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Terrorists and martyrs: The smearing of the line

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Abstract

The past is an inheritance that we all share, but its interpretation varies according to how it is viewed in terms of political and social utility. It is naive to simply see history as an accumulation of facts and figures, or as a series of colourful little stories, which enliven human knowledge. Instead, political suppositions have often played a major role. The past also has considerable political leverage. For this reason, history is a contested terrain: between high and the low; black and white, left and the right; nation against nation. It cannot be a subject to be trifled with or taken lightly. It is extremely dangerous in wrong hands, though a source of enlightenment too. In the political arena, history's worth is well known. Political parties are aware of their own past and are usually anxious to conceptualise the collective past in their own vision. In this context, re-writing of history which many call revisionism or denial of history, assumes utmost significance. In Indian history, there have been times when there has been deliberate intent to write and re-write history to suit political and ideological needs of particular ruling factions. However, it is not only confined to Indian history.

The way societies define themselves changes throughout generations. Each word is used, analysed and interpreted in a particular context and changes its meaning with the changing times. The present paper is an attempt to discuss the more complex issues related to the writing of history and the changing meanings in the context of the phrase 'Revolutionary Terrorism' used by Late Professor Bipan Chandra in his book India's Struggle for Independence.

Keywords: Political leverage, contested terrain, revisionism, revolutionary terrorism

1. Introduction

Re-writing of history is a continuous process in which the historian brings to bear new methodological insights or employs a new analytical frame drawn upon hitherto unknown facts. As and when new information becomes available, our earlier notions and ideas about past events change. The historian's craft, as reminded by the French Historian Marc Bloch, is rooted in a method specific to history as a discipline, most of which has evolved through philosophical engagements and empirical investigations during the last several centuries. No methodology, which the Historian invokes in pursuit of knowledge of the past, is really valid unless it respects the method of the discipline. Even when methodologies fundamentally differ, they share certain common grounds, which constitute the field of the historian's craft. Notwithstanding the present scepticism about the possible engagement with history, a strict adherence to the method of the discipline is observed in all generally accepted forms of reconstruction of the past^[1].

The past is an inheritance that we all share, but its interpretation varies according to how it is viewed in terms of political and social utility. It is naive to simply see history as an accumulation of facts and figures, or as a series of colourful little stories, which enliven human knowledge. Instead, political suppositions have often played a major role^[2]. The past also has considerable political leverage. For this reason, history is a contested terrain: between high and the low; black and white, left and the right; nation against nation. It cannot be a subject to be trifled with or taken lightly. It is extremely dangerous in wrong hands, though a source of enlightenment too. In the political arena, history's worth is well known^[3]. Political parties are aware of their own past and are usually anxious to conceptualise the collective past in their own vision.

In this context, re-writing of history which many call revisionism or denial of history, assumes utmost significance. In Indian history, there have been times when there have been deliberate intent to write and re-write history to suit political and ideological needs of particular ruling factions^[4].

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However, it is not only confined to Indian history. Nazi, Fascist and virtually all totalitarian dictatorships designed history and the educational curriculum in ways that could easily sway young minds with dogmatic ideas which were hammered into their heads from an early phase of their lives. Any semblance of freedom of thought was ruthlessly suppressed and the worst sufferers were the intellectuals^[5].

The way societies define themselves changes throughout generations. Generation is a group of people connected by the same phase of collective process, hence socially constructed^[6]. Meanings of words keep changing in different contexts and over different periods of time. Virginia Woolf observed, "Words hate anything that stamps with one meaning or confines them to one attitude^[7]. Terrorism is one such word. Posterity has to take a note of the historical process through which words have consumed every new orientation and subtlety to appear intricately modern.

The present paper is an attempt to discuss the more complex issues related to the writing of history and the changing meanings in the context of the phrase 'Revolutionary Terrorism' used by Late Professor Bipan Chandra in his book *India's Struggle for Independence*.

Terrorism is as old as human civilization. Psychologically, its onslaught on the human mind has left a deep furrow and an all-pervading panic. Meanwhile, a newer reality –that of the national liberation struggles–has added a new dimension and shade of meaning as these struggles have founded their base on the constituents of 'terror', i.e., sabotage, explosion, guerilla activities and even killing. Since then the world has been struggling to draw a line between 'terrorism' and 'freedom struggles'. The phenomenal growth of the 'terrorist menace' has pushed the world leaders, at regular intervals, to forge ways to at least come to a makeshift agreement among nations-to defend and combat. But as the face of terror becomes monstrous, its indicators and identification have become equally marked and condemnable.

The controversy regarding the use of the historical expression, 'revolutionary terrorism' has been held against the late author Professor Bipan Chandra for his views on Bhagat Singh. The book *India's Struggle for Independence* has become a victim of political cross-winds for calling Bhagat Singh, Surya Sen etc 'terrorists', though 'revolutionary' nearly three decades after being published^[8]. The so-called 'nationalist School of Historiography' has been accused by the right wing to be synonymous with the 'Congress School' and the issue has been taken up by none other than the family members of Bhagat Singh.

In the beginning of 2016 an activist wrote to the HRD minister to get the book by the late historian 'banned, recalled from everywhere and destroyed'. He expressed outrage that the book published in 1987 and in existence as a reference book at Delhi University (it is virtually a must-read-reference book for History students as well as general readers in almost all the universities in India)–referred Bhagat Singh as a 'revolutionary terrorist'. His letter demanded action against officials of Delhi University's Directorate of Hindi medium implementation for publishing it in Hindi for university usage and 'legal action against the authors^[9].

Bhagat Singh's kin met the Vice Chancellor of Delhi University to press for their demand of dropping the book or the references therein. The HRD Minister had called the text

of the book an 'academic murder' of sacrifices of individuals. "It is extremely unfortunate that 'martyrs' and 'freedom fighters' such as Bhagat Singh continue to be denigrated as 'terrorists'." The book came to associate the word with something which was quite opposite of revolutionaries. It was not the way to treat the nation's martyrs. Singh's grandson demanded for immediate removal of the book from the syllabus of the History department^[10].

His nephew told Mail Today, "We demand an ordinance stating that all such derogatory references to the revolutionary freedom fighters be dropped immediately. This is a very sad precedent that even after sixty eight years of independence such words are used for the revolutionaries who gave their lives for the freedom of the nation.....the Britishers who hanged him described him as 'a true revolutionary' in their judgement. Even they did not use words like terror or terrorism. Using such words for revolutionaries in an attempt to stir controversy is very unfortunate^[11]

In Chapter 20 of the book, late professor Bipan describes Bhagat Singh, Chandra Sekhar Azad, Surya Sen and others as 'revolutionary terrorists'. In fact, the book has two chapters where there is reference to 'Revolutionary Terrorism.' Chapter 11 is on 'The Split in the Congress and the Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism and Chapter 20 is on 'Bhagat Singh, Surya Sen and The Revolutionary Terrorists.' Chapter 11 deals with the period after the Surat Split when the Congress is in disarray and Chapter 20 deals with the period after the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation movement, when again there is a feeling of despondency in the mind of the Congress workers. The allegations are that the book describes the Chittagong movement as a 'terrorist Act' and killing of British Police Officer John Saunders as an act of 'terrorism'. The term 'revolutionary terrorism' is used for first time in the book on page 142. Professor Bipan Chandra, who wrote two chapters on the Revolutionary Movement, clearly said that it is 'a term we use without any pejorative meaning and for want of a different term^[12].

In his later writings, Professor Bipan stopped using this term as the word terrorism had acquired a very negative meaning. In his introduction to Bhagat Singh's 'why I am an Atheist?', published in 2006, professor Bipan Chandra doesn't use the term terrorism and says: 'Bhagat Singh was not only one of India's greatest freedom fighters and revolutionary Socialists but also one of its early Marxist thinkers and ideologues.' He also added, "Unfortunately, this last aspect is relatively unknown with the result that all sorts of reactionaries, obscurantists and communalists have been wrongly and dishonestly trying to utilise for their own politics and ideologies, the name and fame of Bhagat Singh and his Comrades such as Chandra Sekhar Azad^[13].

To assess for oneself whether the author has committed 'academic murder' by projecting Bhagat Singh as a revolutionary Terrorist, one just needs to flip through the page where he begins to write about Bhagat Singh. He writes, "Bhagat Singh, born in 1907 and a nephew of the famous revolutionary Ajit Singh, was a giant of an intellectual. A voracious reader, he was one of the most well-read political leaders of the time. He had devoured books in the Dwardakas library at Lahore on socialism, the Soviet Union and revolutionary Movements, especially those of Russia, Ireland and Italy..." In the same vein he continues, "The sword of Revolution is sharpened on the whetting stone of ideas^[14].

The Deputy Chairman of the upper House of the parliament (Rajya Sabha), told the Government to remove all references to Bhagat Singh being a 'Revolutionary terrorist' from the book that has been part of the Delhi University's curriculum for decades and to 'inquire how it happened'. The Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs also assured the Chair that the Government would ask the concerned ministry to take necessary steps [15].

The issue was raised in the lower House of the Parliament (Lok Sabha) on 27 April 2016 by a Ruling Party MP, who demanded a debate on the educational curriculum across the country [16]. The controversy gives force and credence to the Right Wing activists and supporters that the history which is being taught is biased in favour of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru to perpetuate the Nehru-Gandhi rule in the country. It also reinforces the belief that the leaders such as Subhas Chandra Bose, Sardar Patel, Bhagat Singh, Chandra Sekhar Azad, B R Ambedkar have not been projected in the proper light in comparison to Gandhi and Nehru.

The view that has been gaining wider acceptance is that the history that has been taught or written till now have been written either by leftists or Congress sympathizers and they conveniently ignored individuals who professed a view counter to the mainstream of this historical narrative. This controversy will strengthen the view that history books need to be re-written. In Fact, the whole education system needs to be overhauled because it has been dominated by the so-called leftists who have taught skewed lessons in History of India.

However three-four pertinent issues emerge from this whole row about the 'martyr' versus 'revolutionary terrorist' debate. The reaction to the use of the 'historical expression, "Revolutionary Terrorism" seems to be a little out of place and going on the basis of the timing a little opportunistic. The book has been in existence for more than 28 years and it is highly unlikely that the people in academia, politics and media had not come across the phrase earlier. To raise the issue when the author is no more and at a time when Bhagat Singh's constituency is heading for polls in near future, dilutes the genuineness of the allegations.

Secondly, reactions of the family members to this episode, makes the intent on the issue a little questionable. Not only they, have every right to feel 'hurt' by the phrase used, in the changing context of today about the meaning of the phrase, even educated Indians are appalled at the fact that it has remained unchanged for so long. The only concern is that the Provincial elections are round the corner and the motives become a little suspect.

What is even more bothering is the logic with which different political groups are jumping in to the fray on basis of their inclinations. Making a serious discipline like history a hand-aid or official mouth-piece can be fraught with very serious consequences in the long run. Sunil Khilnani, director of India Institute, King's college, London in a new series titled, 'Incarnations-India in 50 lives' while writing on these great sons of India, wrote, "I wanted to bring some of these life stories back into the discussion, in a sophisticated way-to construe historical individuals not as heroes or villains, but as complex figures-and as human resources to think about what sort of society we want to be [12]." So as students of history, it would be more appropriate if we do not stereotype individuals as heroes or villains and start viewing them as more complex figures.

However, the most important aspect that needs to be reflected upon here is the fact that is Professor Bipan Chandra the only author who has referred to Bhagat Singh and his comrades as 'revolutionary terrorists'? Definitely not! While other equally famous authors have used the term and phrases to describe the same martyrs, they have not been targeted. For example equally illustrious historian, Professor Sumit Sarkar in his book, 'Modern India' [18] uses the term on innumerable instances. While talking about the fall-out of the Moderate agitation, reaction of people took three main forms from 1890: a somewhat non-political trend towards self – development through constructive work, ignoring rather than directly attacking foreign rule; political extremism proper, attempting mass-mobilisation for Swaraj through certain new techniques which came to be called passive resistance, and revolutionary terrorism, which sought a short-cut to freedom via individual violence and conspiracies [19].

Describing the Swadeshi Movement, he writes that terrorism of a more efficient variety was meanwhile developing in East Bengal, spearheaded by the much more tightly organised Dacca Anushilan of Pulin Das, with the Barrah dacoity (2nd June 1908) as its first major venture....The revolutionary movement took the form of assassinations of oppressive officials or traitors, Swadeshi dacoities to raise funds, or at best military conspiracies, with expectations of help from foreign enemies of Britain. Despite occasional subjective aspirations, it never rose to the level of urban uprisings or guerrilla bases in the Bengal countryside. The term 'terrorism', hence remains not inappropriate [20].

In the same page he writes, "Terrorist heroism evoked tremendous admiration from very wide circles of educated Indians, and sometimes from others, too-a street beggars's lament for Khudiram, for instance could be heard decades after his execution." (p.124) On the very next page he also writes, "The social limitations of Bengal 'Revolutionary terrorism' remain obvious: in a 1918 official list of 186 killed or convicted revolutionaries, no less than 165 came from the three upper castes, Brahman, Kayastha and Vaidya [21].

On page 144, there is a proper type heading 'Revolutionary Terrorism' dealing with revolutionary activities of the initial decades of the 20th centuries. He discusses about Yugantar, Dacca Anushilan, Rashbehari Bose, Satchindranath Sanyal, Bagha Jatin, and Shyamji Krishna Varma, V D Savarkar, Madan lal Dhingra, Madame Kama, Sohan Singh Bakhna, Hardayal, Ghadar, Komagata Maru, Kartar Singh Sarabha and almost who's who of revolutionary activities of the period. Towards 1928 there is reference to revolutionary terrorist activities. Despite his general aloofness from nationalist politics during these years and well known hostility to terrorism, even Ravindranath Tagore addressed the protest meetings in Calcutta after the British Govt adopted draconian methods of repression, curfew and shooting down detainees in jail at Hijji [22].

It needs to be kept in mind that this book by Prof Sumit Sarkar is published by Macmillan in 1983, five years prior to the book of late Prof Bipan Chandra and others. Another popular text book in Modern Indian History for the last thirty years has been B L Grover's book 'A New Look at Modern Indian History from 1707 to the Modern Times' published in the 1980s also uses the same expression while describing the martyrs. Title of the chapter 33 is "The Growth and Development of the Indian National

Movement” in which the theme of revolutionary terrorism is dealt in two parts-The Revolutionary Terrorist Movement [23] and the second phase of Revolutionary terrorism [24]. On their philosophy, Prof Grover writes, “Though it is difficult to pin-point the political philosophy of the revolutionary terrorists in different parts of India, but their common aim was-freedom of the motherland from British rule [25]. Writing on their methods, he says that the “...the revolutionaries believed that western imperialism could only be ended by western methods of violence. Hence, the advocacy of the cult of the revolver and the bomb” [26]. He also sums up by raising the question, “Were the revolutionary’s seditious and enemies of the society or true patriots, martyrs and freedom fighters? The question will be differently answered by the imperial historians and Indian writers. Although the Gandhians and the Indian National Congress disapproved of Terrorist methods, they were not unaware of the spirit of self-less service to the motherland that inspired the young revolutionaries. Appreciating Bhagat Singh’s patriotism, he (Gandhi) said, “Our heads bend before Bhagat Singh’s bravery and sacrifice [27].

In her book on Modern India Maria Mishra writes, cells of terrorist activists, some in league with enemies, had certainly thrived in the febrile pre-war and war-time atmosphere, but the phenomenon was always rather more sensational than substantial [28].

More recently, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in his famous text book “From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India” has also used the same expression, ‘Revolutionary Terrorism’ to describe armed resistance against the British in India. He argues, “In Bengal revolutionary terrorism developed in the same way since the 1860s and 70s when physical culture movement became a craze or akharas or gymnasiums were set up everywhere to develop what swami Vivekananda described as strong muscles and nerves of steel [29].

Many other examples can be cited to endorse the point that Late Professor Bipan Chandra was not the only author who used the historical expression ‘revolutionary Terrorist’ in describing the activities of the martyrs who adopted more radical cult of the pistol and bomb. Hence the thought of questioning the credentials, the motive and the select targeting of a particular school of authors seems quite unfounded.

However, it brings us to the moot point-is there a need for re-writing of history from time to time? As a historian, it would seem extremely essential that thinkers keep engaging with newly emerging ideas and methods, as history as a discipline is continuously evolving. In the last few decades, the pace of change in historical enquiry has been great; indeed, at times, the transformation from one assumed norm to another has been breath-taking. Where once history was a distinctive compartment in human knowledge, it now has blurred edges which run into other disciplines and across national boundaries [30].

Every work of history is interim. It can be amplified, amended, contested and overthrown by works in its wake. Despite the range of subjects it covers, no book can hope to treat any subject comprehensively [31]. History is, therefore, always unstable, plastic, unsure and precarious. It is at all times being revised because it is made according to requirements of the historian’s own situation [32]....knowing ‘what happened’ cannot, by itself define the concept of

historical truth. Knowing what happened should remain a basis of ‘thinking about’ history.

A historian is a citizen and is bound to be opinionated. The more recent the event, the more it is likely that one would feel strongly about it. And as Marc Bloch said ‘One should feel well rewarded if confrontation with his false conjectures makes history learn truth about herself.’

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3. Ibid.
4. In India, the critics of the policy of the NDA Coalition (of which BJP was the biggest constituent), termed it as Saffronization. Saffronization is an Indian political neologism (named after the saffron robes worn by Hindu sannyasis symbolizing the cremation of the physical body and freedom of the soul while still alive) used by critics to refer to the politics of right-wing Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) that seek to make the Indian state adopt social policies that recall and glorify the ancient Hindu cultural history and heritage of India (the term "Hindu" in their view encompassing Dharmic Indian religions including Hinduism and the Sikh, Jain and Buddhist traditions) while de-emphasizing the more recent Islamic or Christian heritage. Catharine Cookson (ed.), Encyclopedia of Religious Freedom, Taylor & Francis, 2003, 180.
5. For example, Cultural Revolution was a socio-political movement that took place in the People's Republic of China from 1966 through 1976. Set into motion by Mao Zedong, then Chairman of the Communist Party of China, its stated goal was to enforce communism in the country by removing capitalist, traditional and cultural elements from Chinese society, and to impose Maoist orthodoxy within the Party. The revolution marked the return of Mao Zedong to a position of power after the failed Great Leap Forward. The movement paralyzed China politically and significantly affected the country economically and socially.
6. Karl Mannheim, from ‘The Sociological Problem of Generation’, in Olick and Levy (ed.) The Collective Memory Reader, 92-98, 95.
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8. The book titled India’s struggle for independence has been authored by noted historians, late Professor Bipan Chandra, Professor Mridula Mukherjee, Professor Aditya Mukherjee and Professor K N Panikkar and Professor Sucheta Mahjan.
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