Bhagat Singh as ‘Satyagrahi’: The Limits to Non-violence in Late Colonial India

NEETI NAIR

University of Virginia, Randall Hall, PO Box 400180, Charlottesville, VA 22904
Email: nn2v@virginia.edu

Abstract

Among anti-colonial nationalists, Bhagat Singh and M.K. Gandhi are seen to exemplify absolutely contrasting strategies of resistance. Bhagat Singh is regarded as a violent revolutionary whereas Gandhi is the embodiment of non-violence. This paper argues that Bhagat Singh and his comrades became national heroes not after their murder of a police inspector in Lahore or after throwing bombs in the Legislative Assembly in New Delhi but during their practice of hunger strikes and non-violent civil disobedience within the walls of Lahore’s prisons in 1929–30. In fact there was plenty in common in the strategies of resistance employed by both Gandhi and Bhagat Singh. By labelling these revolutionaries ‘murderers’ and ‘terrorists’, the British sought to dismiss their non-violent demands for rights as ‘political prisoners’. The same labels were adopted by Gandhi and his followers. However, the quality of anti-colonial nationalism represented by Bhagat Singh was central to the resolution of many of the divisions that racked pre-partition Punjab.

Introduction

Satyagraha is insistence upon Truth. Why press, for the acceptance of Truth, by soul-force alone? Why not add physical force also to it? While the
revolutionaries stand for winning independence by all the forces, physical as well as moral, at their command, the advocates of soul-force would like to ban the use of physical force. The question really, therefore, is not whether you will have violence or non-violence, but whether you will have soul-force plus physical force or soul-force alone.²

Drafted in January 1930, this manifesto of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association entitled the Philosophy of the Bomb linked the limitations of satyagraha, the pursuit of truth as Gandhi defined it, to the thought and action of Bhagat Singh, easily the most popular revolutionary in northern India at this time. Far from being advocates of illegitimate violence, Bhagat Singh and his comrades aimed at causing a shift in the Congress’ ‘national’ program through a range of measures, most potently the hunger strike. Although they failed in their final goal, I dwell on a moment when the ‘clash of principles’ that necessitated their death by hanging brought together almost all sections of extremist and moderate opinion in the country, barring Gandhi. This process of crafting and affirming new goals in the name of the nation is significant because it acknowledged and accommodated real differences of opinion and method. Equally, Bhagat Singh’s ultimate failure and the concomitant victory of Gandhian nationalism in moulding the shape of Punjabi politics reflects that the balance between center and region had begun to shift towards the center as early as 1931.

**Bhagat Singh and the Politics of Violence, 1925–28**

It is difficult to separate the life of Bhagat Singh from that of anti-colonial activity in the Punjab. As a teenager Bhagat Singh participated in the Sikh movement to acquire control over gurdwaras in the early 1920s. In 1925 Singh was associated with two of the foremost anti-colonial institutions founded that year: he joined the National College at Lahore founded by the leading Punjabi anti-colonial leader Lajpat Rai, and was closely associated with the new Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha (NJBS) that aimed to re-energize the Punjab in the lull following

the collapse of the non-cooperation movement. The workers of the NJBS organized lectures on moral, literary and social subjects: they were explicitly concerned with uniting Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and organized inter-communal dinners to that end. Although their radical views on religion and agrarian reform ensured they had a limited reach, they had the perspicacity to organize public meetings on topics of common interest such as a public meeting denouncing the exhibition of Indians in the Berlin Zoo: a subject of considerable outrage in the colony. That the young men of the NJBS were critical of the shape and tenor of Punjab politics is also revealed in an incident in 1926. Copies of the poem ‘The Lost Leader’ by Robert Browning were printed and distributed to Lajpat Rai and Pt Madan Mohan Malaviya by NJBS members who, angered by their turn away from the Indian National Congress, felt they were steering Punjab politics in the wrong direction.

Bhagat Singh was also engaged in rebuilding the Hindustan Republic Association (HRA) along with the revolutionary Chandrasekhar Azad in Kanpur. This revolutionary party believed in establishing a federated republic of the United States of India by an organized and armed revolution. Its public aims included the establishment of labour and peasant associations; privately, it sought to raise funds and send men abroad for military and scientific training. The Association suffered enormous losses in men during the Kakori train dacoity of 1925 when most of its leaders were caught, arrested and hanged.

There remained some common ground between the radical anti-colonial sentiments espoused by the NJBS and other moderate political formations in the Punjab. To the relief of members of the NJBS and HRA, the late 1920s was a period of intense and continual political change. Even as the British began to engage in the process of constituting a Commission to look into the next stage of constitutional

---

3 A swadeshi enterprise, students at the National College took courses in politics, economics, Indian and European history. See *The Tribune*, 18 June 1925 and 21 February 1929.
4 Home Poll 130 and KW of 1930, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI).
5 *The Tribune*, 15 September 1926.
6 Private Papers of Comrade Ram Chandra, Instalment I, II and IV, Subject file #2, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (hereafter NMML). For a more detailed account of Punjab politics see Duni Chand (of Ambala), *The Ulster of India or an Analysis of the Punjab Problems* (Lahore, 1936).
7 Home Poll 375/1925, NAI.
reform, a younger generation of Congressmen pushed Gandhi into demanding *purna swaraj* or complete independence as the Congress’ final goal. Within the Punjab, however, sections of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were divided on submitting evidence to the all-white Simon Commission. Influential Punjabi Hindus like Raja Narendra Nath, Gokul Chand Narang and Bhai Parmanand, a section of the Muslim League led by Mahomed Shafi, and Sikhs belonging to the Central Sikh League opted to provide evidence to the Commission, thereby lending weight to the unfortunate appellation used to describe the Punjab: ‘India’s Ulster’. But the decision of the Working Committee of the Congress to boycott the all-white Simon Commission served to bring together all the reigning factions within the Punjab Congress: Satyapal, Mohammad Alam, Gopi Chand Bhargava, Lala Duni Chand of Ambala all gathered in support of the boycott. Crucially, the Lion of the Punjab Lala Lajpat Rai, who had broken with his former colleagues in the Congress in the mid-1920s over the issue of boycott and walk-outs from the Legislative Councils, now led this concerted boycott of the Simon Commission. Into this exciting debate on the short- and long-term goals of the anti-colonial movement in the Punjab, the young men of the NJBS poured their political energies. They invited Jawaharlal Nehru to preside over the Punjab Provincial Political Conference in April 1928.

The most controversial resolution passed by the Conference was a recommendation to amend the constitution of the Congress so as to make the attainment of complete independence legitimate ‘by all possible means’, including violence. Opposed by several senior politicians, the resolution was passed by a majority of 75 votes to 56 votes. The *Tribune* denounced the arguments of those who had supported the resolution: it was not ‘violence, far less mere talk of violence’ that would make the government afraid. Indeed, the proposed change in the creed of the Congress would weaken its moral authority and discredit the national movement in India without leading to a more effective means of resistance. The resolution led to several important resignations from the Provincial Congress and

---

8 “The Punjab Is India’s Ulster”, *The Tribune*, 16 March 1928.
10 Report on the political situation in the Punjab, 15 April in Home Poll 1/April 1928, NAI.
threatened to show up the cracks thinly papered over by the boycott until it was later repudiated by another meeting of the Congress.\textsuperscript{11}

Apart, and yet a part of the wave of anti-colonialism spreading across Northern India, members of the HRA from the United Provinces, Bihar, Rajputana and Punjab met in September 1928 at Ferozshah Kotla in Delhi to frame a separate program of action and form a co-ordinating central committee. Bhagat Singh’s proposal to bomb the members of the Simon Commission was accepted as was his decision to stop the practice of looting the homes of rich individuals. It was this category of prosecution witness that had harmed the Kakori accused the most. Reflecting the ideological evolution and persuasive powers of Bhagat Singh, the name of the party changed to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (or Army; hereafter HSRA).\textsuperscript{12}

The demonstrations organized by the HSRA, NJBS and the newly united Punjab Congress against the all-white Simon Commission mark another instance of the ability of a range of parties in the Punjab to cooperate in the political domain. The crowd that greeted the Simon Commission with black flags and loud slogans on the 30 October 1928 was \textit{lathi}-charged outside the Lahore railway station. Lajpat Rai, who was hit by the police, died only two weeks later. His death was widely attributed to the mental if not physical shock he had suffered during the \textit{lathi}-charge.

The HSRA decided to avenge his death: a month later, the three revolutionaries—Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev—killed the Assistant Superintendent of Police, J.P Saunders, and a Head Inspector, Chanan Singh. They had intended to kill the Superintendent of Police J.A. Scott, believed to be the police officer whose blows hit Lajpat Rai, but by the time they discovered their error, it was too late and they decided to kill Saunders instead. The death of Chanan Singh was unplanned: he had rushed to the spot upon hearing the shots. Although the three revolutionaries fled from inside a college campus and there were many witnesses, the Saunders murder case remained unsolved until much later.\textsuperscript{13}

Contemporary sources suggest that this act of terror did not get much support. Although \textit{The Tribune} printed Mrs C.R Das’ appeal to young

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{The Tribune}, 14 April–25 April 1928.


\textsuperscript{13} Home Poll 4/7/1930 of 1929, NAI.
men to avenge Lajpat Rai’s death in late November 1928, an editorial comment averred that the use of violence would make the struggle for national freedom, which was ‘essentially moral, degenerate into a physical struggle': non-violence was India’s strongest weapon. Members of the Punjab and all India Congress demanded that the indiscriminate arrest of college students in the aftermath of the murders be brought to an immediate conclusion, but they were also quick to distance themselves from the act of violence. Deploring the murders at the Punjab Political Conference held in March 1929, the president of the Conference, Satyapal, reaffirmed that the creed of the Congress was non-violence and mocked the idea that Lajpat Rai’s death could be avenged by the killing of a police official. He repudiated terrorism as a political method.

The People, a Lahore weekly founded by Lajpat Rai in 1925, referred to ‘Balraj’—the pseudonym used by Bhagat Singh in the poster proclaiming revenge for Lajpat Rai’s death—as ‘nothing but desperate action’. Moreover, meetings of the NJBS drew increasingly small crowds. With the exception of a meeting to commemorate the Jallianwala Bagh massacre on 13 April, all the meetings announced by the NJBS from the murders in December 1928 until June 1929 were badly attended, small affairs. This is worth bearing in mind when we reckon with the mammoth sized meetings that proclaimed Bhagat Singh as martyr and popular hero. The first president of the Students Union at Lahore remembered the Saunders murder thus:

By and large, the reaction was that the British were made of a very hard fibre, they were the most determined nation, so it would be impossible for the Indians to resort to violent methods and murderous attacks because they would never be able to terrorise them like that. This was the thinking of Mahatma as well as of those who supported him through thick and thin.

Yet Abdul Majid Khan, the author of these views, was also impressed by a small pamphlet published on Terrence MacSwiney, the Irish leader, who died after a hunger strike of more than 70 days.

14 The Tribune, 7 and 20 November 1928.
15 The Tribune, December 1928 and January 1929.
16 The Tribune, 10 March 1929.
17 ‘Gandhi or Balraj—Neither?’ The People, 18 April 1929.
18 J.G. Beazley, Report of the Punjab CID, 2 August 1929 in Home Poll 130 and KW/1930. Also see fortnightly reports from January to May in Home Poll 17/1929, NAI and The Tribune, January to June 1929.
19 OHT of Abdul Majid Khan, NMML, p. 36. The poem ‘Before the Last Battle’ by MacSwiney was re-titled ‘Oh Teach Us How to Die’, printed and distributed by the
A Shift in Strategy: The Assembly Bomb Case and Its Aftermath

As police investigations following the Saunders and Chanan Singh murders floundered, the HSRA busied itself by establishing bomb factories in Agra, Saharanpur, Calcutta and Lahore. However, the repressive side to British colonialism was making itself felt in a series of illiberal bills due to be passed in the Central Legislature. Just as the president of the Assembly rose to give his ruling on the unpopular Public Safety Bill on the 8 April 1929, Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt threw two bombs from the visitor’s gallery towards the officer’s gallery in the Assembly in New Delhi.

‘It takes a loud voice to make the deaf hear’ were the opening words of the leaflets that were thrown alongside these bombs that were carefully designed not to kill. Signed by ‘Balraj’, Commander-in-Chief of the HSRA, the leaflet protested against increasingly repressive legislation and the ‘crumbs of reforms’ expected out of the Simon Commission and declared, unusually for those castigated as violent: ‘it is easy to kill individuals but you cannot kill ideas’. They claimed to hold ‘great sanctity’ to human life but held it necessary to sometimes sacrifice lives for the greater revolution. The young men quietly handed in their revolvers and allowed themselves to be arrested.20

Public criticism of this terrorist action was unequivocal. Gandhi equated the bombs with the knife that killed Rajpal, the author of the notorious pamphlet Rangila Rasul, as subject to the ‘same philosophy of mad revenge and impotent rage’.21 Motilal Nehru pronounced that the choice lay between Gandhi and ‘Balraj’.22


20 The Tribune, 10 April 1929.
21 M.K. Gandhi, ‘The Bomb and the Knife’, Young India, 18 April 1929 in Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (hereafter CWMG), Vol 40, p. 259. Hindu–Muslim relations in the Punjab had reached a new low with the publication of the bigoted pamphlet ‘Rangila Rasul’ in 1924. The ensuing tension abated only with the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act XXV that made it a cognizable crime to insult the founders and leaders of any religious community. However, the publisher of the pamphlet, Mahashe Rajpal, was stabbed on 6 April 1929. Gandhi was equating this stabbing with the bomb that Singh and Dutt dropped in the Legislative Assembly session in Delhi.
22 The Tribune, 18 April 1929.
‘general opinion’ that such outrages were the work of men who did not want India to make any progress towards a responsible government.23 During their trial, Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt prepared a joint statement that responded to these criticisms:

We hold human life sacred beyond words. We are neither perpetrators of dastardly outrages, and, therefore, a disgrace to the country . . . nor are we ‘lunatics’ as the Tribune of Lahore and some others would have it believed. . . . Force when aggressively applied is ‘violence’ and is, therefore, morally unjustifiable, but when it is used in the furtherance of a legitimate cause, it has its moral justification. The elimination of force at all costs is Utopian . . . .24

The Assembly Bomb Statement clearly indicates that the revolutionaries were concerned with the problem of violence in the course of their revolutionary struggle.25 The accused explained the composition of the bombs and their deliberate intention not to cause harm. They could have wiped out a majority of the members of the Legislative Assembly; they could have shot scattered police officers milling around the Assembly in confusion soon after the blast; they did not do so. They had been asked to define what they meant by ‘revolution’. The Statement clarified it did not mean the cult of the bomb and the pistol, it meant that the injustice inherent in the present order of things had to end. Labourers, peasants, weavers, masons, smiths and carpenters could not remain the exploited class. Radical change along socialistic lines was of the essence. They ended the Statement with the slogan Inquilab Zindabad, ‘Long Live Revolution’.26 They were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Evidence during the Assembly Bomb case led the police to link Bhagat Singh and the HSRA with the Saunders murder case.27 This

---

23 The Tribune, 10 April 1929.
24 Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt, 6 June 1929, Trial in the Sessions Court. The Tribune, 8 June 1929.
25 See Colin Lucas, ‘Revolutionary Violence, the People and the Terror’ in Keith Michael Barker (ed.), The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture, Vol. 4: The Terror (New York, 1994) for a consideration of the place of terror in the French Revolution. Further evidence that the revolutionaries were grappling with the problem of violence is in the Statement made on behalf of J.N. Sanyal and five others to the Commissioner, the Special Tribunal Case at the commencement of the trial, 5 May 1930, in Miscellaneous Papers of the HSRA and OHT of Jaidev Kapoor, NMML, p. 227.
26 The Tribune, 8 June 1929.
had not been anticipated by them. The revolutionaries had hoped the leaflets would gain the HSRA a measure of support for their aims and steer the Congress in a more radical direction. However, for a second time in less than four years, the HSRA found its membership in tatters. But the tide of public opinion was shifting in their favour. This was reflected in the respect and admiration that their Assembly Bomb Defence Statement elicited in letters to newspapers. The People now editorialized:

Transportation for life to two young men—their crime had broken a couple of benches in the Assembly Chamber and given slight bruises to two or three members who happened to be near those benches! Seldom has ‘justice’ made a better bargain! . . . the young bomb throwers . . . received [the news] with joy . . . their usual shouts of ‘Long live the revolution.’ It is this spirit the posterity would admire . . . Bhagat Singh . . . has dared all earthly power to curb his spirit.28

The editor continued to point out the many ways in which Bhagat Singh and his companions differed from the average bomb-thrower. Even before their co-conspirators were arrested as under-trial prisoners in what came to be known as the second Lahore Conspiracy Case, Bhagat Singh and Dutt went on a hunger strike. In keeping with Gandhian rules on giving the opponent sufficient warning before embarking on satyagraha, Bhagat Singh wrote a letter to the Superintendent explaining that he had been sentenced to life imprisonment and was obviously a ‘political prisoner’. He had been given a special diet in the Delhi Jail but was being treated as an ordinary criminal in Mianwali Jail. He requested basic provisions—a better diet, no forced labour, books, one standard daily paper, better clothing, some toilet necessities like soap and oil. Upon receiving no response, he embarked on a hunger strike.29 Dutt, who followed soon after, reiterated that he was a political prisoner, not a dacoit or thief and felt political prisoners ought not to do hard labour.30 Both contended that all political prisoners be treated as European ‘special class’ prisoners.

Outside the prison, meetings held to congratulate the prisoners on their convictions were now well attended. Soon after news of the hunger strike spread, 30 June was observed as Bhagat Singh–Dutt Day.

28 ‘Bhagat Singh and Bhutukeshwar’, The People, 13 June 1929.
29 Letter dated 17 June 1929 in Home Poll 244 and KW/1930, NAI.
30 The Tribune, 25 June 1929.
in a majority of districts in the Punjab. In Lahore, 10,000 people attended a meeting organized by the City Congress Committee: the chair, Sardar Sardul Singh Caveeshar, recounted the hardships he had personally endured as a political prisoner. Another speaker Parbati Devi exhorted citizens of Lahore to contribute towards the newly created Defence Committee Fund for the prisoners. Pictures of Singh and Dutt were distributed along with the following lines from their Defence Statement: ‘From under the seeming stillness of the seat of Indian humanity a veritable storm is about to break out. We have given a fair and loud enough warning. By crushing two insignificant units the nation cannot be crushed’. Reporting on the mass meeting, The Tribune stated that thousands of Lahoris had expressed their solidarity with the hunger-striking prisoners by fasting on that day. At a similar meeting in Amritsar attended by 5,000 people, political workers recited poems comparing the revolutionaries’ ardour for their country to the love stories of Ranjha, Hir, Sohni and Farhad. Bhagat Singh and Dutt were hailed as the honour of Punjab and Bengal.

The Defence Statement by Bhagat Singh and Dutt in the Assembly Bomb Case was published in the Congress Bulletin of 1 July 1929. Gandhi wrote in sharp disapproval to the young General Secretary Jawaharlal Nehru that it was ‘out of place’ in a publication devoted to Congress activities. He did not like Nehru’s approval of the fast and referred to it as ‘an irrelevant performance’. Yet, locally in Lahore, news filtered of the under-trial prisoners also refusing to eat. Over a thousand rupees were collected over four evenings when volunteers from the Congress and the youth leagues marched in procession with red banners carrying photographs of the hunger-striking prisoners bearing the inscription ‘Dutt is at the point of death, all for country’s honour sixteen young men are starving to death in your Lahore’. When the success of these processions unnerved the administration and Section 144 was suddenly imposed, Congress, Ahrar and Akali leaders including Sardar Mangal Singh and Zafar Ali Khan courted arrest by shouting the newly

31 The Tribune carried reports of meetings in Jullundur, Gujranwala, Multan, Rohtak, Sargodha as well as Hardwar and Calcutta. Comparisons with the late Lord Mayor of Cork Terrence MacSwiney were made at Gujranwala. See The Tribune, 3 and 4 July 1929.
32 The Tribune, 2 July 1929.
33 Dhian Singh, Sub-Inspector, Note regarding the celebration of “Bhagat Singh Day at Amritsar”, 1 July 1929 in Home Poll 130 and KW/1930, NAI.
banned slogan Inquilab Zindabad along with members of the newly banned NJBS. The Tribune’s headlines proclaimed Satyagrahis Parade Bazars shouting ‘Long Live Revolution’ and the self-professed ‘Satyagraha Committee’ won its first victory when the District Magistrate was forced to modify his order and release the defiant demonstrators. The NJBS celebrated its victory by announcing that 21 July be celebrated as All India Bhagat Singh–Dutt Day. The proposed programme included fasting, processions, the collection of funds for the Conspiracy Case Defence Committee and meetings to explain the purpose of the hunger strike and protest the treatment of political prisoners. A month later, several women sent the prisoners rakhis consecrated in blood. A correspondent to The People suggested that it was not the issue as much as ‘the manner and spirit’ with which the hunger-strikers were undertaking their resolve that was inspiring.

Heart-and-soul devotion to a cause, heart-and-soul loyalty to associates, fidelity to the death, are virtues which command our involuntary reverence. Nowhere are they so common as not to be held in high honour. If Sardar Bhagat Singh and Mr Bhutakeshwar Dutt [sic] persist in their fast to fatal extremities, India will be immensely the poorer for her loss. For them the struggle will be over. But what for us ... is the moral? That is a question for each one to answer ... Most of our lives are built on compromises. Is it possible to be more single-minded?

Jatinder Nath Sanyal and Ajoy Ghosh, fellow prisoners, remembered that the most difficult part of the strike was not the fight against hunger but ‘the fight against the instinct of self-preservation’. Sanyal watched the dying Jatindra Nath Das in his last days: first his toes became paralyzed, then his legs, his hands, and finally his eyes. The archives have preserved daily medical reports that attest both to the determination of the hunger-strikers to maintain their protest and of the prison officers to forcibly feed them so that they could attend the trial. Their steady deterioration is evident from the earliest reports in June to later reports in September. In the middle of July, Major P.D. Chopra, Superintendent of the Central Jail in Lahore, noted that the pulse rate of convict Bhagat Singh was 82,

35 Fortnightly reports from July to September 1929 in the Private Papers of Comrade Ram Chandra, Installment III and V, Subject file #3, NMML, The Tribune, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21 and 23 July 1929; see also The Tribune of 23 August 1929.
36 The Tribune, 22 August 1929.
38 Sanyal, p. 59.
‘soft of weak tension and volume’, but after artificial feeding it rose to 105 per minute. B.K. Dutt’s pulse rate was 64, which rose to 108 per minute after artificial feeding.\footnote{Report signed by Major P.D. Chopra, IMS, Supt Central Jail and Lt Col D.H. Rai, Mayo Hospital, Lahore, 14 July 1929 in Home Poll 26/IV/1930, NAI. Medical reports were often reproduced in newspapers.} A week later both convicts offered so much resistance that the doctors did not recommend artificial feeding. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

The Home Secretary’s philosophy of containment—to avoid action and conciliate moderates—was undermined by the rapidly deteriorating health of some prisoners. In early August, Dr Gopi Chand Bhargava, a member of the Legislative Assembly and the Defense Committee, visited the prisoners. He advised the prisoners to take medicines and not hurt themselves while resisting artificial feeding. To the Punjab Government, he confessed his failure to convince the prisoners. He had used all manner of arguments—national, religious and general—and quoted that even Gandhi, who also resorted to hunger strikes, ‘always brought it to an end before getting to the extreme stage of committing the sin of taking his own life by his own deeds’.\footnote{G.F. de Montmorency, 7 August 1929 in Home Poll 242/1929, NAI.} When Jawaharlal Nehru visited the prisoners, they reiterated that they were fasting for a ‘principle’, viz., that they were ‘political prisoners’ and that all political prisoners should be treated as special class prisoners. The recent communiqué of the Punjab Government that permitted them a special diet did not deal with the larger question of motive in the classification of all political prisoners.\footnote{In keeping with a decision taken at a Viceregal conference in Simla on 15 July, the Superintendent of Police was provided with the discretion to order a special diet for the under-trial prisoners in the Lahore Conspiracy case, including the convicted prisoners Bhagat Singh and Dutt in the Assembly Bomb Case. Home Poll 130 and KW of 1930; Home Poll 242/1929, NAI.} Meanwhile the Punjab Government revised the probable effect of the hunger strike on the situation in the Punjab. It also acknowledged the ‘principle’ that lay at the heart of the fast:

The spectacle of thirteen young men deliberately starving themselves to death for a principle would excite sympathy in a more phlegmatic and less sentimental country than India. It has excited sympathy in almost every quarter, and should one or two of the hunger-strikers die, this sympathy will beget anger against Government ... I think some action ... if taken at once,
SARDAR BHAGAT SINGH REFUSES TO TAKE EVEN WATER.

His Condition Becomes Serious.

ANOTHER ADMISSION TO JAIL HOSPITAL.


It is reported that Dr. Gavas Prasad, another accused in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, who was arrested at Bhudhanpore was admitted to the Central Jail Hospital yesterday in a very weak state of health. There are now as many as seven of the hunger-strikers in the hospital.

PAIN IN STOMACH AND CHEST.

Mr. Lal Chand Das had no fever last night and this morning. He had slight nausea but is becoming weaker. He is said to be able to take in water. He is suffering from pain in his stomach and chest.

His body has lost weight.

Mr. Gokul Varma had no fever but he is bitter-vomiting and very weak. He is being force-fed. When arrested, Mr. Das weighed 160 lbs. He now weighs 152 lbs. Mr. Gokul Varma has lost 8 lbs.

Mrs. Kalyani Singh, who was also admitted to the Central Jail Hospital, was force-fed this morning.

Mr. Lala Lajpat Rai is in hospital and is being force-fed.

Mr. Natha Singh, who was admitted to the Central Jail Hospital on Friday, is also in hospital and is being force-fed.

MARCH AND THROAT TROUBLE.

Mr. Kanwal Singh has had no fever but has developed ear infection and throat trouble. His condition remains serious.

REFUSAL TO TAKE WATER.

Sardar Bhagat Singh was admitted to the Central Jail Hospital four days ago. Forced feeding has been stopped in his case. His condition is reported to be serious. He is refusing even water.

Mr. Dutta is in hospital and could not be fed for the last six days.

HUNGER-STRIKE SPREADS IN JAIL.

Mr. Bhim Barama, the Dakhinwane Bomb case, and Mr. Sohan Singh, who are now in the Lahore Central Jail, are reported to have gone on hunger-strike.

Figure 1. Hunger-strikers make headlines: Gandhi's perspective.
would pull up the agitation and give us time to consider whether Paris is worth a mess, or the peace of Lahore worth half a chatak of ghi for Dr Satyapal.42

A whole month after the 14 under-trial prisoners had joined the strike and after repeated warnings that the condition of various prisoners was critical, the Government of India issued a communiqué requesting local governments to re-examine the rules relating to the classification of prisoners.43 On 2 September members of the

42 F.H. Puckle to J.F. Ferguson, 7 August 1929 in Home Poll 242/1929, NAI. Emphasis his.
43 The Tribune, 13 August 1929.
newly appointed Jails Committee including Lala Duni Chand of Ambala interviewed the hunger-striking prisoners. Their demands included status as special class prisoners for those convicted of violent offences; that all the under-trial prisoners in the Conspiracy Case should be placed together in a general association barrack; and the immediate and unconditional release of Jatindra Nath Das. The Jails Committee promised that all their demands would be met in full and the prisoners agreed, accordingly, to suspend their hunger strike. But the government played for time at a juncture when there really was no time: they insisted on making recommendations regarding special class prisoners for all of India only after receiving the recommendations of all the local Jails Committees.

As the Punjab Jails Enquiry Committee’s proposals became stuck in bureaucratic mire, Das died on 13 September 1929 after a continuous fast of 63 days. On the same day that 50,000 funeral processionists marched through Lahore, the Central Legislative Assembly passed a motion of adjournment to censure the government for their policy regarding the hunger-striking prisoners in the Lahore Conspiracy Case. Speaking on the motion, Motilal Nehru emphatically asserted:

It is not a question, Sir, of sections or of procedure or of substantive or adjective law. It is, Sir, a question of humanity, of the elementary duty of a Government to save life, to save the lives not only of those who seek its protection, but also of those who want to destroy their own lives.

The Home Secretary Emerson defended the British Government’s decision to refer ‘the very great issues’ raised by Bhagat Singh to the local governments concerned since prisons were a provincial subject. The ‘very great issues’ raised by Bhagat Singh and his comrades were directed at the very basis of British rule. To concede that they were ‘political prisoners’ would mean acknowledging that their motives

44 Bhagat Singh, Dutta and other under-trials, Lahore Conspiracy Case, 28 January 1930 in Home Poll 137/1930, NAI. The letter traced their demands from the beginning of their imprisonment.
45 Lahore Conspiracy Case hunger-strikers to the Chairman, Punjab Jails Enquiry Committee and Members of the Hunger-Strike Subcommittee, Simla, through the Superintendent, Borstal Institute, Lahore, 6 September 1929; Lala Duni Chand to the under-trial prisoners of the Lahore Conspiracy Case, 12 September 1929 in Home Poll 244 and KW/1930, NAI.
46 Home Poll 21/63/1929, NAI.
47 Proceedings on 14 September 1929. Extract from the Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol IV, No 9 in Home Poll 21/63/1929, NAI.
were political, not personal, and that they were not common criminals. It would necessitate treating Indian political prisoners, even those accused of violent crimes, on equal footing with political prisoners guilty of violence in Ireland and England. The Secretary’s contention that the government was defending the law was proving to ring hollow. When the hunger-strikers could not come to court because they were too weak to do so, Emerson pushed for an amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure. If passed, the bill would make it possible to hold trials and convict accused persons \textit{ex parte}.

Several fiery speeches protested against this bill in the Central Legislature: Mohammed Ali Jinnah was particularly well prepared. He viewed the bill from three viewpoints: that of criminal jurisprudence, the political point of view and the treatment to the accused under trial. As for the definition of a ‘political prisoner’, Jinnah asked the government to use their ‘common sense’ and ‘intelligence’.

Well, you know perfectly well that these men are determined to die. It is not a joke. I ask the Hon’ble the Law Member to realise that it is not everybody who can go on starving himself to death ... The man who goes on hunger-strike has a soul. He is moved by the soul and he believes in the justice of his cause; he is not an ordinary criminal who is guilty of cold-blooded, sordid, wicked crime.

Jinnah pointed out that the proposed bill ran against a fundamental doctrine ‘which goes to the very root of the criminal jurisprudence ... that no man is to be condemned until he is given a hearing’. He argued that this amendment was unprecedented; he also suggested more humane ways to break the strike. After all, the prisoners were not asking for ‘dressing-tables’ or ‘spring mattresses’. They wanted ‘nothing but bare necessities and a little better treatment. I ask you in all decency, why cannot you concede this small thing? Did the Government want to prosecute these young men or persecute them?’ Jinnah reminded them that he was a ‘patient cool-headed man’ but there were thousands of young men outside, victims of ‘this damnable system of Government, which is resented by the people’. He pointed toward the incessant prosecutions in Bengal, Madras and Punjab and asked the government why these men would want to make seditious speeches and spend their time in jail. ‘Do you not realise yourself, if

\footnote{Notes, 7 September 1929 in Home Poll 244 and KW/1930, NAI.}
you open your eyes, that there is resentment, universal resentment, against your policy, against your programme?49

It was during the debate concerning this bill that under-trial prisoner Jatindra Nath Das had died. His martyrdom brought every leading political thinker on the same platform, except Gandhi. In the Punjab, Drs Muhammad Alam and Gopi Chand Bhargava resigned from the Punjab Legislative Assembly.50 Subhas Bose led the miles-long funeral procession in Calcutta; flower wreaths from Das’ coffin were carried away as so many sacred remembrances.51 It was only fitting that Rabindranath Tagore was inspired to compose a song. His own poem ‘Ekla chalo’ was sung by Das’ brother to him in his final moments. In honour of the martyr, Tagore now wrote:

_Sarba khbaratare dahe taba krodha daha —_
he Bhairav, shakti dao, bhakta-pane chaha.
_Door karo Maharudra jaha mugdha jaha khudra -_
_mrityyre karibe tuchha pranera uthsaha._
_Dukhero manthanabege uthibe amrita,_
_shanka hote raksha pabe jara mrityubheeta._
_Taba deepta roudrateje nirjharia galibe je_
_prastarashrinkhalonmukta tyagera prabaha._

All meanness is devoured by the fire of your anger—
O God, give us strength, have mercy on your devotees.
Sweep away, Almighty, what is false and petty—
May death be dwarfed by the ecstasy of life.
By churning the depths of suffering will be found immortality,
Those who fear death will be freed of their terror.
Your resplendent scorching power will melt and let flow
Freed of the chain of stones, a stream of sacrifice.52

From Ireland Mary MacSwiney, the sister of the late Lord Mayor of Cork Terrence MacSwiney, sent a telegram of sympathy to the Mayor of the Calcutta Corporation, with the hope and the promise: ‘Freedom will come’.53

---

50 _The Tribune_, 15 and 17 September 1929.
51 _The Tribune_, 18 September 1929.
52 I am grateful to Sugata Bose for this song and its translation. For Das’ final moments, see Private Papers of Comrade Ram Chandra, Instalment I, II and IV, Subject file #2 NMML.
53 Quoted in _The Tribune_, 21 September 1929.
Several consequences flowed out of Das’ tragic end. In the first instance, the Hunger-Strikers Bill failed and the government decided to treat both Singh and Dutt on par with the other under-trial prisoners. However the general conduct of the case worsened. The ongoing tug of war between the Magistrate, the police and jail officials, press representatives, relatives of the accused and legal advisors to the accused in the jail-turned-courtroom has been discussed by A.G. Noorani. He has detailed the degrading manner in which the prisoners were handcuffed and beaten, and the occasions they were unable to appeal to the High Court. The proceedings of the court, when the prisoners were able to attend, were widely published. Bhagat Singh and almost all the other accused defended themselves. They were more interested in the ‘moral effect’ of their trial: in revealing the egregious nature of colonial courts and the dissemination of revolutionary propaganda than with expecting justice. So the approver Phanindranath Ghosh was forced to concede that the HSRA considered it ‘improper to kill an innocent person’; approver Lalit Kumar Mukherjee was quizzed on the preparation of picric acid; Hans Raj Vohra’s testimony begged the question why he had turned away from Gandhian methods for procuring India her swaraj; and, after a protracted demand for newspapers, The Tribune was rejected because the jail authorities refused to supply a vernacular paper for political prisoners who could not read English. With each intervention, Singh and his fellow accused prisoners were revealing their strategy and providing pointers on how to navigate the road ahead. They also give the historian little vignettes with which to piece together some of the complex motives that girded the trial.

But their demand for rights as political prisoners continued to have an uneven trajectory. The first phase of hunger strike ended with the death of Das and the promise that a new system of classifying prisoners was in the offing. When it became clear that the Government of India was in no mood to ‘redeem its promise’ to the prisoners and the public, the Lahore Conspiracy Case prisoners provided the Government with one week’s notice before embarking on another hunger strike. The

---

55 The Tribune, 8 April 1930.
Punjab Congress responded with public meetings and a hunger strike week characterized by fund-raising for the defence of the accused and measures to induct new members into the Congress.\textsuperscript{56} In a long letter that traced the history of the hunger strikes and the unfulfilled promise of prison reforms, the prisoners again raised the question of motive and pointedly referred to the difference between non-violent and violent offences:

It is through motive alone that the real value of any action can be decided. Are we to understand that the government is unable to distinguish between a robber who robs and kills his victims and a Kharag Bahadur who kills a villain and saves the honour of a young lady and redeems society of a most licentious parasite? Are both to be treated as two men belonging to the same category? Is there no difference between two men who commit the same offence one guided by selfish motive and other by a selfless one? Similarly is there no difference between a common murderer and a political worker even if the latter resorts to violence? Does not his selflessness elevate his place from amongst those of ordinary criminals?\textsuperscript{57}

This indisputably logical demand was only half-heartedly conceded by the colonial government. Although the racial classification of prisoners was ended,\textsuperscript{58} local magistrates continued to have the last word on whether or not political prisoners were worthy of special class treatment, thereby spurring lengthy appeals for particular political prisoners during the next phase of civil disobedience. The third and final hunger strike undertaken by the prisoners was a response to the arbitrary classification of prominent Congressmen during the Gandhi-led civil disobedience movement of 1930–31. Figure 3 shows the weight loss incurred by Congressmen who, although classified as deserving of ‘A’ and ‘B’ class treatment in the Gujrat jail, decided to consume ‘C’ class food for ordinary prisoners in sympathy with those political prisoners who had been misclassified. Riding on privileges fought for by the revolutionaries, Gandhi’s trusted lieutenant Mahadev Desai described the classification of prisoners as a ‘grave scandal’.\textsuperscript{59} At this particularly dramatic conjuncture,

\textsuperscript{56} The Tribune, 18 February 1930.
\textsuperscript{57} Bhagat Singh, Dutta and other under-trials, Lahore Conspiracy Case, 28 January 1930 in Home Poll 137/1930, NAI.
\textsuperscript{58} The Tribune, 22 February 1930.
\textsuperscript{59} The Tribune, 31 October 1930.
the Special Tribunal, cobbled together to pass judgement on the frequently absentee accused prisoners, declared its verdict.\textsuperscript{60}

When Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were sentenced to death, Bhagat Singh Appeal Committees were established in every district of the Punjab. At a Bhagat Singh Day on 17 February 1931, colleges emptied out onto streets, 15,000 people met in Lahore. Over 138,000 signatures seeking the commutation of the death sentence were sent by the All Punjab Bhagat Singh Appeal Committee to the Viceroy.\textsuperscript{61} In Amritsar, a public meeting organized by the Workers and Peasants Party demanded the immediate release of all political prisoners. The

\textsuperscript{60} Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Raj Guru were sentenced to death; Kishorilal, Mahavir Singh, Bijoy Kumar Sinha, Shiv Varma, Gaya Prasad, Jaidev and Kamal Nath Tewari were sentenced to transportation for life; Kundanlal was sentenced to seven years’ rigorous imprisonment; Prem Dutt was sentenced to five years’ rigorous imprisonment; Ajoy Kumar Ghosh, Jatinder Nath Sanyal and Desraj were acquitted; Ramsarandas and Brahmadutt—the two approvers who changed their statements—were to be prosecuted under a different section and the five approvers were discharged. \textit{The Tribune}, 8 October 1930.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{The Tribune}, 24 February 1931.
Tamil Nadu Congress Committee insisted that commuting the death sentence was an essential condition for peace.⁶²

In his final letters, Bhagat Singh showed an emotional and political maturity far beyond his 23 years. To his followers, he emphasized that compromise was a part of politics, but it was important to remain absolutely steadfast in the final goal. If they were fighting for 16 annas, they were to accept the 1 anna they received and continue fighting for the remaining 15. The problem with the moderates was that they fought for 1 anna and received nothing in return.⁶³ Crucially, Bhagat Singh dealt with the appellation ‘terrorist’. He used the word ‘aatankari’ and was emphatic: ‘mein aatankari nahin hoon, mein ek krantikari hoon’. I am not a terrorist, I am a revolutionary. He had always known that the bomb would not be the solution; it was evident in the history of the HSRA. The bomb would only be of use in certain cases; the main goal was to work with workers and peasants.⁶⁴

In his criticisms of Congress strategy and in his endeavour to chalk out a long-term strategy for the revolutionaries, Bhagat Singh returned to the relationship between means and ends. In their last letters both Sukhdev and Singh distanced themselves from the bomb attacks that engulfed the Punjab in late 1930: Sukhdev was also critical of the raid on the Chittagong Armoury.⁶⁵ Although calling for a military department in the future Communist Party, Bhagat Singh was emphatic that it would have to be subordinate to the political wing. He told his followers not to try and read between the lines. He wanted to inform them with his full strength that except for the first few days of his career as a revolutionary, he was never a terrorist. He was absolutely confident that they would not achieve anything by those means: ‘bam fainkna na sirf bekaar, balki nuksaandayak hai’, throwing

⁶² See the last week of March 1931 in The Tribune.
⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 92. Yashpal remembered that when G.B. Pant released satyagrahis in 1937, he asked the other political prisoners if they were willing to promise they would not walk the path of violence ever again. The revolutionaries refused because that would have meant accepting that violence had been their aim. Violence, he reiterated, was never their aim. Corinne Friend, ‘Yashpal: Fighter for Freedom, Writer for Justice’ in Journal of South Asian Literature, Vol 13, Nos 1–4 (1978), p. 87. For a different perspective on nomenclature, see Durba Ghosh, ‘Terrorism in Bengal: Political Violence in the Interwar Years’ in Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy (eds.), Decentering Empire: Britain, India and the Transcolonial World (Delhi, 2006), p. 273.
a bomb is not only useless but could have negative consequences [for
the revolutionary movement]. Bhagat Singh reminded his followers
that it was important not only to die for your goals but also to live by
them. To the All Punjab Students Conference, Bhagat Singh and Dutt
sent a ‘wireless message’ advising them not to use bombs and pistols,
but to follow the Congress program. Yet the transformation in his
politics and the sophistication of his reasoning has not been studied.
The British damning of these prisoners as ‘terrorists’ has had a long
afterlife in the writing of history.

The debate on whether or not Gandhi did enough to secure the
commutation of the death sentence of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and
Rajguru during his talks with Irwin has long been decided against
him. The greater question is that of Gandhi’s attitude throughout
the hunger-strike and tribulations in the prison-turned-court from
1929 to 1931. The Mahatma who sought to visit Delhi after the killings
of peaceful demonstrators on 30 March 1919, Nankana Sahib after
the massacre of non-violent Sikhs in February 1921 and the arrested
communist leaders in the Meerut Conspiracy Case in 1929, never
bothered to visit the Lahore Conspiracy Case prisoners. Even as Jinnah
and Motilal Nehru damned the British Government for its inhumane
and irresponsible attitude, Gandhi simply informed his inquiring and
protesting readers that his silence on Das’ ‘self-immolation’ was in
the ‘national interest’. The profuse author of a hundred letters in
this period now held that there were ‘very many important questions
affecting the nation’ on which he maintained absolute silence.

66 Bhagat Singh, ‘Krantikari Karyakram ka masauda’, 2 February 1931 in
Jagmohan Singh and Chamanlal (eds.), Bhagat Singh aur unke saathiyon ke dastavez,
p. 397; see also Bhagat Singh, ‘Why I Am an Atheist’, and the OHT of Durga Das
Khanna, p. 69.

67 The Tribune, 22 October 1929.

68 Gopal Thakur, Bhagat Singh: The Man and His Ideas (Bombay, 1953), p. 11. See
the OHT of Jaidev Gupta, pp. 49–50, for an account of the transformation Bhagat
Singh underwent in jail, and the introduction to David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn
for other instances of transformations in prison.

69 Noorani has a detailed discussion of the debates. The Gandhi–Irwin
correspondence is also available in Volume 45 of CWMG. See also Hansraj Rahbar,
Bhagat Singh and His Thought (New Delhi, 1990). In an article in Young India, Gandhi
admitted that he had not made commutation of the death sentences a term of the
settlement with Irwin. See ‘What Did You Do to Save Bhagatsingh [sic]?’ in Young
India, 2 April 1931.

70 M.K. Gandhi, ‘My Silence’, Young India, 17 October 1929 in CWMG, Vol 42,
pp. 6–7.
To Sukhdev’s letter that he speak directly to the revolutionaries in prison rather than talk to them through the press—in a manner reminiscent of British bureaucrats—Gandhi simply replied that the revolutionaries’ methods were secret.\(^{71}\) Even his sermon on the ‘Cult of the Bomb’, written soon after a prolonged period of hunger strike, focused only on the attempt of another set of revolutionaries to bomb the Viceregal train.\(^{72}\) Gandhi did not engage with the revolutionaries’ criticism of the way he seemed to compromise with the British or with Indian capitalists: he focused on violence. When some revolutionaries employed non-violence, Gandhi continued to refer to their violent past. The distinction between the rights of political prisoners and the question of violence was blurred by Gandhi alone: numerous editorials in *The Tribune*, written as a way of presenting the ‘general opinion’ of the country to the British, admitted this difference.\(^{73}\) Why did Gandhi refuse to acknowledge the pain and legitimacy of the hunger-strikers’ non-violent protest?

The historian Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has alluded to the ‘eternal debates about what-Gandhi-said, versus what-Gandhi-really-meant,\(^{71}\) M.K. Gandhi, ‘One of the Many’(?), *Young India*, 23 April 1931 in CWMG, Vol 46, p. 30. Sukhdev’s letter, received posthumously, is reproduced in Appendix IV of the same volume from the CWMG.

\(^{72}\) M.K. Gandhi, ‘The Cult of the Bomb’, 2 January 1930 in CWMG, Vol 42, p. 361 and M.K. Gandhi, ‘To the Indian Critics’, *The Tribune*, 29 January 1930. Although Yashpal and Hansraj did blow up a part of the track through which the Viceroy’s train passed in December 1929, it is not clear this act had the approval of the HSRA accused inside the prison. Indeed it seems this was Yashpal’s attempt to regain the confidence of Azad and other leaders on the run who suspected Yashpal of being a CID agent. See Friend (ed.), *Yashpal Looks Back: Selections from an Autobiography* (New Delhi, 1981), pp. 114–123. Contrast the attitude of Yashpal regarding the raid on the Chittagong armoury with that of Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev discussed above. The Congress Subjects Committee voted 117 for and 69 against the resolution of the Congress Working Committee deploring the bomb outrage on the Viceroy’s train.

\(^{73}\) Editorial in *The Tribune*, 27 June 1929. On 30 July, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi, the editor of *Pratap*, released a statement to the press after a very long interview with the Lahore Conspiracy Case prisoners. He pointed out that the question being raised by the hunger-striking prisoners was related to the self-respect of the country. Public opinion ought to be organized around this issue. He emphasized that the rights of political prisoners was not to be confused with violence. See *The Tribune*, 1 August 1929. A summary of the 30-year long history of the question of the better treatment of political prisoners was the subject of an editorial in *The Tribune* on 24 August 1929. Also see Motilal Nehru’s assessment of the hunger strike in *The Tribune* dated 6 August 1929 and his insistence on separating the issue of subscriptions to the Defence Fund with support for crimes of violence in *The Tribune*, 22 December 1929.
and what-Gandhi-said-elsewhere’. Yet what is so vexing has been the ability of an enormous range of scholars to study Gandhian non-violence without engaging with the greatest critic and successful emulator of his methods: Bhagat Singh. A digression into Gandhi’s views on satyagraha, jail reforms, and the rights of political prisoners is required before we can proceed further with this argument.

In Satyagraha in South Africa, Gandhi defined satyagraha as a ‘force which is born of truth and love or non-violence’. Yet even as he recalled the moment of its birth in 1906, he was acutely aware of the inconsistencies with which he appeared to his readers. After all, he had, in subsequent years, offered his service to the British in the First World War. In a chapter in his autobiography appropriately entitled ‘A Spiritual Dilemma’, Gandhi admitted that his participation in the war effort could ‘never be consistent with ahimsa. But it is not always given to one to be equally clear about one’s duty. A votary of truth is often obliged to grope in the dark’. Gandhi’s understanding of satyagraha developed over the years through particular struggles conducted by himself and those who claimed to perform satyagraha in his name. Early on, he distinguished between passive resistance and satyagraha. While the former appeared to Gandhi to be accompanied alongside the use of force against an adversary, satyagraha eschewed the use of


physical force and could be offered to one’s ‘nearest and dearest’.\textsuperscript{78} Thus Gandhi characterized the hunger strikes deployed by British women suffragettes in prison in 1909, which elicited forcible feeding, as resorting to physical force.\textsuperscript{79} In 1920 he was alone in his criticism of the Irish leader Terrence MacSwiney’s final hunger fast.\textsuperscript{80}

With regard to jail reform, Gandhi’s attitudes took many, often frustratingly conflicting, forms. In a series of articles written for \textit{Young India} in 1924, he dwelt on his experiences in various jails in 1922–23. In these articles, Gandhi was critical of the prevailing system of forcing political prisoners and habitual offenders together in the same cell.\textsuperscript{81} He regarded newspapers as ‘a necessity in no way inferior to breakfast’ and their deprivation a particularly harsh penalty for political prisoners.\textsuperscript{82} However, he concluded with the hope that ‘civil resisters will not misunderstand this’, they were to ‘put up with the roughest treatment’ accorded to them.\textsuperscript{83} Yet in the same series, Gandhi recounted episodes when he intervened on behalf of hunger-striking political prisoners. He allowed that under certain circumstances prisoners were entitled to protest: in the instance he elaborates, Gandhi’s mediation consisted in explaining to the prisoners that their fast could not convince the Jail Superintendent of the wrongness of his flogging punishment, which could only be brought about by reasoning.\textsuperscript{84} In a following article, Gandhi distinguished between embarrassing the government (patently not the goal of \textit{satyagrahis}) and disillusioning the government (which was possible if they behaved in an exemplary fashion).\textsuperscript{85} Some years later in December 1927, when admonished for not speaking on the cause of political prisoners often enough, Gandhi responded that he had lost faith in the British system and in the ‘power of making an effective appeal to the administrators of that system’.\textsuperscript{86} But within a few months, we find Gandhi listing the terrible food and conditions

\begin{thebibliography}{00}
\bibitem{78} Gandhi, \textit{Satyagraha in South Africa}, p. 114.
\bibitem{79} Kevin Grant, ‘The Transcolonial World of Hunger Strikes and Political Fasts, c. 1909–1935’ in Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy (eds.), \textit{Decentring Empire: Britain, India and the Transcolonial World} (Delhi, 2006), p. 258.
\bibitem{80} Brasted, ‘Irish Models and the Indian National Congress 1870–1922’, p. 36.
\bibitem{81} Gandhi, \textit{Young India}, 1 May 1924.
\bibitem{82} Gandhi, \textit{Young India}, 8 May 1924.
\bibitem{83} Ibid. See also his article on 5 June 1924 and ‘Some Rules of Satyagraha’, CWMG, Vol. 42, p. 492.
\bibitem{84} Gandhi, \textit{Young India}, 22 May 1924.
\bibitem{85} Gandhi, \textit{Young India}, 5 June 1924.
\bibitem{86} Gandhi, \textit{Young India}, 29 December 1927.
\end{thebibliography}
of hard labour that were inflicted upon satyagrahi prisoners lodged in the Surat and Sabarmati Central jails, and appealing for ‘humaneness’ in the jails.  

A brief glance at two other strictures given to satyagrahis will make my argument explicit. During the Vaikom temple satyagraha of 1924, Gandhi clarified that satyagrahis should not take the assistance of Sikhs or Christians in their struggle. Untouchability was a Hindu sin that could only be expiated by other Hindus. And in the satyagraha to remove the O’Neill statue in Madras in 1927, Gandhi supported the agitation despite the fact that it would increase feelings of hatred towards the British. The Swarajist, according to Gandhi, was bound to expose ‘the blemishes of foreign rule’. This reading of Gandhi’s rules reveals his awareness of jail maladministration, his concern for the treatment meted out to some political prisoners and his order that satyagraha be undertaken by those most closely affected by the act they wanted to modify. Why then did he not support the satyagraha of Bhagat Singh and his fellow prisoners?

As an issue, the proper classification of political prisoners and the improvement of conditions in jails had been the subject of over 60 articles in The Tribune between 1925 and 1928. The prolonged incarceration of a whole range of prisoners arrested during martial law in 1919 and the Akali movement in the early 1920s brought various oppositional parties to vote together in the Punjab Legislative Council on the side of releasing these hapless prisoners. Indeed in late 1925, Lajpat Rai led the Congress sub-committee for the Jails Committee appointed by the British. He interviewed prominent Congressmen such as Gopi Chand Bhargava, Satyapal, Lala Duni Chand and Sardar Mangal Singh all of whom testified to the chaining of prisoners and

87 Gandhi, Young India, 16 August 1928 and 20 September 1928. His article of 20 September was reproduced in The Tribune on 26 September. See also the discussion on Gandhi and prison reforms in David Arnold, ‘The Self and the Cell: Indian Prison Narratives as Life Histories’ in Arnold and Blackburn (eds.), Telling Lives in India, pp. 34–43 and for a sharp criticism of Gandhi’s silence by the Kakori revolutionary prisoner Manmathnath Gupta, see his memoir They Lived Dangerously: Reminiscences of a Revolutionary (Delhi, 1969), pp. 199, 300–302.

88 Gandhi, Young India, 1 May 1924.

89 Gandhi, Young India, 29 September 1927. In a similar vein, Bhikhu Parekh has suggested that Gandhi always reconciled non-violence with other values like truth (including justice and integrity), national independence, courage, human survival, self-respect and dignity. He justified the harm that was caused to others in the course of pursuing one’s legitimate self-interest and claimed it was not violence if the ‘element of malevolence was absent’. See Bhikhu Parekh, Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi’s Political Discourse (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 134, 150.
other instances of maladministration that they had witnessed in their time spent in various jails since the first non-cooperation movement. In his statement to the Punjab Jails Committee, Lajpat Rai argued that prisoners should be classified according to their position in life and the nature of the crime they had committed.\footnote{The Tribune, 3, 7, 9, 12 December 1925 and 3 and 5 January 1926.}

If the cause was not alien to the anti-colonial movement in the Punjab, the means chosen by Bhagat Singh and his comrades could not have been more home-grown. Perhaps, as argued by Kevin Grant, a historian comparing fasting and hunger-strikers in England, Ireland and India, Gandhi distinguished between hunger-striking and fasting supporting the latter, not the former.\footnote{Grant, ‘The Transcolonial World of Hunger Strikes and Political Fasts’, pp. 258–261.} It is true that the hunger fasts that Gandhi often undertook were in the nature of a penance rather than a protest. Even during the Rowlatt agitation of 1919, when Gandhi’s call for satyagraha first got India-wide publicity, he had insisted that the fast was not in the nature of a hunger strike, but public meetings and a general hartal were registers of protest. Yet Gandhi’s extremely severe fasts (he only allowed himself water with a little lemon juice) were often used to pointedly mould public opinion. In March 1918 he focused on the mill owners of Ahmedabad; in September 1932 he wished that his desire to embark on a hunger fast to protest the Communal Award be broadcast.\footnote{See Gandhi’s letter to Samuel Hoare 11 March 1932 in CWMG, Vol 49, pp. 190–193; letter to Ramsay MacDonald, 8 August 1932, CWMG, Vol 50, pp. 383–384; Statement to the Press, 16 September 1932 in CWMG, Vol 51, p. 62.} In other words, the line between hunger fast as penance, self-purification and a form of political protest was blurred by Gandhi himself.

Located in the dreary prison cells of Lahore, Bhagat Singh and his co-conspirators could neither call for a hartal nor announce their aims at public meetings. They could only express their grievances through a general hunger strike. That these young men, otherwise so fond of life and food,\footnote{After the hunger-strike, Bhagat Singh wrote a letter to his friend Jaidev Gupta asking for almonds and sooji. Letter dated 24 July 1930 in Virendra Sandhu (ed.), Bhagat Singh: Patr aur Dastavez, p. 67.} did not eat for months on end is a testimony to their pursuit of truth and their capacity for self-suffering—cardinal principles of satyagraha as Gandhi himself defined them. In the autumn of 1929, it was Bhagat Singh and his fellow prisoners who plucked at the contradictions in Gandhian satyagraha claiming the right to
suffer, the most fundamental right of all, for the rights of all political prisoners in all of India.94 It was Singh who wrote in his prison diary, sometime during his extended incarceration, these thoughtful, open-ended words from Trotsky’s *Lessons of October 1917*: ‘But a moment comes when the habit of thinking that the enemy is stronger becomes the main obstacle to victory . . . What does it mean to lose the moment? All the art of tactics consists in this, to snatch the moment when the combination of circumstances is most favourable’.95 With regard to the strategic use of non-violence and the relationship between means and ends, Bhagat Singh was ideologically closer to the Mahatma than the latter cared to acknowledge.

Although neglecting to analyse Bhagat Singh’s protest, the historian Claude Markovits does refer fleetingly to the ‘risk, of which Gandhi was aware, of bringing about the birth of a new elite, characterised not by aggressive physical courage but by its capacity to endure sufferings of the flesh for the cause of the nation. Such an “elite of suffering” did not crystallize in the same way as an “elite of violence” might have’.96 Might that have been intentional? In an article that provides a larger context for the 1930 civil disobedience movement, the historian Sumit Sarkar has suggested that late 1930 saw a push towards compromise with the British fuelled by an increasingly assertive bourgeoisie and ‘the absence of a coherent left alternative’. This is exemplified in the convergence of the concrete issues raised by the bourgeoisie with the 11 points presented by Gandhi to Viceroy Irwin.97 Sarkar points out that salt provided Gandhi with a ‘universal rural grievance’ with ‘no socially divisive possibilities’.98 However, once launched, the civil disobedience movement grew in directions not entirely foreseen. In villages and forests in Gujarat, Bengal, Bombay Presidency and the Central Provinces, pressures from below were pushing the movement

---

94 The Kakori accused, who were serving sentences of life imprisonment, did join the hunger strike of the Lahore Conspiracy Case prisoners. Indeed they also spearheaded this technique of protest in 1927. But as acknowledged by Manmathnath Gupta, one of the hunger-strikers, in his memoirs, they were persuaded by Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi to withdraw because of concessions promised (and then withdrawn) by the government. See Manmathnath Gupta, *They Lived Dangerously*, p. 295.
95 The Diary of Bhagat Singh, NMML.
98 Ibid., p. 114.
to include no-rent and no-revenue campaigns, the picketing of liquor shops, anti-grazing fees, chowkidari taxes and forest satyagrahas. It was in this context that influential industrialists decided on a policy of compromise with the British. Neither the 11 points nor the separate demands spelt out during the Gandhi–Irwin talks of 1931 included the commutation of the death sentence of the political prisoners.

In the case of Bhagat Singh and his fellow prisoners, Gandhi’s silence was particularly unfortunate. Bhagat Singh’s protest had welded together an enormous and formidable array of political adversaries. Even more than the Congress-led boycott of the Simon Commission of 1928, Singh’s support for the rights of political prisoners united public opinion across North India. Both the official historian of the Indian National Congress and the official compiler of revolutionary terrorism for the British Government admitted that the popularity of Bhagat Singh rivalled that of Gandhi in this period.99

Contrary to the arguments of Christopher Pinney who dwells on the representation of Singh’s mimicry of an Englishman in a Lahore Railway station in 1928 as a sign of his immense and mobile modernity and emphasizes his ‘structural negation of Gandhi’s corporeal practices’,100 the incredible popularity of Bhagat Singh and his fellow accused prisoners stemmed from their choice of a cause that had always bridged other ideological divides, i.e., the cause of political prisoners. The means used to fight this battle of principles was the hunger fast: a means at once vivid, emotional, intense and exacting, a toll on the human spirit as well as the body.101 The immediate images that flashed across the minds of Punjabis in the late 1920s and early 1930s were not of the trilby hat but of the painful ordeal that the young men had undergone for the sake of all political prisoners. The deteriorating health of the hunger-striking


100 Pinney, ‘The Body and the Bomb’, p. 63. It is worth noting that no photographs of a fasting Gandhi were made available to the press in 1932 or 1933. See Tim Pratt and James Vernon, “Appeal from This Fiery Bed...”; The Colonial Politics of Gandhi’s Fasts and Their Metropolitan Reception’, *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (January 2005), p. 104. Also, the Special Magistrate in charge of the Lahore Conspiracy Case did not allow photographs to be taken in the jail-turned-courtroom. See *The Tribune*, 7 August 1929.

101 One disturbing item in *The Tribune*, 6 July 1930, reported that under-trial prisoner Kamal Nath Tewari had begun eating his own body when subjected to solitary confinement.
prisoners graced the columns of newspapers. The myth of the violent (and therefore popular) Bhagat Singh does not face up to a meticulous scrutiny of the contemporary historical record.

***

In the beginning, it seemed transparent, clear and unequivocally anti-colonial. Before launching the first all-India satyagraha campaign, Gandhi had declared:

*Satyagraha* is self-dependent. It does not require the assent of the opponent before it can be brought into play. Indeed it shines out when the opponent resists. . . . Death in the fight is a deliverance, and prison, a way to liberty. . . . victory lies in the ability to die in the attempt to make the opponent see the truth, which the *Satyagrahi* for the time being expresses.*

Gandhi did not see the truth of his opponent’s *satyagraha* even after their death. By labelling them ‘murderers’ and ‘terrorists’, and invoking their history of violence, the British had sought to dismiss the revolutionaries’ non-violent demands for rights as ‘political prisoners’. This colonial narrative of ‘terrorism’ was accepted and promoted by the Gandhi-led Congress. In his insistence on controlling every *satyagraha* and failing to acknowledge the *satyagraha* of these prisoners, Gandhi sought to retain power in the hands of an overly centralizing Congress. Bhagat Singh’s hunger strike provides us a glimpse into a different anti-colonial nationalism—radical yet willing to compromise; aware of the quality of anti-colonialism that would be needed to weld together truly disparate segments of Indian political society. For a Punjab that may have been, his hunger strike brought together a divided Punjab Congress—Satyapal, Duni Chand, Gopi Chand Bhargava, Sardar Mangal Singh, Zafar Ali Khan and others participated in processions, the Conspiracy Case Defence Committee and the Jail Enquiry Committee. Through a careful reading of multiple sources and by foregrounding the voices of the revolutionaries themselves, Bhagat Singh’s protest offers us a glimpse into an alternative history of revolutionary anti-colonialism—unrequited but full of promise.

BHAGAT SINGH AS ‘SATYAGRAHI’  

Bibliography

Primary Unpublished Sources

National Archives of India, New Delhi

Files from the Home Political Department, 1925–31.
Proceedings of the Lahore Conspiracy Case, 1930.

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi

Miscellaneous Papers of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association.
Private Papers of Comrade Ram Chandra.
Private Papers of Sukhdev.
The Diary of Bhagat Singh.
The People, 1925–29.
Oral History Transcripts (OHT)
Mr Jaidev Gupta interviewed by Mr S.L. Manchanda, 10 May 1978.
Mr Jaidev Kapoor interviewed by Mr S.L. Manchanda, 3 October 1974.
Mr Abdul Majid Khan interviewed by Dr Hari Dev Sharma, 16 June 1974.
Mr Durga Das Khanna interviewed by Mr S.L. Manchanda, 19 May 1976.
Mr Chiranji Lal Paliwal interviewed by Mr S.L. Manchanda, 6 January 1978.

Center for Research Libraries, Chicago

The Tribune, 1924–1931.

Primary Published Sources

Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the INC, Vol 1, 1920.
Duni Chand (of Ambala), The Ulster of India or an Analysis of the Punjab Problems, Lahore, 1936.

Secondary Sources


