

The Extraordinary Bhai Maharaj Singh: First Martyr of the Freedom Struggle

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INDIANS HAD TO WAGE A LONG AND relentless struggle for freedom from the foreign rule. 1857 is considered to be the year in which the first war of independence was fought, in which sepoys, like Mangal Pandey played a leading role. But few people know of the saga of courage, bravery and steadfastness of a Sikh patriot, Bhai Maharaj Singh, who created panic for British rulers in Punjab, and they exiled him to a dark and dingy cell in a Singapore jail in 1853, where he was subjected to a very harsh and atrocious treatment resulting in his death on 5th July, 1856. That happened just a year before the Revolt of 1857, and seven years after the annexation of the Punjab by the British imperialists.

It had taken a whole century for the British to spread their tentacles in the Indian sub-continent, but Punjab had eluded them because of the heroic, patriotic and secular rule of the legendary monarch, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. A great soldier of Mother India, a nationalist leader and a selfless soul, Bhai Maharaj Singh, who was originally known as Bhai Nihal Singh, rose like a phoenix and became a scourge for the colonialists. He preferred to follow the path of the Sikh Gurus, who had undergone untold sufferings and offered the highest sacrifices for upholding the principles of justice and high moral standards.

In his childhood, Nihal Singh was more inclined to spiritual pursuits and he joined the establishment of Bhai Tota Singh Nirmala at the village Thikriwala, not far from his own village. But later he came into contact with a Sikh missionary and social reformer, Bhai Bir Singh and became his follower performing service in the langar and devoting himself to various humble tasks that took him on the path of sublimity and spiritual heights. His sweet utterances, complete absence of ego and contentment set him apart from others, which earned him the epithet of 'Maharaja' among his companions and a belief became prevalent that the saint of Nauranagabad was invested with extraordinary spiritual powers.

But Bhai Maharaj Singh could not remain a silent spectator to the sinister game being played by the Britishers, who were unscrupulously strengthening their hold on the Punjab by setting people against one another. As per the treaty of 1846, the British had divided the Sikh state in three parts. One part – the state of Jammu and Kashmir – was delivered to Raja Gulab Singh, another part consisting of Jalandhar Doab and sis-Sutlej territory was annexed to the British rule, and the third portion was nominally placed under Dalip Singh, the minor son of the late Maharaj Ranjit Singh, with his mother, Rani Jindan as Regent. But cleverly the real power was retained by Henry Lawrence, the agent of the British Governor General.

The British made up their minds not to withdraw their forces from Lahore after a year, as had been agreed to in Treaty of 1846. Thus they wanted to enter into another treaty with the minor prince which would entitle them to stay on till the prince attained majority. Though Rani Jindan and Dewan Dina Nath understood the evil intentions of the British, the latter maneuvered to take Tej Singh and Sher Singh Attariwala on their side, which made a very heavy dent on the position adopted by Rani Jindan and Dewan Dina Nath.

In early March, 1847 reports reached Henry Lawrence that the residential area of Bhai Maharaj Singh had turned into an active arena of revolutionary activities. Lawrence conveyed to the Governor General that a person called Prema, who had been assigned the task of assassinating the pro-British Sikh Sardars, had accused Rani Jindan and Bhai Maharaj Singh having issued such orders. The Resident also informed the Governor General that he had directed Bhai Maharaj Singh to appear before the council. Maharaj Singh, instead, ignored the Resident's orders and went underground, which incident became an open conflict between him and the British imperialists.

Having realized that Maharaj Singh's action was an open defiance of the British power, Lawrence ordered the arrest of his followers and the looting of the entire Majha area where he commanded respect and influence. He also announced a cash reward for information leading to the arrest of the rebel. That, however, did not deter the revolutionary from his chosen path and, instead, strengthened his resolve to continue his mission of opposing the colonialists, for which he started touring various villages encouraging the populace to zealously work against the foreigners.

As the Governor of Multan, Dewan Mul Raj raised the banner of revolt against the British authorities in April 1848. He planned to join hands with Rani Jindan and Bhai Maharaj Singh in their campaign to oust the Europeans from the Punjab, though the Rani had been exiled. Dewan Mul Raj deputed a reliable agent Khira with a special message. The latter caught up with Maharaj Singh at the village Parmanand, in the vicinity of the town Dina in tehsil Batala. The rebel leader took a positive view of Dewan Mul Raj's overtures, and rode towards Multan at the head of a 400 infantry contributed by a former General Sahib Singh Sangla. The news of Maharaj Singh's journey towards Multan spread like wild fire in areas like Batala, Kalanaur and Nurpur and whispers of Prince Dalip Singh having been brought clandestinely to Multan from Lahore gained wide currency. Getting the wind of such developments, the British agent in Lahore dispatched post haste a heavy contingent to pursue the nationalists with express orders to locate and arrest their leader.

As a strategic measure, Bhai Maharaj Singh made an attempt to avoid a clash with the mercenaries of the British and became successful in marching towards Kot Panah on his way to Wazirabad. The Resident declared that anyone found giving shelter or succour to the elusive leader will suffer the penalty of getting his nose and ears cut off. Such was the charisma of Bhai Maharaj Singh and such was the fervor he inspired among the nationalist elements that irrespective of such threats and crude behavior of the foreign usurpers, very few paid heed to the British bluff and many wished to join hands with the liberators. A person called Sahib Singh set an example of his loyalty to the cause that in spite of his whole family having been arrested by the British hounds, he joined the forces of Maharaj Singh with all his horsemen in the struggle for liberation. Peeved at such enthusiasm of the common man, the Resident sacked his commanders Lachman Singh and Tek Chand and handed over charge of the expedition to a British functionary, a captain in their army.

The British commander made repeated attempts to apprehend Bhai Maharaj Singh at various places, but he escaped each time and succeeded in reaching Jhang, via Sherkot, giving a slip once again to his pursuers. As his object was to reach Multan, in a hurry he tried to cross a river in a boat, but the British contingent consisting of two hundred tribals at his heels challenged him and there was a bloody skirmish, resulting in casualties in the fighting and drowning in the river. The Bhai had to abandon much of his paraphernalia including a quantity of weapons, and he along with some of his followers succeeded in crossing the stream and escaping. As an act of vengeance, the British commander set a

number of villages on fire, punishing those who had failed to cooperate with him in pinning down the rebel leader.

These deprivations of the Britishers gave them great satisfaction prompting them to send a confidential report to the Council of the Governor General conveying that the actions taken against the 'dacoit' Maharaj Singh had greatly discouraged and demoralized him and these would prove to be a shot in the arm of the British empire. But the reality was different. Such desperate measures of the British increased the popularity of Bhai Maharaj Singh as a symbol of resistance to the foreigners. He was sought after as a leader by the like-minded nationalists, who contributed large quantities of weapons and presented him with cash, which he started distributing among the needy and the poor. Dewan Mul Raj added to these contributions and Maharaj Singh became his ardent supporter. People from the villages started thronging to him and making presents of fruits and flowers.

Maharaj Singh's sympathisers and supporters included a large number of Hindus, which prompted the Britishers to seek the sympathy of Muslims to hunt for the rebel leader. They prepared a strategy to push Maharaj Singh who, with a perch on a black mare, with hordes as his followers had become highly dangerous for the Europeans, towards the Chenab, where the majority of Muslim residents having enjoyed benefits of revenues were quite obliged to the new masters and were not in tune with the nationalistic outlook. They had a soft corner for Maharaj Singh and they willingly cooperated with the British by mounting an attack on the rebel. Quite a few of his comrades were washed away by the strong currents in the river and he himself lost his grip on the tail of his faithful mare and went under. But the joy of the British authority proved short-lived, when they discovered that Maharaj Singh had reached Multan safely. It was said authoritatively that he was received warmly with his nine hundred comrades and was presented with forty gold coins. This piece of information was like a bomb shell to the British Resident. Apprehending a chain reaction in many other disgruntled Sardars who were seething with discontent and were ready to leap towards rebellion against the usurpers, the Resident announced with all callousness at his command that anybody showing sympathy for Dewan Mul Raj would be dealt with severely and his house and other belongings would be reduced to ashes. At the same time a carrot was dangled for those sitting on the fence that anyone prepared to help against Mul Raj would be rewarded with honours and suitable positions.

As ill luck would have it, differences arose between Dewan Mul Raj and Bhai Maharaj Singh on the quantum of recompense paid to the volunteers. The Bhai preferred to leave Multan after about a week, predicting that this place would be run over very soon. He also thought that any possible engagement between him and the British in Multan would deprive him of direct assistance for the Sikh people in Punjab, which in fact would be necessary for him for any decisive action against the adversaries. His quest for a suitable supporter for the task culminated in his securing a partnership with the Attari Sardars, who had no love lost with the Britishers. Bhattar Singh Attariwala pledged his support to Maharaj Singh. To meet Bhattar Singh, the rebel leader had to go to Hazara by a circuitous route. From Multan he went to Pak Pattan, Muktsar, Anandpur, Jawalamukhi and Shivalik Hills. Ultimately he reached Rawalpindi. In the meantime he was successful in enlisting the support of a number of powerful Sikh aristocrats. A large number of volunteers flocked around him which gave him the confidence of putting up a stiff fight against the Europeans.

Among the burgeoning freedom fighters, Maharaj Singh had an aura of authority and a special kind of charisma. His call for resistance became a source of inspiration to his followers, who were eager to show their courage and prowess. In the battle of Ram Nagar,

the Punjabis under Maharaj Singh resisted the onslaught of General Campbell. The British lost three senior officers in the fighting, who were Lieutenant Colonel Havelock, Brigadier General Cruton and Captain Fitzgerald. According to Professor Sita Ram Kohli, though the battle of Ram Nagar was not of much importance, it boosted the morale of the Punjabis. Maharaj Singh was in the vanguard of the whole action. His partner in the struggle, Raja Sher Singh felt highly encouraged, who sent a message to the British that if they promised to leave Lahore, the battle could be ended. But naturally instead of accepting the offer, the British tried to sow the seeds of disaffection in the ranks of the freedom fighters, as a result of which in the effective battle at Chelianwala, Dogra soldiers and a strong contingent of Rohilla strongman walked over to the British side.

The battle of Chelianwala is well recorded in history. It showed heavy losses having been inflicted on the enemy. Punjabis fought like lions and fell upon the 24th Regiment wiping out countless British soldiers. To celebrate the victory, a 21 gun salute was fired by Raja Sher Singh. He again sent a word to the Britishers to restore the throne to Maharaja Dalip Singh and quit Lahore.

This was followed by the battle of Gujarat in which the Punjabis suffered a setback due to the failure in supply lines. As the Attari sardars, Bhai Maharaj Singh and Baba Bikram Singh proceeded towards Rawalpindi, they were given a hot pursuit by General Gilbert with 1500 soldiers and an artillery with 30 guns. Bhai Maharaj Singh suggested to put up a pitched battle with the British at Rawalpindi, or Hasan Abdal, but having lost his courage, Raja Sher Singh laid his arms before General Gilbert on the 14th March, 1849. In impotent rage, the soldiers accepted their helplessness. Bhai Maharaj Singh's heart was filled with resentment over the abject surrender by Sher Singh, but he resolved to continue the struggle singlehandedly and to meet his end.

Facing a hopeless situation, Maharaj Singh moved towards Jammu alongwith a few trusted followers. From there he went to Bhimber and then to Akhnur and Devi Batala. This was a comparatively safe place because of thick jungles and deep ravines. As per chronicles, though Maharaja Gulab Singh was aware of the activities and plans of Maharaj Singh, he did not cause any hindrance in his efforts. The rebel leader chose to move towards Chambi, where he started chalking out plans alongwith his close advisers like Hari Singh, Dal Singh, Jawala Singh, Mehr Singh, Kahn Singh and a few others. Lack of funds for continuing the struggle became the biggest hurdle. Here Maharaj Singh committed a great blunder. At the instigation of a Dogra official, Ram Das, he occupied a fort at Ram Nagar near Chambi, which belonged to the widow of Maharaja Gulab Singh's brother, Suchet Singh. It cannot be said with certainty whether by this act he wanted to raise some money or just wanted the fort as a safe haven. But Prince Ranbir Singh apprehended Ram Das and some followers of Maharaj Singh. The latter was asked to leave the state, as a result of which he went over to Batala near Jasowal in Punjab to set up a camp in a garden outside the city.

Bhai Maharaj Singh chalked out plans to free Maharaj Dalip Singh from the clutches of the British, for which he organized a group of twenty heroic persons. But, unfortunately, the British discovered this conspiracy in time to arrest all members of the team. Later, Henry Lawrence recorded that this was a moment of destiny. Bhai Maharaj Singh, a man of holy spirit, who was the leader of the movement, was the first man who had raised the banner of revolt in 1848 across Multan and was a leader who had not surrendered to Sir Walter Gilbert at Rawalpindi.

The request of Indian freedom fighters to Amir Dost Mohammad of Afghanistan for help against the British was turned down on the professed ground that he lacked the financial means to make such a move. But this did not deter Bhai Maharaj Singh from carrying forward his mission. He toured various places in Punjab with a view to arranging supplies for the volunteers. While proceeding from Ghagar Thana to Kandola, he crossed the river at Wazir Ghat and sojourned at the village Baliwal in Kapurthala. Even as arrangements for mounting an attack on two cantonments were complete, he was taken into custody as he was given away by a Muslim spy.

As Bhai Maharaj Singh fell into the net of the British usurpers, they heaved a sigh of relief. But realizing that their prisoner enjoyed great respect and prestige among people of all communities because of his spiritual eminence as well as his nationalistic zeal, they wanted to shift him to some place where his compatriots could not contact him openly or even surreptitiously. His fellow prisoners were sent away to jails outside the Punjab. These included Raja Sher Singh, Avtar Singh, Lal Singh Muraria, Mehtab Singh Matjithia, Dewan Hakim Rai, Arjan Singh and others. Dewan Mul Raj was also among them, who had been sentenced to death, but whose sentence was commuted later to life imprisonment. Prior to that Prince Dalip Singh was transferred to Fatehgarh, 300 miles away from Lahore, which was to be his first stop on his journey to England, the country of his exile.

It was decided by the Governor General, Lord Dalhousie to put Bhai Maharaj Singh on trial as early as possible. He issued orders, therefore, to Brigadier Wheeler to take the 'prized prisoner' and his personal attendant, Kharag Singh under heavy escort to Allahabad from where they were to be sent to Calcutta.

Consequently, Bhai Maharaj Singh and his attendant were taken from Jalandhar on the 30th January, 1850. From Allahabad to Calcutta they were joined by Dewan Mul Raj and all the three reached Calcutta on the 19th April, 1850. As per the Governor General's orders Mul Raj was to be detained at Calcutta for reasons of his poor health; while Maharaj Singh and Kharag Singh were to be taken to Singapore. They were made to embark on the ship 'Mohammad Shah' on the 15th May, 1850.

That was the last they saw of their motherland, never to return alive. 'Mohammad Shah' laid anchor at Singapore on the 9th June, 1850 and Maharaj Singh was put in a dark and dingy cell in the new jail. The two windows in the cell were bricked, turning it into a virtual hell. Lack of sunlight, constant harassment, loneliness and hopelessness took a heavy toll of the patriot's health and he developed heavy swelling and pain in his feet and ankles. Due to cataract in both his eyes he became almost blind. The Resident Councillor's recommendations for slight relaxation in the conditions of the prisoner's captivity were turned down and the medical advice too was ignored.

Sadly, towards the later part, Bhai Maharaj Singh was discovered with cancer of the tongue because of which his health started declining rapidly. The end came on the 5th July, 1856 and a life so full of energy, enthusiasm, heroism, patriotic fervor and missionary zeal was extinguished. His undying desire was to liberate his country from the colonists whose avarice had brought them from across the seas to exploit our natural resources and to subjugate us politically.

The British ruled India for another century, but they had to quit, eventually, in 1947 after tremendous sacrifices by countless people of India. Bhai Maharaj Singh's was the pioneering spirit, but he was not alone in this saga. The other great freedom-fighters – not often remembered - include Rani Jindan, Dewal Mul Raj, Chattar Singh, Raja Sher Singh

and, above all, Baba Ram Singh, the Namdhari leader who launched his movement on the day of Vaisakhi in 1857. Their names will always remain enshrined in the history of the Indian freedom movement.

