

BHAGAT SINGH



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An Illustrious Hero

Great freedom fighter, Bhagat Singh (27 September 1907-23 March 1931) is considered to be one of the most influential revolutionaries of the Indian independence movement. He is often referred to as Shaheed Bhagat Singh. Born to a Jat Sikh family which had earlier been involved in revolutionary activities against the British Raj in India, Singh, as a teenager, had studied European revolutionary movements and was attracted to anarchism and communism.

Bhagat Singh became involved in numerous revolutionary organisations. He quickly rose through the ranks of the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) and became one of its leaders, converting it to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA). Singh gained support when he underwent a 64-day fast in jail, demanding equal rights for Indian and British political prisoners. He was hanged for shooting a police officer in response to the killing of veteran freedom fighter Lala Lajpat Rai. His legacy prompted youth in India to begin fighting for Indian independence and also increased the rise of socialism in India.

Early Life

Bhagat Singh was born into a Sandhu Jat family to Sardar Kishan Singh Sandhu and Vidyavati in the Khatkar Kalan village

near Banga in the Lyallpur district of Punjab. Singh's given name of Bhagat means "devotee". He came from a patriotic Jat Sikh family, some of whom had participated in movements supporting the independence of India and others who had served in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army. His grandfather, Arjun Singh, was a follower of Swamy Dayananda Saraswati's Hindu reformist movement, Arya Samaj, which would carry a heavy influence on Singh. His uncles, Ajit Singh and Swaran Singh, as well as his father were members of the Ghadar Party, led by Kartar Singh Sarabha Grewal and Har Dayal. Ajit Singh was forced to flee to Persia because of pending cases against him while Swaran Singh was hanged on 19 December 1927 for his involvement in the Kakori train robbery of 1925.

Unlike many Sikhs his age, Singh did not attend Khalsa High School in Lahore, because his grandfather did not approve of the school officials' loyalism to the British authorities. Instead, his father enrolled him in Dayanand Anglo Vedic High School, an Arya Samajist school. At age 13, Singh began to follow Mahatma Gandhi's Non-cooperation Movement. At this point he had openly defied the British and had followed Gandhi's wishes by burning his government-school books and any British-imported clothing. Following Gandhi's withdrawal of the movement after the violent murders of policemen by villagers from Chauri Chaura, Uttar Pradesh, Singh, disgruntled with Gandhi's non-violence action, joined the Young Revolutionary Movement and began advocating a violent movement against the British.

In 1923, Bhagat famously won an essay competition set by the Punjab Hindi Sahitya Sammelan. This grabbed the attention of members of the Punjab Hindi Sahitya Sammelan including its General Secretary Professor Bhim Sen Vidyalkar. At this age, he quoted famous Punjabi literature and discussed the *Problems of the Punjab*. He read a lot of poetry and literature which was written by Punjabi writers and his favourite poet was Allama Iqbal from Sialkot.

In his teenage years, Bhagat Singh started studying at the National College in Lahore, but ran away from home to escape early marriage, and became a member of the organisation *Naujawan Bharat Sabha* (Youth Society of India). In the Naujawan Bharat

Sabha, Singh and his fellow revolutionaries grew popular amongst the youth. He also joined the Hindustan Republican Association at the request of Professor Vidyalankar, which was then headed by Ram Prashad Bismil and Ashfaqulla Khan. It is believed that he had knowledge of the Kakori train robbery. He wrote for and edited Urdu and Punjabi newspapers published from Amritsar. In September 1928, a meeting of various revolutionaries from across India was called at Delhi under the banner of the *Kirti Kissan Party*. Bhagat Singh was the secretary of the meet. His later revolutionary activities were carried out as a leader of this association. The capture and hanging of the main HRA Leaders also allowed him to be quickly promoted to higher ranks in the party, along with his fellow revolutionary Sukhdev Thapar.

Revolutionary Activities

Lala Lajpat Rai's Death and the Saunders Murder: The British government created a commission under Sir John Simon to report on the current political situation in India in 1928. The Indian political parties boycotted the commission because it did not include a single Indian as its member and it was met with protests all over the country. When the commission visited Lahore on 30 October 1928, Lala Lajpat Rai led the protest against Simon Commission in a silent non-violent march, but the police responded with violence. Lala Lajpat Rai was beaten with lathis at the chest. He later succumbed to his injuries. Bhagat Singh, who was an eyewitness to this event, vowed to take revenge. He joined with other revolutionaries, Shivaram Rajguru, Jai Gopal and Sukhdev Thapar, in a plot to kill the police chief, Scott. Jai Gopal was supposed to identify the chief and signal for Singh to shoot. However, in a case of mistaken identity, Gopal signalled Singh on the appearance of J. P. Saunders, a Deputy Superintendent of Police. Thus, Saunders, instead of Scott, was shot. Shaheed Bhagat Singh quickly left Lahore to escape the police. To avoid recognition, he shaved his beard and cut his hair, a violation of the sacred tenets of Sikhism.

Bomb in the Assembly: In the face of actions by the revolutionaries, the British government enacted the Defence of India Act to give more power to the police. The purpose of the Act was to combat revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh. The Act was

defeated in the council by one vote. However, the Act was then passed under the ordinance that claimed that it was in the best interest of the public. In response to this act, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association planned to explode a bomb in the Central Legislative Assembly where the ordinance was going to be passed. Originally, Chandrashekhar Azad, another prominent leader of the revolutionary movement attempted to stop Bhagat Singh from carrying out the bombing. However, the remainder of the party forced him to succumb to Singh's wishes. It was decided that Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt, another revolutionary, would throw the bomb in the assembly.

On 8 April 1929, Singh and Dutt threw a bomb onto the corridors of the assembly and shouted "*Inquilab Zindabad!*" (Long Live the Revolution!). This was followed by a shower of leaflets stating that it takes a loud voice to make the deaf hear.

The bomb neither killed nor injured anyone; Singh and Dutt claimed that this was deliberate on their part, a claim substantiated both by British forensics investigators who found that the bomb was not powerful enough to cause injury, and by the fact that the bomb was thrown away from people. Singh and Dutt gave themselves up for arrest after the bomb. He and Dutt were sentenced to 'Transportation for Life' for the bombing on 12 June 1929.

Trial and Execution

Shortly after his arrest and trial for the Assembly bombing, the British came to know of his involvement in the murder of J. P. Saunders. Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev were charged with the murder. Bhagat Singh decided to use the court as a tool to publicise his cause for the independence of India. He admitted to the murder and made statements against the British rule during the trial. The case was ordered to be carried out without members of the HSRA present at the hearing. This created an uproar amongst Singh's supporters as he could no longer publicise his views.

While in jail, Bhagat Singh and other prisoners launched a hunger strike advocating for the rights of prisoners and those facing trial. The reason for the strike was that British murderers and thieves were treated better than Indian political prisoners, who, by law, were meant to be given better rights. The aims in

their strike were to ensure a decent standard of food for political prisoners, the availability of books and a daily newspaper, as well as better clothing and the supply of toilet necessities and other hygienic necessities. He also demanded that political prisoners should not be forced to do any labour or undignified work. During this hunger strike that lasted 63 days and ended with the British succumbing to his wishes, he gained much popularity among the common Indians. Before the strike his popularity was limited mainly to the Punjab region.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, one of the politicians present when the Central Legislative Assembly was bombed, made no secret of his sympathies for the Lahore prisoners — commenting on the hunger strike he said “the man who goes on hunger strike has a soul. He is moved by that soul, and he believes in the justice of his cause.” And talking of Singh’s actions said “however much you deplore them and however much you say they are misguided, it is the system, this damnable system of governance, which is resented by the people”.

Bhagat Singh also maintained the use of a diary, which he eventually made to fill 404 pages. In this diary he made numerous notes relating to the quotations and popular sayings of various people whose views he supported. Prominent in his diary were the views of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The comments in his diary led to an understanding of the philosophical thinking of Bhagat Singh. Before dying he also wrote a pamphlet entitled “Why I am an atheist, as he was being accused of vanity by not accepting God in the face of death”.

On 23 March 1931, Bhagat Singh was hanged in Lahore with his fellow comrades Rajguru and Sukhdev. His supporters, who had been protesting against the hanging, immediately declared him as a *shaheed* or martyr. According to the Superintendent of Police at the time, V. N. Smith, the hanging was advanced:

Normally execution took place at 8 am, but it was decided to act at once before the public could become aware of what had happened... At about 7 pm shouts of *Inquilab Zindabad* were heard from inside the jail. This was correctly, interpreted as a signal that the final curtain was about to drop.

Singh was cremated at Hussainiwala on banks of Sutlej river. Today, the Bhagat Singh Memorial commemorates freedom fighters of India.

Ideals and Opinions

Bhagat Singh was attracted to anarchism and communism. Both communism and western anarchism had influence on him. He read the teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and Bakunin. Bhagat Singh did not believe in Gandhian philosophy and viewed that Gandhian politics will replace one set of exploiters by another. Singh was an atheist and promoted the concept of atheism by writing a pamphlet titled *Why I am an Atheist*. Bhagat Singh was also an admirer of the writings of Irish revolutionary Terence MacSwiney. When Bhagat Singh's father petitioned the British government to pardon his son, Bhagat Singh quoted Terence MacSwiney and said "I am confident that my death will do more to smash the British Empire than my release" and told his father to withdraw the petition.

Some of his writings like "Blood Sprinkled on the Day of Holi Babbar Akalis on the Crucifix" were influenced by the struggle of Dharam Singh Hayatpur.

Anarchism

From May to September, 1928, Bhagat Singh serially published several articles on anarchism in Punjabi periodical *Kirti*. He expressed concern over misunderstanding of the concept of anarchism among the public. Singh tried to eradicate the misconception among people about anarchism. He wrote, "The people are scared of the word anarchism. The word anarchism has been abused so much that even in India revolutionaries have been called anarchist to make them unpopular." As anarchism means absence of ruler and abolition of state, not absence of rule, Singh explained, "I think in India the idea of universal brotherhood, the Sanskrit sentence *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, etc., has the same meaning." He wrote about the growth of anarchism, "the first man to explicitly propagate the theory of Anarchism was Proudhon and that is why he is called the founder of Anarchism. After him a Russian, Bakunin worked hard to spread the doctrine. He was followed by Prince Kropotkin, etc."

Singh explained anarchism in the article:

The ultimate goal of Anarchism is complete independence, according to which no one will be obsessed with God or religion, nor will anybody be crazy for money or other worldly desires. There will be no chains on the body or control by the state. This means that they want to eliminate: the Church, God and Religion; the state; Private property.

Marxism

Bhagat Singh was also influenced by Marxism. Indian historian K. N. Panikkar described Singh as one of the early Marxists in India. From 1926, Bhagat Singh studied the history of the revolutionary movement in India and abroad. In his prison notebooks, Singh used quotations from Lenin (on imperialism being the highest stage of capitalism) and Trotsky on revolution. In written documents, when asked what was his last wish, he replied that he was studying the life of Lenin and he wanted to finish it before his death.

Atheism

During his teenage years, Singh was a Arya Samajist. However, he began to question religious ideologies after witnessing the Hindu-Muslim riots that broke out after Gandhi disbanded the Non-cooperation Movement. He did not understand how members of these two groups, initially united in fighting against the British, could be at each others' throats because of their religious differences. At this point, Singh dropped his religious beliefs, since he believed religion hindered the revolutionaries' struggle for independence, and began studying the works of Bakunin, Lenin, Trotsky — all atheist revolutionaries. He also took an interest in Niralamba Swamy's book *Common Sense*, which advocated a form of "mystic atheism".

While in a condemned cell in 1931, he wrote a pamphlet entitled *Why I am an Atheist* in which he discusses and advocates the philosophy of atheism. This pamphlet was a result of some criticism by fellow revolutionaries on his failure to acknowledge religion and God while in a condemned cell, the accusation of

vanity was also dealt with in this pamphlet. He supported his own beliefs and claimed that he used to be a firm believer in The Almighty, but could not bring himself to believe the myths and beliefs that others held close to their hearts. In this pamphlet, he acknowledged the fact that religion made death easier, but also said that unproved philosophy is a sign of human weakness.

Death

Bhagat Singh was known for his appreciation of martyrdom. His mentor as a young boy was Kartar Singh Sarabha. Singh himself considered a martyr for acting to avenge the death of Lala Lajpat Rai. In the leaflet he threw in the Central Assembly on 9 April 1929, he stated that *It is easy to kill individuals but you cannot kill the ideas. Great empires crumbled while the ideas survived.* After engaging in studies on the Russian Revolution, he wanted to die so that his death would inspire the youth of India which in turn will unite them to fight the British Empire.

While in prison, Bhagat Singh and two others had written a letter to the Viceroy asking him to treat them as prisoners of war and hence to execute them by firing squad and not by hanging. Prannath Mehta, Bhagat Singh's friend, visited him in the jail on 20 March, four days before his execution, with a draft letter for clemency, but he declined to sign it.

Last Wish

Singh is said to have mentioned to Randhir Singh, prison inmate, Gadhar revolutionary and a known figure in Sikh circles, that he (Bhagat Singh) had shaven *"hair and beard under pressing circumstances"* and that *"It was for the service of the country"* that his companions *"compelled him to give up the Sikh appearance"* adding to it that he was *"ashamed"*. He had supposedly expressed, as last wish before being hanged, the desire to get "amrit" from Panj Pyare including Randhir Singh and to adorn full 5 K's. However, his last wish, of getting "amrit" from Panj Pyare was not granted by the British.

Randhir Singh being the only source of information about sudden change in Bhagat Singh's point of view towards religion casts doubts, as Bhagat Singh had been a strong critic of religion.

He wrote a pamphlet entitled *Why I am an Atheist* in which he questions existence of God.

“One friend asked me to pray. When informed of my atheism, he said, “During your last days you will begin to believe”. I said, No, dear Sir, it shall not be. I will think that to be an act of degradation and demoralisation on my part. For selfish motives I am not going to pray.”

Conspiracy Theories

Many conspiracy theories exist regarding Singh, especially the events surrounding his death:

Mahatma Gandhi: One of the most popular ones is that Mahatma Gandhi had an opportunity to stop Singh’s execution but did not. This particular theory has spread amongst the public in modern times after the creation of modern films such as *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, which portray Gandhi as someone who was strongly at odds with Bhagat Singh and did not oppose his hanging. A variation on this theory is that Gandhi actively conspired with the British to have Singh executed. Both theories are highly controversial and hotly contested. Gandhi’s supporters say that Gandhi did not have enough influence with the British to stop the execution, much less arrange it. Furthermore, Gandhi’s supporters assert that Singh’s role in the independence movement was no threat to Gandhi’s role as its leader, and so Gandhi would have no reason to want him dead.

Gandhi, during his lifetime, always maintained that he was a great admirer of Singh’s patriotism. He also said that he was opposed to Singh’s execution (and, for that matter, capital punishment in general) and proclaimed that he had no power to stop it. On Singh’s execution, Gandhi said, “The government certainly had the right to hang these men. However, there are some rights which do credit to those who possess them only if they are enjoyed in name only.” Gandhi also once said, on capital punishment, “I cannot in all conscience agree to anyone being sent to the gallows. God alone can take life because He alone gives it.”

Gandhi had managed to have 90,000 political prisoners who were not members of his Satyagraha movement released under

the pretext of "relieving political tension," in the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. According to a report in the Indian magazine *Frontline*, he did plead several times for the commutation of the death sentence of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev, including a personal visit on 19 March 1931, and in a letter to the Viceroy on the day of their execution, pleading fervently for commutation, not knowing that the letter would be too late.

Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, later said:

As I listened to Mr. Gandhi putting the case for commutation before me, I reflected first on what significance it surely was that the apostle of non-violence should so earnestly be pleading the cause of the devotees of a creed so fundamentally opposed to his own, but I should regard it as wholly wrong to allow my judgement to be influenced by purely political considerations. I could not imagine a case in which under the law, penalty had been more directly deserved.

Saunders Family: On 28 October 2005, a book entitled *Some Hidden Facts: Martyrdom of Shaheed Bhagat Singh — Secrets unfurled by an Intelligence Bureau Agent of British-India* by K. S. Kooner and G. S. Sindhra was released.

The book asserts that Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev were deliberately hanged in such a manner as to leave all three in a semi-conscious state, so that all three could later be taken outside the prison and shot dead by the Saunders family. The book says that this was a prison operation codenamed "Operation Trojan Horse." Scholars are sceptical of the book's claims.

Legacy

Indian Independence Movement

Bhagat Singh's death had the effect that he desired and he inspired thousands of youths to assist the remainder of the Indian independence movement. After his hanging, youths in regions around Northern India rioted in protest against the British Raj.

Modern Day Memorials

Singh's contribution to Indian society and, in particular, the future of socialism in India. To celebrate the centenary of his birth, a group of intellectuals have set up an institution to commemorate Singh and his ideals.

Several popular Bollywood films have been made capturing the life and times of Bhagat Singh. Possibly the first is *Shaheed Bhagat Singh (1963)*. Two years later, Manoj Kumar portrayed Bhagat Singh in an immensely popular and landmark film, *Shaheed*. Two major films about Singh were released in 2002, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* and *23rd March 1931: Shaheed. The Legend of Bhagat Singh*.

The 2006 film *Rang De Basanti* is a film drawing parallels between revolutionaries of Bhagat Singh's era and modern Indian youth. It covers a lot of Bhagat Singh's role in the Indian freedom struggle. The movie revolves around a group of college students and how they each play the roles of Bhagat's friends and family.

The patriotic Urdu and Hindi songs, *Sarfaroshi ki Tamanna* (translated as "the desire to sacrifice") and *Mera Rang De Basanti Chola* ["my light-yellow-coloured cloak"; Basanti referring to the light-yellow colour of the Mustard flower grown in the Punjab and also one of the two main colours of the Sikh religion as per the Sikh *rehat meryada* (code of conduct of the Sikh Saint-Soldier)], while created by Ram Prashad Bismil, are largely associated to Bhagat Singh's martyrdom and have been used in a number of Bhagat Singh-related films.

In September 2007 the Governor of Punjab province, Khalid Maqbool, announced that a memorial to Bhagat Singh will be displayed at Lahore museum, according to the governor "Singh was the first martyr of the subcontinent and his example was followed by many youth of the time."

The Other Opinion

Bhagat Singh was criticised both by his contemporaries and by people after his death because of his violent and revolutionary stance towards the British and his strong opposition to the pacifist

stance taken by the Indian National Congress and particularly Mahatma Gandhi. The methods he used to make his point — shooting Saunders and throwing non-lethal bombs — were quite different from Gandhist non-cooperation non-violent.

Bhagat Singh has also been accused of being too eager to die, as opposed to staying alive and continuing his movement. It has been alleged that he could have escaped from prison if he so wished, but he preferred that he die and become a legacy for other youths in India. Some lament that he may have done much more for India had he stayed alive.