

# Remembering Bhagat Singh

## By Manohar Singh Gill

On a mild September day in 1971 I motored to a small fishing village on the east coast of England. I was in search of Shiv Singh Johal, a friend of Udharn Singh, who was said to have in his possession Udharn Singh's last letter. I managed to find him ensconced in a neat flat by the sea with his Norwegian wife. They were both old though their memories of Udharn Singh were young and fresh. As we talked, Shiv Singh's face glowed with vivid recollections of the past. He told me:

"Udharn Singh, popularly known as Bawa—for he seemed somewhat crazy to those kept on getting on in this world—was determined to take revenge for the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. His great hero was Bhagat Singh and he would say that he was going to avenge the Amritsar massacre. His great Bhagat Singh had avenged the insult of Lajpat Rai. While Udharn Singh was in jail after the shooting of Sir Michael O'Dwyer, whenever I met him he worried only about whether his sacrifice would measure up to that of the great Bhagat Singh. He repeatedly asked me if people would remember him as they remember Bhagat Singh."

### SAD THOUGHT

After lunch Shiv Singh produced the last letters of Udharn Singh. They were brief and I read through them quickly. Udharn Singh's obsession with Bhagat Singh was quite evident. In one letter he wrote that he wanted to be hanged on March 23, the day on which his hero had gone to the gallows. In another he wanted to be reassured that he too would be remembered for his sacrifice as Bhagat Singh is. He talked of death in the popular symbolism of a bride whom he was going to marry.

Back in India, I often passed by the village of Khair Kalan and thought of Bhagat Singh. I felt sad that his memorial should be an ugly little marble statuette bearing no resemblance to him. In fact, the memorial was meant to be not just a memorial to Bhagat Singh but to a family of freedom fighters, the Ikk of which India has not seen yet.

### ROMANTIC SLOGAN

Consider just the bare facts. Bhagat Singh's youngest uncle, Swaran Singh, died in 1910 of harsh torture while a political prisoner, three years after Bhagat Singh was born. The second uncle, Ajit Singh, along with Lala Lajpat Rai, led an agitation of farmers in the canal colonies in 1907, and it was perhaps he who gave the romantic slogan "Pagar sambhalo jath." He was arrested and deported to Ranchi and later to Mandalay in Burma. From there he escaped to Iran and Turkey and spent the life of an exile propagating the message of India's freedom struggle.

He returned to his homeland only in 1948, after Pandit Nehru formed the Interim Government, and died tragically and dramatically on August 15, 1947.

Bhagat Singh's father, Sardar Kishan Singh, was a social reformer, who aided the revolutionary movement in the early days. In 1906 he founded a patriotic group called the Bharat Mata Society. In 1907 he gave a thousand rupees to Kartar Singh Sarabha for his work in the freedom movement. Sarda Kishan

Singh was implicated in 42 political trials and suffered jail and internment.

Sardar Arjan Singh, Bhagat Singh's grandfather, lived till 1933—long enough to see a son die in jail, another son go into exile and a youthful grandson mount the gallows for the love of his motherland.

In such a family it was but natural that Bhagat Singh should tread the path of revolution. His hero was Kartar Singh Sarabha, who was hanged in 1915 for his efforts to start a mutiny in the Indian Army. Bhagat Singh wrote a long essay on Sarabha and tried to emulate him. In fact, Sarabha, Bhagat Singh and Udharn Singh were the three heroes of the freedom struggle in Punjab. Each passed

following in your footsteps... You will kindly not tie me down in matrimony but give your blessings that I should be successful in my mission."

To another letter from his father reiterating the proposal to arrange his marriage he sent a reply in even stronger terms.

"I tell you today that if my marriage takes place in enslaved India, my bride shall only be death. The barat will take the form of a funeral procession and the baratis will be the martyrs for the country."

The same symbol of a young revolutionary going as a groom to marry death was used by Udharn Singh in his last letters.

### REVENGE

Bhagat Singh's deeds are well

heard and give the heedless a timely warning...

"We bear no personal grudge or malice against anyone of those who received the slight injuries or against any other persons in the Assembly. On the contrary, we repeat that we hold our lives in the service of humanity rather than injure anyone else."

For this offence they were sentenced to transportation for life on June 12, 1929. In Mianwali jail Bhagat Singh took part in an epic hunger strike of 84 days in which Jalandhar Nath Dass became a martyr. In the meanwhile Bhagat Singh and his companions faced a second trial in Lahore, for the murder of Saunders. When his father tried to offer an alibi,

mounted the gallows on a still March evening, confidently, with the slogan "inqlab zindabad" on his lips.

There had been young men before Bhagat Singh, and there were to be others after him, who gave their lives for country. But no other individual fired the imagination of the Indian people in the manner in which he did. He remains the "beau ideal" of the Indian people. It was sad, therefore, to see the manner in which he was commemorated in his home district—the shabby statue in his village and an even shabbier bust in Jullundur city.

The tragedy is that in this country we always look for the "sasta" deal. Even our heroes, the men and women because of whom we are free today, are sought to be honoured on the cheap. This is why in Punjab we have ugly and unbecoming statues of national figures everywhere. A beginning was made in undoing this wrong by replacing the statue of Kartar Singh Sarabha in Chaura Bazar, Ludhiana.

### FAMILY HOUSE

Tomorrow an equally impressive statue of the peerless Bhagat Singh will be unveiled in his native village. In due course copies of this statue will be put up in Jullundur city and Ludhiana. In Khair Kalan a museum on the life and times of Bhagat Singh is being set up in the hall at the memorial site. The museum will, in due course, be expanded, and the area around it turned into a park.

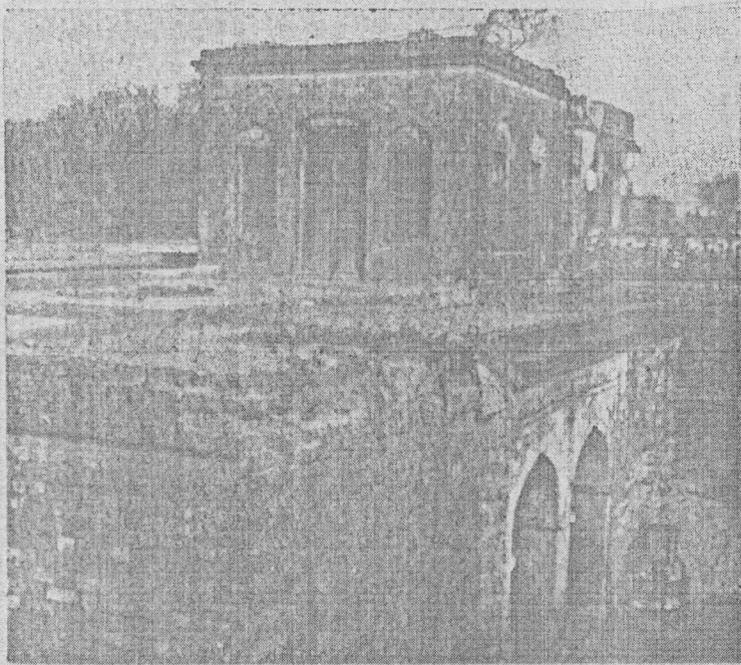
Bhagat Singh's family house in the village is still intact and in reasonable condition. I went and walked around the place and tried to visualise the life of this home of 70 years ago. They were obviously a well-knit peasant family of modest means, God-fearing but not afraid of man or empire. This group of people, this little family, had challenged the might of the British Empire at a time when it must have seemed like an ant trying to fight an elephant. Yet they had not been afraid.

### GREAT MOTHER

What a remarkable group of people! Of them, Bhagat Singh's mother lived long after Independence. I was Deputy Commissioner, Jullundur in 1967 and passed the village many a time. It never occurred to me at that time to go and call on this great mother. This foolish omission remains one of my regrets in life.

The setting up of a fitting memorial with a bronze statue tomorrow in Khair Kalan is a small beginning in remembering Bhagat Singh. A nobler son of India is yet to be born. I hope that our people, particularly the young ones, will go in large numbers to this memorial to pay their homage at his statue, to make some thing of his sacrifice from the museum, and to visit the birthplace in the village which should be taken over and maintained by the State Government.

Bhagat Singh does not need our remembrance. We need his memory more to inspire us in the difficult days ahead.



The house in Khair Kalan, where Bhagat Singh was born in 1907.

the torch on to the other; each hoped to emulate the deeds of his predecessor.

### OATH

Bhagat Singh refused to be tied down by matrimony, and the needs of earning a living. He wrote to his father thus:

"This is not the time for marriage. The country is calling me. I have taken an oath to serve the nation bodily, mentally and monetarily.

"Moreover, it is not a new thing for us. Our whole family is full of patriotism. After two or three years of my birth uncle Swaran Singh died in jail in 1910. Uncle Ajit Singh is living the life of an exile in foreign countries. You have also suffered a lot in jail. I am only

known. On December 17, 1928, he and his companions shot dead Saunders in revenge for the death of Lala Lajpat Rai a month earlier. In 1929 Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw a bomb into the Central Assembly chamber while the Public Safety Bill was being debated. They explained their reason for doing so thus:

"The bomb was necessary to awaken England from her dreams. We dropped the bomb on the floor of the Assembly chamber to register our protest on behalf of those who had no other means left to give expression to their heart-rendering agony. Our sole purpose was to make the deaf

Bhagat Singh refused and wrote:

"My life is not so precious—at least to me—as you may probably think it to be. It is not at all worth buying at the cost of my principles. There are comrades of mine whose case is as serious as mine. We had adopted a common policy and have so far stood shoulder to shoulder. So shall we stand to the last, no matter how dearly we have to pay individually for it."

In prison, during his last days, Bhagat Singh did not waver, as Sarabha had not 15 years earlier, and Udharn Singh was not to nine years later. He