

Bhagat Singh: The character beyond linear history

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Understanding Bhagat Singh: While history will help you know the timelines, his stories will help you understand him.

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Come March, and the fight for the legacy of Bhagat Singh fills the news spaces in the North, more so in the current election season. Not surprisingly, attempts to bring him to one side or the other have begun again, pitting the right wing ideas of nationalism with the left wing ideas of revolutionary socialism. And while the fight for pasting his photo on one or the other competing ideologies carries on, the stories that Bhagat Singh could tell are dying a slow death. Ironically, with every new contemporary debate about Bhagat Singh's legacy, its current relevance has been painfully ignored in favour of the outdated struggle of static and poorly understood ideological labels.

The semiotics of Bhagat Singh has drastically been converged on the key acts of shooting a bullet to kill Saunders, and dropping a bomb in the Assembly. Meanwhile, the motive of the actions, the ideas that triggered them and the context that made him relevant have been lost in the race of popularity. In the current context of instant gratification, Bhagat Singh is often the poster boy for vigilante justice, an action man for quick solutions, avenging the Indian masses.

The resultant understanding of Bhagat Singh then limits him to a much-popularised contrast to Gandhi, serving the narrative of masculinity and power. Tragically enough, this becomes the fate of the legacy of the man who longed for his sacrifice to breathe life into his ideas. The larger objectives of emancipation that he espoused are lost in the adrenaline of the brave-patriot narrative.

The depth and humanity of the character is something that is lost in this linear intensity. The Bhagat Singh who spent his three-day food allowance to watch 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' with his comrades seems almost unreal. While the act of bombing stirs the masses, the depth of his court statements, pressing to highlight the significance of their motives, highlighting the respect for human lives and questioning the institutions for the struggle for emancipation, never forms a part of the dominant narrative. The image of his childlike wonder, spending days in the National College library, jumping with excitement to read the court statement of a French anarchist, voraciously reading political philosophy in jail, doesn't match well with the brave masculine hero of our creation.

No doubt, in the narrative of a man dying for his country, humiliating the evil and powerful imperial regime is important. However, the narrative sees the courage of Bhagat Singh solely as a power dynamic of dominance, where the martyr sticks to his beliefs and robs the establishment of the power and satisfaction of punishing him by deciding his own fate. The appeal here is understandable. But it fails to do justice to the Bhagat Singh, who, while under a near-certain threat of capital punishment, tells the entire court that rasgullas are more important to him than the witnesses. Does that not define a deeper courage of his being?

Another anecdote comes to mind here. A house in Agra, right before the Assembly bombing; Bhagat Singh and his fellow comrades are joking around about how each of them will eventually be caught. Someone claims Sukhdev will be caught sleeping and day-dreaming, and he would wake up confused in the lock-up. Bhagat Singh, on the other hand, would be caught in a movie theatre, and while getting arrested, would

interject, saying, "Great! You got me! Now at least let me watch the whole film!" This courage of the revolutionaries to humour in the face of death is what the linear narrative completely ignores.

The humanity of his courage, sans the violent masculine undertones, is what defines Bhagat Singh's character. It is with this humanity that they fuel their actions, for their emancipatory struggles to question the status quo. Bhagat Singh and his fellow revolutionaries lived the struggles of colonialism, and the political, economic and intellectual inadequacies it perpetuated. Their understanding of sacrifice and nationalism was fueled by the creation of an inclusive, plural and empowering democracy. The essence of their revolution is innovation, re-thinking and re-inventing exploitative institutions, while not being limited by labels of any ideological stance. And that's where the political binaries fall inadequate. Rather than understanding the story of Bhagat Singh, the exercise focuses on his appropriation of his fragments, while presenting a history rife with facts but still lacking in content.

This is why understanding the story of Bhagat Singh becomes important, beyond the limited tenets of his history, because while history will help you know the timelines, his stories will help you understand him. It is in his multitude of stories that we can find inspiration as a nation to empower ourselves.

The essence of power here needs to be based on reflective thought rather than shallow satisfaction of an instance of imperial defeat. If that is where we draw our confidence as a nation, we can hope for producing a new generation of Bhagat Singhs for an age of a new revolution.