

Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna

[5 January 1870 – 20 December 1968]

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Legendary Babas of the Ghadr Party may be “Babas” is the sense of being the grand fathers of our revolutionary struggle but youthful in their spirit and outlook. Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, the founder President of Ghadr Party which was organized in America in 1913 planned an armed uprising in India to coincide with the war between Germany and England, which seemed imminent. As the war broke out much earlier than they had thought, they had the choice between a premature effort and postponement. They chose the former and the abortive uprising of 19th Feb. 1915 is a milestone in the history of our freedom struggle.

Baba Sohan Singh was born in a well to do peasants’ family. By the time he passed his primary examination he was about 16 and fully grown up. His father had died when he was still an infant. He fell into the company of debauches which led him to orgies of drinking and other sensual pleasures till about 1896 when he came into contact with Baba Kesar, the Namdhari saint. About his ‘Dharam Mata’ (the first wife of his father) and Baba Kesar he always talked with profound respect and love. Thus Sohan Singh the gay indulgent youngman turned to the pursuit of virtue and truth. Rather the historic aspect of the change was that he imbibed the anti-imperialist feeling and the comradeship of the Namdhari Movement. One of the implications was continuous drain on his finances. His financial difficulties made him to migrate to America in 1909.

On his arrival in U.S.A. he was interrogated by the immigration department as usual. Apart from other things they wanted to ensure that the immigrants should not be having proclivity towards bigamy. He bluntly told them he was against second marriage. They asked him as to why was it so when their customs allowed second marriage. Then came the retort so characteristic of him, “It is the duty of individual to take a stand against those social customs that are against his conscience.” Little did the immigration officials understand what lay behind and ahead of these words!

The formation of Ghadr Party is a glorious chapter in the History of Freedom Struggle. Babaji was associated with almost every essential of the organisation and the strategy. When the ship, Komagata Maru was turned back from Canada it was decided by the Secret Commission of the party (which included Baba ji, Bhai Santokh Singh, the secretary and Pandit Kanshi Ram, the treasurer) to send him to Japan to contact its leaders and deliver weapons. Every thing was methodically planned by him and Kartar Singh Sarabha. Young Sarabha bought the ticket and carried the boxes containing weapons to the ship. Baba ji arrived through a devious route to avoid police observation only 15 minutes before departure of the ship. It was 21st July, 1914.

On reaching Yokohama (Japan) he met leaders of the ship like Baba Gurdit Singh, Baba Harnam Singh (Gujranwala) and won them over to the side of revolution. The weapons were also delivered to them of course secretly. Incidentally these weapons were concealed in the water tank of the ship and consequently got a rusted and became

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obsolete. These days the German submarine Amden was delivering fatal blows on ships travelling to India. Baba Ji contacted the German Consul in his heavily guarded house stealthily and within a few minutes fixed up with him a code of signals for the passengers of Komagata Maru. As the war had started, Baba Ji's comrades in America asked him to proceed to India instead of coming back. This is what he did and on landing at Calcutta he was arrested. (October 1914).

He was interned in Multan Jail till he was tried alongwith about 80 other comrades in the famous Lahore Conspiracy Case. Sir Michael O' Dwyer who was the Governor of Punjab at that time took particular interest in the case and was able to procure death sentence for 24 including Baba Ji. As none of them pleaded for 'mercy' the date was fixed for hanging. The 'last night' they spent singing patriotic songs. Baba Ji did not remember any particular song out of them but he remembered the tenor of the songs as — "Our Motherland, we are doing our duty." Usually early in the morning the Jail Officials approach the condemned prisoners with water for their last bath. But the prisoners did not see any buckets. They humourously asked them "Would you deny us even the last bath?" Then they were told that the hanging had been postponed. Actually what had happened was that eminent lawyers had prevailed upon Viceroy that atleast 17 of these 24 had not been able to set their foot on the Indian soil except of course as prisoners. So out of these 24, death sentence of 17 (including Baba Ji) was commuted into life imprisonment. Later these 17 alongwith other life prisoners of the case were sent to Andamans reaching there on 10th December 1915. But perhaps a worse fate awaited them — as Baba ji put it "On reaching Andamans we felt that this was worse then death. I am not sure whether there is any hell or heaven after death, but this was indeed a hell". While in Andamans they struggled against the brutal treatment of the authorities under complete veil of secrecy. During the struggle they lost seven of their dear comrades and under went all kinds of torture. Baba Ji himself had to go on prolonged hunger strikes. One of these was against the confinement of Master Chattar Singh in an iron cage for more than 2 years. Ultimately they succeeded in forcing the Government in closing the Andamans for political prisoners. In 1920 they were brought into Jails of South India where they spent another 7 or 8 years.

Later he was brought to the Lahore Central Jail where he met Sardar Bhagat Singh and other young men like him. Sardar Bhagat Singh and Baba Ji became quite fond of each other. Baba Ji once in a lighter vein asked Bhagat Singh as to why he had adopted this tortuous path while his privileged birth and age should beckon him to lead a life of luxury and ease. S. Bhagat Singh replied that the real fault lay with Baba Ji and his comrades who had embraced death and endured the tortures of Andamans with courage and high spirits. Even after the expiry of his life term he was not released till he undertook a fast unto death for unconditional release. He was released in 1930.

After release he devoted attention to another aspect namely education which remained his life long passion till the last moment. he converted his ancestral house into a girls school and himself started living out side the village at his well. Then came his brief association with Congress and imprisonment in the Civil Disobedience Movement. In the meantime one of the comrades, Baba Jawala Singh (of Thathian) had organized Kisan Sabha. Baba Sohan Singh also became an active worker but Congress did not like its members to work in a class organization. So Baba Ji left Congress. This was followed by a long association with Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party. For sometime he was

acting President of All Indian Kisan Sabha. During this period he had started a “Kirti Kisan Ashram” where he arranged living, work and education of children of patriots and martyrs so that they imbibe the spirit of collective work and sacrifice.

His attachment to martyrs was almost an article of faith with him. In his autobiography (Jeewan Sangram) he writes — “No doubt I do not worship any God but I do worship the Martyrs irrespective of their nationality who laid down their lives to liberate humanity from the clutches of oppressors.” One of the immediate cause of his fatal illness was his dejection on Kartar Singh Sarabha’s martyrdom day on 18th November 1968 at Ludhiana. He got a big shock that such a small number of people had come on such a great occasion. On his deathbed also he kept on remembering these martyrs and constantly taking of the miseries of the common people.

The Village High School near his residence has a sort of memorial which sums up his ideals and kind of will. It runs like this: (Original in Punjabi):

“Which was the first organisation that guided the Country, on the path of freedom and equality?

“It was Ghadr Party.

“Which came into existence in America in March 1913 with the combined efforts of Indian labourers, patriots in exile, and students in America?

“Which raised the banner of freedom?

“Hundreds of martyrs laid down their lives. And hundreds of patriots were thrown into hell like prisons of Andemans for life. Though Ghadr Party could not achieve a complete success, yet the efforts of the party infused life and vitality into the crushed souls of Indian people. And this struggle has added yet another chapter. In the history of freedom struggle, for the guidance of the coming generations. Here lie some of the slogans:

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| 1) Fruits of Unity | Strength and liberty. |
| 2) Results of disunity..... | Weakness and slavery. |
| 3) No unity without | Socialism. |
| 4) Disunity strengthens | Imperialism. |

Arise Youngmen
Age is changing,
Fulfill your duty
Eradicate all kinds of slavery,
May be economic, political or social.
Real religion is humanity.
Long live the People!
By the pen of:
SOHAN SINGH BHAKNA (BABA)”