

BHAI MAHARAJ SINGH, FIRST SIKH FREEDOM FIGHTER

Simmi Chahal Research Scholar
Dr. Sukhjit Kaur Bhullar, Supervisor
University of Basic Sciences and Humanities
Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo (Punjab)

ABSTRACT: Bhai Maharaj Singh is known as first Sikh freedom fighter of War of Independence. He had seen the sunset of the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the 19th century. British Possession on the Punjab was not tolerated by him and he vowed to re-establish Sikh rule in the Punjab. Therefore, he took up the flag of rebellion against British rule and also supported the rebellious people. he played an important role in the Anglo Sikh wars. Besides this, he continued to get assistance from Malwa, Majha and Doaba for all kinds of help to the Sikh forces. Even the water and food from Jammu also brought for the Sikhs in the battle field. it is necessary for every student of history, to know about Bhai Maharaj Singh and his contribution in freedom struggle.

Index Terms: - Bhai Maharaj Singh's Life, Contribution and Martyrdom

The first Sikh freedom fighter and a great Sikh saint, Bhai Maharaj Singh's life, present a marvelous example of service and patriotism. He sacrificed his life for a mission, which he did not even imagine in his early life. Bhai Maharaj Singh was born on January 13, 1780, in village Raboo, Nagar Maloud, District Ludhiana. His father's name was Sardar Kesar Singh. In his childhood, Bhai Maharaj Singh was named Nihal Singh. Bhai Maharaj Singh was of religious nature since childhood.¹ Due to which he got Amrit from Sant Tota Singh Thikriwala. Bhai Maharaj Singh used to do Naam Simran daily. That was their daily routine. There was a significant change in Bhai Maharaj Singh's life when he meets with Baba Bir Singh. He was impressed with the philosophy of Baba Bir Singh and started living with them in his dera, where Baba Bir Singh gave him the service of the langar. Which Bhai Maharaj Singh fulfilled with great belief.²

While living in Baba Bir Singh's Dera at Norangabad, Bhai Maharaj Singh was always deeply involve in Sewa and Nam Simran. Because of this, the honor of Bhai Maharaj Singh was greatly increased among Sikh sangat, but the political situation of that time was such that, due to which Baba Bir Singh and Bhai Maharaj Singh used to be anxious, because after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the situation in Punjab was like a jungle. The Lahore Darbar had become a place of intrigues. Due to the hunger of power, many big businessmen and nobles were sold to the British.³

¹ Usma, Gurdip Singh and Dilbag Singh, Bhai Maharaj Singh Central Sikh Gurudwara Board, Singapore, 2006, p.4.

² Ibid, p.5.

³ Dr. Paramjit Singh and Jaswinder Kaur, Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji, Jeevan Atte Shahadat, Bhai Chattar Singh Jivan Singh, Amritsar, 2014, p.15

The Dogra and the Sandhanwalia's conspiracies and the tricks of the British imperials crossed the Sutlej, destroyed a great empire of the Punjabies. At this time, Baba Bir Singh, Bhai Maharaj Singh, Baba Khuda Singh, Chattar Singh and Sardar Sher Singh were the last rays to save the Sikh kingdom.⁴

The Dogra and Sandhanwalia chiefs, decided to take possession of the Lahore Darbar, had declared Kanwar Kashmira Singh, Pishaura Singh, Ajit Singh, Jawahar Singh, son of Hari Singh Nalua, a political absconders. they came to Baba Bir Singh's dera to save their lives. The Dogra Sardar attacked Baba Bir Singh's dera and demanded the transfer of political goons from Baba Bir Singh. This was rejected by Baba Bir Singh. The Dogra Sardar started firing at the camp. In this firing Baba Bir Singh died.⁵

After the martyrdom of Baba Bīr Singh, Bhai Maharaj Singh was selected as the Heir of his throne and he became Bhai Maharaj Singh from Bhai Nihal Singh. This period became the reason to change the life of Bhai Maharaj Singh and he became a Soldier from a Saint. He was always irritated by the thought that his guru was the victim of the political alliance of Punjab. Because of which he took a vengeance against the British and shift to Amritsar from Naurangabad to make the next strategy.⁶

Bhai Maharaj Singh's revolutionary life begins with the famous Prema conspiracy case. This conspiracy was the first bold expression of displeasure against the British Government. Prema of Wazirabad and his brother Mohra were the main figures in this conspiracy.

He was a highly regarded man. British opposers choose them because of this reason. The conspiracy was that the British Resident Henry Lawrence and the supporters of other British supporters will be killed when they attended a gathering in Shalimar Bagh. Bhai Maharaj Singh had stamped his approval on this conspiracy and gave his blessing by offering a sword to Prema.⁷ But three days earlier this conspiracy came to light and Prema and his companions were arrested and brought to Lahore. Bhai Maharaj Singh was then at Aurangabad.⁸

On June 1847, Henry Lawrence send his report to Governor Genral, it was clear in his report that Bhai Maharaj Singh had played a major role in Prema's conspiracy. Henry Lawrence ordered Bhai Maharaj Singh to appear in front of the council but Bhai Maharaj Singh refused to obey the resident's order and went underground to avoid his arrest. This was the beginning of an open rebell between Maharaj Singh and the British Government.⁹

⁴ Ibid, pp. 22, 23.

⁵ Sant Pritam Singh, Baba Bir Singh Ji, Naurangabad, Bhai Chattar Singh Jivan Singh, Amritsar, 2009, pp.40, 41.

⁶ M.L. Ahluwalia, Bhai Maharaj Singh, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1976, p.9.

⁷ M.L. Ahluwalia and Kirpal Singh, Punjab de Modhi Sutanrta Sangramiye, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 1988, p.73.

⁸ Sohan Lal Suri, Umdat-ut-Twarikh, Tranlated by V.S. Suri, Punjab Itihas Parkashan, Chandigarh, 1972, Vol-V, p.37.

⁹ Government Records Punjab, Lahore Political Diaries, Punjab Government Press, 1909, Vol-3 ppp.75, 110, 111.

Henry Lawrence issued strong orders to arrest Bhai Maharaj Singh from Amritsar police arrested all his personal servants and they were tortured to know about Bhai Maharaj Singh, but he refused to tell him anything about Bhai Maharaj Singh. After this the order was issued that the whole area of the Majha, which is considered as the stronghold of Bhai Maharaj Singh, should be plundered and his property be confiscated. Declaration was made of 1000 rupees cash prize for the arrest of Bhai Maharaj Singh. After some time this amount was increased to Rs. 10,000.¹⁰ But arrest of Bhai Maharaj Singh was not an easy task. On 30 September 1848, Lord Dalhousie desperately wrote that "Jimidares, the general public and the Sardaras have expressed open sympathy with Bhai Maharaj Singh. The policemen and employees who were ordered to find him also showed a laxity."¹¹

None of the British operations have prevented the way of Bhai Maharaj Singh. While not caring about his arrest, he moved from village to village and preached in the public that there was a need to take immediate action against the British. The number of pilgrims of Bhai Maharaj Singh was increased meanwhile. Bhai Maharaj Singh heard about the rebellion of the governor of Multan, Mul Raj. This was an opportunity given by God to Bhai Maharaj Singh and he welcomed the rebellion of Mulraj. Mulraj sent a secret message and sought the help of Bhai Maharaj Singh. In the course of which he went to recruit volunteer and the army of more than a thousand pilgrims was ready under his command until he reached Multan.¹²

Bhai Maharaj Singh was strongly welcomed upon reaching Multan. Mulraj himself appeared for the welcome of Bhai Maharaj Singh. He offered 40 gold coins as a tribute. As a result of meeting of Bhai Maharaj Singh with Mulraj, there was a phenomenal activity in the movement. British senses were frozen when they came to know that Bhai Maharaj Singh reached Multan, but unfortunately in the battle of Multan, the British defeated Mulraj and he was arrested and brought to Lahore. He was sentenced to black water, but Mul Raj died on the way to Lahore.¹³

After the defeat of Multan, Bhai Maharaj Singh passed his army from Multan. At the same time, Sardar Chattar Singh Atari wala was also planing to fight against the British in Hazara. Bhai Maharaj Singh wanted to reach him but going to Hazara from Multan was not free from danger. Therefore, he choose the route along with the Pakpattan, Mukatsar, Anandpur and the hills of Punjab.¹⁴ Despite this long route, Bhai Maharaj Singh reached Rawalpindi. Yet the rebel forces were ready to move to Lahore. They meet with Sardar Chattar Singh. The anti-British movement

¹⁰ Nahar Singh, Document Relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh, The Sikh History Source Material Research Association, Ludhiana, 1968. p.2.

¹¹ M.L. Ahluwalia and Kirpal Singh, Punjab de Modhi Sutanrta Sangramiye, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 1988, p.74.

¹² Ibid, p.75.

¹³ Dr. Paramjit Singh and Jaswinder Kaur, Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji, Jeevan Atte Shahadat, Bhai Chattar Singh Jivan Singh, Amritsar, 2014, p.68.

¹⁴ Government Record Press, Lahore Political Diaries, Punjab Government Press, 1909, Vol-IV, p.502.

got great encouragement with the arrival of Bhai Maharaj. Besides this, Chattar Singh's son Sher Singh also joined the battle. Prior to joining the war, Bhai Maharaj Singh spent Rs 50,000 on Pranshad, which was given to soldiers for success in war. There was a war between the Sikhs and the British forces at Ram Nagar. In which the British were badly defeated. The British officers believed that the credit of this success goes to Bhai Maharaj Singh because he was involved in the front row of the Sikh forces. After the conquest of Ram Nagar, the British were asked to get out of Lahore so that the fight could be stopped.¹⁵

The British decided to continue the fight rather than compromise with Sher Singh and Bhai Maharaj Singh. On January 13, 1849, another war broke out between the Khalsa army and the British at the Chillianwala. The Khalsa army fought very bravely. After holding the rule of India, the British once again had to face defeat at Chillianwala. To celebrate the victory of Punjabis, Sher Singh Atari Wala received 21 guns salute. The British were not ready to give up their defeats in any way. They came to Gujarat pursuing Sikh forces. There was a decisive battle on 21 February 1849 in Gujarat. In which the British won.¹⁶

Bhai Maharaj Singh took a hard task in his hand in these battles that was the task of food supply to the soldiers engaged in the battlefield. In order to fulfill this objective, he has been assigned several supply centers and in charge of the facilities for providing reliable items to the Soldiers, was given to Mitha Singh, Jawahar Singh and Gurmukh Singh. The big caravans from these centers used to take the necessary supply of food. Shahzada Ranbir Singh, who was the governor of Jammu, had instructed his officials to give permission to Maharaj Singh agents to buy flour, pulses, timber, and fodder without any restraint.¹⁷ In addition, two major food supply centers were established in Pasrur and Majour.

After losing in Gujarat, Bhai Maharaj Singh came to Rawalpindi with his army and rebellion Sardars. While staying here, he repeatedly encouraged the Sardars to fight at least one battle with the British but the Sardar did not agree with this. So Bhai Maharaj Singh decided to continue the fight against the British alone. This task was very difficult because the rebellious commanders had surrendered to General Gilbert with their army and he had to start all the work from all over again. To keep his mission continue from a safe place, Maharaj Singh went to Jammu and Kashmir and made Devi Batala his center of disaster.¹⁸ As soon as news of the arrival of Bhai Maharaj Singh reached, Local people started reaching out to meet him and to get his blessings. From here onwards, he sent his secret agents to various sections of the Punjab and asked the public to continue their struggle against the British. To finalize his future programs, Bhai Maharaj

¹⁵ Sita Ram Kohli, *Sunset of the Sikh Empire*, Orient Black Swan, New Delhi, 2012, p.174.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.175.

¹⁷ Secret Consultations No. 20-31, Date. 31 January, 1850, Foreign and Political Department Record in the National Archives of India.

¹⁸ *Calcutta Review*, Vol-XXII, 1854, Calcutta University, Calcutta, 1972.

Singh needed a lot of money. So, he planned and started to plunder the British cantonments and their treasury. For this mission, he has prepared 4,000 men's army. To attack on Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar cantonments the day of 20 December was fixed. This day is also known as the Mukati Diwas.¹⁹

In the meantime, Bhai Maharaj Singh came to know that the British are ready to send the Maharaja Dalip Singh out of Punjab. He immediately felt that this movement would hurt due to the exit of the Maharaja Dalip Singh. Maharaja Singh sent his trusted men to Lahore for the release of Dalip Singh from the clutches of the British. Who had to accompany Duleep Singh's personal servants to take him away from the clutches of the British, but unfortunately the British came to know about this move.²⁰

On one side, Bhai Maharaj Singh was preparing to attack the British camps and the treasuries, on the other side, British officers were planning to arrest him. For this task, he appointed a souvenir who was employed in secretly under the police of the British Police. The British plan was successful. On the evening of December 28, 1849, he informed the British officers that Bhai Maharaj Singh was hiding in the fields between Adampur and Sham Chaurasi, 14 miles from Jalandhar. The Englishman Vanistart, along with his party, moved to built direction. The area was surrounded by police. Bhai Maharaj Singh and the British had a fight and a firing, as a result of which Bhai Maharaj was arrested and identified with 21 of his associates because no British official had seen Bhai Maharaj Singh personally.²¹ Governor General Lord Dalhousie congratulated Mr. Vanistart for this work.

After the arrest, Maharaj Singh was taken to Jalandhar jail. There the guard soldiers bowed down before them respectfully. Due to the arrest of Bhai Maharaj Singh, situation had become serious in Jalandhar. So the British government decided that he should be sent out of Punjab. Under this decision, Bhai Maharaj Singh and his associate, Bhai Kharak Singh, deported to Singapore on 15 May 1850 from the ship named "Mohammad Shah". On June 9, 1850, the ship reached Singapore.²² There Mr T Church, who was resident of Singapore, was welcomed to Maharaj Singh. They also had warrants issued under Regulation 3 of 1818. Bhai Maharaj Singh and Kharak Singh were sent to carnwallis Fort. There he was kept in a 41x15 cell. There was no window. They could not walk in open light and in the air. Gradually their health began to deteriorate. Their eyesight went away. The legs were also paralyzed. Jail officer Mr. Cooper wrote to the Governor General of India several times about their health but there was no reply. His

¹⁹ M.L. Ahluwalia, Bhai Maharaj Singh, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1976, pp.43, 46,

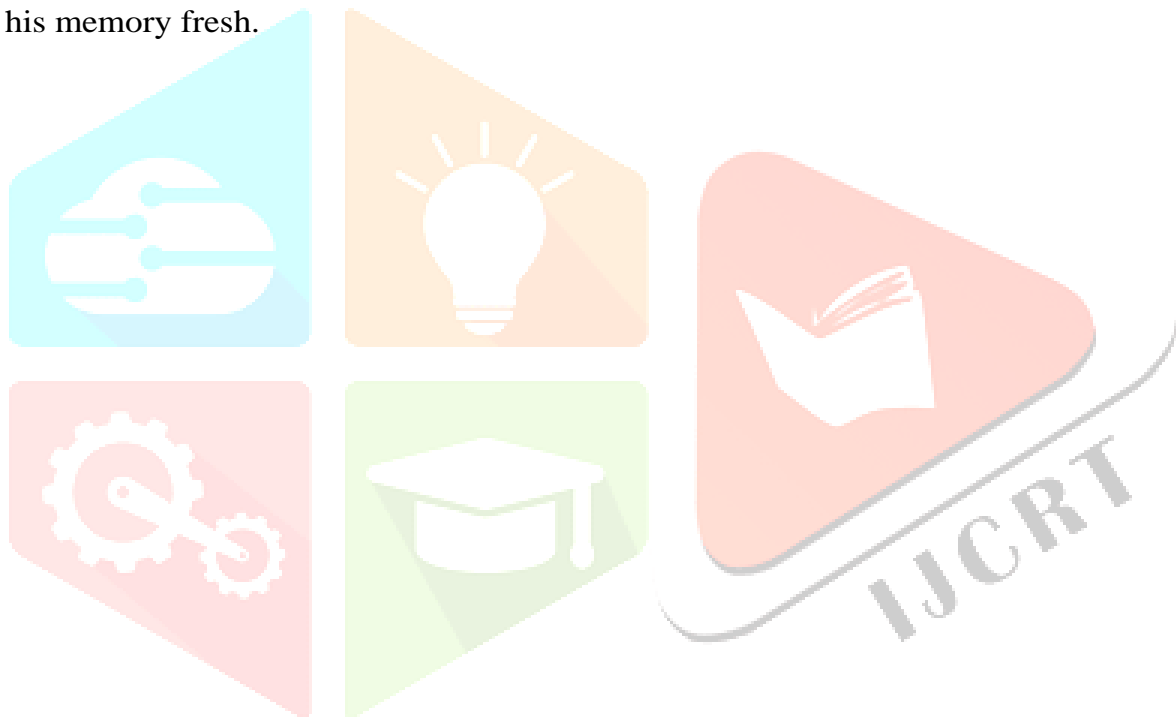
²⁰ M.L. Ahluwalia and Kirpal Singh, Punjab de Modhi Sutanrta Sangramiye, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 1988, p.78.

²¹ Dr. Paramjit Singh and Jaswinder Kaur, Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji, Jeevan Atte Shahadat, Bhai Chattar Singh Jivan Singh, Amritsar, 2014, p.82.

²² Secret Consultations No. 18-19, Date. 31 May, 1850, Foreign and Political Department Record in the National Archives of India.

condition was getting worse day by day. Cancer on the left side of their tongue became serious. Whole day the blood leaked from it. he did not eat anything for 2 months. His disease had taken a very serious condition. Finally, on 5 July 1856, he died. ²³ He fought with his disease with the same courage as he fought against foreign rule.

It is said that people who sacrifice their lives for good purpose are on very high character and strong. These qualities were very high in Bhai Maharaj Singh. Being a religious saint, he did not have any covetous ambition, yet he kept on jeopardizing his life to take part in the freedom struggle of Punjab. Because of these qualities, he was popular among the people. Mr. Vanistart has also witnessed this. According to his words, "Bhai Maharaj Singh was not a simple man. He has the same respect in the hearts of the Punjabis which may be in christian for jesus christ. Bhai Maharaj Singh inspired people to freedom struggle in his life. Which continued with great courage even after his death. Today, we need to keep the great hero of this movement in our hearts and keep his memory fresh.



²³ Nahar Singh, Document Relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh No. 84, The Sikh History source Material Search Association, Ludhiana, 1968.