

Blood Sprinkled on the Day of Holi

Babbar Akalis on the Crucifix

Bhagat Singh

March 15, 1926

ON THE DAY OF HOLI, FEBRUARY 27, 1926, WHEN WE were getting high on our enjoyment, a terrible thing was happening in a corner of this great province. When you will hear it, you will shudder ! You will tremble ! On that day, six brave Babbar Akalis were hanged in the Lahore Central Jail. Shri kishan Singhji Gadagajja, Shri Santa Singhji, Shri Dilip Singhji, Shri Nand Singhji, Shri Karam Singhji and Shri Dharam Singhji, had been showing a great indifference to the trial for the last two years, which speaks of their fond waiting for this day. After months, the judge gave his verdict. Five to be hanged, many for life imprisonment or exile, and sentences of very long imprisonments. The accused heroes thundered. Even the skies echoed with their triumphant slogans. Then an appeal was preferred. Instead of five, now six were sent to the noose. The same day the news came that a mercy petition was sent. The Punjab Secretary declared that the hanging would be put off. We were waiting but, all of a sudden, on the very day of Holi, we saw a small contingent of mourners carrying the dead bodies of the heroes towards the cremation site. Then last rites were completed quietly.

The city was still celebrating. Colour was still being thrown on the passers-by. What a terrible indifference. If they were misguided, if they were frenzied, let them be so. They were fearless patriots, in any case. Whatever they did, they did it for this wretched country. They could not bear injustice. They could not countenance the fallen nation. The oppression on the poor people became insufferable for them. They could not tolerate exploitation of the masses, they challenged and jumped into action. They were full of life. Oh ! the terrible toll of their dedicated deeds ! You are blessed ! After the death, friends and foes are all alike-this is the ideal of men. Even if they might have done something hateful, their lives at the altar of our nation, is something to the opposite side, could highly and uninhibitedly appreciate the courage, patriotism and commitment of the brave revolutionary of Bengal, Jatin Mukherjee, while mourning his death. But we the cowards and human wretches lack the courage of even sighing and putting off our celebrations even for a moment. What a disheartening deed ! The poor ! they were given the "adequate" punishment even by the standard of the brutal bureaucrats. An act of a terrible tragedy thus ended, but the curtain is not down as yet. The drama will have some more terrible scenes. The story is quite lengthy, we have to turn back a little to know about it.

The Non-Cooperation Movement was at its peak. The Punjab did not lag behind. The Sikhs also rose from their deep slumber and it was quite an awakening. The Akali Movement was

started. Sacrifices were made in abundance. Master Mota Singh, ex-teacher of Khalsa Middle School, Mahalpur (district Hoshiarpur), delivered a speech. A warrant was issued against him, but the idea of availing of the hospitality of the crown did not find his favour. He was against offering arrest to fill the jails. His speeches still continued. In Kot-Phatuhi village, a big 'Deevan' was called. Police cordoned the area off from all sides; even then Master Mota Singh delivered his speech. The whole audience stood up and dispersed on the orders of the president of the meeting. The Master escaped mysteriously. This hide-and-seek continued for long. The government was in a frenzy. At last, a friend turned traitor, and Master Saheb was arrested after a year and a half. This was the first scene of that horrible drama.

The "Guru ka bagh" movement was started. The hired hoodlums were there to attack the unarmed heroes and to beat them half-dead. Could anyone who looked at or listened to this, help being mover ? It was a case of arrests and arrests everywhere. A warrant was also issued against Sardar Kishan Singhji Gadagajja, but he also belonged to the same category and did not offer arrest. The police strained all its nerves but he always escaped. He had an organisation of his own. He could not bear the violence against unarmed agitators. He felt the need of using arms along with this peaceful movement.

On the one hand, the dogs, the hunting dogs of the government, were searching for the clues, to get his scent; on the other, it was decided to "reform" the sycophants (Jholi Chukkas). Sardar Kishan Singhji used to say that we must keep ourselves armed for our own security, but we should not take any precipitate action for the time being. The majority was against this. At last, it was decided that three of them should give their names, take all the blame on themselves and start reforming these sycophants. Sardar Karam Singhji, Sardar Dhanna Singhji and Sardar Uday Singhji stepped forward. Just keep aside the question of its propriety for a moment and imagine the scene when they took the oath:

We will sacrifice our all in the service of the country. We swear to die fighting but not to go to the prison.

What a beautiful, sanctified scene it must have been, when these people who had given up all of their family affections, were taking such an oath ! Where is the end of sacrifice ? Where is the limit to courage and fearlessness ? Where does the extremity of idealism reside ?

Near a station on Shyam Churasi-Hoshiarpur railway branch line, a Subedar became the first victim. After that, all these three declared their names. The government tried its best to arrest them, but failed. Sardar Kishan Singh Gadagajja was once almost trapped by the police near Roorki Kalan. A young man who accompanied him, fell down after getting injured, and was captured. But even there, Kishan Singhji escaped with the help of his arms. He met a Sadhu on the way who told him about a herb in his possession which could materialise all his plans and work miracles. Sardarji believed him and visited this Sadhu unarmed. The Sadhu gave him some herbs to prepare and brought the police in the meanwhile. Sardar Saheb was arrested. That Sadhu was an inspector of the CID department. The Babbar Akalis stepped up their activities. Many pro-government men were killed. The doab land lying in between Beas and Sutlej, that is, the districts of Jullundur and Hoshiarpur, had been there on the political map of the country, even before this. The majority of martyrs of 1915 belonged to these districts. Now again, there was the upheaval. The police department used all its power at its command, which proved quite useless. There is a small river near Jullundur; "Chaunta Sahib" Gurudwara is located there in a village on the banks of the river. There Shri Karam Singhji, Shri Dhanna Singhji, Shri Uday Singhji and Shri Anoop Singhji were sitting with a few others, preparing tea. All of a sudden, Shri Dhanna

Singhji said : “Baba Karam Singhji ! We should at once leave this place. I sense something very inauspicious happening.” The 75-year old Sardar Karam Singh showed total indifference, but Shri Dhanna Singhji left the place, along with his 18-year old follower Dilip Singh. Quite suddenly Baba Karam Singh stared at Anoop Singh and said: “Anoop Singh, you are not a good person”, but after this, he himself became unmindful of his own premonition. They were still talking when police made a declaration: Send out the rebels, otherwise the village will be burnt down. But the villagers did not yield.

Seeing all this, they themselves came out. Anoop Singh ran with all the bombs and surrendered. The remaining four people were standing, surrounded from all sides. The British police captain said: “Karam Singh ! drop the weapons and you will be pardoned.” The hero responded challengingly: “We will die a martyr’s death while fighting, as a real revolutionary, for the sake of our motherland, but we shall not surrender our weapons.” He inspiringly called his comrades. They also roared like lions. A fight ensued. Bullets flew in all directions. After their ammunition exhausted, these brave people jumped into the river and bravely died after hours of ceaseless fighting.

Sardar Karam Singh was 75 years old. He had been in Canada. His character was pure and behaviour ideal. The government concluded that the Babbar Akalis were finished, but actually they grew in strength. The 18-year old Dilip Singh was a very handsome and strong, well-built, though illiterate, young man. He had joined some dacoit gang. His association with Shri Dhanna Singhji turned him from a dacoit into a real revolutionary. Many notorious dacoits like Banta Singh and Variyam Singh, too, gave up dacoity and joined them.

There were not afraid of death. They were eager to wash their old sins. They were increasing in number day-by-day. One day when Dhanna Singh was sitting in a village named. Mauhana, the police was called. Dhanna Singh was down with drinks and caught without resistance. His revolver was snatched, he was handcuffed and brought out. Twelve policemen and two British officers had surrounded him. Exactly at that moment there was a thunderous noise of explosion. It was the bomb exploded by Dhanna Singhji. He died on the spot along with one British officer and ten policemen. All the rest were badly wounded.

In the same fashion, Banta Singh, Jwala Singh and some others were surrounded in a village named Munder. They all were gathered on the roof of a house. Short were fired, a cross-fire ensued for some time, but then the police sprinkled kerosene oil by a pump and put the house on fire. Banta Singh was killed there, but Variyam Singh escaped even from there.

It will not be improper here to describe a few more similar incidents. Banta Singh was a very courageous man. Once he snatched a horse and a rifle from the guard of the armoury in the Jullundur Cantonment. Those days several police squads were desperately looking for him; one such squad confronted him somewhere in the forest. Sardar Saheb challenged them immediately: “If you have courage, come and confront me.” On that side, there were slaves of money; on this side, the willing sacrifice of life. There was no comparison of motives. The police squad beat a retreat.

This was the condition of the special police squads deputed to arrest them. Anyway, arrests had become a routine. Police checkpoints were erected in almost every village. Gradually, the Babbar Akalis were weakened. Till now it had seemed as if they were the virtual rulers. Wherever they happened to be visiting, they were warmly hosted, by some with fear and terror. The supporters of the regime were defeatist. They lacked the courage to move out of their residences between the sunset and the sunrise. They were the ‘heroes’ of the time. They were brave and their worship

was believed to be a kind of hero-worship, but gradually they lost their strength. Hundreds among them were imprisoned, and cases were instituted against them.

Variyam Singh was the lone survivor. He was moving towards Layallpur, as the pressure of police had increased in Jullundur and Hoshiarpur. One day he was hopelessly surrounded there, but he came out fighting valiantly. He was very much exhausted. He was alone. It was a strange situation. One day he visited his maternal uncle in the village named Dhesian. Arms were kept outside. After taking his meals, he was moving towards his weaponry when the police arrived. He was surrounded. The British officer caught him from the backside. He wounded him badly with his kripan (sword), and he fell down. All the efforts to handcuff him failed. After two years of suppression, the Akali Jatha came to an end. Then the cases started, one of which has been discussed above. Quite recently too, they had wished to be hanged soon. Their wish has been fulfilled; they are now quiet.

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[In 1925–26 Bhagat Singh was at Kanpur, working under Ganesh Shankar Vidharthi in the Hindi weekly Partap. While at Kanpur he wrote this article, signing it Ek Punjabi Yuvak (a Punjabi youth), about the martyrs of Banbbar Akali movement. It was published in Pratap on March 15, 1926.]

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