

# Bhagat Singh On Dalits

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Bhagat Singh finds a place not only among India's but world's greatest revolutionaries. His life, work, struggle and the way he kissed and embraced death bring him in league of world's great revolutionaries such as Socrates, Bruno, Joan of Arc, Che Guevara etc. His martyrdom will continue to inspire many generations of revolutionaries to sacrifice their lives in defence of truth, justice and freedom. He was a rare thinker. The mastery he could acquire in the art and science of revolution even at a tender age of twenty three when he died is very rare. People still feel the loss that the country suffered on his untimely death. It was not for nothing that the British imperialists hanged him and the future rulers of India preferred to remain silent on his death sentence.

Concerned politicians are well aware of Bhagat Singh's thoughts on topics such as socialism, revolution, India's independence, working class movements, religion, god etc. His life and death centred around these concerns. But not much is known about his ideas on caste system as he has not written much on this. It may be due to the fact that he was a Sikh where caste based differentiation and discrimination is not as acute as among the Hindus.

Yet his article 'Achoot Samasya' (*The Untouchability Problem*) is very important because one gets glimpses of his revolutionary thoughts on this basic problem of Indian society. Now when in the post-mandal phase caste and dalit questions have acquired paramount importance in socio-political discourse it has become relevant to understand his thoughts on this question.

Bhagat Singh wrote this article in the month of June, 1928 as the volume of his collected works indicates. Baba Saheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar had already made history by burning 'Manusmriti' with his followers on December 25, 1927. On March 20, 1927 Baba Saheb with his followers had touched water of Mahad pond which was hitherto not accessible to the *achoots* (untouchables). Baba Saheb with his followers had been demanding right of separate electorates from the British government. The year also witnessed the publication of Katherine Mayo's 'Mother India' and furore over the content of the book. Mahatma Gandhi dubbed the book as a gutter inspector's report. The evils of Indian particularly Hindu society were most nakedly, mercilessly and authentically exposed in the book. The moral hypocrisy, insincerity and hollowness of the elites of Hindu society on the question of eradicating social evils were brought forth before the world. In his article 'Achoot Samasya' Bhagat Singh has quoted a speech of Noor Mohammad, a legislature in the then Bombay council, which also finds a place in 'Mother India'. Not only this Bhagat Singh also quotes Mayo: 'Those who would be free must themselves strike the blow'. Thus three major events of 1927 viz. Mahad Satyagrah, burning of Manusmriti and publication of 'Mother India' had brought the social question onto the surface of the national movement with a vengeance.

In a speech in Bombay council in 1926 Noor Mohammad had demolished the Congress demand for political rights from the British government. He famously spoke, "If the Hindu society refuses to allow other human beings, fellow creatures so that to attend public schools and if...the president of local boards representing so many lakhs of people in this house refuses to allow his fellows and brothers the

elementary human rights of having water to drink, what right have they to ask for more rights from the bureaucracy? Before we accuse people coming from other lands, we should see how we ourselves behave towards our own people.....How can we ask for greater political rights when we ourselves deny elementary rights of human beings.” Bhagat Singh quotes Noor Mohammad in original English and then translates it in vernacular. He is not content with just quoting Noor Mohammad. He wholeheartedly supports the stand of Noor Mohammad, “What he says is fully justified, but as he is a Muslim, he will be accused of pitching for conversion of untouchable Hindus in Islam.” He then supports religious conversion, “If you treat him worse than animals, they will convert to other religions, where they will get more human rights and will be treated like human beings. Then your lament that the Muslim and the Christian are harming Hindu fold will be futile.” In all these quotes Bhagat Singh’s thoughts are strikingly similar to those of Dr Ambedkar. Yet one thing is remarkable that by 1928 when Bhagat Singh penned this article Dr Ambedkar had not yet declared his intention to leave Hindu fold and to embrace other religion. The thoughts of Bhagat Singh on religious conversions have become even more relevant particularly in the backdrop of the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee’s advocacy of national debate on religious conversion after gruesome killings of Graham Staines and his two children. Till now they have been challenged by Dr Ambedkar’s thoughts. Bhagat Singh’s thoughts too are confronting them.

Bhagat Singh recognised that the caste system basically promotes contemptuous feelings for labour and, therefore, has blocked India’s rise. He writes in most simple words, “...Disrespect for even urgent types of work grew among the people. We scorn the Julahas. Even weavers are treated as untouchables. This has retarded our development.” Obviously Bhagat Singh links development to the social justice unlike the today’s model of development where economic development has been completely delinked from social justice.

Bhagat Singh supported the untouchables’ (dalits’ in today’s parlance) demands for separate electorate system. On this point also he is standing in league with Dr Ambedkar. On March 23, 1931 Bhagat Singh was hanged along with two of his compatriots. Had he been alive he would have supported Dr Ambedkar in his battle with Mahatma Gandhi over separate electorate system in 1932. He is unmistakable on this count, “We do understand that their organising themselves separately and, being equivalent to the Muslim in population, demanding equivalent rights, are welcome indications. Either do away with caste based discriminations or bestow separate rights to them. Councils and assemblies must strive to give them equal rights to avail facilities of schools and colleges, wells and roads. It should not be lip service but they themselves should lead them to public facilities. They should ensure admission of their children in schools. But the moot question is, in an assembly where in the name of religion people raise hue and cry over a legislative bill to curb child marriage, how can they dare to embrace the untouchables. It is, therefore, necessary that they should have their own representatives so that they are able to secure more rights for themselves.” It is noteworthy that Dr Amedkar had crystallised the demand for separate electorate for dalits only by first round table conference in 1930. But other dalit protagonists had been demanding separate electorate for themselves. By

supporting separate electorate for dalits Bhagat Singh stands in opposition to the social imperialists and wins everlasting love, respect and confidence of the dalits. Gandhiji too opposed practices of untouch-ability prevalent in the society but he was dead against bestowing rights of separate electorate system to the dalits. By supporting dalits' demand for rights of separate electorate system he proved that he was their true friend. As Kanshiram has contended in his famous polemic 'The Age of Stooges', the Poona Pact that denied rights of separate electorate system to the dalits became the chief tool to prevent the emergence of independent leadership from among the dalits. To repeal Poona Pact and win right of separate electorate system for themselves is still occupying a place of prominence in the Dalit agenda and therefore Bhagat Singh is still relevant for Dalit politics.

The militant Bhagat Singh suddenly turns bitter in his article and says, "Laton Ke Bhoot Baton Se Nahi Bhagte" i.e. "Those fit to be thrashed cannot be dismissed by words." He goes on, "Unite, be self dependent and then challenge the whole of society. Then you will see no one will dare to deny you your rights. Don't allow others to deceive you. Don't expect anything from others." But before this he arouses pride in dalits, "The so-called untouchables, the true servicemen and brothers of the people, rise. Know your history. None but you were the muscle of the army of Guru Govind Singh. It was on your strength that Shivaji could do what he did and for which Shivaji is still alive in history. Your sacrifices have been inscribed in golden letters." Then he quotes Mayo, "Those who would be free must themselves strike the blow."

In this article Bhagat Singh puts forward an important formulation which still holds great importance for dalit politics. He warns dalits against bureaucracy, "Don't get trapped by bureaucracy. They are not willing to reach you help. Rather they are in look out how to make you pawns of their designs. This capitalistic bureaucracy is the real cause of your poverty and slavery. Never make an alliance with it. Beware of their machinations. Then everything will be set aright.." This is very important as Bhagat Singh does not blame directly the British regime for their miseries. Instead he takes an indirect route to blame capitalistic bureaucracy. He does not even name it "British bureaucracy." So far as Bhagat Singh desists from directly blaming the British regime he is in conformity with Dr Ambedkar who too did not blame the Britishers directly for the ills of the dalits. However if one watches the scenario of dalit politics today the words of Bhagat Singh appear prophetic. The biggest faultline of dalit politics today is that it is heavily dependent on bureaucracy in two ways. First, it takes guidance from dalit bureaucracy so far as fixing the agenda of dalit politics is concerned. Second, dalit politics when it comes in power like Mayawati has done in UP again depends entirely on bureaucracy for preparation as well as for implemen-tation of government welfare measures. All talks are centred on how to increase dalit participation in state apparatuses. Dalit as well as other political parties professing their agenda of social justice are in the habit of talking about that when they come in power they are helpless in reaching government welfare measures to the targeted population because of low representation of SC/ST/OBC in bureaucracy. They are unable to understand that so far as Brahminic system continues there will perhaps not come the day when bureaucracy will have sufficient SC/ST/OBC representation. It is the bureaucracy

that supports Brahminism and SC/ST/OBC bureaucrats are compelled to make compromises in order to survive in the Brahminic bureaucracy. No system has ever been changed by people who became part and parcel of that system. Despite sixty years of SC/ST and fifteen years of OBC reservation in central services their percentage has remained abysmally low in elite services of IAS, IPS, IRS etc. *The Hindustan Times*, dated December 21, 2009 carries a news item based on figures provided by Minister of State for Personnel that states that of 88 Secretary level officers in Government of India there is no dalit, of 66 Additional Secretaries only one is dalit, of 249 Joint Secretaries only 13 are dalits and of 471 directors only 31 are dalits. So it is essential that besides doing everything to widen the scope of reservation so as to increase SC/ST/OBC representation in bureaucracy attention should also move towards how to restructure the administrative system so as to decentralise and democratise it. Though SC/ST/OBC participation in bureaucracy has not reached to the desired level, substantial increase in dalit bahujan legislators and people's representatives in parliament, state assemblies and local government bodies is a fact of life. In a true and effective democratic set up, elected representatives are everywhere entrusted and delegated the powers of executives to oversee and supervise the implementation of governmental projects as well as maintenance of law and order. In India in order to vest power in the Brahminic bureaucracy the MLAs and MPs have been reduced to mere ceremonial figures having no authority in his or her constituency. An MLA or MP is a helpless onlooker of excesses of a police and administrative officer in his or her constituency. All powers are concentrated in DMs, SPs and then in the Chief Minister of the province. It is not without reason that it is commonly commented that the administrative system of the country is run by DM (District Magistrate), CM (Chief Minister) and PM (Prime Minister). Such centralised administrative system can never provide relief, welfare and succour to the poor and hapless citizens of the country of whom the overwhelming majority are dalit bahujans. So the best course of action for the sake of democracy and dalit bahujan empowerment at grassroots level will be to take away to the maximum possible extent the administrative powers from bureaucracy and devolve them to the elected people's representatives. In such a backdrop the observation and warning of Bhagat Singh to the dalits to beware of capitalistic bureaucracy assumes significance. Unfortunately, the dalit discourse spends all its energy in targeting Hindu religion to such an extent that other pressing issues remain neglected. Capitalistic bureaucracy is one such issue that has seldom been taken up by dalit intellectuals in their discourse. State question has an important place in strategy and tactics of any democratic movement.

By the end of the article Bhagat Singh provides another important formulation. He writes, "You are the real proletariat...get organised." This is a great lesson to the Indian left who has never taken into account the social question in determining the class who would provide vanguard sections of revolution. The dalits are economically and socially the most oppressed sections of Indian society. Hence Bhagat Singh takes the position that they are the real proletariats.

In Indian society the location of a person in the caste system determines his consciousness. Capitalism in India is not more than one hundred fifty or two

hundred years old but caste system dates back to ancient times. So the social-political consciousness arising out of hundreds of years old caste system is deeply ingrained in the psyche. Improvement in economic conditions of life may dampen revolutionary fervour of an upper caste proletariat but may fuel social consciousness of a dalit proletariat. Improved economic conditions of life may provide him the leisure in life giving him the opportunity and occasion to study the history of oppression, subjugation and discrimination faced by his ancestors. So the economic criteria alone cannot help a theorist of social revolution to determine which class is the real proletariat in the concrete social conditions of Indian society. By taking into account the social as well as economic conditions of life Bhagat Singh reaches at the conclusion that the dalits are the real proletariat of this land.

Bhagat Singh concludes the article, "Bring revolution through social movements and then be prepared for political and economic revolutions." This is yet another important formulation of Bhagat Singh. Right from Jotiba Phule to Dr Ambedkar all have stressed upon the importance of social revolution in bringing about the final revolutions in political and economic sectors. Bhagat Singh who otherwise devoted major part of his short life for socialism and national liberation did not digress much from India's great social revolutionaries in prescribing the trajectory of revolution. Bhagat Singh had started off his revolutionary life by making national liberation from subjugation of British rule the sole preoccupation. In a very short span of time he had realised that the ground for political-economic revolution in India cannot be prepared unless social revolution is effected. This was a great and stirring journey of Bhagat Singh in the realm of philosophy. □□□

*[March 23, 2010, marks the 79th anniversary of Bhagat Singh's martyrdom]*

[source : <http://www.countercurrents.org/yadav231209.htm>]