Bhagat Singh

This article is about the revolutionary. For the early immigrant to United States, see Bhagat Singh Thind.

Bhagat Singh (Punjabi pronunciation: [ˈpəɡaːt ˈsɪŋɡ] listen) 1907[4] – 23 March 1931) was an Indian socialist revolutionary whose two acts of dramatic violence against the British in India and execution at age 23 made him a folk hero of the Indian independence movement.

In December 1928, Bhagat Singh and an associate, Shivaram Rajguru, fatally shot a 21-year-old British police officer, John Saunders, in Lahore, British India, mistaking Saunders, who was still on probation, for the British police superintendent, James Scott, whom they had intended to assassinate.[4] They believed Scott was responsible for the death of popular Indian nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai, by having ordered a lathi charge in which Rai was injured, and, two weeks after which, died of a heart attack. Saunders was felled by a single shot from Rajguru, a marksman.[5] He was then shot several times by Singh, the postmortem report showing eight bullet wounds.[6] Another associate of Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad, shot dead an Indian police constable, Chanan Singh, who attempted to pursue Singh and Rajguru as they fled.[5]

After escaping, Singh and his associates, using pseudonyms, publicly owned to avenging Lajpat Rai's death, putting up prepared posters, which, however, they had altered to show Saunders as their intended target.[5] Singh was thereafter on the run for many months, and no convictions resulted at the time. Surfacing again in April 1929, he and another associate, Batukeshwar Dutt, exploded two improvised bombs inside the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi. They showered leaflets from the gallery on the legislators below, shouted slogans, and then allowed the authorities to arrest them. The arrest, and the resulting publicity, had the effect of bringing to light Singh's complicity in the John Saunders case. Awaiting trial, Singh gained much public sympathy after he joined fellow defendant Jatin Das in a hunger strike, demanding better prison conditions for Indian prisoners, and ending in Das's death from starvation in September 1929. Singh was convicted and hanged in March 1931, aged 23.

Bhagat Singh became a popular folk hero after his death. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote about him, "Bhagat Singh did not become popular because of his act of terrorism but because he seemed to vindicate, for the moment, the honour of Lala Lajpat Rai, and through him of the nation. He became a symbol; the act was forgotten, the symbol remained, and within a few months each town and village of the Punjab, and to a lesser extent in the rest of northern India, resounded with his name."[8] In still later years, Singh, an atheist and socialist in life, won admirers in India from among a political spectrum that included both Communists and right-wing Hindu nationalists.

Although many of Singh's associates, as well as many Indian anti-colonial revolutionaries, were also involved in daring acts, and were either executed or died violent deaths, few came to be lionized in popular art and literature to the same extent as Singh.

Early life

Bhagat Singh, a Sandhu Jat Sikh,[9] was born in 1907[4] to Kishan Singh and Vidyavati at Chak No. 105 GB, Banga village, Jaranwala Tehsil, Punjab, British India (now Punjab, Pakistan).
His family was politically active. His grandfather, Arjun Singh followed Swami Dayananda Saraswati's Hindu reformist movement, Arya Samaj, which had a considerable influence on Bhagat. His father and uncles were members of the Ghadar Party, led by Kartar Singh Sarabha and Har Dayal. Ajit Singh was forced into exile due to pending court cases against him while Swaran Singh died at home in Lahore in 1910 following his release from jail.

Unlike many Sikhs of his age, Singh did not visit the Khalsa High School in Lahore. His grandfather did not approve of the school officials' loyalty to the British government. He was enrolled instead in the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic High School, an Arya Samaj institution.

In 1923, Singh joined the National College in Lahore, where he also participated in extra-curricular activities like the dramatics society. In 1923, he won an essay competition set by the Punjab Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, writing on the problems in the Punjab. Inspired by the Young Italy movement of Giuseppe Mazzini, he founded the Indian socialist youth organisation Naujawan Bharat Sabha in March 1926. He also joined the Hindustan Republican Association which had prominent leaders, such as Chandrashekhar Azad, Ram Prasad Bismil and Shahid Ashfaqullah Khan. A year later, to avoid an arranged marriage, Singh ran away to Cawnpore. In a letter he left behind, he said:

*My life has been dedicated to the noblest cause, that of the freedom of the country. Therefore, there is no rest or worldly desire that can lure me now.*

Police became concerned with Singh's influence on youths and arrested him in May 1927 on the pretext that he had been involved in a bombing that had taken place in Lahore in October 1926. 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 in Amritsar and also contributed to low-priced pamphlets published by the Naujawan Bharat Sabha that excoriated the British. He also wrote for Kirti, the journal of the Kirti Kisan Party ("Workers and Peasants Party") and briefly for the Veer Arjun newspaper, published in Delhi. He often used pseudonyms, including names such as Balwant, Ranjit and Vidhrohi.

**Revolutionary activities**

**Lala Lajpat Rai's death and killing of Saunders**

In 1928, the British government set up the Simon Commission to report on the political situation in India. Some Indian political parties boycotted the Commission because there were no Indians in its membership, and there were protests across the country. When the Commission visited Lahore on 30 October 1928, Lala Lajpat Rai led a march in protest against it. Police attempts to disperse the large crowd resulted in violence. The superintendent of police, James A. Scott, ordered the police to lathi charge (use batons against) the protesters and personally assaulted Rai, who was injured. Rai died of a heart attack on 17 November 1928. Doctors thought that his death might have been hastened by the injuries he had received. When the matter was raised in the Parliament of the United Kingdom, the British Government denied any role in Rai's death. Singh conspired with revolutionaries like Shivaram Rajguru, Sukhdev Thapar, and Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar of the Punjab.

The British Government denied any role in Rai's death. Bhagat was a prominent member of the HRA and was probably responsible, in large part, for its change of name to HSRA in 1928. The HSRA vowed to avenge Rai's death. Singh conspired with revolutionaries like Shivaram Rajguru, Sukhdev Thapar, and
Contemporary reaction to the killing differs substantially from the adulation that later surfaced. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha, which had organised the Lahore protest march along with the HSRA, found that attendance at its subsequent public meetings dropped sharply. Politicians, activists, and newspapers, including The People, which Bai had founded in 1925, stressed that non-co-operation was preferable to violence. Instead, they stayed shouting the slogan “Inquilab Zindabad!” (“Long Live the Revolution”) and threw leaflets. The two men were arrested and subsequently moved through a series of jails in Delhi. However, in a case of mistaken identity, the plotters shot John P. Saunders, an Assistant Superintendent of Police, as he was leaving the District Police Headquarters in Lahore on 17 December 1928.\[31\]

Bhagat Singh did not become popular because of his act of terrorism but because he seemed to vindicate, for the moment, the honour of Lala Lajpat Rai, and through him of the nation. He became a symbol, the act was forgotten, the symbol remained, and within a few months each town and village of the Punjab, and to a lesser extent in the rest of northern India, resounded with his name. Innumerable songs grew about him and the popularity that the man achieved was something amazing.\[32\]

**Escape**

After killing Saunders, the group escaped through the D.A.V. College entrance, across the road from the District Police Headquarters. Chanan Singh, a Head Constable who was chasing them, was fatally injured by Chandra Shekhar Azad’s covering fire.\[33\] They then fled on bicycles to pre-arranged safe houses. The police launched a massive search operation to catch them, blocking all entrances and exits to and from the city; the CID kept a watch on all young men leaving Lahore. The fugitives hid for the next two days. On 19 December 1928, Sukhdev called on Durgawati Devi, sometimes known as Durga Bhahati, wife of another HSRA member, Bhagwati Charan Vohra, for help, which she agreed to provide. They decided to catch the train departing from Lahore to Benares \[35\] route to Howrah (Calcutta) early the next morning.\[34\]

Singh and Rajguru, both carrying loaded revolvers, left the house early the next day.\[34\] Dressed in western attire (Bhagat Singh cut his hair, shaved his beard and wore a hat over cropped hair), and carrying Devi’s sleeping child, Singh and Devi passed 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 (now Kanpur). 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.\[35\][34]

**1929 Assembly incident**

For some time, Singh had been exploiting the power of drama as a means to inspire the revolt against the British, purchasing a magic lantern to show slides that enlivened his talks about revolutionaries such as Ram Prasad Bismil who had died as a result of the Kakori conspiracy. In 1929, he proposed a dramatic act to the HSRA intended to gain massive publicity for their aims.\[25\] 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 allow themselves to be arrested so that they could use court appearances as a stage to publicise their cause.\[26\]

The HSRA leadership was initially opposed to Bhagat’s participation in the bombing because they were certain that his prior involvement in the Saunders shooting meant that his arrest would ultimately result in his execution. However, they eventually decided 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.\[37\] The bombs had been designed not to kill,\[27\] but some members, including George Ernest Schuster, the finance member of the Viceroy’s Executive Council, were injured.\[38\] The smoke from the bombs filled the Assembly so that Singh and Dutt could probably have escaped in the confusion had they wished. Instead, they stayed shouting the slogan “Inquilab Zindabad!” (“Long Live the Revolution”) and threw leaflets. The two men were arrested and subsequently moved through a series of jails in Delhi.\[39\]

**Assembly case trial**
According to Neeti Nair, associate professor of history, "public criticism of this terrorist action was unequivocal." Nonetheless, the jailed Bhagat was reported to be elated, and referred to the subsequent legal proceedings as a "drama". Singh and Dutt eventually responded to the criticism by writing the Assembly Bomb Statement:

*We hold human life sacred beyond words. We are neither perpetrators of dastardly outrages ... nor are we 'lunatics' as the Tribune of Lahore and some others would have it believed ... Force when aggressively applied is 'violence' and is, therefore, morally unjustifiable, but when it is used in the furtherance of a legitimate cause, it has its moral justification.*

The trial began 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 concerns the automatic pistol that Singh had been carrying when he was arrested. Some witnesses said that he had fired two or three shots while 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 an article in the *India Law Journal*, the prosecution witnesses were coached, their accounts were incorrect, and Singh had turned over the pistol himself. Singh was given a life sentence. Singh was re-arrested for murdering Saunders and Chanan Singh based on substantial evidence against him, including statements by his associates, Hans Raj Vohra and Jai Gopal. His life sentence in the Assembly Bomb case was deferred until the Saunders case was decided. He was sent to Central Jail Mianwali from the Delhi jail. There he witnessed discrimination between European and Indian prisoners. He considered himself, along with others, to be a political prisoner. He noted that he had received an enhanced diet at Delhi which was not being provided at Mianwali. He led other Indian, self-identified political prisoners he felt were being treated as common criminals in a hunger strike. They demanded equality in food standards, clothing, toiletries, and other hygienic necessities, as well as access to books and a daily newspaper. They argued that they should not be forced to do manual labour or any undignified work in the jail. The hunger strike inspired a rise in public support for Singh and his colleagues from around June 1929. The Tribune newspaper was particularly prominent in this movement and reported on mass meetings in places such as Lahore and Amritsar. The government had to apply Section 144 of the criminal code in an attempt to limit gatherings.

Jawaharlal Nehru met Singh and the other strikers in Mianwali jail. After the meeting, he stated:

*I was very much pained to see the distress of the heroes. They have staked their lives in this struggle. They want that political prisoners should be treated as political prisoners. I am quite hopeful that their sacrifice would be crowned with success.*

Muhammad Ali Jinnah spoke in support of the strikers in the Assembly, saying:

*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 ... 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.*

The government tried to break the strike by placing different food items in the prison cells to test the prisoners' resolve. Water pitchers were filled with milk so that either the prisoners remained thirsty or broke their strike; nobody faltered and the impasse continued. The authorities then attempted force-feeding the prisoners but this was resisted. With the matter still unresolved, the Indian Viceroy,
Lord Irwin, cut short his vacation in Simla to discuss the situation with 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 began there on 10 July 1929. In addition to charging them with the murder of Saunders, Singh and the 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) from his original weight of 133 pounds (60 kg) since beginning the strike.

The government was beginning to make concessions but refused to move on the core issue of recognising the classification of "political prisoner". In the eyes of officials, if someone broke the law then that was a personal act, not a political one, and they were common criminals. 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. Mohammad Alam and Gopi Chand Bhargava resigned from the Punjab Legislative Council in protest, and 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 a request by his father, ending his hunger strike on 5 October 1929 after 116 days. 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 Crown prosecution team comprising C. H. Carden-Noad, Kalandar Ali Khan, Jai Gopal Lal, and the prosecuting inspector, Bakshi Dina Nath. The defence was composed of eight lawyers. Prem Dutt Verma, the youngest amongst the 27 accused, threw his slipper at Gopal when he turned and became a prosecution witness in court. As a result, the magistrate ordered that all the accused should be handcuffed. Singh and others refused to be handcuffed and were subjected to brutal beating. The revolutionary refused to attend the court and Singh wrote a letter to the magistrate citing various reasons for their refusal. The magistrate ordered the trial to proceed without 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 introduced an ordinance to set up a special tribunal composed of three high court judges for the case. This decision cut short the normal process of justice as the only appeal after the tribunal was to the Privy Council located in England.

On 2 July 1930, a habeas corpus petition was filed in the High Court challenging the ordinance on the grounds that it was ultra vires and, therefore, illegal; the Viceroy had no powers to shorten the customary process of determining justice. The petition argued that the Defence of India Act 1915 allowed the Viceroy to introduce an ordinance, and set up such a tribunal, only under conditions of a breakdown of law-and-order, which, it was claimed in this case, had not occurred. However, the petition was dismissed as being premature.

Carden-Noad presented the government's charges of conducting robberies, and the illegal acquisition of arms and ammunition among others. The evidence of G. T. H. Hamilton Harding, the Lahore superintendent of police, shocked the court. 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 depended mainly on the evidence of P. N. Ghosh, Hans Raj Vohra, and Jai Gopal who had been 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 trial ended on 30 September 1930. The three accused, whose charges were withdrawn, included Dutt who had already been given 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 by 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 the participation of Singh, Sukhdev, and Rajguru in Saunders' murder was proven. They were sentenced to death by hanging. Of the other accused, three were acquitted (Ajoy Ghosh, Jatindra Nath Sanyal and Des Raj), Kundan Lal received seven years' rigorous imprisonment, Prem Dutt received five years of the same, and the remaining seven (Kishori Lal, Mahabir Singh, Bijoy Kumar Sinha, Shiv Verma, Gaya Prasad, Jai Dev and Kamalnath Tewari) were all sentenced to transportation for life.

**Appeal to the Privy Council**

In Punjab province, 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...
Reactions to the judgement

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. Some prisoners sent Mahatma Gandhi an appeal to intervene. In his notes dated 19 March 1931, the Viceroy recorded:

*While returning Gandhiji asked me if he could talk about the case of Bhagat Singh because newspapers had come out with the news of his slated hanging on March 24th. It would be a very unfortunate day because on that day the new president of the Congress had to reach Karachi and there would be a lot of hot discussion. I explained to him that I had given a very careful thought to it but I did not find any basis to convince myself to commute the sentence. It appeared he found my reasoning weighty.*

The Communist Party of Great Britain expressed its reaction to the case:

*The history of this case, of which we do not come across any example in relation to the political cases, reflects the symptoms of callousness and cruelty which is the outcome of bloated desire of the imperialist government of Britain so that fear can be instilled in the hearts of the repressed people.*

A plan to rescue Singh and fellow HSRA inmates from the jail failed. HSRA member Durga Devi's husband, Bhagwati Charan Vohra, attempted to manufacture bombs for the purpose, but died when they exploded accidentally.

Execution

Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were sentenced to death in the Lahore conspiracy case and ordered to be hanged on 24 March 1931. The schedule was moved forward by 11 hours and the three were hanged on 23 March 1931 at 7:30 pm in the Lahore jail. It is reported that no magistrate at the time was willing to supervise Singh's hanging as was required by law. The execution was supervised instead by an honorary judge, who also signed the three death warrants, as their original warrants had expired. The jail authorities then broke a hole in the rear wall of the jail, removed the bodies, and secretly cremated the three men 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 tribunal trial

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.

Reactions to the executions

The executions were reported widely by the press, especially as they took place 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". The New York Times reported:

*A reign of terror in the city of Cawnpore in the United Provinces and an attack on Mahatma Gandhi by a youth outside Karachi were among the answers of the Indian extremists today to the hanging of Bhagat Singh and two fellow-assassins.*

Hartals and strikes of mourning were called. The Congress party, during the Karachi session, declared:
While dissociating itself from and disapproving of political violence in any shape or form, this Congress places on record its admiration of the bravery and sacrifice of Bhagat Singh, Sukh Dev and Raj Guru and mourns with their bereaved families the loss of these lives. The Congress is of the opinion that their triple execution was an act of wanton vengeance and a deliberate flouting of the unanimous demand of the nation for commutation. This Congress is further of the opinion that the [British] Government lost a golden opportunity for promoting good-will between the two nations, admittedly held to be crucial at this juncture, and for winning over to methods of peace a party which, driven to despair, resorts to political violence.\[74\]

In the issue of Young India of 29 March 1931, Gandhi wrote:

*Bhagat Singh and his two associates have been hanged. The Congress made many attempts to save their lives and the Government entertained many hopes of it, but all has been in a vain.*

*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. In his last letter, Bhagat Singh wrote, " I have been arrested while waging a war. For me there can be no gallows. Put me into the mouth of a cannon and blow me off." These heroes had conquered the fear of death. Let us bow to them a thousand times for their heroism.*

*But we should not imitate their act. In our land of millions of destitute and crippled people, if we take to the practice of seeking justice through murder, there will be a terrifying situation. Our poor people will become victims of our atrocities. By making a dharma of violence, we shall be reaping the fruit of our own actions.*

*Hence, though we praise the courage of these brave men, we should never countenance their activities. Our dharma is to swallow our anger, abide by the discipline of non-violence and carry out our duty.*\[75\]

**Gandhi controversy**

There have been suggestions that Gandhi had an opportunity to stop Singh's execution but refrained from doing so. Another theory is that Gandhi actively conspired with the British to have Singh executed. In contrast, Gandhi's supporters argue that he did not have enough influence with the British to stop the execution, much less arrange it,\[76\] but claim that he did his best to save Singh's life.\[77\] They also assert that Singh's role in the independence movement was no threat to Gandhi's role as its leader, so he would have no reason to want him dead.\[29\] Gandhi 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.\[76\] Of 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."\[78\] Gandhi also once remarked about 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."\[79\] Gandhi had managed to have 90,000 political prisoners, who were not members of his Satyagraha movement, released under the Gandhi-Irwin Pact.\[29\] According to a report in the Indian magazine *Frontline*, he did plead several times for the commutation of the death sentences 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 arrive too late.\[29\] 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.*\[29\]
Towards the end of the essay, Bhagat Singh wrote:

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.[81]

Historian K. N. Panikkar described Singh as one of the early Marxists in India.[84] The political theorist Jason Adams notes that he was more enamoured with Lenin than with Marx.[82] From 1926 onward, he studied the history of the revolutionary movements in India and abroad. In his prison notebooks, he quoted Lenin in reference to imperialism and capitalism and also the revolutionary thoughts of Trotsky.[85] 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.[86] In spite of his belief in Marxist ideals however, Singh never joined the Communist Party of India.[82]

Atheism

Wikisource has original text related to this article:

Why I am an atheist?

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.[87] 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.[88]

While in prison in 1930–31, Bhagat Singh was approached by Randhir Singh, a fellow inmate, and a Sikh leader who would later found the Akhand Kirtani Jatha. According to Bhagat Singh's close associate Shiva Verma, who later compiled and edited his writings, Randhir Singh tried to convince Bhagat Singh of the existence of God, and upon failing berated him: "You are giddy with fame and have developed an ego that is standing like a black curtain between you and God".[89][h] In response, Bhagat Singh wrote an essay entitled "Why I am an Atheist" to address the question of whether his atheism was born out of vanity. In the essay, he defended his own beliefs and said 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.[91] He acknowledged the fact that religion made death easier, but also said that unproven philosophy is a sign of human weakness.[89] In this context, he noted:

As regard the origin of God, my thought is that man created God in his imagination when he realised his weaknesses, limitations and shortcomings. In this way he got the courage to face all the trying circumstances and to meet all dangers that might occur in his life and also to restrain his outbursts in prosperity and affluence. God, with his whimsical laws and parental generosity was painted with variegated colours of imagination. He was used as a deterrent factor when his fury and his laws were repeatedly propagated so that man might not become a danger to society. He was the cry of the distressed soul for he was believed to stand as father and mother, sister and brother, brother and friend when in time of distress a man was left alone and helpless. He was Almighty and could do anything. The idea of God is helpful to a man in distress.[82]

Towards the end of the essay, Bhagat Singh wrote:
Let us see how steadfast I am. One of my friends asked me to pray. When informed of my atheism, he said, "When your last days come, you will begin to believe." I said, "No, dear sir. Never shall it happen. I consider it to be an act of degradation and demoralisation. For such petty selfish motives, I shall never pray." Reader and friends, is it vanity? If it is, I stand for it.[89]

"Killing the ideas"

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."[92][better source needed] While in 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.[93] 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.[29]

Reception

Singh was criticised both by his contemporaries,[who?] and by people after his death,[who?] 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.[84][95] 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.[95]

Popularity

Subhas Chandra Bose said that: "Bhagat Singh had become the symbol of the new awakening among the youths." Nehru acknowledged that Bhagat Singh's popularity was leading to a new national awakening, saying: "He was a clean fighter who faced his enemy in the open field ... he was like a spark that became a flame in a short time and spread from one end of the country to the other dispelling the prevailing darkness everywhere"[22] Four years after Singh's hanging, the Director of the Intelligence Bureau, Sir Horace Williamson, wrote: "His photograph was on sale in every city and township and for a time rivaled in popularity even that of Mr. Gandhi himself".[22]

Legacy and memorials

See also: Hussainiwala National Martyrs Memorial

Bhagat Singh remains a significant figure in Indian iconography to the present day.[96] His memory, however, defies categorisation and presents problems for various groups that might try to appropriate it. Pritam Singh, a professor who has specialised in the study of federalism, nationalism and development in India, notes that

Bhagat Singh represents a challenge to almost every tendency in Indian politics. Gandhi-inspired Indian nationalists, Hindu nationalists, Sikh nationalists, the parliamentary Left and the pro-armed struggle Naxalite Left compete with each other to appropriate the legacy of Bhagat Singh, and yet each one of them is faced with a contradiction in making a claim to his legacy. Gandhi-inspired Indian nationalists find Bhagat Singh's resort to violence problematic, the Hindu and Sikh nationalists find his atheism troubling, the parliamentary Left finds his ideas and actions as more close to the perspective of the Naxalites and the Naxalites find Bhagat Singh's critique of individual terrorism in his later life an uncomfortable historical fact.[97]

- On 15 August 2008, an 18-foot tall bronze statue of Singh was installed in the Parliament of India, next to the statues of Indira Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose.[98] A portrait of Singh and Dutt also adorns the walls of the Parliament House.[99]
- The place where Singh was cremated, at Hussainiwala on the banks of the Sutlej river, became Pakistani territory during the
The National Martyrs Memorial, built at Hussainiwala in memory of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru. Statues of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev at the India–Pakistan Border, near Hussainiwala. On 17 January 1961, it was transferred to India in exchange for 12 villages near the Sulemanki Headworks. Batukeshwar Dutt was cremated there on 19 July 1965 in accordance with his last wishes, as was Singh's mother, Vidyawati. The National Martyrs Memorial was built on the cremation spot in 1968 and has memorials of Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev. During the 1971 India–Pakistan war, the memorial was damaged and the statues of the martyrs were removed by the Pakistani Army. They have not been returned but the memorial was rebuilt in 1973.

- The Shaheedi Mela (Punjabi: Martyrdom Fair) is an event held annually on 23 March when people pay homage at the National Martyrs Memorial. The day is also observed across the Indian state of Punjab. The Shaheed-e-Azam Sardar Bhagat Singh Museum opened on the 50th anniversary of his death at his ancestral village, Khatkar Kalan. Exhibits include Singh's ashes, the blood-soaked sand, and the blood-stained newspaper in which the ashes were wrapped. A page of the first Lahore Conspiracy Case's judgement in which Kartar Singh Sarabha was sentenced to death and on which Singh put some notes is also displayed, as well as a copy of the Bhagavad Gita with Bhagat Singh's signature, which was given to him in the Lahore Jail, and other personal belongings. The Bhagat Singh Memorial was built in 2009 in Khatkar Kalan at a cost of ₹168 million (US$2.3 million). The Supreme Court of India established a museum to display landmarks in the history of India's judicial system, displaying records of some historic trials. The first exhibition that was organised was the Trial of Bhagat Singh, which opened on 28 September 2007, on the centenary celebrations of Singh's birth.

Modern days

The youth of India still draw tremendous amount of inspiration from Singh. He was voted the "Greatest Indian" in a poll by the Indian magazine India Today in 2008, ahead of Bose and Gandhi. During the centenary of his birth, a group of intellectuals set up an institution named Bhagat Singh Sansthan to commemorate him and his ideals. The Parliament of India paid tributes and observed silence as a mark of respect in memory of Singh on 23 March 2001 and 2005. In Pakistan, after a long-standing demand by activists from the Bhagat Singh Memorial Foundation of Pakistan, the Shadman Chowk square in Lahore, where he was hanged, was renamed as Bhagat Singh Chowk. This change was successfully challenged in a Pakistani court. On 6 September 2015, the Bhagat Singh Memorial Foundation filed a petition in the Lahore high court and again demanded the renaming of the Chowk to Bhagat Singh Chowk.

Films and television

Several films have been made portraying the life and times of Singh. The first film based on his life was Shaheed-e-Azad Bhagat Singh (1954) in which Prem Aabed played the role of Singh followed by Shaheed Bhagat Singh (1963), starring Shammi Kapoor as Bhagat Singh, Shaheed (1965) in which Manoj Kumar portrayed Bhagat Singh and Amar Shaheed Bhagat Singh (1974) in which Som Dutt portrays Singh. Three films about Singh were released in 2002 Shaheed-E-Azam, 23 March 1931: Shaheed and The Legend of Bhagat Singh in which Singh was portrayed by Sonu Sood, Bobby Deol and Ajay Devgn respectively. Siddharth played the role of Bhagat Singh in the 2006 film Rang De Basanti, a film drawing parallels between revolutionaries of Bhagat Singh's era and modern Indian youth. Gurdas Mann played the role of Singh in Shaheed Udham Singh, a film based on life of Udham Singh. Karam Rajpal portrayed Bhagat Singh in Star Bharat's television series Chandrashekhar, which is based on life of Chandra Shekhar Azad.

In 2008, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) and Act Now for Harmony and Democracy (ANHAD), a non-profit organisation, co-produced a 40-minute documentary on Bhagat Singh entitled Inqilab, directed by Gauhar Raza.

Theatre

Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru have been the inspiration for a number of plays in India and Pakistan, that continue to attract crowds.
Songs

Although created by Ram Prasad Bismil, the patriotic Hindustani songs, "Sarfaroshi ki Tamanna" ("The desire to sacrifice") and "Mera Rang De Basanti Chola" ("O Mother! Dye my robe the colour of spring") are largely associated with Singh and have been used in a number of related films.¹²⁹

Other

In 1968, a postage stamp was issued in India commemorating the 61st birth anniversary of Singh.¹³⁰ A ₹5 coin commemorating him was released for circulation in 2012.¹³¹

References

Notes

1. ^ a b c The date of Singh's birth is subject to dispute. Commonly thought to be born on either 27⁹ or 28⁹ September 1907, some biographers believe that the evidence points to 19 October 1907.¹³
2. ^ Although some sources claim that Swaran Singh died after leaving jail, a letter written by Bhagat Singh as a student described his death as occurring while he was imprisoned.¹⁴
3. ^ The National College inside Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore, had been founded by Lala Lajpat Rai to provide an alternative source of education for people who did not want to use schools operated by the British.¹⁹
4. ^ He was secretary of the Kirti Kisan Party when it organised an all-India meeting of revolutionaries in September 1928 and he later became its leader.¹⁶
5. ^ Opposition in India to the Simon Commission was not universal. For example, the Central Sikh League, some Hindu politicians, and some members of the Muslim League agreed to co-operate.²⁷
6. ^ An example of the methods adopted to counterattack attempts at force-feeding is the swallowing of red pepper and boiling water by a prisoner called Kishori Lal. This combination made his throat too sore to permit entry of the feeding tube.⁵⁰
7. ^ Singh incorrectly referred to Niralamba Swami as the author of the book, however Niralamba had only written the introduction.
8. ^ In his own account of the meeting though, Randhir Singh says that Bhagat Singh repented for giving up his religion and said that he did so only under the influence of irreligious people and in search of personal glory. Certain Sikh groups periodically attempt to reclaim Bhagat Singh as a Sikh based on Randhir Singh's writings.⁹⁰

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External links

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| Media from Wikimedia Commons |
The indomitable courage and sacrifice of Bhagat Singh and his comrades will continue to inspire people.

His Violence Wasn't Just About Killing

Bhagat Singh biography, and letters written by Bhagat Singh

The Tribune

Tracing the Martyr's Footsteps in Lahore, The Quint
Bhagat Singh also known as Shaheed Bhagat Singh (28 September 1907 – 23 March 1931) was an Indian socialist and a revolutionary. He is considered to be one of the most influential revolutionaries of the Indian Independence Movement. He was born to Vidyavati and Sardar Kisan Singh Sandhu, in a Sikh jat family on 27 September 1907 in Lyalpur, Punjab in British India. His family had earlier been involved in revolutionary activities against the British Raj. When Bhagat Singh was a teenager, he studied Shaheed Bhagat Singh was an Indian revolutionary who played an important role in the Indian independence movement. This biography profiles his life, childhood, achievements and death. Shaheed Bhagat Singh was an Indian revolutionary who played an important role in the Indian independence movement. This biography profiles his life, childhood, achievements and death. Bhagat Singh (Punjabi pronunciation: [ˈpaŋɡəʈ ˈsiŋɡ]) (listen) 1907 – 23 March 1931) was an Indian socialist revolutionary whose two acts of dramatic violence against the British in India and execution at age 23 made him a folk hero of the Indian independence movement. In December 1928, Bhagat Singh and an associate, Shivaram Rajguru, fatally shot a
21-year-old British police officer, John Saunders, in Lahore, British India, mistaking Saunders, who was still on probation, for the British police