation of man by man and of nations by nations is brought to an end, sufferings and carnage with which humanity is threatened today cannot be prevented. All talk of ending war and ushering in an era of universal peace is undisguised hypocrisy. (Gupta 23)

The hunger strike that soon followed the reading out of this historic statement in court brought the revolutionaries even more in the public conscious. The strike began on 15 June 1929 when "seventeen convicts and prisoners on trial in jails across Punjab and Delhi embarked on a coordinated hunger strike in protest at differential treatment meted out to Indian and European prisoners" (Maclean 124). Fasting was a

political weapon, often employed by Gandhi yet Gandhi had not been force-fed by the British authorities nor had he to suffer the beatings that the revolutionaries had to while being thus forcibly fed by the British. Though Santoshi, does portray the sufferings of the hunger-strikers, - the chillies eaten by KishoriLal; the prison authorities brutally inserting the nasal-gastric tubes and refraining from giving water to the accused but instead putting milk in the pitchers - he misses a golden opportunity to reveal a little known-fact: Jinnah's defense of the hunger-strikers. On 12th September, just when newspapers were reporting that JatinDas' blood had turned black, Jinnah rose up in the Central Assembly to state that:

Well, you know perfectly well that these men are determined to die. It is not a joke. I ask the honourable law member to realise that it is not everybody who can go on starving himself to death. Try it for a little while and you will see.... The man who goes on hunger strike has a soul. He is moved by that soul and he believes in the justice of his cause; he is not an ordinary criminal who is guilty of cold-blooded, sordid, wicked crime. (Noorani270)

The same omission is in the case of Justice Agha Haider who as one of the judges of the tribunal had protested against the brutal beating and removal of the accused when they did not refrain from singing revolutionary songs as instructed by the court. In fact, he had recorded his protest stating that: "I was not the party to the order of removal of the accused from the Court to the jail and I was not responsible for it any way. I disassociate myself from all that took place in the consequences of that order." Even Sukhdev, who was not easily impressed, commended the judge's protest calling it "Praiseworthy" (Waraich and Jain 31-32). In the movie, Haider is merely shown as making a little noise, ineffectually.

Jinnah was the highest paid lawyer of India at that time while Haider was a member of the judiciary yet both of them spoke against the inhuman practices being followed in the name of law. These two protests definitely show that there were many currents in the freedom struggle which would at times merge for a common cause.

Even as Jinnah resumed his speech the next day - this time questioning the legality of the trial - Jatin Das passed away. While Subhas Chandra Bose sent financial

help and a record four-lakh people turned up for his funeral, it was (as the fortnightly report from UP specifically mentioned) “however significant that Mr. Gandhi has so far made no public reference to the incident” (qtd in Shankar 107). Though Gandhi did explain his stance later stating that any opinion expressed “is likely to do more harm than good to the country’s cause” yet in a letter written to Jawaharlal Nehru he dismissed Jatin’s death as “an irrelevant performance” (qtd. in Shankar 107).

For the people, however, this was no performance let alone an irrelevant one. An Intelligence Bureau report remarked on the rising popularity of the revolutionaries vis-a-vis the congress by stating “that, at a meeting held at Lahore on 13th September to mourn the death of Das, no less than 10,000 persons were present, while at a Congress meeting held on the 22nd, to stimulate the boycott of foreign cloth, the audience numbered less than 300” (qtd. in Maclean 129).

This growing popularity of the revolutionaries as well as the resentment, particularly in Punjab, against the Congress was something that the Congress could not afford especially since the annual session in Lahore was drawing nearer. “ ‘It would be sheer flattery to say that you have today the same influence as you had over the youth of the country some years ago and most of them make no secret of the fact,’” Motilal Nehru wrote to Gandhi (qtd in Maclean 132). In the movie, Jawaharlal Nehru is shown as appraising Gandhi of this fact and thus to the historic declaration of “Purna Swaraj” at the banks of Ravi on 31st December, 1929. Even from behind the bars, the revolutionaries had forced the Congress to abandon its aspiration for Dominion Status and respond more militarily to the British.

“What has got into the Congress?” Viceroy Irwin asks his Home-Secretary H.W. Emerson. “Bhagat Singh,” is the laconic reply. At the Viceroy’s amazement, Emerson tells him that not only does Bhagat Singh’s popularity rivals that of Mr. Gandhi but also that if this trend was not stopped soon they would have nobody left to negotiate with. Henceforward to the tribunal, the farce of a trial –with all the accused boycotting the court – and the death sentences and life-imprisonments. And then the Gandhi-

Irwin pact which raised hope amongst many that Gandhi would make the release of the trio one of the conditions for signing the pact. And Santoshi doesn't let Gandhi off the hook by showing the Naujawan Bharat Sabha – an organization with its seeds in the National College - members presenting black flowers to Gandhi as he arrives for the Karachi Congress and raising slogans against him. "History will always ask you this question," one agitated young man tells Gandhi. As the steam-engine whistles and bellows out its smoke, the question hovers in the air, debated till date.

For the trio, however, the death sentence was just part of their struggle or as Sukhdev put it in a letter that he wrote to Gandhi just a few days before his death, "...the very name 'Hindustan Socialist Republican Party' clearly shows that the ideal of the revolutionaries is to establish a Socialist Republic. The Republic is not an interregnum. They (the revolutionaries) are bound to carry on their strategy until they achieve their goal and realize their ideal..." (Manjula 105).

It was this ideal that had made Bhagat Singh ask (as Santoshi dramatizes in a riveting court-room sequence) as to what difference does it make to the working classes whether "Lord Reading is the head of the Indian government or Sir PurshotamdasThakordas? What difference for a peasant if Sir TejBahadurSapru replaces Lord Irwin!" (Gupta 45).

Seventy years on since the British Raj came to an end, Bhagat's questions are still pertinent

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