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ARTICLE

Commonplace Anti-Colonialism: Bhagat Singh's Jail Notebook and the Politics of Reading

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ABSTRACT

Bhagat Singh (1907–31) is popularly celebrated as one of the major leaders of the Indian anti-colonial movement. Scholars have pointed to his writings to demonstrate his philosophical mastery. One of the primary texts used to support this claim is the activist's jail notebook, a collection of reading notes Bhagat Singh produced while in jail. The existence of the jail notebook, however, has only been used as proof of Bhagat Singh's mastery, rather than as possibly articulating its own philosophy for anti-colonial revolution. This essay analyses Bhagat Singh's jail notebook in order to offer a theory of 'commonplace anti-colonialism' and inconsequence. Rather than use the jail notebook to corroborate Bhagat Singh's 'mastery' as an anti-colonial revolutionary thinker, this essay argues that the jail notebook reveals a more radical revolutionary politics: of reading. Bhagat Singh's reading practices, especially in the face of death, suggest a new way to theorise 'revolution' as the perpetual deferment of authority and mastery, rather than the eventual assumption of those positions. Consequently, 'inconsequential reading' may, in turn, reveal a more radically egalitarian politics of revolution than previously ascribed to Bhagat Singh.

KEYWORDS

Anti-colonialism; Bhagat Singh; inconsequence; reading; revolution

In June 1929, anti-colonial agitator and leader of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA) Bhagat Singh led his fellow prisoners in Lahore on a hunger strike for better jail conditions. His list of demands was as follows:

(1) We, as political prisoners, should be given better diet and the standard of our diet should be at least the same as that of European prisoners. (It is not the sameness of diet that we demand, but the sameness of standard of diet.)
(2) We shall not be forced to do any hard or undignified labour at all.
(3) All books, other than those proscribed, along with writing materials, should be allowed to us without any restriction.
(4) At least one standard daily paper should be supplied to every political prisoner.

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(5) Political prisoners should have a special ward of their own in every jail, provided with all necessities as those of Europeans. And all the political prisoners in one jail must be kept together in that ward.
(6) Toilet necessities should be supplied.
(7) Better clothing.[1]

Bhagat Singh's demands are provocative given his total willingness to die during the hunger strike. Of the seven demands, I find it particularly telling that two of them concern reading (numbers 3 and 4), which are signalled as being just as important as the demand for no hard labour (number 2) and better diet (number 1). What are Bhagat Singh's demands in the context of his awareness of his very likely death? Even if (or, perhaps, especially because) we understand that Bhagat Singh's revolutionary politics cannot be exhausted by the *telos* of his death, in the context of his apparent commitment to his own impending martyrdom, these demands appear rather inconsequential. Why demand to read in the face of death? Even if Bhagat Singh was demanding books *for others* (who might outlive him), the demand remains fairly inconsequential: why books?

Scholars and hagiographers of Bhagat Singh point to these demands and his other writings as a sign of Bhagat Singh's scholarship and wide-ranging reading practices, and flippantly conclude without further comment that 'the revolutionaries were reading the revolutionaries'.[2] This essay takes that claim a bit more seriously. Revolutionaries reading revolutionaries suggests a global network of thinkers and agitators in communication with one another, which is itself a significant revision of more provincial accounts of radical thought around the world. But, moreover, revolutionaries reading revolutionaries should indicate the centrality of *reading* to the revolutionaries under our analysis. The revolutionary was always reading. Reading was revolutionary, I suggest, precisely because it was *not* in the service of scholarship, mastery, authority or expertise. Reading, especially in the face of death, was revolutionary because it was inconsequential.

Post-colonial scholarship on anti-colonial revolutionary writing has insisted, for politically pragmatic reasons, on the important consequences of anti-colonial political agitation (namely, independence). 'Revolution', in this sense, has tended to focus on the teleological assumption of mastery, authority and power that have rendered some practices subordinate, unrecognisable or irrelevant to the eventual success of a culminating event. In other words, our analytic commitment to a narrowly defined set of actions deemed, in retrospect, 'properly' anti-colonial has only replicated the very language that structured colonial thought, including the forms of acceptable revolutionary behaviour. We might therefore sympathetically ask: of what post-colonial historiographical disorder is the desire for mastery a symptom? And, in response, how might we write post-colonial

1. Bhagat Singh, 'Hunger Strikers' Demands (24 June 1929)', in K.C. Yadav (ed.), *Fragrance of Freedom* (Gurgaon: Hope India, 2006), pp. 265–6.
2. J. Daniel Elam, 'The "Arch Priestess of Anarchy" Visits Lahore', in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (2013), p. 151. I do not find it useful to single out particular scholars for individual indictment (besides, of course, myself); instead, I am more interested in the rhetorical tics that show up across much of the scholarship on Bhagat Singh as a whole. Readers interested in a bibliography of such work on Bhagat Singh will find a reasonably robust selection scattered—perhaps 'commonplaced' or anthologised, in other words—throughout this essay.

history and post-colonial theory without replicating the undergirding authorial logics of colonial rule?[3]

A focus on reading requires us to reconfigure our model of 'revolution' itself, which has tended to privilege a singular, consequential event over and above the slow accretion of seemingly unimportant and irrelevant actions. A focus on reading brings to light a radical and egalitarian political theory implicit in actions previously relegated to the dustbin of inconsequence.[4] Bhagat Singh's anti-colonial reading offers us a model of revolution that depends on the perpetual displacement, rather than the eventual assumption, of mastery.

To illustrate this point, this essay takes the *inconsequence* of Bhagat Singh's list of demands as the *basis* for a revolutionary politics. Leela Gandhi has argued that a commitment to inconsequence reveals an attachment to minor forms of politics severed from teleological events. It refuses the status quo of future realisation by, instead, insisting on the present. Its insistence on the present is not an investment in the present, but a celebration of the present's 'irrelevance'—its commonness, its inconsequentiality.

In order to approach a theory of anti-colonial inconsequentiality, I begin by focusing on Bhagat Singh's jail notebook, a substantial if understudied piece of his corpus. It remains understudied primarily because, although it was written 'by' Bhagat Singh, it offers no original contribution from the young anti-colonialist. In my reading, Bhagat Singh's jail notebook reveals the young martyr's commitment to the inconsequential and, by extension, to the common and the revolutionary present.

Anti-Colonial Commonplace

The jail notebook is a 404-page notebook in which Bhagat Singh filled 75 pages, skipped 25 pages, and organised a separate section called 'Sociology'. Some pages feature one or two quotations, some have notes that would otherwise be marginalia, and others have extensive block quotations from major texts. Writers represented in the notebook include Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Bernard Russell, Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine, Horace Greeley, Maxim Gorky, Walt Whitman, J.S. Mill, Thomas Jefferson, Eugene Debs, Upton Sinclair and Leon Trotsky. In other words, the jail notebook is representative of European and American contemporaneous Leftist thought in the late 1910s.[5]

'Sociology', the second portion of Bhagat Singh's jail notebook, begins on page 101 after 25 blank pages.[6] It opens with a quotation from the first few pages of Karl Marx's *Capital*, and moves on to include a selection of writing from Victor Hugo, Fyodor

3. In a closely related vein, David Scott examines the relationship between colonial authority (archives, state formations) and post-colonial writing which has, in the wake of Edward Said and Michel Foucault, asserted a relationship between power and knowledge. How might anti-colonial writing, when re-examined, reveal a different logic of power and knowledge with a commitment to egalitarianism and unknowing? See David Scott, *Refashioning Futures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
4. In this argument, 'inconsequence' is not necessarily a synonym for 'irrelevance' or 'unimportance', but, rather, suggests a closer analysis of 'inconsequence' on its own etymological terms.
5. Bhagat Singh's philosophical genealogy actually prefigures the now-established canon of democratic theory. In his jail notebook and throughout his writings, he cites the democratic revolutionary theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine, as well as the radical utopian writings of Henry David Thoreau and Friedrich Engels. Bhagat Singh's writings, therefore, suggest this academic intellectual canon, so often credited to the post-war US Political Theory Department, had many roots, some of which are more global—not to say more revolutionary—than we tend to imagine.
6. Some pages might have been destroyed by the jail guards or might have been smuggled out for illicit circulation. Pages appear to have been pre-numbered in the notebook.

Dostoevsky, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Vladimir Lenin, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, René Descartes, Thomas Aquinas, Niccolò Machiavelli, John Locke, John Milton and many other Western writers. It also includes a long section on Indian revolutionary history, including notes from the Ghadar Party, Rabindranath Tagore, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal, as well as long passages from Valentine Chirol's infamous *Indian Unrest*. 'Sociology' also features more of Bhagat Singh's notes—large sections on Lenin are Bhagat Singh's own paraphrasing of Lenin's arguments, rather than direct quotes (though direct quotes are interspersed throughout).

S. Irfan Habib claims to have extrapolated a 'reading list of Bhagat Singh…from his unpublished diary' and published it as an Appendix to his reflective manifesto, *To Make the Deaf Hear*.[7] The list is twenty significant books long, with ten more books recommended for reading to his friend Jaidev Gupta, and a further long list of poets. Habib's 'unpublished diary' is the jail notebook, which has a much more confusing lineage than simply remaining 'unpublished'. Habib's 'reading list' also might be overstating the *material* extent of Bhagat Singh's reading habits. Quotes from the poets and writers listed in Habib's Appendix can be found in the jail notebook, alongside additional notes and questions, but most of the page numbers listed in Bhagat Singh's jail notebook correspond, instead, to Upton Sinclair's 1915 edition of *The Cry for Justice*, a self-published compendium of radical Leftist thought. Sinclair's radical primer, at almost nine hundred pages, was published through a grant from John Hayes Holmes, himself a radical Unitarian preacher and anti-colonial sympathiser,[8] and features an 'Introduction' by American novelist and progressive Jack London. For example, a quote from J.S. Mill, 'Hitherto it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being', which appears on page 20 of the jail notebook, is cited as appearing on 'page 199'. The quote, in fact, appears on page 199 of *The Cry for Justice*, in between passages by Antiparos and Edwin Markham.[9]

I suggest we briefly examine *The Cry for Justice* as a compendium, and therefore a 'commonplace', of contemporaneous radical Leftist thought. American revolutionary socialist Upton Sinclair was already famous when *The Cry for Justice* was published in 1915.[10] *The Jungle*, his most famous work, had been published to Leftist acclaim in 1906, and is generally acknowledged as one of the catalysts for the passing of the US Food and Drug Act in the same year. Like many of his contemporaries, his activism was multifaceted and wide-ranging: he was corresponding with socialists, anarchists, Indian anti-colonialists, Irish revolutionaries and trade union activists.[11] In the 1920s, however, Sinclair had not yet become a politician (running for office in 1934) or Nobel Prize winner (1943). Drawing on his own resources and those of his friends, he published *The Cry for*

7. S. Irfan Habib, *To Make the Deaf Hear* (Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2007).
8. Holmes corresponded with Jawaharlal Nehru, M.K. Gandhi and Dhan Gopal Mukerji and published regularly in the Calcutta-based *Modern Review*.
9. Upton Sinclair published several editions of *The Cry for Justice*: 1915, 1921, 1963 and 1964. A 1996 version is also available. Unlike the 1915 edition, the subsequent editions were published by various Leftist publishing organisations in Philadelphia, Boston and New York. The 1915 edition was self-published from Pasadena, California. The content differs considerably between the four editions published during Sinclair's lifetime. Bhagat Singh's jail notebook page numbers only correspond to the 1915 edition, not the 1921 edition.
10. Upton Sinclair, *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest* (Pasadena, CA: self-published, 1915).
11. In 1930, Upton Sinclair sent M.K. Gandhi a signed copy of *The Cry for Justice.* Sinclair to Gandhi, 26 Nov. 1930, Pyarelal Files Misc. #19, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi (NMML). He sent other books and pamphlets throughout the 1930s.

Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest from his offices in Pasadena and New York. The cover promises 'a gospel of new hope to the race'; it was 'Illustrated with Reproductions of Social Protest in Art'.

The book is divided into seventeen sections: 'Toil', 'The Chasm', 'The Outcast', 'Out of the Depths', 'Revolt', 'Martyrdom', 'Jesus', 'The Church', 'The Voice of the Ages', 'Mammon', 'War', 'Country', 'Children', 'Humor', 'The Poem', 'Socialism' and 'The New Day'. Jack London's 'Introduction' argues for the book's place next to 'the Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud'.[12] *The Cry for Justice* features more than 450 entries 'selected from twenty-five languages [and] covering a period of five thousand years'.[13] At the same time, the radical primer is a selection very much of its time, and Sinclair predicts that the volume would have to be regularly updated to reflect the revolutionary vision for each age. This 'whole movement',[14] he notes, requires 'a new Bible': 'I believe that [this book] is, quite literally and simply, what the old Bible was—a selection by the living minds of a living time of the best and truest writings known to them. It is a Bible of the future, a Gospel of the new hope of the race'.[15]

Consequently, *The Cry for Justice* becomes a 'humanist Bible' (in Jack London's phrase), devoted to the secular world. 'We know how gods are made. Comes now the time to make the world', London proclaims at the end of his Introduction.[16] Sinclair's insistence on this secular 'Bible' takes on even greater weight in his particularly Protestant instructions:

> If the material in this volume means to you, the reader, what it has meant to me, you will live with it, love it, sometimes weep with it, many times pray with it, yearn and hunger with it, and, above all, many times pray with it. You will carry it with you about your daily tasks, you will be utterly possessed by it; and again and again you will be led to dedicate yourself to the greatest hope, the most wondrous vision which has ever thrilled the soul of humanity.[17]

Sinclair prescribes a set of protocols for reading, encompassed in his expansive definition of 'reading': loving, weeping, praying, hungering and praying again. Similarly, Sinclair's call here associates 'reading' with 'revolution' and an egalitarian commitment to 'humanity'—in other words, his call is for the development of a readerly sensibility necessary for revolution.

Of course, Bhagat Singh's reading list was significantly broader than *The Cry for Justice* alone. His definition of anarchism, taken verbatim from Emma Goldman, is not in *The Cry for Justice*, but rather in Goldman's *Mother Earth* publications.[18] Bhagat Singh's notes include now-obscure poetry and socialist economic analysis. Interspersed with selections from *The Cry for Justice* are Urdu poems, notes on economic practices in the USA, conversion rates between different world currencies, and selections from Rabindranath Tagore's lectures on Indian nationalism in Japan. Nevertheless, *The Cry for Justice* is both

12. Sinclair, *The Cry for Justice*, p. 3.
13. *Ibid.*, cover.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 5. This resolutely secular 'Bible' thus prefigures much vibrant post-colonial criticism, especially by Edward Said. See Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).
17. Sinclair, *The Cry for Justice*, p. 21.
18. See Bhagat Singh, 'Anarchism', in Yadav, *Fragrance of Freedom*, pp. 77–93.

the central component of Bhagat Singh's 75 pages of notes as well as the primary reference for the jail notebook's structure.

According to Chaman Lal, the jail notebook was part of a set of writings that Bhagat Singh gave to Kumari Lajjawati, the secretary for the Bhagat Singh defence committee, to be passed on to Bejoy Kumar Sinha.[19] In any case, the notebook circulated privately within Bhagat Singh's family before being deposited in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Records (NMML) in 1981.[20] Part of it first appeared publicly in L.V. Mitrokhin's 1981 book, *Lenin in India*. Bhupendra Hooja published the full notebook in 1994 as *A Martyr's Notebook*; Chaman Lal edited the 2007 LeftWord edition.[21] The journal, originally written mostly in English, has been translated into Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi.

The jail notebook is 'by' Bhagat Singh in the fullest sense of the preposition: it is an agglomeration of texts that circulated *next to* or *alongside* him, but he 'wrote' it only insofar as it is in his handwriting. As Isabel Hofmeyr explains in the case of M.K. Gandhi, books 'by' anti-colonial writers emerge to confirm an authoritative 'author' figure, often in retrospect. Anti-colonial writing, in Hofmeyr's account, emerged under radically different, experimental, 'textual conditions', including practices that fundamentally trouble our notion of 'author'.[22] This sense of 'by' is considerably more fungible than an indication of singular authorship, which is why it is curious that the jail notebook has become the corroboration of Bhagat Singh's authorial expertise.

I want to assert the importance of the jail notebook as a commonplace of anti-colonial reading rather than anti-colonial authority and authorship, not as a way of undermining Bhagat Singh's scholarly pursuits—I am not interested in charging him with having cribbed from a primer—but as a way of demonstrating his (and Upton Sinclair's) experimentation with textual production, including commonplace books and anthologies.[23] Commonplace books were collections of important quotations, notes, letters, poems, proverbs and prayers. A commonplace book signalled a readerly curatorial project, with each of these notes arranged according to the reader's interests. Readers used commonplace books to document their reading and as an aid for remembering especially important quotations.

A commonplace book was a way for the reader to practise self-cultivation without the demand to attain mastery. Unlike anthologies, commonplaces rarely feature an authorial editorial presence.[24] Indeed, both Bhagat Singh's jail notebook and Upton Sinclair's *The Cry for Justice* insist on their creator's non-authority and non-authorial status. Bhagat Singh's and Sinclair's demands (implicit and explicit, respectively) that other readers read *with* them signal a commitment to reading that is egalitarian in its orientation, actively

19. This account is likely based on Kumari Lajjawati's oral history transcript at NMML.
20. See Chris Moffat's essay in this volume for an additional discussion of the circulation of Bhagat Singh's writings.
21. L.V. Mitrokhin, *Lenin in India* (Delhi: Allied, 1981); Bhupendra Hooja (ed.), *A Martyr's Notebook* (Delhi: Sanghar Vidya Sabha Trust, 1994); and Chaman Lal (ed.), *The Jail Notebook and Other Writings* (Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2007).
22. Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), esp. pp. 6–7.
23. Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
24. This is not to suggest that commonplaces are never associated with authority and mastery, but that the corroboration of this is necessarily other single-author books produced as a result. As I discuss below, Bhagat Singh's 'other books' are non-existent despite our historiographical desire to find them.

disavowing their own mastery and expertise in favour of a commitment to reading in the present.[25]

As David Arnold notes, jail writings often served as the documentation of a revolutionary identity, forged under conditions of incarceration as well as the injustice of colonial rule writ large.[26] Many scholars of Bhagat Singh point to the notebook as the sign of his developing scholarly authority and philosophical mastery; this is no doubt a politically sympathetic attempt to place Bhagat Singh in line with other radical writers, especially Antonio Gramsci.[27] Nevertheless, such an account of his impending 'mastery' undermines, if not outright forecloses, the truly egalitarian vision that Bhagat Singh invokes in his published writings. It strikes me, therefore, that a greater focus on the *inconsequentiality* of Bhagat Singh's reading (and his documentation thereof) offers us a clearer vision of revolutionary egalitarianism.

Reading Revolutionaries

There exists a rich scholarly conversation about the literary strength and imagination of Bhagat Singh's *writing*, especially that written in jail. To recount briefly, this includes his writing on atheism, cosmopolitanism, youth and revolutionary violence. Simona Sawhney has traced the lineages of revolutionary martyrdom (*shahaadat*, *sarfaroshi*) and love (*ishq*, *prem*) through Bhagat Singh's writings and the *ghazals* of his co-conspirator, Ramprasad 'Bismil'.[28] Kama Maclean has written about his use of another sort of text—photography—to spread revolutionary sentiment.[29] Bhagat Singh's extensive body of writing is made even more enticing given that he wrote all of it before he was 23, to say nothing of the appeal of his scholarly approach to revolution, his attractive studio portrait and his charismatic writing style.

Consequently, Bhagat Singh has been a vibrant figure for recent scholarly turns in South Asian history, especially those towards intellectual history, transnational studies, and radical and revolutionary histories. Historians of Bhagat Singh have long been eager to recuperate his extensive and expansive collection of writing, which reflects, as Bipan Chandra notes, a political philosophy 'in motion'.[30] Hagiography of Bhagat Singh appears

25. A commonplace book might thus be contrasted with an anthology, especially in Leah Price's outstanding *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*. *The Cry for Justice*'s insistence on radical egalitarianism stands in direct contrast with the didacticism of the editor's notes in the anthologies Price analyses.
26. David Arnold, 'The Self and the Cell: Indian Prison Narratives as Life Histories', in David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (eds), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 31. See also Sunil Khilnani, 'Gandhi and Nehru', in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed.), *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008), pp. 151–76.
27. Giuliana Chamedes notes that Gramsci's own 'authorship' and revolutionary 'authority' were crafted by the editors of his jail notebook, and even more so by the early English translators of the work. In the original set of publications, Gramsci constantly disavows his mastery over revolutionary intellectualism. Personal conversation with Chamedes, 23 Nov. 2015.
28. See Simona Sawhney, 'Death in Three Scenes of Recitation', in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (2013) pp. 202–15; and Simona Sawhney, 'Bhagat Singh: A Politics of Death and Hope', in Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir (eds), *Punjab Reconsidered* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 377–408. See also Kama Maclean and J. Daniel Elam (eds), *Revolutionary Lives in South Asia: Acts and Afterlives of Anticolonial Political Action* (London: Routledge, 2014).
29. Kama Maclean, 'The Portrait's Journey: The Image, Social Communication, and Martyr-Making in Colonial India', in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 70, no. 4 (2011), pp. 1051–82.
30. Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1997), p. 232.

to have started as soon as his death in 1931; collected writings and commentaries on his philosophy began to appear in the 1950s.[31] Scholars, wanting to claim Bhagat Singh as one of the 'proper' leaders of Indian independence, point to the philosophical sophistication on display in his published essays, personal correspondence and various other writings.

In order to make Bhagat Singh a 'proper' authority of anti-colonial revolutionary action, scholars and activists alike have been far too keen to sweep away his insistence on quieter forms of political agitation as being 'improperly' ethical or personal.[32] Even accounts of anti-colonial revolutionary thought that insist on agitators' reading practices have been ready to show that these reading practices were in the *service* of a greater, more authoritative practice (writing, bomb-throwing, publicity). This is no doubt related to the more nefarious version of an anti-colonial hangover that is consumed with proving the masterful forms of anti-colonial agitation and their political potency. Such accounts must, it seems, always be rendered 'properly political' and 'properly revolutionary'.[33]

Bhagat Singh's *reading* practices, and revolutionary reading more generally, have likely been overlooked because reading is often relegated to the 'inactive' and 'passive', or at least to an instrumentalisable step in the process of 'proper' revolution. Historians and politicians (across the political spectrum), wanting to resuscitate Bhagat Singh and his legacy, have tended to focus on those acts easily deemed 'active' and 'productive',[34] and therefore properly revolutionary. To be sure, the publicity inaugurated by the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army contributed to this virile image. Nevertheless, Bhagat Singh's self-proclaimed interest in reading has been employed merely to corroborate his more actively political pursuits and interests, as opposed to being taken seriously in its own right as articulating a theory of non-instrumentalisation and revolutionary action in the present. It is for this reason that Bhagat Singh is a particularly crucial figure in reconsidering the relationship between anti-colonial reading and anti-colonial revolution. A reconsideration of this relationship reveals that the formula of anti-colonial 'revolution' was a focus on method, process and means, rather than ends, authority and results.

That Bhagat Singh loved to read is no secret. Many of his colleagues recall his avid reading practices, and some of his correspondence from jail begs for specific books to be sent to him.[35] Jitendra Nath Sanyal, among others, recalls that one of Singh's favourite books was Leonid Andreyev's *The Seven That Were Hanged* (1908), about seven Russian peasants who were sentenced to hang; the novel traces how each of them dealt with their impending death.[36] Jaidev Gupta recalls that in his late teens, Bhagat Singh 'was always seen with a book in English in his hands and a dictionary in his pocket'.[37] Yashpal writes of seeing Bhagat Singh driving a camel-drawn cart for his father as 'an interesting sight:

31. It includes scholarship and popular writing in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and English, as well as in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada.
32. See Leela Gandhi, 'The Pauper's Gift', in *Public Culture*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (2011), pp. 27–38.
33. For a fine historical account that nevertheless replicates this masculinist, action-focused philosophy, see Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). For a discussion of this account, see J. Daniel Elam, 'Echoes of Ghadr', in *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, Vol. 34, no. 1 (2014), pp. 9–23.
34. Or, perhaps, *actively* 'destructive'.
35. See the letter from Bhagat Singh to Jaidev Gupta, 24 July 1930, in the appendix of the Gupta Oral History Transcript, NMML.
36. K.C. Yadav and Babar Singh (eds), *Bhagat Singh: The Making of a Revolutionary* (Gurgaon: Hope Press, 2006), p. 108.
37. Gupta Oral History Transcript, NMML, p. 77.

the camel drove the cart and Bhagat Singh sat in the driver's seat, reading his book'.[38] Durga Das Khanna remembers Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev praising his reading practices when he first met them.[39] Bhagat Singh allegedly read Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde, and he spoke often of Kropotkin's and Bakunin's writings as having 'transformed his life'.[40] He also read Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*.[41] Bhagwan Das Mahor recollects that Bhagat Singh had given him a copy of Marx's *Das Kapital* and, thus, 'the seed that Bhagat Singh had planted into my heart…began to germinate and grow up. Thus, personally speaking, what I have upper most in my mind about Bhagat Singh is that he was my first teacher to turn me towards Socialism'.[42]

Reading remains a crucial part of Bhagat Singh's afterlives, though often mentioned only in passing. Chaman Lal writes:

> When the time came to take him to the gallows on the last day of his life, he was reading Lenin. The revolutionary poet Avatar Singh Pash, slain by extremists many years later, paid tribute to Bhagat Singh by saying that the Indian youth needed to read the next page of the book that Bhagat Singh closed as he went to meet his death.[43]

Or consider journalist Kuldip Nayar's semi-fictional biography of Bhagat Singh:

> The warden had allowed Bhagat Singh to smuggle in all the books he wanted to read. It was all Marxist literature, strictly banned by the government. Still that was what he read or literally devoured. Hardly would a book on Marx, Lenin or Russia arrive when he would put in a demand for more. The secret supply by the local Dwarka Dass Library, founded by progressive nationalists, could not keep pace with his speed of reading. So keen was he about books that he once wrote to his schoolmate, Jaidev, to draw from the library, *Militarism*, by Karl Liebknecht, *Left-Wing Communism*, *Why Men Fight* by Bertrand Russell, *Land Revolution in Russia* and *Spy* by Upton Sinclair, and send them to him through Kulbir, his brother…. Indeed, Bhagat Singh's passion since his childhood was books.[44]

In both these examples, Bhagat Singh's passion for reading and his passion for books strikes me as the overlooked aspect of the young martyr's constant interest in anti-colonial self-cultivation and self-culture.

In his 'Introduction' to LeftWord's 2007 publication of Bhagat Singh's jail notebook, Chaman Lal argues that Bhagat Singh had three agendas in jail, one of which was to 'develop himself ideologically and politically by undertaking a rigorous and serious programme of reading'.[45] Lal goes on to describe what he thinks are the effects of this goal: the possibility of four unfinished manuscripts that Bhagat Singh might have written from

38. Yadav and Singh (eds), *Bhagat Singh*, p. 115.
39. In his oral history transcript at NMML, Durga Das Khanna reports: 'At this Bhagat Singh enquired if I had read Gandhiji's speeches. I replied in the affirmative and added that I had been reading the *Young India* regularly for some time and had also read his book the *Hind Swaraj*. This pleased both Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev. They said, "Well, we are glad that you have the reading habit. This will go a long way to help you in life whether you agree with us or not"'. Durga Das Khanna, interviewed by S.L. Manchanda, Oral History Transcript, 16 May 1976, OHT 294, p. 6, NMML. Thank you to Kama Maclean for drawing my attention to this.
40. Yadav and Singh (eds), *Bhagat Singh*, p. 109.
41. Nikhil Govind has written about Bhagat Singh and *Anandamath*. See Nikhil Govind, *Between Love and Freedom* (Delhi: Routledge, 2014).
42. Yadav and Singh (eds), *Bhagat Singh*, p. 149.
43. Chaman Lal, 'Introduction', in *The Jail Notebook and Other Writings* (Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2007), p. 23.
44. Kuldip Nayar, *The Martyr: Bhagat Singh—Experiments in Revolution* (Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 2000).
45. Lal, 'Introduction', pp. 21–2.

jail.[46] S. Irfan Habib claims that Bhagat Singh wrote four books, which were subsequently lost.[47] Lal is of course correct in identifying Bhagat Singh's interest in reading, but his efforts to portray Bhagat Singh as a fully-developed political thinker elide other interpretations. Lal's (and others') dedication to the idea of a 'developed' Bhagat Singh has enabled the conclusion that the jail notebook is a sign of the work that Bhagat Singh *could have written*—the elusive, incomplete four volumes—as opposed to considering the jail notebook itself as the key document in unpacking Bhagat Singh's fundamental approach to an anti-authoritarian politics.[48]

Indeed, the majority of the scholarship on Bhagat Singh has been invested in the futurity of his project: the *potentiality* of Bhagat Singh's political thought, illustrated by the existence of this jail notebook. As Chris Moffat has written:

> It can be difficult to untangle Bhagat Singh from his futures. The revolutionary's uncommon passion, taken alongside the event of a young death, seems to demand speculation—'what ifs' and 'if onlys'—the now-familiar lament for potential unfulfilled, trajectories interrupted.[49]

Applied to our case, this requires us to disentangle the document we have—that is, the commonplace jail notebook—from the documents we could have had—allegedly, a book on socialism, a history of India, an autobiography, and a reflection on death[50]—'if only' Bhagat Singh had remained alive (or if they had not 'been lost'). In other words, analyses of Bhagat Singh are so eager to endow him with the proper *authority* of an anti-colonial leader that they point to his *potential* books as the sign of his status as an *author*.[51]

In the specific context of Bhagat Singh, this accounts for a myopic focus on the *possibility* of authoritative books rather than the actual notes and fragments. An insistence on authority, expertise and productivity doubly reproduces an authoritative vision of anti-colonial activism focused exclusively on productivity, action and expertise. It has, moreover, blinded us to a fundamental aspect of anti-colonial thought and, consequently, anti-colonial politics in the face of colonial rule. I think this excludes a more radically utopian strain of Bhagat Singh's anti-colonial vision. In response, we need an account of Bhagat Singh's jail notebook that refers to it, not to its potential, as one crucial and overlooked strain of Bhagat Singh's anti-colonial revolutionary vision. Our demand for Bhagat Singh to have authored a theory of revolution 'in his own words' requires that we render him as the authorial figure that he himself was reluctant to become.

46. According to Shiv Verma, 'They were: (1) The Ideal of Socialism, (2) Autobiography, (3) History of Revolutionary Movement in India, (4) At the door of Death'. Quoted in Yadav, *Fragrance of Freedom*, p. 3.
47. Habib, *To Make the Deaf Hear*, p. 112.
48. There were and remain politically pragmatic reasons for insisting on Bhagat Singh's mastery. These include countering the colonial allegations that his politics were untheorised or irrational commitments to 'terrorism'. See Kama Maclean, 'The History of a Legend: Accounting for Popular Histories of Revolutionary Nationalism in India', in *Modern Asia Studies*, Vol. 46, no. 6 (Nov. 2012), pp. 1540–71.
49. Chris Moffat, 'Experiments in Political Truth', in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (2013), p. 185.
50. Shiv Varma, quoted in Lal, 'Introduction', p. 22.
51. This is a curious, but fairly common historiographical move. Bipan Chandra's essay, 'The Revolutionary Terrorists', is a prime example. Throughout the essay, Chandra repeatedly uses the reading lists of the HSRA and Bhagat Singh to 'corroborate' the future rewards such reading would accomplish, including an 'Indian Revolution'. See Bipan Chandra, 'The Revolutionary Terrorists', in *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1997), pp. 228–56. I think this is also in line with Anjali Arondekar's excellent analysis of the missing chapter of Richard Burton's writings. See Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

If we understand the jail notebook as a commonplace or an anthology, and we understand this document to contain no 'original' material written by Bhagat Singh, we must abandon our fascination with the contents of the four allegedly written books in order to look at the theory implicit in the document we actually possess. In other words, Bhagat Singh's theory of anti-colonial reading emerges at the exact moment when his jail notebook contains no traces of him as an author.

The jail notebook functions both as a private record of Bhagat Singh's own autodidacticism as well as a public document. In this sense, I think we can understand the jail notebook as a semi-public document. By semi-public document, I want to mark the ways in which the jail notebook was therefore neither fully 'public' (it was not 'published') nor fully 'private' (even during his lifetime, his colleagues knew of the existence of the notebook and its contents). Bhagat Singh's reading was both an ethical practice (a 'care of the self', frequently rendered 'private' and therefore irrelevant to anti-colonial activism) and a political vision (frequently rendered 'public' and therefore celebrated as productive).[52] His practice of reading as a properly anti-colonial practice confirms the centrality of reading and the formation of a readerly sensibility as fundamental to anti-colonial action. Bhagat Singh's insistence on his own readerly self-cultivation, without the goal of mastery (nor in order to become an author), is a politics that rests on non-instrumentalisable practices and inconsequential action. This is a far cry from the notions of revolution (of authority) that historians have tended to wrest from the scattered writings of Bhagat Singh.

Commonplace Anti-Colonialism

To diminish the importance of reading and its concomitant parts (solitary study, analysis, critique, social discussion) is to fundamentally misinterpret the philosophical and political egalitarianism of Indian anti-colonial thought. It is *reading* as a non-instrumentalisable revolutionary practice, more than 'active' revolt, which offers a fundamental piece of the unacknowledged inheritance of contemporary post-colonial democratic theory.

With this in mind, I suggest we return to the list of demands at the beginning of this essay, which now comes into starker relief. If, from the moment of his arrest, Bhagat Singh knew he was going to die—indeed, he welcomed death[53]—what does it mean to ask for more reading material? Many scholars (to whom I am otherwise sympathetic) have been eager to suggest that this demand for books indicates, in conjunction with his jail notebook, that Bhagat Singh was working towards a scholarly mastery of Marxist and radical thought. This begs two questions: one, if Bhagat Singh knew he was going to die soon (even if he was able to slow the judicial process), why would he have had any desire to attain 'mastery'? Two, if Bhagat Singh's politics were those of mastery and expertise, why would he have been willing to make his fairly inexpert jail notebook a semi-public

52. On 'ethics' versus 'politics', see Leela Gandhi, 'The Pauper's Gift', in *Public Culture*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (2011), pp. 27–38. 'Semi-public' also refers to studies of print culture more broadly, where print circulation marked both private and public spheres. In my use, 'semi-public' may align, in some ways, with Michael Warner's 'counterpublic' as a mode of analysis rather than an empirical object. See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). For an analysis of public sphere theory in the context of South Asia, see J. Barton Scott and Brannon Ingram, 'What is a Public? Notes from South Asia', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (2015), pp. 357–70.

53. For a discussion of this point, see Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2015), p. 36. Bhagat Singh's letters from jail signal performatively his willingness for, and even interest in, death.

document? In other words, Bhagat Singh's revolutionary thought was doubly 'inconsequential' in the sense we have been discussing. Firstly, across his published writings, Bhagat Singh's preferred self-identification is marked by a willingness to die. Secondly, he consistently uses 'master' and 'expert' to describe others, especially regarding recommended reading.[54]

Not all reading is the same. Therefore, I think it is more in line with the anti-colonial martyr's own political vision to ask: what does it mean to read in the face of death? What does it mean to read without seeking mastery or expertise? What does it mean, therefore, to read without consequence? What is inconsequential reading, and what might Bhagat Singh's inconsequential reading offer to a radical revolutionary politics and ethics?

For Leela Gandhi, consequence means the accrual of virtue on the basis of generativity, succession and sequence. Consequentialism is thus marked by a filial logic, undergirded by the processes of procreation and futurity that mark both the units of the modern family and the modern nation. In response, inconsequence might 'treat virtue as its own end, without care for rewards and commendations that might accrue [to] the bearer'.[55] It originates from and signals a commitment to lives that have been deemed 'inconsequential', 'common', and therefore unrecognisable to the logics of state rule.

A focus on the revolutionary virtue to be accrued allows more critical historians of Bhagat Singh to conclude that the failure of the revolutionaries was 'that of not linking their practice with their theory', wherein 'theory' is assumed to be an *authoritative* philosophical vision and 'practice' is defined as 'individual action'.[56] In addition to the 'individual action' that Bipan Chandra envisions here (bomb-throwing, assassination, 'terrorism'), Bhagat Singh's vision for 'individual action' included, as we have been discussing, reading and the documentation of readerly self-cultivation rather than mastery. In other words, the practice *was* the theory.

Bhagat Singh envisioned that everyone read—or, in other words, he believed that reading should become common. In his Introduction to Ram Saran Das' poetry collection, *Dreamland*, Bhagat Singh concludes:

> I strongly recommend this book to young men in particular, but with a warning. Please do not read it to follow blindly and take for granted what is written in it. Read it, criticise it, think over it, try to formulate your own ideas with its help.[57]

Bhagat Singh therefore openly advocated reading as an anti-colonial practice. 'Commonplace anti-colonialism', in the first instance, refers to Bhagat Singh's practice of readerly collection and curatorial vision. 'Commonplace anti-colonialism', in the second instance, refers to the egalitarian politics inaugurated by the public documentation of one's own reading practices and the demand to become a common reader.

54. See, for example, 'Joint Statement at Court', in Yadav, *Fragrance of Freedom*, pp. 247–54; and Bhagat Singh, 'Introduction to *Dreamland*', in Chaman Lal (ed.), *The Jail Notebook and Other Writings* (Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2007), pp. 151–6.
55. Leela Gandhi, *Common Cause* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 133.
56. Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, p. 249.
57. Bhagat Singh, 'Introduction to *Dreamland*', p. 156. Ram Saran Das was convicted in the 1915 Lahore Conspiracy Case and, while in jail, wrote *Dreamland*. After his release, he was affiliated with the HSRA, but wavered in his support of revolutionary action. In his essay, Bhagat Singh writes that he strongly disagreed with Ram Saran Das' view of revolutionary action, which is exactly why he was keen to write a supportive introduction. In other words, reading for Bhagat Singh was not a passive project, but rather an active one that features critiquing and disagreeing with texts. As far as my records indicate, *Dreamland* was originally published in 2007 as Malvinderjit Singh Waraich (ed.), *Revolutionaries in Dialogue* (Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar: Unistar Press, 2007).

Bhagat Singh's reading practices were not based in rote memorisation and replication, but rather in practices of perpetual self-interrogation. Michel de Certeau's seemingly sociological question, '*Who* reads?', becomes a political and philosophical conundrum.[58] Who does a person become when he or she reads and what political spaces are made possible from a textual interaction? Reading, in this sense, evokes a new revolutionary subject, a virtue in the present, and a figure for whom mastery and authorship are beside the point. Bhagat Singh's quite successful praxis was the assertion of one's own radical inconsequentiality, commonness and accessibility. This is seen most clearly in his practices of readerly reception and collection, and therefore his commitment to an egalitarian present rather than to future virtues earned through production and dissemination.

An ethics rooted in inconsequence refuses future possible outcomes in favour of an investment in the secular (that is, non-transcendent) present.[59] For Leela Gandhi, this is a political gesture: 'we democratise our consciousness by sacrificing our *telos*', she notes.[60] If inconsequentialism names 'a force of interruption in the worldly drama of repetition, reproduction, and duplication, so that newness might reenter the world',[61] inconsequentialist reading is the practice of a revolutionary anti-authorial recalcitrance that both inaugurates and is made possible by a certain worldly commitment to the common and the irrelevant.

This is especially true for Bhagat Singh, whose adherence to atheism was rooted in a philosophy of the present, lived human experience and non-transcendence. He understood that a relationship existed between this atheist secularism and reading.[62] In his essay on atheism, it is studying without attaining mastery—'the cry that reverberated in the corridors of my mind'—that convinces him that 'the moment the rope is fitted round my neck and rafters removed from under my feet, that will be final moment.... Nothing further. A short life of struggle, with no such magnificent end, shall in itself be the reward'.[63] A reward 'in itself', without the promise of either future virtue or transcendental benefit, is the model of an inconsequential reading that Bhagat Singh offers in commonplace form.

As Simona Sawhney writes, 'love' in Bhagat Singh's writing is inherently secular, indebted to a politics of martyrdom and self-sacrifice.[64] By way of reading, perhaps 'love' names the political vision made possible by a refusal of mastery and authority, of an egalitarian relationship with others in the world.

58. To complete de Certeau's thought: '*Who* reads, in fact? Is it I, or some part of me?' See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 173.
59. See Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*.
60. Gandhi, *Common Cause*, p. 128.
61. *Ibid*., pp. 145–6. This is a citation from Homi Bhabha, who is in turn citing Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Penguin, 1988). In other words, the most vibrant strains of post-colonial theory are indebted in part to anti-colonial reading and non-authorial citation.
62. I mean 'secularism' here in Edward Said's particular sense as a democratic commitment to the human world. See Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*; and Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Given Bhagat Singh's own description of his atheism, I think it is more accurate to align Bhagat Singh's 'atheism' with Said's 'secularism' (as a commitment to the non-transcendent world of human life), rather than contemporary popular uses of 'atheism' (as a rejection of faith), though obviously, the terms are related in their anti-theological orientation.
63. Bhagat Singh, 'Why I am an Atheist', in Yadav, *Fragrance of Freedom*, pp. 25–8. To be sure, 'studying' here is affiliated with an aggressive defence of one's 'cult' against opposing viewpoints. In my reading, I would suggest here that what Bhagat Singh means by argumentation is not for the conversion of others, but for perpetual *self*-cultivation without end. In this sense, it is neither mastery over others nor mastery over oneself, but a form of perpetual interrogation and argumentation.
64. Sawhney, 'Bhagat Singh'.

Coda: The Terrorist and the Reader

In his fictional 1936 short story, 'The Terrorist', Mulk Raj Anand describes two young revolutionaries, Bir Singh and Vasu Dev, in the minutes leading up to their throwing a bomb in the 'Central Legislative Assembly'. Bir Singh is able to enter the Legislative Assembly because of his 'handsome, white-blonde face, with a forehead, shadowed by a khaki polo topee, inflamed by pink-white cheeks, which tapered from the edges of the sharp nose over a regular, expressive mouth down to the chin, whose determination was sadly flawed by the pit of a dimple'.[65] Bir Singh is 'histrionic', 'wild and furtive', 'full of molten lava' and filled with 'youth's fire' and 'the pure joy of violence, destruction, and annihilation'.[66] He watches Congress Party members—whom he declares to be traitors, opportunists and, worst of all, Swarajist traitors—enter the chamber as he prepares to explode the bomb. He remembers his past crimes—robbery, assassination—as he readies it. As the story closes, he throws the bomb, but it fails to go off; Congress Party officials flee only to return again to their seats. He is about to proclaim his mission: '"I sacrifice myself for…" he roared, but the roar ended in a hoarse whisper…. The word sounded hollow as it struck the dome of the Chamber'.[67]

The short story is damning of these young revolutionaries, whose youthful rage blinds them against seeing the alleged wonders of the slow procedural lurch towards self-rule and whose angry ignorance is ultimately impotent. Anand makes no attempt to hide the referents for his two revolutionary teenagers: Bir Singh and Vasu Dev are barely pseudonyms for Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev;[68] and Bhagat Singh's attractive pale skin and Trilby hat had famously allowed him to pass uncaught (as a British, or at least a cosmopolitan, figure) in the hagiographic iterations of his biography. Anand's almost mean-spirited dismissal of the HSRA revolutionaries is somewhat surprising. Anand, who had founded the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in the late 1930s with his fellow Leftist novelists, would have been a close colleague of at least two of Bhagat Singh's collaborators, Sachchidananda Vatsyayan (Agyeya) and Yashpal, both of whom spent time in jail following the collapse of the HSRA in 1930. Agyeya and Yashpal, who had each published accounts of their jail experiences, continued to defend the actions of the HSRA in fiction and memoir into the 1960s.[69]

On the other hand, it was no secret that Anand's sympathies aligned more closely with Gandhi's, at whose Sabarmati Ashram he had allegedly written *Untouchable* in 1935. Unlike Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru, who expressed mild sympathy for the HSRA's actions,[70] Gandhi agreed fully with the British Raj that the revolutionaries were 'terrorists' and members of 'the cult of the bomb'. Gandhi published an editorial in *Young India* in February 1930, in which he insisted that violence was a 'cult' inconsistent with 'the vast masses who have become conscious of the fact that they must have freedom…untouched

65. Mulk Raj Anand, 'The Terrorist', in *Selected Short Stories* (Delhi: Penguin, 2006), p. 91.
66. *Ibid*., pp. 91–8.
67. *Ibid*., p. 101.
68. To be clear, it was Batukeshwar Dutt who accompanied Bhagat Singh to the Legislative Assembly; Sukhdev was an active member of the HSRA and was hanged alongside Bhagat Singh, but he was not actually present at the bombing.
69. 'The Terrorist', then, signals a fundamental rift in the PWA even as early as a year after its founding. For a discussion of Agyeya's work, see Snehal Shingavi's essay in this collection.
70. For a detailed discussion on this point, see Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India*, pp. 119–46.

by violence'.[71] HSRA revolutionaries, by contrast, were so 'saturated with violence as to be beyond the pale of reason'.[72] In this iteration of his quite complicated philosophy of non-violence,[73] Gandhi insists that violence only replicates the authority of British rule, whereas non-violence causes people to 'bec[o]me conscious of their power. They ceas[e] to fear authority.... It [is] the true swaraj of the masses attained by the masses'.[74]

In response, the HSRA released a statement, 'The Philosophy of the Bomb', signed by 'Kartar Singh'. The title refers to the subtitle of Har Dayal's 1912 pamphlet, '*Shabash!*', published from California by the Ghadar Party.[75] 'Kartar Singh' refers to the nineteen-year-old Berkeley engineering student who was the first to be hanged in 1914 after the Ghadar Party's failed mutiny. These citations should alert us to a refusal of mastery and professed authority. A proper 'philosophy of the bomb', as opposed to a 'cult of the bomb'—in other words, a debate around the universalism or particularity of violent revolutionary agitation—argues that the violent revolutionary method 'shatters the superiority of the ruling class', whereas Gandhi's methods are concerned with the reproduction of authority, except with Indian faces.[76] A significant part of the critique directed at 'The Philosophy of the Bomb' is directed at Gandhi's insistence on his own authority: instead of an egalitarian relationship with the masses, Gandhi provides *darshan* (ability to be devoted, to be beheld) and *updesh* (providing counsel, advice), two 'services' that only replicate his own mastery and transcendent authority. By contrast, the HSRA 'affirm that the masses of India are solidly with us because we know it from personal experience'.[77] I have written elsewhere that this debate between Gandhi and the HSRA was about maintaining rhetorical command over the 'masses' as the metonym for 'humanity'.[78] A different reading, however, reveals that the 'masses' are also a thinly-veiled metaphor for a commitment to egalitarianism, rooted fundamentally in a debate about authority.

In other words, at the heart of the Gandhi/HSRA debate in 1930 was a central concern about becoming common and inconsequential.[79] In response, both Gandhi and the HSRA attempted to publically relinquish their own authorial and masterly presences as properly anti-colonial political gestures. At the same time, both Gandhi and the HSRA attempted, in a seemingly counterintuitive move, to insist on the authority of the *other* and the other's methods. At the centre of this debate, therefore, is an insistence on one's own anti-colonial, anti-authoritative inconsequentiality.

71. M.K. Gandhi, 'The Cult of the Bomb', 1 Feb. 1930, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting), p. 361.
72. *Ibid.*
73. Gandhi's philosophy is too often flattened for philosophical and political exigency, and requires considerably more space for its complexity than I am affording it here. I refer thus only to the particular iteration of the philosophy that appears in 'Cult of the Bomb'. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Gandhi's 'non-violence' and HSRA's 'violence', see Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India.*
74. Gandhi, 'The Cult of the Bomb', p. 363. This replicates, in many ways, the colonial discourse about Bhagat Singh. See Maclean, 'The History of a Legend'.
75. Ghadar Party, '*Shabash!*', South Asians in North America Collection, no. 342, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA.
76. Again, to be clear, Gandhi describes how his own political/ethical plan should avoid this as well. See M.K. Gandhi (Anthony Parel, ed.), *Hind Swaraj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
77. HSRA, 'The Philosophy of the Bomb', Indian Proscribed Tracts, Reel 3, item 28, npg, South Asia Microform Project (SAMP), University of Chicago.
78. Elam, 'The "Arch Priestess of Anarchy" Visits Lahore', pp. 140–54.
79. See Gandhi, *Common Cause.*

Given both Gandhi's and Bhagat Singh's insistence on reading and reading practices as foundational to the cultivation of a properly anti-colonial self, we should return to Mulk Raj Anand's short story to discover a central confusion around citation in the scene shortly before Bir Singh throws his bomb. The bomb—an actual bomb in the short story versus the smoke-bomb Bhagat Singh threw—is meant to explode at the same time as Bir Singh and Vasu Dev release hundreds of their manifestos into the crowd:

> 'The challenge! The challenge!' he said. 'The words which will spread throughout the length and breadth of India like wildfire, words as memorable as those of Proudhon and Mazzini: "I die for my motherland. I become a sacrifice for it. I have tried to avenge Bharat Mata against the devilry of the British!"' He exulted to think that tomorrow these words of his speech would form the headlines of all the newspapers in Hindustan. He had printed the words on leaflets, so that if all died in the Chamber, the printed matter would remain.[80]

Even if Anand's sympathies are more with Gandhi than Bhagat Singh, the flurry of quotation marks around Bir Singh's words reveal the confusion provoked by the referent revolutionary's readerly sensibility. Even at the height of his revolutionary power, Bir Singh—much like Bhagat Singh—deflects and relinquishes his authorial status in favour of citing Proudhon and Mazzini. The obvious reference here is to Bhagat Singh's insistence that Auguste Valliant's words be the material of the smoke-bomb's 'explosion' in 1929, that at the precise moment when Bhagat Singh might have claimed true authority over the Legislative Assembly, the terrorist becomes a reader.

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80. Anand, 'The Terrorist', p. 99.