



Ideological Conflict And Controversy In Indian Nationalism- Mahatma Gandhi Versus Bhagat Singh

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Abstract- India attained independence after a prolonged struggle marked by sacrifices of the countless freedom fighters who selflessly devoted their lives to the nation. Although the list of such leaders is extensive, the paper confines itself to a comparative analysis of two prominent figures- Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh. Both were leaders of exceptional stature and commitment, yet they represented sharply contrasting world views and ideological approaches. While their ultimate objective- the liberation of India from colonial rule was identical, the means they advocated to achieve this goal differed fundamentally. These divergent strategies and philosophies not only reflected their distinct ideological orientations but also at times generated intense debate and disagreement within the national movement. One such controversy centres on Mahatma Gandhi's and Indian National Congress alleged failure to prevent the execution of Bhagat Singh despite Gandhi commanding considerable moral authority and political influence with British Government. This issue has generated sustained debate among scholars and has also been examined in the present study.

Keywords: Divergent ideologies, Revolutionary, Non Violent Resistance, Colonial Tyranny, Controversy

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh were contemporaries during the 1920's though their active political engagement overlapped only briefly. Gandhi was widely regarded as sun of Indian nationalism around whom various political forces revolved. In contrast, Bhagat Singh emerged as a revolutionary star who carved out an independent ideological orbit of his own. Revered as the 'Prince of Martyr's' he fearlessly tread the thorny path and embraced gallows with exceptional courage. Bhagat Singh rivalled Gandhi in popularity and moral stature across much of the country though his influence was particularly pronounced in Punjab. While Gandhi led the Indian National Congress and championed the path of non-violent mass struggle, Bhagat Singh was a prominent member of Naujawan Bharat Sabha and represented a revolutionary alternative to Gandhian politics. Even today, while Mahatma Gandhi is reverentially remembered as Bapu, Bhagat Singh continues to be celebrated as Shaheed-e-Azam. This duality of remembrance reflects not merely difference in methods but also the deeper divergences rooted in their formative social environments.

The intellectual and ideological outlook of a person is deeply shaped by the political environment in which one is nurtured and this holds true for both Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh. Mahatma Gandhi belonged to a Modh Baniya family of Gujarat whose members had traditionally served the princely states within established framework of authority. None of his ancestors were directly involved in activities opposing colonial rule. Gandhi thus emerges as the first in his family to consciously envisage and pursue a sustained struggle against British domination. But the absence of a revolutionary or anti-colonial tradition in his immediate lineage inclined Gandhi towards a reformist engagement rather than an outright rejection of authority. Consequently, Gandhi's political strategy evolved gradually privileging moral persuasion, negotiation and non-violent resistance. His struggle against colonial rule was not an inheritance but a consciously developed ethical and political choice forged through personal experimentation and intellectual reflection. In contrast, Bhagat Singh political trajectory was shaped by a family deeply immersed in revolutionary nationalism. Born in a Jat Sandhu family of Panjab, he was socialized from an early age into a culture of resistance. He was raised in an environment steeped in anti-colonial resistance as several members of his family actively participated in revolutionary movements. His home functioned as active hub of political activities and anti-colonial mobilization. The sacrifices of his father Kishan Singh and uncles Ajit Singh and Swaran Singh provided living examples of revolutionary commitment. They were associated with the Ghadar Party led by Kartar Singh Sarabha and Lala Hardyal. This formative milieu profoundly shaped Bhagat Singh's revolutionary consciousness and uncompromising commitment to the cause of India's freedom. He inherited a tradition of defiance that predisposed him towards radical action and ideological militancy.

II. IDEOLOGICAL DIVERGENCE

Within the broader spectrum of India's anticolonial struggle, Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh represented fundamentally divergent ideological and strategic approaches to resistance against British rule. While Gandhi articulated and practiced a politics of mass mobilization grounded in non-violence and moral persuasion, Bhagat Singh emerged as leading figure within revolutionary tradition that endorsed direct action and the strategic use of force. The withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922 marked a decisive moment in Bhagat Singh's ideological evolution, reinforcing his scepticism towards Gandhian non-violence. To him, the persistent violence and structural repression of the colonial rule exposed the limitations of moral restraint when confronted with an inherently coercive and exploitative regime. Bhagat Singh's advocacy of revolutionary violence was neither impulsive nor nihilistic rather it was calculated and ethically defensible response to colonial tyranny. He argued that when political authority itself rests on violence, resistance through physical force acquires moral legitimacy. He wrote, *"Non-violence is backed by the theory of soul force in which suffering is courted in the hope of ultimately winning over the opponent. But what happens when a non-violent attempt fails to achieve the object? It is here that the soul force has to be combined with physical force so as not to remain at the mercy of tyrannical and ruthless enemy."* He felt, *"If the deaf are to hear, then the sound has to be very loud."*

Gandhi articulated a long term moral vision and firmly rejected the policy of retaliation famously arguing that, *"an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind."* His philosophy rested on the belief that violence ultimately reproduces the very inhumanity it seeks to resist. In contrast, Bhagat Singh adopted a retaliatory logic of tit for tat viewing revolutionary violence as a legitimate response to colonial repression. His plan to assassinate the Superintendent of Police Scott who had ordered lathi charge on the protestors was conceived as an act of retributive justice for the death of Lala Lajpat Rai. While Gandhi conceptualized Satyagraha as an ethical and rational intervention aimed at transforming an exploitative and dehumanizing system from within, Bhagat Singh's approach foregrounded direct action as a means of exposing the moral bankruptcy of colonial authority.

Gandhi adopted a comparatively conciliatory stance towards British imperialism at least in initial phase of national movement and was prepared to accept subordinate dominion status for India under the broad framework of imperial rule. Bhagat Singh, on the other hand, categorically rejected any compromise with colonial authority and demanded total independence expressing a readiness to sacrifice his life for the same. Gandhi maintained that resistance to powerful imperial state could not be sustained by isolated individual actions. Instead he emphasized on necessity of mass mobilization and collective political struggle to resist Britishers. He held, *"Freedom of nation cannot be won by solitary acts of heroism even though they may be of true type, never by heroism so called."* Bhagat Singh's revolutionary praxis by contrast relied on individual acts of defiance intended to dramatize colonial injustice and awaken public consciousness.

Gandhi's political strategy prioritized transfer of political power only with relatively limited disruption to existing socio-economic structures. He envisaged independence as primarily the replacement of British rule through moral and political reform rather than radical restructuring of society. In contrast, Bhagat Singh's conception of freedom extended beyond political liberation to encompass the transformation of India into a Socialist Egalitarian Society. He explicitly endorsed Socialism as ideological foundation of post-colonial India. Bhagat Singh was an advocate of Socialism whereas Gandhi's vision was rooted in resurgence of rural areas, self-sufficient village economies and ethical reconstruction.

This ideological divergence between two leaders was further evident in their attitude towards religion. Mahatma Gandhi's politics was deeply informed by religious faith and moral spirituality which he regarded as essential for sustaining mass movements and social harmony. Bhagat Singh, however consciously rejected religious beliefs arguing that they impeded revolutionary nationality and reinforced social divisions. His turn towards atheism was shaped by communal violence particularly Hindu Muslim riots that followed the withdrawal of Non-Cooperation movement which led him to critically interrogate religious ideologies. Instead, Bhagat Singh increasingly engaged with atheist and socialist revolutionary thought grounding his politics in reason, material conditions and class struggle rather than spiritual ethics. When in prison in 1930-31, one of his fellow prisoners Randhir Singh tried to convince Bhagat Singh of the existence of God and on failing berated him, *"You are giddy with fame and have developed an ego that is standing like a black curtain between you and God."* In response to his charge, Bhagat Singh authored an essay *'Why I am an Atheist'* in which he offered a rationalist defence of his belief. He argued that idea of God was a human construction shaped by imagination and fear and that faith in unproven doctrines reflected intellectual insecurity rather than moral strength.

It is noteworthy that despite harbouring sharply divergent ideologies, Gandhi and Bhagat Singh had mutual respect for one another. While consistently condemning revolutionary violence, Mahatma Gandhi acknowledged courage, sincerity and the intense patriotism of Bhagat Singh. Bhagat Singh respected Gandhi for his impact on masses and asked the revolutionaries to learn from his connectivity with masses. This mutual recognition underscores the complexity of ideological debate within the Indian National Movement where profound disagreements coexisted with personal respect and shared commitment to the cause of Independence.

III. CONTROVERSY REGARDING RESPONSE OF MAHATMA GANDHI TOWARDS EXECUTION OF BHAGAT SINGH

The role of Mahatma Gandhi and Indian National Congress in responding to the execution of Bhagat Singh and his comrades generated considerable controversy which has persisted in both the historical and popular discourse. Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were sentenced to death in Lahore Conspiracy Case for the assassination of J.P Saunders. While Bhagat Singh did not associate himself with plea of mercy made on the behalf of accused to Privy Council and was prepared to embrace martyrdom, the entire period between the pronouncement of death sentence on 7th October 1930 and its execution on 23rd March 1931 witnessed intense public debate over the possibility of clemency. It was widely argued that

the lives of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru should be spared not merely on humanitarian grounds but also in recognition of the fact that their actions were motivated by patriotic impulse rather than selfish or personal considerations. Contemporary opinion further held that their execution was likely to provoke widespread public anger and unrest. Reflecting this sentiment, a memorandum was submitted to Viceroy outlining several serious objections to the judicial process. First, it was contended that the trial was not conducted in accordance with the ordinary procedures of law before a regular court but instead carried out ex-parte in an extraordinary tribunal in the absence of accused. Second, it was pointed out that following the judgement the accused was denied the right to appeal to the High Court. Third, Bhagat Singh's father Kishan Singh was reportedly prevented from presenting a documentary and oral evidence intended to challenge the official version of Saunders murder. On these grounds, repeated appeals were made for commutation of death sentence. Despite Bhagat Singh's own opposition to seeking clemency, his mother Vidyawati also petitioned the Viceroy to exercise his prerogative of mercy, underscoring the emotional and political intensity surrounding the case. She appealed to Viceroy to exercise his prerogative of mercy by staying the execution and commuting the sentence to life imprisonment. In her petition she maintained that a proper judicial examination would have established her son's innocence and emphasized that he had been deprived of the right to appeal to High Court under Criminal Procedure Act.

Mahatma Gandhi, meanwhile came under considerable public pressure to intercede with the Viceroy for commutation of death sentence. However, his approach provoked criticism from several nationalist leaders most notably Subhash Chandra Bose who publicly condemned Gandhi's willingness to pursue a compromise with the British authorities while the execution of revolutionaries remained imminent. Bose went so far to argue that Gandhi should sever Gandhi Irwin Pact with Viceroy on this issue viewing any accommodation under such circumstances as morally untenable.

Although Gandhi was unwilling to identify with revolutionary violence, he nevertheless raised the issue with the Viceroy seeking commutation rather than unconditional remission. The position reflected Gandhi's attempt to reconcile his commitment to non-violence and constitutional negotiation with mounting public sentiment, a balancing act that ultimately intensified intra nationalist divisions and later contributed to enduring criticism of both Gandhi and the Congress leadership. According to Gandhi's own account, he urged Viceroy, *"If you want the present atmosphere more favourable, suspend Bhagat Singh's execution as it would create unnecessary turmoil."* The Viceroy reportedly responded that while commutation of death sentence would be difficult, a temporary suspension could be considered. On the question of making commutation of death sentence a condition for truce, Gandhi maintained that he was not acting unilaterally but in accordance with the decision of Congress Working Committee which had resolved that he should not insist on this demand as negotiator of truce. At the same time, he warned the youth that Bhagat Singh cannot be secured through violent agitation warning that recourse to violence would trigger more violence which would entail the sacrifice of thousands and ultimately undermine the moral foundations of the nationalist movement – an outcome he was unwilling to countenance. Jawahar Lal Nehru also echoed these concerns reinforcing the Congress leadership's emphasis on non-violent political strategy.

The developments surrounding the proposal for suspension of execution deeply unsettled Bhagat Singh who was unwilling to endure further confinement under harsh prison conditions. In the subsequent meeting, the Viceroy informed Gandhi that he had carefully considered the case of Bhagat Singh but found no grounds on which commutation of death sentence could be justified in conscience. He rejected Gandhi's request for postponement on the grounds that delaying execution for political reasons after sentence had been pronounced would be improper. Such postponement would be inhumane as it would raise false hopes among friends and relatives of Bhagat Singh and expose the government to accusations of having acted in bad faith.

Consequently, Gandhi was left with little room for further intervention and was unable to prevent Bhagat Singh and his comrades from being sent to gallows. The refusal of Bhagat Singh's and his comrades to seek mercy and instead their insistence on execution in a military manner further complicated Gandhi's position. The execution of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev on 23rd March 1931 proved to be critical turning point damaging Gandhi's public standing. Many historians have argued that Gandhi did not exert sufficient pressure on the Viceroy despite considerable moral and political influence he commanded and might have been able to secure clemency had he chosen to do so.

Public reaction was swift and hostile. Gandhi was greeted with black flags and protest slogans when he attended Karachi session of Indian National Congress. He faced particularly sharp criticism from left wing nationalists, who accused him of failing to make commutation of death sentence a non-negotiable condition of Gandhi Irwin Pact. Yashpal, a revolutionary associate of Bhagat Singh and a vocal critic of Gandhi wrote: *Gandhi considered it moral to put government pressure on people for prohibition but considered it immoral to put people's pressure on foreign government to commute the sentence of Bhagat Singh.* Leftist revolutionary Manmath Nath Gupta and other revolutionary figures similarly launched scathing attacks on Mahatma Gandhi over his handling of the issue. Members of Naujawan Bharat Sabha reportedly raised slogans such as 'Gandhi Go back', 'Down with Gandhi', 'Gandhi's truce has sent Bhagat Singh to gallows' holding him responsible for what they viewed as betrayal of revolutionary sacrifice.

Despite the intensity of this opposition, Gandhi later remarked, *"Though they were incensed against me, they gave vent to their wrath in a most dignified manner. It was open to them to do physical injury but they refrained from doing so."* Gandhi paid a tribute to the courage and self-sacrifice of Bhagat Singh and his comrades through a resolution adopted at the Karachi session of Congress which ran, *"The Congress while dissociating itself from and disapproving political violence in any form places on record its admiration for bravery and sacrifice of late Bhagat Singh and his comrades and mourns with the bereaved families the loss of their lives."*

In Young India, Gandhi further clarified his position asserting that he had pleaded with the Viceroy to the fullest extent possible and had brought all available political and moral pressure to bear upon him though without success. He could have taken the additional step of making commutation a condition of the settlement but maintained that Congress Working Committee had decided against introducing such a condition as a pre requisite to the truce. Instead Gandhi relied on an appeal to Viceroy's sense of magnanimity which did not materialize.

Accounts provided by both Mahatma Gandhi and Lord Irwin make it clear that Gandhi sought postponement rather than commutation of death sentence. The explanation offered for this limited demand was that the Congress leadership had already explored the possibility of legal commutation and concluded that it stood little chance of success. Gandhi himself acknowledged this constraint in a letter to C.Vijaya Raghavachari dated 29th April 1931 in which he noted, *"the legality of conviction was discussed threadbare by jurists like Sir Tej Bahadur with Viceroy but it was of no use."*

One final attempt made by Gandhi to save the lives of Bhagat Singh and his comrades took the form of Asif Ali mission. Asif Ali was entrusted to get an undertaking from Bhagat Singh and his comrades that they would renounce violent methods but this mission also failed. The account is corroborated by Asif Ali himself in a statement published in Bhavishya on 27th March 1931: *"I had come to Lahore from Delhi to meet Bhagat Singh with the permission of Punjab government with the intention of getting a letter from him for Revolutionary party instructing the party to postpone their violent activities until there was hope of gaining independence through non-violent movement of Mahatma Gandhi. I tried every possible means to meet him but without any success."*

The Viceroy for his part conceded that Gandhi had made a sincere effort but he remained unmoved and told Gandhi that, *“there was a minor difference between a revolutionary and a patriot for one section of society and a terrorist and criminal for government.”* Irwin has recorded in his autobiography, *“Mr Gandhi said he greatly feared that unless I do something the effect would destroy our pact.”* He also writes, *“As I listened to Mr Gandhi forcibly putting up the case before me, I reflected on what significance it surely was that an apostle of non-violence should so earnestly plead the case of devotees of creed so fundamentally opposite to his own.”* Mahatma Gandhi, however, insisted that the issue at stake was not a debate between violence and non-violence but the immediate imperative of saving precious human lives.

Gandhi's position in Bhagat Singh's case must therefore be situated within his broader philosophical and political approach to revolutionary violence. He possessed an unwavering faith in the moral futility of violence and the transformative efficacy of non-violent resistance. Since 1908, Gandhi had maintained a consistent opposition to revolutionary methods even while acknowledging the patriotic impulse that motivated them. In his view political violence was not criminal in intent but fundamentally misguided in strategy and morality. In 1909 he wrote, *“The assassin is quite convinced in his mind that he is acting in the interest of country but it is difficult to see what good assassination can do. Whenever assassinations have taken place; they have done more harm than good.”* Gandhi regarded all forms of violence as morally corrosive including violence sanctioned by law in form of imprisonment and capital punishment. He reiterated this position on March 7, 1931 declaring, *“I cannot in all conscience agree to any one be sent to gallows much less a brave man like Bhagat Singh.”* As back as 4th May 1930 Gandhi had written to the Viceroy sharply criticising him for creation of special tribunal for trying revolutionaries in Lahore Conspiracy Case, *“You have found a short cut through laws delay in the matter of trial of Bhagat Singh and others by doing away with ordinary procedure. Is it any wonder if I call all these activities a veiled form of Martial Law?”*

Critics of Gandhi have often overlooked the extent to which he stood to gain politically and morally by securing Bhagat Singh's reprieve. Gandhi was acutely aware that his failure to prevent the execution would provoke widespread anger particularly among youth and risk transforming Bhagat Singh into a martyr whose sacrifice would glorify revolutionary violence and popularize its ideological appeal. Such an outcome would inevitably constitute setback to Gandhi's non-violent mass mobilization. Conversely a successful intervention would have been widely interpreted as decisive vindication of non-violence over revolutionary violence and moral triumph of Gandhi's political method.

IV.CONCLUSION

It may therefore be concluded that Gandhi made sustained and genuine efforts until the very end to persuade the Viceroy to halt execution invoking public opinion, the larger interest of peace, moral responsibility and even appeal to Christian sensibilities of Irwin. These efforts ultimately failed not due to Gandhi's indifference or duplicity but because of structural constraints within which he operated. Gandhi remained a supplicant without executive authority while Lord Irwin functioned as a representative of a colonial state determined to assert its coercive power against revolutionary nationalism. Both actors were bound by their respective ideological and political limitations. Any assessment of Gandhi's role in Bhagat Singh's episode must therefore move beyond simplistic accusations of half- heartedness or betrayal and instead recognize the complex interplay of moral conviction, political strategy and colonial power that shaped the tragic outcome.

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