"Give Me Blood, and I Will Give You Freedom"

Bhagat Singh, Subhas Chandra Bose, and the Uses of Violence in India's Independence Movement

By Thomas Lamont

Photograph of Bhagat Singh taken in 1929 when he was twenty-one years old. Source: http://tinyurl.com/k8wwjjw.

Subhas Chandra Bose. Source: *The Japan Times* website at http://tinyurl.com/m2znmu7.

Last April, two Indian students visited my high school for a few weeks and joined my world history class. One day, during a discussion of the Indian independence movement, I asked all of my students in the class to hold up their hand if they had ever heard of Bhagat Singh or Subhas Chandra Bose. Only two hands went up, those belonging to our visitors from India. Our Indian guests expressed shock and dismay that their American peers had never heard these two names that are so familiar to Indians. The vast majority of Indians view Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose as critical figures in India's struggle for independence, and many Indians view them as equally important as the Mahatma, Mohandas K. Gandhi, the individual most closely associated with the Indian independence movement. A history teacher at one of India's leading secondary schools describes Bose and Singh as "British India's most loved and most controversial figures." In 2006, the top-grossing movie in India was *Rang de Basanti*, a Bollywood film about a group of disaffected college students in today's India who find inspiration in the legend of Bhagat Singh. High school history textbooks in India often devote an entire chapter to Subhas Chandra Bose, whom many Indians call the "George Washington of India." The tenth-grade text used at the aforementioned prestigious private school calls Bose's contributions to Indian independence "unforgettable" and describes Singh as a prominent revolutionary "who will be remembered by history" for his contributions to the Indian struggle for independence.[1]

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While most historians, whether Western or Indian, agree that Gandhi should be recognized as the most important figure in India's independence movement, few Americans understand the critical role played by Singh and Bose. Most Americans are taught that Gandhi brought about Indian independence virtually on his own, mostly through his deep commitment to nonviolence (*ahimsa*). *Gandhi*, the Academy Award winner for Best Picture in 1982, captures this thoroughly Western view of India's long and tortuous struggle for independence.

Westerners who view the Indian independence movement as the victory of nonviolence over oppression may be quite surprised to learn about Bhagat Singh or Subhas Chandra Bose because these two figures were anything but nonviolent. Singh assassinated a British police official in 1928 and then a year later threw two bombs onto the floor of India's fledgling legislature. Bose, once a prominent figure in the Indian National Congress, collaborated with the German and Japanese governments during World War II to raise an army of Indian soldiers with which to fight the British.

While the violence embraced by Singh and Bose stands in stark contrast to the kind of civil disobedience championed by Gandhi during the same period, such violence, and especially the threat of even greater violence, was critical to the success of Gandhi's campaign of nonviolence. Singh and Bose were to Gandhi what Malcom X was to Martin Luther King Jr., the violent alternative that eventually persuaded the establishment to work with the reformers who espoused peaceful change. Gandhi, like King, was morally opposed to and distrustful of violence as a strategy, but he also recognized that violence—or at least the threat of violence—could be used to leverage demands from the British government. Indeed, during his Quit India campaign of 1942, Gandhi signaled a willingness to let Indians engage in violence in the face of unprecedented British repression.[2]

As Indian nationalism grew during the second half of the nineteenth century, both the Indian National Congress and the broader Indian independence movement developed two

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opposing wings: one that espoused peaceful protest and patient negotiation with the British authorities and one that espoused anti-British violence with the goal of forcing the immediate withdrawal of the British from the subcontinent. From the latter camp during the 1890s came one of the most vociferous Indian nationalist writers and an early member of the Congress, Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The British authorities came to call him "the Father of Indian unrest" because he called for Indians to oppose—by force, if necessary—British policies that denigrated or undermined Indian customs and practices—especially Hindu ones. Tilak's rival in the Congress was Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who became Congress president in 1905 and before his death in 1915 would briefly mentor Gandhi. Gokhale criticized and tried to marginalize Tilak, describing Tilak and his supporters as "extremists" and himself and his supporters as "moderates."

When Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915, Tilak's views had moderated somewhat. However, those who had agreed with Tilak were more dissatisfied than ever by Britain's Indian policy during these years. They had expected that the British would reward India for its contributions to the UK's war effort during World War I by granting India greater autonomy. When this did not happen, Tilak's followers argued that moderation had gained nothing for India. They instead found inspiration in the 1917 Russian Revolution, especially the ostensible idealism of the Bolsheviks, who portrayed their seizure of power that autumn as a popular revolt and the beginning of a totally new and completely egalitarian society. The Bolsheviks' vocal and long-standing opposition to imperialism also helped make the USSR an appealing model for many Indian nationalists. The tragic events in Amritsar on April 13, 1919, persuaded far larger numbers of Indian nationalists that Britain would leave India only if confronted by force. On that day, British troops massacred hundreds of defenseless Indian men, women, and children who were attending a peaceful rally at Amritsar's Jallianwalah Bagh.

Bhagat Singh at twenty years old. Source: *Shahidbhagatsingh.com at* http://tiny.cc/txx7bx.

Bhagat Singh was one of the Indians who eventually became a believer in the utility of violence. When the massacre occurred, Singh was only eleven years old and lived at home near Amritsar with his middle-class family, who admired Gandhi. Yet Bhagat Singh appeared to have been strongly influenced by the massacre, and a year later, he visited the massacre site. For Singh, who grew up in the Punjab, the heart of the subcontinent's Sikh community, India's honor was being despoiled and needed to be avenged. In this cultural milieu, violence was an accepted response to perceived slights. Thus, it should not be surprising that Singh eventually embraced violence in the name of gaining independence for India. Perhaps the final straw for the young man was Gandhi's decision in 1922 to cancel the Congress' growing noncooperation movement because an Indian mob violated Gandhi's prohibition against the use of violence, killing more than twenty Indian policemen at Chauri Chaura. Although many prominent Indian nationalist leaders—including Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose—were similarly disappointed with Gandhi's decision, they stuck by the Mahatma and his program of nonviolence.

Singh went on to college in Lahore, which at the time was inhabited largely by Sikhs and there, despite acquiring the dress and the rhetorical style of an educated Englishman, flirted with what the British authorities labeled "revolutionary terrorism." He eventually joined a small group dedicated to the cause of Indian independence that called itself the Hindustan Republican Association. Inspired by the methods of anarchists and communists who spread panic and fear throughout elite Western society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Singh and his cohorts dreamed up schemes to singlehandedly bring down the British Raj. They collected weapons, learned how to make bombs, and made lists of targets and demands. In 1928, Singh and an accomplice shot and killed the British Assistant Superintendent of Police in Lahore. Singh managed to evade the police dragnet by donning a disguise, and within a few

The Tribune.

VOL. LI NO. 70 LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 1931. Price One Anna

BHAGAT SINGH, RAJGURU AND SUKHDEV EXECUTED.

NO "LAST INTERVIEW" WITH RELATIONS.

Shouts Emerge From Jail.

DEAD BODIES SECRETLY DISPOSED OF

Removed to Distant Place.

Thick Veil of Secrecy.

Relations' Futile Quest for Dead Bodies.

Bhagat Singh's Letter.

DEAD BODIES REMOVED.

Optical Instruments

The headline of *The Lahore Tribune*, March 25, 1931. The article also claims that there were no last interviews with relations and that the bodies of Singh and his associates were secretly disposed of.
Source: *Wikimedia* at http://tiny.cc/awu7bx.

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months, the story of his daring exploit and clever escape attained mythical status—especially in the Punjab and northern India. In a clear rebuke to Gandhi, ordinary Indians began calling Singh and compatriots "Freedom Fighters."

One year later, Singh and two of his co-conspirators emerged from hiding and attacked the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi, an important symbol of growing Indian autonomy but one that many nationalists such as Singh denounced as a rubber-stamp body under British control. Singh and his accomplices threw two bombs from the visitors' gallery during a session. According to Singh, no one was intentionally injured in the ensuing explosions. He and his co-conspirators quickly surrendered, knowing that a public trial would afford them a pulpit from which to proclaim their cause and possibly win converts. Sure enough, the resulting trial was front-page news throughout India for months, and Singh's reputation was enhanced as he and his supporters in the courtroom taunted the British authorities with cries of "Inquilab zindabad!" ("Long live the revolution!").[3]

The spectacle of a small group of brave, young Indians standing up publicly to the British authorities placed Gandhi in a quandary. If he denounced the bombers, Gandhi risked alienating huge segments of India's population who admired Singh. Gandhi's solution was to let his subordinates contain the damage by offering legal support to the defendants during the trial and issuing vague statements that neither condemned nor praised Singh's actions. During the trial, Singh issued a statement that mocked Gandhi's strategy as "utopian nonviolence, of whose futility the rising generation has been convinced."[4] Unfortunately for Singh, new evidence at the trial linked him to the earlier killing and led to his conviction for murder and a death sentence. After Singh's 1931execution, his supporters immediately proclaimed Singh a *shaheed*, or martyr, to the cause of Indian independence. Despite his clear embrace of violence as a means of achieving Indian independence, Singh's reputation among Indians continued to proliferate after his death—particularly during the decades since independence in 1947 as India's populace, especially Indian historians and politicians, sought to construct a pantheon of "founding fathers."[5]

Subhas Chandra Bose arriving at the 1939 meeting of the All India Youth Congress (the central presidium of the Congress Party). Source: *Wikimedia* at http://tiny.cc/rcv7bx.

Bhagat Singh was barely a decade younger than Subhas Chandra Bose who, like Singh, was originally a supporter of Gandhi's nonviolent approach. Bose, born and raised on the other side of the subcontinent in Bengal and whose father was a lawyer, excelled in school, and left India in 1919 to attend Cambridge University, just as Gandhi and Nehru had done. Upon graduation, Bose returned to India determined—like Gandhi and Nehru before him—to avoid working in the service of the British Raj. Bose soon became the leader of the All India Youth Congress and, because of his vocal support for the independence movement, was arrested by the authorities and exiled for two years to Mandalay in Burma. Upon his release, he joined the Indian National Congress and worked closely with Nehru on devising and promoting peaceful civil disobedience campaigns. With Nehru's encouragement during the mid-1930s, Bose traveled to Europe and met leading intellectuals and politicians, including Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. While in Europe, Bose became captivated by the vigor and apparent success of both Fascism and Communism, new ideologies that even many moderates in the Congress thought might consign liberal democracy to the dustbin of history.

Bose returned to India convinced that only more forceful action by Indians and their leaders would bring about Indian independence. In 1938, his obvious passion

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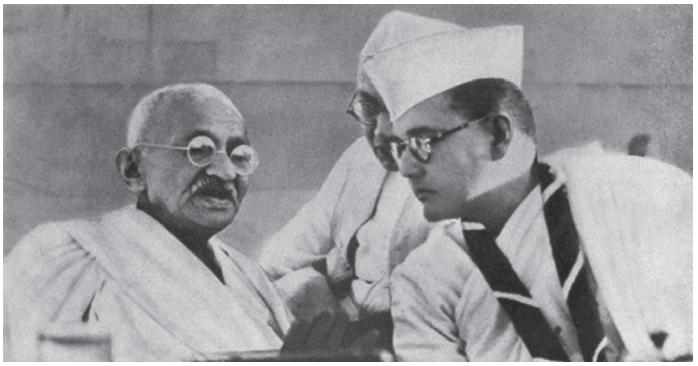
for independence helped him get elected president of the Congress. Soon, it became clear that Bose wanted to move the Congress and independence movement in a direction radically different from Gandhi's vision. When a year later he had to run for reelection, he introduced a platform that seemed to imply support for mass action of a potentially violent nature. Gandhi became so concerned about Bose's approach and temperament that he offered an alternative candidate, but the man still lost to Bose. So Gandhi then quietly but effectively persuaded the rest of the Congress leadership to force Bose to step down. Isolated and vulnerable, Bose had no choice but to resign his position in frustration. In response, he created within the Congress his own internal faction of like-minded leftists and radicals, which he dubbed the "All India Forward Bloc."

By the summer of 1940, with World War II well underway, Bose's faction left Congress to emerge as an independent political party that advocated militant action against the British authorities in India. Bose called on Indians to take advantage of Britain's precarious position, as German warplanes pounded London and German armies overran France. By this time, Bose was rated by Britain's intelligence services as India's third-most popular leader after Gandhi and Nehru—especially among students and other young Indians who simply called Bose *Netaji*, "revered leader" in Hindi.[6] The British authorities thus quickly arrested Bose and put him under house arrest. But just like Bhagat Singh twenty years earlier, Bose managed to escape and elude the British authorities using a variety of disguises and fake documents.



Top: Gandhi and Congress President Subhas Chandra Bose at the Indian National Congress annual meeting in Haripura in 1938. Source: *Institute for Historical Review* website at http://tiny.cc/1807bx.

Bottom: Subhas Chandra Bose meets Hitler, May 1942. Source: *Institute for Historical Review* website at http://tiny.cc/1807bx.

He made his way north through Afghanistan to the Soviet Union, where he hoped to convince Stalin to support his anti-British activities. Instead, Stalin, who at this point was still on good terms with Hitler, sent Bose on to Berlin, where his fervent anti-British views won him an audience with Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop. Ribbentrop agreed to allow Bose to transform a few thousand Indian prisoners-of-war, who while fighting for the British in North Africa were captured by the Germans, into loyal troops of Germany's army, the Wehrmacht.[7] However, when, in June 1941, Hitler turned against Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union, Bose became disillusioned with and distrustful of the Nazis and asked to be allowed to travel to Japan. Japan was long admired by Indian nationalists ever since Japan had emerged as a strong, independent, non-Western country because of Japan's surprising victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05).

In Bose's only face-to-face encounter with Hitler, the German leader agreed to Bose's plan, and in early 1943, Bose traveled by submarine halfway around the world to imperial Japan. So came to an end Bose's three-year stay in Germany, where, behind his back, the Nazis derided him as a *untermensch*, an inferior human. In Japan, Bose would encounter similar racist attitudes that reflected growing Japanese disdain for other Asian peoples, including Indians. Yet by this time, Japan's military was suffering critical reversals at the hands of the Americans, and some Japanese officials recognized that Bose could prove useful. They allowed him, as earlier in Germany, to try to create a unit within Japan's army, composed of Indian soldiers who had been captured by Japan while fighting for the British. Bose's reputation and charisma helped him win the loyalty of these Indian soldiers, as well as many in the Indian expatriate communities of Southeast Asia that provided Bose with financial and moral support. The soldiers were organized into what became known as the Indian National Army (INA). Bose boldly declared to his troops, "Dilli Chalo" ("On to Delhi") and offered Indian nationalists a rousing new slogan, "Give me blood, and I will give you freedom." Indians, who throughout the subcontinent

Subhas Chandra Bose, second from left in the front row, with crewman of the Japanese submarine 1-29 after he was transferred from the German submarine U-180, June 1943.
Source: *The Japan Times* website at http://tinyurl.com/m2znmu7.

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were chaffing under increased British repression and economic exploitation, welcomed news of Bose and the INA. Soon, the morale of Britain's Indian troops sagged, and their loyalty fell into question. In response, the British government created a special propaganda unit dedicated to countering the growing mythology of Bose and the INA.[8]

During late 1943, the INA battled British forces in Burma and reached Manipur, a state in eastern India today. However, Japan never gave Bose the material support he needed, and soon, the INA was suffering successive defeats under withering counterattacks by the British army. Thousands of INA troops surrendered to the British in 1944 while a few retreated with Bose. At this point, it is unclear what happened to him. But most historians give credence to the Japanese account that Bose died of injuries sustained in the crash of an overloaded plane upon which he was a passenger while attempting to get from Taiwan to Japan.[9]

It is perhaps easy today to dismiss Bose as delusional for believing that the Nazis and Japanese would be India's saviors. Like Bhagat Singh's embrace of terrorism, Bose's flirtation with fascism and militarism seem naïve, if not immoral. So why do so many Indians regard both Bose and Singh as heroes of the Indian independence movement?

Many Indians are understandably drawn to the romantic idealism of Singh and Bose and pay little attention to the less appealing details of these men's methods—notably their embrace of violence. Instead, Indians admire Bose and Singh's physical courage and intense dedication to the cause of Indian independence reflected in their tragic deaths. Even Gandhi in 1946 admitted that Bose's patriotism was "second to none." Singh's support for socialism and secularism made him an especially attractive figure for Indian intellectuals like Nehru, particularly after India won independence, and Nehru believed that India needed unifying figures to bind the new nation together. Furthermore, Bose's and Singh's flaws perhaps make them more accessible and more interesting than Gandhi. Historian Sugata Bose, a very distant relative of Subhas Chandra Bose, notes that, as evidenced by the popularity of the figure Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*, Indians traditionally have no problem revering equally both saints like Gandhi and warrior heroes like Bose and Singh.[10]

While most Indians may not possess a deep or nuanced understanding of Singh and Bose, many do grasp the significant role that they played in helping Gandhi and his supporters win

The National Martyrs Memorial in the Indian town of Hussainiwala on the Pakistani border with the Indian state of Punjab is a memorial for Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, and Rajguru, who were cremated here in 1931 after their execution at the Lahore Jail. Source: *Wikimedia* at http://tiny.cc/ke07bx.

Indian independence. Singh and Bose stoked the intense fear of the British authorities that a mass uprising similar to the events of the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion might occur, especially if a charismatic and determined individual emerged to lead it.[11] For the same reason that the British made every effort to keep Gandhi from dying while in their custody, they feared what Singh and Bose represented: the possibility that many, if not most, Indians would embrace violence and sweep away British power in India like a tempest, as was almost the case in 1857. Given the choice of suppressing a mass uprising characterized by horrific violence or negotiating patiently with Gandhi and his supporters in the Congress, the British authorities wisely chose the latter.

It may not be necessary for American students to know in detail the roles played by Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose in the Indian independence movement. However, gaining an appreciation for the contributions of these two fascinating individuals may go a long way in helping our students develop a much fuller picture of India's struggle for independence. In addition, it will elicit fewer quizzical looks from Indians who might otherwise wonder why Americans seem so ignorant of the history of 1.3 billion people. ■

NOTES

1. B.B. Tayal and A. Jacob, *Modern Indian History: Contemporary World and Civics,* 9th Edition (India: Avichal Publishing Company, 2004), B-148, B-164.
2. Barbara D. Metclaf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India,* 2nd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 206.
3. During the trial, Singh and his codefendants often sang the song "Mira Rang de Basanti Chola (Dye My Clothes in Saffron Color)", saffron representing the color of courage and sacrifice in Indian Hindu culture. See Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Global, 1987), 250.
4. Bhagat Singh, *The Selected Works of Bhagat Singh* (Lexington: CreateSpace, 2009), 30.
5. Metcalf and Metcalf, 189.
6. James Lawrence, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), 553-554.
7. This German regiment of Indian soldiers was designated the *Legion Freies Indien* (Free Indian Legion). While the episode was a small propaganda coup for the Nazis, few members of the legion saw significant combat; and at the end of the war, most were repatriated back to British India, where many were tried for treason.
8. Lawrence, 576-577.
9. So strong was Indians' attachment to Bose and his promise of deliverance that many refused to believe that he was killed, and well into the 1970s, many Indians insisted that Bose was alive and perhaps living in the USSR.
10. Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011), 7.
11. With the hope of rekindling memories of 1857, Bose created, as part of the Indian National Army, an all-female regiment named after the Rani of Jhansi, the legendary heroine of the Revolt of 1857.

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