

THE RANCIERIAN REVOLUTIONARY?  
BHAGAT SINGH AND THE POLITICS  
OF THE DEAD IN MODERN INDIA

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Chris MOFFAT, *India's Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 292 p.)

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How did we get to Modi? Some have suggested the explanation lies, in part, in the maneuvers of the Congress Party after independence. Nehruvian developmentalism failed to uplift the poor, while Congress' post-1991 liberalization only exacerbated their plight: a combination that produced a crisis of hegemony for the ruling party.<sup>1</sup> Others trace Modi's rise past post-independence Congress to the doyen of Indian nationalism itself: Mohandas Gandhi. Perry Anderson, for instance, once faulted Gandhi for infusing politics with (Hindu) religion, a practice that was to alienate Indian Muslims and fan Pakistani nationalism.<sup>2</sup> Though conceived before Modi's electoral victory, Anderson's argument anticipates his rise.

The general critical reappraisal of Gandhi<sup>3</sup> has been accompanied by a search for an alternative anti-colonial hero. Subhas Chandra Bose was a potential candidate, but his association with the Nazi Party troubles his legacy. In this effort to dethrone the Mahatma, it is B. R. Ambedkar who has stood above the rest. For his supporters, Ambedkar's strident anti-casteism is the perfect antidote to Modi's Brahmanism, his sympathy for Muslims a counter to Hindu majoritarianism, and his early criticisms of S.A. Dange, a founder of the Communist Party of India, prescient in foreshadowing Indian communism's enduring caste-blindness.<sup>4</sup>

But something appears missing in Ambedkar. Arundhati Roy once wrote of two Ambedkars. There's "Ambedkar the Radical", but then there's "Ambedkar the Father of the Indian Constitution", whose role in the creation of the Indian constitution, widely praised, still betrays a commitment to constitutionalism as such.<sup>5</sup> In the age of extremes—"millennial socialism" on the one hand, "alt-right" on the other—Ambedkar can, for

<sup>1</sup> Achin VANAIK, 2018, "India's Two Hegemonies," *New Left Review*, 112: 51-54.

<sup>2</sup> Perry ANDERSON, 2012, "Gandhi Centre Stage," *London Review of Books*, 34 (13): 3-11.

<sup>3</sup> See Ashwin DESAI and Goolam VAHED, 2015, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (Palo Alto, Stanford

University Press); PERRY ANDERSON, 2013, *The Indian Ideology* (London, Verso); Arundhati Roy, 2014, "The Doctor and the Saint," in S. Anand, ed., *Annihilation of Caste* (London, Verso).

<sup>4</sup> ROY 2014: 110.

<sup>5</sup> ROY 2014: 44.

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Shozab RAZA, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada, [shozab.raza@mail.utoronto.ca]

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some, stand too conventionally in the centre. Is there anyone to take Ambedkar's place? It would be tempting to see Chris Moffat's recent book as delivering an answer in Bhagat Singh. In fact, only after a few pages does Moffat contrast Bhagat Singh with Gandhi, Bose, and Ambedkar. Unlike the latter, Bhagat Singh's life was dramatically cut short (he was hanged at 23). Because of this, the revolutionary—in contrast to these other anti-colonial figures who lived much fuller lives—is seen as less implicated in the structures, and compromises, infecting post-colonial India.

Yet Bhagat Singh's abbreviated revolutionary career has also made him more susceptible to disparate interpretations. In him, Sikh nationalists find a champion of Punjabi culture, Indian communists detect a proto-Marxist, and Hindutva nationalists like the Bhagat Singh Kranti Sena see a Hindustani patriot. Instead of elevating Bhagat Singh over the other anti-colonial figures, Moffat's actual purpose is to account for these diverse afterlives. But his book is no simple study of the various ways in which the living instrumentally deploy deceased anti-colonial figures. This would be to subordinate the dead to the logic and interests of the living, affirming the agency of the latter at the expense of the former. Instead, Moffat provocatively reverses the direction in which agency travels. The dead, for him, can exert demands on the living, such that the latter feel that "something is owed" to the former. A debt needs to be repaid. And more than Gandhi, Bose, or Ambedkar, people feel particularly indebted to Bhagat Singh because of how his project was left incomplete. The revolutionary's untimely death sets up specters—the plural here is important—that provokes and cajoles the living to live in his example. They must finish what he began.

To comprehend these specters, Moffat draws heavily on Jacques Rancière's conception of politics. Writing against the liberal idea of consensus-making as the mainstay of politics, Rancière held that politics is actually about constant critique, disruption and upheaval of any and all norms.<sup>6</sup> Dissensus, rather than consensus, should be the bread and butter of political practice. For Moffat, Bhagat Singh's specters tempt this sort of politics. Yet despite insisting that he is uninterested in discovering the "true" Bhagat Singh, Moffat also seems to read the revolutionary in these Rancierian terms: someone who invites us to constantly rebuff norms, someone whose afterlives resist any settled judgment, because Bhagat Singh himself, in his own short life, did the same. Moffat does concede that this dissensual politics is susceptible to the same criticisms leveled

<sup>6</sup> Jacques RANCIÈRE, [1995] 1999, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press).

against Rancière. It is, he argues, “ultimately non-foundational” [114]. But is Bhagat Singh’s life simply one of insurrection-without-foundation?

### *Lahore in Bhagat Singh*

Bhagat Singh was born in 1907 in a village in Punjab’s Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) district. While facts about his early life are disputed, what is certainly clear is that his childhood proceeded amidst inspirational revolutionaries. Bhagat Singh’s own uncle Ajit Singh, for instance, collaborated with renowned nationalist Lala Lajpat Rai to oppose the anti-farmer Punjab Colonization Bill, for which they were both deported to Burma’s Mandalay jail in 1907. Upon his release in 1908, Ajit Singh fled to Iran, then spent time in Paris working with Indian revolutionaries, before moving to San Francisco and associating with the city’s Ghadar Party. Bhagat Singh, one of his comrades recalled, spoke of this uncle as a “great rebel” who had a “patriotic impact on him from teenage [sic] onwards”<sup>7</sup>.

Yet despite Bhagat Singh’s familial revolutionary inheritance, he also disavowed family control. In 1923, he ran away to Cawnpore to escape an arranged marriage. “My life has already been committed to a noble cause”, Bhagat Singh later explained to his father, “the cause of the freedom of India”.<sup>8</sup> He also combated his family on the issue of religion. Bhagat Singh’s father was a Hindu reformist and his mother was a devout Sikh. The revolutionary broke from both when he penned the now infamous essay, “Why I am an atheist?”<sup>9</sup>

For Moffat’s purpose, recounting this history is important. Though he claims to be uninterested in who the revolutionary “really was”, Moffat repeatedly ends up showing how Bhagat Singh’s demanding influence in the present, the way he compels the living to engage in a consistent politics of dissent, is traceable to who the revolutionary was in the flesh. But underlying Bhagat Singh’s refusals—say, his rejection of marriage—were certain emergent foundational claims. Moffat does not consider this. Once, for instance, a friend and classmate of Bhagat Singh’s asked why he refused to get married. The revolutionary replied that he had chosen a path “full of many possibilities”, a path two of his uncles had

<sup>7</sup> Sohan SINGH JOSHI, 1976, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh and Other Early Revolutionaries* (New Delhi, Communist Party of India: 16).

<sup>8</sup> Bhagat SINGH, 1986, “Letter to Father” (1923), in Shiv Verma, ed., *Selected Writings*

*of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi, National Book Centre: 56).

<sup>9</sup> Bhagat SINGH, 1986, “Why I am an Atheist?” (1931), in Shiv Verma, ed., *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi, National Book Centre).

chosen as well. But they had left two widows. “Should [I] also leave another widow for weeping?”, he asked his friend rhetorically. “[I’m] not going to spoil the life of any young lady”.<sup>10</sup> Bhagat Singh’s refusal to get married was based, one could argue, on an evolving normative claim about the second sex. This was to develop as he later came under the influence of revolutionary women like Prakashvati Kapur and Durga Vohra, who pushed him to think more concertedly about a woman’s place in revolutionary anti-colonialism. We see this influence in 1931 when, days before his execution, Bhagat Singh wrote “Our Opportunity”, a document where he outlined the structure of a future revolutionary party. A “Committee for Women” was envisioned as part of that structure. Although the role he assigned to women was an inferior one, it was nonetheless the first time women were given an explicit place in the manifesto of any Indian revolutionary party.<sup>11</sup>

Bhagat Singh’s normative dispositions would develop on other fronts as well, especially after he enrolled in Lahore’s National College in 1923. The college was formed from the merger with the Tilak School of Politics, a school founded by Lajpat Rai as a progressive alternative to colonial-run schools. Inspiration for it came, surprisingly enough, in New York, where Rai lived from 1914 to 1919. Here, he stumbled upon the Rand School of Social Science, a school established by members of the Socialist Party of America to raise the political consciousness of the country’s labor movement. Rai was impressed. Within a year of returning to Lahore, Rai would inaugurate a school modeled after the Rand School. The death of his friend B. G. Tilak, a teacher and nationalist Lenin even admired, gave the school its namesake.<sup>12</sup> Tilak himself encapsulated the school’s mission: to promote a social scientific inquiry, at once both critical and politically-engaged. Through the school, Rai wanted to fashion nothing short of a new nationalist subject – one envisioned from the decidedly transnational flow of ideas and people.

By Bhagat Singh’s own admission, the College and the Tilak School played a major part in his political evolution. “It was there”, he later recalled, “that I began to think liberally and discuss and criticize all the religious problems, even about God”.<sup>13</sup> At the college, Bhagat Singh befriended other like-minded students. Borne out of this shared

<sup>10</sup> See S. R. BAKSHI, 1981, *Bhagat Singh and His Ideology* (New Delhi, Capital Publishers: 28-89).

<sup>11</sup> Ania LOOMBA, 2019, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism and Feminism in India* (New York, Routledge: 94-95).

<sup>12</sup> See V. I. LENIN, 1973, “Inflammable Material in World Politics”, in *Collected Works*, 15 (Moscow, Progress Publishers: 182-188).

<sup>13</sup> Page 122, in SINGH 1986, cf. *supra*.

friendship, and a brewing anti-colonial sentiment and disillusionment with the Congress leadership, was the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NJBS, or “Young India Association”). Founded in 1924, the Sabha reflected the spirit of the Tilak School in more ways than one. First, the Sabha’s name itself affirmed the Tilak School’s transnational inspirations. In naming it the “Young India Association”, the students were connecting themselves to the Irish Republican group, “Young Ireland”. A nationalism transnational at birth. Second, everything was up for criticism. At the time, communalism, of both caste and creed, defined the political landscape of Lahore (and indeed India at large). The Sabha, on the other hand, required its members to renounce ties of caste and creed, even holding community dinners where Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims sat side by side eating pork and beef, violating religious dietary laws and norms of pollution. According to Moffat, the purpose of these transgressions was not to accommodate difference in order to build a consensual unity—the mainstay of Congress-led nationalism up until that point—but to encourage dissensus, an enduring critique, of all norms. Colonial India, as one of the NJBS’s manifestos put it, was going through a “critical juncture”<sup>14</sup>, and Indians, so as not to be exploited by communal forces, would need to detach themselves from all normative identities as a prerequisite for making a decisive and revolutionary intervention.

### *The Conspiracy*

The NJBS’s opposition to both the Raj and Congress left the group isolated. In 1927, it was banned from university campuses. But just one year later, Bhagat Singh and his comrades reconvened their political activities by forming the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA). The group emerged out of the remains of the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA). Qualifying their republicanism as “socialist” was significant: it signaled a connection to Lenin and Bolshevism, news of which had begun circulating in earnest in Indian newspapers during the 1920s. The revolutionaries continued the internationalism of their NJBS days, at the same time as they advanced towards a more decided socialism. HSRA members also broke from their predecessors in the HRA on the issue of religion. While the HRA had infused its political rhetoric with

<sup>14</sup> Page 153, in “Manifesto of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha” (4 June 1928), 1986, in Shiv Verma, ed., *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh*, (New Delhi, National Book Centre).

Hindu overtones, the HSRA was much firmer on this question. “No more mysticism”, Bhagat Singh later wrote about his time in the HSRA, “no more blind faith. Realism became our cult”.<sup>15</sup>

Moffat dwells on this commitment to “realism”. In both popular and scholarly discussions of the young revolutionary, Bhagat Singh is seen as the anti-thesis to Gandhi. The former saw violence as necessary in a world “armed to the very teeth”, while the latter advocated *satyagraha*, or disciplined non-violence.<sup>16</sup> But Moffat takes a different, more alluring, tack. He views their relationship as a contradictory unity: their approaches antipodal, but their aim, Moffat reveals, was an elusive “Truth”. On this, the Revolutionary and the Saint meet. “Revolution is Law, Revolution is Order and Revolution is the Truth”, the HSRA’s manifesto grandly declared, adding “The youths of our nation have realized this truth”.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the fact that the HSRA was led by a generation much younger than Gandhi and his Congress associates is also significant—for both Moffat and the HSRA. The HSRA explained its more violent means to approach “Truth” in these terms. The Congress’ insistence on non-violence demanded an elderly patience the HSRA described as “utopian”.<sup>18</sup> Neither did non-violence reckon with the battalions of the Raj nor a present birthing with possibility. The world was rapidly changing and, to the HSRA, a decisive and immediate intervention was needed to direct that change. The HSRA wanted nothing short of revolution. *Inquilab Zindabad* (or Long Live the Revolution) became its slogan. Defending the slogan in 1928, Bhagat Singh wrote “old order should change, always and ever, yielding place to new, so that one ‘good’ order may not corrupt the world”—a call for perpetual revolution that Moffat reads as a Rancierian politics of dissensus.<sup>19</sup>

The HSRA soon confronted this “old order”, most notoriously on April 8th 1929, when Bhagat Singh and another comrade threw two bombs inside the Delhi Legislative Assembly. After his arrest, Bhagat Singh repudiated another assigned role, just as he had earlier disavowed a destiny of domesticity. This was the role of the prisoner. Alongside his other imprisoned comrades, Bhagat Singh refused to be a compliant criminal. He and his comrades sabotaged the trial proceedings and even inverted the meaning of the prison-space, turning it into a place of study,

<sup>15</sup> Page 123, in SINGH 1986, cf. *supra*.

<sup>16</sup> Page 155, in “Manifesto of the HSRA” (1929), 1986, cf. *supra*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*: 155.

<sup>18</sup> “Statement of Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt in the Assembly Bomb Case” (1929) [shahidbhagatsingh.org, <http://www.shahidbhagatsingh.org/index.asp?link=june6>].

shahidbhagatsingh.org/index.asp?link=june6].

<sup>19</sup> Page 76, in Bhagat SINGH, 1986, “On the Slogan of Long Live Revolution”, in Shiv Verma, ed., *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi, National Book Centre).

reading and reflection. Pace Gandhi, they rejected suffering rather than advocating it.

Fed up with the sabotage, the colonial government replaced the Magistrate with a Special Tribunal, which was empowered to proceed with the trial even with the defendants absent. Unbeknownst to the Raj, this decision accomplished precisely what Bhagat Singh and his comrades wanted: to expose the coercive core beneath the colonial administration's consensual and legal pretenses. In the process, the revolutionaries too showed the public what they were themselves. In sabotaging court proceedings and repudiating their prisoner roles, they affirmed a new nationalist subject, one driven by a justice not reducible to petitions, the courts, the prisons or the law. A justice in fact exceeding the law. While Gandhi's non-violence, in provoking the state to expose its brutality, showed "what is", Bhagat Singh and his comrades, in their court and prison performances, revealed "what could be". But Moffat ends up settling on the conclusion that, however transgressive the revolutionaries' performance may have been, it was only transgressive vis-a-vis the law. The revolutionaries, he suggests, had no independent foundation outside of the law.

This is somewhat misleading. Throughout the book, Moffat sees the slogan *Inquilab Zindabad* as indexing the revolutionary's anti-foundational disposition. But he overlooks how this slogan was modified during the court proceedings. On January 21st 1930, for instance, Bhagat Singh and another accused appeared during that day's proceedings wearing red scarves. When the magistrate took to the chair, the revolutionaries shouted: "Long Live Socialist Revolution", "Long Live the Communist International", and "Lenin's Name will Never Die". Such changes in their sloganeering are significant: they suggest that a dissensual politics was being buttressed, increasingly so, on certain fidelities. One outcome, certainly, of their education under incarceration. After the chants, Bhagat Singh even read out a telegram in which he aligned himself and his comrades to Lenin, the Soviet Union and the international working class movement.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Revenant Revolutionary*

On 23rd March 1931, Bhagat Singh and two of his comrades were hanged for their role in the Delhi bombing. His death, however, birthed various spectral afterlives—a diversity partly enabled, according to

<sup>20</sup> See page 82, in Shiv VERMA, ed., 1986, (New Delhi, National Book Centre). *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh*,

Moffat, by Bhagat Singh's own "non-foundational" or Rancierian disposition. Though I am skeptical of this interpretation—the diversity perhaps stems less from the revolutionary's lack of normative foundations and more from the rapidly evolving and embryonic nature of them—Moffat's investigation of these afterlives, which he pursues in the book's second half, remains compelling.

Some have seen in Bhagat Singh a constant provocation to act and to strike—in a heroic, almost adventurist, spirit. In 1968, for instance, Punjabi Maoists assassinated a landlord who received his land in exchange for testifying against none other than Bhagat Singh.<sup>21</sup> These Maoists engaged with Bhagat Singh's revolutionary inheritance in a way that rejected the parliamentarianism of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and compelled, instead, these sorts of insurrectionary activities. Others however have tried to refute such "misappropriations", to contain the revolutionary's spectral wanderings, by uncovering what they believe to be the "true" Bhagat Singh. For instance, the Punjabi poet Amarjit Chandan, a disillusioned former Naxal, compiled and published the letters and writings of Bhagat Singh in 1974.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, he sought to resurrect what he believed was the "real" Bhagat Singh: a deliberative and thoughtful revolutionary, not the romantic insurrectionary celebrated by Punjabi Naxals. The Indian government, for its part, has also tried to contain Bhagat Singh's spectral wanderings—by setting up monuments of him. But by placing the revolutionary on a nationalist pantheon firmly rooted in the past, these monuments, according to Moffat, delimit history's intrusion into the present.

Surprisingly, it is on the other side of the divide, in post-partition Lahore, that Moffat finds the anti-thesis to Bhagat Singh's Indian monumentalization. Though the revolutionary was born in what is now part of Pakistani Punjab, and mostly lived and eventually died in Lahore, Pakistanis still see him as an Indian hero. Some, however, are working to change that perspective. For several years now, a campaign has been underway to rename the chowk where Bhagat Singh and his comrades were hanged to "Bhagat Singh Chowk". For these Pakistani campaigners, Bhagat Singh is seen as either a champion of the Punjabi language (who can assist in their battle with Urdu hegemony), a secular (to challenge the country's Islamicization), or a socialist (to guide their confrontation with an increasingly capitalist Pakistani state). The

<sup>21</sup> See pages 63 and 66, in Paramjit S. JUDGE, 1992, *Insurrection to Agitation: The Naxalite Movement in Punjab* (Bombay, Popular Prakashan).

<sup>22</sup> Amarjit CHANDAN, 1974, *Chithiaan: Shaheed Bhagat Singh te Saathi* (Amritsar, Balraj Sahni Yadgar).



campaign has drawn swift opposition from religious parties, who argue that Bhagat Singh, as an atheist, is an insult to the Pakistan ideology. For Moffat, Bhagat Singh's specters take on an especially anti-foundational form in Pakistan, inciting these sorts of confrontations that may upend the founding ideology of the Islamic state itself. In India too, despite the state's effort to monumentalize him (and thus imprison him in the past), the revolutionary's specters are hardly put to rest. Moffat, in his pursuit of these spectral meanderings, finds both those "who seek to contain [the specters'] vertiginous nature, to reconcile it with existing order, *and* those who aim to escalate that sense of vertigo toward a dissensual politics" [my emphasis, 246].

Nor is this dialectic of order and disorder limited to engagements with Bhagat Singh. Moffat concludes by suggesting that this dialectic also animates the subcontinent's post-colonial democracy. He certainly has a point. In both countries we see popular dissatisfaction with established order manifesting itself in an anti-centric populism: in India, Modi's triumph against Congress hegemony; in Pakistan, Imran Khan's conquest against two of the country's long-standing political parties, the Pakistan Muslim League-Noon and the Pakistan People's Party. Indeed, the subcontinent mirrors dynamics that are transpiring across the world. And like their doubles, both Modi and Khan have ridden the challenge against established order only to inaugurate much of the same. Moffat suggests that an engagement with Bhagat Singh—especially by those "who aim to turn this inheritance... towards an unfinished revolution" [251]—may upend all this, taking both countries towards a different kind of future. But if we forget the normative claims—certainly evolving—upon which Bhagat Singh thought and acted, what will these engagements or challenges amount to?

Just over one month before his execution, Bhagat Singh penned a letter addressed "To Young Political Workers".<sup>23</sup> In it, he lamented the fact that many youth cry out "Long Live Revolution" without knowing what revolution means. Normative precision, for Bhagat Singh, was key: "We must always maintain a clear notion as to the aim for... which we are fighting". He goes on to indicate that aim: "revolution means the complete overthrow of the existing social order and its replacement with the socialist order... [a] social reconstruction on a new, i.e. Marxist, basis". In what is otherwise a remarkably innovative study of Bhagat Singh's life and afterlives, Moffat downplays this crucial point, preferring

<sup>23</sup> Pages 113–120, in Bhagat SINGH, 1986, Verma, ed., *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi, National Book Centre). "To Young Political Workers," in Shiv

“revolution” be a floating signifier over a radically rooted one. Evading the precision Bhagat Singh demanded has troubling implications for us today. For unless we ourselves have some sense—again, however tentative and maturing—of what new order we would like to see, an invocation to dissent may just as easily enable a Trump, Modi or Bolsonaro as a Sanders, Corbyn or Chavez.

S H O Z A B R A Z A