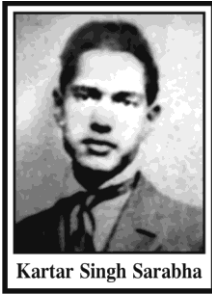


Shri Kartar Singh



A staunch devotee of *Ran Chandi* the goddess of war, rebel Kartar Singh was not even 20 years of age when he had laid down his life at the altar of liberation. He appeared on the scene like a tornado, attempted to stir the sleeping goddess of wars, ignited the revolt, and finally offered his life to the very same fire. Who was he? Where did he descend from? And wherefore did he vanish? We are unable to fathom it all. One marvels at how someone has been able to accomplish such gigantic deeds at such a raw age. Such audacity, self-confidence, sense of sacrifice, intensity, and dedication is rare indeed. There are very few who could be termed as real revolutionaries in India. Sh. Kartar Singh heads the list of these few true revolutionaries. Rebellion ran through his veins and his singular ideal, desire, and hope was this rebellion. He lived and died for the same.

He was born at village Sarabha (District Ludhiana) in 1896 (on 24th May — Ed.). The only son of his parents; he was brought up with immense love and care. Having lost his father at a very tender age, his grandfather brought him up with best efforts. His father's name was Sardar Mangal Singh; one of his uncles was a police sub-inspector in the United Province and another uncle was a high official in the forest department in Orissa. After his initial education at the village school, Kartar Singh took admission in Khalsa High School, Ludhiana. Academically he was an average student. Mighty mischievous, he would play pranks on others and was termed as '*Aflatoon*' (plato) by his classmates. He was loved by everyone, had a separate group at school and was a leading sportsperson. He possessed all the qualities of a leader. After studying up to class 9th, he left for Orissa to be with his uncle. Having passed his matriculation examination there and joined college. It was the year 1910-11. He got a chance to expand his horizons by reading books much beyond the squeezed school curriculum. Those were the days of the freedom movement and that atmosphere further intensified his sentiments of patriotism and freedom.

He desired to go to the USA. The family was supportive of his desire and sent him there. In 1912, after landing at the San Francisco port, the immigration authorities quarantined him for special questioning. On being questioned by the officer he replied, "I have come here for studies."

Officer said, "Didn't you find any place to study in India."

He answered, "I have come for higher studies and intend to take admission in the University of California for that purpose."

"And if you are denied permission to land?"

To this Kartar Singh replied instantly saying, "I would consider that a grave injustice. If hurdles are created in the path of students, the progress of the world would stop. Who knows the education here might empower me to accomplish some great deed for the good of the world. In case I am disallowed to disembark, won't the world suffer due to the lack of that great deed?"

Impressed with this answer, the officer allowed him to disembark.

His sensitive soul suffered deep wounds at each and every step after his landing in a free nation. He was maddened at hearing phrases like "damn Hindoo" and "black coolie" from the haughty white-Americans. The lack of respect for his nation by the Americans disturbed him a great deal. On reaching his abode, the images of an enslaved, shackled, insulted, helpless, impotent India would flash before his eyes. That sensitive in him began to harden, and the resolve to dedicate his life for the freedom of the nation got stronger all this while. How could we comprehend the state of his heart? Now, it was impossible for him to sit still; that won't do anymore. How would the country gain independence — this was the main challenge before him. And, before giving much thought, he started organizing Indian workers there instilling love for freedom in them. He would spend hours with each individual, impressing upon them the sentiment that death is many a time preferable to the humiliating life of a slave. After the commencement of this task, many others joined him and in May 1912, a meeting was organised by these six persons who pledged to sacrifice

their body and soul for securing freedom for the nation. In the meanwhile, Gyani Bhagwan Singh, an exiled patriot from Punjab too reached there. Meetings were being held at a hectic pace, where ideas were being disseminated, and groundwork prepared.

Thereafter, the need for a paper for propaganda purposes was felt. A newspaper named “Gadar” was launched. The first edition was published in November 1913, and our hero Kartar Singh was a member of the editorial board. He would write fervently and print it himself on the hand-press. Kartar Singh was a zealously rebellious young man. When exhausted by his work at the hand-press, he would sing this Punjabi song:

*Sewa desh di jindriye bari aukhi,
galan karnian dher sukhalian ne.
Jinhan desh sewa wich pair paya,
unhan lakh Musibtan jhalian ne.*

[Hard is the path of patriotism, easy enough uttering of speeches. Those who follow the path of service of Motherland, have to bear countless torments.]

Kartar Singh’s style of hard work was infectious. Despite that he would always have a cheerful disposition which motivated others manifold.

Our hero had well considered how freedom would be secured for India, even if no one else had given it much thought. In September 1914, when Komagata Maru ship had to turn back after undergoing indescribable suffering at the hands of brutal white bureaucracy, our hero, along with another revolutionary, Mr. Gupta had flown to Japan. There, they discussed the future strategy at length with Baba Gurdit Singh ji in the city of Kobe.

At the *Ghadr* press at the Yugantar Ashram, San Francisco, many publications such as *Ghadr* and *Ghadr di Goonj* were printed and distributed. Propaganda was in full swing, and so was enthusiasm. In February 1914 itself, the tricoloured party flag was hoisted at a public meeting in Stockton and pledges were taken in the name of freedom, equality, and fraternity. Amongst the many effective orators in that meeting included young Kartar as well, all the speakers had declared their commitment to hard work and investing every single penny earned by the sweat of their brow towards securing liberation for the country. Soon, the World War broke out. This generated endless happiness and enthusiasm, and they all sang — “Let’s proceed to our country to launch our war/this is our ultimate compact and command.”

Rebel Kartar vastly publicised the idea of return to India in America and then left USA for India by ‘Nippon Maru’ ship. The ship reached Colombo on Sept. 15-16, 1914. Those days most of the Indians used to get arrested on their return from overseas under Foreigners’ Ingress Ordinance. Only a few could manage to reach home as free men. Kartar Singh was one of them. The work started with tremendous gusto. There was lack of organisation but somehow they managed to overcome it. The Maratha hero Pingle too arrived in December 1914. It was with great efforts that the leaders of Banaras conspiracy Sh. Shachindra Nath Sanyal and Ras Bihari too came down to Punjab. The work began to get fully organised.

Kartar Singh was present everywhere at all times; be it the secret society meeting at Moga; propaganda among students in Lahore colleges; weapons for dacoity; establishing a support base within the sepoy of the Ferozepur cantonment; or carrying weapons to Calcutta (The judges held him and him alone out of hundreds of Ghadrites as ubiquitous and the same expression was used about his Bhagat, that too for him alone. — Ed.) On learning about the paucity of resources, some of the Ghadrites proposed resorting to dacoities. Many of the revolutionaries were stunned to hear about the dacoity, but he exclaimed that Bhai Parmanand has consented to dacoity and there was no reason to fear. He was entrusted the responsibility of seeking his approval. The next day, without meeting Bhai Parmanand and seeking his specific approval, he informed, “I have asked him. He has consented.”

In his heart of hearts could never tolerate the delay in the preparation for the uprising due to a lack of funds. They had gone to a village named ‘Rabbon’, for dacoity. Kartar was the leader, and the dacoity operation was in full swing. There was an extremely beautiful girl in a house. One of the accomplices cast a bad eye at her and held her hand. Seeing that lusty beast, the girl started

screaming. Kartar immediately rushed there and aimed his revolver at the miscreant upon which he dropped his gun. A furious Kartar Singh roared, "Villain, your crime is very serious and you should be put to death. However due to special circumstances I am forced to forgive you. Therefore bow your head at this girl's feet and seek her forgiveness by saying, 'Sister, please forgive a sinner like me,' and seek forgiveness of her mother by falling at her feet too. If both of them forgive you, only then I would let you live; otherwise, I am going to shoot you dead here and now." That villain complied likewise. Both the women had tears in their eyes, and the mother lovingly addressed Kartar Singh, "Son, how come such a righteous and decent young man like you is participating in this evil deed of dacoity?" Kartar Singh with a lump in his throat, said, "Mother, it is not for the greed of money. We have put our lives on the stake for preparing for a revolt against the English government. We need money for buying weapons. Where else can we get the money? Mother, it is for that noble cause that we have been forced to commit this lowly act."

It was a heart-rending scene: The mother said, "This girl has to be married off, and money is needed. It would be beneficial if you could leave some." The entire loot was placed before her, and it was said, "Take as much as you wish." After keeping some amount, the mother gracefully put the rest in Kartar's lap and blessed him saying, "I wish you success." This episode illustrates what a sensitive, pure, and noble being Kartar Singh was, even during his participation in a base act like a dacoity.

Before coming into contact with the Bengal group, he had already planned the attack on the magazine of the Lahore cantonment. Once, he met with an army soldier in a train who was in-charge of the magazine and who promised to give him the keys. On November 25th, he reached there along with a few other daring comrades. However, that soldier had been transferred to some other place a day earlier. This led to the collapse of the entire plan. However, to get disheartened or anxious is not in the genes of such revolutionaries.

The revolt was planned for the month of February. He, along with comrades, went to Agra, Kanpur, Allahabad, Benaras, Lucknow, and Meerut; and tied up plans with the army regiments for the revolt.

Finally that day drew near whose very thought evoked thrills, fondness, and awe. 21st February, 1915, was the day fixed for an all-India revolt. All the plans were underway in accordance with that. However, at the very same time, there was a rat biting away the roots of the tree of their aspirations. They were unaware that the hollow trunk would fall down with a single gust of wind. The suspicion arose 4-5 days prior to the set date. Fearing that the operation would fail because of the treachery of Kirpal, Kartar Singh suggested to Rasbihari Bose to pre-pone the date to the 19th instead of the 21st of February.

Kirpal Singh got wind of the new plan as well. A single villain's existence led to such a tragic end to the great plan of a grand revolt — what else but ill luck.

Yet as per the plan, Kartar, along with 50-60 others, reached the Ferozepur cantonment on 19th February. After a few hours, hence Kartar Singh would hoist the tricolour on the soil of India, the battle would ensue. It would be the day when Guru Gobind Singh's disciple Kartar, and his comrades would be fired by the zeal to do and die.

Kartar Singh entered the cantonment and met with the army havildar who had promised support. They talked about the revolt, but Kirpal had already done the damage and the Indian soldiers were disarmed already. There was a spate of arrests. The havildar flatly declined help despite Kartar Singh's entreaties. Dejected and disappointed, he and the gathered Ghadrites returned. The entire effort and hard work went waste. There were rampant arrests in Punjab. A number of revolutionaries turned approvers and began to feel disillusioned at their earlier ideals. Someone was getting arrested today, while someone else was spilling the beans on his comrades. In such a disappointing state, Ras Babu and Kartar Singh were thoroughly broken-hearted. It is difficult for us to imagine the extent of their anguish:—

We were destined to rack our brain to improvise,
Alas, the resources to try, luck eluded us.

It was decided to leave Punjab by crossing the western border. The three who crossed the British India border included Sh. Kartar Singh, Sh. Jagat Singh, and Sh. Harnam Singh Tundilat. After crossing a desert mountain, they came across a picturesque spot. A beautiful stream was flowing, where they sat at its bank, and started munching roasted gram. After the snacks, Kartar Singh began to sing:

Bani Sir Seran de, ki jala bhaj ke?

[With death staring in their faces, where would the lions run to?]

Sensitive Kartar was a poet too, and had written this poem while in America, which implies, “Why run away, when the challenge is staring us in the face?” He sang this reoccurring in his melodious voice, and then suddenly stopped and asked one of his companions, “What do you think, Jagat Singh, was this poem written for others? Shouldn’t we be responsive to it as well, when our comrades are in dire straits?” They looked at each other and decided to come back to India to join their comrades, knowing fully well that death was awaiting them. They intensely wished for the outbreak of a strife where they may be able to sacrifice their lives, fighting away. They went to Chak Number 5, near Sargodha to the lines of a cavalry regiment in which Jagat Singh had once served, but were shortly arrested there and shackled, and put to chains. Fearless, captive rebel Kartar Singh when brought to the Lahore station, said to the police Supdt., “Mr. Tomkin, please get me something to eat.” How light-hearted he was! Seeing his attractive visage, friends and foes alike would get charmed. He was in his natural best at the time of his arrest, and often used to say, “After dying fearlessly, I should be given epithet ‘Rebel’. I should be remembered as Rebel Kartar Singh.”

His restless heart was still not pacified even after he was behind the bars. One day he managed to obtain tools to cut through the prison bars, and contacted 60-70 under-trial prisoners. It was decided that except for the 4-5 extremely weak and innocent, all else should escape from the prison. The news was received that the in-charge of the Lahore cantonment magazine was ready to assist the prisoners. It was decided that after the jail-break, 50-60 persons would straightaway go to the Lahore cantonment and get equipped with the weaponry from the magazine, and thereafter restart the revolt. It was thought that more prisoners be freed from other prisons so that they all join hands in the revolt. But in those days of dejection and failure, such a ray of hope was nothing but a mirage. One of the ordinary prisoners got wind of this plan leading to the confinement of everybody in their cells. All were shackled and searched, resulting in recovery of tools from a pit under the water pot. All efforts ended in a naught.

Kartar Singh was only 18 and a half years old when the trial began. He was the youngest of all accused. However, the judge wrote, “He is one of the most important of these 61 accused; and has the largest dossier of them all. There is practically no department of this conspiracy in America, on the voyage, and in India, in which this accused has not played his part.”

On the day of the recording of his statement, Kartar Singh admitted everything. Seeing him confess, the judge stopped writing. Throughout the day, Kartar Singh continued his statement. With the pen between his lips, the judge kept staring at Kartar without writing anything. Later, he just said, “Kartar Singh, your statements have not been recorded. Give your statement thoughtfully. You know what would be the consequences these statements of yours.” Those who were present in the court scene narrated that after the above-mentioned words of the judge, Kartar Singh nonchalantly said, “You would hang me to death? What else? We are not afraid of that.” The court was adjourned that day. The next day, Kartar Singh’s statement started again. The judges were under the belief that Kartar Singh had given his earlier statement at the behest of Bhai Parmanand. They, however, could not fathom the profundity of the young heart. Kartar Singh’s statement was more forceful, more spirited, and confessional than that of the day before. Finally he said, “For my offence, I would either be given life imprisonment or death by hanging. But I would prefer hanging so that I may be reborn soon and get reborn for India’s war of freedom. Till India achieves freedom, I desire to take birth time and again, and go to the gallows. And if I am born as a woman in my next birth, then I shall give birth to such like revolutionaries.”

The judges were impressed his audacity, yet they did not have any soft corner for his bravery. Rather, they wrote like a petty minded enemy, “He is a young man, no doubt, but he is certainly one of the worst of these conspirators, and is a thoroughly callous scoundrel, proud of his exploits, to whom no mercy, whatever, can be, or should be shown.”

Brave and benevolent enemies do not behave in such a fashion with a defeated soldier, but this is exactly how it happened here. Kartar Singh was not only stigmatised, but also given the death penalty. He was an astute revolutionary who could manage to dupe the police on his trail. Many a time he had drunk water from the very hands of the cops before giving them a slip, but today, he was given the death penalty for revolt and rebellion. Smiling valiantly, he said to the judge, “Thank you!”

Kartar’s grandfather visited him when he was locked in his death cell. He asked, “Kartar, what special event in your life turned you into a worshipper of the goddess of death. Those for whom you are giving away your life call you names. I don’t even see the country gaining anything out of your death.” Kartar Singh politely asked him, “Grandpa, where is that person?”

“Died of plague.”

“Where is so and so?”

“Died of cholera.”

“Do you wish that Kartar Singh should be bed-ridden and wailing in pain, die due to some such disease? Isn’t this death better than that sort of death?” The grandfather just became mum.

Today, the question rises again. What was achieved by his death? What did he die for? His ideal was to sacrifice his life for the nation, and did not wish anything else. He wanted to die anonymously. His ideal was to die — unsung, unhonoured, and unwept.

Chaman zar-e-mohabbat men, usi ne ki bagbani
Jisne mehnat ko hi mehnat ka samar janna
Naheen hota mohtaj-e-jumaish faiz shabnam ka,
Andheri raat men moti luta jatee hai gulshan men.
Only that gardener tended the garden of love,
Who regarded his labour to be its reward
(just as) The dew shuns show off
(and thus) Bestows its pearls (dew) surreptitiously during pitch dark night.

The trial lasted for one and a half years. It was probably the month of November (16) in 1915 when he was hanged to death. As ever, he was in high morale and had even gained a weight of 5 kilos. Chanting ‘Hail to Mother India’ he embraced the gallows.

— ‘Balwant’ (Bhagat Singh’s pen name. — Ed.)