

## The lost letters



Illustration: P. Manivannan

*On Bhagat Singh's death anniversary, the writer looks at a newly revealed document that establishes him as a mature political thinker.*

Bhagat Singh is better known as an action-oriented revolutionary, but recent studies of his writings have shown that he was also a mature political thinker. During his two years in jail, before being executed on March 23, 1931, Bhagat Singh expressed his views on the Indian freedom struggle and socialist revolution in India. Many of his writings were lost or suppressed. Some are now slowly coming to light. In the August 15, 2011, issue of *The Hindu*, I had written about his correspondence with the British colonial administration as well as with judicial authorities. Now another significant 'lost letter' in Bhagat Singh's own words has come to light. A photocopy of this published letter was sent to me by Dr. Raghuvir Singh from Palwal and Ram Sharma from Beena town near Jhansi in Uttar Pradesh.

These two letters refer to Harikishan's case. Harikishan was a young revolutionary who had shot at the Governor of Punjab on December 23, 1930, during the convocation of the Panjab University Lahore. Harikishan was the son of a rich and influential personality, Gurdas Ram Talwar of Mardan, now in Khyber Pakhtunwa province of Pakistan. Bhagat Singh was upset with the defence lawyer's advice to Harikishan during the trial.

He wrote to an unnamed contact about it, but his letter did not reach its destination and was 'lost', as Bhagat Singh himself mentions in a second letter, which repeats the arguments made in the first letter. The first letter, till now considered to be lost, was published as a Hindi translation on June 18, 1931, in *Hindu Panch* immediately after the execution of Harikishan on June 9, 1931, at Lahore Jail. His father stood by his son and suffered for it. Harikishan's brother Bhagat Ram Talwar became a Communist and helped Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose escape from Kabul to Germany.

Incidentally this is the second time that Bhagat Singh's writings are being retranslated. During the Partition, the English version of Bhagat Singh's seminal essay 'Why I am an Atheist' (first published in *The People*, September 27, 1931) was lost. It was retranslated into English from the Tamil version translated by Comrade P. Jivanandam and published in 1934 in *Kudiyarasu* by Periyar. Interestingly many websites still feature the retranslated version, though the original printed version of *The People* reached India later. The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, has the essay on microfilm in its records. Perhaps one day this letter's original English version may also appear.

It seems that the reason behind the suppression of Bhagat Singh's first letter could be his criticism of the defence lawyer Sh. Asaf Ali for charging a high fee while defending revolutionary activists. "I was no less surprised to know that Sh. Asaf Ali was called for arguing the case from Delhi and, apart from charging a fat fee for the case; he was paid double first class rail fare." But Bhagat Singh and his comrades bore no ill will towards Asaf Ali who often referred to Bhagat Singh in eulogising terms.

Today when the political parties are trying to appropriate Bhagat Singh's legacy, it becomes imperative to look at his ideas, which are clear in their political manifestations. It is not fair to his memory to 'evolve' one's own Bhagat Singh with imposed and imagined perceptions. These documents do not leave space for any hypocrisy in the name of Bhagat Singh.

The new political phenomenon of Aam Aadmi Party, which claims to carry forward the legacy of Bhagat Singh, should introspect on whether its own lawyers follow the same ethical values in their profession, as Bhagat Singh expected from them.

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## English retranslation of Bhagat Singh's original letter in English, as yet untraced in original

January 1931

Dear Brother,

I was surprised to know that Sh. Harikishan wants to present the same arguments for defence in the court that were used in the Assembly bomb case. I was no less surprised to know that Sh. Asaf Ali was called for arguing the case from Delhi and, apart from charging a fat fee for the case, he was paid double first class rail fare. Though any good lawyer from Lahore would have agreed to take up the case, at a much lower fee. But anyhow the second aspect is not the main reason for writing this letter. I mean here the first aspect.

Possibly I have no right to intervene or meddle with the matter of a young man, who is certain to get the highest punishment in law that is the death sentence. Seeing that it is certain that he would be sentenced to death, I am daring to speak on the political aspect of the matter, leaving behind the issue of personality.

At the moment, I am writing this letter to you on a personal level, though I don't know for sure whether you can do something about it. I hope that before any final decision in this matter, my views will be taken into account.

The incidents of the case are clear, and the consequence is also clear. The accused himself understands this clearly. He has accepted his crime in the lower court, can give his statement in the session court and he should give the statement.

What I have heard is that the defence lawyer is advising him to state:

He had no intention to kill the Governor.

He only wanted to hurt him.

And this he wanted to do as a warning.

I request you to please think calmly over this issue. Would not such statements be ridiculous? What would be the meaning of such statements here? Would it not be repeating the same thing, which has already been stated in an appropriate manner and which has no meaning at present?

After a long careful consideration, I have come to the conclusion that there is no such person who can understand purely individual efforts and appreciate it, even if these efforts are much scattered and disconnected! No one tries to ensure that each such occasion is used to strengthen the movement. Because of a lack of vision in political matters, the defence lawyer has dared to give such advice, or due to his personal ambition, the lawyer has thought of getting such a statement. I don't mean that people should not offer defence in the cases, rather my opinion is on the contrary. But this also does not mean that lawyers, without understanding the real problems, should intervene to put revolutionaries in confusion and discourage them. Despite participating in public causes, these lawyers – and I am

referring to Punjab alone – have not adopted revolutionary thinking at all. They neither understand the viewpoint of the revolutionaries nor their mental outlook.

Rather than talking in general terms, let me come to the point. In this matter, to state that the aim of Harikishan was only to issue a warning is absolutely inadequate. Just ponder over it: this incident has occurred after the Assembly bomb case, the attempt to blow up the Viceroy's train, the Chittagong revolt and many such incidents. It is foolishness to say that the accused just wanted to hurt the Governor as a form of protest. For him, a more appropriate statement would be:

That, despotic use of power like the lathi charge in Bombay and Amritsar, the arrest of women, beatings and the unprovoked firing on people (here the reference is to one-sided proceedings of the tribunal in the Lahore conspiracy case and the award of death sentences, which can link this incident to a continuous chain of actions of the whole revolutionary movements, can also be made), motivated him to act in that manner.

This is just the beginning; the accused has only given an indication of the resentment prevalent among people, which if it explodes, will bring destruction.

It is standard government policy to take the country towards bloodshed. People can lose patience at any time and take to violence. The accused does not want the government to stop this policy, as it would encourage people to rise against it. The government has already stopped following the rule of law in general.

And the aim of the revolutionary movement is to show the people that the British rule is here only through military power and so this government should be overthrown through political action.

After this, he can define the socialist programme. He can make an appeal to Lahore students that they should shed their laziness and join the people's movement.

Under the circumstances, this is the best statement he can give.

He can state that, like an idealist, he has not come to kill an individual; rather he wanted to destroy the system. He feels anguished at the killing of a man, but there is no other way. Individuals have to be sacrificed at the altar of revolution. After all he is also an individual.

He can express sorrow at the killing of the senior inspector, whom he had not wanted to kill. He can also congratulate the Governor for surviving the attack. He can also add that to liberate the oppressed people, loss of individuals cannot matter much.

He should say all these things. Does the lawyer think that by saying that he did not want to kill the Governor, he can be saved? This is sheer childishness. The statement has no advantage but the harm it causes is immense. If an incident is detached from a movement, it loses its significance. When a sacrifice has to be made, then it should be fully utilised for the best purpose. In future also, all such incidents should be linked to the revolutionary movement and other such efforts; the revolutionary movement should be linked to mass movements. The best way in such matters is to invite a panel of lawyers...

(Incomplete...)

## Second letter by Bhagat Singh in continuation of the first

February 1931

I am very sorry to note that my last letter in this connection did not reach its destination at the proper time and therefore failed to serve the purpose for which it was written. Hence, I write this letter to let you know my views on the question of defence in political cases in general and revolutionary cases in particular. Apart from certain points already discussed in that letter, it shall serve another purpose too — that of providing documentary proof that I have not become wise after the event.

Anyhow, I wrote in that letter that the defence plea the lawyer suggested should not be adopted. But it was done in spite of your, and my, opposition. Nevertheless, we can now discuss the matter in a better light and can formulate definite ideas about the future policy regarding defence.

You know that I have never been in favour of defending all the political accused. But this does not imply that the beauty of the real struggle should be altogether spoiled. (Please note that the term beauty is not used in the abstract sense but refers to the motive that actuated a particular action). When I say that all the politicals should always defend themselves, I say it with certain reservations. It can be cleared by just one explanation. A man does an act with a certain end in view. After his arrest, the political significance of the action should not be diminished. The perpetrator should not become more important than the action itself. Let me further elucidate with the help of an illustration. Mr. Harikishan came to shoot the Governor. I don't want to discuss the ethical side of the action. I only want to discuss the political side of the case. The man was arrested. Unfortunately, some police official had died in the action. Now comes the question of the defence; well, when fortunately the Governor had escaped, there could be a very beautiful statement in his case, i.e., the statement of actual facts as was made in the lower court. And it would have served the legal purpose too. The wisdom and ability of the lawyer depended on his interpretation of the cause of the Sub-Inspector's death. What did he gain by saying that he did not intend to kill the Governor and only wanted to warn him, and that sort of thing? Can any sensible man imagine even for a moment the possibility of such a design? Had it any legal value? Absolutely none, then, what was the use of spoiling the beauty of not only the particular action but also the general movement? Warning and futile protests cannot go on forever. The warning had been given long ago. The revolutionary struggle had begun in right earnest so far as the strength of the revolutionary party allowed. The Viceroy's train action was neither a test nor a warning. Similarly, Mr. Harikishan's action was part of the struggle itself, not a warning. After the failure of the action, the accused should take it in purely sportsman-like spirit. The purpose having been served he ought to have rejoiced in the lucky escape of the Governor. There is no use of killing an individual. These actions have their political significance in as much as they serve to create a mentality and an atmosphere which shall be very necessary to the final struggle. That is all. Individual actions are to win the moral support of the people. We sometimes designate them as the 'propaganda through deed'.

Now, the people should be defended but subject to the above consideration. This is, after all, a common principle that all the contending parties always try to gain more and to lose less. No general can ever adopt a policy in which he may have to make a greater sacrifice than the gain expected. Nobody would be more anxious to save the precious life of Mr. Harikishan than myself. But I want to let you know that the thing which makes his life precious should by no means be ignored. To save lives at any cost, is not our policy. It may be the policy of easy-chair politicians, but not ours.

Much of the defence policy depends upon the mentality of the accused himself. But if the accused himself is not afraid of shrinking but is as enthusiastic as ever, then the work for which he risked his life should be considered first, his personal question afterwards. Again, there may be some sort of confusion. There may be cases where the action is of no general importance in spite of its tremendous local value. There the accused should not be sentimental as to admit responsibility. The famous trial of Nirmal Kant Rai would be the best illustration.

But in cases like this, which are of such political importance, the personal aspect should not be attached greater value than the political one. If you want to know my frank opinion about his case, let me tell you that it is nothing short of the political murder of an incident of historic importance at the altar of professional (legal) vanity.

Here I may point out one thing more, that the people responsible for this strangulation of the case, having realised their blunder and having become wise after the event in not daring to shoulder their responsibility, are trying to belittle the beauty of the marvellous character of our young comrade. I have heard them saying that Mr. Harikishan shirked to face it boldly.

This is a most shame-faced lie. He is the most courageous lad I have ever come across. People should have mercy upon us. Better ignored than demoralised and degraded but well looked after.

Lawyers should not be so unscrupulous as to exploit the lives and even deaths of young people who come to sacrifice themselves for so noble a cause as the emancipation of the suffering humanity. I am really... (some words missing), otherwise, why should a lawyer demand such an incredible fee as has been paid in the above case?

In sedition cases, I can tell you the limit to which we can allow defence. Last year, when one comrade was prosecuted for having delivered a socialistic speech and when he pleaded not guilty to that charge, we were simply astounded. In such cases, we should demand the right of free speech. But when such things are attributed to one, but he has not said them and are contrary to the interests of the movement, deny. Though, in the present movement, the Congress has suffered for having allowed its members to go to jail without defending themselves, in my opinion that was a mistake.

Anyhow, I think if you read this letter along with my previous one, you will come to know very clearly my ideas about the defence in political cases. In Mr. Harikishan's case, in my opinion, his appeal should be filed in the High Court without fail and every effort should be made to save him.

I hope both these letters indicate everything I want to say on this subject.

(Some words missing)

(From Selected Writings of Bhagat Singh by Shiv Verma)