

SHAHEED BHAGAT SINGH BIRTH CENTENARY YEAR

Bhagat Singh: A Perennial Saga Of Inspiration

THE life and work of Bhagat Singh and his death by hanging at the age of 23 at the hands of British imperialism on March 23, 1931, has been a perennial saga of inspiration to all those who cherish sovereignty, secularism and socialism – ideals for which Bhagat Singh and his comrades fought valiantly to the end.

On March 23, 2006, the country observed the 75th anniversary of martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev, and a little earlier on February 27, the 75th anniversary of martyrdom of Chandrashekhar Azad.

From September 28, 2006, we begin the celebration of the Birth Centenary Year of Bhagat Singh, a powerful symbol of the still ongoing struggle of the people of India against imperialism, capitalism, feudalism, communalism and casteism – a struggle that is infinitely more complex but no less urgent today than it was in Bhagat Singh's time.

Bhagat Singh and his comrades belonged to the current of armed anti-imperialist freedom fighters. Their glorious struggle against British imperialism assumed legendary proportions. But their truly distinctive feature was that, amongst the large galaxy of thousands of armed freedom fighters spread over two centuries of the freedom struggle, it was Bhagat Singh and his comrades alone who were inexorably moving ideologically towards the current of Marxian socialism and the Communist Party.

Bhagat Singh and his colleagues were also conscious of the need for social justice and the overthrow of the caste system. They were bitter and uncompromising enemies of communalism in all its forms. And they were inveterate opponents of the bourgeois-landlord class strategy and tactics of the Congress Party and its leadership that were exhibited in ample measure throughout the course of the national movement.

GHADAR MARTYRS & JALLIANWALA BAGH

Bhagat Singh was born to Vidyavati and Kishan Singh on September 28, 1907, in the

village Banga in Lyallpur district, now in Pakistan. His original village was Khatkar Kalan in Jalandhar district. He hailed from a patriotic family. His uncle Ajit Singh, along with Lala Lajpat Rai, was exiled to Mandalay jail in Burma by the British. In such an atmosphere, Bhagat Singh naturally imbibed patriotic sentiments.

While Bhagat Singh was in school, Punjab was rocked by the hanging of seven Ghadar martyrs by the British on November 16 and 17, 1915, in the First Lahore Conspiracy Case. Prominent among them were Kartar Singh Sarabha from Punjab and

Vishnu Ganesh Pingle from Maharashtra. The young Bhagat Singh was deeply moved by the heroic saga and sacrifice of Kartar Singh Sarabha, who was just 20 years old when he was hanged.

Bhagat Singh always carried a photo of Sarabha in his pocket and was carrying one when he was arrested in 1929. In March 1926, when Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Bhagwati Charan Vohra founded the Naujawan Bharat Sabha in Lahore, its inaugural session began with the unveiling of Sarabha's portrait, in open defiance of the British authorities.

Another event that was to leave a deep impression on the young Bhagat Singh was, of course, the horrific Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar on April 13, 1919. The butcher of Amritsar, General Dyer fired 1600 rounds of ammunition on the unarmed crowd of around 10,000 that had gathered for a public meeting, killing 379 according to official figures; unofficially, it was put at over 1000; and leaving over 1200

wounded.

Bhagat Singh was then just 12 years old and was studying at the D A V School in

Ashok Dhawale

hatma Gandhi in 1920 and his declaration of "Swaraj in One Year" galvanized the entire country as never before. Millions of people all over the country came out on the streets to oppose the British re-

game. For the first time since 1857, the peasantry joined the struggle in strength. It linked burning agrarian issues like taxes, rent, eviction by landlords etc to the struggle for independence. The support of the Congress to the Khilafat movement also drew the Muslim masses into the struggle in huge numbers and remarkable Hindu-Muslim unity was witnessed everywhere in the course of the movement.

1927.

The victory of the Russian Revolution had a big impact on young armed freedom fighters in India and abroad. Its three sterling contributions were: a) it infused confidence in Indian revolutionaries that imperialism and the exploiting classes could be overthrown, b) it brought on to the agenda the economic and social content of Indian independence, c) it provoked a serious study of Marxism and Communist principles.

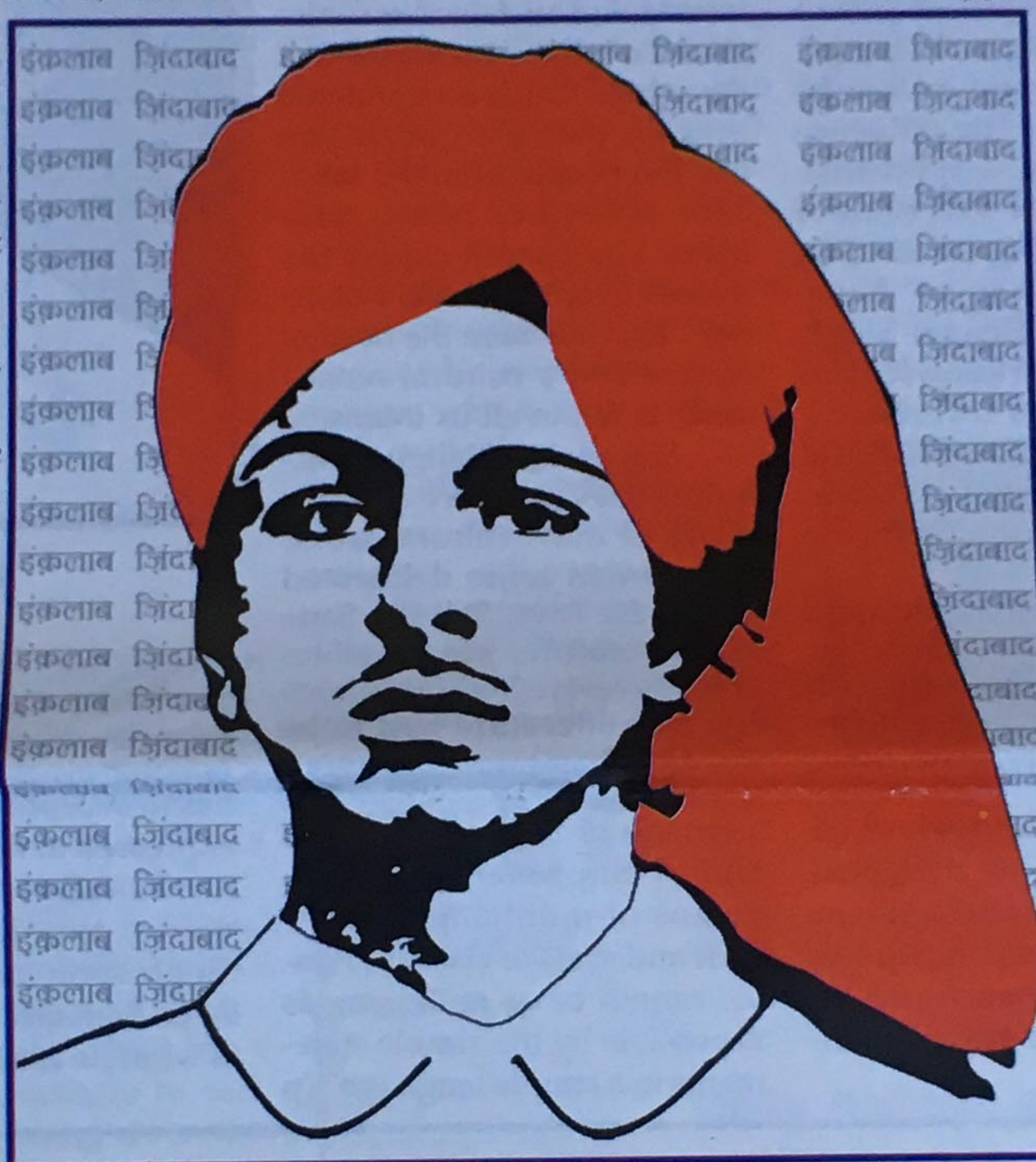
HRA AND THE KAKORI CONSPIRACY CASE

It was in the background of all these historic events that Bhagat Singh reached Kanpur in 1924. There he went to his father's friend Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi, a prominent Congress leader and the editor of *Pratap*. Though Vidyarthi was himself a Gandhian, his house was a common meeting place for socialists, communists and other revolutionaries. It was here that Bhagat Singh met Chandrashekhar Azad, Batukeshwar Dutt, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, Shiv Verma, Bejoy Kumar Sinha and others. In Kanpur, he continued to read voraciously and completed his study of Karl Marx's *Capital*. He wrote and distributed nationalist and revolutionary leaflets amongst the masses. It was in his six months stay at Kanpur that he joined the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA).

The HRA had been formed in 1923 – within a year of Chauri Chaura and its aftermath – by Sachindranath Sanyal, who was transported for life in the Banaras Conspiracy Case and later released. Sanyal had written the Manifesto of the HRA, which was distributed in all major cities of North India on the night between December 31, 1924 and January 1, 1925. The HRA Manifesto, which was titled *The Revolutionary*, was a powerful piece that set out its aims.

On August 9, 1925, the HRA revolutionaries stopped a train at Kakori near Lucknow and broke a government safe. One passenger was accidentally killed. The British govern-

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September 27, 1907

March 23, 1931

Lahore. He was deeply enraged by the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. It has been recorded that he immediately went to the Bagh, collected its soil in a bottle and kept it as a constant reminder of the hurt and humiliation that the Indian people had suffered.

When the Non-Cooperation Movement started in 1920, Bhagat Singh left the D A V School and joined the National College. His college friends included Bhagwati Charan Vohra, Sukhdev and Yashpal. He evinced great interest both in his studies and in politics and was a voracious reader. His area of special interest was the history of revolutions. In 1924, Bhagat Singh had to give up his BA studies and leave Lahore because his father and grandmother were forcing him to get married. To escape that, he went to Kanpur.

THE TURNING POINT

In the backdrop of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, the Non-Cooperation Movement announced by Ma-

Mahatma Gandhi's sudden and arbitrary withdrawal of the nationwide movement in February 1922 after the events in Chauri Chaura in UP came like a bolt from the blue. The peasants of Chauri Chaura were fighting both imperialism and landlordism, when many were shot and killed by the British police. Enraged, they burnt down the thana where the police fled to take shelter. Twenty-two policemen were killed.

The withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922 had two salient effects. The great demoralization in the ranks of the people was exploited to the hilt by agents of the British rulers to whip up communal riots all over the country. It is no accident that the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha were both revived in 1923 and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was formed in 1925. According to the Simon Commission Report, 112 major communal riots broke out in the country between 1922 and

Naresh 'Nadeem'

ism and misery of imperial wars" (p 74).

This is the running theme that runs through all the available writings of Bhagat Singh and his comrades-in-arms.

It was therefore natural that Bhagat Singh's conception of culture was permeated with this broader objective regarding the future of India and the world. To him, in plain and simple words devoid of jargon, culture should be such that it facilitates the end of exploitation of man by man and nation by nation.

There are reasons to believe that Bhagat Singh understood the importance of culture as early as in the age of 16. Written in Hindi in 1923, his article "The Problem of Punjab's Language and Script" belongs to a period when he was still under the influence of Arya Samaj, a revivalist movement, more so because of his family background. (His grandfather was an Arya Samajist, and Bhagat Singh himself later acknowledged the fact of this influence.) However, on the importance of culture in revolutionary work, this article has the following to say:

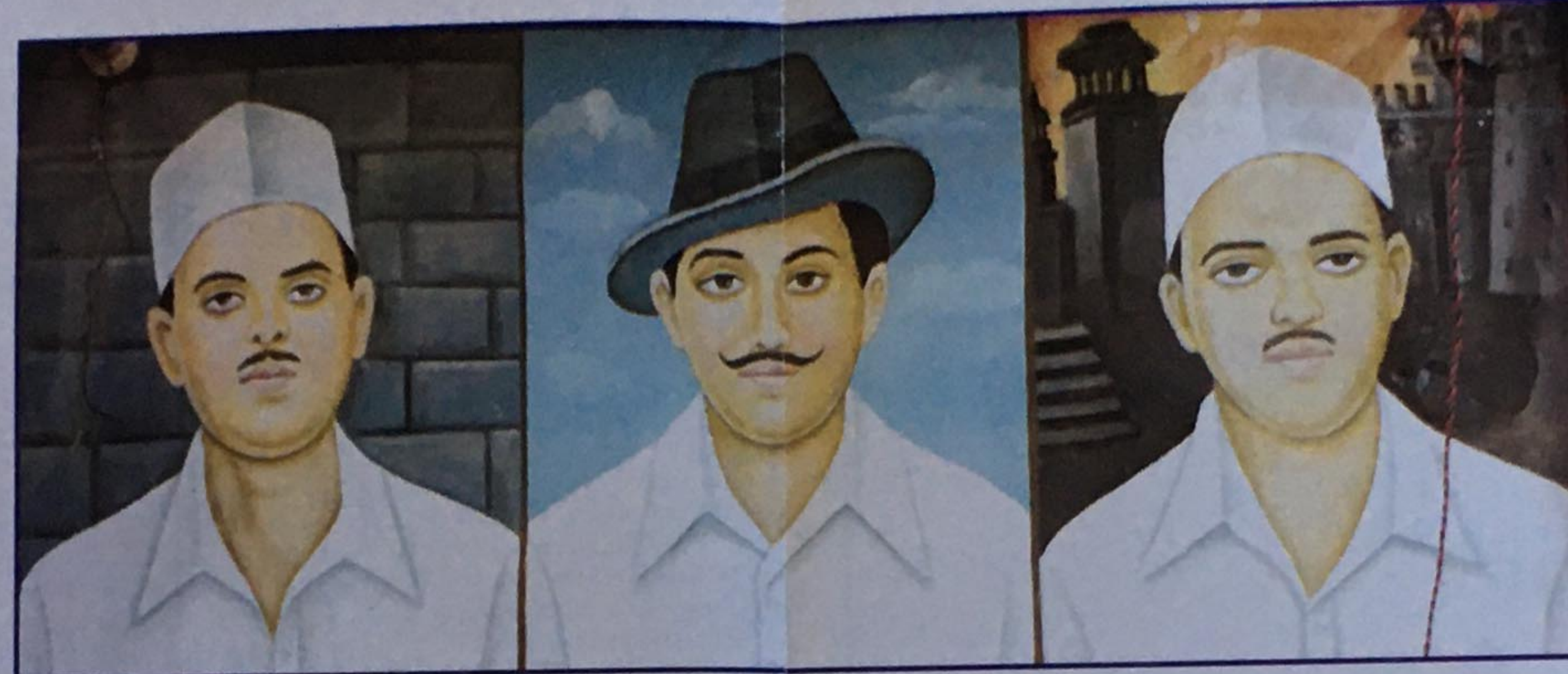
"Perhaps Garibaldi could not have succeeded in mobilising the army with such ease if Mazzini had not invested his thirty years in his mission of cultural and literary renaissance. The revival of Irish language was attempted with the same enthusiasm along with the renaissance in Ireland.... The French revolution would have been impos-

ness and sensitivity

It is thus clear that Bhagat Singh's conception of literature or culture was radically different from the way a ruling class or a ruling party projects these things. If you like, we may put it thus in today's context: culture is not confined to a few items of classical or folk dances, and the like, that our rulers present in (say) many a "Festival of India" held abroad. Nor is it something that need be confined to the elite. Culture is what makes the broad mass of people aware of the need of a fundamental transformation of society and rouses them to action for the purpose.

This could not be otherwise. Unless you make a protracted and sustained effort to clear the mass consciousness of the whole muck accumulated over the past, and unless you free the people from the influence of alien or ruling class ideas, you cannot expect the masses to enter the field of action. That is where the need of culture and a cultural renaissance is felt in all its intensity.

Simplicity of language acquires relevance here as a corollary of mass cultural work, in its broad sense delineated above. He says, "All the Sanskrit literature, put together, failed to revive the Hindu society; new literature had to be written in a contemporary modern language.... Even for a person of proper education and comprehension, the hymns of unintelligible Sanskrit and *ayats* of classical Arabic cannot be as enthralling as is possible by the simple statements in a simple language" (p



Sukhdev

Bhagat Singh

Rajguru

script, he would get the Punjabi language in Hindi script recognised in the University" (p 49). However, one has to accept that these views, expressed at the age of 16, cannot be taken as his authentic views, as a mature Bhagat Singh soon came out of this Arya Samajist influence. This is what he himself talks about

vein: "That this world is 'Maya' or 'Mithya', a dream or a fiction, is clear mysticism which has been originated and developed by Hindu sages of old ages, such as Shankaracharya and others. But in the materialist philosophy this mode of thinking has got absolutely no place" (ibid). At places, Bhagat Singh does recognise a particular function of mysticism, viz that it gives a revolutionary a measure of courage to face the risks of secret work and to face the personal temptations and desires, to lead a risky life "without hope and without fear, always prepared to die unknown, unhonoured and unsung," and he says "this sort of mysticism is by no means demoralising" (ibid). At another place, he explicitly says that the "idea of God is helpful to a man in distress" (p 152). However, contrary to those taking recourse to such mysticism, an atheist faces "all troubles quite boldly" without any props. In the same way he too wanted "to stand like a man with an erect head to the last, even on the gallows" (p 153).

This relatively long article, "Why I am an Atheist," needs to be carefully read and pondered in order to grasp how Bhagat Singh, adopting an historical approach, viewed the origin of the conception of God, and of religion that "was useful to the society in the primitive age." At the same time, however, he is very clear that the society of today does not need such kind of props. More-

over, in a letter to Sukhdev, he says, "We become pitiable and ridiculous when we imbibe an unreasoned mysticism in our life without any natural or substantial basis" (p 108).

In this context, Bhagat Singh proceeds from the idea that those who hold this world to be an illusion cannot vigorously fight for its betterment. Secondly, religion also serves to blur one's vision. Referring to various doctrines of the past, including Charvak,² Bhagat Singh talks of what our "misfortune" is. "Instead of using the experiments and expressions of the ancient sages and thinkers as a basis for our future struggle against ignorance and to try to find out a solution to this mysterious problem, we, lethargical as we have proved to be, raise the hue and cry of faith, unflinching and unwavering faith to their versions and thus are guilty of stagnation in human progress" (p 147). He is also clear that it is such an uncritical attitude that gives rise to "primitive national and racial hatred" (p 122) that goads our men to fight mutually.

And how do they fight mutually? The Manifesto of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, quoted above, says without mincing words: "...we Indians, what are we doing? A branch of peepal tree is cut and religious feelings of the Hindus are injured. A corner of a paper idol, tazia, of the idol-breaker Mohammedans is broken and 'Allah' gets enraged, who cannot be satisfied

religious preachers and possessors of power brought forth jails, gallows, knouts and these theories" (pp 150-51).

It was with this perspective that Bhagat Singh rejected religion lock, stock and barrel. About the manuscript Dreamland, he says the author (Lala Ram Saran Das, another convicted revolutionary) tries to conciliate various conflicting religions "just as all nationalists try to do.... on my part, I would have dismissed it with one sentence of Karl Marx that religion is opium for the masses" (p 120).

However, even if we ignore the feeling that Bhagat Singh has understood Marx here somewhat wrongly, the fact remains that dismissing religion as opium for the masses does not solve the problem of "various conflicting religions," as we in India are sadly witnessing today. Atheism may be one's personal creed, just as this or that particular religion is, but it cannot be imposed on the masses who believe in this or that particular religion. Then? Evidently the problem of conciliating "various conflicting religions" still remains.

Here one cannot but compare Bhagat Singh with the Ghadar Party revolutionaries of a generation ago. This party

ideals of secularism in its real sense, as separation of religion from politics, and to late Comrade Shiv Verma, "This was their first great achievement in Indian politics."⁶

Be that as it may, Bhagat Singh was very clear that a critical and scientific bent of mind was very much needed to clear the muck accumulated over the ages. And we think the best way to sum up this discussion is to present here his testimony in his own words:

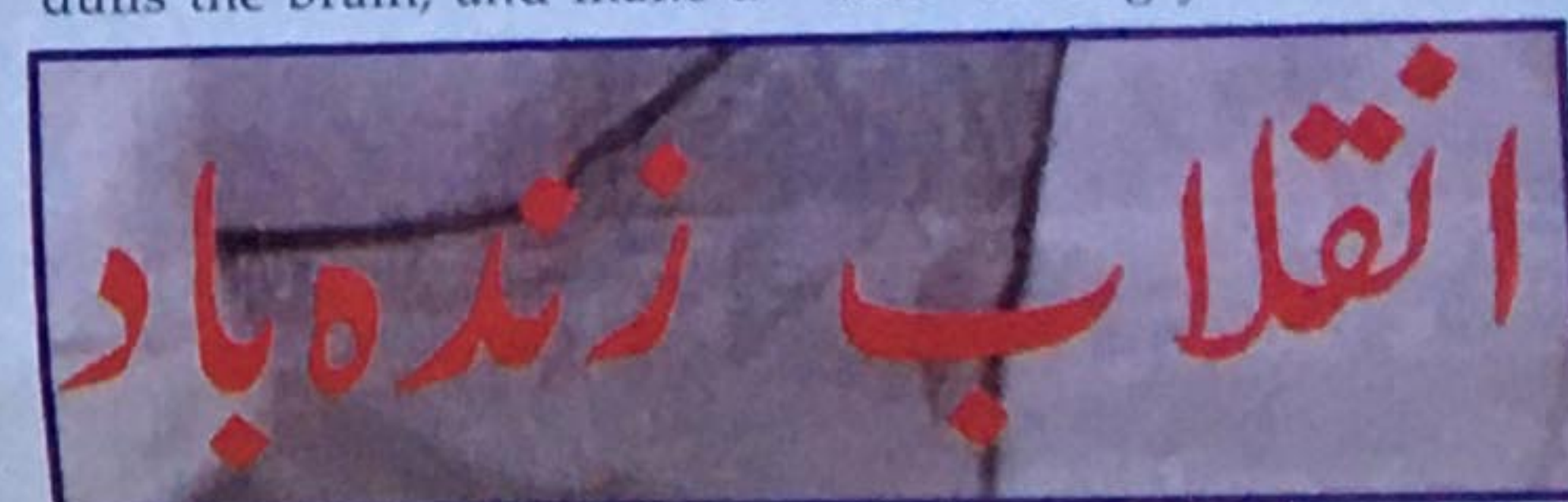
"Any man who stands for progress has to criticise, disbelieve and challenge every item of the old faith. Item by item he has to reason out every nook and corner of the prevailing faith. If after considerable reasoning one is led to believe in any theory or philosophy, his faith is welcome. His reasoning can be mistaken, wrong, misled, and sometimes fallacious. But he is liable to correction because reason is the guiding star of his life. But mere faith and blind faith is dangerous: it dulls the brain, and make a

world.

Notes & References

1. Unless otherwise indicated, references are to Shiv Verma (ed), *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh*, New Delhi, 1986. The book was published on the 55th anniversary of the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev Comrade Shiv Verma (1904-97), the editor of the book, had been a colleague of Bhagat Singh and was sent to the Andaman Cellular Jail in the same Second Lahore Conspiracy Case that ended with the execution of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev.

2. Curiously Bhagat Singh takes Charvak not as a school of philosophy but as an "independent thinker of the past ages." It may also be mentioned here that during his few months of stay in Kanpur after leaving home, Bhagat Singh was constantly in touch with Radha Mohan Gokul Ji, an avowed atheist, whom great Urdu-Hindi writer Premchand had lovingly nicknamed



Times of India, 9 April 1929

BOMB OUTRAGE BY COMMUNISTS IN THE ASSEMBLY. 718

FINANCE MEMBER AND SIR B. DALAL INJURED.

Panic in Chamber: Second Bomb Thrown on Members Fleeing at First Explosion.

TWO MEN ARRESTED: POLICE POSTED TO GUARD HOUSE DAY AND NIGHT.

sible without the literature of Rousseau and Voltaire. Had Tolstoy, Karl Marx and Maxim Gorky not invested years of their lives in the creation of a new literature, Russian revolution would not have taken place, leave alone the propagation of communism" (pp 45-46).

That is why he says that social and religious reformers place much emphasis on "the literature of their country," and quotes the example of Kabir Sahib whose couplets still captivate people with their sweet-

47.

It is true that Bhagat Singh drew a wrong conclusion from this correct observation and advocated unitarian acceptance of Hindi language in Punjab. So much so that he was ready to cast the Punjabi language aside and sought to denigrate Urdu; he even regretted that the people of Punjab did not accept the efforts made in this direction by Mahatma Hansraj who promised that if the leaders of Punjab "accept the Hindi

in his article "Why I am an Atheist." Also, after he came out of the Arya Samajist influence, Urdu poetry became his constant companion; many of his letters he wrote in Urdu.

To proceed further. Religion occupies a key place in Bhagat Singh's thinking, and in this regard he categorically declared that he was "a materialist" whose "interpretation of the phenomena would be causal," instead of being "teleological and metaphysical" (p 119). He says in the same

INDIA DEEPLY MOVED OVER BHAGAT SINGH'S EXECUTION.

DEMONSTRATIONS ALL OVER COUNTRY.

Prayers, Processions and Hartals.

FUNERAL PROCESSION IN LAHORE.

Cremation on Bank of Ravi.

India has been deeply moved over the execution of Bhagat Singh and his comrades, as indicated once by the James O'Brien in the Assembly.

PRAYERS, PROCESSIONS, HARTALS.

The news was first received with a shock, people refusing to believe it. But when it was confirmed, many hartals were declared, processions held, prayers offered for the souls of the three youths.

THE PRISON REVERIES.

There were hardly 100 men at the Lahore Prison, Lahore, for the souls of the three youths.

REVERIES, SLEEPING AND EATING.

As Bhagat Singh and his comrades were being taken to the gallows, the prisoners of the Lahore Prison, who were the comrades of Bhagat Singh, and the mother and wife of Rajguru, stood up to offer hartals. There was nothing but weeping in all corners of the prison during these hours. Many were found being overpowered by their inmates.

THE 12th APRIL 1931.

The members of the Revolutionary Party and many others walked out of the Assembly.

was formed in San Francisco, USA, in 1913 and the British used the cruellest methods to decimate it through the first Lahore Conspiracy Case of 1915-16.⁴ According to late Comrade Sohan Singh Josh, the Ghadar revolutionaries "believed in secularism and stood for a stable Hindu-Muslim-Sikh unity. They also did not accept the categories of touchables and untouchables. Unity of India and unity for the freedom struggle of India were the main principles which weighed within and guided them."⁵ Josh correctly said that Ghadar Party was the first among the Indian revolutionary groups to adopt the

man reactionary. A man who claims to be a realist has to challenge the whole of the ancient faith. If it does not stand the onslaught of reason it crumbles down. Then the first thing for him is to shatter the whole (thing) down and clear a space for the erection of a new philosophy. This is the negative side. After it begins the positive work in which sometimes some material of the old faith may be used for the purpose of reconstruction" (p 147).

This is the injunction one has to scrupulously follow if one has to do something for a betterment of the life of people in our own country and the

"modern Charvak."

3. Interestingly, Upton Sinclair was one of Bhagat Singh's favourite authors and Bhagat Singh, even in his condemned cell, had had a copy of Sinclair's *Spy* with him.

4. Ghadar revolutionary Kartar Singh Sarabha, who went to the gallows at the tender age of 16, was Bhagat Singh's ideal.

5. Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History*, New Delhi, p 160.

6. Shiv Verma, *op cit*, Introduction, p 17.