**Bhagat Singh and His Afterlives**

*India’s Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh* is an innovative study of the life and afterlives of the legendary Bhagat Singh. Chris Moffat states that his aim is to discover not the “true” Bhagat Singh but the reasons for his enduring popularity with people on the left and the right of the ideological spectrum. This study of Bhagat Singh engages with ideas of European thinkers on revolution, memory, monuments, dissensus, and inheritance in a creative and nuanced way. Moffat explores “the vertiginous urge for communion with the past and its effects in the present” (p. 4). Bhagat Singh is the revolutionary icon who demands both critique and action.

The fact that Bhagat Singh was executed when he was only twenty-three, that his life is not well documented, and that his writings are not very copious makes it easier to imagine his legacy in multiple and even contradictory ways. Moffat explores “the vertiginous urge for communion with the past and its effects in the present” (p. 4). Bhagat Singh is the revolutionary icon who demands both critique and action.

The second chapter, the militant life envisaged by the revolutionaries is understood in terms of three factors: resolute action, willingness to face death, and fearlessness “linked to a sense of imminent change” (p. 62). The revolutionary climate of the 1920s was shaped by responses to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, democratic movements around the world, and the Russian Revolution. Moffat argues that the promise of Bhagat Singh emerges because he had the courage to ask “What is to be done?” and not because he provided any answers. It was not any particular program that made Bhagat Singh a popular icon but the “passion of a dispute” (p. 16). Moffat dexterously weaves together the ideas of European theorists into his historical account but sometimes this does not work well. The effort to link the open-endedness of Bhagat Singh’s revolutionary ideas or promise with those of Vladimir Lenin in
his 1902 tract (titled “What Is to Be Done”) is not very convincing. He argues that Bhagat Singh—like Lenin—believed that a mass movement was possible in their time. The revolutionaries “fight for the present and all its possibility” (p. 83). This open-endedness—which Moffat emphasizes repeatedly—is not there in Lenin even in 1902. However, the author does acknowledge that the HSRA might have misunderstood Lenin.

Moffat frequently cites the numerous studies of Bhagat Singh that deal with nationalism, atheism, Marxism, and various revolutionary traditions across the world. Without denying the importance of these themes, he trains his sights on Bhagat Singh's argument with power and the state. The spectral afterlives of Bhagat Singh are the result of the “play between a potentiality which exceeds the national and the vertigo produced by an anarchic idea of justice,” which is not bound by existing laws or institutions (p. 88). The author regards the provocative slogans raised by the revolutionaries and their defiant courage during their trial as the staging of a dispute. Kissing the noose before being hanged—and the “overt thrill of antagonism” produced by raising the slogan “Inquilab Zindabad” frequently in the courtroom and in jail—accounted for the immense popularity of Bhagat Singh rather than any ideology or “any self-standing principle” (p. 98). The courage of Bhagat Singh and his comrades validates their cause and this helps them to be “constituted as subjects of a discourse of truth” (p. 100).

In the second part of the book, Moffat surveys the afterlives of the legendary figure. A book on Ghazi Miyan, a young Muslim warrior who sacrificed his life protecting cows, grappled with the theme of afterlives earlier. Believed to be a nephew of Mahmud Ghazni, an invader in the eleventh century, Ghazi Miyan has long been venerated as a saint. His shrine in eastern Uttar Pradesh attracts thousands of Hindus even today.[1] What is distinctive about Bhagat Singh's afterlife is that his enduring appeal rests on his courage rather than his political program or writings. Cutting “across the political spectrum, across contradictory futures,” he inspires and incites people to act fearlessly (p. 60). This is also true of Mahatma Gandhi who appeals to diverse ideological groups—including Marxist radicals—despite the fact that he lived a long life in the public glare and his voluminous writings are widely known.[2]

One of the important themes of this book is how Bhagat Singh himself calls the living to account to undertake a struggle that was left unfinished by his early death. Moffat proposes that the living articulate a sense of responsibility toward the dead and express a commitment to continue the struggle. The sense of disappointment with the postcolonial state in India propels young revolutionaries to resume the struggle. According to the author, “the living respond to the demands of inheritance” (p. 121). The author gives a detailed account of the “ideologically promiscuous” appeal of Bhagat Singh and the fragmentary and contradictory corpus of his writings—his essay on atheism, the Jail Notebook, and numerous journalistic articles (p. 158). Although Vidyawati, Bhagat Singh's mother, and his nephew Jagmohan Singh were aggrieved that his contribution was not adequately acknowledged by mainstream nationalists, they opposed the appropriation of the legend by Bhindranwale during the Khalistan movement. The Bhagat Singh Research Committee set up by the legend's fellow revolutionaries in the HSRA also tried to set the record straight as did S. Irfan Habib and S. R. Bakshi.

With some disappointment, the author concludes that the careful garnering of evidence by scholars like Chaman Lal, P. C. Joshi, and K. C. Yadav actually served to “embellish a hagiography rather than deflate it” (p. 142). For instance, Lal compared Bhagat Singh with Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara because he too tried to combine communism with local and national culture. Bipan Chandra has asserted that Bhagat Singh would have evolved into a Marxist Gandhian if he had
not been hanged in 1931. The metaphor of Bhagat Singh’s journey, according to Moffat, diminishes the “anarchic vertigo created by sacrifice” (p. 150). This metaphor delinks the revolutionary from the charge of violence and terror on the one hand and proposes the move toward a destination that is more “refined, comprehensive, stable” and imagined as Marxist, anarchist, or a superior form of patriotism, on the other hand (p. 151). While Moffat has asserted repeatedly that his aim is not to discover the “true” Bhagat Singh, he strongly insists that the revolutionary’s “destination can never be ‘validated’” and that myths cannot be refuted because they are based on convictions (p. 156).

In the fifth chapter, “In League with the Dead,” Moffat proffers the view that the dead have an “interruptive potential” and intervene in contemporary politics by cajoling and demanding action. The author refers to “a vision of community that spans the living and the dead, establishing a dispute that is held in common across sequential time” (p. 166). Moffat notes that in the India Against Corruption movement of 2011, right-wing provocateurs have played a role and have invoked Bhagat Singh. The vigilantism of the Bhagat Singh Kranti Sena is also narrated briefly. When it comes to producers of films like *Sadda Haq* (2013) or musicians like Jazzy B and other supporters of a militant Jat Sikh identity, the spectral presence of Bhagat Singh cajoling them into action becomes problematic. As far as the Sikh pantheon is concerned, Bhagat Singh is only one “amid a crowded congregation,” although all are regarded as “contemporaries in this perpetual, ongoing confrontation with *zulm* [oppression]” (p. 195). Somehow it does not look as though Bhagat Singh’s presence is sufficiently integral here, inflecting the dispute and “demanding attention in his own right as a spectral ‘third person’” (p. 249).

Moffat also gives a synoptic account of the appeal of Bhagat Singh to various strands of the left. In Punjab, the Maoists sought to study the Ghadar movement, Teja Singh Swatantra’s Lal Communist Party, Bhagat Singh, and even the Babbar Akalis. The mainstream left was less willing to embrace Bhagat Singh because of the primacy they attached to mass struggles rather than individual acts of courage. The young revolutionaries of Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi interviewed by Moffat are not cajoled by Bhagat Singh’s ideas alone. Influenced by various contemporary Marxist theorists and activists, they have more clearly defined agendas and destinations in mind. Besides, both the left and the right have to deal with what is known about Bhagat Singh’s life and writings. In an article in 1926, Bhagat Singh had praised the courage of six Babbar Akalis who had killed informers and government officials even though he did not approve of their actions. Bhagat Singh admired courageous commitment regardless of ideology—whether demonstrated by Vinayak D. Savarkar or Guru Gobind Singh, or the revolutionaries of France, Ireland, or Russia. As the author rightly observes, this has happened to Bhagat Singh himself. He too is admired across the ideological spectrum for his uncompromising spirit and willingness to sacrifice his life.

In the final chapter, Moffat critiques the idea of commemorative monuments as a form of exorcism. “By affirming death,” he argues, “the monument comes to inflict death, denying the possibility of the ghost and forestalling the revenant’s return” (p. 203). He deals skillfully with the controversy and the politics of appropriation that developed when a tall statue of Bhagat Singh was put up in front of the Parliament building in 2008. This was the very building in which he had thrown bombs—not to kill but to make the deaf hear. It was criticized by various party leaders for representing Bhagat Singh—a national icon—as a turbaned Sikh and a portly one at that. Across the border in Pakistani Punjab, Bhagat Singh is regarded as a “son of the soil” (p. 240). The gathering of a group of committed activists at a site in Lahore where Bhagat Singh was hanged on March 23—coincidentally the National Day of Pakistan—
to rename it Bhagat Singh Chowk is a measure of the dissensus the icon can incite. Invoking Bhagat Singh, activists in Pakistan also use street performances and film screenings to reclaim an “indigenous legacy of secularism, socialism or indeed radical revolution” (p. 229).

Trying to break from the “historicist injunction” to demystify, Moffat focuses on the heterogeneous nature of inheritance (p. 248). Following Jacques Derrida, he argues that inheritance is a choice and a task; one has to assume an inheritance and particularly its most “living” part (p. 246). Only when action in the present is strongly linked to the desire to complete “unfinished business” can we speak of revolutionary inheritance. By focusing on the incalculable or non-foundation- al, he is not forsaking what he calls the “archaic narratives of state and nation” but regards them as “co-constitutive” (p. 249). Moffat argues that despite looking at all the relevant facts he cannot tell the full story of Bhagat Singh because deep feelings cannot be fully known. The afterlives of the revolutionary—marked by the play between anarchy and arche, the forces of disruption and containment—also provide insights about the nature of Indian democracy. As discontent based on unfulfilled promises and unrealized potential affects the entire postcolonial world, Moffat’s book will cajole and incite others to assume their revolutionary inheritance or explore the role of the spectral in politics.

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