

SHAHEED BHAGAT SINGH

Malwinder Jit Singh Waraich*

Bhagat Singh was born on 28th September, Saturday, 8.45 AM in 1907 at village Banga (Chak No. 105), District Lyallpur/Faisalabad (Pakistan). It was his grand father Sardar Arjan Singh, who had decided to migrate from their original village Khatkar Kalan, District Jalandhar/Nawanshahr in 1899 or so. In fact, countless farmers had simultaneously shifted from Eastern to Western Punjab with an eye on the fertile virgin land of canal colonies, irrigated by newly dug canals.

Sardar Arjan Singh was an Arya-Samajist, and was an active member of Congress besides being a stout opponent of obsolete social customs, rituals and particularly of the caste system. It was not then surprising that all his three sons Sardar Kishan Singh, Bhagat Singh's father, Sardar Ajit Singh and Sardar Sawaran Singh, the uncles plunged into radical stream of freedom movement. The year of Martyr's birth, 1907 was the year of political turmoil in Punjab. The partition of Bengal in 1905 was the catalyst at the national level and Punjab Colonisation Act for Punjab. Through this Act the Government sought to deprive the farmers settled in canal colonies of their right to ownership of the land which they had made cultivable with hard toil. The farmers were aghast, and chanted '*Pagri Sambhal O' Jatta*' articulating their hurt pride. Expectedly, this family was in the forefront of the agitation, resulting in the exile of S. Kishan Singh to Nepal, banishment of S. Ajit Singh to Burma and imprisonment of S. Sawaran Singh. The Martyr was born under a lucky star, to coincide with the news of the return of the trio, earning him the epithet '*Bhaganwala*', the lucky one, later formally named Bhagat Singh, a name which was to become a legend. As for the 'lady luck, she did smile on the baby but in its own way!

Bhagat Singh, while he was still a child had to reckon with two forlorn *Chachis*, Mata Harnam Kaur w/o S. Ajit Singh who was in exile, no one was sure even of his survival, and Mata Hukam Kaur w/o S. Sawaran Singh who had died in jail at a very young age of 23 in 1910. Both of them doted on the child, who even at that age did not fail to detect a deep-seated melancholy in their psyche. It did not take him long to diagnose the malady, which he aptly identified, as the oppressive rule of foreigners. Often on return from school he would ask in all innocence, whether *Chachi* (Harnam Kaur), had got a letter from *Chacha ji*, little knowing that this question would stir in her psyche a volcano of emotions. Not able to reply, the dejected expression on the face of *Chachi* would incite him to assert that once grown up, he shall have a gun to fight against the British to make India free and see his *Chacha* to be back. Sympathy for the oppressed and anger against the oppressor was embedded deep in his mind since their family house was frequented by radicals of all hues including the *Ghadrites* of 1914-15. Of them, their young hero Kartar Singh Sarabha became his idol and the role model.

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The massacre of Jallianwala Bagh Amritsar, on 13th April, 1919, the auspicious Baisakhi festival shook the nation to its core, and the young Bhagat Singh could not help visiting the bloody site on 14th April to collect the blood-soaked soil which he preserved as a memento all his life. On that day he, instead of going to his school (at Lahore) proceeded straight to Amritsar to return late in the evening, to soothe the nerves of a highly anxious family members. This blood bath was thus a turning point not only in the history of our struggle for freedom, but a kind of watershed in the life of the Martyr too. Another blood-bath perpetrated at the sacred shrine *Gurdwara* at Nankana Sahib, the birth place of first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev ji, just two years thence, when on 20th February 1921 about 150 unarmed Sikh pilgrims were butchered, on the spot and burnt by sprinkling kerosene oil on their mortal remains. Though apparently a religious matter, it had a political angle also. In reality, this massacre was perpetrated by debauch priests/*Mahants*, who controlled and grossly misused the sacred premises and vast landed property attached to the shrines. These *Mahants* were regarded as apostates by the Sikhs, and a *Gurdwara* reform movement had been launched to dislodge them but they were supported by the Government to the hilt. Bhagat Singh again, was deeply moved when he went to Nankana Sahib on 5th March 1921 to attend a big conference, from where he carried back a calendar commemorating the brutal killings. Also he started wearing a black-turban like many others, viewed as a mark of protest and defiance, besides learning Punjabi/*Gurmukhi*, the medium of *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred Sikh scripture, a language learnt mostly by the devout Sikhs in days of yore. Interestingly, Bhagat Singh had already acquired good command over Urdu, Hindi and Sanskrit, though he had to struggle later to master English. All the same, Martyrs' learning of Punjabi came handy to him while writing for *Kirti* magazine, series of articles, mostly bio-sketches of martyrs. Soon after, he left D.A.V. High School Lahore, on the call of Gandhi ji's Non-Cooperation Movement which had exhorted the students of government aided or recognised institutions to shift to National Schools/Colleges. Bhagat Singh who was yet in his 9th Class too sought admission in National College Lahore, for which he was required to pass a pre-admission test, which he did.

It was during his stay in this college that he came into contact with quite a few of his future associates such as Sukhdev, Bhagwati Charan Vohra, Yashpal and the like. Above all the entire atmosphere of the college including its syllabus, library books, and the teachers was designed to encourage radical political consciousness. The Martyr became a voracious reader, a trait which became his second nature. His college career was cut short soon after having passed his F.A. examination when he chose to leave home because of the determined efforts of his family elders to get him married. This happened in second half of the year 1923. He spent about 6 months of separation from his family at Kanpur, where he was initiated into the art of journalism by famous nationalist Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi, editor of *Partap*, and had also made initial contacts with Hindustan Republican Association, popularly known as Kakori group. He jumped into the active revolutionary movement and was actively involved thereafter in setting up a HRA unit in Punjab with the cooperation of Sukhdev.

Soon after his return to home in early 1924, he had to go underground in April 1924 for having organised food/*langar* for a 500 strong band of *Satyagrahis* in connection with Gurdwara Jaito agitation, while it halted in his village Chak 105 Banga, Distt. Lyallpur for lunch. He remained underground till December 1925, during which period he remained mostly at Delhi or in U.P.

In early 1926 he organised *Naujwan Bharat Sabha*, along with Comrade Ram Chander and Bhagwati Charan Vohra, Sukhdev and other comrades. It was an open organisation, a public platform for the revolutionaries. It had a wide social uplift agenda, including promotion of communal harmony.

While he was in the thick of his revolutionary activities, he was arrested by Lahore police on 29th May 1927 and remained under arrest till 4 July 1927 when his father S. Kishan Singh was able to get his released on a bail bond of Rs. 60,000! His father thrashed Bhagat Singh even before he met his other family members with a big stick/*Khunda* while the son kept joking and laughing. Incidentally, this kind of treatment for the wayward son was not rare!

A new outfit was formed at Delhi on 8-9 September 1928 called Hindustan Socialist Republican Association/Army. It aimed at making India a Socialist Republic through a revolution. The first major action of H.S.R.A. was the murder of Assistant Superintendent of Police J.P. Saunders on 17th December 1928, for being instrumental in *lathi* charge in which Lala Lajpat Rai was injured, leading to his death. A poster was issued by H.S.R.A. owning the murder and proclaiming their faith in revolution, but as far as possible by avoiding 'shedding of human blood'.

After a three month conclave at Agra during early 1929, a bomb was dropped by Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutta in Central Assembly on 8.4.1929 without doing physical harm to anyone and then surrendering to the police for arrest. Again posters were dropped after the explosion claiming that this was the only way to make the 'deaf hear'. They also made an elaborate statement in the trial court enunciating their concept of revolution and the slogan shouted by them after the explosion, *Inqulab Zindabad*, resounded throughout the country.

Soon after, most of his comrades were arrested and though Bhagat Singh and Dutta had already been sentenced to transportation for life, they too were to face another trial along with their other comrades, in the Lahore Conspiracy Case.

While in jail they had to go on hunger strikes for more than two months at a stretch to vindicate their right to a humane treatment. Above all they had to sacrifice their dear comrade Jatin Das, the bomb expert in this struggle. They were, then able to win over heartfelt sympathies of the public.

They faced the trial, rather celebrated it by shouting revolutionary slogans. They celebrated it also by observing 'Days' like 'May Day', 'Lenin Day', 'Kakori Day' and so on. As for the proceedings in the courts, they aimed only at exposing the entire affairs as a drama, showing little concern for their own 'defence'. Ultimately three of them Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukhdev were sentenced to death and most of the rest to transportation for life.

From the date of the judgement, 7th October 1930 to 23rd March, 1931, a lot of petitions were filed by public spirited lawyers both in India and in the Privy Council in England. None of these, was, however, filed on behalf of the accused. All the petitions were based on law points.

Bhagat Singh, Sukh Dev and Raj Guru in their letter to the Punjab Governor, sent on 20th March, pleaded on behalf of three of them to be shot by a military squad instead of being hanged, since they had been found guilty of 'waging war' and were hence war prisoners.

Ultimately the Government decided to hang them on 23rd March at 7 P.M. (instead of on 24th morning) but to disclose the news on 24th morning. The families of the Martyrs could not have their last meeting with their departing dear ones on 23rd March due to stubborn attitude of the authorities.

They went to the gallows chanting patriotic songs, and shouting slogans while mocking at death and at the system that perpetuated the unjust order.

S. Ajit Singh (1881-15 August 1947) — the younger brother of Sardar Kishan Singh, father of Shahid Bhagat Singh struggled and suffered for forty seven long years both at home and exile before he expired in 'forty seven'. The first part of his life is marked by his outstanding role in Agrarian Agitation of 1907, *Pagri Sambhal O' Jatha*, against the draconian colonisation Act seeking to deprive the colony's settlers of their ownership rights, whereupon he was sent in exile to Burma along with Lala Lajpat Rai. Upon his return from exile, he, in order to evade his imminent arrest left India for Iran, thence for Europe ultimately reaching Brazil in South America. All this while he pursued with unremitting zeal his cherished goal of India's liberation from foreign rule. He returned to India only in March 1947 to breathe his last with India's tryst with destiny, the 15th of August 1947.
