



Book Review of Irfan Habib (ed.), Inquilab: Bhagat Singh on Religion and Revolution

DR MANMOHAN SINGH LUTHRA

UK based academic and retired British Civil Servant.



Article History

Published by: 11 January 2024

The eminent technology historian dwells on the enduring relevance of Bhagat Singh's messages in the contemporary global context, particularly within the Indian political discourse. This second updated schedule is a translated compilation of Singh's selective works in modern English which fulfils a crucial lacuna on literature regarding the reflection aspect of his life. The book has been sensibly printed in a cost-effective softcover format, it aims to enhance accessibility of Bhagat Singh's ideas beyond his popular projection as a young nationalist martyr, which it does quite well and it has some gripping chapters. There are however some aspects that perhaps merit further attention and refinement

The introductory section adeptly distils Singh's key messages, revealing their resonance in the modern world and their continuous reverberation, particularly within the Indian socio-political landscape.

One noteworthy observation lies in the structure of the text. While the subheadings in certain chapters are effective as navigators, others could benefit from their inclusion for improved readability. In general the chapters are well bunched.

Additionally, the length of paragraphs in some chapters presents challenges for the readers. The book's typography, particularly in the diary pages towards the end, pose readability issues for senior readers due to the small print size.

The book provides stimulating but a partial window to Singh's mindset and evolution of his thinking as a young well-read budding intellectual for the notion of anarchistic socialism and his views on religion, secularism and equality.

CONTACT Dr Manmohan Singh Luthra ✉ luthramohan@hotmail.com 📍 UK based academic and retired British Civil Servant.



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Enviro Research Publishers.

This is an Open Access article licensed under a Creative Commons license: Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY).

Doi: 10.12944/CRJSSH.6.2.02

The author has compiled series of scattered writings in a readable framework. The book is chronologically arranged, for example, the first section of the work is based on the social and political ideas of Bhagat Singh from 1924 to 1928 focusing on universalism including universal brotherhood, religion and the freedom struggle, addressing vexed issues such as communal riots and untouchability including youth politics.

Others sections include the writings explored under Revolutionary ideas on page 49 extend to 1934

In Part 1, 'Dharma and Our Freedom Struggle' (Religion and Our Freedom Struggle) — Bhagat Singh makes a cogent case for freedom to be a pre requisite from absolute independence from social life. Quoting Nehru and important Congress and Regional council resolutions. He also highlighted the failures or limited impact of egalitarian messages of Indian religious reformers. He is critical of those who proclaim that all religions were equal or inclusive or those who used religion for selfish reasons or those who were duplicitous or self-contradictory concluding that it is better to do away with all religions in the struggle by excluding those who engage in such practices.

In his seminal essay on 'Why Am I an Atheist' he makes a lucid case for his acquired freedom from religious faith which was printed in *The People* in Lahore, a paper owned by Lala Lajpat Rai, a unionist leader who is criticised at length by young Singh (captured in Section 8) for the lack of egalitarian strands beyond freedom goal in his thinking and his disconnect with Panjabi youth.

On the improvement aspect, contextualization within each writing providing a more extensive backdrop and what happened later, i.e. a better narrative continuity, could have enhanced the reader's understanding of the historical context to Singh's youthful and impactful ideas.

Incorporating details about personalities referenced by Singh, such as Lajpat Rai, and his political role within the Panjab Unionist politics, would have provided valuable contextualization.

A concise biographical chart outlining critical life and political events and milestones would have served as a useful reference for readers, especially research scholars.

While the compilation sensibly organizes Singh's writings, the absence of certain significant events, like the mistaken killing of Saunders, raises questions about the comprehensiveness of this compilation.

The absence of excerpts from Singh's court speeches during his trial, particularly during his final trial leading to his execution, diminishes the book's chronological aspect and coherence of narrative. Inclusion of these extracts would have not only elucidate Singh's arguments but also enrich the framing of the historical narrative. Regarding abstract ideas explored by Singh, an expanded exploration on the notion of just force in the face of oppression, drawing parallels with the central ideas of historical figures like Guru Gobind Singh, could have amplified the depth of this discussion.

Additionally, exploring Singh's views on Nehru and Bose's contrasting leadership 'head versus heart styles' and his admiration for Nehru's as a well-travelled, well-read person, invite commentary on Singh's intellectual orientation. These astute observations were daringly put in the public domain that too at such a young age and in a period when history had gifted India with a lot of lucid writers and commentators.

Similarly Singh's distinction between just force deployed for greater good with utilitarian noble compassionate intentions has resonance with the notion of a just war which needed some unpacking at least in the narratives of the footnote.

The limited in-fill commentary on Singh's ideas and their historical context leaves the compilation for the readers somewhat incomplete. Integration of news clippings and articles from the period could have augmented the contextual understanding and improved interchapter connectivity.

In summary, while "*Inqilab: Bhagat Singh on Religion and Revolution*" offers an easy read introduction to youthful Singh's evolution of ideas, it needed some further exploration in the tradition of history of ideas which in this case were simultaneously paralleled by actions. This dynamics between action and reflection in action could have been explored in the commentary, encouraging further scholarly exploratory discourse and imparting better contextual understanding of his life against the backdrop of nationalist struggle epoch in the Indian history.