

IMPRINTS OF BHAGAT SINGH IN INDIAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Born into a Sikh family which had earlier been involved in revolutionary activities against the British Raj, as a teenager Bhagat Singh studied European revolutionary movements and was attracted to anarchist and Marxist ideologies. He became involved in numerous revolutionary organisations, and quickly rose through the ranks of the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) to become one of its main leaders, eventually changing its name to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) in 1928. Seeking revenge for the death of Lala Lajpat Rai at the hands of the police, Singh was involved in the murder of British police officer John Saunders. He eluded efforts by the police to capture him. Soon after, together with Batukeshwar Dutt, he undertook a successful effort to throw two bombs and leaflets inside the Central Legislative Assembly while shouting the slogan of revolution.

The two men were arrested, as they had planned to be. Held on this charge, he gained widespread national support when he underwent a 116-day fast in jail, demanding equal rights for British and Indian political prisoners. During this time, sufficient evidence was brought against him for a conviction in the Saunders case, after trial by a Special Tribunal and appeal at the Privy Council in England. He was convicted and subsequently hanged for his participation in the murder, aged 23. His legacy prompted youth in India to begin fighting for Indian independence and he continues to be a youth idol in modern India, as well as the inspiration for several films. He is commemorated with a large bronze statue in the Parliament of India, as well as a range of other memorials.

KEYWORDS: European Revolutionary Movements, Parliament of India, Indian National Congress

INTRODUCTION

Bhagat Singh, a Sandhu Jat, was born on 28 September 1907 to Kishan Singh and Vidyavati at Chak No. 105, GB, Banga village, Jaranwala Tehsil in the Lyallpur district of the Punjab Province of British India. His birth coincided with the release from jail of his father and two uncles, Ajit Singh and Swaran Singh. His family were Sikhs, some of whom had been active in Indian independence movements, and others having served in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army. His ancestral village was Khatkar Kalan, near the town of Banga in Nawanshahr district (now renamed Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar) of Punjab. His grandfather, Arjun Singh, was a follower of Swami Dayananda Saraswati's Hindu reformist movement, Arya Samaj, which had a considerable influence on the young Bhagat.

His father and uncles were members of the Ghadar Party, led by Kartar Singh Sarabha and Har Dayal. Ajit Singh was forced to flee to Persia due to pending court cases against him, while Swaran Singh died at home in 1910 following his release from Borstal Jail in Lahore. Unlike many Sikhs of his age, Singh did not attend the Khalsa High School in Lahore.

His grandfather did not approve of the school officials' loyalism to the British authorities. Instead, he was enrolled in the Dayanand Anglo Vedic High School, an Arya Samaji institution.

In 1919, at the age of 12, Singh visited the site of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre hours after thousands of unarmed people gathered at a public meeting had been killed. At the age of 14, he was among those in his village who welcomed protestors against the killing of a large number of unarmed people at Gurudwara Nankana Sahib on 20 February 1921. Singh became disillusioned with Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence after Gandhi called off the non-cooperation movement. Gandhi's decision followed the violent murders of policemen by villagers who were reacting to the police killing three villagers in the 1922 Chauri Chaura incident. Singh joined the Young Revolutionary Movement and began to advocate for the violent overthrow of the British in India.

In 1923, Singh joined the National College in Lahore, where he was also involved in extra-curricular activities such as the dramatics society. In 1923, Singh won an essay competition set by the Punjab Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, writing on the problems in the Punjab. He founded the Indian nationalist youth organisation Naujawan Bharat Sabha (Youth Society of India) in March 1926. He also joined the Hindustan Republican Association, which had prominent leaders, such as Ram Prasad Bismil, Chandrashekhar Azad and Ashfaqulla Khan. The name of the organisation was changed to Hindustan Socialist Republican Association at Singh's insistence. A year later, to avoid getting married by his family, Singh ran away from his house to Cawnpore.

Police became concerned with Singh's influence on youths and in May 1927 they arrested him on the pretext of having been involved in a bombing that had taken place at Lahore in October of the previous year. He was released on a surety of Rs. 60,000 five weeks after his arrest. He wrote for and edited Urdu and Punjabi newspapers, published from Amritsar, as well as contributing to low-priced pamphlets published by the Naujawan Bharat Sabha that excoriated the British. He also wrote briefly for the *Veer Arjun* newspaper, published in Delhi, and for *Kirti*, the journal of the Kirti Kisan Party. He often used pseudonyms, including names such as Balwant, Ranjit and Vidhrohi.

REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITIES

Lala Lajpat Rai's Death and Murder of Saunders

In 1928, the British government set up the Simon Commission to report on the political situation in India. The Indian political parties boycotted the Commission, because it did not include a single Indian in its membership, and it met with country-wide protests. When the Commission visited Lahore on 30 October 1928, Lala Lajpat Rai led a silent march in protest against the Commission. Police attempts to disperse the large crowd resulted in violence. The superintendent of police, James A. Scott, ordered the police to *lathi* charge the protesters and personally assaulted Rai, who was injured. Rai died of a heart attack on 17 November 1928, probably as a consequence of shock.

Doctors thought that his death might have been hastened by the injuries that he had received. When the matter was raised in the British Parliament, the British Government denied any role in Rai's death. Although Singh did not witness the event, he vowed to take revenge, and joined other revolutionaries, Shivaram Rajguru, Sukhdev Thapar and Chandrashekhar Azad, in a plot to kill Scott. However, in a case of mistaken identity, Singh received a signal to shoot on the appearance of John P. Saunders, an Assistant Superintendent of Police. He was shot by Rajguru and Singh while leaving the District Police Headquarters in Lahore on 17 December 1928.

Although the murder of Saunders was condemned as a retrograde action by Mahatma Gandhi, the Congress leader, others were more understanding of the motivation. After killing Saunders, the group escaped through the D.A.V. College entrance, across the road. Chanan Singh, a Head Constable who was chasing them, was fatally injured by Chandrashekhar Azad's covering fire. They then fled on bicycles to pre-arranged places of safety. The police launched a massive search operation to catch them, blocking all exits and entrances from the city; the CID kept a watch on all young men leaving Lahore. They hid for the next two days. On 19 December 1928, Sukhdev called on Durgawati Devi, sometimes known as Durga Bhabhi, wife of another HSRA member Bhagwati Charan Vohra, for help, which she agreed to do.

They decided to catch the train departing from Lahore to Bathinda *en route* for Howrah early the next morning. Singh and Rajguru left the house early the next morning, with both men carrying loaded revolvers. Dressed in western attire and carrying Devi's sleeping child, Singh and Devi passed off as a young couple, while Rajguru carried their luggage as their servant. At the station, Singh managed to conceal his identity while buying tickets and the three boarded the train heading to Cawnpore. There they boarded a train for Lucknow since the CID at Howrah railway station usually scrutinised passengers on the direct train from Lahore. At Lucknow, Rajguru left separately for Benares while Singh, Devi and the infant went to Howrah, with all except Singh returning to Lahore a few days later.

1929 Assembly Bomb Throwing Incident

Singh had for some time been exploiting the power of drama as a means to inspire revolt against the British, purchasing a magic lantern to show slides that enlivened his talks about revolutionaries who had died as a result of the Kakori Conspiracy, such as Ram Prasad Bismil. In 1929, he proposed a dramatic act to the HSRA with the intention of gaining massive publicity for their aims. Influenced by Auguste Vaillant, a French anarchist who had bombed the Chamber of Deputies in Paris, Singh's plan was to explode a bomb inside the Central Legislative Assembly. The nominal intention was to protest against the Public Safety Bill and the Trade Dispute Act, which had been rejected by the Assembly but were being enacted by the Viceroy using his special powers; the actual intention was for the perpetrators to get themselves arrested so that they could use appearances in court as a stage to publicise their cause. The HSRA leadership were initially opposed to Singh participating in the bombing because they were certain that his prior involvement in the Saunders shooting would mean that his arrest on this occasion would ultimately result in his execution. However, they eventually determined that he was their most suitable candidate.

On 8 April 1929, Singh, accompanied by Batukeshwar Dutt, threw two bombs into the Assembly chamber from its public gallery while it was in session. In accordance with the plan, no-one was killed by the explosions, although some members were injured, including George Ernest Schuster, the finance member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. The smoke from the bomb filled the Assembly and if they had chosen then they probably could have escaped in the confusion; instead they stayed, shouting slogans of *Inquilab Zindabad* and showered leaflets. The two men were arrested and subsequently moved through a series of jails in the Delhi area. Gandhi, once again, issued strong words of disapproval for their deed.

Singh was elated with the success of the bombing and referred to it and the forthcoming legal proceedings as a "drama". The trial took place in the first week of June, following a preliminary hearing in May. On 12 June both men were sentenced to life imprisonment for "causing explosions of a nature likely to endanger life, unlawfully and maliciously."

Dutt had been defended by Asaf Ali, while Singh defended himself. Doubts have been raised about the accuracy of testimony offered at the trial. One key discrepancy related to the automatic pistol that Singh had been carrying at the time of his arrest. Some witnesses said that he had fired two or three shots and the police sergeant who arrested him testified that the gun was pointed downward when he took it from him and that Singh "was playing with it." According to the *India Law Journal*, however, these accounts were incorrect because Singh had turned over the pistol himself. According to Kooner, Singh "committed one great blunder" by taking his pistol on that day "when it was clear not to harm anybody and offer for police arrest without any protest."

Kooner further stated that the police connected "the shell of the gun fire found from the (Saunders') murder site and the pistol." The HSRA has set up bomb factories in Lahore and Saharanpur in 1929. On 15 April that year, the Lahore bomb factory was discovered by the police, leading to the arrest of other members of HSRA, including Sukhdev, Kishori Lal and Jai Gopal. Not long after this, the Saharanpur factory was also raided and further conspirators became informants. With the new information available to them, the police were able to connect the three strands of the Saunders murder, Assembly bombing and bomb manufacture. Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev were charged with the murder of Saunders.

Hunger Strike and Lahore Conspiracy Case

Singh was re-arrested for murdering Saunders and Chanan Singh based on substantial evidence against him, including the statements of his associates, Hans Raj Vohra and Jai Gopal. His life sentence in the Assembly Bomb case was deferred till the Saunders' case was decided. He was sent to the Mianwali jail from the Delhi jail, where he witnessed discrimination between European and Indian prisoners, and led other prisoners in a hunger strike to protest this. They demanded equality in standards of food, clothing, toiletries and other hygienic necessities, as well as availability of books and a daily newspaper for the political prisoners, whom they demanded should not be forced to do manual labour or any undignified work in the jail.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah spoke in the Assembly supporting Singh, and sympathised with the prisoners on hunger strike. Jawaharlal Nehru met Singh and the other strikers in Mianwali jail. The Government tried to break the strike by placing different food items in the prison cells to test the hungry prisoners' resolve. Water pitchers were filled with milk so that either the prisoners remained thirsty or broke their strike but nobody faltered and the impasse continued. The authorities then attempted forcing food using feeding tubes into the prisoners, but were resisted. With the matter still unresolved, the Indian Viceroy, Lord Irwin, broke his vacation in Simla to discuss the situation with the jail authorities.

Since the activities of the hunger strikers had gained popularity and attention amongst the people nationwide, the government decided to advance the start of the Saunders murder trial, which was henceforth called the Lahore Conspiracy Case. Singh was transported to Borstal Jail, Lahore, and the trial of this case began there on 10 July 1929. In addition to charging them for the murder of Saunders, Singh and 27 other prisoners were charged with plotting a conspiracy to murder Scott and waging a war against the King. Singh, still on hunger strike, had to be carried to the court handcuffed on a stretcher: he had lost 14 pounds (6.4 kg) weight from 133 pounds (60 kg) before the strike.

By now, the condition of another hunger striker, Jatindra Nath Das, lodged in the same jail had deteriorated considerably. The Jail committee recommended his unconditional release, but the government rejected the suggestion and offered to release him on bail. On 13 September 1929, Das died after a 63-day hunger strike. Almost all the nationalist leaders in the country paid tribute to Das' death, and Mohammad Alam and Gopi Chand Bhargava resigned from the

Punjab Legislative Council in protest. Motilal Nehru moved a successful adjournment motion in the Central Assembly as a censure against the "inhumane treatment" of the Lahore prisoners. Singh finally heeded a resolution of the Congress party and the request of his father, ending his 116-day hunger strike on 5 October 1929. During this period, Singh's popularity among common Indians extended beyond Punjab. Singh's attention now turned to his trial, where he was to face a British team representing the Crown and comprising C. H. Carden-Noad, Kalandar Ali Khan, Gopal Lal and the prosecuting inspector, Bakshi Dina Nath.

The defence was composed of eight lawyers. When Jai Gopal turned into a prosecution witness, Prem Dutt, the youngest amongst the 28 accused, threw his slipper at Gopal in court. The magistrate ordered that all the accused should be handcuffed, despite all other revolutionaries having dissociated themselves from the act. Singh and others refused to be handcuffed and were therefore subjected to brutal beating. The revolutionaries refused to attend the court and Singh wrote a letter to the magistrate citing various reasons why they had done so. The trial was henceforth ordered to be carried out in the absence of the accused or members of the HSRA. This was a setback for Singh as he could no longer use the trial as a forum to publicise his views.

Special Tribunal

To speed up the slow trial, the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, declared an emergency on 1 May 1930, and promulgated an ordinance setting up a special tribunal composed of three high court judges for this case. The ordinance cut short the normal process of justice as the only appeal after the tribunal was at the Privy Council located in England. The Tribunal was authorised to function without the presence of any of the accused in court, and to accept death of the persons giving evidence as a concession to the defence. Consequent to *Lahore Conspiracy Case Ordinance No.3 of 1930*, the trial was transferred from Kishan's court to the tribunal composed of Justice J. Coldstream (president), Justice G. C. Hilton and Justice Agha Hyder (members). The case commenced on 5 May 1930 in Poonch House, Lahore against 18 accused.

On 20 June 1930, the constitution of the Special Tribunal was changed to Justice G.C. Hilton (president), Justice J.K. Tapp and Justice Sir Abdul Qadir. On 2 July 1930, a *habeas corpus* petition was filed in the High Court challenging the ordinance and said that it was *ultra vires* and therefore illegal, stating that the Viceroy had no powers to shorten the customary process of determining justice. The petition argued that the Act, allowed the Viceroy to introduce an ordinance and set up such a tribunal only under conditions of breakdown of law-and-order, whereas there had been no such breakdown. However, the petition was dismissed as being premature. Carden-Noad presented the government's grievous charges of conducting dacoities, bank-robbery, and illegal acquisition of arms and ammunition amongst others.

The evidence of G. T. H. Hamilton Harding, the Lahore superintendent of police, shocked the court, when he stated that he had filed the First Information Report against the accused under specific orders from the Chief Secretary to the governor of Punjab and that he was unaware of the details of the case. The prosecution mainly depended upon the evidence of P. N. Ghosh, Hans Raj Vohra and Jai Gopal who had been Bhagat Singh's associates in the HSRA. On 10 July 1930, the tribunal decided to press charges against only 15 of the 18 accused, and allowed their petitions to be taken up for hearing the next day. The tribunal conducted the trial from 5 May 1930 to 10 September 1930. The three accused against whom the case was withdrawn included Dutt, who had already been awarded a life sentence in the Assembly bomb case. The ordinance (and the tribunal) would lapse on 31 October 1930 as it had not been passed in the Central Assembly or the British Parliament.

On 7 October 1930, the tribunal delivered its 300-page judgement based on all the evidence and concluded that participation of Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru was proved beyond reasonable doubt in Saunders' murder, and sentenced them to death by hanging. The remaining 12 accused were all sentenced to rigorous life imprisonment. In Punjab, a defence committee drew up a plan to appeal to the Privy Council. Singh was initially against the appeal, but later agreed to it in the hope that the appeal would popularise the HSRA in Britain. The appellants claimed that the ordinance which created the tribunal was invalid, while the government countered that the Viceroy was completely empowered to create such a tribunal. The appeal was dismissed by Judge Viscount Dunedin.

Reactions to the Judgement and Execution

After the rejection of the appeal to the Privy Council, Congress party president Madan Mohan Malviya filed a mercy appeal before Irwin on 14 February 1931. An appeal was sent to Mahatma Gandhi by prisoners to intervene. A plan to rescue Singh and fellow HSRA inmates from the jail failed. HSRA member Devi's husband, Bhagwati Charan Vohra, attempted to manufacture bombs for the purpose, but died when they exploded accidentally. Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were sentenced to death in the Lahore conspiracy case and ordered to be hanged on 24 March 1931. That schedule was moved forward by 11 hours and he was hanged on 23 March 1931 at 7:30 pm in Lahore jail with his comrades Rajguru and Sukhdev. It is reported that no magistrate of the time was willing to supervise his hanging as was required by law. The execution was supervised by an honorary judge, who also signed the three death warrants as their original warrants had expired. The jail authorities then broke the rear wall of the jail and secretly cremated the three martyrs under cover of darkness outside Ganda Singh Wala village, and then threw the ashes into the Sutlej river, about 10 kilometres (6.2 mi) from Ferozepore.

Criticism of the Special Tribunal and Method of Execution

Singh's trial has been described by the Supreme Court as "contrary to the fundamental doctrine of criminal jurisprudence" because there was no opportunity for the accused to defend themselves. The Special Tribunal was a departure from the normal procedure adopted for a trial and its decision could only be appealed to the Privy Council located in Britain. The accused were absent from the court and the judgement was passed ex-parte. The ordinance, which was introduced by the Viceroy to form the Special Tribunal, was never approved by the Central Assembly or the British Parliament, and it eventually lapsed without any legal or constitutional sanctity. The execution of Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were reported widely by the press, especially as they were on the eve of the annual convention of the Congress party at Karachi. Gandhi faced black flag demonstrations by angry youths who shouted "Down with Gandhi". Hartals and strikes of mourning were called. Bhagat Singh did not wish to live. He refused to apologise, or even file an appeal. Bhagat Singh was not a devotee of non-violence, but he did not subscribe to the religion of violence. He took to violence due to helplessness and to defend his homeland.

Ideals and Opinions

Singh was attracted to anarchism and communism. He was an avid reader of the teachings of Mikhail Bakunin and also read Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. Singh did not believe in the Gandhian ideology—which advocated *Satyagraha* and other forms of non-violent resistance, and felt that such politics would replace one set of exploiters with another. From May to September 1928, Singh published a series of articles on anarchism in *Kirti*. He felt that the word anarchism has been abused so much that even in India revolutionaries have been called anarchist to

make them unpopular. In his opinion, anarchism refer to the absence of ruler and abolition of state, not absence of order, He believed that 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.

Historian K. N. Panikkar described Singh as one of the early Marxists in India, although others have said that he was less interested in class- or communal-based issues than youth-based ones and the political theorist Jason Adams notes that he was less enamoured with Marx than with Lenin. From 1926 onwards, he studied the history of the revolutionary movement in India and abroad. In his prison notebooks, he quoted Lenin in reference to imperialism and capitalism and also the revolutionary thoughts of Trotsky. When asked what his last wish was, Singh replied that he was studying the life of Lenin and he wanted to finish it before his death. In spite of his belief in Marxist ideals however, Singh never joined the Communist Party of India.

Atheism

Singh 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 other's 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 Soham Swami's book *Common Sense* (Singh incorrectly referred to Niralamba Swami as the author of the book, however Niralamba had only written the introduction), which advocated a form of "mystic atheism". While in his prison cell in 1931, he wrote a pamphlet entitled *Why I am an Atheist* in which he discussed and advocated the philosophy of atheism. This pamphlet was a result of some criticism by fellow revolutionaries on his failure to acknowledge religion and God in jail; 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.

Randhir Singh, a Ghadar Party revolutionary convicted of the first Lahore Conspiracy Case, claimed to have met Bhagat Singh in Lahore Central Jail on 4 October 1930 during his release. According to him, Bhagat Singh said that he had shaved "his hair and beard under pressing circumstances" and that "it was for the service of the country". He also said that Bhagat Singh told him that his companions had "compelled him to give up the Sikh appearance", and that he was ashamed. Many scholars are sceptical about the claims of Randhir Singh, which have no independent verification and represent a sudden change in Bhagat Singh's highly critical attitude regarding religion. Singh was condemned on 7 October 1930 contradicting his presence in condemned cells on 4 October.

Death

His mentor as a young boy was Kartar Singh Sarabha, whose photo he always carried in his pocket. Singh is himself considered a martyr by Indians 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: "It is easy to kill individuals but you cannot kill the ideas. Great empires crumbled, while the ideas survived." After studying 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. From prison, Singh and two others had written a letter to Lord Irwin, wherein they asked to be treated as prisoners of war and consequently to be executed by firing squad and not by hanging. Prannath Mehta, 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.

There have been suggestions that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had an opportunity to stop Singh's execution, but refrained from doing so. A variation of this theory is that Gandhi actively conspired with the British to have Singh executed. Gandhi's supporters argue that Gandhi did not have enough influence with the British to stop the execution, much less arrange it, but claim that he did his best to save Singh's life. They also assert that Singh's role in the independence movement was of 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 stated 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. Gandhi had managed to have 90,000 political prisoners who were not members of his *Satyagraha* movement released under 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 Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev, including a personal visit on 19 March 1931. In a letter to the Viceroy on the day of their execution, he pleaded fervently for commutation, not knowing that the letter would be too late.

CONCLUSIONS

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 and Gandhi. Singh was criticised both by his contemporaries and by people after his death, both for his violent and revolutionary stance towards the British as well as his strong opposition to the pacifist stance taken by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. The methods he used to convey his message, such as shooting Saunders and throwing non-lethal bombs, stood in stark contrast to Gandhi's non-violent methodology.

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