



Why Bhagat Singh refused to pray before he was hanged

90 years ago today, the British hanged Bhagat Singh. Devyani Mohan Talwar sheds light on some of the lesser known facets of his personality through anecdotes handed down by family members who knew him well

On March 23, 1931, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were hanged for the killing of British officer JP Saunders. They had intended to shoot superintendent of police James Scott, whose lathi-charge during an anti-Simon Commission protest in Lahore had caused the death of Lala Lajpat Rai in November 1928. But as the killing was a symbolic act, they considered their mission successful despite the mix-up.

A few months later, Singh and BK Dutt threw a bomb inside the Central Legislative Assembly chamber before courting arrest. Singh's daring acts and defiance of the British are well-known, but Gurgaon resident Lalit Mohan, son of Virendra and son-in-law of Durga Das Khanna, both associates of Bhagat Singh, says what people don't see is his extraordinary humanity.

A Sensitive Man

Determined and audacious though he was, Singh had a softer side too, and Mohan might not have met his better half without it. "On a cold night in January 1927, Rajguru and Sukhdev persuaded my father-in-law Durga Das Khanna to slip away from his own wedding with all the shagun money, right before the ceremony, because they were in desperate need of funds. But when Singh heard he had forsaken family and his bride-to-be turned pensive. 'What



will happen to your mother?' he said. Durga Das replied, 'She will probably die of shame and embarrassment.' At this, Sukhdev laughed and said, 'Don't worry, we will erect a memorial to her when India becomes free.'"

Mohan said his father-in-law told him that Singh did not like the joke. "No, we cannot let that happen. I think you had better go back," Singh said to his friend, and Durga Das returned home and got married, much to the relief of his family.

Not a 'Terrorist'

Singh shot Saunders, and on April 8, 1929, he also threw a bomb inside the assembly chamber, but he was no terrorist. "Where he and his fellow revolutionaries differ from the present-day mass killers is that they never terrorised innocent people. He did use the gun, but very selectively, always careful to avoid collateral damage," Mohan said.

In the Legislative Assembly incident, "many leading lights of the British government were seated before them. But he was not out to kill anyone. He did not try to escape. He sacrificed his life just to make a point." Later, in his statement to the court, Singh himself said: "We hold human life sacred beyond words... Our sole purpose was 'to make the deaf hear' and to give the heedless a timely warning."

Honesty, Above All

Mohan's father Virendra "had a fascinating account of Singh's final moments based on what chief prison warden Charat Singh, who was present at the execution, told him."

This interaction is described in Virendra's memoirs, 'Destination Freedom': "As Singh was about to reach the gallows, he (Charat Singh) pleaded with him, 'Son, it is a matter of just a few minutes more. At least remember Wahe-guru now.' The warden told us that Bhagat Singh laughed at his words and said, 'Sardarji, I did not take His name all my life. In fact, when I saw how the poor and the oppressed were being treated, I even rebuked Him. Now if I pray to Him, when death stares me in the face, He will say this man is a hypocrite and a coward. So, what effect will my prayer possibly have on Him? If I don't change my opinion, at least He will concede this man was honest.'"



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