

A Martyr of India's Freedom Struggle: Bhai Maharaj Singh

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Bhai Maharaj Singh was a soldier in the Sikh Army which suffered defeat (1849) at the hands of Lord Dalhousie's armed forces, including Bengal and Oudh recruits. The kingdom of Punjab's forces were then disbanded and Punjab annexed to the British Indian Empire. Leaving the short army career Maharaj Singh joined Dera of Baba Bir Singh where, as a boy, he was schooled and began a new life mission of *Seva*, *Bhakti*, and management of *Langar*. This Dera was popular with people of not only Punjab but also U.P., Rajasthan and Jammu. The Dera Chief, before his death, appointed Maharaj Singh as his successor who in a message to the rulers of Kabul, Tibet, Nepal urged them to unite, for expelling the foreign rulers from Punjab and India.

Mr. Vansittart, British Deputy Commissioner, Jullunder Division, who arrested Maharaj Singh for conspiring against British Authority later wrote: "**The Bhai is not an ordinary man. He is to the natives what Jesus Christ is to the most zealous of Christians**".

Bhai Maharaj Singh was despatched to Singapore and kept alone in a four sides bricked cell and suffered all kinds of ailments and privations and the most heinous and cruel punishments.

Later, Commissioner Jullunder Division Mr. Mcleod paying tribute to the Bhai wrote: ... "hundreds and thousands of devotees visited him for his divine discourses and urged independence. He also arranges *langar* (food) for them. His life is an outstanding example of a Martyr, a devoted Khalsa (Sikh) who lived upto the Guru's ideal of the saint soldier, and gave up his life for the cause of freedom, justice and human dignity."

His life and martyrdom were glorious, and bloodless like the fifth and ninth Sikh Gurus. He asked his followers not to take revenge and not harm Britishers as happened in several other revenge cases. However, his acute sufferings for six years caused a resolve to take revenge in Punjab and UP which contributed to the scenario of the Great Uprising. His death caused widespread anguish against the Britishers as witnessed in the 1857 Uprising. Colonel Mallason the author of "sepoy mutiny" wrote about the dominance of the national factor behind the Uprising, after talking to various people in India.

The aggressive and imperialistic policy of the British government in India left no stone unturned to annex the Sikh empire after obtaining a foot-hold therein, as a consequence of the First Anglo-Sikh War of 1846. Naturally the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims of the Panjab were scarred by the unfair tactics of the, British government in accepting minor Maharaja Daleep Singh as the nominal head of an administration virtually under the control of the British Resident. In this patriotic struggle against the occupation of the Panjab and the subservience of the Lahore Darbar, Bhai Maharaj Singh, a preacher and saint, played a vital and heroic role.

Passion for Freedom:

During the interim period between the First and the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1846-1849) there were lots of intrigues in the Lahore Darbar affecting Maharaja

Daleep Singh's minority administration. Hira Singh Dogra, a minister of the Lahore Darbar wanted to punish Attar Singh Attariwalla, Prince Kashmira Singh and Prince Pishora Singh for their rebellious activities. These persons had taken shelter in Baba Bir Singh's *Ashram*. The Darbar Army decided to attack the Dera of Baba Bir Singh to arrest the above so-called 'rebels'. Baba Bir Singh ordered Maharaj Singh to purchase food and *Karah Parsad* for thousands of people. So large quantities of cooked food were kept ready for the soldiers coming with artillery and cavalry to arrest the wanted persons. Baba Bir Singh told the attacking force that these persons had taken sanctuary in his hospice, but they were free to go if they wanted too. The commander ordered the attack and bombarded the place on 6 May 1844. Before his death, Baba Bir Singh appointed Maharaj Singh as his successor and *care taker* of his Ashram. But the Baba, who was regarded as a saint, and many others, were killed, but Maharaj Singh survived the ordeal.

Bhai Maharaj Singh became the head of a popular movement against British occupation of the Punjab. As the grip of the British power over the Punjab tightened, Maharaj Singh became suspect in the eyes of the British officials. At this time (1847) some Sikh Sardars and demobbed soldiers of the Lahore Darbar made a plot to murder the British Resident-Lt. Col. Henry Lawrence. Prema and Sardar Lal Singh conspired to attack him at a meeting fixed for 21 April 1847, in Shalimar Gardens, Lahore. This is known as the *Prema Conspiracy* case. He was so much respected and honoured as a saint that no one dared to disclose his whereabouts in spite of the reward for his arrest. However, his property, whatever it was, was confiscated. For three years, he moved about in the Punjab and yet the police and the military force could not capture him. This fact is supported by the Governor-General Lord Dalhousie in a note *dated* 30 *September* 1848, mentioning: "The Zamindars (land-owners), the people and the Chiefs openly displayed entire sympathy in the cause, and the Darbar officials and the 'Kardars' who were ordered to pursue him, followed him tranquilly and remained on the best terms with him." Fearlessly, Maharaj Singh moved from one village to another, and even military areas, stirring the masses to revolt against British rule and to save the *Khalsa Darbar* and the remnants of the Punjab army from destruction.

At this time (September 1848) occurred the Multan Revolt in which Diwan Moolraj and some Sikh Sardars like Sher Singh and Attar Singh protested against the aggressive and anti-Sikh policies of the British administrator. Bhai Maharaj Singh wanted to join the agitation led by Sardar Chattar Singh Attariwalla in Hazara against the British occupation of the Punjab. Maharaj Singh went to Rawalpindi by a circuitous route to get assurances of help in terms of men and money before the outbreak of this revolt, and he was fairly successful in this task.

Later Maharaj Singh went to Ram Nagar exhorting the Sikh soldiers to be vigilant against the plots of the British to divide the Sikh community and to annex the Punjab to their own territories. It is uncertain whether he took any part in the actual fighting in the battles of Chillianwalla and Gujarat. However, there is no doubt that he gave a lot of support to the Sikh cause. The greatest need of the Sikh army during these battles was the shortage of food and fodder. Maharaj Singh procured adequate supplies of these things from the neighbouring villages and arranged for their transport to the 'rebel' army.

Finding his stay in the Punjab difficult after its occupation by the British forces in 1849,

Maharaj Singh moved to Jammu. From Chambi he sent messengers to different parts of the Punjab asking the people to sabotage the British administration. He was equally keen on securing the person of Maharaja Daleep Singh, fearing that he might be exiled and then it would be difficult to continue the struggle for the liberation of Punjab. He made a plan for the abduction of Daleep Singh from Lahore, but it did not succeed.

Great Influence on the Sikh Soldiers:

The British authorities knew his great influence on the Sikh soldiers who might be tempted to revolt. In this connection Sir Henry Lawrence, President of the Board of Administration of Punjab wrote: "Bhai Maharaj Singh, a Sikh priest of reputed sanctity and of great influence, the first man who raised the standard of rebellion beyond the confines of Multan in 1848 and the only leader of note who did not lay down his arms to Sir Walter Gilbert at Rawalpindi, was tampering with the Sikhs of the Punjab Cavalry Corps at Lahore". The authorities therefore promptly exiled Maharaja Daleep Singh to Farukhabad, in United Provinces, in April 1849.

Revolutionary Role:

Then Bhai Maharaj Singh planned a general revolt in the Punjab. He moved to Sajuwal from July to October 1849, to organise attacks on the cantonments at Jullundar and Hoshiarpur. For this purpose, he motivated the local priests to persuade the people to help the rebel cause for the liberation of Punjab. He sent his personal friends like Bhai Kishan Singh and Nihal Singh to Kabul for obtaining assistance from the Amir of Afghanistan, Jwala Singh Rarewalla and Mitha Singh to Anandpur, Hari Singh to Ambala, and Dharam Singh to Lahore. Attar Singh, a descendent of the erstwhile rulers of Kangra, promised to supply armed soldiers and adequate food-grains. Maharaj Singh contacted many influential persons in Hajipur. He visited the Sikh soldiers at Hoshiarpur to reassure himself of their help. He checked the arrangements for assembling of sufficient forces at specified places in Mahjha, Malwa and Hazara. He fixed 3rd January 1850 for attack on the Jullundar and Hoshiarpur cantonments. He collected stocks of weapons and grain near Tanda. For checking all these centres, he used to hold meetings at night in secret spots.

Apprehension and Persecution:

Maharaj Singh reached Adampur on the night of 28 December 1849 to hold a meeting with his trusted friends in a garden in the suburbs. Unfortunately, a Muslim informer happened to see him pass by, and he immediately contacted Mr. Vansittart, Deputy Commissioner of Jullundar. The latter reached the spot with 20 soldiers and surrounded the garden. After arresting Bhai Maharaj Singh, his personal attendant Kharag Singh and other associates, he lodged them in the local jail. Many people gathered near the jail to hold a protest demonstration. With tremendous self-control and will to suffer, his message to them and his followers was to be remain non-violent and peaceful. But the authorities fearing public disturbance, placed Maharaj Singh and Kharag Singh under heavy guard. Then they were sent to Allahabad under military escort and sometime later to Calcutta where they reached on 12 March 1850. The Governor General decided that Maharaj Singh be deported to Singapore along with his attendant Kharag Singh. Under a special British guard, Maharaj Singh and Kharag Singh reached Singapore on 14 June 1850.

Solitary Confinement in Singapore:

He was lodged in the new Jail, but his solitary cell was completely bricked so as to prevent light and ventilation. He was not allowed to move out of this. For this reason, his health deteriorated. After a few months, he lost his eye-sight. Later he developed throat cancer and could not eat anything. Maharaj Singh felt resigned to the Will of God and spent most of his time in prayer and meditation. For six years, he had not moved out of the cell or seen the sun or the sky. The end came on 5 July 1856. His last message to his compatriots was : "Never submit to injustice, never surrender your arms, never compromise on principles". He gave up his life in the cause of holy war against the treachery and aggression of the British rulers who had destroyed and dismembered the last independent Empire in India.

