

Indian Freedom Movement in Far East: The Story of Intrepid Sr. Pritam Singh

*Dr. Harkirat Singh**

** VPO Kalhe Majra, Tehsil Nabha, Distt. Patiala. 147201. Punjab.*

Email: dr_harkirat@rediffmail.com

The legendary Sr. Pritam Singh, a resident of Nagoke Sarli in Lyalpur district (now Faisalabad in Pakistan) was born in the month of November in 1910. His father S. Maiya Singh came of a noble Sikh family. As a child he was loving, humble and dutiful that his parents doted on him. These qualities he retained till the close of his career. From his early years, he devoted himself to studying Sikh heritage and grew to be a man of great learning. He was deservedly popular with his companions and with every one he had the chance of coming across.

He was still in his teens when he passed his matriculation examination with credit to himself and to his Alma Mater. Having come from an agriculturist family Pritam Singh showed inclination towards the scientific study of agriculture and for that purpose joined the Lyalpore Agricultural College. But he left the college without completing his studies as he had taken a liking to religious and political sciences. He joined the Sikh missionary College at Amritsar, where he put his heart and soul into the study and in the annual examination of the College topped the list. There, in the College, he came in contact with the great Sikh religious thinkers, Professors Ganga Singh and Dharmanand Singh. Their teachings had a great effect on Pritam Singh and shaped his destiny. Though young in years he had a mature head on his shoulders. He became one of the active workers in the Sikh political circles. Every one with whom he came in contact formed a high opinion of his character and personal ability. The Sikh political circles had high hopes of him. He was always in the front line whenever and wherever his services were needed. He did his duty.

His coming in contact with many political thinkers of the day made him firm in his belief that India can never flourish as a British colony. He joined the Akali movement and played his part well.

Colonial Rule:

The British policy of "divide and rule" was a wellknown stratagem during colonial rule. The local authority in Kashmir cleverly incited the Hindus against the Muslims to serve this narrow objective. Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhik Committee was alive to these tricks and tried its best to bring about an understanding amongst the parties which were fighting for nothing. The choice of the committee fell on Pritam Singh and so he was deputed to Kashmir as the head of a volunteer corps in 1929. There he did more than what was expected of him to quell the Hindu-Muslim riots. His success in Kashmir encouraged him to and prepared him for still greater services.

Frontier Gandhi:

India was awakening and many parties were formed for the attainment of independence. In 1930 there was the Red Shirt or Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God) movement started by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi, for the defence of the rights of the people. The Government of the day could not bear to see it come up, and, with a view of crushing the movement, to nip it in the very bud, declared the Red Shirts an unlawful body. Every thing that could be done was done to suppress the movement. Cudgels were freely used to disperse the gatherings and sometimes, when the people proved stubborn, machine guns resorted to. On hearing the news of firing upon the Red Shirts in Peshawar, Pritam Singh was despatched to NWFP with 300 Akali volunteers to demonstrate against

government's action. On the way, he stopped at various places and made speeches inviting the public to rise up for the protection of their rights and the freeing of the motherland from the foreign yoke. He was arrested at Gujrat, while still on the way, and was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for a year and half. There, in the jail, he had a chance to meet many national leaders whose company had the desired effect of making him a confirmed nationalist.

The Sikhs have been residing in Bangkok for the past many years and are all well-to-do business men. They built their own gurdwara. Need was then felt for a qualified person who could preach Gursikhi and talk to outsiders about Sikh religion. The Sikh Missionary Society was approached to supply the need and it recommended Pritam Singh as the person suitable for the purpose. Amongst many recommendatory letters there was one from Master Tara Singh, the well known leader of Punjab, so as the invitation of the Singh Sabha, Pritam Singh came to Bangkok on the 11th of April, 1933. Before long he endeared himself to all the Indians. He was loved equally by the old and the young, the rich and poor. Besides Sikhism, he had a vast knowledge of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. He could discourse equally well on all the leading religions of the world. Raja Mahendra Partap, a well known Indian patriot and politician, was greatly impressed by his abilities and they worked together during his sojourn at Bangkok in 1934.

Baba Amar Singh:

In 1940, on the release of Baba Amar Singh after twenty-three years of confinement in the Mandalay penitentiary Pritam Singh joined forces with the Baba and started the freedom movement for liberating India from the British yoke. They had to work with extreme caution because then the British had much influence in this country. It was at the risk of ones life that one could work against the English and Pritam Singh braved the risk. He had to work under adverse circumstances and the odds were against him. But he steered through purpose. He was secretly in league with the Japanese. Pritam Singh had full faith in Japan and her help for the liberation of Indian from the British hands. Japan offered to help the cause of India with the greatest pleasure. He aforesaid that in case war broke out in Asia, the lives and properties of the Indians in Thailand and Malaya would not be safe. Their safety became his first consideration. Pritam Singh had a keen insight into affairs and knew that war would come. The war clouds spread very fast and burst without giving the least warning. Pritam Singh's judgement proved correct. Thailand chose right and joined Japan against the English and the Americans. Had it not been for Pritam Singh's foresight the position of the Indians who had been residing in these parts for a considerably long time and had built up large fortunes, would have been very hazardous.

In Thailand:

With the turn of fortune in his favour, Pritam Singh founded the Independence League of India with its head office at Bangkok. At the time of the Japanese attack on Malaya in 1941 , he proceeded to Thailand and placed his services at the disposal of the Indian community there. He took with him a few volunteers. The danger to life and property and the uncertain conditions of life during a war can be understood only by those who have actually come through it. Pritam Singh was of great service to the Indian community. He succeeded in safeguarding the lives and interests of the Indians in Malaya. While saving their life and property, Pritam Singh did not neglect his real goal, the liberation of India. With this end in view he started the Independence League of India in Malaya with offices in all the towns. He was successful in infusing the Indians in Malaya with the spirit of freedom.

Free India Army:

Before Pritam Singh started on his fatal journey to Japan, a meeting was held in Singapore

which was attended by the representatives of all the leagues for the Independence of India in Malaya and Thailand. Tributes were paid for the active services of Pritam Singh, and it is no less a matter for pride that all the speakers who took part in the conference praised Pritam Singh and his work in eloquent words. It was only through his effort that they were able to meet and consider the ways and means for the liberation of their motherland. It was through him that they were able to create a joint front in these parts for the freedom of India and recruit the Free India Army for the purpose. So far he had done it all with the help of his fellow workers and on his own responsibility. But now, as they were all confronted with the greater problem of the freedom of India, he would be glad to find them sharing the burden and the responsibility with him. He had started the work, and now it was up to them to see that it was crowned with success.

By the decision and choice of the representatives of the Independence League Pritam Singh was to have taken part, with other Indian leaders in the conference which was to have been held in Tokyo. To deal with the problems of India Pritam Singh started on the 11th of March at 8 A.M. for Japan via Saigon. Though he was going out for greater things and to discuss greater problems, his thoughts were always with the Independence League which he had started. He never wanted to do any thing without the permission of the proper authorities.

National Hero:

The date of his leaving Saigon with Swami Satyanand Puri, Mohammad Akram and Nilkanth Ayer is not known. It is reported that the tragedy occurred on the 24th March. The news came so suddenly and they were so shocking that at first none believed it. The Indians in Thailand mourned the death of the great patriot as a national loss.

Pritam Singh was a bold and fearless worker, and was broad minded. In religion he was no bigot. For him all the religions were entitled to respect. He came as a religious preacher, and a preacher he was in the real sense of the word. He was generally seen in the company of the Buddhist monks, the life he led was very simple. His whole life is an example for a man of the world. He always lived within his means and even when he was in trouble he never mentioned it to his friends, and never asked help from anybody. He felt for the needs of the others and always took pleasure in helping them. He was a patriot in the true sense of the word. Once, on sick bed and in reply to some query, he remarked that he would rather like "to die for the cause of his country than on a sick bed". His death proved true his words. Even in his death he has left a lesson for us. He died arm in arm with a great Hindu and a great Muslim.

□