

SOHAN SINGH JOSHI
My Tryst With Secularism
An Autobiography



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My Tryst With Secularism
An Autobiography

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Josh's Last Will

The following is the last message of veteran freedom fighter and Communist leader Sohan Singh Josh who died on 29th July, 1982 at his home village Chetanpura, district Amritsar at the ripe age of 87.

I am a Communist—firm believer in Marxism-Leninism. I have contributed to the best of my capacity towards the formation and growth of the Communist Party and propagation of Communist ideals.

I am leaving after having lived a full life. I am very happy that I dedicated my life to the toiling people who are the source of a country's wealth and on whose labour depends the very life of society. As far as I can say, my life has been purposeful and fruitful.

Communist ideology is based on historical materialism according to which it is not man who is the creation of God but God itself is the creation of man. Tell-tales of heaven and hell are myths without any basis in reality.

It is therefore my desire that after my death there should neither be any crying or mourning nor any Kriya ceremony. There should be no other type of religious ceremony either. There should be no Path (religious recitations), nor any Ardas (prayers) for 'peace of my soul'.

I am satisfied that I have really lived to the best of my capacity a life of honesty, selflessness, sacrifice and devotion to our toiling people. Also that I have held the view that success in life lies in fighting struggles of toilers and in helping them to stand on their feet as proud, equal and self-respecting brave human beings. For me blessing of any religious personality has no value, nor is it needed.

Souls of only those remain restless who have committed sins and acts of deception and betrayal against the people. Wealth could not lure or lead me astray.

I am leaving behind all this in writing so that my dead body is not dragged into religious ceremonies. After cremation my last remains should be thrown into the flowing

Labore branch canal, as an expression of my eternal love for the Muslim people across the WAGAH and of spotless and unblemished role of my party during the mass massacre at the time of the partition.

Last of all, my life has been the disciplined life of a member of the Communist Party. I have always considered it my duty to abide by and implement the decisions of the party. After my death only my party will have the right to take decisions concerning me and not any relation of mine. Decisions of the party should therefore be honoured.

Source: Translated from the original in Punjabi by Vimla Dang; and reproduced from LINK, Weekly, August 8, 1982.

I hope, I shall live to
see the day when socialism
will be established in India

Sohan Singh Joshi

1.1.72

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Preface

Comrade Sohan Singh Josh, affectionately called “Joshji”, came on the political stage at a very critical period in India’s history. This book, in his own words, gives an account, among other things, of his fight for secularism, against religious dogmatism and of the evolution of the Left and democratic trends in the country, in Punjab in particular. However, browsing through the pages of the *Autobiography*, the reader would, inevitably, get glimpses of this charismatic personality represented on a reduced scale, in miniature form as it were, as if he is viewing the author from the other end of the telescope. This aberration out, the reader is in the right perspective to understand and evaluate Comrade Sohan Singh fully and objectively. The clarity of his mind, his unflinching commitment to secularism, his unmatched faith in the strength of the people – all these facets of his life will then stand out illuminatingly in this book.

Born in a Sikh Jat family in Chetanpura village of Amritsar district – the Majha belt of Punjab – in 1896, Comrade Josh breathed his last on 29 July, 1982, in the Central Office of the Communist Party of India, in New Delhi. From his early childhood till his death at the age of nearly 87 years, Comrade Josh, brick-by-brick, built the Left Democratic movement and in that process emerged as an outstanding personality of the country. Despite the enviable position he occupied, first in the Akali Movement, then in the Communist Party of India, Comrade Josh, unlike many modern politicians, was not only soft-spoken and mild-mannered but was also unassuming in his day-to-day conduct.

In 1920, when he was still in his early twenties, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) elected Sunder Singh Majitha, the then head of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, as its president. This decision of the SGPC pleased the British rulers as it fitted well in their scheme of things to have the feudal lords as “natural leaders” of the Sikh masses. The colonial rulers thought that with this development the Akali Movement could be contained. But this

development gave a rude shock to the younger generation of Sikhs, particularly to those who came from poor peasant families. Comrade Josh in this book, through his experience, has brought out how the colonial rulers had miscalculated and how they failed to understand the psyche of the Sikh masses. It is in this context that Comrade Josh in his *Autobiography* has underlined how the Chief Khalsa Diwan had given a go-bye to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus; how their class interest had blinded them to the tenets of Sikhism. The Sikh Gurus had called upon the people to fight the tyranny of the rulers. But the leaders of the Chief Khalsa Diwan danced to the tune of the British rulers. That is why at that stage when the Akali Movement was essentially an anti-imperialist movement, the feudal elements among the Sikhs became opposed to it. Ironically, the Sikh feudal leaders even invited General Dyer, the butcher of Jallianwala Bagh, to the Golden Temple in Amritsar and enacted the farce of converting him to Sikhism by presenting a robe of honour to him while cringingly uttering: "You have saved Punjab".

It is in the midst of this ferment in Punjab that Comrade Sohan Singh Josh received his political baptism and plunged himself into the Akali Movement. Comrade Josh was arrested but the rebel in him asserted itself even in the confines of the jail. He refused to cooperate with the authorities during his trial. He proclaimed: "I am an humble non-cooperator. I do not want to answer the questions put to me." In that period, as Comrade Josh himself has put in his *Autobiography*, he saw himself as synthesis of "Gandhi, Bhagat Singh combined", though the phenomenon of Bhagat Singh had not till then emerged.

Comrade Josh's political personality took a new turn while in jail when he started studying political literature to widen his horizon. The books which influenced his thought structures at that formative age of his life most were: *Liberty and the Great Libertarians*, compiled by T. Spreading, *History of American Revolution* and *The Constitution of America*.

Nevertheless, what struck him the most was what Mark Twain had said about the Czarist Russia which he felt very fittingly applied to the British enslavers of India; "In Russia, whenever they catch a man, woman or child that has got any brains or education or character, they ship that person straight to Siberia. It is admirable, it is wonderful! It is so searching and so effective that it keeps the general level of Russian intellect and education down to that of the Czar."

Comrade Sohan Singh's participation in the Akali Movement, his efforts to mobilise the Sikh masses in support of the Movement and his intensive study of the revolutionary literature of the world, including on the American and French revolutions, began to shape his world-view dramatically. In his *Autobiography*, he has clearly stated that he had ceased accepting any dogma blindly. He had begun to reason with himself whether this or that concept should be made relevant to the current problems facing the people, the Sikhs in particular.

Significantly, it was in this period that Comrade Josh began to argue that the Punjabi language in *Gurmukhi* script could not be made a cementing force because it was equated with the *Gurmukhi* script. Thus, he pleaded that the Punjabi language in the *Gurmukhi* script should be delinked from the Sikh religion. How prophetic he was! Had this happened the course of history of the Punjabi-speaking people would perhaps have taken a different turn.

Comrade Josh was born in the politically backward area of Punjab and was brought up in a puritan religious atmosphere, but his experience and modern revolutionary literature which he studied drove him to the conclusion that religious philosophies should invariably be assessed along with social, political and cultural values of the particular period in which they were evolved. Thus, he looked at the Sikh religion not as a dogma but as an important component of the heritage of a particular period of history of Punjab. This clearly stands out in his *Autobiography*. That explains why in the late twenties, Comrade Josh had already come to the conclusion that the fight against rigid religiosity and against preachers of fatalism was essential to raise the consciousness of the people. This change in his world outlook had taken place long before he came to grasp Marxism. What is important to note is that this transformation in his outlook took place when the whole of Indian milieu was surcharged with fatalism. Those days, as perhaps now once again, the unquestioned accepted philosophy was "nothing happens without God's will: not even a leaf can flap without His order".

It was in the late twenties that Comrade Josh was drawn towards Marxism. It was precisely the period when Communist groups had sprung up in the various parts of the country and Punjab was no exception to it. Nevertheless, at that stage the Communist trend was an integral phenomenon of the national movement. For instance, in the assessment of Comrade Josh, in December 1927, Jawaharlal Nehru

played a leftist role in the Madras Session of the Congress. He moved a resolution calling for complete independence of India because of the "radicalisation of the masses". The left-wing trend was also expressed in the choice of Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose as General Secretaries of the Indian National Congress in 1928, according to the assessment of Comrade Josh. He did not leave at that. In his *Autobiography*, he has mentioned that Jawaharlal Nehru's views, as expressed in one of his speeches, had inspired the youth of Punjab, breathed fresh air, brought to the fore many radical ideas. Quoting approvingly from some of the speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru of that period, Comrade Josh has gone out of his way to bring into sharp focus the views of Nehru on many vital issues.

"The result of capitalist development and capitalism is that one group or country is exploiting and looting the other group or country. If we are opposed to this exploitation and loot, then we should oppose this exploiter capitalism as well. Not only that. We will have to oppose the domination of one country by another. The alternative to all this is 'some form of socialism'. That means the instrument of production and distribution should be in the hands of the state. To better the condition of society we will have to bend towards socialism. If we accept the socialist viewpoint, the result would be the giving up of all customs and rituals based on birth or caste. In future, we shall have to keep the society clear of exploiters and do-nothings. British imperialism is our greatest enemy."

This refreshing assessment of Jawaharlal Nehru by a veteran Communist leader has its own relevance in today's political situation when anti-Nehruism is again on the ascendancy. When Comrade Josh was arrested on 20 March, 1929, in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, he had already become an outstanding leader of the Left Movement. He had built the workers' and peasants' parties and was a driving force behind the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. He was released from jail in September 1933 and soon began organising workers and peasants. In the general elections of 1937, which had unleashed a new popular upsurge in the entire country, Comrade Josh contested as a Communist and won the election. His entire campaign was financed by the people. After the elections he was left with a surplus of Rs. 350. An interesting feature of the elections was that while casting votes many men and women had put rupees and small coins into the ballot boxes thinking the money would go to the election fund of

Comrade Josh. That was how the elections were fought those days—on the basis of popular support.

Comrade Josh in his *Autobiography* has analysed the causes of the weakness of the National Movement in the western part of the pre-partitioned Punjab. According to him, the main reason for this weakness was that the western part was under the spell of Muslim feudalism. The Muslim tenants were completely under the thumb of Muslim landlords and religious leaders. They had reconciled themselves to the miserable plight taking it as "God's Ordering". That is why the political storms in the eastern Punjab could never touch them. That also explains why the Congress and its programmes are unknown to the common villager in that part of Punjab.

In the last portion of his *Autobiography*, Comrade Josh has given his assessment of the Second World War and the post-war situation and has concluded the book with some reminiscences of the late Ajoy Kumar Ghose who led the Communist Party till his death.

Almost three years before his death, Comrade Josh wrote a piece in which he expressed his grief over the split in the Indian Communist Movement. In his estimate, if the split in the Indian Communist Movement had not taken place the United Communist Movement would have crossed many a hurdle and the hotch-potch Janata Party perhaps would never have come into existence and gained power. He did not leave at that.

In anguish, he articulated the aspiration that if even today the two Communist Parties, the CPI and the CPI-M, came together in a Left Democratic Front and worked to win over the Naxalites, the leftists and the democratic groups in the Congress, the Indian political scene would radically change. He had predicted that "history will not forgive those who will let the opportunity slip".

Comrade Josh's *Autobiography*, therefore, is not merely a narration of his own experience in life. It is an interpretation of the history of evolution of the Left and Democratic Movement in Punjab and an exploration of the causes which have led to the emergence of the monster of communalism in this border state. There may be differences of opinion on some of the facts given in this book by Comrade Josh. But one thing is certain that this book is a valuable contribution to the literature on the history of diverse political forces in the state.

This *Autobiography* unfolds his great life and his unequivocal determination to build a new edifice in the communally-torn Punjab. It, therefore, is a true revelation of the life of a crusader against com-

munalism. We hope that this *Autobiography* will be read by the new generation of political leaders and intellectuals with an open mind. That the *Autobiography* could not be published earlier is tragic. There may be objective and subjective reasons for this. Nevertheless, we are grateful to the CPI leadership which handed over the manuscript to us for publication. We are indebted to Comrade Satyapal Dang who took personal interest in the publication of this book and has been chasing us for its early appearance on bookstalls. We are also thankful to Ashok Chatterjee for copy-editing of the book. We must also express our thanks to the team of Patriot Publishers which has supervised the publication of this book.

We are sure this book will enable scholars, academics, intellectuals and researchers to look at the Punjab problem from a fresh angle, from the angle of one of the tallest leaders of the state who knew not only the Sikh religion, the Sikh psyche, the aspirations of the Punjabi people but who also had devoted his entire life in their service.

— V.D. CHOPRA

May 15, 1991

Introduction

THIS is the autobiography of a great revolutionary, Sohan Singh Josh, a veteran of the Communist movement in the country. The autobiography deals with the period before the split in the CPI and does not cover the latter period. Sohan Singh Josh made tremendous contribution to the development of the workers, peasants and communist movement in Punjab. His role in the struggle for independence is also not insignificant. There is not a single progressive movement launched on the soil of Punjab in which he did not participate.

Coming from a poor peasant family, even as an urchin he used to help his father by grazing cattle. With the family income being hardly sufficient to make both ends meet, it was difficult for his father to send him to a regular school. Still through struggle, hard work and facing severe odds Sohan Singh was able to pass the intermediate examination. Then began his hunt for a job. As a worker doing odd jobs at various places he was able to get a taste of what exploitation meant.

In those days, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs used to live in peace. Though a deeply religious man himself, Sohan Singh Josh, from the beginning had not prejudices against any religion. When the Akali movement, started for the liberation of the Gurdwaras from the hands of the tyrant Mahants who were stooges of British imperialists, assumed the character of the freedom movement Sohan Singh Josh plunged deep into it and rose to the position of the general secretary of the Shiromani Akali Dal. He was one of the accused in the Lahore Conspiracy Case and stood by the radical wing of the Akalis who refused to compromise with the British.

By this time, the October Revolution had a deep impact on the people struggle for independence in our country. Some of the *Mohajirs* who had the opportunity to go to the Soviet Union to study Marxism-Leninism had come back as leaders of the Ghadar Party. After the failure of the armed struggle which they had initiated they

came to the conclusion that the workers' and peasants' unity and class struggle was the only means for social emancipation. Sohan Singh Josh also got influenced by these ideas. After coming out of prison he joined the *Kirti* monthly which was started by Bhai Santokh Singh and Ratan Singh, leaders of the Ghadar Party, to propagate the ideas of socialism in Punjab. There were not many in the movement then who were educated. Sohan Singh Josh, a brilliant student and a scholar, developed his talent as a journalist. He had the capacity of putting his ideas in writing in a popular style. As books on Marxism-Leninism were rarely available in those days, it was not possible to judge all his writings from the standpoint of dialectical, historical materialist outlook. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the writings of Sohan Singh Josh contributed a great deal to the propagation of the communist and socialist ideology. Within a few years he could reach out to the progressive people through this monthly and became popular.

Sohan Singh Josh was one of the founders of the Navjawan Bharat Sabha in 1928 and joined hands with Bhagat Singh, who later worked with him for some time in the *Kirti*. He was also one of the founders of the Workers and Peasants Party in Punjab, which held its first conference at Hoshiarpur in the end of 1927. The Communist Party was in its initial stages and only a small group of 4-5 people was formed of which he was the secretary. He was selected to preside over the All-India Workers and Peasants Party conference in Calcutta held in the end of 1928. It was after this conference that the British imperialists decided to strike at the communist movement and launched the famous Meerut Conspiracy case of which Sohan Singh Josh was one of the main accused. He was a member of a communist group formed in jail and a signatory to the joint statement before the court by the communists who took advantage of this conspiracy to popularise the ideas of communism and the October Revolution. The conspiracy case which lasted for about five years became a vehicle for the communists to spread their ideas throughout the country. Sohan Singh Josh became a popular figure standing along with other revolutionaries in the defence of the cause of the Indian revolution. When he came out of prison in the late 1933 he was given a rousing reception.

His first effort after coming out of jail, was to unite the various groups into a strong united left movement and a united communist party but could not succeed. Then he formed the Anti-Imperialist

League which was an open platform of the communists, but not limited to them alone. I had just come from jail and attended the meeting which was held at Jalianwala Bagh. After that meeting a selected number of communists, hardly about 12 or so, met again and formed the Communist Party. I remember the presence of the Comrades Abdul Majid, Fazal Illahi Qurban, Firozuddin Mansoor, Fauja Singh Bhuller, Arjan Singh Gargaj, Bashir Ahmed and Inder Singh from Gujranwala. Since then I had been closely associated with him and his activities.

Josh also started a monthly journal named *Prabhat*. My activities were confined to Doaba which consists of the districts of Jullundur, Hoshiarpur and the state of Kapurthala. We had the strongest Communist group in this area and were able to elect three members of the Legislative Assembly of united Punjab in 1937, which had a limited franchise. In 1935 we started a weekly paper "*Dukhi Kisan*" from Jullundhar and persuaded Josh to edit it. This was the first weekly of which he became editor. In 1936 with the help of Comrade Achhar Singh Cheema we succeeded in achieving communist unity and a six-man committee was formed. This again got disrupted in 1937 with the arrest of Baba Gurmukh Singh.

Sohan Singh Josh was a top leader of the CPI in Punjab and was not only a journalist, a writer and a poet but also a good orator. His speeches were a source of great inspiration for the young generation as well as for the people struggling for national freedom and for socialism. He was elected to the state assembly in 1937 and as a legislator played a significant role. He was not very social. He used to study books on history, communist ideology and literature. He was fond of going to see films all alone. Otherwise, from morning till evening he busied himself either in reading or writing.

When the war broke out in September 1939, I was one of the first persons against whom arrest warrants were issued. He accompanied me on a tour of the state for activating the party. When we were in Lyallpur he took leave for two days to go to his village. After the first day I read the news of his arrest in his village. I was left alone to complete the job. I joined him in prison in Deoli Concentration Camp in 1941. After our hunger strike we were transferred to Gujarat, from where he was released in the month of May in 1942. While most of us were released in 1942, I was released only in 1944. After coming out of prison, for some time I was given the task of organising the party in Ludhiana. But within a short time I was asked to go to the State

Headquarters and join the State Committee which consisted of Sohan Singh Josh, Teja Singh Swatantar, Dr Bhag Singh and myself. Josh was at that time editor of the party organ *Junge Azadi* and through his pen popularised the policies of the party.

The Communist Party was under severe attack after its second congress in 1948. Josh was arrested, while I remained underground. He was released after two years. He then joined the underground apparatus when I assumed the secretaryship of the State Committee after the change in the party line. We worked together till 1964, when the split took place. At the time of the split he fully agreed with our position and was a signatory to the documents also but decided to remain with the CPI because he did not think that we would be able to rally a large number of party members to form a party for lack of international support, which the then CPI enjoyed. It is not proper here to go into the discussions which he had with me in those days.

When he was writing his autobiography he came to me to see some documents which were with me. As they were lying somewhere else it was not possible for me to make them available to him. Due to non-availability of these documents, most of the quotations which Josh has given are from government records which do not always carry the truth and sometimes are coloured.

Irrespective of all that and our differences in later years, I have no hesitation to admit that Josh led a life of a dedicated revolutionary. He faced all types of repression and suppression courageously and inspired hundreds of workers to the revolutionary cause. His life was very simple and his requirements few. He used to live solely on the party wage and never used to hanker for money. He did not leave any property for his children. His elder son, who is related to me, is a taxi-driver in Delhi struggling to make both ends meet. His younger son, Devender Singh, who is a member of our party, is also leading a simple life in his village Chetanpura. Com. Sohan Singh Josh had to go through untold sufferings. He had gone through 12 years of imprisonment, around three years of underground life. But all through he never compromised on principles and on what he stood for. Everybody was concerned about his own family, but this renowned figure never gave much consideration to this aspect. There were times when he would be found struggling to arrange some hundred rupees. He used to share his difficulties with me. Both of us were in the same boat at that time. I do not find any mention of his wife Karam Kaur in his autobiography. He had great affection for her and

she was loyal and lived to his expectations. She looked after the children and managed the house amidst immense difficulties but never bothered him. Her's was a big contribution factor in his revolutionary life.

Sohan Singh Josh held many responsible positions. He was the general secretary of the Shiromani Akali Dal when the movement was at its peak and did not compromise on principles. He was the main office-bearer of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and the president of the Workers and Peasants Party when it was formed. He was the Secretary of the Punjab State Committee of the CPI and was also the General Secretary of the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee before independence in 1938-39. He took keen interest in the struggles of the working class and was himself a participant in the various peasants struggles led by the party in Punjab. He was editor of various party organs. He was editor of the *Kirti* monthly and a wide section of the people used to read his writings. His poetry had a distinct character. Though he wrote some poems on the cultural aspect his poetry was mainly devoted to the national liberation movement, class struggle and the struggle for socialism. He wrote both in Urdu and Punjabi over which he had a mastery. He also had a sound knowledge of English.

He was quick to grasp the party line and loyally carried it out. He had the capacity to adhere to the framework of the party through his writings. But one has to admit that Josh did not significantly contribute in formulating the policies and in ideologically contributing to the development of the theory of socialism/Marxism in the concrete conditions prevailing in our country. That is why in his autobiography while evaluating the past there is no self-criticism. When dealing with the struggle to unify different communist groups in Punjab, at places he shows subjectivism. This is the case also with others who have written books on the controversies among the various communist groups in Punjab at that time. In fact, in my address to the Reception Committee of the 5th Congress of the Communist Party of India, held at Amritsar, I had given some assessment of the different groups who had contributed to the development of the communist movement in Punjab. He conveyed his reservations to me. But with all these limitations I must say that his name is synonymous with the development of the communist movement in Punjab. His whole life was of a dedicated revolutionary, struggling all through, a real communist. Nobody else was so close to him as I was during the years

1935 to 1964. When a proper history of Communist Movement in Punjab is written, his name will be there for the outstanding contribution made by him.

Though in later years, after the split in 1964, when we had parted company we did not have many occasions to meet each other. But even then I felt that we never lost mutual confidence.

I am sure that his autobiography will be widely read by the Communists and left oriented people throughout the country. They will draw lessons from his devotion to the cause, the sacrifices made, the spartan life he led. He was always confident of the victory of the cause of Marxism-Leninism and his surname "Josh" carried the spirit of this enthusiasm.

HARKISHAN SINGH SURJEET

1. Early Days and Education

As I begin to pen down this autobiography, I am about 75 years old, having lived a fairly long span of life. I have fought many a militant battle in my life, but my old age has not affected my revolutionary fervour; the fire of revolution still burns within me as bright as it did in my youth. I am still active mentally, though physically I have grown weak.

*

I was born in a Sikh Jat family in village Chetanpura of Amritsar district about the year 1896. The exact day of my birth is not known, but the date stated in my primary school certificate, however, is 12 November, 1898.

My father's name was Lal Singh and mother's Dyal Kaur. Ours was a poor, debt-ridden family. The birth of a son in a peasant family was not much of an event in those days. Children were born and died as if the God willed so, such was the notion. Economic conditions were very bad in the last decade of the 19th century, and worse still in the early 20th century. The then prevalent philosophy was that "All is *maya*"; that is to say that people followed a philosophy of resignation.

Children died like flies due to malnutrition, small-pox and other fell diseases. No doctors or medicines were available to the children of the poor working people, and the parents never even thought of birth control. A fertile woman could raise a dozen or more children. One or two daughters were welcome; but if more came along they were uncared for. If they died, well, it was good riddance. However, sons were sought after, but their upbringing was not anyone's responsibility because parents were hard put to make even both ends meet.

During the first five or six years of my childhood, I suffered throughout from one ailment or the other due to malnutrition. While defecating my rectum would protrude out, and my aunt pushed it in with the help of the sole of a shoe! My parents could hardly provide

me with warm clothing in winter. For nine years or so, I did not even have a pair of shoes.

My father had learnt the three R's from a *mullah* of the village mosque. I remember him reciting Persian couplets from *Gulistan* of Sheikh Saadi. He was much respected by the people of my village and those around. He could do calculations and measure land accurately. Almost all land disputes in the village were settled by him. People loved and respected him because he performed his job without fear or favour.

My father was very keen that I should get a good education, but during those days schools were few and far between. There was none nearby for me to go. I was about seven when I was sent to this *mullah* to learn Urdu. But I do not know how and why I became allergic to his way of teaching. He always made an obnoxious, shrill noise through his nose while breathing out and all the students hated him for this and cut jokes behind his back.

Nevertheless, I went to him in the mosque, sat there for some time, felt feverish and came back home. But immediately thereafter I would climb to the roof top, sit there and watch kite flying. My father perhaps thought that I was malingering, but somehow I did not like the whole atmosphere at the *madarasa*. Hence, I made no progress whatsoever in acquiring even the rudiments of the Urdu language.

My father, noticing that I was making no progress at all, excused me from going to the *mullah*, but asked me to graze the cattle. Thus, I had to take out a herd of cattle daily at about nine in the morning and tend to it till dusk. I did this for about two years, and all the while I was barefoot. I found it very difficult to keep the herd together and control it. Stray cattle would break loose and run into other people's fields. Farm-owners often scolded and abused me; and at times I was also beaten up.

I was about eight years when I went along with my parents to attend the marriage of one of our relatives in a distant village in Lyalpur district. On our way back home, we stopped over at Amritsar. It being "*Amavas*" (no-moon day) my parents decided to visit the Golden Temple and have a dip in the holy tank. I had never seen a city before. I was so absorbed in gazing at the big buildings, shops full of merchandise dressed beautifully in the show-windows, fruits, shoes, clothes, watches, etc., that I got separated from the family group. Suddenly I could see my parents no more. Finding myself all alone in an alone crowd, I began to wail loudly. People stared at me

and then went about their way! Fortunately, a few people of my village returning from the Tarn Taran "*Amavas*", recognised me and enquired about my missing parents. Amidst sobs, I told them my story, but they refused to take me back to the village because I was a "bad boy" who let loose his cattle in their fields! "Unless you give us your word that you will not allow your cattle to break loose, and keep them under control, we will not take you along to the village" was the deal they offered me. I was small, helpless and completely at their mercy. I could not but give my words to them to reach back to my village.

I was fed up with cattle grazing. My unshod feet were sore and swollen, constantly pricked by *usha* grass. Over and above that were the abuses hurled at me by the people in whose fields my cattle would break loose and graze and almost daily. These people went to my father complaining about my negligence; and he, in turn, would severely rebuke me. Even though I was sick at heart, I carried on with my task for two full years.

About this time, a Subedar Major of my village, named Sardar Mit Singh, returned home after being pensioned off by the army. He had been round the world and knew the value of education. Wanting that his children should get a good education he engaged a Punjabi teacher for Rupees 15 a month plus food. Eventually, he opened a school in a big building he owned. Thus, the children of our village got an opportunity of attending a school and learning the three R's in the village itself.



The opening of Mit Singh's school in the village was a big factor that brought about a sea-change in my life. One afternoon our cattle were resting in the shade of the trees. Usually this was the time when we, the child grazers, played some game or the other. But that day I spoke to another boy named Harnam Singh and made a proposal. "Harnam, a school has been opened in the village and some boys are joining it. I think, we should also enroll. Afterall, what do we get by cattle-grazing, foot-sores, reprimands, abuses, rebukes? I am going to ask my father to send me to school. You too ask your father. We shall attend school and learn something".

He agreed at once and promised to ask his father. When I came home that evening I asked my father for his permission to go to the

school. He agreed; so did Harnam's father. Both of us joined the school the very next day.

Sometimes I wonder why I had taken such an initiative at that tender age of nine. Was it due to the hard life of a cattle-grazer that I had experienced; was it due to some hidden self-respect within me; or did I sense school-going to be an easier task than cattle grazing? Whatever the reason, I joined the school in all earnest and put my mind and soul in learning Punjabi. My father too was very happy to see that I was so keen on my academic pursuit.

Unlike at the mullah's *madarssa*, I began making rapid progress in this private school. For about three years, the medium of instruction in the school was Punjabi. Master Fauja Singh's handwriting in Gurmukhi script was beautiful, and his method of teaching was also good. This enabled us to read and write Punjabi well. When the school was later taken over by the Government, the medium of instruction was changed to Urdu.

I passed the fifth primary class very creditably in 1912 from the school, having been the monitor throughout. But I could not compete for the government stipend because I was overaged. Next I joined the Church Mission Middle School at Majitha, about three miles from my village.

In the Mission School, English was taught from Class 4, and I did not even know the "a, b, c". Therefore, I along with many other students was not admitted into Class 6, but retained in the junior special class to make up for the deficiency in English. This I did topping the class.

I passed the Middle from this school in 1916, beating all previous records and standing first in every subject. I was the monitor in every class and the captain of the cricket as well as the tug-of-war teams. I also came out second in the high-jump competition of the Government Middle Schools at Tarn Taran in 1916.

During my four years in the Mission School only one boy named Ram Rakha Mall of Chawinda Devi could compete with me in studies. But he could not dislodge me from my first position, and always came second in every class. An Urdu master of his village, Maulvi Hurmat Ali, took an unhealthy interest in our competition. He was the examiner in one of the quarterly examinations of class eight, and Urdu B answer sheets were examined by him. He gave me only five marks out of 50 in this paper. However, as I secured 45 marks in Urdu A, I passed in the aggregate.

I knew too well that all the answers written by me in Urdu B paper were correct. I went up to Maulvi Hurmat Ali and asked why he had given me no marks for the other correct answers? His reply was: "I know your answers are correct, but you have been showing off by answering in high-flown Urdu. I have punished you for this audacity"!

Despite this, Ram Rakha Mall could not overtake me. I had a special knack for English grammar, and would often point out mistakes committed even by my teachers. The school's teaching staff was impressed by my performance as in mathematics and geometry I used to score cent per cent marks.

I joined the Khalsa Collegiate High School in Amritsar in the ninth class. My father was too poor to pay my high school and boarding fees. So I approached my uncle Mangal Singh who was a pensioner havildar and begged of him to help me financially to continue my studies. But he refused point blank. However, my father was proud of his son's performance in the schools, and hence borrowed some money to enable me to continue my studies. I had also insisted that I should be allowed to further my studies even with borrowed money.

But I found conditions in this high school not congenial for my studies. The standard of the students and studies in all the subjects was very low. The students of the 9th class of the Khalsa High School were no match even to the 8th class students of the Majitha Mission School. Besides after a month's time, the teachers too began to pass me over, realising that I was over-standard for my class-mates. I did not like this at all, because that would have made me complacent and slack in studies. This I realised within two months of my stay at Amritsar.

I picked up courage and went first to Master Suraj Singh soliciting his good offices to help me to attend the 10th class instead of the 9th. He was aghast: "What are you talking, my boy"? He said, "Boys of the 9th class often spend two years or even more to get promoted to 10th. Your proposal is unheard of, impossible". I approached Master Amar Singh and other teachers with the same proposal. Their replies too were more or less on the same lines. Thus discouraged, I made up my mind to leave the school before the summer vacations and study privately at home.

This I did. I came back home with the school leaving certificate in my pocket, told my father the entire story and proposed that I should

appear in the matriculation examination by preparing for it in the remaining nine months. I got his assent and blessings for my plan.

Straightaway, I took upon myself the task of studying the courses prescribed by the Panjab University for the matriculation examination. I already had some books; the remaining ones I procured from Amritsar and devoted my entire time in self-study. Everyday, I got up in the morning, washed my face, ate whatever was there for breakfast, took my books and went to our well outside the village, sat there all alone and studied till dusk. My mother brought my lunch to the well-side, and went back home after I ate. Drinking water was, of course, at hand nearby.

I followed this daily routine till the matriculation examination. There was another boy named Ganga Ram who also had not joined any High School after passing the Middle and was studying at home for the matriculation examination. We met sometimes and helped each other. There were no help books or "guides" in those days, and we only had dictionaries to refer to when needed.

Then a problem arose. We could appear in the matriculation examination only through the good offices of some High School head-master. I along with Ganga Ram walked 16 miles to Dera Baba Nanak High School to seek the help of the headmaster there. But he refused to accept our fees and send the necessary papers to the Panjab University, fearing, as he said, that would affect the results of his school! We were disappointed, but did not lose heart. A few days later we went to the second master of the D.A.V. High School, Amritsar, who after asking us some questions in English agreed to send our admission papers and fees for the examination. Both of us took the examination in March 1917 at the Amritsar Centre. My diligence and studiousness bore fruit, and I passed the matriculation examination in the second division. Unfortunately, Ganga Ram could not get through as he was very weak in mathematics. My parents were very pleased at the success of their son and were willing to incur more debts in order to send me to the college for higher education. They were even willing to mortgage some of our land to raise the loan.



I joined the Khalsa College in Intermediate in May 1917, and went to pay respects to my old teachers Suraj Singh and Amar Singh who

were both very pleased at my success. Among my class-follows in the college were Achhar Singh Chhina (who later became a communist leader), Anup Singh (who went to the USA, did a doctorate and came back to India and later became a Congress M.P.), Mohan Singh Nagoke (who became an M.L.A.) and Partap Singh Kairon (who rose to become a Chief Minister of post-partition Punjab).

Anup Singh was the dullest but the naughtiest boy in our class. He liked to cut jokes and play pranks with his co-students. As soon as he was on the scene, most of us would hide away our books. He resented my revising the lessons taught in the class-room, and often teased me by hiding away my books at different places.

I grew up in a Sikh milieu. The Sikh Gurus have left behind great traditions of self-sacrifice, truthful living and militant struggle against tyranny. Their teachings are very humanistic, and make no distinction between man and man for reasons of colour, caste, community or religion. They recognised no such thing as untouchability. Guru Nanak has said that he was "with the lowliest of the lowly". Those whom Guru Gobind Singh baptised and took into his fold belonged to the lowly castes. Thus, Sikhism is thoroughly saturated with true democratic spirit.

Having learnt Punjabi, I began to read whatever came to my hand about the Gurus and their teachings. One day I came across a very sentimentally written pamphlet regarding the sacrifice of the two younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh. It was nightfall and I read the narration to the entire family. It told the story of Fatch Singh and Zorawar Singh who were bricked alive into a well in Sirhand. These young sons of Guru Gobind Singh were asked by the Qazi to embrace Islam in return for freedom, but they had refused to bow before the tyranny, and preferred death to surrendering to religious bigotry. As I read the episode, my voice was surcharged with emotion. Tears rolled down my parents' eyes and it was with much effort that I finished reading the pamphlet. This episode, and the sacrifices made by Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur influenced my life very much. In fact, these, to a great extent, moulded my character in those early years.

The desire to study more on Sikhism took hold of me. I discussed with a friend a proposal to open a library in the village. Besides, I had read somewhere that books were the man's best friends. One's best friend may desert at times, but books were always at hand to give comfort or share one's sorrow. This had given me the idea of

opening a library in the village.

My friend agreed with me, and we did not let the grass grow under our feet. Immediately, we approached the two village headmen, and some other men of affluence. All of them greeted the proposal and promised to contribute – from one rupee a month to annas 12 or eight. Thus, we could collect more than Rs 10 every month. Books in those days were cheap, and within a few months we bought some 50 books, as also many pamphlets and weekly papers. The library began to function promisingly. A room was rented to house the library and receipt books were got printed. More and more books were bought and placed on the shelves, and Punjabi-knowing people of the village began to take interest in our library.

Like most residences of those days, our living quarters were separate from our cattle pen, where my father had allowed a Muslim couple and their two small daughters to live in a small room. They did some odd jobs for the villagers and were given certain fixed amounts at times like betrothals, marriages and like occasions. At harvest times they were also given some quantity of grain. During Muslim festivals like Id, they cooked some sweets and invariably invited me to share with them, which unhesitatingly, I always did. But my mother used to reprimand me, saying: "Do not eat anything from their hands. They are Muslims and we Sikhs do not eat anything cooked by them". And the matter would end there: I had not inhibitions in this regard even from those early days of my life.



I could not study long in the college for want of money. My father did his best to somehow scrape some money for a few months, but it was beyond his capacity to do so month after month. Sorrowfully, one day he told me: "It is impossible for a poor man to educate even one of his sons. I am helpless. You will have to leave college and get some job in order to rid the family of the curse of the accumulated debt".

My father was not given to any addiction like drinking or opium-eating. Even on occasions like marriages, he neither drank liquor nor served it to the guests. He was a man of clean habits. How did he, then, incur this heavy debt of more than Rs. 3,000, a big amount in those days?

The first reason was that the *Baniyas* charged very heavy interest for the money they advanced to him. The second reason was that in

1912 he had taken a loan for a Persian well in his *barani* land and equipped it with all the required paraphernalia costing approximately Rs 1,000. He had got me married twice, borrowing about another Rs 1,000 for ornaments, clothes, etc., for my wife. Over and above this, he had bought a ploughing bullock on credit from a Shahpuri Arora, who came every year during the harvest time, board and lodge with us and pestered my father to pay back the debt.

So I had no other alternative but to leave college and come back home. But how was I to get a job and help my parents get rid of the debt? Agriculture activities did not pay beyond food and meeting other sundry requirements of running the household. Even land revenue sometimes was paid by borrowing from some money-lender if the crops failed. My father was in very bad straits, and it was my filial duty to give him a helping hand. But how? I was but a rustic boy and knew nothing about the ways of the world. To be brilliant in a class is one thing, but to do something more practical like earning money is quite another.

2. Service Life

FORTUNATELY for me, an electrician of my village named Surain Singh worked in Hubli in Karnataka. He was employed by the Greaves Cotton and Company of Bombay to do some electric fittings of a big textile mill at Hubli. He was a trusted man of the company, and had a batch of wiremen of his own choice working under him, most of whom belonged to our village. I wrote to him for some job under him. Surain Singh was unlettered in English, and wanted someone to help him correspond with the company. Knowing that I knew English, he offered me the job of an "electrical clerk". The entire family was happy that I would at least be earning something. My father used to say that if a farmer managed hard cash of Rs. 10 every month, he could be on his own and be rid of all his financial uncertainties.

But, my mother was very sad. She did not like the prospect of her son separating from the family for the sake of a few rupees. She went to the extent of saying that we could all eat half a bread (*roti*) instead of a full one, but she would not send her son to a far-off, unknown place. However, my father ruled her out, and I began to make preparations to leave for Hubli.

We are three brothers and a sister and I am the eldest. I was first married when I was about nine years old. In those days it was considered proper for the sons and daughters of respectable families to be married early. My wife came to our house only during the marriage ceremonies and immediately went back to her parents. I never saw her again as she died of some disease. I was married a second time when I was about 13. At the time of my departure for Hubli both my mother and wife were in tears, imploring me that I must write a letter as soon as I reached my destination.

From here onwards I began to write a diary, a part of which escaped falling into the hands of the police during their many searches later in my life.

It is noted in the diary that I left my village home on Friday, 14

December, 1917, with only Rs. 36 in my pocket. The railway fare from Amritsar to Delhi was Rs. 4 = 5 = 6 (Rupees four, annas five and pies six). When I reached Hubli, I was left with only Rs. 8.

The life at Hubli was quite homely with about 10 of us Punjabis working and living together. I was employed on a daily wage of Re. 1 and As. 8 plus overtime. I bought the wiremen's and carpenters' tools and adjusted myself to my new job in a couple of weeks. My other colleagues were always there to help me if and when I faced any difficulties.

But I had no knowledge of the technical terms for the material used for electrical fittings. The company found this out from some of the letters sent to them by the foreman, and my wages were reduced by two annas. Our monthly expenditure on food etc., was only Rs. 15 per head, and the money I saved was promptly sent home.

I regularly sent 12 annas per month as my subscription to the village library we had started. I also wrote at least three articles in the weekly "Panth Sewak" on the need to spread the gospel of Sikhism among the people of Karnataka as they knew nothing about the Sikhs or Sikhism. I also contributed, like a true Sikh, one-tenth of my earnings to the "gurdwara". All shows that I was an ardent Sikh at that time.

For the first time at Hubli I came in contact with local labourers working in the textile mill. I saw them in dirty, tattered clothes, eating *bajri chapatis* with chilli powder paste. They were indeed very poor, poorer than the poor among Punjabis, and it seemed to me impossible for a human being to live on such food. These local labourers got between 8 and 12 annas a day as wages.

On Sundays we used to go to the city bazar to buy fresh butter, curd, vegetables, etc., from the local women vendors who brought their produce to sell. This was a new experience for me, for in Punjab then women only worked in the kitchen. I also saw women processing jute fibre for making sarees and other clothes. In Punjab people also grew jute, but the fibre was only used to make ropes.

The work of electrical installation finished by the end of April 1918, and our group left for Bombay, the head-office of our company, on Wednesday, 1st May and reached port city the next day.

My diary gives an indication of the prices of those times. For instance, I bought two shirts for Rs. 3 and four annas, and a shirt and a belt for Re. one and 14 annas. I also got stitched a coat and trousers all for Rs. 10 and eight annas, while a pair of shoes cost me Rs. 3 and

eight annas.

On 26 June, 1918 I left the Greaves Cotton and Company and joined the Turner Hoare and Co. the next day. Thus, I parted company of my village co-workers and began to live in a rented room in a gurdwara in the Fort area of Bombay. Here I was properly baptised as a Sikh.

However, on 20 July I left the Turner Hoare and Co and got Rs. 35 As 5 and 3 Pies for 19 days' work. Three days later I joined the British India Steam Navigation Co. I bought a season ticket for Mazgaon for Rs. 2 to commute between my house and my new work place.

The gurdwara was of great help for the unemployed Sikhs seeking employment. While I was working for the steamship company, a Sikh co-worker informed me that there was vacancy in the Censor's Office, part of the Bombay G.P.O. I promptly applied for the job.

But in September 1918 tragedy struck. I received a telegram that my uncle Mangal Singh had died on 17th of the month, and that I should reach my village as soon as possible. I settled my accounts with the shipping company, bought a railway ticket for Amritsar and reached my village on 27 September.

After the long strenuous journey, I was tired. Having eaten the lunch served by my mother, I lay down on a bare *charpai* in the verandah, with a pillow under my head. I dozed off. My father had returned home for food after having worked in the field. He too sat down on the cot I was sleeping on, and began tenderly to run his fingers through my hair. This woke me up; and the first words he addressed me were: Did you do anything wrong in Bombay?

His inquiry puzzled me: Why did he ask me this question? I could well read his face that he was real worried. I replied in the negative, and asked him the reason for asking the question. He replied that about a fortnight back a policeman had come to the village, and made enquiries about my character and education from the village headmen. The latter had, however, given a favourable report about me, but the policeman had not approached my father at all. My father was worried because generally policemen came to the village to enquire into the antecedents of bad characters or suspects, and he imagined that I might have committed something unlawful in Bombay. Policemen were terror personified in those days, and their visit to a village only meant trouble for someone.

Then I understood the reason for the police enquiry about me. I

told my father to relax and not to worry. I had done nothing criminal in Bombay, but had only applied for a job in the Censor's office there. This was a secret service job, and the authorities wanted to know about my past before considering me for employment. My explanation satisfied my father, and he was happy that I had started earning and relieving the family of some of the debts. My mother was happy too for having me with the family. But her happiness did not last long. After about a fortnight of my home-coming, my father suddenly fell ill, and his condition started deteriorating day by day. He died on 13 October, 1918, 26 days after the death of his elder brother Mangal Singh, leaving us all in utter grief and mourning.

My father's death was a terrible blow for the entire family. My brothers were teenagers yet, and had not even learnt to properly handle a plough. We were completely dependent on our father; and knew nothing about domestic affairs. The calamity had shifted ground from under our feet, and we lost our bearings and felt helpless and dejected beyond measure. My brothers would not believe that our father was gone for ever, leaving us to our fate.

Mother's non-stop weeping and wailing made us weep too; and we felt still more helpless. The worry eating into her vitals was: what will become of her sons? Their father gone, their uncle gone, the burden of indebtedness weighing heavily on the family. Heartless creditors and usurers would soon be knocking at our doors for their pound of flesh. How would she meet the situation? The entire future appeared bleak and deathly to her.



As the eldest in the family it was now my responsibility to take the family burden on my shoulders. I had had some education, but had no idea as to how I was to go about to discharge this new responsibility.

Fortunately, after about a fortnight, I received the appointment letter for a junior post in the Censor's Office in Bombay. But my dilemma was whether I should leave the family in that helpless situation to take up the job in Bombay? After considering many pros and cons, my mother agreed, albeit with a heavy heart, that I should go and send back home some money to keep the wolfish usurers at bay. My departure for Bombay was very emotional and tearful. My mother commented that poverty is a curse; it compels the dearest

ones to leave home and be separated from the family. My wife was a picture of grief, while my brothers and sister sobbed bitterly. I left for Bombay on 28 October, reaching there on the 30th. I joined duty from 1 November, 1918.

Major Ferrar was the incharge of the Censor's Department. He asked me what salary I wanted. I replied "one hundred", and that settled the question. I did not know that that was the minimum salary.

I was handed over the Censor's stamp, and my job was to censor letters in Punjabi coming from abroad. These letters came from Punjabis, especially Sikhs, living in Canada, America, Fiji, Argentina, Singapore, Penang, Shanghai, Malaya (now Malaysia), etc., to their relatives in Punjab. Our instructions were that "innocent" letters should be allowed to proceed onward; but letters containing suggestions, symbols, innuendoes or vague words should be torn and thrown in the waste-paper basket. Special care was asked to be taken to pass on any information contained in the letters regarding the whereabouts and the activities of Lala Lajpat Rai, Hardayal, Ajit Singh, Raja Mahendra Pratap and Maulvi Barkatullah to Sardar Sujan Singh, who was our head.

How many letters I destroyed during the period I worked in the Censor's office I do not know. They must be a few hundreds. The addressees must have been thirsting for information from their dear ones abroad, but we in the Censor's Office were merciless – a cog in the machine working like automats, showing no sympathy or human emotions either for the addressers or the addressees. Rather, we were keen on collecting as much information as possible from those letters for the special files allocated in the name of patriotic Indians who were considered "conspirators, suspects or seditionists" by the British Government.

I was a mercenary, with not even the ideas of patriotism or freedom of the country. I had left Punjab to lessen my family burden of indebtedness, and that was all about it then. The love for my country and the yearn for freedom as yet lay dormant somewhere within me. I was a Sikh, and like other Sikhs was loyal to the government.

I worked in this office up to 12 March, 1919, the date on which the Censor's Office was closed down. When I had first joined the office, I was paid Rs. 54 and four annas as railway fare; on leaving it I was paid one month's salary in lieu of notice. I was able to save Rs. 450

during my tenure, which paid off a part of our debt. Earlier, I had sent home Rs. 250. Thus a total burden of Rs. 700 was off our shoulders. I returned home.

While in Bombay I had picked up good acquaintance among the local Sikhs. I was also selected the assistant secretary of the Fort Gurdwara, where I lived in a room. The gurdwara was near the G.P.O and the V.T. Station. I was endearingly called Meetji (brother) by everyone. The gurdwara was a flourishing one, because Indian soldiers left for abroad from Bombay, as also disembarked here. Religious meetings were held every Sunday in the gurdwara which attended by a large number of people who made substantial offerings. The president of the gurdwara committee was one Bhai Faqir Chandji; Sardar Gulzar Singh was the secretary. They pulled on very well together, and worked selflessly and consciously. They also appreciated the work I did for the gurdwara in my spare time.

In April 1919, I received a telegram from Gulzar Singh from Bombay, promising to provide me with a job worth Rs. 75 per month. This was not a bad salary for a man of my education. The gurdwara people trusted me implicitly, and I had been of great help to them while I was in Bombay. They wanted me to continue my assistance to the gurdwara administration, and were ready to find me a job in some company in Bombay.

But my mother, wife and other members of the family insisted that I should not go away again. So I stayed on with them in the village. It was very improper on my part not to have even acknowledged Gulzar Singh's telegram.

But how long could I stay at home without doing any work? My brothers had got over their grief by now, and had gained self-confidence to be able to carry on their farm work. And my mother had withstood the ordeal of my father's death like a spartan. I had lost a good job offer in Bombay by default; now I was feeling sorry for the lost opportunity. However, army recruitment for Mesopotamia was going on even then. I filled in a two-year agreement on Rs. 99 p.m. plus ration and clothing, and was promptly despatched to Karachi in June for transit abroad.

The life in Karachi was very difficult. We were taken out in batches every day for fatigue in the cantonment area and made to dig land with hoes and other implements, and do levelling work. If anyone showed any slackness, a torrent of dirty abuses flowed from the Muslim Havildar incharge of the job. We were hardly treated like

any ordinary rustic recruits, but like donkeys. The Havildar incharge was an uncultured autocrat whose right to shower abuses on us could not be challenged.

However, some of us were not sent overseas, but to Kohat in the North Western Frontier Province, and I was one of them. The life in the NWFP was not as hard or unpleasant as it was at Karachi; still I did not like the services. Having been thus buffeted about for five months, I had my agreement cancelled, and came back home with a sigh of relief. Into the bargain debts worth another Rs. 400 had been cleared off, and the family burden lessened to that extent.

The Singh Sabha organisations had launched a movement against wearing ornaments by our women, and I was in favour of this. I proposed to my brothers that our wives may retain the ornaments their parents had gifted them, but collect the ornaments our family had provided them and sell them to pay off our remaining debt. My proposal was readily agreed to, and the ornaments were collected and sold in Amritsar. Thus, excepting for a few hundred rupees, all our debts were off, and the whole family was happy. Of course, there were undercurrents of some displeasure among our wives.

By then a cooperative credit society had been established in the village of which we became members. The remaining debt was also cleared by taking a credit from the society. The family was now completely free from the clutches of the usurers, and we could now walk erect, our heads held high.

During my stay at home I helped my brothers with agricultural work, but generally I was looking out for a job somewhere. Learning that Major Terrar of the Censor's Office was now the Deputy Commissioner of Lahore District, I went to him on 27 November seeking a job. He called me in his office, saw the certificates he himself had given to me appreciating my services but told me point blank that he could not give me any employment in Lahore. Dejected, I returned home.

I even thought of going to America for further studies. In fact, I helped a boy named Surat Singh of my village to go to America for higher studies. He along with friend of his, Surain Singh of Sham Nagar, sailed for America on 18 February, 1920, after passing the matriculation examination.

In April 1920 I privately appeared for Gyani examination (Roll No. 23) and F.A. English (Roll No. 911) of the Panjab University without any preparation whatsoever. I passed the F.A. in the second

division, but could not get through one paper of the Gyani examination.

In the meantime, the head-master of the Church Mission Middle School of Majitha, Edward Namaiah, was seeking me through the students of my village. He sent words to me that he wanted to see me. I met him on 11 July, 1920 in the school. He offered me the post of a teacher for Rs. 40 a month, which I readily accepted. I joined the Church Mission Middle School on 12 July and was asked to teach mathematics and English to the 5th and the 6th classes.

I had no teachers' training, but to the surprise of the school staff, I proved to be a successful teacher, and in a few months I became very popular amongst the students as well as the staff. In a second quarterly examination I was asked to set the arithmetics paper, which was appreciated by the head-master.

As a teacher I never beat any students, nor did I use offensive language against those who did not do their home-work or learn their lessons. I loved my students and helped them get over their difficulties and inspired confidence in them by repeating that they could learn anything if they put their heart and soul in their studies. "Given the will and determination, there is nothing in the world that is difficult to acquire. If I could pass two classes in nine months, why could you not perform similar deeds?" I would say. Must be other teachers failed to win over their wards either because of their superior bearing or because they used harsh words against those who did not perform well.

3. I Join the Akali Movement

IT was the Punjabi daily *Akali* which brought me into the Akali movement. The *Akali* began publishing from 21 May, 1920, and took its name from a great Sikh General, Phula Singh Akali of the Sikh Army who had made his mark in the Sikh history during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In its very first issue, the *Akali* had announced its working policy:

1. Putting an end to the administration of the gurdwara by the corrupt *mahants* and bringing them under the democratic control of the Sikh community;
2. Taking the Khalsa College, Amritsar, out of government control and setting up a democratic control of the Sikhs over it;
3. Forcing the Central Government to rebuild the demolished walls of Delhi's Gurdwara Rakab Ganj at the same site and in the same position as it stood before;
4. Rousing political and national awareness among the Sikh masses, bringing them into the struggle for freedom and enthusing them to vigorously participate in it; and
5. Building a central representative organisation of the Sikh community on the principle of democracy.*

The paper was brought out from Lahore mainly due to the efforts of Master Sundar Singh Lyallpuri with the cooperation of a few others from Lyallpur city and the district. He brought together an editorial staff comprising men of integrity and selflessness. The programme put forward by it answered the requirements of the times. The daily became popular very soon, and was hailed by the Sikhs who held strong nationalist and religious views.

Earlier, I used to read religious weeklies such as *Khalsa Samachar*, *Panth Sewak* or *Punjab Darpan*. *Khalsa Samachar* was a

* Hira Singh Dard's *Merian Kuchh Itihassik Yadan*, p. 153.

pro-government (pro-British) journal mostly reflecting the views of the feudal *sardars* of the Chief Khalsa Diwan on religious and political issues. The other two papers were liberal in characters. Besides dealing with the religious matters, they also addressed requests to the government to do justice to the Sikh community by giving them more posts in various government departments. Their policy was to the right of even the Liberal Party of those days.

I took to reading the daily *Akali* which changed my entire outlook. It rousing anti-British government editorials, poems and articles instilled a new life, as it were, in the nationally dried up bones of the Sikh community. Its ringing call to the Sikh masses and youth to come forward, make sacrifices and rid the gurdwara of the corrupt and immoral *mahants* began to sway the people. Its appeals to the youth and students to join the freedom struggle inspired them, and they came out in large numbers ready to make any sacrifice in the cause of freedom of their motherland and gurdwara reforms. The daily succeeded in changing the outlook of the Sikh community in a very short time. Response to its call to the Sikhs was tremendous, and *Akali* circulation began to soar.

The daily became a powerful weapon for moulding the religious and political views of the Sikhs. It acted as the agitator, mobilizer and organiser of the new *Akali jathas* began to spring up spontaneously everywhere in the towns and villages. A new epoch of Sikh revivalism had begun. The awe in which government administrators in the villages – the *numberdars*, *sufaidposhes* and *zaildars* – were held began to pall. The latter had been virtually holding the destiny of the people in their hands, like dictators.

A new climate of fearlessness and boldness began to be generated. Everywhere in Punjab the Sikhs began to talk about reform of the Sikh temples, of the necessity to end the control of the gurdwaras by the corrupt *mahants* and of winning freedom for the country from the British “butchers of Jallianwala Bagh”.

Akali initially concentrated its fire against the *mahants* of the historic Sikh gurdwaras. The biggest of these were the Golden Temple of Amritsar, Tarn Taran Sahib and Nankana Sahib, the last being the birth place of the first Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Nanak. These gurdwaras had become dens of thieves, drunkards, womenisers and pickpockets. The *mahants* themselves indulged in these vices. The huge income of the gurdwaras, at their disposal, accruing from gurdwara land holdings and offerings of the devotees had thoroughly

corrupted them. There was no religiosity about them, and they hardly cared for the sentiments of the worshippers because they had the backing of the government officials.

The Amritsar Golden Temple and the Tarn Taran gurdwaras were supervised by a Sikh *Sarbrah*; a British stooge who was appointed by the Deputy Commissioner who acted like a puppet at the latter's behest. He could not take any independent decision. The worshippers time and again had drawn the attention of the *Sarbrah* and the Deputy Commissioner to the corrupt practices and irreligious pursuits of the *pujaris*, but both turned a deaf ear to these. Such was the state of affairs of the two main Sikh gurdwaras of Amritsar and Tarn Taran, the centre of Sikhism, before 1920. The situation in other gurdwaras was much worse.

The cunning British bureaucrats knew fully well how to manipulate the slothful, parochial, uneducated incumbents of the gurdwaras for their own political interests and ensure their *raj* stability. The Sikh temples and the religion were used as weapons to strengthen the British rule by completely subordinating the *mahants*. The latter behaved like slaves of the British and paid no heed to the complaints by the common devotees.



The Akali movement was in its initial stages when I joined it. In fact, I had been taking interest in it even while I was a school teacher. I remember when in August or September, 1920 Sardul Singh Kaveeshar came to Guru-Ka-Bagh (Ghukewali, Amritsar) to address a Sikh congregation on an *amavas* day along with Amar Singh Chahal and Dan Singh Vachhoa. He had two objectives before him: some propaganda work with regard to the second session of the Central Sikh League which was to be held in Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore on 13 October, 1920; and to enlist volunteers to re-build the wall of the Gurdwara Rakab Ganj at Delhi, which had been demolished by the Government. The Government had acquired some gurdwara land and demolished the boundary wall to straighten a road leading to the Viceregal Lodge.

Sardar Sardul Singh made a very passionate appeal for enlisting volunteers who would go to Delhi to rebuild the wall; even be ready to lay down their lives for the cause. The appeal touched the chords of my heart and I stood up and offered myself to be one of the volun-

teers.

He had laid down two conditions for being accepted as a volunteer: first, the volunteer would give up his job or work, and be ready to proceed to Delhi when the call came; and secondly, he would not return home till the wall was rebuilt. These two conditions were accepted by every one of us: the forceful, anti-government speeches had so, inspired and impressed everyone.

For the first time interference in Sikh religious affairs by the government was taken up seriously, condemned severely and a call given to the Sikhs to gird up their loins and see that the gurdwara wall was rebuilt by the government. And if the government failed to do so, a decision was to be taken during the Lahore Sikh League session as to when the volunteers should go to Delhi to put up the wall. The volunteers were oath-bound to make every sacrifice for the religious cause.

In October 1920, I went to Lahore to attend the Central Sikh League session, and find for myself about the future plans. It was during the session in Bradlaugh Hall, that I for the first time saw most of the prominent leaders of India. They had all come in a body to attend the important meeting which was to influence the future course of action of the Sikh community. The special session of the Indian National Congress had been held a month earlier, where Mahatma Gandhi's programme of non-violent non-cooperation had been accepted. Mahatma Gandhi, the Ali brothers (Mohammed Ali and Shaukat Ali), Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew, Dr. Satyapal, Sardar Sardul Singh, Sardar Kharak Singh, (president of the session) and many others were present at the conference. In their speeches, they imbued the Sikhs with a new spirit and enthusiasm, and influenced and advised them on their future course of action. I heard the speeches very receptively and respectfully.

The Sikh League session was a very crucial one. The nationalist Sikhs and the loyalists were ranged against each other. The loyalists put up a great fight trying to defeat the non-cooperation resolution, but the progressives and the forward-looking nationalists had the majority in the conference and the resolution was passed by an overwhelming vote. Thus, the destiny of the Sikhs was linked with Indian nationalism.

There, I saw Mahatma Gandhi for the first time, sitting on the dais with the Ali brothers. He was of a small built and wore rough, hand-spun "khaddar" kurta and dhoti. He spoke slowly in broken Hindus-

tani, measuring every word. He praised the Sikhs for passing the non-cooperation resolution. Once he caused amusement on the dais and among the audience by uttering a vulgar word instead of *farz* (duty)! But despite his faulty Hindustani, he carried everything before him. He elaborated his programme of non-violent non-cooperation in a very persuasive manner. I was very much impressed by his simple manners and use of simple Hindustani which could be understood by everyone in the audience.

I also took part in a separate meeting of the volunteers in which it was decided that we should be prepared to proceed to Delhi on 1 December, 1920. Important Sikh leaders like Sardar Kharak Singh, Teja Singh Samundari, Sardar Dan Singh, Sardar Sundar Singh Lyallpuri, Sardar Mangal Singh, Amar Singh, Jaswant Singh and others were present at the meeting. Politically and intellectually Sardul Singh was head and shoulders above the rest. It was he who put forward the proposal of sending volunteers to Delhi, and dominated the proceedings. The volunteers left the meeting in high spirits, ready to lay down their lives for erecting the gurdwara wall again.

However, much before 1 December, the British government got the wall rebuilt through the intervention of the Maharaja of Nabha.

This was the first victory of the gurdwara freedom movement, and it was won without shedding a drop of blood. It boosted the morale of us volunteers, and the Sikh masses everywhere against the profligate *mahants*.

After the Sikh League session, I began attending religious and political meetings more often. I also attended the Church Mission School regularly and taught my students. But I found that I was being increasingly drawn towards the gurdwara reform movement. A big struggle waged inside me whether I should take a plunge in the struggles ahead, or not. I was still contemplating when the editor of *Akali* Sardar Mangal Singh was arrested under Section 124-A for writing allegedly seditious editorials in his paper. This shocked me. I immediately wrote to Giyani Hira Singh Dard, then incharge of the *Akali* that I was willing to become the next editor of the daily if the management approved of me. I also offered to resign from the school and set out for Lahore. My salary was of no concern, as apart from food I wanted nothing else.

Gyani Hira Singh had been a school teacher in Bhakna-Chabhal, Bangla Thikriwala in Lyallpur. Therefore, I also wrote to him that he could enquire about my antecedents from my relatives there. He

wrote back, asking me to resign and reach Lahore as soon as possible. I quit on 31 March, 1921, defying the implorings of my mother and wife, and set out for Lahore.

However, even before I set foot in Lahore, the paper's management had already decided to make Sardar Partap Singh, B.A.B.T. and headmaster of the Kairon Middle School, the editor of the daily. They had summoned me only to work on the staff of the *Akali*. Gyaniji assigned me the task of reporting the on-going cases against the Akalis and the political workers in the Lahore courts. This I did for more than two weeks.

But I had come to Lahore to become the editor of the *Akali*, and did not relish being relegated to a reporter's job. Besides, being unacquainted with the lanes and streets of Lahore, and not possessing a bicycle, I found it impossible to work in that capacity. I, therefore, requested Gyani Hira Singh to relieve me and allow me to go back and work for the Akali movement in my own district of Amritsar. He agreed.

I came to Amritsar, where I met Bhai Thakur Singh of Fatehgarh Churian (Gurdaspur). He told me that Master Chanda Singh, editor of the weekly *Panth Sewak*, had some time back secured a declaration for a daily called *Sansar* and that he was willing to pass it on gratis to anyone who would run it. Bhai Thakur Singh proposed that he would be the manager and I the editor of the paper, and that we both could become co-partners and bring out *Sansar*. I was inexperienced and gullible, and fell for the proposal. I went back to my village to fetch whatever money I could manage as my share to start the paper.

I had no money at home. So I asked my wife to spare her ornaments given by her mother at the time of our marriage. I told her about the co-partnership and the daily paper. But she was furious, and did not want to part with her ornaments. "You want to make us beggars? You gave up your job despite your mother's and my pleadings... You sold all the ornaments your father had given to his daughters-in-law. Now you want to deprive me of what my mother gave me? This is unjust, unfair and cruel. I beseech you not to do anything that will bring ruin to our home. You come back and work with the Akalis here, in the villages", she implored in anger and anguish.

But I was deterred. The dream of becoming the editor of a daily paper had taken possession of me. I had made up my mind and there

was no question of my retreating. I argued with her – at time aggressively, on others coolly – to convince her. It was a hard battle, but ultimately I succeeded in getting the ornaments from her. I went to Amritsar and sold them to goldsmiths, realising Rs. 400 in exchange. I handed over the money to the manager and my partner, Bhai Thakur Singh, and began to edit the daily *Sansar*.

It was a four-pager, and I alone wrote the editorials, the notes and the news. We could not afford to engage even a single sub-editor, let alone have an editorial staff. The paper, despite having a big-sounding name, like *Sansar* (world) dished out only local news. Just imagine a daily paper being run with a joint capital of only Rs. 800! It was really foolish on my part to join the venture; first because I had to bear the whole burden of writing up the entire paper and secondly, because the paper demanded more and more money to be brought out every day. Where was the money to come from? And how long could I carry on this business single-handed?

I soon realised that I could not continue for long. It was better for me to part company with Thakur Singh in time instead of ending up in debt. I told him that I was quitting without demanding a single pie from him and that he could run the paper as and if he liked. Thus, I ended my first venture at being a journalist, much to my discomfiture.

Now, my wife and my mother had the upperhand. I had gambled and lost. I was crest-fallen and had to put up with much harsh words from them.

On my return to the village, I made it the centre of my activities. The Akali movement by then was spreading like wild fire. The rousing propaganda of the daily *Akali* had infiltrated into areas around my village too. My joining the Akali movement had given rise to different reactions from different people in the village and its surrounds. Pro-government individuals thought that Baba Lal Singh's house was on the way out. Now that Sohan Singh has turned against the British Government, it would not let him alone. He will soon be put behind bars; relatives would leave or boycott him; nobody would marry his daughter or give his daughter to his sons; the creditors would swallow up his land, house, etc., etc.

In those days, being sent to the jail was considered a big blot and dishonour for any respectable family. Only criminals, decoits and thieves were sent to jail, not men of any good repute. Feudal respectability prevailed in the countryside.

The reaction of the more religious people, on the other hand, was that Sohan Singh had done the right thing. The Sikh religion was under attack; the gurdwaras had been seized by the immoral *mahants*. If educated men like him would not come forward to bring them back to the Panth, who else would? Did not our *Gurus* call upon the Sikhs to make sacrifices for good causes?

My participation in the Akali movement encouraged others to become Akalis. Harnam Singh, a big land-holder Ganda Singh's son, became an Akali; then Tara Singh, Namberdar Sundar Singh's son, came forward. Half a dozen more young men also joined us. Soon Chetanpur village began to stir with Akalis, and their shouts of *Sat Sri Akal*.

While the Akali movement was spreading, the British rulers were not sitting idle. They foresaw great danger in its spread, and launched a whisper — and smear — campaign against it. The main burden of their slander campaign was that "it was good-for-nothing men, having nothing to lose, who joined the movement, and that 15 per cent of them were *tarkhans* (carpenters), *lohars* (black-smiths) and men of lower caste".*



Government minions like *zaildars* and other petty officers, spread rumours that thieves, decoits and armed bands were roaming the villages in the guise of Akalis and that people should be beware of them. This was their propaganda line. Government officers defined *kripan*, the religious symbol of the Sikhs, as an arm, and hence its possession was punishable under the Arms Act. *Kripan* was liable to be confiscated any time by any government officer. The Akali movement was dubbed as "a movement of the low castes" in order to wean away the land-owning peasantry from it.

Despite all this British propaganda, the gurdwara freedom movement by the Akalis was gaining momentum. The British officers until then had never faced such an organised, peaceful and non-violent movement, and were completely nonplussed. Although the general mass of the peasantry was in the forefront of the movement, both rich and poor were taking active part in it. Educated people, especially school teachers, barristers and advocates also joined the movement,

* File No. 459, Part II, 1922.

and a good number of them led it from the front. It must be said to the credit of the then leadership that they did not shirk any sacrifice till the Gurdwara Act was won in an acceptable form.

The British rulers never wanted the Sikh peasantry to join the Akali movement. Their ignorance about the real sentiments and emotions of the peasantry was being fed on false reports from the countryside by their petty officials. In fact, the peasantry was immensely antagonised over the British rule because of the heavy burden of direct and indirect taxes imposed on them. Their farm produce was selling dirt cheap, and money was scarce. They suffered all kinds of insults and indignities at the hands of *numberdars*, *zaildars* and *thanedars* at the time of revenue collection. As a result, the Punjab peasants joined the Akali movement in overwhelming numbers.

Sikhism is a proselytising religion, and a person professing any other religion, and of race, caste or creed can join it after performing certain Sikh rituals. The Chief Khalsa Diwan preachers were converting non-Sikhs, including low-caste people, to Sikhism, which was not liked by the *pujaris* of the main Sikh temples. They even sought to prevent the Chief Khalsa Diwan preachers and leaders from entering the gurdwaras.

The *mahants* in control of the gurdwaras had, in fact, obliterated the dividing line between Sikhism and Hinduism. Hindu idols had been installed inside the gurdwaras, while Hindu customs, rites and rituals mostly prevailed in the Sikh temples. The incumbent *mahants* did not brook any criticism of their misdeeds, backed as they were by the British authorities. Sikhism, which taught its adherents to fight against tyranny and oppression and stand by what is good, was turned into a tool by the *mahants* to safeguard the interests of the British rulers. Gurdwaras, instead of being places of worship of God, became places of prayer for the everlasting *raj* of British imperialists! The then prevailing illiteracy, intellectual backwardness and poverty were the reasons why the *mahants* succeeded in so degrading Sikhism, Punjab had a literacy percentage of only five then.

The main plank of the Akali movement in the beginning was to hold *diwans*, sing hymns, speak on the current situation, propose the ouster of corrupt *mahants* from the gurdwaras and restore the Sikh temples to the democratically elected Sikh bodies. At every meeting, appeals went out to the Sikh audiences to become Akalis and join the Akali *jatha* of the village or the area. There was no dearth of people who came forward to get themselves enlisted. The sacrifices of the

Sikh Gurus inspired the Sikhs, and they were once again ready to lay down their lives in the manner of the Sikhs of the past who had made sacrifices to get the gurdwaras back from the hands of the Moghuls.

History, whether religious or otherwise, shows that whenever an organised body had fought against oppression and for a good cause, it had grown in strength with the voluntary enrolment of new members. No central Akali organisation had come into existence as yet. Neither the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), which provided the self sacrificing volunteers for the movement, had been formed. The *jathas* formed spontaneously, especially in the central districts of Punjab. The Akalis gave the lead in this interim period. The SAD came into being in order to centralise and keep the *jathas* in discipline. The Chabhal brothers – Surmukh Singh, Amar Singh and Jaswant Singh – played a notable role in organising the SAD.

The gurdwara freedom movement had already forged ahead, and taken control of a few important and historical gurdwaras by driving out the old *pujaris* or incumbents from them. The general consensus among the Akali *jatha* leaders was that the British rulers or their laws had no business to interfere in Sikh religious affairs. The gurdwaras were theirs, and it was for them to retain the old *mahants* or drive them out. And they went on acting on this presumption till the British authorities came down heavily on them.

The Akali *jathas* had already captured Gurdwara Babe-di-Bar in Sialkot city (now in Pakistan) and taken possession of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Then, at a conference in front of the Akal Takht on 15-16 November, 1920, the central body of the SGPC was formed to control and guide the gurdwara freedom movement in close collaboration and cooperation with the SAD. This was the birthday of the SGPC, born to win back the Sikh gurdwaras.

Until 13 April, 1919, the day when the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was enacted by General Dyer, nationalists could be counted on one's fingers. The Jallianwala tragedy was followed by martial law, indiscriminate arrests, humiliation and indignities heaped on Punjabis which shook and roused them from slumber. Punjab was thus being "reward" by the British for their assistance in winning the World War I. Realization dawned, slowly but steadily, on the Punjabis that all the pronouncements and promises of the British imperialists and their allies of granting more democratic rights, self-determination, etc., were aimed merely to secure Indian cooperation for the war.

Having won the war, they were again at their old game of repression and suppression of the rising political movement only a bitter struggle against the British to secure the country's freedom was the only alternative left.

This realisation made the number of Sikh nationalists to swell. Initially, the Central Sikh League played a big role in politicalising the Sikhs. Simultaneously, the influence of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, the feudal loyalists' body, began to wane. The repression launched by the British against the Akali-led gurdwara freedom struggle helped the process of a popular movement.

The November 1920 meeting of the SGPC at Amritsar elected Sunder Singh Majithia, the then head of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, as its president. This pleased the British rulers as it fitted in their scheme to have the feudal lords as the "natural leaders" of the Sikh masses. They also hopefully thought that the Akali movement could now be contained. But they were mistaken.

After a few days of his election as the SGPC president, the Punjab Government offered Majithia membership of the Governor's Executive Council. He immediately resigned the SGPC post and joined the government. It was evident that he was more interested in preserving his class interests than work for the gurdwaras freedom. Power was more alluring to him than the presidentship of the SGPC, which would have him come into conflict with the British rulers, something against his class interest.

The SGPC delegates who had elected him had the illusion of freeing the gurdwaras from the clutches of the *mahants* without coming into clash with the government. They had, it seems, thought that Sunder Singh Majithia, one of the staunch supporters of the British government, would intervene on behalf of the Akali movement and get the gurdwara freedom issue resolved without bloodshed. But they were disappointed and in discomfiture by Majithia's action. The way to secure the freedom of the gurdwaras only lay through struggle and sacrifices.

For all practical purposes, the Chief Khalsa Diwan had given a go-bye the teachings of the Sikh Gurus; their class interests had blinded them to the tenets of Sikhism. The Sikh Gurus had called to fight the rulers' tyranny and taught to call a tyrant as such. But the leaders of the Chief Khalsa Diwan danced to the British rulers' tune instead, and did not want to come into conflict with the government. Sunder Singh Majithia stuck to his post of the head of the Chief Khalsa

Diwan even when lay Sikhs were being mercilessly beaten and tortured inside British jails, and killed by the *mahants* and the British stooges.

The main leadership of the Khalsa Diwan was opposed to the Akali movement. A few of them, at best, were lukewarm. The British government wanted to enlist their active help in order to keep the *mahants* in saddle. But the Akali movement had passed many a post by then.

With the hotting up of the Akali struggle, a number of Singh Sabhas affiliated to the Chief Khalsa Diwan broke away from it, and joined the Akali movement. But the Diwan leadership served as the cat's paw whenever the government faced difficulty with regard to the gurdwaras freedom issue. The Diwan believed that the British power had come to stay permanently in India and prayed in their religious and educational conferences for eternal British presence in India. Its leaders consistently opposed any progressive Sikh movement against the British Government. They even ex-communicated the Ghadar heroes who had waged an armed struggle and heroically embraced the gallows fighting for the freedom of their motherland.

Not only that, they even invited General Dyer, the butcher of Jallianwala Bagh, to the Golden Temple at Amritsar and enacted the farce of converting him to Sikhism by presenting a robe of honour on him; cringingly uttering: "You have saved Punjab"!

Such were the indignities the Chief Khalsa Diwan leaders had heaped upon the Sikh community. The Akali movement never forgave them for their anti-national and anti-patriotic stance. They were condemned not only for opposing the Akali movement, but also for their sins of political omissions and commissions. The Chief Khalsa Diwan stood exposed as the sycophants and stooges of the British rulers.

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We moved *jathas* of five or more Akalis from place to place. On *amavas* days, diwans were held in Guru-ka-Bagh, the historic gurdwara about seven miles from my village. I was a good speaker and was often invited to speak there on the situation in the Panth and the country. The general burden of my speeches was invariably to expose the British government's policies vis-a-vis Punjab, the Sikhs and the gurdwaras. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of the innocents, the

hanging of the Ghadar Party heroes and life sentences imposed on hundreds of others were the main weapons to condemn the British government. No speaker ended his speech without mentioning some aspect or the other of these incidents.

As the Akali movement progressed, new incidents took place which further embittered the Sikh masses against the Government. The Akalis had been urging the *mahants* to reform themselves and place the gurdwaras under the central control of the SGPC, the only representative body of the Sikhs. But the *mahants* treated the gurdwaras as their personal property, and did not pay heed. But for the government's abetment and collusion, the *mahants* could not have defied the Sikh community's wishes and pleadings.

There were many complaints against the *mahants* of the Tarn Taran gurdwaras. On 26 January, 1921, an Akali jatha went to the gurdwaras and began to sing hymns. The gurdwara guardians attacked the jatha with whatever weapons they could lay hands on. Many Akalis were wounded, two of whom later died due to the injuries sustained.

Within a month of this incident, on 20 February, a gruesome massacre was perpetrated by *mahant* Narain Das of Nankana Sahib in Sheikhpur District (now in Pakistan). It was known to the people beforehand through newspapers that the *mahant* had turned the gurdwara into a fortress and planned to kill Akali leaders after allowing them to enter the holy place. The British law and order authorities were conspicuously absent from the scene, on the day of the massacre, in which about 200 Akalis were killed. Commissioner King and D.C. Currie were alleged to have colluded with Mahant Narain Das in the horrendous crime.

These incidents among other developments estranged the Sikh masses further from the government. The British adopted an open partisan stance in the case against the *mahant* and his goons. The Akali demand was that two cases should be instituted; one against the *mahant* and his stooges, and the other against the Commissioner King and D.C. Currie. The government summarily turned down the second demand, and the concerned judge carried out the government's bidding and decided the case against the Mahant Narain Das in the way the government wanted it to be done.

Under this situation the provisional committee of the SGPC passed a resolution of non-cooperation with the government, which was later endorsed by the general body of the elected SGPC on

25 August, 1921. This was a victory for the nationalist Sikhs over the pro-British elements. Henceforth, the efficacy of non-violent non-cooperation was to be tested in the field of religion also — of freeing the gurdwaras from the clutches of the *mahants*, the unashamed British stooges.



I had become an active member of the Ramdas Akali jatha, which covered Ajnala tehsil of Amritsar District and the whole of Gurdaspur District.

The *mahant* of Gurdwara Tejakalan in Gurdaspur District had agreed on 17 February, 1921 to work under the supervision of the SGPC. But sensing the hostile government attitude towards the SGPC, he began to back-paddle. He enlisted a number of strongmen, and sought and secured the assistance of the local officials. Complaints regarding his defiant conduct began to be reported to the SGPC. It was being openly alleged that his desperadoes were preparing to enact another Nankana tragedy.

The SGPC executive committee appointed a sub-committee consisting of Sardar Bhag Singh Vakil of Gurdaspur and Jathedar Teja Singh Akarpuri on 17 February, 1921 to enquire into the complaints against the *mahant* and make suitable arrangements for the proper administration of the gurdwara. The sub-committee found substantial truth in the complaints and recommended that the *mahant* be thrown out of the gurdwara. The SGPC took possession of the gurdwara on 23 February.

But the deposed *mahant* continued his nefarious activities to re-establish himself and recapture the gurdwara. Soon, a message reached me from the Tejakalan gurdwara managing committee that the gurdwara feared an imminent attack from the *mahant's* supporters and that I should immediately reach there with a jatha of Akalis to defend the gurdwara. I collected some Akalis from the nearby villages and reached Tejakalan the next morning. A large number of people were already gathered there to oppose the planned attack by the *mahant's* men.

Next morning, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, Gurdaspur came to the gurdwara. The Akalis elected Sardar Bhag Singh Vakil and me to meet and talk to him. The first thing the DSP demanded was that we vacate the gurdwara at once and hand over its possession

back to the *mahant*. Bhag Singh was a soft-spoken man. Arguing like a *vakil* he said that the *mahant* had himself agreed to work under the supervision of the SGPC, that he had gone back on his commitments, and that the gurdwara could not, therefore, be handed back to him.

The tone of the DSP was threatening, and he insisted that the gurdwara be vacated at once. Else, he said in an overbearing gesture, that he would have to take action.

I could not contain myself any further. Intervening, I said: "We will not vacate the gurdwara. You do whatever you like, we are ready to face the consequences". The DSP then left the meeting in a huff. We also came back to the Akali gathering, reported in detail our talks with the DSP and called upon the people to be ready to face the police peacefully and defend the possession of the gurdwara.

But as it turned out, the DSP's threat was hollow, and the gurdwara remained in the hands of the Akalis.

In the second week of March a meeting of the representatives of the Ramdas Akali jatha was called in Tejakalan to review its constitution. Some of the provisions of the constitution were very parochial and anachronistic, although it also contained numerous socially progressive aspects. For instance, the constitution stipulated simple marriages and opposed the dowry system in any form. A fine of Rs. 25 was specified for any member breaking this law. Veiling of bride's face at the time of the marriage ceremony was banned; nor was she allowed to wear any ornaments. The parents of the bride or the groom were prohibited from arranging for fireworks display or band music during marriages.

Akalis of those times were fanatically dogmatic in religious matters. They did not welcome any reformistic ideas from the educated among them, and regarded the latter as "lax" in following religious principles, hence not even "genuine" Sikhs! I was strongly opposed to certain prevalent religious views, and made it a point to vent them whenever opportunities came my way.

All top leaders of the jatha were present at the Tejakalan meeting, including the tehsil and thana jathedars. It was a representative meeting attended by about 200 members, and the atmosphere was one of jubilation following the gurdwara victory. The main point on the agenda was reconsideration of the constitution of the Ramdas Jatha presided over by Sardar Amar Singh Chabbal.

The main rules were unanimously passed without much discussion. Even the sub-rules did not draw any comments from the mem-

bers. Then a discussion began on the "principles". The first principle laid down that "if one partner in a marriage was willing to be baptised according to the Sikh rites and the other refused to do so, he or she should have no relation with him or her in matters sexual or domestic".

I stood up and objected to this, saying that it would mean only break-up of marriages that had already been solemnised, and that the principle was impracticable and unworkable which would lead to disruption of married lives. Besides, it would have far-reaching consequences for one's social life. But no one supported my contention, and my pleadings with the other members failed to cut ice. The principle was accepted in its original form by the meeting.

Next, it was sought to be made compulsory for women on being baptised to wear turban and carry the Sikh symbol "kirpan". I again stoutly opposed the stipulation on wearing of the turban by women. The proponents quoted scriptures out of context to back their move, which I vehemently rebutted. The president of the Ramdas Jatha and some other leading Akalis had already compelled their wives to wear turbans. Therefore, they kept mum. I was the only one opposing the innovation, and none in the whole meeting dared to support me. On the other hand, some rank-and-file Akalis began demanding that I should not oppose anything that was being incorporated in the new constitution.

I told the members that I would oppose anything which I considered out of place or wrong, and in doing so I was only exercising my right as a member to speak what I considered right. But other members wanted me to keep quiet and not to make any criticism. This I considered to be violation of my legitimate right of expression.

Some more points were taken up, to which I again reacted sharply. For instance, it was stated that a girl could not be betrothed or married without the consent of the "*panj pyaras*" (the five beloved ones) or that a married Sikh could not take part in baptism ritual of others if his wife was illiterate and did not recite the usual Sikh prayers in the mornings and evenings; or that a woman could not be one of the "five beloved ones" in the baptismal process of others because, if she menstruated during the ceremony the baptism would become null and void. All these, in my opinion, were measures which treated women unequal to men, and denied her equal rights. Strangely, I found myself alone standing up again and again and opposing many of the clauses of the new constitution. The majority of the

Akalis assembled expressed their opposition to me by heckling me, and demanding from the president that I should not be allowed to speak.

I roared back: "I have the right to be heard as a member".

"We don't want to hear you," some people shouted back. "Impose (section) 144 on him", said a raised voice, addressing the president. (Section 144 refers to the prohibitory order in the Cr PC).

"I will defy 144; this is gagging me".

"Put it to vote, president sahib," demanded a section.

The president put the issue to vote, and the imposition of Section 144" against me was carried by the whole house. Mine was the only negative vote. But I refused to accept the verdict.

Another clause came up for discussion, and I objected again. A volley of voices shouted, "Sit down, sit down. This is defiance of the decision of the house; a very serious matter".

A proposal was then put forward by a delegate that 10 of them should be permitted to bodily throw me out of the meeting. The proposal was passed by a majority vote, despite my protestations. I was lifted up by 10 of the Akalis and thrown out of the meeting. My one grouse was that none of the leaders intervened; rather they were a party to this sordid and undemocratic behaviour of the members of the jatha.

I lay alone outside for a couple of minutes near the samadhi of the *mahants*. Two Akalis from Rajasansi—Sant Singh Bajaj and Shiv Singh—approached me and said: "We feel very sorry for what has happened. We agree with you on the points you had raised. If you form a separate Akali jatha, we shall join and help you".

I told them that I was opposed to forming a rival jatha, because that would cause a split in the movement.

I got up and went to the verandah. I covered myself from head to feet with a sheet and began to reflect over what had happened. Meanwhile, the entire constitution was adopted within five minutes and the meeting was adjourned. Some of the members came up to the verandah to relax, and I heard one of them say: The man, Sohan Singh, having been educated a bit went on speaking and speaking in spite of warnings! He has been served right."

I woke up early the next morning, and quietly returned to my village. My wife saw dejection writ large on my face and asked me the cause. But I evaded answering her. Later, she came to know about the whole episode, and was very pleased that I had been pleading the

cause of women, eventhough I faced humiliation and was thrown out.

The question uppermost in my mind was "what next"? Did it mean that I was not wanted in the Akali movement? But within a week, the jatha sent me a message to attend an *amavas* meet at Guru-ka-Bagh (Ghokewali) and speak. The jatha knew my worth as a speaker, and could not ignore me on such an occasion. I thus got rehabilitated without having to compromise on my firm views.



4. Golden Temple Key Incident

ON 7 November 1921, the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, one Mr. Dunnet, all of a sudden confiscated the keys of the treasury of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. It was a bolt from the blue for the Sikh community. The keys for the previous 13 months had been with Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia, the Government appointed *sarbarah* of the Golden Temple who had been working in harmony with the SGPC. The SGPC had just passed a resolution saying that the keys be taken away from the *sarbarah* and handed over to the president of the SGPC, Sardar Kharak Singh. The Deputy Commissioner had smelt rat in the resolution and ordered an Extra Assistant Commissioner accompanied by the police to fetch the keys from the *sarbarah*. The Government obviously did not want the treasury keys to fall into the hands of the SGPC, as it feared that the nationalist majority in the SGPC would utilise the temple funds for political purposes against the Government.

This was yet another instance of unabashed interference by the government in the religious affairs of the Sikhs. Figuratively speaking, the community was on fire and a storm broke out against the arbitrary action of the Deputy Commissioner. Everywhere, in the towns and the villages, protest meetings were held spontaneously condemning the DC, and strongly worded resolutions were adopted asking him to return the keys to the SGPC president.

The daily *Akali* took up the issue, and helped build up a strong opinion. In numerous editorials it condemned the DC's action and rallied the Sikh community, exhorting it to meet the challenge.

In yet another injudicious act, the DC went to the tehsil town of Ajnala in Amritsar District on 26 November and at a *darbar* began to explain to the people the government's viewpoint on why the keys had been taken over. The people listened to his explanations quietly, but when he was about to disperse the meeting, a few SGPC members and Akali-cum-Congress leaders stood up and called upon the audience to keep seated as the SGPC's point of view was also being

placed before them. People kept on sitting to listen to them.

The DC had walked away some distance by then, but returned and asked the SGPC leaders if they were holding a meeting there. The latter replied in the affirmative, saying: "We are holding a religious *diwan* to explain to our people the situation with regard to the keys' affair. There will be no political speeches here: only the SGPC point of view will be placed before them". Upon this, the DC declared the meeting unlawful under the provisions of the Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act and ordered the accompanying police officer to arrest the leaders. Sardar Dan Singh Vachhoa, Sardar Jaswant Singh Chabhal, Sardar Teja Singh Samundari and Pandit Dinanath were arrested on the spot. Even Zaildar Harnam Singh of village Sidhar was arrested because he was wearing khadi clothes!

Within a few hours, the news of the arrests reached the SGPC members in Amritsar. They were indignant, and decided to proceed to Ajnala and continue the religious *diwan* there and uphold their right to conduct religious meetings which had been granted under a new order passed by the Government. They were prepared to court arrest, if needed, in the process.

Before leaving Amritsar, they sent words to the DC informing him about their intention to go to Ajnala to defy his orders, and that he could arrest them. The DC ordered their arrest, and Sardar Kharak Singh, SGPC vice-president Sardar Mehtab Singh, general secretary Bhagat Jaswant Singh and some other members were sent behind bars. Thus began the first peaceful *satyagraha* of the Punjab Sikhs against the British Government.

I went from village to village, narrating the Golden Temple key episode to Sikh audiences. Response by the people was tremendous to the call by the *Panth*. People began to defy law and hold spontaneous meetings wherever a speaker could be found. I received word from the SGPC that I should avoid getting arrested, but move from place to place explaining to the villagers the seriousness of the government's interference in Sikh religious affairs in taking away the Golden Temple treasury keys and rouse them against the Government.

The movement soon turned into a big upsurge against the Government. New speakers emerged in the countryside who could speak in the idiom understood by the villagers, and even illiterate youngmen became excellent speakers. The daily *Akali* printed enough material which gave tongue to hundreds of agitated Sikhs. A new leadership

in the countryside began to emerge. People laid aside their working tools, and plunged into the movement without caring for the consequences that could flow from their actions.

The main Akali morcha shifted to Amritsar City, but the whole of Punjab was agog. The Government found itself incapable to cope with the situation as it had never faced such a big mass upsurge before. I continued visiting villages, rousing the masses from their slumber and asking them to do their bit in the great struggle for upholding the Sikh religious rights. Village patwaris and government henchmen sent reports regarding my anti-government activities to their superiors, and warrants for my arrest were issued at least from two *thanas* of Ajnala and Majitha. But people continued to give me shelter, food and company. I delivered a speech in one village at night but slept in another village, where I addressed another meeting in the morning, and yet a third in some other village. This was how I kept moving, addressing the people and evading arrest.

In the third week of December 1921, the marriage of the daughter of Bhai Bhagwan Singh, an Akali leader, was to take place in village Jassar in Ajnala tehsil. This was the first Akali marriage in the area and all leading members of the Ramdas Akali *Jatha* were invited to attend the marriage. I too went there, inconspicuously. The marriage had been announced through posters asking people to collect the night before and listen to the Akali leaders attending it. A little less than a thousand people had gathered when the *diwan* began about 8.30 p.m.

The local Akali leaders sat on a raised platform, and the local *jathas* began to sing religious hymns. I sat among the people behind the platform. But some local Akalis insisted that I address the *diwan* from the platform. I pleaded with them that I was wanted by the police, that my speech from the platform would create disturbance as the police was already there to arrest wanted persons. But they did not pay heed to my pleas, and persisted in their demand that I be the first speaker. Ultimately, I had to yield.

I stood up to speak, and began to explain to the audience the nature of the gurdwara struggle and the issues for which the Sikhs were agitating. I had spoken for hardly five minutes when *thanedar* Surain Singh of Ajnala got up from among the audience and announced: I arrest Sohan Singh Josh. I have warrants against him with me. As soon as the audience heard him, they got up *en masse*, gheraoed him and began to abuse and threaten him with dire consequences. Had

wiser counsel not prevailed, the matter would have taken a very ugly turn.

While the melee was still on, I stepped down from the platform and asked the Akali leaders to decide whether I should get arrested or not. I informed them that the SGPC did not want me to get arrested, wanted me to elude the police and spread the campaign message for continuing the gurdwara struggle until the *morcha* was successful. At the same time, I told them that if they decided that I should get arrested, I would submit to their decision.

Their decision was that I should not get arrested. They deputed two trustworthy Akali members, Ishar Singh Sagtunangal (of Amritsar) and Harnam Singh Lalnangal (of Gurdaspur), as my escorts. We were to go to Lalnangal, about four miles from there, take three horses from the village and tour the villages in Gurdaspur and Amritsar districts on horsebacks, addressing the rural masses and asking them to be ready to make sacrifices to free the gurdwaras from the clutches of the British and their stooges.

We immediately started off on our mission, and after walking about four miles, slept the rest of the night on mats in a two-room school called Vidyalaya on the Fatehgarh Churian-Dera Baba Nanak Road. Getting up early next morning, we went to Harnam Singh's house in Lalnangal, had a hearty breakfast, secured three horses, and rode on to Wahila village (Gurdaspur) Gurdwara Tajekalan and onward.

Harnam Singh Lalnangal was a well-built, six footer influential man of the village. Ishar Singh was five feet six inches, hefty and a dare-devil. They acted as my bodyguards and were very resourceful. They would go to a village, get a drum and summon the people for a meeting in about 10 minutes. It was as if people were already waiting for us. One of them would introduce me to the audience and I would harangue for more than half an hour, appealing to them to come forward as Akali volunteers and serve the *Panth*.

After the meetings were dispersed, we invariably found food waiting for us. The horses too were fed and looked after. After food, we rode on to the next village, held another meeting there in the afternoon and yet a third one at night after 8 p.m. We moved over to another village to sleep, and next morning addressed another meeting there. Three meetings a day in three different villages was the routine. We covered dozens of villages in Gurdaspur and Amritsar districts. I have now forgotten the names of the villages we covered,

but the ones I remember are Wahila, Teje, Manjianwali, Othian, Sathiala, Butala, Dhardeo, Nangli, etc.

People welcomed us everywhere. We did not come across a single village which refused to listen to us or did not give us shelter. Confiscation of the treasury keys of the Golden Temple had agitated every Sikh. People were very vigilant and kept a voluntary look-out for policemen and informed us whenever they saw one hanging around. We were received by all and sundry everywhere with open arms, and were encouraged and respected.

Such spontaneous reception by the people also inspired my two colleagues. One day Ishar Singh said: "Let us continue working underground like this even if the morcha is settled one way or the other." I refused him, saying that the time had not yet come for such a life.

During these days of hectic activities we lost all sense of time. The number of Akalis was increasing by leaps and bounds, and black turbans could be seen in every village. We did not encounter any policeman anywhere.

As we carried on our agitational work, the news spread that the struggle for the keys was over; that the government had yielded to the demand to hand over the Golden Temple treasury keys to the SGPC president Kharak Singh and ordered the release of all arrested Akali and other leaders. Newspapers carried reports of Sir John Maynard's announcement in the Legislative Council on 11 January, 1922 that the Punjab Government had decided to hand over the keys of the Golden Temple to the SGPC, that detenués were being released and all pending cases in the courts would be withdrawn, warrants issued against Akalis were also being cancelled.

Our mission was over. We three took leave of each other and parted company. But there was a fly in the ointment. The government released only 150 out of the 193 detained Akalis. Pandit Dinanath and others were not released, and this cast a doubt regarding the bona fides of the Government. The agitation for the release of the remaining Akalis and Pandit Dinanath flared up all over Punjab. The victory over the key issue had boosted the morale of the Akali leadership and the Sikhs, and they now had enough confidence in themselves to bring the Government to its knees by waging a struggle. On the other hand, the Government supporters and administrators in the countryside were a demoralised lot.

I returned to my village, rested for three or four days and again plunged myself into the release campaign. I addressed several meetings during those stormy days, two of them were significant because they landed me in jail for the first time.

The first meeting was held on *amavas* day at Guru-Ka-Bagh on 27 January, 1922. Four Akali leaders—Sardar Dan Singh Vachhoa, Bhai Wadhwa Singh Bhallapind, Bhai Sahib Singh Bhindian and myself addressed the meeting. Our speeches applauded the sacrifices made during the keys agitation by the Sikhs and the glorious victory won in that struggle. We appealed to the local administrators like *zaildars*, *sufedposhes* and others not to side with the Government but be with their co-religionists in matters of religion. The impact of the speeches was that Ishar Singh, *zaildar* of Sainhsara and Narain Singh, *sufedposh* of Lashkari-Nangal, came on the platform, apologised for having opposed the Akali movement, announced their resignations from their posts, put on black turbans and joined the Akali movement amidst thunderous shouts of *Sat Sri Akal*. This was a severe blow to the prestige of the Government in the rural areas, and boosted the morale of the Akalis still further.

The second meeting was held on 29 January 1922 in Ball Kalan, four miles from my village, under the leadership of Sardar Kishan Singh of Ballkhurd of the Chief Khalsa Diwan—the organisation of feudal landlords who were totally loyal to the British Government. I was invited by an Akali sympathiser Jathedar Narain Singh of Ballkhurd. I reached the meeting place at about 2 p.m. and sat amongst the audience to listen to what was being preached. Not a word about the Akali movement, either for or against! Speeches were generally of religious nature, praising the sacrifices made by the Sikh Gurus while fighting against the tyranny and oppression of the Moghul rulers.

I sent up two chits, one after another, to the secretary managing the stage, asking for being allowed to speak on the Akali movement. But I did not get any reply. I approached Jathedar Narain Singh with the same request, but the organisers were putting up one man after another on the stage to speak, mostly nothing substantial. It was about 5 p.m., and time for the people to reach their wells or to feed their cattle. I lost my patience, stood up and addressed the audience from the place I was. I said "I came here to tell you about the developments in the Akali movement and the attitude of the Govern-

ment towards it. But I am not being given time to speak. Either get me time, or I shall go". This had an immediate effect and men from the audience began to shout "Give him time, give him time".

About 15 minutes later I was given the podium, and I spoke for 45 minutes on the keys affair, the arrest of Akali leaders and their subsequent release, and the victory which had been won. There were cheers and clappings as I spoke.

Obviously, my speech made a big impact on the audience because two *numberdars* of the village, Lachhman Singh and Sham Singh, announced then and there that they were resigning from their government jobs to become Akalis. The enthusiasm amongst the audience on the turn of events can best be imagined.

But another interesting incident took place here. After the meeting, I was conducted to the village gurdwara by Jathedar Narain Singh. The door of the gurdwara was locked. Asking me to wait in the verandah, he went to fetch the Bhai or *Granthi* of the gurdwara. Just then a hefty fellow appeared, and sat on his haunches opposite me, glaring with blood-shed eyes. He carried a thick, two-foot long iron rod with a sharp round edge, with which he began to scrape the ground. Looking up to me ferociously, he said: "You have created disturbance in our *diwan*. I shall reduce you to ashes", and began to mutter some *mantras*: I was not afraid of his *mantras*, but he had a dangerous weapon in his hand and I had nothing to defend myself. This filled me with fear. Just then Jathedar Narain Singh entered, and seeing him the hefty man took to his heels.

Policemen often visited villages, trying to find out where I was hiding. They asked the village *chowkidar* about my whereabouts; went inside village gurdwaras to search for me; approached the Muslim weavers to ask if they had seen me, and for the like. But whatever they enquired about or did in the village was conveyed to me immediately. So I came to know that the police was after me on the strength of some new warrants against me.

I suggested to the Akali unit in the village that it would be better if I got arrested in Amritsar City, where the occasion could be used for propaganda advantage. My suggestion was accepted and the next day some 15 of us left for Amritsar, some 10 miles away. We went to the Darbar Sahib, and a meeting was held before the Akal Takht where I spoke about the repression let loose by the Government. Later, about 100 people went with me in a procession to the police *Kotwali* and I surrendered to the *Kotwali* in-charge.

I was sent to the Amritsar sub-jail at about noon. To my pleasant surprise I found that Dan Singh Vachhoa, Wadhwa Singh Bhallapind and Sahib Singh Bhindian had already been lodged there.

The next morning the daily *The Civil and Military Gazette* of Lahore printed the news that Sohan Singh Josh, a prominent Akali leader who had been absconding in a case, had been arrested in a village "hiding under seven quilts".

We read the news and had a hearty laugh over a specimen of Anglo-Indian journalism.

I found out that there were two cases against me—one for the speech delivered at Guru-Ka-Bagh on the *amavas* day along with the other three co-accused, and the second for a "seditious" speech made in Ball Kalan.

More and more people began to be sent to jail as a new wave of repression was started by the Government.

On the fourth day of my under-trial period in the jail, I was called to the jail gate to have an interview. Jathedar Narain Singh of Ballkhurd had come to see me, and had brought with him four quintals of sugarcane juice *khir*, three quintals of milk *khir* and some 500 'aalo-ka-parathas' among other eatables. It was a gala day for all the sub-jail inmates, as the eatables were distributed among the jail warders, the under-trial prisoners and the convicts. Most of them were having their fill for the first time since their arrival in jail, and were very thankful for the treat.

The event had a healthy effect on the detainees inside the jail, because it showed them that they, who had made sacrifices for a good cause, were loved by the people. This also raised the prestige of the under-trial prisoners, generally known as "political prisoners".

The first case came up before Mr. F.A. Conner, Magistrate, First Class, against four of us—Dan Singh, Wadhwa Singh, Sahib Singh and myself. The case against me was that I had spoken at a meeting on 27 January, 1922 in Guru-Ka-Bagh and said that the bureaucracy and its stooges had been searching me to arrest me, but that I had the order of the Panth not to court arrest.

The second public witness added: The accused had said that henceforth he would work for *swarajya* and appealed to the people to become Akalis. The third P.W. corroborated what the other two had stated in their evidences.

Mr. Conner sentenced each one of us to six months' rigorous imprisonment and imposed a fine of Rs. 100, nonpayment of which

would be another six weeks' jail.

The second case came up before Mr. E.M. Jenkins, Magistrate, First Class, on 10 February, 1922 under Section 7 of the Seditious Meetings Act X, 1911. Three prosecution witnesses – a head constable, a *zaildar* and a *patwari* – appeared before the court against me. The content of their deposition was that in Ball Kalan I had delivered a political speech, making several violent remarks against Sardar Kishan Singh. According to the first witness, I had said: "He neither wears a black *pagri*, as the SGPC orders, nor does he wear *khaddar*". He also alleged that I had spoken on boycotting foreign cloth, about the gurdwara question, Nankana Sahib massacre, the keys issue, and the arrests of Sikhs and called the Government *zalim*, *bewakoof*, etc. On the following day, as a result of my inflammatory speech, two roused *lambardars* had sent in their resignations.

The second witness, *Zaildar* Wadawa Singh of Sobiankhurd, corroborated what the first witness had deposed and added that I had also said that "Although we have got the keys, we are not satisfied; that I had also spoken about the Komagata Maru which had gone to Canada, and the Nankana Sahib incident, saying 'many of our brothers were slain there'. Patwari Ganga Ram merely corroborated the earlier two witnesses.

Non-cooperation against the British was a creed then. As far as I remember, I told the Magistrate that I had no faith in the justice of his court, and, hence, I would neither call any witnesses to defend myself nor engage any lawyer to make any points of law. The Government had no right to interfere in our religious affairs and that British laws were enacted and courts instituted not to give us justice but to strengthen British imperialism's grip over our country.

Mr Jenkins slapped on me six months' rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 300; or in default serve six weeks' further imprisonment.

Thus I was sentenced to one year's hard labour and fined Rs. 400 (or in lieu three months' imprisonment). The two sentences were not to run concurrently.

5. Inside British Jails

AS an under-trial prisoner in the Amritsar sub-jail I did not have to do any hard labour. Under-trials were free to go to the jail gate, meet friends and get eatables or books from relatives and friends. We were locked up in our cells for a specific time, but could remain outside the cells during the rest of the day. We were also the last ones to be locked in for the night and first to be let out in the morning. We were looked upon as sort of "privileged ones" by other inmates of the sub-jail. But after we were convicted, Dan Singh and I were transferred to the Dera Ghazi Khan jail (now in Pakistan). This was a prison set apart for A and B class prisoners. I was a C class prisoner, but the jail *daroga* had sent me there due to some misunderstanding that I was a class B prisoner. Both the magistrates later clarified that I had been given class C; hence I was transferred from Dera Ghazi Khan jail to the Lyallpur District jail (now in Pakistan) a fortnight later.

In the Dera Ghazi Khan jail, I met Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and other prisoners from North-West Frontier Province for the first time. The Khan was a six-foot-plus tall young man with a prominent nose and cropped beard, and had well-chiselled features. He spoke soft Urdu and was very friendly with other prisoners. Discipline inside this jail was not enforced very strictly.

But in the Lyallpur jail things were quite different. The superintendent of the jail was an Englishman named Wilson, who prided himself to be a disciplinarian. He had till then dealt only with criminal prisoners. When Akali and Congress political prisoners began being sent to the jail, he wanted to meet them out the same treatment at par with the criminal prisoners, because, in his eyes, all of them were "just criminals". While one category of prisoners had committed dacoities, thefts, raped women or murdered people to deprive them of their property, the Congress and Akali prisoners wanted to deprive the British of their valuable possession, India! But the Congress and Akali prisoners demanded to be treated different-

ly, as prisoners of a different status.

This was a situation Wilson had never faced before. He was the "lord" of the jail. With his virtual dictatorial powers he could do, and did, as he pleased within the four walls of the prison; and nobody could challenge his powers. The Jail Manual, that ante-diluvian book of jail rules, had conferred on him all powers, so to say, over the lives of the prisoners under his jurisdiction.

Life inside the Lyallpur jail was unbearable. Prisoners were treated like beasts and the purpose of sending them there appeared to be to kill their human dignity. Every Monday, a parade was held inside the jail between 8 and 9 in the morning. Prisoners were made to sit in two long rows facing each other. Every prisoner had been given ridiculous-looking jail clothes to wear. For this morning parade, the prisoners were expected to put their blankets and clothes rolled up at one end of the mat, and deposit his two iron pots for dal and drinking water near the clothes. He had to sit at the other end of the mat, wearing a big iron ring round his neck which had a small dangling wooden plaque which displayed his day of conviction, the section under which he had been convicted and the date of his release. As if this humiliation was not enough, the prisoners had to sit on their haunches with their upturned open palms on the knees. This was, perhaps, to ensure that the criminals did not carry anything which could be used to attack the jail superintendent.

The Akali and Congress prisoners in the jail, about 150 of us, were aghast at this practice and decided to fight against it. We were unanimous in our resolve to bear any consequences of contesting such a humiliating order.

The fat was in the fire. We discussed our strategy among ourselves and decided to begin our struggle from the next parade day. Disobedience of jail rules could mean that none of us would have any interviews with our relatives, or postcards to write home; no complaints about bad food or issue of clothes, etc. But everyone of us was ready to face the worst.

Our agitation was just for the acceptance of two demands: one, that the Akali and Congress prisoners should not be compelled to wear the iron ring around their necks; and second, that they should not be made to sit with upturned open palms on the knees at Monday parade. Complaints with regard to bad food and demands for better and new clothes, etc., were pushed to the background.

The subordinate jail authorities had come to know our decisions,

and they had posted Wilson with the information before he came to the parade ground. All of us sat normally on our mats while our iron neck-rings lay on the clothes in front of us. The leaders occupied the front of the rows in the direction the superintendent was scheduled to arrive.

The superintendent entered accompanied by his troupe and the jail paraphernalia. He saw the neck-rings lying on the knees and the palms turned upwards.

Mr. Wilson's inspection procession was unique, and any outsider stumbling into the jail during his parade time could split his sides laughing – the scene was so ludicrous and ridiculous. Harbingers first hailed that the superintendent "sahib" was coming for the parade and that everybody should be ready and be in position. Dead silence was to be observed. The "sahib" then crossed the inside gate of the jail, followed by the jailor and his clerks, half a dozen warders, half a dozen convict *numberdars* and many others – in short, a virtual army of men. But the most funny thing was a huge umbrella, as big as a parachute, fixed on a very long bamboo pole and carried by a hefty *numberdar*, in yellow to shield Wilson Sahib's head!

As Wilson walked, the umbrella too was moved forward, while between the "umbrallawala" and the superintendent walked another *numberdar*, this one in black carrying a fly-whisk in his hand to drive away the flies! Even a feudal despot would have envied the grandeur bestowed on the superintendent's procession by his jail henchmen. The entire scene reminded one of an Indian Raja in all his despotism, having arrogated powers over life and death of the people under his suzerainty.

Wilson's show was meant to keep the inmates of the jail in awe, and to protect himself from desperadoes of this criminal land! The jail was a replica of how India was being ruled outside the jail walls as well.

The superintendent was furious at the disobedience of his jail rules and ordered Kartar Singh Sarli and me to put on our neck-rings. We refused, and told him that none of the Akali and Congress prisoners will wear anything that was for identification of cattle. Our refusal was punishable under the jail manual, and Wilson promptly stopped our interviews and letters for six months, simultaneously awarding cell confinement for one month. The jail clerk wrote down the punishment on our history sheets on the spot. The superintendent then passed on to other Akali and Congress prisoners, who also took our predetermined course of behaviour.

The number of cells in the jail was limited, therefore some of the

prisoners were given cell confinement for a limited period—a fortnight or so—some within handcuffs, some with fetters and bar-fetters. But our punishments were awarded every week. All of us bore these punishments boldly, firmly and standing our ground.

Some of the Akali prisoners from Lyallpur had to go out now and then to the district courts in connection with their cases. There they met friends and relatives whom they told what was happening within the four walls of the district jail. Thus, the news of our struggle was periodically appearing in the press and getting publicity. Not only that these inmates also brought back reports of the struggle going on all over the country.

Our struggle in the jail was, in fact, part of the general struggle that was being waged throughout the country for religious and political reforms. Things were very inhuman inside the jails, hence our struggle for jail reforms. We knew that no improvement in the jail conditions could take place without struggles and sufferings; we knew how the *Ghadar* patriots had fought in Andaman and Indian jails and made great sacrifices for winning their rights for *kachcha* and *pagree*.

Sadhu Singh of Lyallpur and a few others were taken out to attend the courts with their fetters on, and they brought back the news how the Akali papers were giving publicity to our jail agitation and that in some places resolutions were passed sympathising with our struggle. Such informations helped to raise the morale of us fighting prisoners and strengthen our spirit to carry on till victory was achieved.

Meanwhile, superintendent Wilson became still more revengeful. Kartar Singh and I were special targets of his wrath. During my stay in the Lyallpur District Jail, my history-sheet had the privilege of registering the words "ring leader" on three occasions. We received all the stipulated jail punishments, except caning.

Taking our agitation a step forward, we decided to go on an indefinite hunger-strike against the practice of the neck-ring, and gave notice of the same to the jail authorities. This was a very bold step and the last resort of the prisoners. This was a risky plunge too, because a long hunger-strike could demoralise some of the weaker prisoners, compelling them to give up the strike, and thus weakening our struggle to a certain extent. But before the hunger-strike could reach that stage, the Punjab Government issued an order rescinding the inhuman practice of neck-rings in jails.

This was a big victory, not only for the Lyallpur District Jail prisoners but for the prisoners in all Punjab jails. The credit for this,

however, goes to the glorious struggle of the Lyallpur prisoners.



The Government order was a blow to the prestige of the jail authorities. Sensing that keeping leading agitators in the same jail could create fresh problems for them, they thought it proper to transfer them to the camp jail at Montgomery. I was one of the 25-odd leading agitators, including Kartar Singh, Sadhu Singh, Harnam Singh Chamak, who were transferred to Montgomery in July 1922.

The camp jail in Montgomery was not a jail in the real sense. It was an improvised arrangement made to meet the shortage of jail accommodation. In fact, a former army camp had been converted into a sort of jail. It was an open *maidan* with seven army barracks, surrounded by two parallel barbed wires fencing with a passage in between for sentries to keep watch. Through the wires prisoners could even see people passing by. Tents had been pitched inside the *maidan* to create more accommodation.

The camp jail at the most could receive 500 prisoners. There were no *chakkis* for grinding flour, nor were there arrangements for hard labour like in the Lyallpur jail. There were no cells, either. The barracks remained open day and night. Only light labour like *newar*-weaving or *charkha* plying was given to the prisoners sentenced to hard labour. On top of it, no one bothered whether a prisoner did his quota of work or not. Arrangements for bath and toilet were not so bad.

Almost all the Akali leaders and about a dozen Congress prisoners were lodged here. Sardar Mangal Singh, Sardar Hira Singh Dard, Sardar Pratap Singh and Master Sundar Singh Lyallpuri all editors of the daily *Akali* were in this jail. Sardar Gopal Singh Qaumi, and Sardar Harbans Singh, editors of *Azad Akali* were also serving their sentences here. Besides them, there were Gyani Sher Singh of daily *Pardesi Khalsa Sewak*, Sant Singh, Sultanwind and many other jathedars of Doaba and Malwa who had been brought to this jail to serve their terms of imprisonment. Arjan Singh Gagraj in his book has also counted me as one of the "famous leaders".

For all intents and purposes we were free to move about wherever we liked, but remain within the barbed wire enclosure. We could play cards or any other games, hold classes, meetings or poetic symposia. It was a sort of detention camp and not a prison at all. The only discipline binding on us was that we had to help the jail authorities

count the prisoners every morning and evening.

But here too we were not without problems. The food served to the inmates was C class, and the quality of cereals was most unsatisfactory. The prisoners were fed up eating *masur dal* every day and the jail authorities refused to change it for variety. Even before we were brought to the jail, an agitation was going on for securing a better class for the prisoners. We too joined the agitation. Our demands were: provision of a *charpai* (stringed cot) to sleep on, provision for *ghee* instead of oil for cooking vegetables and pulses, milk twice a day, soap for washing hair and clothes instead of *sajji* and *reetha* and permission for interviews and issue of postcards every month.

The authorities refused to pay heed to our demands. The first step of our agitation was that we gave up one meal till our demands were met. This continued for months, yet the authorities refused to yield.

The camp jail was infested with scorpions and snakes which crept in through the barbed wire fencing. Every other day scorpions were found under our beds and we saw snakes slithering in the camp. They were promptly killed by the inmates. Hot winds blew inside the jail, bringing in all kinds of dirt, dry leaves and dust. It was a big job to dust the clothes and sweep the tents and barracks, etc., twice every day.

One day I lay inside my tent at dusk. Arjan Singh Gagraj, Kartar Singh Sarli and Master Kabul Singh Gobindpuri and four others were also in my tent. Suddenly a snake fell from the tent pole right on my chest. With an instinctive jerk, I cast it away. All of us got up and found the snake hiding under one of our beds. The two-foot long snake was immediately killed. Arjan Singh Gagraj has described the incident in his book *Mera Apna Ap* (page 45) under the heading "A snake on the chest of Soban Singh Josh".

An incident inside the jail embittered the relations among the prisoners. The Akalis used to sing in chorus twice in the morning and in the evening after the prayers, which translated means: "The Sikhs shall rule: nobody will exist who defies them..." The Congress inmates of the jail objected to the couplet; and they were right. They had been jailed for their struggle for attaining *swaraj* for all the Indian people belonging to all communities, and not for a "Sikh Raj". They were right in objecting to this Akali chant. A few of us tried to persuade the Akalis to give up singing the couplet, but they would not listen, advancing the argument that it was a part of Sikh religion and they, in no case, would give it up. The fanaticism among the Akalis at that time was at its height.

The Congress prisoners resented this. The chant was a sort of inspiration for the Sikh warriors who had fought the Moghul rulers. The Moghuls were long gone and times had changed, but the hold of the old anachronistic slogans still remained. No argument could convince the fanatical Akalis to give up the singing of the couplet.

A new superintendent, one Mr. Ghosh, had by then taken charge of the camp jail. He ordered that the prisoners be given hard labour and that strict discipline be observed in the jail. He also forbade functioning of any committee of prisoners. We refused to obey the order. Besides, he had gone through our history sheets, and in his eyes I was a notorious "ring leader". I was called to the jail office along with some others and given bar fetters. It was difficult to walk straight with these fetters on, so we began to sing a couplet: "We shall walk two paces less but walk on struttingly...".

I was very energetic in my youth. I called a meeting of all the "poets" in the jail to begin some cultural activities. I received good response, and some 25 "poets" attended the meeting. I was made the chairman of the organisation and we decided to hold biweekly and weekly symposia. These provided good education and entertainment for all those who attended the gatherings, where we could freely express our views through the medium of poems. There was none to impose Section 144 on us!

Besides, weekly lectures were also organised in the jail and leaders in the jail delivered lectures on any current topic of their choice. Mangal Singh, Hira Singh Dard, Gopal Singh Qaumi and Master Sunder Singh Lyallpuri participated in these activities. I also gave two lectures – one, on the way a Sikh should live and another on freeing the gurdwaras from the Government.

We also arranged for adult education for the illiterate Akalis. Many of the Akalis did not even know the rudiments of the Punjabi language, but within three months many of them were able to read books, written in simple language.

News about our problems and agitations inside the Montgomery jail was regularly appearing in the Press and we received good publicity. Sardar Hukum Singh Vakil of Montgomery often visited some of the jailed leaders and regularly supplied us with oil, washing and toilet soap, etc. The authorities were worried over the Press publicity as it boosted the Akali movement as a whole. We came to know later that the Government had decided to crush the Akali movement with the most repressive measures and also to demoralise

the prisoners by resorting to more punishing treatment to break our tenacity and force us to apologise to seek individual release. That was why orders were soon received in the Montgomery camp jail to close the camp and pack off the prisoners to Multan District Jail.

A special train was commissioned to transfer the 436-odd prisoners from Montgomery to the Multan District Jail. Chained in twos along with a policeman, we were taken to the Montgomery railway station in lorries. The train was an exclusive "prisoner special" to ferry prisoners from one jail to another. There were no arrangements for toilet, nor was water provided in the small compartments, each of which accommodated eight prisoners and four policemen. There was only a hole in the floor to answer calls of the nature; there was no provision even for privacy.

Before leaving for the Montgomery station, we had elected a committee of three – Ishar Singh Marhana of Amritsar, Bhag Singh of Sialkot and Wadhwa Singh Bheti of Kartarpur – to ensure the interests of the prisoners and talk on their behalf with the authorities if the need arose on way to Multan Jail. The Akalis had learnt to act collectively, and not in an individual manner.

As soon as we reached the station, we found hundreds of people shouting slogans defying police restrictions, and showing their respect for the prisoners. They had brought fruits, sweets and other eatables for us. Policemen prevented them from handing over these things to us, but, undeterred, they threw these in our compartments; defying the custodians of law at times and at times even with their connivance.

The train steamed off at 1 p.m. On the way wherever it halted, there were people to greet us, to boost our morale and offer us eatables. The people's concern for our welfare was touching indeed. The train reached Multan Cantonment station at about 9 p.m. The jail authorities had sent us our evening food at the railway station itself – two *chappatis* and a pot of watery *dal* for everyone. The stuff was so rotten that we refused to accept it.

The *Akali-te-Pardesi* reported the incident in its issue of 17 January, 1923: "When the Akali prisoners special train reached Multan station in the evening, the police, armed with guns and lathis, made a big show of strength. Thousands of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs had gathered at the station, but nobody was allowed to enter the platform. As the train was late, people had waited for it for over four hours. The train carried 436 Akalis, 200 policemen and one Deputy Superintendent of Police. As there was no arrangement for

water, the prisoners refused to take food.”

The prisoners' committee members were ordered by the police to ask us to walk down some two miles to the jail. The prisoners were carrying bundles of their clothing and could not possibly carry this weight so far. Besides, there were dozens of prisoners in fetters. The committee representatives demanded that some transport arrangements be made for all of us. But the police refused, and dragged them away to the jail. While being taken away they left word that Sohan Singh Josh will be the leader in their absence.

Rumours were flying that the committee members had been whisked away forcibly and beaten up mercilessly. Nobody knew whether they were dead or alive. Hence, a decision was taken that unless the prisoners were informed about the fate of their representatives they would not move from the station, come what may.

Some sat on *dharma* on the platform, others did not come out of the train itself. I passed the word round that everyone should remain wherever he was, that we would spend the night on the station and wait for the morning to consider our next move.

In the morning, I asked everyone to leave the train and the platform and gather on the grassy plot near the railway platform which was within the station boundary. People of Multan had come in their thousands to see us off to the jail and bless us. We were surrounded by the police and it soon became a sort of a public meeting. I stood up and said that unless two of us were taken to the jail to meet our three leaders, and so long as they were not allowed to come back to tell us that they were safe and sound, we would not budge an inch from the station.

In his autobiography, Arjan Singh writes about this as follows: “On this there emerged two views: one was that we should go to jail and carry on our agitation there. This was expressed by Gyani Hira Singh Dard. And the other (view) was that nobody was going to lend us an ear in the jail, therefore we should take a firm stand here on our demands. This view was expressed by Sohan Singh Josh. All prisoners supported his view, and it was decided that the police authorities be made to fulfil this demand”. (Page 53).

Another of our demand was that we will not go to the jail on foot and that transport be arranged for us. This was unanimously agreed to by us all. The police officers surrounding us were hearing every word we said, and gnashed their teeth. But thinking that discretion was the better part of valour, decided not to use force in full view of

the local people. Finally, the authorities yielded, and we entered the Multan District Jail to face a new series of trials and tribulations.

Here too, there was not much accommodation for all of us. The authorities had pitched tents for the newcomers, the number of prisoners in a tent was far more than its capacity. We asked the *daroga* to accommodate the extra prisoners somewhere else, but he would not care to listen. This stiffened our attitude, and he retaliated by ordering the removal of the tents altogether. We were made to sleep under the open sky.

On 15-16 February night it rained, and we had nothing overhead to protect us. As the rain pelted down we began to chant in unison "Sat Sri Akal". This went on intermittently for the whole night. Our clothes and cover sheets were completely soaked and many among us began to shiver.

A little before dawn, the jail officials in collusion with the district authorities sounded the alarm bell. We knew at once that we were in for a spell of thrashing. Within about 20 minutes "six English officers, numerous jail warders and *numberdars* and a number of armed police from outside (Akali, 24 February, 1923) entered the jail, as if to quell a rebellion. We were completely nonviolent yet they fell upon us like hungry wolves.

Actually, the police officers were smarting under the humiliation they had suffered at our hands at the station. Now it was their turn to take revenge and they took full advantage of our helplessness. This "revenge army" entered every tent, and kicked and carried away 47 of the prisoners to the cells. Some others were taken elsewhere.

Six of them barged into my tent, grabbed me by my feet and hands and dragged me all the way to a cell, abusing constantly and kicking me on my back and buttocks. Opening a cell door they threw me in with a swing; and I fell with a thud. They went away locking up the cell.

I lay on the cold floor of the cell almost half dead. Skin had peeled off from parts of my back, while the kicks had caused considerable swelling all over my body. I was in piercing pain and found it impossible to turn on my side. There was no *chatai* (mattress) or a blanket in the cell; not even water. I lay on the bare floor, uncared for. Only if my wife had been by my side at this time.

The same treatment, more or less, was meted out to other prisoners; there was no discrimination here. Everyone was thrown in the cells and the "revenge army" had "crushed" what it perceived to be a prisoners' rebellion!

For the next three days, no official entered my cell. *Dal* and *chapati* were pushed through the door bars; water too was supplied in the same manner. Slowly, in a week's time my aches began to lessen in its intensity, and I began to move. Strength seemed to be returning.

Terrible repression had been let loose in this jail, with the objective to demoralise the prisoners and compel them to apologise in writing to secure their release. But we knew not to yield to repression. Although all lines of communications had been blocked for us prisoners, vague news of severe beating up of our peaceful and non-violent compatriots, offering *satyagraha* at the Guru-Ka-Bagh gurdwara for chopping trees for the *langer* fuel, had reached us. The Government machinery was bent upon crushing the Akali movement by fair means or foul. But the Akalis stood firm.

Bhai Ishar Singh Suhana of Ambala, on his release from the Multan Jail, told the reporter of daily *Akali-te-Pardesi* (2 March, 1923) that "40 Akalis, tied up with bar-fetters, are on hunger-strike". And the first name mentioned in the list was that of Sohan Singh Josh.

The SGPC, in its communique No. 448 dated 28 March, mentioned the names of the Akali prisoners who were made the special targets for repression and tyranny. Bhai Jai Singh and Sundar Singh were prominently mentioned—they were stripped naked and criminal *numberdars* were made to spit on their private parts" (*Akali-te-Pardesi* 22 March, 1923).

The SGPC communique added: "Our office is receiving heartrending reports of repression from the Multan Jail. All this is being done to make the Akali prisoners tender apologies".

Akali-te-Pardesi wrote leading articles, notes and front-page reports severely condemning the Multan Jail repression. In its issue dated 13 April, 1923, the main headline screamed: "Fie, Fie, Fie on the bureaucracy"! Under it was a gory account of the repression let loose on Multan prisoners. "The stories of repression by the Mughal rulers have paled into insignificance before it", it wrote. "The prisoners are being subjected to all sorts of indignities and inhuman tyranny. They are ducked in dirty water containing urine and human excreta till they fall unconscious... The jail officials openly say: write whatever you like against us; this only places us in the good books of our officers".

The SGPC issued a long statement in daily *Akali*. "Since the visit of the Inspector-General of Jails to Multan, repression inside the jail

has increased to such an extent that it puts in shade the repression perpetrated in the Guru-Ka-Bagh and Attuck Jail... The Akali prisoners have been given the hardest jobs of oil extracting, wheat grinding and water pumping, like criminals and goondas. ...But they have stood the trial manfully”.

A Government reporter, meanwhile, tried to whitewash the whole incident thus: “ In the Multan District Jail, the Akali prisoners were creating trouble. It was therefore necessary to transfer 50 of the Akalis from one camp to another. But they refused to move. Subsequently, they had to be lifted bodily. A police party had been kept in readiness to avoid trouble”. (File no. 25, 1923, Home Pol. Month February).

Daroga Gokal Chand had been brought to Multan from the Attuck jail. He was more loyal to the Crown than even the British officers themselves. He had already earned notoriety for his abuses, bestial beating and insult of the Akalis. He was a jail law unto himself; the jail manual of the British rulers having been cast away in the dust-bin. He could even go to the extent of killing his prisoners if his masters so desired. He was subsequently made a *Rai Sahib* in recognition of his services to the British rulers.

Gokal Chand was a lean, tall fellow, sported a twirled-up moustache and always carried a stick in his hand. He never entered the jail premises without three or four of his Pathan bodyguards. He knew that the Akalis and other political prisoners hated him, and his *modus operandi* for subduing a prisoner was to get him beaten up by Pathan *numberdars* and then make him grind 18 *seers* of wheat every day.

Ducking Akali prisoners in the dirty urine-faeces water receptacles began after he was brought to the Multan jail. Five or six Pathan criminal *numberdars* took the prisoner to the receptacle, where this water used to accumulate behind the barracks, caught hold of him sternly and lowered him in it, head downwards. The head was held down in the water till the prisoner became unconscious. He was then pulled out and thrown aside. Gyani Jai Singh, Santa Singh and others had been subject to such torture, but had not relented.

Questions were raised in the Central Assembly and in the Punjab Council on such gruesome treatment of the prisoners. But Government officials, well-versed in the art of evading direct answers, took the plea of “public interest” or trotted out some other meaningless replies.

One day I was sitting in my cell after grinding about 4-5 *seers* of

wheat, which was my daily labour. Just then six hefty Pathan *number-dars* entered my cell. Seeing the bucket of some underground wheat, they began abusing me and beating me up with leather belts. They forced my hand to the handle of the grinding stone and ordered me to grind on. But I did not move the handle. One of them grabbed my hand and forced the rotatory motion. After a few turns he took away his hand; only for the grinding stone to come to a dead stop! Now furious, they began to beat me up again with their belts. They finally left me, warning: "If you don't do your quota of work by this evening, you will be in for a still severe beating".

Next day, Gokal Chand came to my cell with the same Pathans. Turning to me he said: "Has your zeal (*josh*) gone down yet or not?" "Not yet", I replied. "I shall ensure that it goes completely", saying this he moved away.

The policy of the Government to crush the Akali *morcha* by brute force in Guru-Ka-Bagh had failed miserably. The DC had sought help of the SGPC for keeping peace in Amritsar City because a communal riot between the Hindus and the Muslims had broken out. The Akalis helped the DC in bringing the situation under control by their intervention. The Government took this help as a pretext for releasing the Guru-ka-Bagh prisoners.

Earlier, the Government had also got out of the Guru-Ka-Bagh embarrassment through the intervention of Lala Ganga Ram, who got the disputed land on lease from the *mahant*, and handed it over to the SGPC, thus saving the face of the British.

In the afternoon of 28 April, 1923 I was called to the Jail Superintendent's office and asked if I had anything to do with the Guru-Ka-Bagh affair. I said that I had been arrested and sentenced in one case for delivering an allegedly "seditious" speech there. I heard them say: "He has only four days of his sentence remaining. That is nothing; let him go".

So, I was released along with the other Guru-Ka-Bagh prisoners. Thus, the first jail chapter of my life was over.

We returned to Amritsar as heroes, were honoured and garlanded and taken out in a big procession. We made stirring speeches, not only for the freedom of the gurdwaras but also for the freedom of our country. This victory had raised the Akali morale sky high and they were ready to lay down their lives, if need be, for the cause of the gurdwaras and the country.

6. Maharaja of Nabha and British Folly

MY activities both inside the jail and outside had been noted by the Akali leadership. They also knew that I was devoting myself whole-time, and voluntarily, in the service of the *Panth*.

The Guru-Ka-Bagh struggle and its success had won new laurels for the Sikhs. National leaders like Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Pandit Motilal Nehru, C.P. Andrews, Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew and many others had even visited the places of Akali struggles and lauded the peaceful conduct of the agitations. The Guru-Ka-Bagh struggle had proved the validity of the Gandhian path of peaceful nonviolent *satyagraha* and it was hailed in all quarters and impressed the entire nation. And I felt proud of my humble contribution in creating the awakening in my area of activities.

The Congress leadership was specially happy because pro-Congress, meaning the pro-freedom, trend was getting strengthened among the Sikh masses as the latter were gradually moving away from British dependency and sycophancy and had started denouncing the pro-British community chieftains in Punjab as also the Government's repressive policies. The Congress leadership had been hoping for such a development for a long time. Therefore, it was natural that Congress help was forthcoming for the Akali struggles, unasked. It is a fact that the gurdwara freedom movement did strengthen the Indian freedom movement in many ways.

Guru-Ka-Bagh in Amritsar District was the area of my activities. I attended the May and June *amavas* meetings there and received praise and respect of the people of my community for my services to the *Panth*. We chalked out plans to strengthen the Akali *jatha* by enrolling new members. This was not difficult at all as there was great enthusiasm and upsurge in the region because of the victory of our struggle.

I was elected a member of the general committee of the SGPC at its meeting on 15 July, 1923 which imposed greater responsibilities

on me. The SGPC leadership called upon us—Dan Singh of Vachhoa and me, to make preparations for a big, four-day thanks-giving conference at Guru-Ka-Bagh to be held from 31 August to 3 September. We took up our job enthusiastically and enlisted the help of all the workers of the region to mobilise funds, manpower, food, etc. The SGPC utilised its machinery to raise *jathas* in the whole of Punjab and asked them to join the conference in large numbers in a disciplined and organised manner. The conference attracted a huge gathering of over 25,000.

All the top Akali leaders attended the conference, excepting Sardar Kharak Singh, the SGPC president, who was in jail. They were much impressed by the arrangements and the huge gathering. The conference passed many resolutions, condemning the inhuman repression by the Government of the peaceful *satyagrahis*, congratulating the people for their sacrifices and enduring their trials and tribulations, denouncing the arrest of Kharak Singh and dethronement of Maharaja of Nabha. The resolutions were passed with thunderous applause and shouts of *Sat Sri Akal*.

The general elections to the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) were held on 30 September, 1923 and my name was proposed by someone for the post of the general secretary. To my surprise, and joy, I was unanimously elected to the post in the august body, only office secretary Kartar Singh voted against me. Even the representatives of those who had thrown me out of the Teja Kalan meeting now did not dare to oppose me because of my standing amongst the Akalis. My election to the post added to my stature, and I began to be counted as one of the leadership.

The SAD was the central body of all the Akali *jathas* in Punjab, and it was this body which provided its members as volunteers for the struggles launched by the SGPC for the freedom of the gurdwaras. It was an independent body which took part in religious, social, cultural and political activities, while the activities of the SGPC were confined only to religious and cultural matters of the Sikhs. In the struggles for reforms and freedom of the gurdwaras, both the SAD and the SGPC coordinated their activities and cooperated hand in hand.

My new responsibility as the SAD secretary general gave me an opportunity to know more about the functioning of the organisation. I had to deal with the leaders of the district *jathas*, their problems and inner-*jatha* wrangles. The president of the Dal, Sardar Sarmukh Singh Chabhallia (one of the three Chabhallia brothers) was very

honest, straight-forward and cooperative. Thus it was not difficult for us to tackle most of the problems by putting our heads together.

The Maharaja of Nabha, Ripudaman Singh, was deposed by the British Government on 9 July, 1923 for his sympathies with the Akalis and their political movements. His ouster was therefore considered a lateral attack on the Akali movement and agitated the religious and political minds of the Sikhs so much so that moves were being talked about to undo the injustice.

On 5-6 August, 1923, the newly-elected committee of the SGPC met. According to a confidential report of the Government, the "extreme party" had taken possession of the SGPC and "all powers were in their hands". (File 25/1923 August). This was in fact correct; the nationalists had gained an overwhelming majority in the committee, and the pro-Government compromisers were reduced to a minority because they had been discredited during the Golden Temple "keys" and Guru-Ka-Bagh struggles. The deposition of the Maharaja of Nabha was a god-send issue for the SGPC, especially with the Government in a mood to settle the *gurdwara* issue. The Akali *jathas* too clamoured for launching a struggle over the deposition. The SGPC discussed the question and condemned the Government for dethroning the Maharaja and took upon itself to get the injustice rectified. There were only "six dissenting votes" including that of Bhai Jodh Singh. (File 25/1923 August). In my statement before Mr. Anderson, I said:

"... The Nabha question was taken up to kill two birds with one stone, i.e. to say, to reinstate the Maharaja of Nabha on his ancestral throne and to settle the *gurdwara* question once for all. The first object is implied, if not clear, in the resolution passed by the SGPC as the words 'to get the wrong done to the Maharaja righted' show. In my view, these words mean... nothing less than reinstating the Maharaja on his paternal throne. This is what I understood at the time when this resolution was declared carried. The second object is explicitly clear as the words 'side-attack on the *gurdwara* movement' in the resolution show."

The Government took shelter behind "a dispute" that had "arisen between the Maharaja of Nabha and the Maharaja of Patiala over some State affairs. Some charges were brought against the former by the latter. The Government stepped in to dole out justice to them. The Maharaja of Nabha, on account of having great sympathy with the reform movement, was a thorn in the side of the officials who

wanted to put him out of their way. He was, therefore, deposed forcibly, despite the treaties with the Phulkian States”.

The Government began a propaganda through a communique that “the Maharaja of Nabha had abdicated his throne voluntarily”. But this was a blatant lie. The SGPC issued challenge after challenge to the Government to prove it before the public. But the Government did not reply, and the challenges remained unaccepted ever after. Meanwhile, people were getting into an agitational mood over the issue.

The Government then employed another strategy. It compelled the Maharaja to make a declaration that though he thanked his sympathisers, he “disapproved of any action on their part that might embarrass the Government”. But this forced declaration could not assuage the indignation of the public at large who were convinced that the issue was political, and that the Maharaja was being punished for his sympathies with political and religious movements in the countryside.

Further, it was well-known that the Maharaja resented having to eat out of the hands of Government minions, unlike the Maharaja of Patiala who was a British sycophant and danced attendance to all high Government officials. The British wanted to impose the Patiala Maharaja as the leader of the Sikh community; but the Sikhs hated him because he had no morals and lost all sense of dignity while acting as a fulsome stooge of the British Crown.

The SGPC had by now become a very powerful institution whose leaders had won the minds and hearts of the Sikh masses through their fearlessness, sacrifices and dedication to the cause of the *Panth*. The resolutions passed by the SGPC were treated by the people as sacrosanct and anybody opposing them was considered an apostate.

A *diwan* was to be held at the Jaito Gurdwara to protest against the deposition of the Maharaja of Nabha. All political meetings in Nabha State had been banned and state police was instructed to arrest those holding the meeting. Not only all those holding the meeting outside the Jaito Gurdwara were arrested, but even the *Granthi* reciting the *Akhand Path* was taken into custody, thus interrupting the *Path* in violation of its sacredness. This was a clear desecration of an established religious rite.

The Deputy Administrator, Gurdial Singh, had acted in a most foolish manner in handling a religious matter. The holy scripture of the Sikhs was seized and thrown aside, thus adding insult to the in-

jury, and the incident roused the religious feelings of the Sikhs. The SGPC decided "to resume the unfinished *path*", and Akali *jathas* started converging on Jaito for the purpose. They were arrested every day and sent to the sandy wilds of Bawal. "They were given innumerable tortures which no human tongue can describe and which exposed the complete bankruptcy of the British statesmanship...", I had said then in one of my statements.

The movement to reinstate the Maharaja of Nabha enveloped almost the entire Sikh community. Those few against lacked guts to face this popular storm; some also thought it wise to remain quiet and pretend to be neutral. The officialdom was still stuck in its old political digits while the situation had changed completely. Failing to properly appraise the awakening of Sikh "giant", it thought of binding his hands and feet by hatching up a big conspiracy against the Sikh leaders.

The Government embarked upon a scheme to crush the Akali movement with a stern hand. It declared the SGPC, the SAD and all the bodies and *jathas* affiliated to them as "unlawful associations", and on 13-14 October night arrested about 60 leaders and office employees under Section 120-121 and 124-A, etc. "for waging war against the King Emperor and setting up a Sikh Raj". I said in my statement:

"Burning with rage it (the bureaucracy) rushed to the last resort of shutting the mouths of those who were exposing its high-handedness and injustice. A chargesheet, therefore, replete with cock and bull stories – that the SGPC wanted to make the Sikhs the rulers of the Punjab; that the hands of the various *jathas* were known and addressed as *zaildars*, *thanedars*, *tehsildars* etc.; that a large number of members of the SGPC were political extremists; and that the Akalis had used violence under cover of nonviolence, and so forth – was trumped up to arrest the agitation and throw dust into the eyes of the world. What is this charge-sheet? A perversion of facts to deceive the public in that the Sikhs had conspired to overawe and finally to overthrow the British Government established by law and that they wanted to establish a Sikh Raj. A dozen, more or less, such absurd charges...were brought against the Akalis to suppress their movement and cast them in jail in the dead of night, exactly at the time when Jesus, who was crucified barbarously afterwards, was arrested by the betrayal of traitor Judas and thrown in jail".

The aim of the Government was to bring the SGPC machinery to

a dead stop, and it was acting on the advice of Sir John Maynard, Finance Minister of the Punjab Government who had said "if we cut off the head, the body would fall to the ground by itself". But this was also a wrong assessment: the body did not fall, instead obtained new heads, as subsequent developments proved.

I could not be arrested in the first swoop as I was neither at home nor in Amritsar, the two places where the police had been sent to arrest me. I was perhaps in Guru-Ka-Bagh. I came to Amritsar in disguise and put up in the Baradari of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a small old building just opposite the Golden Temple, and began to function as the SAD general-secretary. The first thing I did was to issue an appeal to the Akali *jathas*, Sikh youth, women and intellectuals to be ready to boldly meet the new challenge and defeat the Government conspiracy to crush the Akali movement. But all the press proprietors refused to print the appeal. Bhai Arjan Singh Gagraj came to my help and the printer and publisher of the *Gagraj Akali Press*, printed the appeals. He was later sentenced to two years R.I. for printing the appeal of an "unlawful body".

The Baradari was out of bounds for the police. The Akali *jathas* were undeterred and *Jathedars* met me often, keeping up the regular line of 25 volunteers for the Jaito morcha. I issued more posters, asking the Akali *jathas* for more sacrifices and was working overtime to instill spirit and courage in the movement.

I had no experience of living and working underground in a city, although I could do so in the villages. It was very difficult to remain stuck-up in one room day after day. I wanted to go to the Bandemataram Hall to see a "talkie". I altered the mode of my dress to hoodwink the CID men and reached the hall through dark lanes and bylanes of the city. I bought a ticket and sat in the last row of the cinema hall to avoid detection. But the hawk-eyed CID personnel had spotted me. In few minutes before the interval, a man approached me and said that I was wanted outside. I knew at once that I had been caught. The police was already there to arrest me.

Incidentally, the *Daroga* of the Amritsar sub-jail was also watching the cinema show, and he too was abruptly called out to receive another prisoner in his jail! Both of us shared a tonga to the jail; the *Daroga* fuming all the way at me for having cut short his enjoyment.

I too was cursing myself for having committed the blunder of coming to the cinema hall and getting arrested in this manner. I wondered what other leaders would say. They would surely accuse me of

deserting my post of duty at a time when the Government was bent upon wiping out the Akali movement. This could be construed as nothing but betrayal of the cause. I was really feeling ashamed of my mistake of having left my hideout to enjoy a movie.

That night I could not sleep in the sub-jail. I did not know how I would face my colleagues lodged there in the morning—they were locked in their cells and barracks when I was brought into the jail. Nobody among them knew that I had been arrested.

Next morning the *Daroga* himself came when the cells were being unlocked, and told the entire story of my arrest to all the detained leaders. All my night's worry proved baseless as nobody made any adverse comments. On the other hand, Sundar Singh said encouraging me that brave men were usually arrested from such places! I knew fully well that he was not sarcastic; and I somewhat felt at ease. But the blot of guilt never left me.

Our trial had not started yet as the Government was still preparing its case. We constantly exchanged notes and discussed the development of the movement outside the jail. We also passed our time reading available literature. Mehtab Singh, Teja Singh Samundari, Master Tara Singh and other members of the SGPC thought of putting up a strong defence by engaging reputed lawyers to prove the falsity of the charges against us in the law courts. The two barristers among the accused were Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh, president of the SGPC who had been a Government advocate, and Narain Singh. There were two *vakils* too—Bhag Singh of Gurdaspur and Gurcharan Singh of Sialkot. Three professors of the Khalsa College Amritsar, were also among the accused—Prof. Harkishan Singh, Prof. Niranjan Singh and Prof. Teja Singh; there were three retired armymen too who had been implicated in the alleged conspiracy: Captain Ram Singh, Risaldar Sundar Singh of Sialkot and Risaldar Ranjoo Singh Gurdas-Nangal. Among others were some well-known Akali *jathedars* and prominent members of the SGPC and its office staff.

Eight of us chose to be non-cooperators, those who were not interested in the defence of the case at all. They were Gurcharan Singh Vakil, Sewa Singh Thikriwala, Santa Singh Sultanwind, Teja Singh (*Jathedar Akal Takht*), Rai Singh, Sarmukh Singh Chabhal, Gopal Singh Qaumi and myself. In my statement to the court I later declared:

“I am an humble non-cooperator. I do not want to answer the

questions put to me. It does not mean that I want to withhold or conceal the truth in any way... I will, however, like to make a general statement, wherein I shall try to narrate about the role I played in the so-called conspiracy thrust upon us by the agents of the bureaucracy ... I will let the world know what wonders can be worked by a united nonviolent community of thousands of men...." Today, as I read this, I feel there is lot of Gandhian touch about it. I was Gandhi-Bhagat combine during those days.

The Government, with all its vigilance at its command, tried its best to keep all the accused aloof from the outside world. It sought to prevent us from establishing any contact with the associations functioning outside the jail lest these received any guidance from their detained leaders. But it could not succeed.

We could easily send our messages through our lawyers, whom the Government had to allow to meet us to discuss the case. We could also buy up the jail warders and send our messages through them. Messages could even be received from the outside – letters were carefully packed inside oranges and smuggled in along with fruit supplies. There were numerous other loopholes in the jail and bureaucratic administration which could be tapped for maintaining contact with the outside world.

SGPC president Mehtab Singh had a very faithful servant named Mangal Singh, whom he had picked up for maintaining our outside contacts. Everyday Mangal came outside the jail wall exactly at an appointed time to give and take back messages through the drain hole, and then vanished in the fields around the jail. He did this for full six months till we were transferred to a part of the Lahore Fort which was temporarily converted into a jail and a court.

This transfer was specifically made because the Government had reports that we had established contact with the leaders outside and were guiding them to carry on the movement. But even at Lahore, the Government could not plug our contacts as we devised new means to exchange messages with the outside world.

The case against us dragged on, and the cooperating leadership wanted to prolong it. We, the non-cooperators, were not interested in prolonging the case and had lost all interest in it after about six months. We kept ourselves occupied by reading books according to individual choice. Some others killed time by playing cards or chess. Everybody had a hobby horse to ride, while only six or seven leaders applied their mind to the case and cross-examined the witnesses

along with the lawyers. The case went on and on.

We were all awarded C class in the jail and got ordinary convict's diet. Some of the cooperators could have got B or even A class if they had approached the authorities, but they did not do so, fearing that if the Government did not accede to their demand, then, logically, some sort of struggle would have to follow. The cooperators did not want to embarrass the Government in any way.

The undertrials, however, were allowed under the jail rules to get their food from outside. While some of the well-to-do people began taking advantage of the rule, the non-cooperators could not afford to do so. We ate whatever was provided to us from the jail kitchen. However, the quality of flour, *dals*, and vegetables was not as bad here as provided to the convicts in other jails.

For some time, Gokal Chand—the same one, notorious for maltreating Akali prisoners in the Attock and Multan Camp jails—was posted at Lahore Fort. Straightaway he began to apply the jail manual in its letter, and treat us undertrials haughtily. In the jail prisoners were counted twice a day, in the morning and the evening. He ordered us to sit in twos on the ground for the counting. We refused; and I, Gopal Singh Qaumi and Santa Singh Sultanwind began to argue with him: They (the undertrials) are the most respected leaders of the Sikh community; they are only about 60 in number, therefore not difficult to be counted... This is not an ordinary jail, and you should not insist on making them sit on the ground for counting. This is humiliating, etc..etc. But he would not budge and began to threaten us with dire consequences. He actually itched to take a revenge on us.

One of the warders caught hold of one of us by the arm, but the latter jerked the grip away. Thereupon, Gokal Chand played his usual trick of ringing the alarm bell and all the warders and *number-dars* came rushing, armed with lathis and guns. As the alarm bell rang, we began to chant *Sat Sri Akal* over and over again.

Our shouts were heard outside the Fort, and people in the nearby Gurdwara Dera Saheb thought that we were being beaten up, knowing the character of *Daroga* Gokal Chand. They immediately sent messages to the press and the SGPC. However, despite interventions by some leaders, we were not spared the beating.

But the news of beating brought the Chief Secretary of the Punjab Government, prosecuting advocates and defence lawyers to the Fort. The Government seized up the situation and decided to transfer

Gokal Chand and some other members of the staff to some other jail. The new staff which replaced them counted us on our *Khadi* (raised earthen platforms to sleep or sit on). There was no trouble thereafter in the Fort.

7. Book That Changed My Life

BY the very nature of the trial, the “conspiracy” case was destined to be a protracted one; and it carried on for about three years. Those of us not cooperating with the court had no interest in what was going on. We quietly sat in the court-room, listened to the loaded arguments of the prosecution or the defence and heard the witnesses tell some truth, some half-truth or pure and simple tutored lies. We got bored and fed up with the trial and wished that the case would end soon and sentences passed against us.

But it did not lie in our hands to have our own way. The defenders were the real masters of the situation, and willy-nilly, we had to put up with the situation. The trial went on and on, and advocates, including several accused barristers, had a field day—their “day” lasted about three years for us!

One of the court room’s door opened to our jail barrack. Often some of us went into the barrack on the excuse of easing ourselves, but stayed back there for an hour or so. The cooperators bent upon proving that the charge of conspiracy was false, took all the interest in the court proceedings. Sardar Bahadur Sardar Mehtab Singh, formerly the Deputy Speaker of the Punjab Council, led them.

I decided to spend most of my time in the jail studying political literature to increase my political horizon. Fortunately for me, my village friend Surat Singh, who was then a student of the Berkeley University, California, had sent me some good books. He was editor of the weekly *Gaddar*, the mouthpiece of the Hindustan Gaddar Party, San Francisco. The books were mostly political, one of them was *Liberty and the Great Libertarians*, compiled by T. Sprading. It contained revolutionary material which opened a new world before me. Other books were: *History of American Revolution*, *Constitution of America*, on constitutions of some European countries and reports of three municipal committees of England.

In Punjab jails, censorship was very strict and books of political nature were not allowed to the political prisoners. But in the Fort Jail

I received not only political books, but also the aforesaid book with its highly revolutionary content. These were passed by one sub-inspector Daryao Singh, and the rubber stamps on the books carried his name. I still wonder how he allowed these books to be passed on to me: was it because big-wigs were involved in the conspiracy case, or was it that he was a liberal sort of officer? The book *Liberty and the Great Libertarians* was published in Los Angeles in 1913 by the author, four years before the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia. It did not contain anything from the revolutionary writings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, and a few others. But other renowned revolutionaries were covered and quoted. The author had chosen them "from different political parties and economic schools", representing Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, Single-Taxers, Anarchists and Women's Rights Advocates. The author, Sprading wrote in his preface:

Some of it (the literature) was withdrawn by the authors after much persecution; some was suppressed by the publishers owing to opposition from influential conservatives, and a considerable part of it is literature that has been neglected and not published because its thought was too far ahead of its time. The general reader will find the writer of a century ago perhaps as radical as he can tolerate, while the real progressive thinker will appreciate the more advanced thought of the libertarian writers of his own age".

This was the book which fell into my hands and affected my future course of life and activities. I was no longer the young man that I was before being exposed to this book as it began the process of transforming my life. It literally opened up new vistas before my mind.

The quoted writers in the book were great radicals and revolutionaries of their times. Every quotation reproduced in the book arrested my attention and gripped my mind and heart, and I marvelled at the vast material and spiritual knowledge contained therein. Till then I knew nothing about the character of the state, about the difference between the republicans or socialists, anarchists and the advocates of women's rights. This book explained it all. On every issue like liberty, democracy, majority rule, force and power, liberty and society, love and marriage, ideology, labour, capital, interest, peace and war, machines, etc., considered opinions of the

authors were reproduced. At times individual opinions clashed, but that helped me to understand the issue better. There were aspects in the book which were beyond my comprehension at the time. The book contained a wealth of new knowledge about which I did not know an iota. Reading the book in all eagerness and curiosity, I found that I was an ignorant man so far as politics was concerned.

To share my experiences in this regard with the reader, I will invoke some small quotes from the book. But the reader should remember that I am talking about the year 1925, and not about the 80s when all sorts of political literature is easily available to us. In the British days, Punjab was deliberately barred from and deprived of all literature containing radicalism.

I quote below some of the laconic passages that swept me figuratively off my feet. Voltaire of the French Revolution says "It is difficult to free fools from the chains they revere".

Tacitus says: "When the state is corrupt, then the laws are most multiplied".

Goldsmith writes: "Law grinds the poor, and richmen rule the law".

Patrick Henry's famous laconic – known to well-read, politically-conscious persons – "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death".

About religious fanaticism, Voltaire says: "Believe as I do or I shall hate you... What an impious master thou art? Not to be of my religion is to be of none".

And just what effect the following words of a French revolutionary uttered in 1778 had on my young mind:

"The world will have no rest till the last king is hanged with the guts of the last priest". (Mark Stirner)

"All men are partially buried in the grave of custom, and of some we see only the crown of their head above ground. Better are they physically dead, for they more lively rot". (H.D. Thoreau)

"I love mankind, but I hate the institutions of the dead unkind. Men execute nothing so faithfully as the wills of the dead, to the last codicil and letter." (Thoreau)

What Mark Twain said about the Czarist Russia applied also very fittingly to the British enslavers of India: "In Russia, whenever they catch a man, a woman or child that has got any brains or education or character, they ship that person straight to Siberia. It is admirable, it is wonderful! It is so searching and so effective that it keeps the general

level of Russian intellect and education down to that of the Czar”.

Poet James Russel Lowell's poems opened new windows of light before me.

*We will speak out, we will be heard,
Though all earth's systems crack;
We will not bate a single word,
Nor take a letter back.
Let liars fear, let cowards shrink,
Let traitors turn away;
Whatever we have dared to think
That dare we also say.
We speak the truth and what care we
For hissing or for scorn;
While some faint gleanings we can see
Of freedom's coming morn.*

Or,

*They must upward still, and onward, who
keep abreast of truth;
Lo, before us gleam her camp-fires!
We ourselves must pilgrims be,
Launch our Mayflower and steer boldly
through the desperate winter sea,
Nor attempt the future's portal with the
Past's blood-rusted key.*

The revolutionaries had expressed their views on all the subjects facing the western world and America. But the revolutionary contents of the fervour.

*

Even earlier, I had ceased accepting any dogma on trust. I had begun to reason with myself why this or that concept should form part of my life. I accepted only those values which stood the test of reason. For me, in a small way, the “Age of Reason” had dawned.

I reflected that the daily recitation of the Sikh prayer had become mechanical. Whatever value it had imparted earlier, had lost its meaning. Now it only dulled my mind, and memory was merely repeating it

without any interaction with the mind. I, therefore, gave up reciting the prayer and began to seriously study the *Granth Sahib* and Sprading's book. The book gave a blow to my uncritical faith, and I started to study Sikh religion and its canons more critically. Bhagat Jaswant Singh, one of my liberal co-accused, was good enough to present me a copy of the *Guru Granth Sahib* bound in four parts.

The more I studied the book, the more I got interested in it. It kindled in me a desire to know more about religion, politics, economics and culture. My educational background was not much, and I found it difficult to fully understand these difficult subjects. But my native, inborn sense stood me in good stead and I found myself moving towards radical views.

At times I shared my views only with Professor Niranjjan Singh of the Khalsa College. But he was not impressed by the radical views quoted in the book. He was a convinced Gandhite, and would not care for views other than Mahatma Gandhi's.

I began to differ from some of my jail companions on some of the then current Sikh concepts. On occasions I landed myself in trouble because of these differences. My way of bluntly and ruggedly putting my viewpoint was also responsible for this in no less a degree. I thought that Sikhs at that time were very bigotted and were under the spell of numerous anachronistic ideas.

For instance, the problem of *Gurumukhi* which is the script of the Punjabi language. But it was confused with the Punjabi language itself. The British authorities were mainly responsible for this confusion, equating the Punjabi script of *Gurumukhi* with the Punjabi language. But bigotted sections of the Sikhs added to this confusion because they wrongly considered that the *Gurumukhi* script was "created" by Guru Nanak, and hence it was sacred and reverential.

One day in the Lahore Fort Jail we were talking among us about the backwardness of the Punjabi language. Without weighing my words properly, I said rather rashly: How can the Punjabi language develop when its script, *Gurumukhi*, is considered sacred by the Sikhs? We are making the Punjabi language the language of the Sikhs alone. Non-Sikhs cannot consider the *Gurumukhi* script as a sacred one. We reverently pick up any piece of paper which has *Gurumukhi* words written on it from the street or in the house and throw it in the well, thinking that disrespect has been shown to our Guru. The Punjabi language cannot develop because of such attitude. The criterion of a developed language is that its written pieces on papers can be

thrown about, trampled under foot and lie scattered in many places. There is a justification in the charge against us that we treat Punjabi language as a Sikh language.

As soon as I had uttered these words, Mr Gopal Singh Sagri of Rawalpindi rushed towards me furiously, and said: "You have profaned and insulted our Guru; I shall kill you (for this)".

Among those who were participating in our jail discussion were Teja Singh Samundari, Master Tara Singh, S. Gurucharan Singh Vakil of Sialkot, Bhag Singh Vakil, S. Sarmukh Singh Chabbal and others. Teja Singh Samundari caught hold of Gopal Singh Sagri and tried to prevent him from reaching me, but he wrestled out of him and came to blows with me. It was with much difficulty that Teja Singh Samundari, Master Tara Singh and others could pacify him. Gopal Singh never spoke to me after this incident.

I might have hurt his religious susceptibilities of blind faith, but the incident shows how ignorant the Sikhs then were about the history of the origin of *Gurumukhi* script, and how poor their thinking was. In my view this was religious bigotry born out of stark ignorance. It created prejudices among the non-Sikhs in accepting Punjabi as their mother-tongue and stood in the way of the development of the Punjabi language. Such was our religious and cultural consciousness of that time.



I have mentioned earlier that I had also received from America three municipal committee reports of Liverpool and Manchester in Britain. I read these carefully and found that the health of the population of these municipal committees had shown improvement from year to year after their take-over by elected bodies. Improved sanitation had resulted in bringing down the rate of infant and maternal mortality. The reports had given annual statistics to prove these claims.

The reports had also given yearwise figures showing the falling rate of syphilis cases in these municipal areas. Medical science had helped the population to secure healthy conditions of life, lowering the death-rate and increasing the average life-span. There should have been nothing surprising about it, but not so for some of my jail inmates.

One day I was talking about these reports, and quoting statistics from them, to illustrate the benefits accruing from sanitation

measures taken by these elected municipal committees. The decline in the death-rate, infant mortality and less number of syphilis-afflicted people was statistically proved. About a dozen companions sitting on their *Khadis* listened to what I was saying.

All of a sudden, Jathedar Teja Singh Akarpuri blurted out: "It seems you are suffering from syphilis. That is why you are talking about it". I was completely flabbergasted, and stared at him in surprise. Recovering from the shock, I told him pointblank that I was willing to get myself physically examined by him on one condition: that he would truthfully announce the result of his finding. He agreed.

Both of us went to the nearby urinal. I took off the *Kachha* (under-wears) and he examined my genital. After a few minutes, we came out, and I asked him to announce his findings. He had to declare brazenly that I was free from any disease!

Now why this outburst from Teja Singh Akarpuri? Because that was his understanding of the Sikh religion. He had learnt that: "Not an iota changes without the will of god. Without His order, not a leaf can flap". This was the stage of religious consciousness of most Sikhs of the time.

That I had given up my morning and evening prayers could not go unnoticed. Teja Singh Akarpuri, the Jathedar of Akal Takht and perhaps a few others had noticed it. One morning as I was reading the *Guru Granth Sahib*, a deputation of five co-prisoners led by the Jathedar came and sat by my side. The four others were Captain Ram Singh, a retired military man, Rai Singh of Komagata Maru fame, Sardar Sewa Singh Thikriwala (later martyred) and Teja Singh Ghawind. I welcomed them and asked them why they had come. The Jathedar said: "All other Akalis involved in the case say their morning and evening prayers. You are the general-secretary of the Shiromani Akali Dal, the central organisation of the Akalis. But you do not say your prayers. You must say it".

I replied that I studied the *Guru Granth Sahib* very keenly and seriously in the mornings. I was thus devoting the prayer-time to this study, and that they were welcome to come in the morning and listen to what I read.

But what I said was only half the truth. The other half was that under the influence of the revolutionary book, I had given up saying the morning prayers and had no mind to continue the practice. This part I did not spell out to my colleagues. It was, on the face of it, my moral weakness and lack of courage that I had not spoken the whole

truth.



Born in the politically backward province of Punjab, I was brought up in a puritan religious atmosphere. But the idea enunciated in *Liberty and the Great Libertarians* later became a touchstone for me to assess the religious, social, political and cultural values inherited from the past. I cast away a lot of rubbish that I had been carrying in my mind, and the book awakened the critic in me.

The Akali trial provided me a good chance and time to pursue my studies. Top Sikh leaders were with me in the jail, living in the same barrack, and I could closely study their behaviour, habits and treatment of one another. I could understand their living and evaluate their political, social and cultural thoughts and draw my own conclusions.

The only common issue among the Akali undertrials was their objection to Government interference in the gurdwara freedom movement and the latter's open siding with the *mahants*. On all other issues, they differed. Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh and his followers had earlier been cooperating with the British Government, but had joined the Akali movement because the Government had interfered in their religious affairs. They were hardly interested in politics and fighting for India's freedom. They, therefore, wished to settle the gurdwara problem with the Government on some reasonable terms before the case reached the judgement stage.

There were pensioners among us like Risaldar Sundar Singh, Risaldar Ranjodh Singh, Captain Ram Singh and loyalists like Sardar Gurdit Singh, Prof. Bawa Harkishen Singh and Bakshish Singh who did not wish to incur the blot of a jail sentence on their careers because some of them hoped to subsequently join Government services as officers. A court sentence would have meant ruin to their careers, and Sardar Mehtab Singh, their leader, openly talked about this many times. These people held the view that the British Government had deep roots in the country and that it was not so easy to throw them out of India. These people comprised the biggest group involved in the conspiracy case.

The second group consisted of S. Teja Singh Samundari, Master Tara Singh, Bhag Singh Vakil, Jatbedar Teja Singh Akarpuri, Sewa Singh Thikriwala, Tripat Singh, Teja Singh Chuharkana and Teja Singh Ghawind. They were the rightist nationalists taking interest in

the case, defending themselves and not boycotting the court. They were mostly political people, fighting for India's freedom as well.

The third and last group of people did not cooperate with the court. In fact, they boycotted the proceedings and did not engage any advocate to defend themselves. They desired that the trial should soon end and sentences pronounced. They were the left nationalists, and among them were Gopal Singh Qaumi, Sarmukh Singh Chabhal, Gurcharan Singh Vakil (Sialkot) and Santa Singh Sultanwind, who were the followers of Mahatma Gandhi. I was also counted in this group though I was not a blind follower of Mahatma Gandhi. I believed in what Guru Gobind Singh had said: when all other means fail, it is rightful to take the sword in hand.

The case dragged on in Special Magistrate Anderson's court. I was slowly coming round to resolve that after the judgement, I would serve my jail term, and on my release would join the freedom struggle after severing my links with the Sikh religious movements. I opposed regionalism and communalism and wanted to fight for the complete independence of the biggest Gurdwara – India.

Illiteracy had made the Sikhs most backward in terms of thought and ideology. They were completely unaware of the true meaning of their Gurus' teachings. Hindu rituals, customs and conventions, condemned so vehemently by Guru Nanak, had come to prevail in the gurdwara affairs. Hindu idols had even been set up for worship in the Golden Temple of Amritsar itself; what to talk about the smaller gurdwaras. Guru Nanak's famous creation *Japuji* had been turned into a *jantar-mantar* (mumbo-jumbo) book. Each *Pauri* (portion) if recited in a particular manner at a particular time or a particular number of times every day for a particular period could grant you your desire – even the desire to win over the love of your coveted woman! Such was the degradation to which Sikhism had been reduced to due to ignorance, illiteracy and lack of proper understanding of the Sikh scriptures. So much so that an idiotic Sikh had declared in Paonta Sahib (near Dehradun) that Guru Gobind Singh had taken re-birth in him and that he was the next Sikh Guru!

Those who understood the real meaning of Sikhism could be counted on one's finger-tips. Sikh weeklies had a limited circulation, mostly in the cities, and the Sedition Law hung over their heads like the Damocle's, Sword. The British enslavers had vested interest in keeping the Sikhs illiterate and ignorant, as that helped them in keeping the Sikhs loyal to the crown, and employing them as soldiers

they could be utilised to keep India in bondage. The Chief Khalsa Diwan was a typical hanger-on of the British.

It was the *Daily Akali* which sounded warnings from the housetops that the Sikh religion had become the hand-maid of the British Government, and that it was being distorted and utilised for the perpetuation of the British *Raj*.

Stories had been spread by the stooge writers of the Englishman that Britain had conquered India because Guru Tegh Bahadur had predicted their coming! They also propagated the falsehood that if one heard the *azaan*, one became a Muslim for 24 hours! The purpose was to keep the Sikhs at loggerheads with the Muslims. The Sikhs had to be freed from such falsehoods and wrong notions, together with the struggle to free the gurdwaras from the hands of the British lackeys, the *mahants*. This was the call given by the *Daily Akali* trying to rouse and enthuse the Sikh community and prepare them for the fight and make sacrifices.

The main concern of the Akali leadership from the moment of their arrest and lodging in jails was that the gurdwara freedom movement must continue uninterrupted at any cost. If only the movement was kept going and did not give in to the onslaught of the British through repression and bullets, then could the gurdwara problem be solved. If we failed in this, not only will it be a terrible blow to our movement and prestige, the gurdwaras and religion would remain in the hands of the British sycophants, the *mahants*. The SGPC and the SAD would remain illegal, and its leaders would continue to languish in jail. Therefore, the only guarantee of a solution of the gurdwara problem lay in the unyielding continuation of the struggles of the Akali movement.

The new committee that took charge of the movement after our arrest had on it members who knew the ins and outs of the struggle to continue agitation. But they too were arrested soon and put behind bars. The next batch of leadership consisted of quite a few new men who needed guidance to carry forward the movement. They, therefore, depended upon the advice of the leaders inside the jails. Despite the CID vigilance and strict security, the Government could not stop the imprisoned leaders from communicating with the outside world and guide the movement from there.

Between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. was taken up by court proceedings when the prisoners attended the trial and listened to the evidences by witnesses or the arguments of both the prosecution and defence

lawyers. Rest of the time, and the holidays, was spent inside the jail barracks or the courtyards attached to it, doing something or the other individually or collectively. Everything was done in the open, except when some of us met in conclaves for private talks.

Sardar Sant Singh Lyallpur, Lala Raghunath Sahai with his principal counsel, Raizada Bhagat Ram, a Bar-at-Law of Jullundur, and a few advocates had been engaged to defend the case. From amongst the accused, Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh (Bar-at-Law), Sardar Narain Singh (Bar-at-Law), Sardar Bhag Singh Vakil and Sardar Teja Singh Samundari took keen interest in the day-to-day trial proceedings. Rest of the accused were mere lookers-on, sitting quietly in the court or at times whispering to one another. Now and then there was loud laughter in the court room when some witnesses made some foolish statements. Thus the case dragged on—week after week, month after month.

The main thrust of the defending accused was not to challenge the main charge of conspiracy—that the Akali movement wanted to establish a Sikh Raj in Punjab. It was a most absurd charge, as not one of the accused had even breathed or thought of such an impracticable and foolish idea. Most of the accused did not believe that the British Raj could be ended in near future. They were in the Akali movement only so far as the gurdwaras were concerned; and no further. They had no political aspirations at all, nor any stomach for politics.

Punjab, as it was constituted then, was a Muslim majority province. Hindus and the Sikhs were almost equal in number; if at all fractionally more. Thus, no one would have even thought about talking of a Sikh Raj. The Indian National Congress leaders had several times objected to the Sikhs singing the couplet "The Sikhs will rule and none will remain rebellious; getting disgraced all will join. Only those who yield will be safe". If the reader would recall, there was a row between the Congress and Akali prisoners over the singing of this couplet in the Montgomery camp jail.

Both Hindu and Muslim leaders supported the Akali movement, and neither believed in the frivolous and ridiculous charge of Sikh Raj aspirations. The British tactics to drive a wedge between the Akalis and the other two communities, the Hindus and the Muslims failed. Even some leaders of the Indian Christian community had expressed their sympathy with the Akali movement.

8. My Statement in Anderson's Court

AT long last, the prosecution evidence ended and the accused were called upon by the Court to answer the charges levelled against them. I was accused No. 54 and my turn to answer the charges came on 14 January, 1925.

To the question whether I was a member of the SGPC, I replied as follows:

"I am a humble non-cooperator. I, therefore, do not want to answer the questions put to me by the Court. This attitude of mine does not mean that I want to withhold or conceal the truth in any way. It is a question of principle with me... I cannot please anybody by giving up my principles. I would, however, like to make a general statement on the role I played in the so-called conspiracy thrust upon us by the bureaucratic agents of the British Government.

"My statement will not be an apology to defend myself, but on the other hand it will be the bitter truth that will please the lovers of truth and displease the enemies of truth and justice, high or low, white-skinned or dark-skinned. Ours is a conspiracy of its own type. This is an additional reason why I feel myself called upon to let the public know what the true facts in the case are" (emphasis mine).

Eleven questions were put to me to enquire whether the SGPC sent *jathas* to take possession of the gurdwaras; whether the question of the reinstatement of the Maharaja of Nabha was taken up by the SGPC; whether I was the secretary of the SAD and whether I spoke at a meeting held at Sri Akal Takht on 9 November, 1923, and so on. To all these questions my answer was one and the same: that I did not want to answer the questions there and then, and that the answers would be given in my general statement.

The last question was: You have heard the evidence against you. What have you to say about it? Thereafter, I began reading my statement which ran into 14 cyclo-styled pages ending up on 17 January, 1925, after four working days.

I described the loyalty of the Sikhs, their disillusionment with the British Government and the Crown in my poor English (which I retain here on purpose) thus:

“Before the year 1919, the Sikhs were in the good books of the British Government... The word of a whiteman was a religious law to them; nay it was much more. They could sometimes break the religious law, but they could not refuse to carry out his orders. It was their morality to obey him; to disobey him was a religious sin. The whiteman called them the ‘Right Arm’ of the British Government. They could not contain themselves at hearing themselves (being) so-called. Loyalty was their liberty, blind faith was their consciousness and devotion to the British Raj was their religion. Politics? Oh, it was a bugbear to them. They could not tolerate to hear this odious word. The British Government was their *mai-baap*. The duty of the children was to execute the orders of their parents and not to look after their own interests. It was the duty of the parents to take care of the interests of the children. The whiteman was a *topiwala* (hat wearing) Sikh of the 9th Guru. Was it not then incumbent on them to carry out his orders? Was not to disobey him to disobey the Guru? Oh, they could lay down their lives rather than disobey the Guru. Alas, there was no help for the Sikhs; they were past cure. They had sold themselves body and soul to the Government. They had gone to dogs. They had enslaved themselves and were out to enslave others. It is a very painful episode of our history. The less said the better.

“Such were our relations with the bureaucratic Indian Government. But what did the non-Sikhs think of us? Mere parasites and hangerson! We were no more for them. They had lost every hope in us. They and we were poles apart. They wanted (and now want too) to establish *swaraj* in India. We wanted to tighten the hold of the foreigners here for ever. They said: ‘India is for Indians, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs’, we said: ‘No, it is for the Britishers! They said: ‘We will drive out the foreigners from India’. We said: ‘We will keep them here at all hazards! They were taking pity on the naked and famished children of mother India; we were out to shoot them down. They detested us, we despised them. So there was a great gulf fixed between them and us... They, both (Hindus and Muslims), made common cause to denounce us. We were stigmatised as the sworn foes of India and its nation. Time and again, we were told straight on our face that we were dead to all sense of shame, that we were rupees-twenty-a-month slaves.... But we did shamefacedly grin and bear it.

We never tried to pause and consider our situation. We went on dancing attendance on the officials. Fortunately for us, we have lived to know that the Hindus and Muslims were right. We were intoxicated with the inborn slavery. We were not ourselves. We did great injury to them. Now we repent for all what we did. Now we beg humbly of them to forgive us, to forget the old sores and think of us as their brothers. Now we have realised what these foreigners are. Now we have come to ourselves again. The world-master experience has taught us all this by opening our eyes to the realities.

"It was at this time that the attention of the Sikhs was strongly drawn towards the reform of the gurdwaras. The *mahants* had become corrupt and profligate. They had great properties attached to the gurdwaras. They rolled in money and had become fast livers. The gurdwaras, once the source of religion and inspiration, had become the 'dens of thieves'. *Nautch* parties were held there in the open daylight. Drinking was the order of the day. Men (worshippers) were abused and maltreated. Women and girls were seized and molested there. No religious ceremony was performed. Irreligion had reached the lowest point.

"The Sikhs held meetings through the length and breadth of the country. We entreated the *mahants* to reform themselves. We begged them... to utilise the gurdwara money in the propagation of the Sikh religion. But they gave no ear to what we said. They said: 'We are the sole masters of the gurdwaras. Who are you to have the face to say that the *Panth* is the master of the gurdwaras? Get away and never show us your face again'. We came back dejected and disheartened. What could we do in despair? We thought of our 'seventyfive-year old friend'. We formed deputations and waited hand and foot on him to give us a helping hand, but he refused pointblank. We went to his law courts hoping to find 'reform' there. But there was no reform there. He was emptying our pockets. We found ourselves deserted. We found that our friend was a fair-weather friend. He lent us no hand and turned his back on us. It was then that we made up our mind, to carry out the reform ourselves".

This was how, in a nutshell, the Akali movement had started and in the course of its onward march turned against the British Government.

Later, I portrayed how the Government sided with the corrupt

* Proceedings of the Akali Leaders' Conspiracy Case, Volume II, pages 1158-1165.

and profligate *mahants* in order to suppress the Akali movement. The Akalis were branded as robbers and dacoits; they were sentenced to between 7 and 19 years of imprisonment in order to strike terror. Mahant Narain Das enacted the tragedy at Nankana Sahib, killing about 200 Akalis with the connivance of the British officers. The state machinery was put in full gear to terrorise Akalis and suppress the movement. The *mahants* were encouraged to arm and defend themselves, which resulted in many clashes. Law-makers trampled upon the laws made by themselves and beat up the black-turbaned Sikhs everywhere. Two Akalis – father and son – working in a field near Guru-Ka-Bagh were belaboured so mercilessly that they succumbed to their injuries. The British Government had come out in its true colours. The Sikhs were being thus paid for the services they had rendered to the Government during the World War First and even before that. Then they began to realise, slowly but surely, what it means being slaves to a foreign government, and the need to fight against slavery for the freedom of India.

I said the Akalis were now striving to achieve their objective of freedom of the gurdwaras. When requests, petitions, deputations and all other means short of a mass movement or a mass struggle failed, they could not be expected to throw up their hands. They have been compelled to start the mass struggles to secure back their gurdwaras. They have taken to direct action and began driving out the *mahants*. The British Government tried its level best to suppress this movement in order to keep their lackeys, the *mahants*, in saddle.

The sacrifices made by the Akalis were immense. I said:

“Fines, imprisonment, attachment of properties, setting up of punitive police posts in the (Akali) villages, beating orgy at Guru-Ka-Bagh, and killings. Oh! they beggar description. Will they bring the government to reason?”

I quoted the great American poet, Walt Whitman, who had depicted the situation in his immortal words as follows:

“Oh, to struggle against odds, to meet the enemies undaunted, to be entirely alone with them, to find how much one can stand, to look strife, torture, prison, popular ruin face to face, to mount the scaffold, to advance to muzzles of guns with perfect non-chalance, to be indeed a God!”

Exposing the “law and order” cry of the British Government, I said: (again, the original poor English has been retained) “One of the charges, a serious one, levelled against us is that we have been dis-

crediting law and order. Law and order is God of Governments all over the world. It is a very fierce God; it is always red in tooth and claw and it has diseased eyes, which see red everywhere. It is very blood-thirsty, far more blood-thirsty than the Goddess Kali of the Hindus. It sees disorder and chaos everywhere in the world. There is no world cosmos (or order) in its vocabulary. A peaceful citizen who wants to express his thoughts on any matter of public interest is a malfactor in its eyes. It runs at him, who creates disorder; takes him by the throat and dashes him to the ground, or...binds him in chains and sends him to the 'House of Corruption', popularly known as the "House of Correction", and the poor man rots and rots; will this God (of law and order) takes compassion on him and lets him off". This is British "law and order"), I said.

Continuing further I observed:

"Men, left to themselves, have the natural instinct to bring about peace and order. But the law and order, which the government wants to maintain, is not always identical with the law and order which the public wants to preserve, because there is always a conflict of interests between the government and the people. The people want to come into their own, but the government wants to keep them enslaved. The government, working for its aggrandisement, always, tried to get rid of him, by fair means or foul, who comes in its way, stigmatising him as an enemy of the society and/or a revolutionary who wants to bring chaos and disorder on the peaceful citizens. So, there is a great gulf between the viewpoints of the people and the government. What is law and order to the people is lawlessness and disorder in the eyes of the government and vice versa....

"The (British) law and order is in full swing when the people are led like dumb-driven sheep; and when they can be exploited, fleeced, skinned, etc., without any murmur. But when they just raise their voice of protest against this loot, or cry on account of hunger or thirst or too much weight of chains of slavery, there is the breach of law, and they are mercilessly done away with. Wonderful are the gods of Israel, but much more wonderful are the deirophants of law and order".

About the so-called Sikh *Raj* and *Swaraj*, I said: "Nobody in the Sikh leaders' conspiracy case had the remotest thought of establishing a Sikh *Raj*. The idea never entered the Akali leaders' head. It was a concocted charge from beginning to end; and a weapon to deal a severe blow to the Akali movement. But the Government has failed

in its objective.

“The British Government could do nothing to clear up its position with regard to the Maharaja of Nabha’s abdication. The SGPC threw challenge after challenge to the Government to prove that the abdication was voluntary. The Government was absolutely mum on the question. It rushed to the last resort of shutting the mouths of those who were exposing its highhandedness. A complaint, therefore, replete with cock and bull stories, that the SGPC wanted to make the Sikhs the rulers of the Punjab, ...that a large number of the members of the SGPC were political extremists and that the Akalis had used violence under cover of non-violence and so on and so forth was trumped up to arrest the agitation and throw dust in the eyes of the world by propagating that the Sikhs conspired to overawe and finally to overthrow the British Government, established by law, and that they wanted to establish a Sikh *Raj*.”

“I have been trying to win *swaraj* under the auspices of the Central Sikh League by legitimate and peaceful means... I will strain every nerve, when I go out, to attain *swaraj* which is not a terror to me and which in my view is the birthright of every Indian, be he a Hindu or a Muslim or a Sikh or a Christian.

“I have never worked for the attainment of the Sikh *Raj*, the talk of which is a religious sin to me... Those days, long ago, took wings and flew away when Indians used to work for selfish ends. These are the days of democracy and I fully believe in the democratic form of government. So, all my efforts will be bent towards achieving *swaraj*; That is to say, the *swaraj* of the Indians by the Indians and for the Indians, without favouring any creed or colour. I will fight for the freedom of my country with might and will leave no stone unturned to achieve *swaraj* peacefully (and) as soon as possible”.

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I must confess that my views expressed in my statement were hardly mature. I did not know much of the political, social or economic affairs of the country. I did not know the reasons for or the full implications recurring famines and killer diseases prevalent in our land. I had read about the Soviet Revolution in papers, but had no knowledge that it was the anti-thesis of colonial slavery of world imperialists; nor did I know its far-reaching effect and impact on the working class and the national liberation movements throughout the

world. I did not understand that the Russian Revolution could be the catalyst in transforming the world order.

As an example of my political immaturity, I quote what I wrote about the Akalis in my statement:

“He (the Akali) is born to unify the warring communities to fight shoulder to shoulder with the Hindus and the Muslims for the freedom of India and will not rest until *swaraj* is attained... He came into the world not to sit, drink and make merry, but to wage an unceasing war against slavery, tyranny, oppression, falsehood and evil. His chief object in life is to uphold and work for truth and justice. He would lay down his life rather than stoop to meanness and foul-play. He is a lifelong fighter. He cannot make peace with tyranny, untruth and injustice and there can be no compromise with them, and his struggle ends only with the end of these evils. In short...he has wagered his all to bring about the much-longed for millennium where the triumvirate of love, truth and justice will reign...where no exile will heave a sigh and no prisoner will wail...where the Gibbets' shadow will not fall, where labour will reap its full reward and lastly where work and worth will go hand-in hand”.

This was indeed my foolish idealisation of the Akali. Though I had qualified my views by saying that the Akali was not an angel or God, yet it was quite an unbalanced statement about the real and living Akali, and a highly overdrawn and exaggerated version of his virtues. The living experience is that even an Akali is an ordinary man like any other Punjabi with all his faults and drawbacks, and made of the same clay as any other people.

Three different sources had worked on me to imagine an Akali to be like that. First was selfless sacrifices made by the Akalis in the struggle against the British Government to free their gurdwaras. Thousands of them had left their bullocks in the fields and joined the Akali movement when the call reached them; hundreds of Government servants had left their jobs for the same purpose. School teachers gave up their services, and advocates gave up their practice to lead the Akali movement.

The second was the sacrifices made by the Sikh Gurus against the Mughal rulers to win the right of a person to pursue his own religion and oppose forcible conversion. The Sikh history is replete with instances of such sacrifices. The sacrifices of the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh for this cause had moved me emotionally.

And the third source of inspiration was the book *Liberty and the*

Great Libertarians which had transformed my life. The reader will discern that much has been borrowed from this book in my idealisation of the Akali. My description of an Akali only reflected my own immature views at that time.



In my statement, I also exposed the foul methods adopted by the prosecution to strengthen its case in the conspiracy trial. Witnesses were tutored to give evidence against the accused, individually and collectively. I also stated that the Government was bent upon bringing the accused on their knees by means fair or foul.

“Having this end in view, the prosecution has throughout been trying in this case not to arrive at the truth but to make out their case by hook or by crook. Every principle of morality, every doctrine of probity has been laid aside and totally disregarded. There has been much hard swearing and special pleading throughout the case. Being government servants, most of the witnesses could not but please the prosecution without listening to the voice of their inward monitor. They tamely deposed what was put in their mouths. How many of the witnesses, who some time back were suspended from service on some account of the other, were reinstated simply because they gave evidence as required of them? How many of them were dismissed because they did not play in the hands of the prosecution? How many of them have been offered high posts because they sold their conscience and religion for a mess of pottage? The more I look into the inner working of this case, the more do I feel ashamed of the so-called justice of the British ruling class.

“It is far from me to do injustice to those witnesses who (had) deposed truthfully in the court of what they knew, but I am sorry to say, such exceptions have been very few. While, on the other hand, most of the witnesses have been men who did not have qualms to make mountains of mole-hills, and some of them were so-called Akalis who had some base motives of their own to thus depose. But the question is: Can this got-up conspiracy terrify us? Not in the least. We do not care a straw (damn) for this conspiracy. The government may lock us up for any period of time, but the movement cannot halt. It will go on and on until it achieves its object. The government has been spending public money like water on this trial to justify itself, but before our eyes it stands self-condemned”.

Then in the statement I put forward the demands of the Akalis.

1. The passage of a Gurdwara Bill, giving over to us all the gurdwaras;
2. The exemption of *kirpan* from the Arms Act; and
3. The release of all prisoners connected with the gurdwara reform movement.

The Government was following a time-serving policy. The Gurdwara Bill was put on the agenda at one time; and at another it was put on the shelf! The Bill was never seriously considered by the Government, whose game was to crush the Akali movement by sentencing its leaders to long-term imprisonment. But the movement went on, gathering momentum on its way.

At the same time, the Government did not want the loyalists to be thrown overboard. It wanted them to demarcate themselves from the freedom loving national sections of the Akalis, which they did in their many statements. The Government took up the framing of the Gurdwara Bill with them in the jail. Two British officers, H.W. Emerson and F.H. Pukhe, under the new policy, began to visit the jail to discuss the terms of the Gurdwara Bill with Sardar Mehtab Singh, Narain Singh, Bawa Harkishan Singh, etc. Their discussions lasted for weeks till the terms of the Bill were settled to the satisfaction of both the Government and the loyalist Akali leadership.

In one part of my statement, I said:

"I have been advocating taking part in obtaining possession of the gurdwaras by what the prosecution calls illegal means. To break laws and create disaffection towards the government have remained a privilege to me, and will have to remain so as long as the gurdwara question is not settled honourably, and the Gurdwara Bill is not passed according to the wishes of the Sikh community".

My conception about the Gurdwara Bill was:

"The Gurdwara Bill which will put an end to all our sorrows, that will fulfill all our overdue demands; that Bill I most earnestly want to have. But unfortunately I have come to dread this ill-starred Bill. There is something repellent, something abhorrent about the (much-talked about) Gurdwara Bill. The evolution of its history sends a shiver through my body... It is a Penelope's web which was woven in the day-time and unwoven at night.

"First of all a Bill was introduced in the Council in April 1921;

(and) the Government wanted to palm it off on us without our consent. But we trampled it underfoot. At the same time, the Government began to repress the Akalis everywhere. The Government again introduced the Bill (in a somewhat modified form) in the Council and passed it in November 1922, immediately after the Guru-Ka-Bagh (repression) affair. But as the Bill was not passed in consultation with the SGPC, it was condemned unanimously and made a dead letter.

“The Sikhs cannot accept any Bill which does not satisfy them. The workability of a Gurdwara Bill depends upon the carrying out of the Sikh demands. If the Government concedes all our demands, we will have no quarrel with it (on this score). But if it diplomatically imposes any spurious bill upon us, then it is as certain as death that there can be no peace with the Government...We would prefer to die rather than accept any Bill without the fulfillment of our demands”.

Winding up my statement I said that putting up a defence in the case was merely a waste of time and money. For, I knew from my experience the kind of justice imparted to the accused in the British courts in India. What justice and fairplay could one expect at the hands of those who have violated their own laws time and again?

9. Governor Hailey's Divide and Rule

DURING the pendency of the case, the non-cooperators sent three letters (or perhaps four) to the SGPC through secret channels, assuring the committee not to worry about them, that they would ever remain firm and that they would never take any step that would betray any weakness on their part and bring discredit to the august body. The non-cooperators also implied that the SGPC should talk to the British Government from a position of strength with regard to acceptance of the Gurdwara Bill. We knew that the Bill was being discussed, section by section, with the Government's men and accepted by the Sardar Bahadur group in the Fort Jail court-room.

We had known much earlier that the Sardar Bahadur group did not want the case to reach its logical end, because he repeatedly announced to the accused in the jail barrack that he did not want any of his men to get the stigma of imprisonment, and thus be debarred from becoming a police or army officer, or securing some high post in Government service. This was most reprehensible to us non-cooperators. Here was a leader following whose call thousands of Akalis had been beaten up with iron-knobbed lathis, trampled under the hoofs of horses and maimed for life; killed in hundreds inside jails and outside, talking of securing Government services for the accused and saving them from the blemish of imprisonment! Such was the kind of leadership the Sikh community had at that time.

The non-cooperators also urged upon the SGPC to see that the SGPC and the SAD were made legal, and the order banning them was withdrawn. They insisted that the Government's attempts to change the name of the SGPC be foiled, and that a fool-proof Gurdwara Bill be got accepted, guaranteeing Government's non-interference in Sikh religious affairs. Also, that it should be the prerogative of the SGPC to define the qualification of a Sikh voter in the democratic control of the gurdwaras, and that the elected SGPC

should not have more than a three-year term.

We were mostly enthusiastic youths, and had no fear of facing any odds. Death held no terror for us. Our motto was: "We don't frighten anybody, and do not get frightened by anybody!"

I was virtually a religious fanatic, having acquired some poor and limited knowledge of Sikhism. But I was not obstinately fanatic like some of the less-educated or illiterate Akalis. I was quite critical of much of their fanatical views.

Professor Niranjana Singh, a co-accused in the case, wrote in his life story *Jivan Vikas* in Punjabi that Gopal Singh Sagri had begun abusing the Akali leaders, saying: What connection had the Nabha question with the Gurdwara Movement? On the other side, Sarmukh Singh Chabbal, Gopal Singh Qaumi and Sohan Singh Josh were taunting the leaders, saying: Have you seated the Nabha on the *Gadhi* (she-ass)? *Gaddi* is throne, while *Gadhi* is a she-ass (p. 108). The Nabha question was slowly being forsaken.



Malcolm Hailey replaced Edward Maclagan as the new Governor of Punjab. He was a dyed-in-the-wool bureaucrat, who had been an outstanding member of the Viceroy's Council and was an expert in the art of creating dissensions in anti-government movements and struggles.

Sir Maynard's dictum was: Cut off the head of the movement, and the body will fall by itself! But this did not work because after the arrest of the Akali leadership, the struggle continued and new Akali leaders carried forward the movement without break. Hailey had his own prescription to deal and cripple the Akali movement.

Hailey did not mince words. He was shamelessly blunt and outspoken. On 4 July, 1925 he wrote to Muddiman, a senior member of Viceroy's Council, that he had no desire to release the extremists, that he wanted to consolidate the position of those who would strive to work the Gurdwara Bill in practice.

In order to create dissension in the Akali movement and thereby weaken it, he set up loyalists' reform committees on the *zail* basis in the Akali movement districts. He encouraged them officially and gave them financial aid to divide the movement between moderate Akalis and extremist Akalis. Through Government propaganda he made this mole-hill organisation look like a big Himalayan anti-Akali

organisation mountain to deceive the people. He encouraged the loyalists to frame a Gurdwara Bill of their own to fight and confuse the Akali masses and sympathisers. He tried his best to poison the minds of Hindus and Muslims to make them withdraw their sympathies and support to the Akali movement.

After getting the Gurdwara Bill passed in the Punjab Council, Hailey made a speech on 9 July, 1925 in which he said that appeals had been made to the Government to release all Akali prisoners without any condition in order to remove bitterness; but that he would not do so. He laid down conditions for their release. (1) No Akali who had committed or incited violence would be released; (2) Others will have to give written undertakings that they will work for the articles of the Gurdwara Bill on being freed, and that they will not make use of force to take possession of the gurdwara property. Only then would the Government reconsider the cases of forfeiture of pensions and land of the Akalis.

The Akali victories in the Gurdwara Movement had been a humiliation for the Punjab Government, and Hailey's conditions were put forward to humiliate the Akali leadership in turn and boost the Government's morale. But it was the unbending strength of the Akali movement that had made the Government frame its own Gurdwara Bill and get it passed.

Those detained and charged in the Akali conspiracy case were already divided between the cooperators and the non-cooperators. After the Government-sponsored Gurdwara Bill was passed, the former began to argue amongst themselves that "there was no use remaining in jail anymore when the main gurdwara *mahants* had been ousted and the remaining ones would also have to go". Only the release conditions were an obstacle that barred the cooperators' way out of the jail.

However, these "obstacles" did not stand in the way of two of the pensioner-prisoners – Risaldar Sundar Singh and Risaldar Ranjod Singh. They accepted the conditions laid down by the Governor on 21 January, 1926 and were immediately released. Four days later, 20 more Akali leaders came forward under the leadership of Prof. Bawa Harkishan Singh who read a statement in the court, following which the Special Magistrate passed the following order:

"I view the undertaking to work out the new Gurdwara Act and not to take direct action in future which has been given by the accused mentioned below, in accordance with the speech of

H.E. Governor on 9 July, 1925 at the session of the Punjab Legislative Council in Simla. Mr. Bewan Petman, Crown Advocate, states that he has been instructed by the Government to withdraw the cases, with the permission of the court. The accused whose names are given below are accordingly acquitted under Section 494 of the Criminal Procedure Code and they are to be released forthwith.

Signed P.J. Anderson, Special Magistrate, dated 25 January, 1926*.

Thus, Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh, Bawa Harkishan Singh, Gyani Sher Singh, Headmaster Mehtab Singh, Sardar Gurbaksh Singh, Dan Singh Vachhon and others secured their release, leaving the rest in the jail and to fight on to secure the legitimate control of the gurdwaras.

Before these Akalis accepted the release conditions, Sardar Teja Singh Samundari, Master Tara Singh and others had repeatedly pleaded with them not to act in haste and wait for just two months more; by when the Government would have had to release everyone unconditionally because the *raison d'être* of the conspiracy was gone, and it would have been impossible for the Government to resist public pressure for long to release all the Akali leaders. That would have also saved the unity of the Akali movement and helped meet the situation on the eve of and after taking over the management of the gurdwaras. But Mehtab Singh and his colleagues refused to pay heed to such sane request and advice and despite entreaties to the contrary secured their immediate but conditional release, breaking the unity of the movement and starting quarrels amongst the Akali leaders.

Thus, Governor Hailey succeeded in his scheme to create dissensions in the Akali movement and putting the so-called moderates in control of the gurdwaras in the teeth of opposition by the majority of the Sikhs.

The conspiracy case continued against the remaining 16 of us in jail. But on 8 February, Teja Singh Chuharkana, despite our persuasions in general and Teja Singh Samundari's in particular, also passed out of the jail gates by the same process. Thus, only 15 Akali prisoners remained behind, all of whom refused to give any undertaking.

* For details see "History of the Akali Struggles" in Punjabi and Hindi by the author.

A few months later, the Fort Jail was closed and we prisoners were transferred to the Lahore Central Jail, where a spacious room was turned into a court-room and the trial continued with all the court paraphernalia as before. Sardar Teja Singh Samundari had begun to take greater interest in the case along with the defence lawyers. But on 17 July, 1926 he cross-examined some witnesses, came back to the jail, took off his clothes in order to change when suddenly he had an heart-attack and died a few minutes later. It was a big shock to all of us. On 18 July, his body was taken out of jail in a big procession.

The conspiracy case against us had lost all its validity by then. But the Government was continuing with it, perhaps expecting that a few more may follow Teja Singh Chuharkana and accept release conditions. But those of us still in jail were determined to see the case through, and face the consequences.

In pursuing the case, the Government had put itself in much ridicule. The pressure for our release was mounting and everywhere in Punjab resolutions were being passed calling for our release and condemning those who had accepted the release conditions and come out of jail. Teja Singh Chuharkana, sensing the atmosphere, began saying that he had blackened his face by accepting the conditional release and that he be pardoned for his crime.

At last the Hailey Government was compelled to withdraw the conspiracy case on 27 September, 1926 and release us unconditionally. The 14 who were thus released were Master Tara Singh, Sardar Bhag Singh Gurdaspur Vakil, Sardar Gurcharan Singh Vakil (of Sialkot), Sardar Gopal Singh Qaumi, Sardar Sarmukh Singh Chabbal, Sohan Singh Josh, Sardar Sewa Singh Thakasiwala, Babu Tript Singh Lyallpur, Sardar Teja Singh (Jathedar Akapuri), Sardar Santa Singh Sultanwind, Sardar Teja Singh Ghawind, Sardar Hari Singh Jullundhari, Sardar Rai Singh (Daljit Singh) and Sardar Hari Singh, editor of *Akali* daily.

The freed Akali leaders were given a hero's welcome by the SAD members. Huge processions were taken out to honour them and "zindabad" slogans rent the air in their honour. We made thundering speeches to boost the spirit of the Akali movement, and criticized those who had secured their release under humiliating conditions. All the released leaders again plunged themselves in the Akali movement.

I had made up my mind to part company with the Akali movement

and join the national mainstream. But Master Tara Singh did not want me to leave. He was president of the SGPC and told me that he had chosen me to be the president of the historical gurdwara Guru-Ka-Bagh.

I told him frankly that I was no longer interested in the Akali movement which had achieved its objective of freeing the gurdwaras from the British and their stooges, and that I wanted to devote my life now to the freedom struggle of the country. Master Tara Singh was not against my joining the national movement, but insisted that I must agree to become the president of the Gurdwara Guru-Ka-Bagh. I accepted the position on an honorary basis and renovated the gurdwara and erected walls all round the holy tank.

I would like to share with the reader an incident which shows the extent of caste prejudices then prevalent among the Jat Sikhs. The caste-hold has loosened somewhat, but it does exist even today.

Gyani Gurmukh Singh Musafir and I were asked to proceed to Sidhar in Ludhiana District, and address a meeting to persuade the people against following Mehtab Singh's and Gyani Sher Singh's group because they had lowered the Sikh prestige by giving an undertaking to the British Government to secure their release. Their group held complete sway in the area, and the Akali Party of Master Tara Singh and the SAD had no foothold there. When we reached Sidhar, the meeting was already in progress. We sat down among the congregation, while the Sardar Bahadur and Gyani group had captured the platform. They were virulently abusing the Akali Party to which we belonged, and the atmosphere was surcharged against us. There seemed no chance for us even edgewise.

Gyani Gurmukh Singh, a Khatri by caste—my caste being Sher Gill—hit upon an idea to get ourselves heard. We knew that the area was largely inhabited by Jats of the Gill caste. Spotting an old man sitting near us with a lathi by his side, Gyani Gurmukh Singh said to him: "It is very unfair. We have come here to exchange our views with our Gill caste brothers, and they are abusing us without listening to us. His trick worked. The old man stood up lathi in hand, and announced: "This public meeting will be dispersed if our visiting brothers are not allowed to speak. If the meeting is to proceed, we shall have to listen to them".

The result was that we were called to speak from the platform, and were heard without interruption. Later, the old man took us to his house and gave us a good feed.

I chided Musafir for having used my caste in an opportunist way to influence the old man. He replied: "That was the only way to have our say in that anti-Akali party atmosphere", and added laughingly: "Everything is fair in love and factional struggle!"

I never used caste after my name. Sikhism is against the caste system, yet it persists among the Sikhs. Most of them mention their caste after their personal names to show off their caste hierarchy.

The leadership thrown up by the Akali religious movement was honest, self-sacrificing and straightforward. Sardar Kharak Singh of Sialkot symbolised the fighting spirit, fearlessness and staunch anti-imperialism of the movement. He hated our slavery under the British rule and represented the anti-slavery and pro-freedom spirit of Sikhism. But the British rulers considered him their greatest enemy. But after his arrest, religiously motivated but pro-British Sikhs captured the Akali movement.

The leaders of the Akali movement then were educationally and politically backward, and were not well-versed in the art of strategy, tactics, diplomacy and manoeuvres. Besides, they had no experience of running a big movement. Hence they made many mistakes.

But their backwardness was due to no fault of theirs; it was deliberate policy of the British Government which was to blame. The Punjab Province was a bastion of the British army recruitment drive, and the Sikhs were a favoured community in this respect. They were, therefore, deliberately kept backward to prevent the army from getting influenced by the national freedom movement. Politics was almost made a taboo in Punjab. The educational institutions run by the Chief Khalsa Diwan were watched closely by the Government. These could freely teach British loyalty, but any talk of even Sikh unity or religious reform or making the Sikhs strong was considered sedition against the British rule. The Khalsa College, despite protests from progressive Sikhs, was fully controlled by British Principals and professors. The British rulers thought that the Sikhs still harked back on the old days of the Sikh Raj; and any revival of this sentiment did not augur well for them.

Mistakes are invariably made in any big religious, social or political movement. No leader, political or otherwise, can foresee all the twists and turns any movement may face ahead. Only stay-in intellectuals living in their own cuckoo-land or sitting pretty and aloof from any active movement may make no mistakes, and laugh and scorn at the leaders who do make mistakes.

The cooperators among the Akalis, who entered the movement with a religious motive alone, were not interested in the national freedom movement. They, of course, resented that the British rulers were interfering in their religious affairs and shielding the *mahants*. But they could not perceive the overall British concern against the movement to free the gurdwaras. Freedom of the gurdwaras would have meant an end to utilise the Sikh religion and the gurdwaras to strengthen the British *Raj*, and this, obviously, the Government did not want to concede. For them it was not merely the question of protecting the property of about 2,000-odd *mahants*; they had bigger stakes in keeping the gurdwaras in the *mahants*' (and by proxy in their own) hands. The puppet *mahants* had been very useful to them during the World War First and thereafter, as also earlier.

The Government had, therefore, resorted to repression against the Akali movement with the objective of putting it down, just as it had done earlier with the Kuka (Namdhari) movement. But the British had underestimated the awakening the world war and the Russian Revolution had brought about in Punjab, as elsewhere in India. The Sikh soldier in the battlefields in foreign lands had not only learnt to fight the enemy, but also become aware of the conditions in his own country. That was why thousands of retired army personnel had joined the Akali movement and a big *jatha* of them had congregated at the Gurdwara Guru-Ka-Bagh but got beaten up at the hands of Beati, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, and his gang.

The goal of the gurdwara reform movement was to secure the freedom of the Sikh religion and the gurdwaras. This was achieved by compelling the Government to concede the Gurdwara Bill; which was a big victory for the Akali movement although there were many shortcomings in the Bill. The victory, in a manner, created a Sikh religious state within the political state of Punjab with a budget of a few crores of rupees. Whether the funds were subsequently used properly, or were wasted, is a different matter and for the Sikhs to go into it. But the aim of the movement then was to use this money to remove illiteracy among the Sikh community. Alas! that aim remains unfulfilled even today.

The Akali movement was non-violent throughout. Mahatma Gandhi supported it in the beginning and congratulated the Akalis on their first victory in getting back the keys of the Golden Temple treasury, calling it "the first decisive victory of *swaraj*". Akali leaders

often consulted him in the course of their struggle, and the latter had sent one Mr. Panikkar, a scholar from Kerala, as his representative to watch the movement. But this gentleman misguided the Mahatma through his correspondence. Mahatma Gandhi was opposed to sending bigger *jathas* to break the law preventing Akalis from entering gurdwara lands. He called it coercion, not in keeping with the spirit of non-violence. He was therefore displeased when the Akali leaders began sending 500-strong *jathas* of Akalis to Gurdwara Jaito. The Akali leaders refused to accept his advice, and went on sending *jathas* of that strength, one after the other. Later, Mahatma Gandhi became indifferent towards the movement, not learning much from this big non-violent Akali movement.

Padre C.F. Andrews himself witnessed Akali Sikhs "largely from the army" being beaten by the police at Guru-Ka-Bagh. "They had served in many campaigns in Flanders in France, in Mesopotamia and in East Africa. Some of them at the risk of their own safety may have saved the lives of wounded Englishmen. Now, they were felled to the ground at the hands of English officials serving in the same Government which they themselves had served".

With a keen insight, he then observed: "There has been something far greater in this event than a mere dispute about land and property. It has gone far beyond the technical question of legal possession of distraint. A new heroism, learnt through sufferings, has risen in the land. A new lesson in moral warfare has been taught to the world".

In the introduction to my Punjabi book, *History of Akali Struggles*, I wrote:

"Sons and daughters of our new generation do not know anything about this glorious chapter in our history. These struggles were fought some 55 years ago, and had brought about a transformation in the Sikh community. At the end of the struggles, the Sikhs did not remain the same as before. The Akali struggles had converted them into patriotic fighters. They threw off the yoke of loyalty to the British and lined up on the side of the patriots fighting for the liberation of their country".

10. Bane of Fatalism in Indian Mind

MY bold statement in the Akali leaders' conspiracy case had impressed my colleagues and the people, and it became the subject matter of talk inside the jail as well as outside in Punjab. Gyani Partap Singh, author of the *History of Gurdwara Sudhar and Akali Lahar* (Punjabi) wrote that the statements of Sardar Gopal Singh Qaumi and Sohan Singh Josh "were fearlessly anti-imperialist, which were then much talked about" (p. 331) and discussed among Akali circles.

Later, I found out that my statement had also attracted the attention of Bhai Santokh Singh, leader of the Hindustan Gaddar Party who had started a Punjabi monthly magazine *Kirti* (worker) in February 1926. Through Bhai Bhag Singh Canadian he asked me to write articles for his magazine. I wrote two articles for the *Kirti*, one on "Martyrs" under my own name and the other, "Worker and Mullah" under the pen name of "Mian Rukan Din". Both these articles appeared in the December 1926 issue of the *Kirti*.

These articles reveal my understanding of issues and development of my ideas as in 1926. I have re-read these articles now. They are inspiring, but from the Marxist viewpoint are ideologically weak. However, certain points stressed in the articles still hold good. The ideology that gets expressed through them is individualistic, not socialistic.

In the article "Martyrs", I wrote: "Thousands of people come, eat and live their span of life and then depart. The world gains nothing by their coming, nor loses anything by their going. But a martyr's martyrdom brings changes; it makes the world more beautiful and loftier than before... A martyr's thinking is higher and goes beyond his age. His ideas are higher than those of the ordinary people... It is such martyrs who keep the flame of freedom burning and raise the civilisation to a higher level... It is he who has dragged us out of the pristine barbarian life..."

The second article assigned, in substance, three obligations a

worker should carry out. The original text reads:

1. "The workers should not accept blindly what the *mullah* or (any religious leader) says, without examining it on the touch stone of why and how. *Mullah's* God is very odd. He has no equality of justice in him. He is partisan, favours the rich and does injustice to the poor. He likes the rich to continue sitting on the shoulders of workers and the poor to remain beasts of burden. This God should be given the good-bye by us...To accept what the *mullah* says without questioning is the root cause of our slavery. Today, blind faith, past rituals, etc., have become *dharma*; to get oneself called a non-believer is, in my opinion, a sign of respect. And I have been accepting those non-believers as my friends who have been on warpath against blind faith or outworn old values and want to make the world more beautiful and forward-looking than at present. It is such non-believers who have brought about whatever progress is there in the world, after having undergone long sufferings. Such non-believers are the people who bring salvation to a nation or a country. I respect such people and congratulate them for possessing independent views. Progress does not come through suppressing views, but through clash of opposite ideas.

"The selling and buying of slaves was a general practice in Greece and Rome, and this obnoxious practice ended in America only in the nineteenth century. The religious leaders of those places used to say: There can be no better social system than this. But those who had the perspective of a brighter future and were born to bring to earth the ideal of *Swaraja* could not be befogged by them. They spoke with thunderous voices: 'A better social system than this can be brought into being and this can be done only if slavery is abolished and selling of people like cattle is ended. For, a man has no right to buy another human being and make him slave forever under duress. Every person has equal rights. Slavery, therefore, must shut shop'.

"These brave people were stigmatised as being 'irreligious' and 'mad caps'. Prices were put for their heads. Many were hanged and many murdered. But those brave souls firmly stood their ground. At long last, the truth of what they were saying

was accepted by the world, and the outworn carpet of slavery was rolled off from the stage of the world. If they had taken fright, the world would have remained ugly, full of ills and bad practices. But because of the steadfastness of these 'infidels', the world got rid of the curse of slavery, and this world, in comparison with that (old) world, has become beautiful and worthy to live in.

"1, therefore, think that the power of the *mullah* must be broken. He is an agent of the rich man, preaches slavery and blind faith.

"2. The second obligation of workers must be that the old philosophy—'God ordained our fate, this is written in our destiny, this is the fruit of our *Karma*—must be given up. They should learn a new philosophy, that is to say, every man is the architect of his own fate. If he wills, he can make his destiny beautiful, and if he wills he can also mar his destiny. Many inherent powers are dormant in him, which have never come into use. Those powers must be awakened and brought into play; then only victory will kiss your feet. Victory will come where a genuine effort is made. You have to cut off your chains yourself. Nobody will come from above to bring freedom to you. Audacity is success and success is audacity.

"3. The third obligation of the workers must be to organise themselves. No progress is possible without organisation. The workers have to bring about a revolution in social ideas and have to do away with many rituals and anachronistic ideas. This can happen only if everybody embeds it firmly in his mind that he has to stand on his own legs and throw off his back the burden of slavery. But the primary rule of workers' organisation is that it should be above any colour, race or sect; that is to say, it will be the organisation of all workers belonging to any race, colour or sect... Enquiry will be the first principle of this organisation."

In the situation then prevailing, it was necessary to fight against rigid religiosity and against the preachers of fatalism. We wanted the people to accept religion critically, and lessen the hold of religious bigotry on the minds of the working people to prepare the ground for

a workers' organisation. The general conception ingrained in the minds of the people then was that Guru Gobind Singh, Krishna or Imam Mehdi would come down from above and deliver India from the shackles of slavery! Such passive fatalism had to be dealt many blows to bring workers of all faiths, colours, races and regions together and to enthuse them to have the correct perspective of their own collective strength.

But I must admit that I was still very far from being knowledgeable in the theory and practice of Marxism, of the Marxist principles of organisation, and betrayed individualism as the two articles reveal.

However, my articles were liked by Bhai Santokh Singh, who was then on his sick-bed. Through Bhai Bhag Singh Canadian again, he contacted and persuaded me to join the *Kirti* as its editor-in-charge.

I accepted the offer, and joined the *Kirti* on 21 January, 1927.

Though I was now denouncing fatalism, it was still a hard struggle to eradicate its roots from my mind. The whole Indian milieu was surcharged with fatalism, much more than it is today. The unquestioned accepted philosophy was "Nothing happens without God's will; not even a leaf can flap without His order". The general mass of people refuted us when we said: Man can do anything he likes provided he is class conscious and well organised.

I had read a small pamphlet written by a Marxist on philosophy, the title of which I have forgotten. It said something like this: You should struggle to organise the peasantry; you should struggle to achieve their demands. It is the class struggle that ultimately decides the fate of your movement.... The word struggle, struggle, struggle in the pamphlet baffled me for some time. But on analysis I found that my bafflement was due to the roots of fatalism still ingrained in my mind. I realised that we had to defeat the philosophy of fatalism in the mind of the Indian masses by launching mass struggles of the workers and peasants, getting their short-term demands accepted by the authorities and patiently convincing them that through their organised strength and struggles alone could they remove most of the disabilities they are suffering from.

11. The *Kirti* Phase

ALTHOUGH I had joined the *Kirti* staff on 21 January, 1927 as its editor-in-charge, my name did not appear as such in the paper. The practice in those days of British suppression of civil liberties was to have dummy editors. It was through this practice that the *Akali* daily, despite losing two or three of its good editors, had succeeded in winning the right of the freedom of the press in Punjab, built a big public opinion at a time when the national freedom movement had been suspended after the Chauri-Chaura incident, defeated British machinations time and again and wrested back for the sikhs their religious shrines from the control of the stooges and the benchmen of the alien rulers. The Punjabi press had to adopt such subterfuge because there was a dearth of good, intelligent editors, and because the government was sending one editor after another to jail under section 124 A (sedition) or the criminal law amendment act.

The *Kirti* was the organ of the Hindustan Ghadar Party which had turned its policies towards Marxism after the defeat of the 1914-15 armed struggle. I did not know much of Marxist theory: I knew only what I had read and learnt from the *Liberty and the Great Liberations*, which also contained some excerpts from the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Hence, whatever I knew was eclectic, anarchistic and communistic all mixed together and unsystematic. My thoughts had not been properly oriented, yet I must admit that the book had laid a basis for my leaning towards Marxism.

The Bolsheviks and Bolshevism was much talked of during the Akali movement; however, words like communists and communism were almost unknown. At times the Akali leaders were being dubbed as "Bolsheviks" in order to denigrate or slander them in the eyes of the newspaper-reading intelligentsia. The British propaganda machine had turned the world Bolshevik synonymous with the "worst enemy of established society"! And the Bolsheviks were being slandered day in and day out, as satan incarnates. But we had by then learnt to read an opposite meaning to whatever the Government offi-

cials said. Our own view of the Bolsheviks was of good and bold people who had dethroned the Czar and established the rule of the proletariat. The British propaganda against Bolshevism, therefore, did not carry much weight with us.

Com. Santokh Singh was in bed with T.B. in the Sikh Missionary Hall, Amritsar when I took over the charge of *Kirti*. He was under the treatment of Dr. Chunilal Bhatia who had strictly instructed the *Kirti* staff not to disturb him in any manner. Com. Bhag Singh was not in a position to guide me, politically speaking, in what I wrote. With the only man who could guide me on his death-bed, I had to be my own guide.

The *Kirti* library had a few pamphlets published by the Labour Research Department of the British Labour Party and some on American labour. There was no book on Marxism or by Marx. Everything on Marxism was banned in India by the British Government, and anyone in possession of a book on communism or writings of Marx or Lenin was liable to be prosecuted. Even moderate books written by Lala Lajpat Rai like *Young India*, or Dr. Sunder's *India in Bondage* and others were proscribed. The Government had imposed a kind of strict "thought control" in Punjab because the province was a preserve of British imperialism's cannon-fodder recruitment. I, therefore, hungrily read whatever I could lay my hand-on on these subjects.

I was writing as I pleased, because there was nobody to check up what I wrote, and nobody to discuss with what to write. My writings were progressive and leftist no doubt, but, strictly speaking, not Marxist.

About three months after I had joined *Kirti*, Bhag Singh asked me to meet Com. Santokh Singh in the Sikh Missionary Hall. I found him very pale and emaciated; and there was a tremour in his voice. Actually, he was languishing and dying bit by bit. I felt very sad and sorrowful for him. The only thing he said to me in his low, tremulous voice was: "You are writing very hot stuff; go cautiously".

I came back to *Kirti* office and began to go through all that I had written during the past two months. I found that in an editorial in the February 1927 issue, I had written that "the goal of the *Kirti* is neither home rule nor Swaraj. It's goal is to establish complete independence and a workers' Government". And, at the end of the same piece I had given a call to the Punjabi poets to write poems for the poetic symposium of the *Kirti*, the theme of which was: "Some day

there will be Kirti Raj here”!

I could not understand what Com. Santokh Singh meant when he asked me to “go cautiously”. I thought he was not up to date with regard to the real situation in Punjab. The Akali movement had won civil liberties after many struggles and sacrifices and we could write anything we wanted to, albeit circumspectly. But now I think, I was wrong; he knew the nature and character of the movement and wanted to avoid any premature hazards it contained. He had the experience of the Gaddar Party’s armed struggle which had been started prematurely, without proper preparation and thorough assessment of the Indian situation and organisations. “Go cautiously” could only mean “patiently organise the workers and peasants to fight their struggles, tell them who their friends were and who their enemies; and, perhaps, do not indulge in bombastic slogans”.

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Under the heading: “Why did Kirti appear?” Comrade Santokh Singh in an editorial note on page 10 of the first issue had said that the *charkha* and *khadi* were not the panacea for *Swaraj*. Mahatma Gandhi could not win *Swaraj* within a year as he had claimed to. The *khadi* has not harmed the British capitalists, nor did it overawe them in any way. He had declared in clear terms:

“The call of the Kirti is this that Hindustan will have to pay for its freedom the same price as history proves other countries have paid for their freedom, and as a free country has always to pay for the preservation of its freedom.

“After the end of the World War I in 1918, the Indian writers have propagated the idea that the good or ill of India has nothing to do with the good or ill of the world... The stand of the Kirti is that we have to learn from the sacrifices of the lovers and martyrs of freedom, irrespective of the country to which they belong. We are a colonial country, we should not see the oppressed peoples of the world with the same coloured spectacles as the oppressors do. The world has become very small. The day is not far off when the Chinese and the Siamese (now Thailand) on a holiday, for an after-noon excursion will fly to Chandni Chowk in Delhi and back home. If Hindustan’s tongas and the Chinese and Japanese human-propelled rickshaws have not been able to prevent railway trains coming here (in India) from Europe, how in the future will India build an iron

wall around her to keep herself aloof from Europe, America and the rest of the world? The programme of our freedom should be based not only on the conditions – social, economic and political – prevailing in India, but also take into consideration the situation prevailing in the world. The condition of the Indian working class is so bad that it beggars description. In the current situation no country can come into its own unless its working class is able to stand on its own feet. In the past, when the reins of the world were passing from the hands of the feudal lords to those of the capitalists, though the burden of sacrifices fell upon the working people, the programme of the salvation of the very working class had little weight in the programme of the freedom struggle. But at present, it is crystal clear that the reins of the world are coming into the hands of the working class. And the most powerful ruling classes consider it an accretion to their power to give a place to the demands of the working class in their national programmes. The Kirti will raise its voice for their rights, and place their (past) history before them.

“It was to be expected that the national aims of the Indian workers living in Canada and America would be slandered by the alien bureaucracy through misrepresentations and falsehoods, but what about our national leaders? They also have either misrepresented it, or have prevented it from being presented before the people in a helpful way. Now and then mention of the sacrifices of friends in Canada and America had been made, but with such restraint or circumspection that these in no way had encouraged their idealism. And how many times have misunderstandings been created about their work! Not only that, even the difficulties and sufferings they had to undergo for the country’s cause have not been placed before the nation. Nor has any time or energy been devoted to know about their history. Even if a little regard had been shown to these workers and their sacrifices in foreign countries, at least some efforts should have been made to lessen their sufferings.

“The Kirti will throw some light on this forgotten page of history, and for the appreciation of these services by the nation, the Kirti will perform its duty more enthusiastically”. Com. Santokh Singh’s mission in starting *Kirti*, in my opinion, was three-fold: To fight against British imperialism for complete national independence and expose its colonial policies to keep India under its yoke, to keep an eye on international developments and make contacts with other imperialist countries to strengthen our national freedom struggle; To present

tenets and principles of communism in a simple and cautious manner in order to create conditions for building up working people's organisations and prepare them to fight both their national and class struggles; and to fight the slanders hurled from time to time by the British bureaucracy and henchmen against the Gaddar Party and its leaders, to explain and publicise the unprecedented sacrifices they had made for the country and inspire the youth by shedding light on their contribution to the freedom struggle".

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Comrade Santokh Singh passed away on 19 May, 1927 which was followed by the incognito visit to India by Com. Rattan Singh Dabha sometime in June the same year. Government reports do mention of his arrival in India and his meeting in Calcutta with Dr. Bhupendra Nath Dutt. But the CID hounds could not trace his whereabouts at any time, such was his art of travelling incognito and remaining underground.

It was the end of June 1927 when Bhag Singh, my companion in the *Kirti*, told me that an outlawed revolutionary had been put up with Nahar Singh, an Akali leader of Fatehgarh Sukarchakian in Amritsar district for a fortnight or so, and that he could no longer be kept there any more because of the fear of his being tracked down. He asked me if I could make some arrangements for Rattan Singh's stay. I thought over the matter and told Bhag Singh that I could. I made arrangements for Rattan Singh to stay at Gurdwara Guru-Ka-Bagh as long as he wanted, and told the manager of the gurdwara that the newcomer would be another *sewadar* who would be looking after the *langar* (cooking arrangements).

Com. Rattan Singh was a smart, short-statured peasant of Raipur, Doaba of Jullundur district. He mixed up so unobtrusively with the people that nobody could suspect him of being a revolutionary. He wore very ordinary clothes—a *khaddar* kurta and chaddar, an old turban and ordinary shoes. He had simple habits and showed no trace of any European style of life. He could also quickly adapt to any situation.

Com. Rattan Singh remained in the gurdwara for about a month. It seems that he came to know about my antecedents from the gurdwara manager and the accountant and was impressed by my anti-imperialist, freedom-loving views as the editor of *Kirti* as later

events showed.

We had fixed up a meeting of the *Kirti* management at Amritsar in the last week of July, and asked Rattan Singh to attend it. When he reached the Raja Sansi Canal bridge, it was very early in the morning. The Thikri Pahiya police was guarding the bridge. The police picket stopped Rattan Singh and began to question him. Without losing his nerve, Rattan Singh calmly told them that he was a *sewadar* at the Gurdwara Guru-Ka-Bagh and that he had been sent by the manager of the gurdwara to deliver an urgent message to the SGPC. That was why he had started early and that the truth of the fact could be verified from the gurdwara itself. The SGPC enjoyed great prestige in those days and to arrest its messenger would be inviting trouble. The policemen let him off with the warning never to travel so early again!

We were flabbergasted, and thanked our stars when he told us the story of his encounter and escape. A great calamity had been averted, else I would have been in for trouble.

We held our meeting in a big house in Ram Bagh, half the portion of which was occupied by a police officer. That was the safest place for such a meeting. Only three of us – Bhag Singh, Rattan Singh and myself – were present, while Comrade Karam Singh Cheema guarded the house. I briefed Rattan Singh on the situation in the country, the progress made in the circulation of the *Kirti* and the political line we were following. Comrade Bhag Singh told him about the breakdown in Comrade Santokh Singh's health, his contracting T.B. and the subsequent premature death, which was a big blow to the infant revolutionary movement. Bhag Singh also told him about the talks he had had with Santokh Singh before his death.

I placed before him our future plans. We were soon to prepare the ground to organise the workers, peasants and the youth in Punjab. I told him about the visit of Shapurji Saklatvala to India and the general effect it had on the Indian situation, and added that his visit had helped our movement to a certain extent.

Comrade Rattan Singh expressed his satisfaction over our work and assured us that *Kirti* would not suffer from paucity of funds. He told Bhag Singh that from then onwards I would be the managing-director of the *Kirti* monthly along with him.

Next day he took leave of us and vanished.

Com. Rattan Singh had safely reached Kabul on his way back. His letters to us began to reach us sometimes signed "Ishar Singh",

sometimes "Mitha Singh". He had many aliases, and was gifted with great persuasive powers. It seems he had spoken very highly of my political activities to our friends in Kabul, because Baba Gurmukh Singh, Chanan Singh and Vasudev Singh wrote very warm letters to us which were published in the September and October issues of *Kirti* in 1927.

In the September issue, our friends in Kabul wrote a long letter under the headline: "The second manager of the *Kirti*":

"...After his (Bhai Santokh Singh's) death, an able person having a sterling heart for workers like him was required to fill up the vacancy....The readers and sympathisers of the *Kirti* will rejoice to hear that Bhai Sohan Singhji Josh of Chetanpura has taken the place of the Bhai Sahib... Sohan Singh's articles...(were) published in the *Kirti* in the time of Bhai Santokh Singh, from which his views can be gauged...Sufficient to write this much about him...he is the only suitable person in Punjab to replace him (Santokh Singh). He had patriotism and a feeling heart for the workers from the beginning, and had been to jail several times in this connection. And he is one of the self-respecting leaders who did not accept (government's) conditions... Henceforth, Bhai Bhag Singh Canadian and Bhai Sohan Singh Josh will be the managers of the *Kirti*."

In the same issue, I thanked the comrades who had reposed their confidence in me. Their estimation about my qualities was highly exaggerated. There were a large number of people who were "superior to me in education, in intellect, in (making) sacrifices". I wrote "... This responsibility is very grave...Shall I be able to win the confidence of local and foreign brethren?... One thing which encourages me and persuades me to shoulder the responsibility is that the brethren who have selected me will certainly extend a helping hand to me and continue to make me take to the right path by pointing out my mistakes".

*

Anyone going through the files of the *Kirti* of the years 1927, 1928 and 1929 (upto March) may not be able to locate the articles written by me, excepting the ones under my own name, I wrote articles under two other pen-names—Mian Rukan Din and the Sutantar Singh, B.A. Besides I also wrote leading and other articles and monthly notes anonymously. I did not want that everything I wrote should go

under my name; that would have made the journal monotonous, unattractive and uninteresting. I adopted the usual journalistic trick of writing articles under various names, and I think the trick did work to some extent.

Looking back, I think that my writings then were loosely worded and imprecise from the Marxist viewpoint. I had not studied Marxism, yet always felt that I was marching on the right track and making great efforts to understand Marxism. One point in a small pamphlet had impressed me deeply.

The author of the pamphlet had asked the worker: "Workers, do you know that you are a worker only below the nose; above it, your head is not a workers' head, but a bourgeois' head stuffed with bourgeois ideology? Unless you cleanse your head of the enemy ideology you cannot successfully fight for your class interest. You must throw out that bourgeois filth from your head and acquire class ideology. Only then will you be able to fight for your class interests".

From this I had understood that nothing should be accepted on trust. Every old idea must be questioned and, if found wanting should be discarded. We should be able to retain the good ideas and discard the outworn ones; that is to say, we must adopt a scientific attitude of mind towards our past heritage. This is more true with religious ideas, because nothing is static in the world. Change is the law of the nature and the society; as the socio-economic situation changes, so do ideas change.

I had given up thinking dogmatically like the religious fanatic and had become quite receptive to new ideas. I had begun to look into religion critically. This attitudinal change served me well and the way was cleared for me to proceed ahead on the road towards Marxism.

The first issue of *Kirti* had come out with Sikh religious ritual. A *shabad* from Sikh scripture had appeared below the title of the issue, and on the top was a quotation from *Guru Granth Sahib* "We shall fulfil our task with our own hands". I felt that this was not only odd but also wrong. Why this bias in favour of the Sikh religion? *Kirti* though published in *Gurmukhi* characters, was not a paper for the Sikh workers alone. It was a paper fighting for the interests of all workers, irrespective of their religious beliefs, or even if they were non-believers. Such Sikh rituals in *Kirti* could create prejudice in the minds of believers of other religions, or the non-believers. In the situation of great communal tension prevailing in Punjab then, it was wrong, in my opinion, to start the paper in that manner.

The first thing I did after I became its editor was to reproduce at the top of the title page of the February 1927 issue the famous words of Karl Marx (quoted at the end of the Manifesto of the Communist Party): "Proletarians of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!" But carelessly, I left out the words "they have world to gain".

And the last words were printed in bold letters "Working men of all countries, unite!" Then onwards, this became the recurring slogan of *Kirti*.

However, the other quotation: "We shall fulfil our tasks with our own hands" remained there in some more issues. There was nothing wrong in it politically, except the religious tinge of its origin. It was subsequently replaced in the May 1927 issue by the words, "Arise, awake, ye workers of the world, and unite!"

Now, there remained the picture on the title page. It showed a dead, or a killed, worker lying on the ground in a coffin, with *Kirti* garlanding it. In the background was a factory with a smoking chimney and a logo of two ploughs and a yoke. The picture neither enthused nor said much. I personally did not like its idea and had discussed with Bhag Singh either to drop or replace it.

In Moscow, Gaddar Party men studying Marxism had also sharply reacted against the illustration. They suggested a replacement, depicting two workers with chains on their feet facing each other. One was supposed to be a factory worker holding a hammer on his left shoulder and the other an agricultural worker with a sickle in his left hand, both shaking hands. Harjan Singh* takes the credit for suggesting the portrait for the title page of *Kirti*.

This was a political portrait which suggested the unity of the factory workers and the farm workers for breaking the chains of slavery. In the background was a globe with factories on one half and green fields on the other. It was topped off with a fluttering red flag with hammer and sickle. This illustration began appearing from October 1927 issue of the *Kirti*.

As far as I know this was the first time in the history of the working class movement in India, that the red flag with embossed hammer and sickle had appeared on the scene. Much later, it became the flag of the working class party and the Kisan Sabha.

Arjan Singh Gargaj in his autobiography has said it is true that ...

* Harjan Singh's life by Gyani Harkewal Singh, p. 28.

since Sohan Singh Josh had taken over the charge of the managing editorship of the *Kirti* the propaganda of scientific socialism had started more and more..."

Then on the same page of the autobiography (Page 100) he wrote: "But truth cannot be denied that the *Kirti* began to be sought after by Hindu-Muslim circles only after S. Sohan Singh Josh took over its charge".



Kirti, with its growing influence, could not but attract the attention of the British Government. Coatman, Director of Public Information, wrote in *India*, an annual publication of the Government of India:

"The openly confessed intentions of the Soviet to capture and direct to its own ends the indigenous revolutionary movement in India continue to be translated into action in Bengal and elsewhere. A new feature has been the alliance of the Soviet with (the) disaffected Sikhs in America and in China. These latter intrigues have already accounted for the appearance in Amritsar of a monthly Gurmukhi magazine entitled the *Kirti* (worker)" (p. 290).

Coatman had also talked about "Moscow agents" and "financial help" in the section on "Communism in India". I could not allow it to go unchallenged, and wrote a long editorial in the *Kirti's* June 1928 issue.

"We are happy to note that mention has been made of the services of the *Kirti* in the Government annual report – India. We thank our stars that we have been taken into some account by Mr. Coatman who was one time a C.I.D. officer in Punjab and took great interest in Punjab affairs.

"We want to make it known that we have no direct or indirect connection with Soviet Russia, nor do we get any monetary or other help from her. You can take it as our misfortune or fortune, but we can say this with emphasis that most of our principles are akin to Bolshevik Russia. They have solved the food problem and we want to follow them. They want to put an end to wars, and we also want to do so. They have ended the unplanned distribution of wealth and we also want to bring equitable distribution of wealth in India. They have liquidated capitalism and our main objective is also the same. We believe that so long as capitalism is not brought to an end, ... the poor workers and peasants of the world would continue making ef-

forts to free themselves from the yoke of the capitalists. The Bolshevik Russia having established the workers' rule, has given a call to the poor people of the world that they can also succeed like her, after building a strong militant organisation and can secure all things that go to make life happy. It is but natural that such views will get hold of our people's mind. It is unthinkable that to win such freedom people will hesitate to make any sacrifices like Soviet Russia...

"The Government has charged us (with) having contacts or connections with the Soviet Union. We challenge the Government to prove that...by starting a case against us. Otherwise, the public will understand that false propoganda is being made by the Government to defame the Kirti. Our main objective should be understood clearly..., the Government considers any contact or connection by any organisation dangerous to its existence because the British Government considers Russia dangerous to its (own) existence. But we like the activities of Russia and therefore do not think it improper to have contacts or connections with Russia. We only say this that we have not so far had any contacts with Russia. And even if we desire to make contacts with Russia, we will not be able to do so because our post is censored and the CID hounds do not allow us to rest even for a while.

"We are honoured by the Government for having given us the title of 'malcontents'. Not because we have secured a title of a 'rai sahib' or 'khan bahadur' by committing treachery to the country, but we have received this title by doing service to the country, day and night. We do not know anything about the Sikhs in China and America. We have told you what we know about ourselves. We are of the opinion that India in general, and Sikhs in particular, should be proud of having produced from amongst them such men who consider it their duty to attain independence, and nothing less than independence. They keep aloof from religious and communal quarrels. This movement is really dangerous for this government. Any people, therefore, who participate in this movement, are really 'malcontents'. In our view India can never win freedom unless every adult of India becomes a 'malcontent'.

"Some of our sympathisers are giving us the advice that we should launch a case in a court of law against the secretary of state to get a verdict against what has been written in the government report, because it has given a very big blow to our dignity and prestige, and that we should therefore sue for damages from the Government. But we

are sorry that we cannot accept their advice because we do not want to prove our loyalty by going to a British court of law as loyalists. We want to remain what we are. Let the government launch the case against us if it feels necessary. Otherwise, what is the use of creating such a hullabaloo?

“This and such other propoganda that is being done against us, overtly or covertly, goes to show that some danger is going to arise for us; some black cloud is in the offing that will not go without bursting”. (*Kirti* editorial, June 1928).



The publication of *Kirti* in Punjabi from February 1926 was the harbinger of a new epoch. It brought a new ideology in the political life of Punjab. The working people, a non-issue so far, became the central issue. The Marxist ideology was yet unclear to the people, but the road taken by some of us was the right one. More and more young people, fed up with communal bloodshed, began to accept it, and welcomed it openly.

This new ideology, launched an offensive against the old, out-moded and obscurantist belief of status quoism of fatalism. This, somewhat, loosened the dead hand of the past. The ice was broken, new ideas began to take root, and Punjabi poets came forward, though haltingly, to express their new ideas in different poetic metres.

Many prominent Punjabi poets of that time began to write poems for *Kirti*. Gyani Hira Singh Dard, Avtar Singh Azad, Comrade Arjan Singh Gargaj, Vidhata Singh Tir, Gyani Gurmukh Singh Musafir, Lakha Singh Jauhar, Babu Feroze-Din Sharaf and many others wrote poems for the journal. Through their poems they depicted the miserable condition of the workers and the peasants of Punjab. The main edge of their writings was against the capitalists, and capitalism.

Gyani Gurmukh Singh Musafir's poem “There will be workers' raj here one day” was once adjudged the best, and won a prize. The point he made was that if time takes its normal course according to its own laws, then there would come the workers' raj in India one day. Many others had written poems on this theme, all of which were published in the issues of *Kirti*.

Hira Singh Dard, former editor of the daily *Akali* and a well-known poet and freedom-fighter, joined the *Kirti* movement and

remained with us throughout his life. Avtar Singh Azad wrote very good poems on the living conditions of Punjab workers. It was he who on my request wrote a poem based on the Red Flag song by Connell. Introducing the poem I wrote that it should be learnt by heart by everyone and recited at public meetings. It is a longish poem, whose refrain is:

*We shall unfurl the Red Flag
in the West, East, North and South;
We will sing its songs
while mounting the scaffold of the gallows.
It is the shroud of our bodies, its
glory is very very high,
Its colour enkindles our blood
wonderful in its unfurling.
Its flare is brighter than that of
lakhs of suns and moons,
When it flies flapping, it infuses great courage.
Our life and death lie embodied in it,
We shall raise it ever,
By freedom we swear that we shall
unfurl the Red Flag the World over!*

(*Kirti*, August 1928)

Lakha Singh Jauhar wrote:

*"When will the blood-coloured Red Flag be seen fluttering on the
peak of the Himalayas? When will my class rule India and the
whole world?
When shall I see workers' rule over the world?
This is the only longing in my heart, O Jauhar!"*

Most current topics formed the subject matter of the poets. Said one: The working people of Russia have captured power, and the workers of China are looking forward to it. Said another: If the railways and workshops stop work today, the capitalists will fall prostrate at the feet of the workers.

Still another wrote: The sword of oppression will break and fall down from the hands of the capitalists. The day is not far off when those who make us weep, will weep themselves.

Most of us were just learning the A,B,C of Marxism! Poets like us had many illusions; they had illusions about the British Labour Party Government in Britain, not knowing that it was in no way different from the conservative or the liberal government; that all served the interests of British monopoly capital more or less in the same way. Some poets even expressed anarchist views in their poems. But it must be said that despite these shortcomings and weaknesses the new ideology did cause a stir among the young men.

12. Kirti Kisan Party

THE *Kirti* was not only a propaganda paper; it was also a mobiliser and organiser. In fact, the main purpose in starting the magazine was to organize the workers and the peasants around their immediate demands, make them conscious of their ultimate goal and launch their struggles for better living conditions. Organisation and class struggle were the main weapons which could improve their lot.

In the September 1927 issue of *Kirti*, we had informed the readers that a Kirti Kisan Conference was to be held at Hoshiarpur on 6-7 October and that the conference would discuss the problems of the working people under the presidentship of Sohan Singh Josh. The dates of the conference coincided with the conference of the Sikh League presided over by Kharak Singh, and was well attended. It was my first step towards organisational work.

In my address to the conference, I spoke at great length about the starving and famished conditions of the working masses, especially the peasant masses, and substantiated my points with statistics from M.L. Darling. A few Akali leaders immediately came forward to lend a helping hand in my organisational work. The new organisation was to establish close links with the Indian National Congress. The main task, at that time, was to create a stable organisation of the workers and peasants.

The conference adopted the following resolution:

1. For India's national freedom a strong party of workers and peasants should be formed whose aim would be to achieve the freedom.
2. Branches of the party should be organised in every district.
3. The party should support the Chinese liberation struggle and the Russian revolution.
4. Small-size holdings should be exempted from revenue by the government.
5. Eight-hour day should be fixed for the factory workers.

6. The conference expressed its sympathy and solidarity with the Cawnpore (now Kanpur) mill workers who were on strike.

During the conference, I received a cable from the League Against Imperialism, Berlin, saying: "The League Against Imperialism sends you hearty greetings on organising the Kirti Conference and hopes that workers' and peasants' parties will be organised and affiliated to the League and thus complete freedom will be gained through the united joint efforts of the oppressed people and classes. Send report of your decisions by cable – Gibarlic Andolia, Berlin".

The cable boosted our morale, and the man behind the cable was none else than Rattan Singh!

Those who participated in the conference were mostly peasants from Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts. A sprinkling of urban leaders were there too. Most of those who participated were Congressmen and Sikh Leaguers. It was definitely not a class-oriented conference, but the good thing was that a beginning had been made.

The organisation came into being on 12 April, 1928. Under the signatures of Bhai Bhag Singh and myself, a notice was issued inviting about 60 political workers and leaders to meet in Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar on that day to organise the Kirti and Kisan Party. The meeting was attended, among others, by M.A. Majid, Gopal Singh Qaumi, Kidarnath Sehgal, Ram Chandra, B.A., Master Kabul Singh, Feroz-Din Mansur and Dr. Satyapal. It was a representative meeting in which workers from the North-West Frontier Province and central districts of Punjab participated.

I explained the objectives for calling the meeting. It was necessary, I said, that the workers and peasants should be organised to strengthen the national freedom movement. After some discussions, the meeting unanimously adopted a resolution saying that the workers and peasants be organised, the main object being to organise the working masses. Those present at the meeting were considered the founder-members of the party. I was elected the general-secretary and Comrade M.A. Majid of Lahore was elected the joint secretary. (*Urdu Kirti* May 1928 p. 66).

A sub-committee of five, consisting of Sehgal, Majid, Gopal Singh Qaumi, Hira Singh Dard and myself, was appointed to frame the party's rules and regulations. The sub-committee finalised the constitution of the Kirti Kisan Party in August 1928. The aims and ob-

jects of the party were:

1. To secure complete independence from British imperialism by every possible means, to liberate the workers and the peasants from every kind of political, economic and social slavery and to establish a United Socialist Republic; and
2. To organise workers and peasants.*



The second conference of the Kirti Kisan Party was held in Lyallpur City on 28-29 September, 1928. On these very dates, two other conferences were held at the same venue, just a few hundred yards away from each other.

The Zamindara League conference was convened by Choudhari Chhotu Ram to expose the trading class (*baniyas*) who looted the peasants through malpractices and compound interest charged on the loans. The League stood for the interests of the landlords and the "kulaks"; the Choudhari used the word *zamindar* to cover the entire peasantry, including the poor and the middle peasantry.

The Provincial Congress Committee was also holding its conference to defend the interests of the corrupt *baniyas* and put forward its own political programme.

We wanted to wean away the poor and the middle peasantry from the influence of the Zamindara League and expose the pro-landlord politics of Choudhary Chhotu Ram, who had become popular among all sections of the landowning people by his criticism of the various methods of exploitation, loot and despoliation resorted to by the *baniyas*. Our strong point was that we were against landlordism, and wanted their lands to be distributed among the landless and the poor peasantry. The weakness of the Provincial Congress was that it was also pro-landlord; hence its defence of *bania* interests could not cut much ice with the peasantry as a whole.

In my statement before sessions judge R.K. York in the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case, I had stated:

"We deliberately held the second workers' and peasants' conference at Lyallpur because the influence of the Zamindara League was very strong there, and the peasants of that district were completely under the control of the big landlords and *sahukars*. Our object in holding the conference there was to free the peasants from the

* Meerut Documents, Page 344/T.

leadership of the landlords and to expose the Zamindara League in its true colours...As the general-secretary of the party, I can claim that we did succeed to a great degree at our conference”.

The Punjab Provincial Congress was very cross with us—the workers of the Kirti Kisan Party—because we had been criticising the pro-landlord policy of the Congress too. We were also emphasising the fact that “the non-cooperation movement had failed because the Congress had betrayed the peasants by passing the new famous Bardoli resolution, taking sides with the landlords and *zamindars*”.

Our criticism enraged the Congress leaders. In Lyallpur we requested the congress leaders to allow us to utilise their *pandal* for a few hours, but they refused point blank. “We were, therefore, forced to hold our conference in the open. The result was that after a short time of the start of the conference, the Congress *pandal* became empty because the peasants left that conference and flocked to us. The Congress leaders became very furious with us over this” (quotes from my statement in R.K. York’s court).

As the general-secretary of the party, I read the messages and explained that Comrade S.A. Dange, the president-elect, and Comrades Ghate, Mirajkar and Nimbker could not attend the conference because they were conducting the strike of the Bombay mill workers. I had also sent invitations to Muzaffar Ahmed and Phillip Spratt of Calcutta, but they too could not come due to their prior engagements. Some Punjabis of Calcutta, who were members of the Kirti Kisan Party, however, attended the conference.

The important issues discussed at the conference and the resolutions passed were: (a) Impending imperialist war, its opposition by the workers and peasants and refusal to assist war efforts; (b) Motilal Nehru report demanding Dominion status for India; (c) the Trade Disputes Bill and our condemnation of it; and (d) Fight for securing legal right to keep arms. There was one resolution praising the patriotism of the martyrs who had sacrificed their lives in the fight for India’s freedom.

The most topical issue of the day was the report of Pandit Motilal Nehru on the constitutional demand for Dominion status for India. The discussion on the subject was very lively and acrimonious. The conference could not stomach the half-way-house goal of a Dominion status. There were sharp attacks on the report, and the conference would not accept nothing short of complete independence as the goal. Those attending the conference expressed their readiness to

fight for complete independence and the willingness to make any sacrifice to achieve it. The demand for Dominion status for India put forward by the Motilal Nehru Committee virtually confirmed the thesis of the Kirti Kisan Party leaders that the Indian bourgeoisie was ready to compromise with the British imperialists for something short of complete independence.

Local issues also found proper concern and emphasis at the conference. The workers and peasants were called upon to organise and solve their problems like *begaar* (forced labour), lack of irrigation facilities was commented upon and demand was made for reduction in taxes and land revenue.

I intervened several times in the discussions and spoke four times on various resolutions during the three-day session. (Readers interested in knowing about my speeches and views can find them in the printed Meerut records available with the National Archives of India, Delhi.)

Among important leaders who took part in the conference were: Principal Chhabil Das, Comrade Ramchandra, Comrade Abdul Majid, Lala Kidarnath Sehgal, Munshi Ahmad Din, Swami Balswarup and Dev Narain Pande from Cawnpore (now Kanpur).

The Lyallpur conference had a great impact on the youth who had come from far and near to attend it. Demands were made to hold the Kirti Kisan Conferences in Sargodha, Rohtak, in Rajasthan and other places. Our *Kirti* (Communist) group members were so few that they could be counted on finger-tips. Our small cadre was not in a position to cope with the demands made on us. We hoped to get some workers from the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, but it would have required time for them to do any revolutionary work. Further, our main problem was to find finances to meet the expenses on these conferences. The *Kirti* had limited funds to meet its own expenses, and was not in a position to advance money for additional organisational work. We could, therefore, take only limited responsibilities upon us.

The third Punjab Provincial Workers' and Peasants' Party conference was held with our consent at Rohtak on 10 March, 1928. I had promised to attend the conference, which was presided over by Arjan Lal of Ajmer. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru also attended the conference and made a speech. I shall narrate later how Jawaharlal became popular with us, and why we invited him to many more such public meetings to speak.

The agenda of the Rohtak conference was almost the same as that of the Lyallpur conference. I spoke against the philosophy of fatalism, and emphasised the fact that man as well as class were the architects of his fate. Our society was broadly divided into two classes, the rich and the poor, and their interests are antagonistic to each other. The aim of the Workers' and Peasants' party was to achieve the *Kirti Raj*, and not the *raj* of the white or brown bureaucrats. The main task was to meet the land needs of the peasantry.



The Meerut Conference took place on 13–15 October, 1928. This conference occupies a place of pride in the history of our freedom struggle as it formed the basis of the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case trial.

Kidar Nath Sehgal of Lahore presided over the conference. Besides him, Comrade Abdul Majid and myself attended the conference from Punjab, and Comrades Phillip Spratt and Muzaffer Ahmad participated from Bengal. Kidar Nath in his address dealt with all the then current problems—the Simon Commission, Nehru Report, Bolshevism-phobia of the British Indian Government, the success of the Russian revolution, the miserable conditions of the working masses and their exploitation, etc.

The Workers' and Peasants' Party was formed in UP for the first time and delegates for the All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party conference, to be held in Calcutta in December, were elected at the conference. Comrade Abdul Majid presented a resolution to uproot casteism and communalism and to improve the condition of the factory workers by providing them with education, medical and maternity facilities, etc. Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad made the point that after the British Raj disappeared from India, power should pass into the hands of the workers and the peasants.

I moved a six-point resolution on the abolition of landlordism. The resolution said that *zamindari* and *talukdari* be abolished and land made the property of the nation and distributed among the working peasants and workshops. Also that market places and tanks etc., be nationalised and that workers have an eight-hour day. The points I made were that freedom of the country was most imperative for those who were perpetually starving and possessed no land or had no job as their means of living; that soon the scourge of un-

touchability would be no more, and only those who did not work would be treated as "untouchables". "It was unfortunate that those who worked for the poor were shadowed by the CID and we could be arrested any day... Young men must come forward to take over the leadership if and when many of us would be arrested".

Winding up my speech, I said that our present society was rotten to the core, where the poor suffered injustice. We should unite and overthrow this society, and start a proletarian revolution. On hindsight, I feel that my speech was based more on sentimental stuff than on substantial facts.

The Meerut conference also brought P.C. Joshi to the fore who was then a law student of the Allahabad University. He later became the general-secretary of the CPI and played a great role in building up the party.

13. Radicalisation of National Movement

THE *Kirti* journal reflected the three important factors that radicalised the freedom movement in India. They were: The Chinese Revolution, the visit to India of Comrade Shapurji Saklatvala and Jawaharlal Nehru attending the conference of the International League Against Imperialism at Brussels, as well as his visit to the Soviet Union in 1927. All the three events imported new revolutionary ideas into India and helped the growth of the radical movement among Indian youth.

The Chinese Revolution of 1924-27 made a great impact on India's freedom struggle awakening all sections of our people and galvanising the Indian youth into action. India reverberated with the slogans "not a single soldier, not a single rupee for war against China!" The Chinese patriots were fighting against British imperialism — our common enemy — and China's victory meant victory coming nearer to us.

Saklatvala's visit to India had the effect of sharpening the anti-imperialist struggle for national freedom. He knew the ins and outs of the designs of British imperialists against its colonies, and he could expose them in a very convincing manner.

Comrade Bhag Singh Canadian and I attended the 8th session of the All-India Trade Union Congress in Delhi on 12 March, 1927 in which Saklatvala took part. This was also for the first time that I came into contact with the Indian trade union movement.

The April 1927 issue of *Kirti* printed a report by me of Saklatvala's speech at the AITUC session. He said:

"As long as workers do not become their masters, freedom has no meaning. The trade union movement has been started to free the workers, and this means overthrowing capitalism and establishing workers' own raj. Indians should strengthen the movement in association with (similar) movements in other countries, and India would find its place with other free countries...The workers' movement is

bringing about great changes in the world and workers have to acquire power... India should take a long jump and fill the void between 1848 (Communist Manifesto) and 1928... The time is coming when the capitalists will not be able to give quit notices to the workers; but workers will be serving notice on the capitalists to quit... In the coming period the trade union leaders will become the rulers of the country”.

We also attended a meeting to observe the death anniversary of Karl Marx on 14 March. It provided us an opportunity to hear Comrade Saklatvala's views on world politics. It is beyond the scope of this book to relate here all that happened at that meeting. Suffice to say that Saklatvala's comments on world developments were most inspiring and encouraging. He said:

“History of man is the history of class struggle. One class dominated over the other in its own interests. Workers in the capitalist system produced wealth for the dominant capitalist class, while they themselves got steadily impoverished. The rich were becoming richer and the poor poorer. To get rid of exploitation, the means of production should be brought in the hands of the society... There is no justice in the world; here the law is: You produce and I will eat! Producers of wealth, the workers and the peasants, are living in very bad conditions...”

Expounding his views on religion, he said: “Religion should remain confined to a temple or a mosque. It should not create quarrels in our social life. Change is working in the world.. (but) we are slaves because we have not changed”.

In the end he explained in detail the revolutionary changes that had been brought about in the lives of the working people by the Russian Revolution.

As I have said earlier, Saklatvala's visit was a big event in the history of radical political movement in India. He was a bold, fearless communist speaker who did not mince words or mix matters. He was thoroughly imbibed in Marxism-Leninism and was a faithful communist to the core. He lambasted British imperialism wherever he spoke and defended the Russian October Revolution and lauded its achievements. He ridiculed the demand of Dominion status for India and boldly propagated and demanded complete independence.

Saklatvala visited Bombay, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Delhi and a few other places. Everywhere he created an atmosphere favourable to communist ideas and was received with open arms because of his

tireless fight in the British Parliament and elsewhere for complete independence for India.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's participation in the meetings of the International League Against Imperialism at Brussels in the beginning of 1927 was of great political importance. He also visited the Soviet Union in November 1927, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution. During both these visits he learnt a lot in politics and economics. His discussions with the League leaders broadened his vision and made him aware of the real designs and intentions of the British, French and other imperialists to keep their colonies for ever under their iron heel. His visit to the Soviet Union brought home to him the political, economic and social changes the October Revolution had worked for. All these had a great impact on his political and economic thought, and made him conscious of the role of the workers and peasants in the fight for India's freedom.

Pandit Nehru himself spoke about the impact the League meetings had on him.

"The Brussels Congress, as well as the subsequent committee meetings of the League which were held in various places from time to time, helped me to understand some of the problems of the colonial and dependent countries. They also gave me an insight into the inner conflicts of the Western labour world... As between the labour world of the Second International and the Third International, my sympathies were with the latter".

In December 1927 Jawaharlal Nehru played a leftist role in the Madras session of the Indian National Congress. He moved a resolution calling for complete independence for India because of the radicalisation of the masses. He himself had admitted later that the resolution on complete independence passed at the Madras Congress session represented a widespread and growing sentiment.

The Madras session of the Indian National Congress also adopted the resolution for boycotting the Simon Commission, and asked the people to hold mass protest demonstrations on the day of the commission's arrival and to organise public opinion for the boycott. The session also adopted resolutions on the war danger and expressed solidarity with China.

The left-wing trend was also expressed by the election of Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose as the general-secretaries of the Indian National Congress for 1928.

The people of Punjab had the privilege of hearing Jawaharlal

Nehru's views as the president of the Punjab Provincial Political Conference held in Jallianwala Bagh on 11 April, 1928. His address breathed fresh air, bringing to the fore many radical views. It inspired the youth of Punjab and made him very popular among them.

The Urdu *Kirti* of May 1928 published excerpts from his speech with appreciation, pointing out some of the salient points made therein. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said: The world had changed beyond recognition and countries have become internationally interconnected. But our Indian thoughts are still of the old world, which create conflict and retard our onward march. We want to retain the old civilisation, and think that we can bring back the past times again—the Vedic times or the Quranic times. But all our so-called purity or wisdom cannot stop the onward march of history."

Continuing, he said: "The result of capitalist development and capitalism is that one group or country is exploiting and looting the other group or country. If we are opposed to this exploitation and loot, then we should oppose this exploiter capitalism as well. Not only that, we will have to oppose the domination of one country by another. The alternative to all this is 'some form of socialism'. That means the instruments of production and distribution should be in the hands of the state. To better the conditions of society we will have to bend towards socialism".

He said further: "If we accept the socialist viewpoint, the result would be giving up of all customs and rituals based on birth or caste. In future, we shall have to keep the society clear of exploiters and do-nothingers. British imperialism is our greatest enemy".

He also severely criticised the Indian educated class, saying that they had never paid any attention to the needs of the masses. On the contrary, they have been fighting for their own loaves and fishes. Only a change in the society can improve this condition.

He said: "Unless you define *Swarajya* you cannot get the cooperation of the working masses. They must know what *Swarajya* would give them after its achievement. For this purpose, it is necessary that we formulate an economic programme for the masses".

Jawaharlal Nehru condemned communalism and said that organisations have been built by persons eager to secure governmental posts and offices. "Whenever a vacancy occurred for the post of a judge or the like, the question of communalism was brought up. How did it help the nation?" He asked. He said many more things in the same vein.

However, we made a political distinction between Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose. In the *Punjabi Kirti* issue of July 1928 we asked the Punjabi youth, our comrades and readers to understand that Jawaharlal Nehru was looking far ahead than Subhash Bose. While the latter was a national revolutionary, the former was a socialist revolutionary who was giving expression to some new ideas. But we warned in that article that *Nehru should not be followed blindly*. (emphasis added).

We could not, however, at that time, characterise Jawaharlal Nehru as a bourgeois leader working to organise and mobilise the working masses in the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie.

14. Naujawan Bharat Sabha and Bhagat Singh

THE year 1928 was full of political activities against British imperialism in India. The visit of the Simon Commission which did not have even a single Indian representative; the public safety bill which prohibited the entry into India of Europeans with pro-worker leanings, the Trade Disputes Bill which sought to shackle the working class organisations and bound its hand and foot to the interests of the industrialists—all these British moves only helped to unite all sections of the Indian people against the British imperialists. The united struggle gave rise to a great mass upsurge which swept the country from one end to the other. It also led to many skirmishes with the custodians of British law and order.

The Kirti Kisan Party and the Naujawan Bharat Sabha were in the forefront of the Indian freedom struggle in Punjab. The Indian National Congress had decided to boycott the Simon Commission and all freedom-conscious Indians—the socialists, the communists, as well as others—unitedly gave hell to the Simon Commission, staging gigantic demonstrations. Slogans like “Go back, Simon. We don’t want you”, rent the air and people faced the British police with death-defying courage. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha of Punjab played a glorious role in the agitation and campaign against the commission.

The Naujawan Bharat Sabha was formed in Jallianwala Bagh at a conference held on 11-13 April, 1928 on the invitation of the *Kirti* management. Rural and urban middle-class youth took part in the conference, as did the Bhagat Singh’s group of individual activists.

Bhagat Singh met me for the first time on 6 or 7 April, a few days before the Jallianwala Bagh meet, in the *Kirti* office which was then situated on the fruit market side, near the wooden railway-crossing bridge. He introduced himself as Bhagat Singh from Lahore, saying that he was interested in the youth movement and wanted to know kind of political programme we were going to place before the youth

conference.

Bhagat Singh was younger to me by a few years. He was handsome, somewhat lanky, with sharp features and a bit shorter than me. He told me that he had been conducting a youth organisation called Naujawan Bharat Sabha in Lahore for the past two years or so, and wanted to take part in the Jallianwala Bagh youth conference along with his group.

I welcomed the idea of his participation and explained to him our programme for the conference. We were Marxists, I told him and believed in Marxist ideology and scientific socialism. The *Kirti* monthly had already been writing about it. There was an urgent need for a programme for the Indian youth to fight for the country's freedom.

Bhagat Singh was quite satisfied with our talk, and promised to attend the conference along with his companions. We had not yet decided on the name for our youth organisation. As stated earlier, Bhagat Singh and his friends were working for Naujawan Bharat Sabha at Lahore. Bhagat Singh asked me if that name could be acceptable to our conference. I replied that the name was good, upon which he asked me to lend my support to the name. I accepted the suggestion, and enjoined on him to attend the conference with a big contingent.

We had chosen Kidarnath Sehgal to be the president of the conference. He was a left nationalist, and had pledged to wear black from head to foot till freedom was won.

He continued to wear this dress even after Independence was won in August 1947. He was involved in the first Hindustan Gaddar Party Lahore case (1915) along with Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, Baba Jawala Singh, Kartar Singh Sarabha and others, but was released when the case ended. He was fully imbibed in the revolutionary ideology of the Hindustan Gaddar Party. He used to recite a Punjabi couplet in almost all his speeches, which when translated meant:

*"Four books descended from above,
The fifth one was a big rod;
The four books do absolutely nothing,
Whatever is done is done by the rod!"*

The Jallianwala Bagh conference was a big success. Delegates were full of enthusiasm, and expressed full support for complete in-

dependence for the country, and for socialism. In his capacity as the conference president, Kidarnath Sehgal condemned the Hindu-Muslim communal riots instigated by the British agents-provocateurs in order to thwart our freedom struggle and prolong our life of slavery. It was a shameful thing that a brother was killing a brother, he lamented, and called upon the youth to unite and foil the machinations of the British to disrupt our freedom movement. It was a shame for the Punjabi youth.

He admonished that their province was being dubbed as the "Ulster of India" by the nationalists.

A discussion of significance at the conference was whether young men belonging to religious-communal organisations should be allowed to join our organisation or not. There was a sharp division over the issue among the youth attending the conference.

One wing, belonging to Gopal Singh Qaumi representing the Akali organisation and Munshi Ahmad Din representing the Muslim Ahrar Party, wanted that the youth of these communal organisations be permitted to become members of our youth organisation. The other wing, consisting of the *Kirti* group and the Bhagat Singh group, were of the opinion that this canker of communalism should not be permitted to enter our youth organisation; rather it should be exposed, fought and defeated.

The Punjabi youth was very bitter against the religious-communal leaders who were playing into the hands of the British rulers and providing them strength to continue their oppressive rule by broadcasting to the world at large that if the British left India after granting freedom, communal riots would flare immediately. One of their leaders went to the shameful length of saying that "if the British rulers left India, they would have to be called back before they reached Gibraltar!"

Some young men confused religion with communalism. It was made clear by us that nobody was asking any one to give up his religion in order to join our new organisation. Religion was one's private concern, and communalism was our bitterest enemy to be fought and defeated. It were the British stooges who were setting one religious community against the other, and it was the task of the youth to expose and fight the religious leaders engaged in this fratricidal war and expose their links with the British rulers.

I proposed the name of the organisation as Naujawan Bharat Sabha, with headquarters at Amritsar. It was accepted unanimously

because the ground had already been prepared for it. The Sabha was to function as a non-communal, secular and democratic organisation, and take a bold stand against all aberrations and deviations which harm, retard or put spokes in the wheel of our movement. The youth movement had to emerge as a big force in the political arena of our country.

The conference passed nine resolutions – on boycott of the Simon Commission, colour of the National Flag, boycott of British goods, removal of untouchability, attitude towards religion, etc. The resolution on organisation of the youth said:

“The conference decides that in order to organise the youth of the province, a central organisation be set up with Naujawan Bharat Sabha as its name to organise branches of the Sabha in the districts and villages of the province. To carry out this job, a provisional committee of 10 members be set up to prepare the constitution and do propaganda to establish branches and bring into being the central committee of the Sabha”.

The elected members of the committee were: Sohan Singh Josh, (president), Lala Ram Chandra, B.A., Comrade Abdul Majid, Mohamed Tufail, Ehsan Ilahi, Sheikh Hisam-ud-Din, B.A., Principal Chhabildas (Tilak National College), Gopal Singh Qaumi, B.A., Kapil Dev Sharma and Hari Singh Chakwalia.

The committee held its meeting and passed the aims and objects of the Sabha as follows:

- To secure complete independence of India in cooperation with progressive and radical parties in India;
- To establish a government of labourers and peasantry;
- To inculcate a spirit of self-sacrifice and patriotism in the minds of young men; and
- To propagate a spirit of tolerance in religious matters.

Government intelligence reports evaluating the conference proceedings noted that the “revival of the Sabha” had its origin in the April 1928 conference and “the policy of the Sabha was now definitely enlarged to work in association with the *Kirti* group of Amritsar; thus it includes a programme of devolution of power by revolution or other methods” (See my booklet *My Meeting with Bhagat Singh*).

Our combined victory at the conference over the communal-religious elements brought the *Kirti* group and the Bhagat Singh

group nearer. The Sabha was an open and overt organisation and its main function was to work among the workers and peasants, organise them for their economic demands and make them realise the political need for fighting for freedom, unitedly with other fighting forces.

Before the 1920s and sometime thereafter, the Indian National Congress was a liberal body, entertaining a lot of illusions about the bonafides of the British rulers and about their pretences about law and order and constitutionalism. The political line of the Congress then was no different from that of the British Liberal Party. The party hoped that the British rulers would fulfil their promises of ushering democracy and self-determination made solemnly to the people of India at the beginning and during the course of the World War I. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of innocents had shattered these illusions and the pipe-dream to a certain extent, but only partially.

The non-cooperation movement of 1921-22 witnessed the biggest upsurge in the country. Boycott of British courts, boycott of studies, giving up of titles conferred on Indians by the British government, burning of foreign cloth and wearing of *khadi*, etc., roused Indians everywhere. And non-violence was the means behind the stirring call of the non-cooperation movement. People plunged themselves into the movement with a death-defying spirit. Jails were filled with *satyagrahis* who refused to put up any defence and hurled defiance at the British courts. Everybody hoped that the goal of freedom was just round the corner.

But just then, suddenly, the movement, which was taking a revolutionary colour, was withdrawn by Mahatma Gandhi because violence had taken place in Chauri-Chaura in Gorakhpur district of UP, in which a certain number of policemen were killed and the police chowki was burnt down. This caused great demoralisation and disquiet in the country. The people's forces were on the verge of storming the British fortress of slavery when the "commander" ordered the fighting forces to withdraw. The whole country was stunned, including top Congress leaders who were then in jail.

After the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement, there was not only a political lull, but silence of the grave enveloped the country. It was this political atmosphere which shook up and awakened the youth, and raised a great political upsurge in them. The battlefield beckoned them and they plunged headlong into it.

The Naujawan Bharat Sabha was up and doing in Punjab. After some time two main political trends emerged in the Sabha. One represented our *Kirti* group—the majority Marxist trend which laid stress on organising the workers and peasants, fighting for their agrarian and economic demands and making them conscious of their political role in the freedom struggle. The group emphasised that winning of freedom was also their concern because they were the most oppressed and brutally exploited classes under the British rule; hence they must get organised and prepare for a popular revolution.

The other trend was represented by Bhagat Singh and his comrades. It was a minority trend, which became clear after my discussions with him. Bhagat Singh wanted to do something very quick, through the use of bombs and pistols, in order to politically awaken the slumbering youth and students who had forgotten their duty toward their motherland; something spectacular that would make them sit up and do some thinking about the soul-crushing British enslavement of India and come forward to make sacrifices for the cause of freedom. He could not wait for long when workers and peasants would be properly organised, when the revolutionary situation would become mature and a call would come to start the hoped-for revolution. “Our young, hot blood cannot wait for that long,” he asserted.

His line of argument in support of his thesis was that “single deed makes more propaganda in a few days than a thousand pamphlets... One dead brings forth another, opponents join the mutiny, the government splits into factions, oppression intensifies the conflict, the concessions come too late, the revolution breaks out...”

Sometimes, Bhagat Singh went to the length of saying hyperbolically that “one human being in revolt with a torch or dynamite was able to instruct the whole world!”

Such thoughts and line of action immensely appealed to the immature youth. But these are bookish revolutionary knowledge, which can become helpful tools only if it becomes the yardstick for properly measuring all aspects of a given situation and is thoughtfully and flexibly applied to solve the problems of a country. Transplanting of revolutionary conditions of one country to another with different situations generally results in disaster.

I was still very immature in theory and practice of Marxism, and could not differentiate between Marxism and terrorism. I did not know that Marxism lambasted terrorism, which was sterile and dis-

ruptive of the mass movement. This was the reason why I could not write even a single article in *Kirti* to demarcate ourselves from the terrorists' viewpoint and refute the articles written by "Vidrohi" (Bhagat Singh) in a few issues of *Kirti* in 1928. There were two reasons for this: first Marxist literature was banned and not available to us in Punjab, and, secondly, I was under the spell of the Ghadar Party ideology and Kartar Singh Sarabha was the common hero to both of us.

It seems that the Bhagat Singh group wanted to win me over to its way of thinking. We had discussed these differences several times, but I stuck to our viewpoint of organising the workers and the peasants and patiently prepare for the mass revolution. The Ghadar Party had failed because it could not get the masses on its side. This awareness was the main factor which prevented me from joining them.

We were friends, and one day Bhagat Singh took me to a meeting place of theirs in Lahore. The house, well decorated and neatly kept with pictures of Kropotkin and Bakunin hanging on the walls, was occupied by Bhagwat Charan Vohra and his wife. This was an indication of their faith in me.



I was the general-secretary of the Amritsar City Naujawan Bharat Sabha from its very inception. Ours was not a communist organisation, and we had the slogan: "Revolution by the masses, for the masses" — in other words *Swaraj* for 98 per cent of the Indian people. The Sabha had no connection with any terroristic activities in any form; Bhagat Singh's influence of individual activists existed only in Lahore City. The "mass revolution" point I had made in my Kakori day speech on 16 December, 1928 at Amritsar was repeated in my presidential address to the second session of the Punjab Naujawan Bharat Sabha held in Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore, about 70 days after Saunder was murdered. Bhagat Singh and his comrades had not been arrested by then.

I was most active during the 1928 period which witnessed a great upsurge all over the country. I displayed tremendous energy, addressing public meetings, writing articles in *Kirti*, conducting study circles, activising the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and the Kirti Kisan Party units and recruiting new members for them. We also used

magic lantern slides to disseminate revolutionary patriotism by exhibiting the lives of Indian martyrs. The Amritsar unit of the Sabha was most active in the whole of Punjab.

The Russian Revolution was the inspiration for our activities, and Karl Marx and Lenin were our heroes. We were deeply involved in the freedom movement too, and despised everything that created hurdles in the way of achieving freedom – communalism, liberalism, Gandhian non-violence, etc. Our first priority was freedom of the country, everything else was subordinate. "Freedom by all possible means" was our motto.

Some Congress leaders believing in Gandhian non-violence, would come to us and say: Why are you so impatient to invite death by rejecting non-violence outright? Our answer was: We don't reject any means, nor are we wedded to violence. We want to make India free and as early as possible. We don't want that the freedom struggle should be withdrawn again if another Chauri-Chaura takes place; freedom cannot be won without sacrificing lives. Such was the spirit that surged in our veins.

The British Government had let loose repression with a vengeance. Some of our top Naujawan Bharat Sabha leaders like Gopal Singh Qaumi, Munshi Ahmad Din and Arjan Singh Gargaj (editor of the *Punjabi Kirti*) were arrested in Amritsar under Section 124-A (spreading sedition) and sentenced to about two years' rigorous imprisonment each. In Lahore, the government arrested Kidarnath Sehgal, Ramchandra, Panda Sant Ram and a few others and also sentenced them to various terms of imprisonment. Repression in Punjab was more severe than that in Bengal and other provinces.

The British Government arrested the Hindustan Ghadar Party leaders in China who were helping in the Chinese liberation struggle by persuading the Punjabi police and army personnel in Canton and Shanghai not to act against the Chinese who were fighting the British for their liberty. Daswanda Singh Dhada (Hoshiarpur) and Master Gajjan Singh (Ludhiana) were arrested and banished from China. And when they reached India, they were detained under the draconian Regulation III of 1818. The Government used the same Regulation to arrest and detain Santa Singh Gadiwind of Amritsar when he returned from San Francisco as he was a member of the Hindustan Ghadar Party.

The Indian Press had been shackled by repressive laws, and it had no freedom. The Press printed news very circumspectly and avoided

publishing anything of serious political nature. Most of the printing presses had already lost their sureties, once or for more times. The press proprietors did not dare to risk their business and livelihood, hence, most political news went by default. However, there were exceptions. The printing presses owned by political parties took risks and published political news of their parties. We generally criticised or even took to task the Press for suppressing important political news and devoting much of its space to love, abduction or rape stories and the like.

The general targets of political attack in our speeches were General Dyer and Lt. Governor O'Dwyer, the enactors of the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh, and condemnation of death or life sentences against many Hindustan Ghadar Party heroes. Unemployment, general poverty, the poverty of the peasantry and recurring famines were the general themes of most speakers. The topical subjects to mobilise the people for the freedom struggle were the Simon Commission, the Trade Disputes Bill and the Public Safety Bill. Condemnation of repression and Press fetters were the other issues we protested against.

Issues affecting the lives of the rural masses were police terror and repression, *begaar* without any payment, compulsory *Thikri Paitra* law, remission of water rates, reduction of land revenue, etc. In the countryside repression and suppression of the villages knew no bounds. Besides settling land disputes and keeping land records, the *patwaris* doubled as CID informants, reporting on the activities and speeches of the political leaders in their areas of jurisdiction.

The active leaders of the Punjab Naujawan Bharat Sabha upto the time of my arrest on 20 March, 1929, including those mentioned as arrested and sentenced earlier, were: Sohan Singh Josh, Abdul Majid, Feroz Din Mansur, Ajit Singh, Mohmed Tufail, Sohan Singh Sewak, Rattanlal Bhatia, etc. Local committees of the Sabha had been set up in Amritsar, Lahore, Jullundur, Ludhiana, Jaranwala, Morinda, Sialkot, Rawalpindi and some other cities. With the spread of the Sabha propaganda, units were springing up at numerous places, and then seeking affiliation with us.

In my statement in the sessions court in the Meerut Conspiracy Case trial, I said:

"It (the Sabha) is, in fact, a revolt of the petty bourgeoisie against the Congress leadership. While in the Lahore Conspiracy Case (against Bhagat Singh and his comrades) the prosecution, and for

that matter the government, is trying to prove that it is a terrorist organisation, here in the Meerut Case, the prosecution seems to suggest that it is a communist body! But...I emphatically say that it is neither...They realise quite well that the Congress is a bourgeois body and in spite of its professions and promises, it cannot fight for the interests of the workers and the peasants. Knowing fully well that singlehanded this class cannot give a successful battle to British imperialism and thus improve its lot, they want the help of the workers and the peasants, the two classes that can fight imperialism to the finish and bring about revolution. Their aim is the establishment of an independent republic of workers and peasants because in that aim they see the solution of their miseries and a good opening for better life." (p. 306).

15. Calcutta WPP Meet

IT came as a great surprise to me that I was selected by the then Central Committee of the CPI to preside over the first All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party conference at Calcutta. I was not yet a member of the CPI; besides, there were many senior and mature comrades in the industrially developed provinces of Bengal and Bombay. Perhaps, the party took me as a symbol of the peasantry, whose role in the struggle for the revolution it wanted to stress. Up to that time the workers' and peasants' parties were functioning separately in different provinces without a centre to guide them.

I came to know later that it was at the instance of Comrade Phillip Spratt that the workers' and peasants' parties were brought into existence. I had read a small news item, perhaps in daily *Tribune* that Comrade Dange had formed a Workers' and Peasants' Party in Bombay. Comrade Dange was well known by then. That gave me the cue, and we also formed a party with the same name in Punjab. There were no instructions to us to form this body from Moscow, or from anywhere else. The Ghadar Party people were not on good terms with M.N. Roy.

This organisation of workers and peasants was not a communist organisation. It was an open organisation whose real spirit and main organisers, however, were communists. It was set up to organise the workers and the peasants and to further serve as a cover for communist meetings in order to carry on communist activities.

At that time there were only four provincial units of the Workers' and Peasants' Party; Bengal and Bombay units had come into existence earlier, and the Punjab and UP units were formed a little later. The CPI was still in the initial stage of its development and the number of communists was very few. What they wished to achieve was beyond their strength then.

The Calcutta conference of the All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party was held in Albert Hall on 21 December, 1928. I had got my presidential address printed in Amritsar and it was distributed

among the delegates to the conference who came from the four provincial units. It was a “revolutionary democrat’s” address—no precise formulation, no communist phraseology. Comrade P. Dinda, bar-at-law, was the chairman of the reception committee.

The address was a closely-printed, 20-page pamphlet dealing with all the then current problems delineated earlier. It dealt with the Chauri-Chaura resolution passed by the Congress, and criticised the same by saying that the Congress had suspended the mass civil disobedience movement because:

- The cultivators had refused to pay land revenue and other taxes to the government;
- The ryots (peasants) had withheld the rent payment to the *zamindars* (landlords) which, according to the Congress resolution, was contrary to the Congress policy and “injurious to the best interests” of the country”;
- The Congress assured the *zamindars* that the Congress movement in no way intended to attack their legal rights.

I commented in my address that this class resolution clearly proves that the no-tax campaign and the mass civil disobedience movement were given up not because of the Chauri-Chaura incident, but because the cultivators were resolutely bent upon not paying rent even to the landlords. The peasants who had become conscious of their rights had joined the movement in the hope of being freed from the tyranny of the landlords. They made great sacrifices, but the Congress leaders said to them that the interests of the country required that they should pay the rent, which meant that men who could be counted on finger-tips be allowed to exercise this tyranny over the peasants who formed 75 per cent of the total population and keep them under their thumb for ever. How strange was the ‘interest of the country’ that requires that millions should suffer the pangs of hunger and want in order to support the luxury of a few!”

The address exposed the Congress bourgeoisie leaders by name and said that the Congress movement had been carried on for the benefit of the bourgeoisie and landlords and had done nothing to ameliorate the lot of the masses. About the Simon Commission, it said: “I am fully convinced that this is a move to strengthen the imperialist hold over India...By writing the Nehru Report, the bourgeois leaders have acknowledged the right of the British Parliament to

enact a constitutional law for India.”

“The word *Swaraj* is not defined”, I said. “To some it means Dominion Status; to others, complete independence. The Nehru Report keeps us chained to the chariot wheel of the (British) empire, leaving the armed forces and foreign affairs in British hands. In internal affairs, the Governor-General can interfere in all matters he likes. The Nehru Report is characterised as a class constitution which betrays the interests of the masses.”

The British Trade Union Congress, with regards to its attitude towards the Simon Commission, was completely unmasked, showing that there was practically no difference between Baldwins and McDonalds; they were chips of the same block. The Trade Disputes Bill, the Public Safety Bill, the Indian trade union movement, the peasant movement’s programme, the coming war – all these were touched upon and explained in my address.

I emphasised the need for setting up a central organisation in order to avoid the danger of differences arising in future. The central body was overdue, but we had not been able to coordinate our activities till then. The Calcutta Conference gave us this opportunity.

I noted that new parties were coming up because of the dissatisfaction with the congress reformist policies. The Khilafat agitation did one good thing; it sent some *Hijratis* to Afghanistan from where some of them went to the Soviet Union, and on their return to India brought with them communist ideas. They had seen what great changes the Soviet revolution had brought about there.

They had returned to India after undergoing great sufferings, conspiracy cases, jail-terms and the like, and had again started working, saying: “Let us be on the side of, and with, the masses” and not be like the bourgeoisie Congress leaders who said: ‘Let us get the masses on our side’ in order to strengthen the bourgeois cause and its interests. In my address, I stressed that our programme should be based on class interests and class struggle.

This class struggle point was criticised sharply by the Calcutta bourgeois press. I further said: “We must see that all our members became class conscious and knew their goal and how to reach it. We shall have to educate them on the necessity of unceasing war against exploiters, for we have to win economic freedom as well”.

In short, my address asked the comrades to fight for complete independence, abolition of landlordism and the Indian princely states, just distribution of wealth, international affiliation and against the

impending imperialist war. It reminded the delegates of their duty towards our comrades rotting in jails, for whose release they must fight tirelessly.

In conclusion, I said: "The age through which we are passing is the age of democracy. I do not want to be a prophet, but I say that the present century will see socialism and communism governing the world. Kings will vanish from the surface of the earth: Mussolinis, now oppressing the poor and the helpless humanity, will be wiped off the world. Empires and imperialism will cease and the dignity of man and labour will be proclaimed where all men will be truly equal, free and prosperous. This so-called civilisation will be no more, because in it the real earners are deprived of their bread earned by them with the sweat of their brows, and in it, man is exploited by man".

"This civilisation will yield place to another one where the governing principle will be: he who does not work, neither shall he eat."

16. Bhagat Singh: Man and Ideas

THE Urdu *Kirti*, which was first published in April 1928, had the following couplet of Dr. Mohammed Iqbal addressed to the workers on its title page.

*“Rise, for the mood of the world society
has become different,
Thy era has begun in the East and the West.”**

The first editorial was written by me as the chief editor, while the overall in-charge of the monthly was assistant editor Comrade Feroze Din Mansur, who was sentenced in the Peshawar Conspiracy Case.

This Iqbal couplet continued to be there till September 1928. From the October 1928 issue, it was replaced by another couplet composed by Dr. Mohan Singh Diwana, a professor in the Government College, Lahore.

*“Rise, O worker, display your zeal and
become from a drop into a river,
Cut asunder the chains of slavery and become
from a servant to a master”.***

Dr. Mohan Singh had political leanings, and had contacts with me in supporting the freedom struggle.

Some time later, the entire title page was given a new look. I approached the well-known artist S.G. Thakar Singh of Amritsar with an idea of a picture logo, depicting the collapse of the British system of slavery, and the slogan: “Smash up the old system”. His artistic

* *Uth ki ab bazam-i-jahan kaa aur hi andaaz hai,
Mashraq-o-maghrib men tere daur kaa aaghaaz hai*

** *Uth ai Kirti tu josh men aa,
aur qatra se darya ban jaa;
Zanjirein tor ghulaami ki
Haan, naukar se aqaa ban jaa.*

logo had a young man in a white shirt and red loin-cloth smashing up a rocky hill-stretch with a hammer. It bore the legend: Smash up to pieces the old system. Behind this man were shadowy figures of three other workers, also smashing away with a hammer, a pick-axe and a shovel, respectively. In the far background was a red flag bearing the symbol of a hammer and a sickle. The entire logo eloquently conveyed the anti-British spirit of the times.



The Urdu *Kirti* was to serve a wider readership. We approached Bhagat Singh to join the Urdu *Kirti* staff. However, at that time he was facing the same problem with his father as most youngmen faced while daring to join the freedom fight against the British regime. His father did not want him to work with any secret society, but Bhagat Singh had already established contacts with secret societies working in UP and Bengal. His group in Punjab, comprising Sukh Dev, Ehsan Ilahi, Bhagwati Charan, Dhanwantri and others, was well-knit and strong. His father who came to know about his activities, and asked him to desist from these and tried to persuade him to work in the Indian National Congress.

But Bhagat Singh was firm in his belief, and he left his home. First he went to Delhi and then to Kanpur, where he came into contact with that great patriot Ganesh Shanker Vidyarthi and worked in the latter's daily *Pratap* for some time. On our request, he joined the *Kirti*, worked for about three months and then vanished.

I remember that the management of *Kirti* had given him Rs. 800 and Rs. 300 at different times to be used as he liked, over and above what was paid to him as his salary.

From the discussions I had with him, I found that Bhagat Singh did not believe in any religion; he was an atheist. After his martyrdom some *Aryasamajists* had claimed that he was an *Aryasamaji*. Some Sikhs also claimed that he was a Sikh. In fact, he was neither. "I am an ordinary human being, that is all", he often told me. He hated religio-communal leaders who exploited religion for their own selfish ends and shamelessly served the British officers. He was anguished at the recurrence of communal riots which only helped the British tyrants to prolong India's slavery.

Bhagat Singh and his comrades were nationalist revolutionaries to the core who wanted to drive out the British rulers, gain inde-

pendence and establish socialism in India. The British imperialists labelled him and his group as "terrorists" or "anarchists" in order to defame them in the eyes of the Indian people. They were neither terrorists nor anarchists, as these terms are known in English language. They were most self-sacrificing, most honest and selflessly dedicated to the cause of liberating India. They hated exploitation of the working class and the Indian people by the bloodsucking British imperialists and their allies, and were willing to make any sacrifice for the upliftment of the working class.

They were prepared to adopt any form of struggle to end the British slavery. Violent or nonviolent, peaceful or nonpeaceful, all means were justified in their eyes provided these advanced the cause of freedom. But their preference was for individual or group action. They believed in meeting British terror with patriotic counter-terror. The ceaseless throttling of the freedom of the Press, of speech and organisation by the British rulers provoked them into action. The working class and their party had not yet struck roots in backward Punjab to influence them with Marxist ideology. They were, in effect, impatient patriots who detested any wait-and-see or go-slow policy. They could no longer stand the continuous degradation, demoralisation and dehumanisation of the Indian people under the British rule and were ready to contribute their mite in the earliest liquidation of British despotism.

On this, Bhagat Singh's colleague and co-accused Ajoy Ghosh, who later became the leading light of the Communist Party of India, said:

"As for the most important question, however—the question of the manner the fight for freedom and socialism was to be waged—armed action by individuals and groups was to remain our immediate task. Nothing else, we held, could smash constitutionalist illusions, nothing else could free the country from the grip in which fear held it. When the stagnant calm was broken by a series of hammerblows delivered by us, at selected points and on suitable occasions, against the most hated officials of the government and a mass movement unleashed, we would link ourselves with that movement, act as its armed detachment and give it a socialist direction."

The Naujawan Bharat Sabha had passed a resolution to observe the Kakori case martyrs' day on 16 December, 1928 and instructed its branches to hold meetings and explain to the people why they were hanged by the British. We had also issued a poster in this connection.

I was the main speaker at the Jallianwalla Bagh meeting on that day. My speech, delivered in Punjabi, has been preserved by the CID. It covers four foolscap pages.

“...The Kakori people committed a decoity to collect money for the cause of freeing India. Four of them have been hanged, being leaders of the action, and some sentenced to life-imprisonment. When we published a poster to advertise this meeting, some friends warned: “You are also going towards that same path”. I want to make it clear that our Naujawan Bharat Sabha does not believe in terrorism. We understand that individual terrorism has not succeeded anywhere in the world. It is possible to kill a few people by the use of terroristic methods, but these could be replaced by other tyrants. This way we cannot change the system, nor can we remove injustice and oppression. Our objective is that man should not be killed, but that the system should be uprooted. That is why we want to prepare for mass civil disobedience or mass no-tax campaign; that is why we lay stress on organisation”.

I emphasised further: “As long as masses are not with us, class-consciousness has not been brought about, we cannot achieve freedom... In Bombay 1,50,000 mill workers went on a strike and forced the millowners to accept their demands. This is what we mean by organisation”.

The CID report says that Sohan Singh Josh made an “objectionable speech” on the Kakori day, “praising the ideal of the Kakori ‘martyrs’ and drawing attention to their methods, but at the same time carefully dissociating himself and his party from terrorism as a means to political freedom”.

This was the demarcation I had made from the terroristic trends of Bhagat Singh and his comrades in the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. And this is what the government report quoted above said: that “the revival of the Sabha” had its origin in the April 1928 conference and that “the policy of the Sabha was now definitely enlarged to work in association with the *Kirti* group at Amritsar”.

The Sabha units in Lahore and other places had also observed the Kakori Martyrs Day, but speakers there did not demarcate themselves from the terrorist trend. However, for the government officials this differentiation meant nothing, for them terrorism and communism posed the same headache.

Next day, i.e. on 17 December in the afternoon, a British police officer was killed by some revolutionaries outside the police headquarters. By the evening, rumours were afloat all over Amritsar that either SSP Scott or Saunders had been killed, along with an Indian who had kept on chasing the alleged assailants despite being warned.

On the same night, a little after 11 p.m., somebody knocked at my door in Bara Ghara in Islamabad. I was all alone in the house as my family had gone away to my village, Chetanpura in Amritsar. I opened the door and to my utter surprise I found Bhagat Singh and Sukh Dev standing there. I welcomed them in, but told them that it was rather risky on their part to have come to my house because the police might raid it any time. But Bhagat Singh said: "Don't worry. We have made all arrangements". They said they were hungry. "Give us something to eat". I could offer them only two chapatis, some vegetables and a glass of milk. I offered to cook something for them, but they said: "Nothing doing, we shall talk and sleep".

Bhagat Singh was wearing a felt hat and an English-style suit. He was quite unrecognisable in those clothes. Sukh Dev was wearing an English hat and a suit. Bhagat Singh took off his hat and placed it on a table. He hung his pistol on a peg above the cot. Then, after finishing the meagre meal, the first question he shot at me was: "what is the reaction in general to Saunders' murder?" Now I knew that it was Saunders who had been killed.

"The youth are happy", I replied, "but they would have been happier if Scott had been killed".

"We had gone there only for him (Scott), but the other devil came out", he said, "and we could not go back empty-handed after all the pains we had taken for the preparation". Then he added: "Anyway, some beginning has been made".

"There is another opinion also about this murder", I put in, "that of Gandhi's followers".

"We knew it beforehand", he said, "we had discussed this before deciding upon this action". Then he added contemptuously: "Gandhi had stabbed the nation in the back by withdrawing the non-cooperation movement (1921-22) after the Chauri-Chaura incident. The people are still suffering the frustration and demoralisation which he had brought about."

"But, leave that aside", he continued. "Do you know what has been the effect of Saunders' murder on the British rulers?"

"I do not know, it is too early yet to know that."

"There is great panic in them", he said. "Some of them have already booked passages for their wives and children for England. They are terribly frightened."

"But this panic is temporary", I opined, "it will wear off soon."

"What do you think of this action?" Bhagat Singh asked.

"You know my views. We have talked about this matter several times. Our Naujawan Bharat Sabha workers will be arrested, there will be greater repression and the movement will suffer, will be retarded."

"I don't agree", he said. "This action will rouse the masses and strengthen the movement."

During all this conversation, Sukh Dev did not say a word. I was meeting him for the first time.

The Bhagat Singh enquired when I was going to Calcutta for the conference.

I replied: "You go your way, we go ours", and that ended our talk.

There were only two cots in the house. Sukh Dev slept on the smaller one, and Bhagat Singh and I shared the other, which was bigger. They woke up a little before four in the morning to be ready to leave. The book, T. Spreading's *Liberty and the Great Libertarians* lay on the table. Readers will recall it was the book which I had got while I was in the Lahore Fort Jail during our trial in the Akali Conspiracy Case. It had the censor's stamp, sub-inspector Daryao Singh's signatures and my name. I was reluctant to part with it but Bhagat Singh promised to return it after reading it and took the book away.

We embraced each other and parted company. He did not indicate to me his destination.



I left for Calcutta on Tuesday, 18 December, to preside over the All-India Workers' and Peasants' Conference. Bhag Singh, Feroze Din Mansur and three others were with me. However, as was to be expected, on 19 December, large scale arrests of youths belonging to the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and students' union were made in Lahore. The Government of India enquired from the Punjab Government about the latter's steps following Saunders' assassination. The Punjab Government replied that it was pursuing the investigation "with the greatest vigour" and that 16 persons had been

arrested on "reasonable suspicion of murder, abetment of murder and for criminal conspiracy". Orders were issued for the arrest of three more — Mehta Anand Kishore, Sohan Singh Josh, (president of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Amritsar) and Ram Chandra.

Important men already arrested were Dhanwantri, Virendra, Ahmad Din, Kedarnath Sehgal, Mir Mohmed Afzal, Sant Ram Pandha, Mir Abdul Majid (Lahore), Hari Ram Sethi (Rawalpindi), Keshab Bandhu (Kashmir) and Raj Kishore Singh (UP).

Since I had already crossed the Punjab boundary, the Punjab Government sent a wire to the Government of India to arrest me, who in turn forwarded the necessary instructions to the Bengal government. The latter replied: "As Sohan Singh Josh...is to preside over the Workers' and Peasants' Conference, his arrest has been postponed till after the conference".

On 20 December we reached Calcutta at eight in the morning, and crossed the river in a boat and put up at 121, Lower Circular Road. The All-India Workers' and Peasants' Conference began on 21 December in Albert Hall sometime after 2 p.m. I read out my address and the conference adjourned after 6.30 p.m. Next day was a Saturday, and an off day. On Sunday, 23 December, the conference met again and carried on its business.

On 24 December, while I was presiding over the conference, a message was brought to me that someone wanted to meet me outside the Albert Hall. I pleaded my inability to leave the conference as I was in the chair. But the messenger was insistent that I should accompany him to meet the waiting person. I requested another comrade to take the chair, and left the hall with the messenger.

After walking about a furlong, my guide and I entered a barber's saloon, and to my utter surprise I found Bhagat Singh seated on a chair, waiting for me! I was flabbergasted. Just imagine the scenario: Josh entering a barber's saloon in Calcutta with his flowing beard and all the Sikh paraphernalia about him, and the CID shadowing him and hunting for Bhagat Singh everywhere! That was just the invitation for the British police to come and arrest us!

I chided Bhagat Singh for doing such a foolish thing. But he laughed and replied nonchalantly as usual: "Don't worry, nothing is going to happen. We have made all arrangements".

What arrangements he had made, I do not know till today.

17. The Calcutta WPP Decisions

THE Calcutta conference of the All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party lasted four days. Proclaiming the nature of the session, the well-decorated Albert Hall displayed the following slogans: "Down with Imperialism", "Down with Capitalism", "Down with Simon Commission", "Down with Nehru Report", "Down with Landlordism", "Workers and exploited people of the world unite", "Complete National Independence", "All power to the masses", "Universal Suffrage", "Seven-hour day", "Long live the Workers' and Peasants' Party of India" and so on.

The session began with the singing of the *Internationale* in Bengali composed by the great revolutionary poet of Bengal Kazi Nazrul Islam. He also personally recited some of his revolutionary poems. He was introduced to me by Comrade Muzaffer Ahmed, and one day he visited my place in Calcutta and recited some of his great poems on Indian peasants.

A message of greeting was received from the Workers' Welfare League of India, London, calling upon the delegates to achieve the unity of the workers and the peasants for future struggles. I moved two resolutions, protesting against the arrest of J.W. Johnstone of America, a fraternal delegate to the conference from the League Against Imperialism, and of three members of the Workers' and Peasants' Party M.A., Majid, Ramchandra Kapur and Kedarnath Sehgal of Lahore.

The rest of the first day was devoted by speeches devoted by visitors and delegates from other provinces and countries. Comrade J. Ryan of the New South Wales Council of Trade Unions and the Pan-Pacific Trade Unions Secretariat spoke of his experiences of the events in China and their bearing on India. He emphasised that extremely sharp conflict between the bourgeoisie and the masses was inevitable. The Chinese bourgeoisie had deserted the struggle in the course of their national revolution, therefore it was necessary to assert the independent position of the working masses and free them

from bourgeois influence in respect to both organisation and ideology. He also emphasised the strengthening of the Indian Trade Union movement and connecting it with the international working class movement.

For the first time during the conference I came in contact with comrades from Bengal and Bombay, who were later to be my lifelong friends and comrades in the struggles for freedom of the Indian working masses. Comrades S.V. Ghate, general-secretary of the CPI, K.N. Joglekar, S.S. Mirajkar and other leaders of the Girni Kamgar Union of Bombay and Comrades G. Adhikari, B.T. Ranadive and M.G. Desai came on the last day to take part in the conference. Comrades Dharni Goswami, Gopen Chakravarti, Muzaffer Ahmad and others of Bengal had all remained loyal to the communist cause and ideology. They were all later hauled up in the Meerut Conspiracy Case but remained staunch and firm in their beliefs.

During the conference, I also met for the first time that great son of the British working class, Comrade Ben F. Bradley of the Amalgamated Engineering Union and an important leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He spoke on the urgent necessity of forming the Workers' and Peasants' Party of India and elaborated on the international movement for liberation from imperialism, and assured the conference of the sympathy and solidarity of the revolutionary working class forces of Britain and Europe. I had met Philip Spratt earlier at the Meerut W.P.P. conference.

The Calcutta conference adopted three main documents after some discussion and amendments: (1) Workers' and Peasants' Party—Principles and Policy; (2) Thesis on the trade union movement; and (3) Political resolution.

My own political, social and economic awareness of that time stands spelt out in the AIWPP conference address, a gist of which I have already given. However, my understanding was defective in several ways: I had not yet fully realised the whole programme of the national democratic revolution, for the achievement of which we were fighting. The national democratic revolution required an open, strong and ascending mass movement, and for this very purpose the workers' and peasants' parties were being formed. Though the CPI had not till then formally been declared an illegal organisation by the then British Government, the Peshawar Bolshevik Conspiracy Cases and later the Kanpur Communist Conspiracy Case launched against our comrades showed that to declare oneself a member of the CPI

was to invite some conspiracy or criminal charge. What was required was separate organisations of workers and peasants in each province and their strong centralisation. The workers and the peasants were not to be together under a single Workers' and Peasants' Party, but separate—one for the workers and the other for the peasants, and yet a third for the youth. It was for the working class to lead the revolution and make the peasantry their politically conscious allies. And the task of the revolution-conscious petty bourgeoisie was to help in organising and forging this instrument of revolution.

The objective of the three main documents of the Calcutta conference was to unify and centralise the CPI and under its guidance to strengthen and broaden the mass movement in order to fulfil the tasks of the national democratic revolution. The upsurge among the Indian youth and the revolutionary spirit and struggles fought by the striking workers and the awakening peasantry gave us hope that the revolution was not far off. But we were counting without our British hosts.

The documents written in the form of a thesis were meant to clarify the confusion created by bourgeois leaders and to place before the Communists, workers and the masses the political and ideological position of the CPI. These are long documents, and I will only touch upon certain important points made in them.

Principles and Policy: The first document on “Workers and Peasants: Principles and Policy” debunks Mahatma Gandhi’s trusteeship theory, without mentioning his name, as against the sharpening of the class struggle between the capitalist employers and the workers, as well as the landlords and tenants, etc. The general idea propagated was that the organisation of Indian life was based on caste and not on class, and the theory that society is divided into classes and that class struggle is bound to take place between the capitalist owner of a factory and a worker did not apply to India. The document repudiated this propaganda and said that “material forces dominate India as they do all other societies with similar results”.

Mahatma Gandhi had tried for some time to lead a Major Mahajan Union, emphasising that the *Mahajan* (capitalist) as a trustee will look after the interests of the workers. But the trusteeship idea did not work in practice for long. The meaning of trusteeship theory is to keep the workers exploited, enslaved and at the mercy of the owners of capital. Workers saw through the game and threw it

out like a counterfeit coin.

Again, a group of Indian people at that time were raising their voice against materialist industrialisation of India on the western pattern, as against Indian spiritualism. They did not want industrial development in India. Our policy document laid down that industrialisation of India was bound to come and that no power on earth could stop it. "To bolster up the hand industry and individual production in opposition to it (industrialisation) is, in general, reactionary, not only economically but also politically." It was an effort to check further development of India. The document said that undoubtedly industrialisation is "capable of doing great mischief while used primarily for profit-making", but "it is capable of equally great good when socially controlled". The nationalisation of monopoly capitalism was mentioned here in a veiled form.

Trade Union Movement: The document on the trade union movement was the product of the then prevailing situation in the country. The British Government and the employers, in mutual cooperation and collusion, had launched an attack on the working class' right to strike and on collective bargaining. The miserable wages paid to the workers was hardly enough to keep the wolf of hunger from the door. The workers had fought many a battle in the textile industry for a better life and working conditions, and were preparing for a new fight. But the dominant reactionary trade union leadership was collaborating with the employers and discouraging any struggle.

The British Government had on the anvil of legislation a Trade Disputes Bill whose purpose was to prevent any strike in the railways, the department of posts and telegraphs, etc. as also to bar all sympathetic or political strikes. The Bill provided the machinery of Courts of Enquiry and Conciliation Boards to settle issues in dispute. However, these courts and boards could not but serve the class interests of the factory owners against the working class. These impediments and provisions were not acceptable to the workers, who were stubbornly fighting for the withdrawal of the Bill. The Workers' and Peasants' Party had, in fact, started a campaign for its withdrawal.

However, the trade union movement in India was not strong or organised enough to face the combined onslaught of the Government and the employers. The TUs also had to tackl the collaborators among the reactionary trade union leadership included in the trade union movement. In these circumstances, the Workers' and Peasants'

Party could not sit idle; it had to strengthen the organisation and prepare for the struggle.

It was, therefore, essential to expose and fight this section of reactionary leadership which was preaching its own policy of industrial peace: that the object of trade unionism was to preserve peaceful relations between the employer and the employee; that the policy exercising the right to strike was unwise; that strikes generally failed and was disastrous for the workers, etc. These sinister precepts could only make the working class timid and cowards.

Our conference, therefore, called upon the working class to boldly oppose these imbecile, defeatist and collaborationist ideas, and imbibe revolutionary ideas of struggle. The conference enunciated that strike was the only weapon in the armoury of the working class which can preserve and enhance their rights; strike was a great teacher, mobiliser and organiser; it raised the class-consciousness of the strikers in comprehending their own interests as against the interests of the employers, and the latter's Government, and gave rise to the spirit of greater determination to fight for their class gains to the bitter end. If small strikes failed, these only prepared for bigger ones, even for a general strike.

The working class was the most revolutionary class in the country. It had displayed during the textile mill strikes in Bombay, Bengal and elsewhere that it could make tremendous sacrifices in the common class struggles for improving their material condition. Not only that, the working class also came out in support of political strikes as well to serve the cause of the motherland.

We were for taking a clear line in the international sphere too. The reactionary and the collaborationist leadership wanted the Indian Trade Union Congress to be affiliated to the International Federation of Trade Unions (Amsterdam). We were dead opposed to this, and wanted it to be affiliated to the R.I.L.U. (Moscow). We were also advocating affiliating the Trade Union Congress to the anti-imperialist Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat (Shanghai). A bitter struggle was being fought by us in the Indian Trade Union movement to oust the reactionary, pro-employer leadership.

Political Resolution: The political resolution summed up the political movement that had developed upto then. The basic conditions that had led to radicalisation of the political movement were: trade depression, rising prices, employers' offensive against the working

class, impoverishment of the vast masses of the peasantry, unemployment, disillusionment even in sections of the petty bourgeoisie with the compromising policies of the Indian bourgeoisie vis-a-vis British Imperialism, spread of revolutionary ideas among the working class, and the leadership of the national revolution.

Here, I would like to mention a few important developments to enlighten the reader on the situation existing then. The most discussed political document of that time was the Nehru Committee Report which has been mentioned earlier. The Report was in reply to the challenge of Lord Birkenhead to Indian leaders to produce their own constitution since the whole nation was boycotting and rejecting the Simon Commission for constitutional reforms. But it was an unsatisfactory reply, and the Nehru Constitution betrayed the compromising character of the Indian bourgeoisie. It created dissidence among the Indian bourgeoisie, a section of which later set up an Independence for India League. The League was not a separate body, but a wing of the Indian National Congress and was, in fact, a sort of threat to the British rulers. The threat was: grant Dominion status as called for in the Nehru Report, or else the Indian National Congress would fight for complete independence.

But the threat did not work. The Nehru Report not only disillusioned a section of the petty bourgeoisie and the political conscious Indian masses but it also strengthened the hands of the Workers' and Peasants' Party leadership, which had been propagating that the Indian National Congress was not fighting for any national revolution but for a compromise with the British rulers and merely to secure some concessions.

The British rulers were determined to keep India under their control and were not amenable to any reasonable compromise with the Indian bourgeoisie. Therefore, the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress had to pass a resolution proclaiming its intention of securing *Swaraj* within one year and launching a non-violent, peaceful, no-tax campaign to secure it.

Under these circumstances the main task for us was to make the Workers' and Peasants' Party an independent organisation, politically to establish its separate entity, to free it from all bourgeois illusions, manoeuvres and manipulations, to dislodge the Congress from national leadership and to achieve hegemony in the anti-imperialist struggle. It was, indeed, too big a task for us to achieve in the then prevailing circumstances. Yet, that was the aim we set for

ourselves, though we did not have sufficient class-conscious cadres nor the wherewithal to push ahead. We mainly relied on the spontaneously rising tide of the anti-slavery and anti-imperialist movement.

We had so popularised the demand for socialism and for the abolition of landlordism that a number of staunch followers of the Congress and even Mahatma Gandhi were attracted by them and raised these slogans in Congress demonstrations against the Simon Commission.

Our political thesis explained that the Workers' and Peasants' Party was "the only organisation which had the correct policy and can unite and lead all the mass revolutionary forces of the country". The party could work with the Independence League in a united front on the basis of its demand for independence, but it was necessary to expose the faults in the League's programme and policy, and its vacillations.

The Communist International looked up to the WPP as "a fusion of two classes" and insisted on building an underground Communist Party of India to unite all the scattered communist groups and individuals into a single, independent and centralised party. But the message reached us too late in the conference to be put into practice.

The Indian National Congress also held its annual session in Calcutta in the last week of December 1928. Pandit Motilal Nehru, the main author of the Nehru Report on constitutional reforms, was the president of the session. The goal of Dominion status set by the Nehru Report created fissures among Congress delegates. Subhash Chandra Bose moved an amendment to the main political resolution rejecting Dominion status, but he secured only 973 votes against 1,350 in favour of Dominion Status.

The youth in the Congress fold was for complete independence, not for Dominion status. As a concession to the youth, the Congress resolution permitted propaganda to be conducted for the goal of independence. The radical youth spirit was voiced clearly by Srinivasa Iyengar, who said that it would be "suicidal for India to accept Dominion status". It was after this that Iyengar, Subhash Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru set up the Independence for India League.

The WPP took out a procession on 23 December from Shradhananda Park and marched to Congress Nagar, shouting slogans like: "Down with Imperialism", "Down with Dominion Status", "Down with the Nehru Report", "Long Live the Independent Soviet

Republic of India", etc. A short meeting was held near the Congress Nagar at which I and R. Mitra spoke along the lines of the above slogans.

Later, another huge procession of about 50,000 workers arrived from Lillooah and occupied the Congress pandal for about two and a half hours. Fiery speeches were delivered and a resolution passed demanding independence for India. Then the workers vacated the pandal. This was indeed a memorable event at the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress.

The WPP conference passed many resolutions. Some of them were: against detention of some of our comrades under Regulation III; against the continued imprisonment of certain political prisoners after their terms had expired; against the preparation for war by the British Government against the Soviet Republic; against the arrest of J.W. Johnstone, the fraternal delegate from the League Against Imperialism, and assuring him of our complete solidarity and agreement with the League; regretting the absence of some of our members because of their arrest on or before they could leave for the Calcutta conference; affiliating the WPP to the League Against Imperialism; and calling for a one-day general protest strike if the Trade Disputes Bill was passed.

A decision was taken to immediately organise the WPP. A constitution was adopted and the National Executive Committee elected. The following were its members: Bombay—K.N. Joglekar, R.S. Nimbker, S.A. Dange, S.V. Ghate; Punjab—Sohan Singh Josh, Bhag Singh, F.D. Mansur and M.A. Majid; UP—P.C. Joshi, L.A. Kadam, Dr. B.N. Mukherji and Gauri Shanker Sharma; Bengal—Muzaffar Ahmad, Dharni K. Goswami, R.K. Sarkar and G.K. Chakravarti.

A detailed programme for the peasantry and the working class was also passed. The Executive Committee was authorised to set up provincial committees of the WPP in the other provinces.

During the WPP session I was put up with Baba Gurdit Singh of the Kamagatamaru fame. He looked after my comforts very well. While in Calcutta I was invited on 2 January, 1929 by the Jamsshedpur Labour Federation to address their workers. I reached the steel city the next morning and was received by Mr. Homi, the popular Labour Federation leader, and some other Punjabis. Thousands of Punjabis worked in the iron factories in Jamsshedpur. I met Daswandha Singh, Hanu Ram, Mangal Singh and others, and addressed a rally of the

workers, and returned to Punjab a few days later.

The WPP conference had enthused and galvanised the participants, who later went back to their respective places to organise and mobilise the workers and peasants with redoubled vigour. My daily work-diary published in the Meerut papers shows that "I had become more active. I was elected president of the second Provincial Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Lahore, and that Comrade Bhagwati Charan of the Bhagat Singh Group played a leading role in my election.

The Naujawan Bharat Sabha conference was held in the Bradlaugh Hall on 22-23 February, 1929. It was almost a replica of the Calcutta WPP conference. My address to the conference was highly political, and almost all the issues discussed in the Calcutta conference were discussed in Lahore too. Many college students of Lahore attended the conference, and later after many years they told me that they were much impressed by my speech. The conference gave a call to the youth to fight to free India from British slavery and to establish complete independence leading to socialism. It demanded that the Indian princely states be abolished and debts by the British Government in India be repudiated. It was also decided that the workers and the peasants would be organised separately.

18. Red Rag for John Bull

THE October Socialist Revolution of Russia (November, 1917) was the biggest challenge to the existence of world imperialism, in particular the dominant British imperialism. For the first time in history, the most exploited of humanity, the working class, had overthrown the exploiting classes and set up its own class government under the leadership of the Russian proletariat. World imperialism read the writing on the wall, and was up in arms. But all its Herculean efforts, mobilisation of the 14-nation armies, arming of the feudal generals and war offensives failed to succeed. The revolutionary government led by the Russian proletariat boldly faced all the imperialist might and defeated all their mechanisation, and in the process of these struggles grew from strength to strength.

The Russian Revolution released tremendous forces of national liberation in the colonial world and opened new vistas of freedom before the world working class. India was no exception. Despite strict censorship and the control exercised by the British rulers on the Press, new ideas from the Russian revolution penetrated into India in various ways. Revolutionary ideas do not heed national boundaries. The on-going freedom movement in India and the working class got a new impetus from the Russian revolution, and a mass revolutionary movement surged forward to break the chains of slavery.

The British rulers did not much fear the reformist-bourgeois led struggle for freedom, but they were wary of the workers' and peasants' struggles for economic, social and political demands. The radical Indian youth were also hastening to the political forefront to fight for complete independence. The main worry of the British rulers was the fact that the mass movement was spearheaded by Marxist-Leninists in the growing Workers' and Peasants' Parties which had centralised into the All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party in the Calcutta conference.

Government intelligence reports of those times betray this worry,

bordering on panic, on the growing activities of the Communist Party of India. The movement had advanced further in 1928 through the All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party and the youth organisations. Director of Intelligence Bureau, D. Petrie, had evaluated the growing communist movement as "Soviet intrigues against the British Empire". According to him, Soviet Russia considered Great Britain "the chief bulwark against a worldwide revolution", and that "the *Bolsheviks are convinced that in the British Empire, the most vulnerable point is India*" and "till India was liberated Russia will not be rid of the menace of England". (Communism in India, 1927 pp. 1 & 2) (Emphasis mine).

With such evaluations and analyses, the British rulers' attitude with regard to the growth of the communist movement in India can well be imagined. Communism assumed the proportions of the biggest bug-bear for the British rulers in India, to be singled out, hunted and crushed. Volumes of correspondence exist between the Provincial Governors and the Viceroy, and the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India on this subject; the prime aim being to lay the ghost of communism to rest as early as possible. The highest officials were coming round to the view that a general prosecution for conspiracy be started against Indian communists.

On 26 August, 1928 F. Isemonger wrote to the Government: "The feasibility of a general prosecution for conspiracy might be examined provided that trial on such a charge was not held in Bengal, for success there would be improbable". Bombay was also ruled out for such a conspiracy trial because of the jury system there.

Long confabulations took place at the top government levels, and various suggestions were made by the Governors on how to smash the communist movement. The Punjab Governor was of the opinion that "powers might be taken by a direct executive order that a Communist should not leave the limits of his own province or district, and also should not make any speech at any public meeting". Authorities in Bombay and Punjab attached great importance to the development of Government propaganda and to enlist the support of the classes whom the communist programme threatened. UP and Bengal authorities took special steps to cut off money supplies reaching the Indian communists from abroad.

It was suggested that the print press be controlled further, because the law afforded no effective means of checking sedition and revolutionary propaganda in the Press. Another idea mooted was to

keep the nationalists and communists divided. The government also cautioned the bourgeoisie, landlords and their Congress representatives that "communism contains grave dangers for them", and, hence, they should not support the communists. The government was prepared to do anything to ensure against an artificial union between the two movements – national and Communist.

On 25 September, 1928, the Viceroy sent a telegram to the Secretary of State for India in London, saying: "We might be able to proceed against Bradley and Spratt in a general conspiracy case, prospects of which are now under investigation". According to Government reports, Bradley and Spratt "had done great harm" and it was necessary to arm the government with more powers to stop their activities.

Mr. Horton and Mr. D. Petrie examined the papers concerning the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case and recommended to the Government of India to put the case forthwith into a court with every hope of securing conviction. "The material shown to the would-be Prosecuting Counsel Langford James has convinced him that there would be a good case. *But we should not take the chance of submitting the case to a jury, however good the case there could be no assurance that a jury would convict; and we cannot put the case into court unless we are convinced that it will result in conviction.*"

The two principal centres of communist activities were Bombay and Calcutta, the two industrially developed cities of India. Cases of a conspiracy nature had been tried by the High Courts with a jury in those cities. But now neither the Home Department nor the government counsel Langford James was prepared to recommend that the communist conspiracy case trial be conducted there. They wanted to locate a place where they could pull the strings and secure conviction. They desperately wanted that the "conspirators" should be sentenced.

The Government thus chose Meerut Cantonment for the trial, having assured itself beforehand that there was no jury trial there. The "reason" for the trial place stated by the government was that the Workers' and Peasants' Party Conference had taken place there, and where P. Spratt, Muzaffer Ahmad, Sohan Singh Josh, Abdul Majid, Kidarnath Sehgal, P.C. Joshi and others had delivered speeches.

The government had anticipated that "objections will be raised on behalf of Spratt and Bradley that by conducting the trial at Meerut",

we are depriving them of the privilege of being tried by a jury, which they would enjoy at Calcutta and Bombay'. The Government, therefore, decided that it "will not agree to transfer of the case to some other place".

The Viceroy's Council discussed all the above points and laid down the strategy before the arrests were made. The privilege of trial by jury given by law to British citizens—Bradley and Spratt—was to be ignored, and the venue had to be Meerut cantonment. The Government also required the judicial pronouncement as early as possible to enable it to deal with further manifestations of communism. And the government also wanted clear pronouncement from the court that communist activities were illegal.

Readers should keep all these points in mind, because these were going to be raised again and again by the defence in the course of the trial, and the court was always to decide these points in favour of the Government, legally or otherwise. Such was the practice of British law and justice in India! Under British rule, the executive was all-powerful; the courts and the Legislative Assembly were to dance to its tune.

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Thus, everything decided, pre-planned and well-thought-out, the British authorities chose 20 March, 1929 to strike at the Indian Communist movement. Just a little after midnight, large scale raids assisted by a big police force took place in four provinces to arrest communists, trade union, peasant and left-wing national leaders. The raiding parties were also instructed to thoroughly search all places connected with these people and take into possession all papers printed or hand-written, correspondence files, newspapers, pamphlets and books which they could lay their hands on. Thus, several cartloads of material connected or not connected with the case were seized and deposited at the newly set up Meerut office of the prosecution for use during the conspiracy trial.

As many as 32 persons were taken into custody. The break-up was:

From Maharashtra—B.F. Bradley, S.V. Ghate, S.S. Mirajkar, K.N. Joglekar, R.S. Nimbkar, S.A. Dange, A.A. Alwe, G.R. Kasle, D. Thengdi, M.G. Desai, G. Adhikari, S.H. Jhabvala; and a few weeks later, L. Hutchinson.

From Punjab—Sohan Singh Josh, M.A. Majid, and Kidarnath Sehgal.

From U.P.—P.C. Joshi, Ayodhya Prasad, Gauri Shankar, Biswanath Mukherji, Dharmbir Singh, L. Kadam and Shaokat Usmani, and

From West Bengal—Philip Spratt, Muzaffar Ahmad, Dharni Goswami, Gopen Chakravarti, Gopal Basak, Radha Raman Mitra, Shibnath Banerji, Shamsul Huda and Kishorlal Ghose.

The above list was not final yet. Others wanted in the case in India were: Amir Haidar Khan, Abdul Halim, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, Pendse and Kulkarni. However, these comrades were later not proceeded against; only Amir Haidar Khan was arrested and sentenced to two years in a separate case.

There were others too, not residents of India but amenable to Indian law. They belonged to the Communist Party of Great Britain. They were: R. Page Arnot, R.P. Dutt, S. Saklatvala, Harry Pollit, George Allison alias D. Campbell, N.J. Upadhyaya and Graham Pollard. M.N. Roy's name was added later to the list. However, they were all dropped from the case later. The whole list showed that the British government wanted to make the Meerut Conspiracy Case trial a big anti-communist international show.

The case was actually launched against only 32 of us listed at the beginning. They were all prominent leaders of the working class, peasant and youth movements. The Bombay comrades had led big strikes under the aegis of the Bombay Girni Kamgar Union. Calcutta did not lag far behind, both Abdul Majid and Shaukat Usmani were Moscow returnees who had been tried and sentenced earlier in the Peshawar Bolshevik Conspiracy Case. The latter has written a book titled "Peshawar to Moscow" about his visit to the USSR.

The two Englishmen, Bradley and Spratt, were members of the CPGB who had been sent to India to help build the Indian trade union movement and organise the peasantry, the future ally of the working class. They were prominent members of the WPP, fighting for improving the condition of the workers and peasants. Bradley was a member of the executive committee of the GIP Railwaymen's Union and the Girni Kamgar Union. Philip Spratt, likewise, held prominent positions in the trade union movement in Calcutta. He was an intellectual and a Marxist theoretician. Spratt had written a booklet "India and China", for which he and Mirajkar were charge-sheeted and arrested under the Sedition law. But the jury had

released them.

Hutchinson was a free-lance journalist who took up the work after the arrest of the Meerut "conspirators" and began to edit the *New Spark*. He too, was later arrested and brought to the Meerut jail.

The arrest of these three Englishmen along with Indian Communists and leftists was a testimony that there were Englishmen, especially English Communists, who were fighting their own colonialist brethren in India for India's freedom. In fact, Comrades Bradley and Spratt did great service to the cause of the Indian working class by imparting the experience of British trade union organisation to the Indian trade unionists.

I held high positions in all the organisations of the youth, WPP, etc., in Punjab. In fact, I was one of the founder-members of these organisations. Comrade Abdul Majid was in-charge of the trade union front and had built up a very strong Press Workers' Union in Lahore. Comrade Kidarnath Sehgal was a Left nationalist and a devotee of the cause of freedom and self-sacrifices.

The searches during the arrest raids in Punjab were so thorough that even innocent books were seized from my house. There were two reasons for this: the search warrants were executed literally and, secondly, the sub-inspectors were hardly literate! Imagine, my copies of "Self-Help" by Samuel Smiles, "The Republic of Plato" and "My Religion" by Tolstoy were taken away from my house! In Amjad's case, they took away all his clothes, bed sheets, pillow and even unwashed linen!

However, in all their searches the police did not find a single lethal weapon—pistol or revolver—with any of those arrested anywhere. I had a *Kirpan* in the village house presented to me in Lyallpur. It was not seized because it represented a religious symbol. In the Meerut Conspiracy trial, the deadliest weapon produced was not any firearm, but communist literature!

Reaction of the Indian Press and the national leadership to the Meerut case arrests was very favourable to us, though the pro-British Press howled for the blood of communists. Correct comments were made in the Indian Press that the British Government wanted to crush the growing trade union movement. The Bolshevik bogey was raised to get the Public Safety Bill and the Trade Disputes Bill passed in the Assembly. In Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's view, the government wanted "to strike terror in the hearts of those who worked for labour or youth movement". Dr. Saif-ud-Din Kitchlew,

addressing a meeting in Amritsar, said: "It has become a national affair inasmuch as it was intended to aim a blow at the organisation of workers and peasants". Mahatma Gandhi wrote in *Young India*: "The Government believes in a periodical exhibition of its capacity to supersede all law and to discover to a trembling India the red claws which usually remain under cover".

We were lodged in separate cells of the Meerut District Jail. A strong guard was mounted on us, and we were forbidden from talking with one another. I was not even allowed to take my turban and shoes inside my cell. Nor were any books allowed.

Our plight can only be imagined. Terrible stench of the urine pot prevailed in every cell. You could not speak to your next door companion; no reading, no writing. You only heard the constant tip-tap of the steps of the guard pacing up and down outside your cell, while you counted the things lying in the cell or the number of wooden planks lining the cell ceiling to keep away boredom. For a while you saw the weaving of a web by a spider, but soon got fed up. It was very sickening. Yes, our captors wanted to drive us mad; yes that's what they were after. You wanted to cry out, "Get us out of this living hell"; you felt suffocated and wanted to breathe some fresh air.

Hour after hour, day after day, for three weeks we endured these hellish, miserable conditions. Our plight, somehow, leaked out, and the Press took up the issue in public. Only then were we shifted to a big barrack, all together. We saw one another's face for the first time in three weeks, and shook hands. Some of us had never met before, but that did not matter.

19. Meerut Conspiracy Case

AFTER a prolonged wait, the Meerut Conspiracy Case came up on 12 June, 1929 before a Special Magistrate, Mr Milnerwhite, who was to enquire whether a prima facie case existed against the accused or not. It was all a sham, a formality and sheer waste of time because everything had been fixed by the British Government beforehand with regard to procedure and the verdict. The farce was being enacted to parade the British law and justice before the public to bamboozle them and to vitiate the Indian political atmosphere with rabid anti-communist propaganda.

Mr Milnerwhite was just another British bureaucrat operating in India, but the fact that there were three English prisoners along with the Indian accused, made some difference in his attitude towards us. He was tactful, somewhat considerate and not very aggressive in his dealings. This is not to say that there were no verbal clashes between the Magistrate and the prisoners; they were there, but he handled them in a manner that these were settled mostly amicably.

The Meerut trial was the latest in a series of Communist conspiracy trials. Earlier, there were four Peshawar Bolshevik Conspiracy case trials and the Kanpur Conspiracy Case trial. The main charge against the two dozen or so communists in these trials, who were subsequently sentenced to various terms of imprisonment, was that they had either gone to Moscow or had organised some trade unions in India and led some strikes. Being a communist in India and acting up to one's conviction was a crime under the British *raj*.

As in other conspiracy cases, here also we were charged with "conspiring to overthrow the King Emperor". I was reminded of the Akali Conspiracy Case in which I along with other Akali accused were charged with the same crime of "conspiring to overthrow the King Emperor". Then, the charge was that the Sikhs wanted to establish a *Sikh Raj* in place of the King Emperor's *raj*! Here, at Meerut, we were accused of setting up a *coolie raj* instead! To strive to overthrow the British usurpers' *raj* in India was the biggest crime in an

enslaved India that cost the country so dearly by way of lives of hundreds of young men.

The government prosecution counsel was Langford James, president of the European Association of Calcutta. He was one of the bitterest enemy of Indian freedom struggle, let alone communism. In early December, 1926, at a banquet in Calcutta in honour of Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, he had delivered a speech, in the course of which he had said that for reasons of "moral nature", the continuation of the British rule in India was "necessary for the good of the Indians themselves"!

This European Association under Langford James had tried to make General Dyer, the butcher of Jallianwala Bagh, a hero, and had presented him a big purse in appreciation of his heinous crime. However, the storm of protests and hatred of the people of India against General Dyer was so overwhelming that the British Government was compelled to send him back to England in sack cloth and ashes.

This very Langford James opened the Meerut Conspiracy trial before the Special Magistrate, Milnerwhite, with a long speech lasting four days. He repeated this performance before the Sessions Judge as well, in greater detail. In the words of Comrade Hutchinson, his speech "from the beginning to the end was nothing but pro-government propaganda, anti-communist propaganda and anti-Russian propaganda. For Langford James the main criminals were the Russian Government and the Communist International. He denounced Marx, Lenin and Stalin with equal vehemence and expressed opinions of the Russian Revolution which even Lord Rothermere (the greatest opponent of the revolution) would consider exaggerated! (Conspiracy at Meerut, pp 89-90)

His political speech was delivered before the Sessions Court for seven days. His address was a landmark in the history of trials in any British court. Here are a few, only a few, of his gems.

"It is the case for the prosecution that these accused are Bolsheviks, i.e. they cherish at the Bolshevik ideal, and that they designed and worked to instal in India the same rule as that exists in Russia... To be a Bolshevik of unimpeachable character, you require certain definite qualifications to which the ordinary man does not aspire. You do not love your country, you are anti-country, you are anti-God and you are anti-family... Infact, a Bolshevik of unimpeachable character is anti-everything..! A large part of Bolshevik propaganda is directed to destroy belief in God, whether he be the

god of the Christians, the Jews, the Mohammedans or the Buddhists... I am sure the belief in the God of Hinduism will also have to be destroyed..."

He went on and on in this vicious strain, condemning the principles, ideology and philosophy of Marxism-Leninism. The bulk of his speech contained quotations from the writings and decisions of the Communist International, the Soviet leaders and their journals. He had striven every nerve to show that communism was the greatest curse on earth as the mouthpiece of British imperialism and the Indian bourgeois class, he performed his duty well.

All his carefully chosen quotations only aimed at:

- showing that the communists are the most uncivilised people, are out to destroy civilisation;
- isolating the communists from their countrymen by depicting them as the "enemies" of their own country;
- changing them with being anti-national in order to deny them sympathies and assistance of the nationalist leaders and forces;
- enlisting the sympathies of the general mass of believers in religion and God, against the communists to justify their prosecution; and
- depicting the communists as destroyers of family life and indicating, by implication, that the Communists stood for promiscuous sexual relations.

The advocates of the exploiting and blood-sucking capitalist class can go to any length to divide the fighting patriots of the working and the exploited classes. Horrendous charges have been brought against the newly-rising working class by the old, decaying, exploiting class in order to keep themselves in saddle. But all its tyranny and murder could not help it stay in power. History has condemned it, and by giving it the order of the boot made it quit the stage.

In the initial stages of the Meerut trial, many prominent lawyers came to defend our cases. Some of them were K.P. Nariman, D.P. Sinha, M.C. Chagla, C.B. Gupta and K.C. Chakravarti. Mr Chakravarti stated that the charges enumerated by the prosecution counsel showed that the Government was as much launching a case against the Soviet government as against the 32 accused! Hence, "the only law which applied to such a conspiracy case were was the law of

nations", and the "municipal tribunal" such as the District Court of Meerut had no jurisdiction over the case.

Senior defence counsel, D.P. Sinha, maintained that it was the first systematic prosecution by the government of a group of men holding certain ideals and cherishing certain beliefs, even though their actions were not contrary to law.

The prosecution examined 320 witnesses and filed 12,500 exhibits. But most of us refused to cross-examine the prosecution witnesses, nor did we make any statements or call any witnesses. Only Dharamvir Singh, A.A. Alwaye and S.H. Jhabwala made statements saying that they were not communists.

The trial in the Magistrate's Court came to an end on 15 December, 1929, after about seven months. In summing up the case, the Special Magistrate put down 17 counts against us, saying that "it has been definitely proved" that the Communist International in Moscow was the supreme head of all communist organisations throughout the world, and wanted to set up workers' republics in every country through violent revolutions. It wanted to cause a revolution in India by overthrowing the sovereignty of the King Emperor, and with this objective it has formed a conspiracy and organisation like CPI, the WPP and youth sabhas, etc., etc."

We were committed to trial in the Sessions Court on 13 January, 1930. Only Dharamvir Singh was acquitted after he gave an undertaking: "I do not agree with the object or methods of communists. I am an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi and believe firmly in non-violence; and in practice, I am a nationalist and propose to remain so".

Since the case was based mostly on communist literature, we had applied to Milnerwhite to supply us with all the literature which concerned the case. This was all proscribed literature which could not be secure in the open. The magistrate accepted our request, but on one condition that the literature would be kept under lock and key, and Comrade Bradley would be in charge of it. We readily accepted this condition.

Milnerwhite also sanctioned that all the prohibited or proscribed literature be provided to the accused inside the jail to help them prepare their case. Pamphlets, books, etc., which were not available to us outside, were now made available to us inside the Meerut District Jail! We listed them and stacked them in an almirah, and the key of the lock was handed over to us. It was a god-send for us Com-

munists to have been supplied about 200 books and pamphlets to study. Almost all the pamphlets and books were new and very useful to me, this filled me with joy. I studied the literature voraciously to equip myself politically and theoretically for my future work. The entire period of trial of four years or so was utilised by me to study Marxism-Leninism. I hoped to become a graduate in communism from the Meerut Jail University!

This acquisition of books was most valuable as it satisfied our hunger for communist literature and enabled us to increase our political and general knowledge of scientific socialism. The library was under the close supervision of the authorities lest any of the "poison" should escape to the outside world. It was periodically inspected to ensure that no books were missing. The library was of immense help to us in our defence as well.

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As the case progressed, the accused began to find their political bearings. Groups of like-minded prisoners began to be formed. The 14 communists formed their own group and began to function as such inside the jail. We were the most disciplined and organised group which discussed and decided on many matters which cropped up in our day-to-day detention life. There were a few others who also followed the communist discipline, but were not formally members of the CPI. But individualism in any shape or form was not tolerated.

However, Comrade Dange did display individual tendencies and refused to be disciplined by our collective. Hence, he was dropped from our group. He never rejoined the group throughout the trial, gave a separate statement in the sessions court as an individual and did not sign the statement given by us collectively under our signatures.

In the early stages, Congress leaders took great interest in the Meerut case. A number of top Congress leaders came to meet us inside the jail. Even Mahatma Gandhi found time to come and have a talk with us in the barrack in which we were lodged. He told us that he was going to launch a peaceful satyagraha movement very soon. On this, Comrade Dange quipped: "We hope you will not withdraw the movement again if another Chauri-Chaura takes place!"

A Meerut Defence Committee was set up with Pandit Motilal Nehru as its president. An appeal for funds was also made on behalf

of the Committee. Defence Committees were also formed in Great Britain and the Soviet Union and some financial assistance did come from the latter quarters. But it was not sufficient to meet the charges of the lawyers and their office expenses. But it did demonstrate the growth of proletarian internationalist solidarity. With the prolongation of the case, interest in the defence flagged, and we were left to our own resources and resourcefulness.

Some of us made an application for the transfer of the case either to Bombay or Calcutta, where jury would be available to try the case. But our applications were rejected out of hand. The Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court, rejecting the first application, said that the trial was being conducted under "most normal conditions" in this country!

The final application for transfer on our behalf was made on 23 January, 1930 by two top lawyers in India, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and Pandit Motilal Nehru, arguing that the case be transferred to the Allahabad High Court and that it be heard by a jury. Chief Justice S. Edward Grimwoodmears dismissed the application and ordered that the case be proceeded with in the Meerut Sessions Court. His arguments in doing so were not at all convincing, as he was simply dittoing the decisions made earlier by the Government of India in this connection.

20. Meerut Court as A Platform

DISCUSSIONS with Marxists is great education. In our group in the Meerut jail were Marxist theoreticians like Dr. G. Adhikari, Philip Spratt and P.C. Joshi and practical politicians like Bradley, R.S. Nimbker, K.N. Joglekar, S.S. Mirajkar, S.V. Ghate and others. In our group meetings, all kinds of political and economic subjects were discussed and I for one benefitted from them immensely. All the co-accused lived and ate together in the barracks, occasionally pulling each other's legs in fun for pastime. M.G. Desai was popular for his broken Hindi and S.A. Dange for his jokes. It was a good, livewire company.

Intellectually, there can be no comparison between the Akali Sikh detenués of Lahore or other Punjab jails and the communist and socialist detenués in Meerut jail. The latter were by far well informed and learned. In comparison, the Akali farmers' knowledge was very limited in political, social or cultural fields. Among the Akali detenués, there were two professors of literature and a professor of science. But the communist and socialist detenués were well read not only in English literature, but those who had also read great French and Russian authors. Dr. Gangadhar Adhikari was a Ph.D. in Physical Chemistry, and had studied philosophy at Berlin University. Indeed, there were intellectual giants among my co-accused.

The sessions trial in R.L. York's court began on 31 January, 1930. We had accepted Mahatma Gandhi's advice of "not assisting the farce by being represented by a counsel". We did not "run into the trap", and did the "wise" thing, according to him.

Prosecution Counsel Langford James harangued for more than a week against the Third International, the Russian revolution, communism, the Communist Party of India and us, the accused. His line of anti-communist propaganda was the same as he had unfolded in the Magistrate's Court, but this time his damning scale was wider. He was almost lecturing that "to be a communist was to be a satan incarnate!"

Only after Langford James' anti-communist harangue, we of the Communist group took a very significant decision: we decided that this so-called British lion should be bearded in his own den, and that we would make the Sessions Court our propaganda platform and refute all the rubbish accusations the prosecutor had made in the Court, and through the Court before the world. If the Government was bent upon discrediting and crushing communism, our group would face the challenge boldly and stand firmly by Communist principles and proletarian internationalism without fear of consequences and propagate them in the Court for the benefit of the general public at large.

We further decided that we would not put up any defence through legal loopholes to secure reduced sentences but would challenge the very nature of the charge of "Communist conspiracy" and expose the intention and purpose of the British rulers behind it.

With this political end in view, we decided to conduct our own defence and nominated Joglekar, Nimbkar and Muzaffar Ahmed to look after the defence. Langford James approached us on behalf of the Government and offered us free legal aid, but we refused. We engaged one Sheoprasad, a junior lawyer of Meerut, to represent us in case any one of us fell ill and was unable to attend the Court so that the proceedings were not held up. We paid him a very small fee for his services, but he remained with us till the end of the trial.

Lawyers generally derail their clients by concentrating only on legal quibbling and loopholes. We firmly rejected the defence lawyer's line and decided not to take any advantage of these legalities.

I am glad to say that I played a significant part in taking these decisions. I had taken the non-cooperation line in the Akali conspiracy case, and I advocated the same view in regard to this case as well. My comrades appreciated my stand on taking a firm course in the sessions court and were of the same view as mine. Thus, collectively, we decided on the line to expose British imperialists' machinations to curb communist thought and movement.

Comrade Philip Spratt, the main accused in the case, had mentioned my name approvingly in his long statement before the Sessions Judge.

(1) "As Sohan Singh has pointed out, no attack on communism is complete without the allegation that the money comes from Moscow, and in this case prosecution has followed the fashion. But there is no

evidence for it". (p. 382, para 3).

(2) "As Sohan Singh has pointed out, communists are quite normal people in general. They support or join the Party because it has what they regard as sensible and practical policy in the same way as people join other parties." (p. 362 last para).

(3) "It is obvious that this case was launched not as a consequence of any crime committed by us but as part of a political policy. In this connection, I agree with what various others, Mitra, Chakravarti, Joshi and Sohan Singh Josh have said in their statements." (page 456, para 2).

The Communist group asked each one of us to study the case thoroughly in order to prepare statements to boldly defend our revolutionary political activities, rebut the wrong and distorted facts and uphold the democratic rights of freedom of speech, assembly and organisation, etc. We decided to defend the Russian revolution, Marxism-Leninism and the right to have international connections.

Our main argument was: The CPGB (Communist Party of Great Britain) was legal in Great Britain. It had its international connections with the League Against Imperialism, the Communist International, and so on. It had the right to publish, read and buy communist literature. Why then was India being discriminated against in this respect? Why were we being deprived of this scientific thought? Why were the CPI and communist literature hunted and treated as illegal here in India?

We stood four-square for complete independence and against the Nehru Report which demanded Dominion status from Britain. We were right in criticising the Congress leaders as "bourgeois compromisers" and not serious in their professed fight for complete independence.

The Meerut prisoners reacted to almost all important political happenings taking place outside in the world. On 23 March, 1931 news reached us that Bhagat Singh, Sukh Dev and Rajguru had been hanged on the eve of the Karachi National Congress session. We were shocked, and decided that we must vehemently protest against these hangings on the morrow in the court. I was to lead the protest.

On 24 March, as the judge arrived in the court and took his chair, I stood up and began condemning the execution of the martyred heroes. The judge threatened to take action against me, shouting at the top of his voice for me to sit down. But I ignored his threats, and submitted the following application to him, as also began to read it

aloud:

“We are attending the court today under the grim shadow of a dastardly execution. The execution of Comrades Bhagat Singh, Sukh Dev and Rajguru has been a cold-blooded murder, a most gruesome piece of imperial justice, and a cowardly act of white terror. These valiant men have been the victims of barbarous domination of British imperialism against which they had the daring and courage to revolt.

“We honour them as martyrs to the cause of national revolution in India. We admire their daring and sacrifice. We join in the deep sorrow of their comrades, friends and relations.

“We ask you, therefore, to forward this telegram of commiseration to their Defence Committee through the Magistrate”.

The telegram read: Sardar Krishan Singh, Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore. We write to express our horror at the execution of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukh Dev and admiration at their martyrdom. Meerut Accused.

On 27 March, 1928, we had celebrated the 12th anniversary of the Russian revolution by singing the Internationale and shouting slogans like: “Long live the Russian Revolution”, “Victory to the First Workers’ State”, “Down with enemies of Soviet Union”, “Prepare for world revolution and up with Indian Revolution”, etc., before the arrival of the Magistrate in the courtroom.

I also requested the Magistrate to pass on a telegram from us 25 accused to the president of the Union of the Socialist Soviet Republic which contained greetings for the 12th anniversary of the Workers’ Republic.

*

To sit through a case, week after week, month after month for more than four years is a horrible experience. It becomes sickening to hear over and over again the same thing repeated in one form or the another, often more than a dozen times during a single day. It is natural to become absent-minded or lose interest in the proceedings. Only something new or different by some witness can enliven the interest for a while. Then, once again, interest begins to flag.

We spent most of our time in the dock cutting jokes. Somebody would draw a cartoon of York or Langford James and circulate it among us, evoking smiles of approbation. Everybody began sketching the facial expression of somebody or the other and passed it on.

Dr. Adhikari was quite adapt in this art. He would caricature my beard and distort my figure to make the comrades laugh at my cost. Some court titbits were also scribbled almost daily, and circulated. This cartooning and doodling kept us in some humour.

Often we also circulated in the dock few very small-sized papers. Their titles were *Punch*, *Undertrial*, *Arcom Bulletin*, etc. The targets of their attacks generally were P.C. Joshi, S.V. Ghate, Sohan Singh Josh, B.F. Bradley, M.G. Desai and so on. Some cartoons were also included in these "dock papers". I, too, took part in this game. In the *Punch* of 21 March, 1930, just after our first year in jail, I wrote:

"It is now an open secret that the judge, the prosecution counsel and even the government are fed up with this case and want somehow or the other to rid themselves of this cumbersome boring job. But how to get satisfaction for both the parties? The proposal is before us; there is no doubt about that. But who is to break the deadlock and how?...We hope some via media will be found and matters set right".

I wrote a loconic also: "Humour is humour so long as its victim is another man; but when the sting of the humour is brought to bear on you, it is no longer humour, but an abuse!"

In this manner, we killed our trial period in the dock driving boredom out with mirth-making. Inside the jail too, we wrote wallpapers poking fun at each other without malice or ill-will, and enjoyed the jokes in a healthy spirit.

Langford James was generally the butt-end of our cartooning and doodling. He was a chronic crusader against communism, clever and quick-witted. He possessed an inexhaustible vocabulary of invectives, and very cleverly fitted political oratory into legal verbosity.

He also kept the court in good humour. He once remarked to Comrade Bradley that the Meerut trial would hasten his own death. He did die on 28 March, 1930 during the pendency of the trial.

We used to poke fun on his gesticulations, flourishes and shafts of humour. Hutchinson wrote:

*"Hail Langford James,
Saviour of Britain's grace;
Whose fees are more handsome
than his face!"*

About me, Comrade Hutchinson wrote in his *Conspiracy at Meerut*: "Sohan Singh Josh, a gigantic Sikh from Amritsar, the ferocity of whose exterior belied his mild disposition. (p. 67)

After Langford James' death, K. Mc J. Kemp replaced him as the chief government counsel. He was humourless, dry as dust but legally as vociferous as his predecessor. Mitter, the junior counsel, in effect, conducted the case.

We used to go to the court shouting revolutionary slogans and singing revolutionary songs. Dr. Adhikari and I led in singing the revolutionary songs. I had composed two such songs to the tune of the "Red Army March" and an English tune. These songs became very popular not only with our friends in the Meerut case, but also with the working classes of Calcutta and Bombay outside. We also sang the Internationale, the Red Flag song and Kakori martyr Ram Prasad Bismil's Urdu song "Now our heart's desire is to sacrifice our lives... etc." (*Sarfaroshi ki tamanna...*)

Slogans were shouted as suited the situation. The common slogans were: "Long live the Revolution", "Death to British Imperialism", "Communist Party Zindabad", "Long Live Soviet Revolution", "Our goal complete independence", "We want socialism", "Workers of the world, unite", etc.

The Meerut case evoked worldwide attention. It drew protests from almost all quarters, including statements from such international celebrities as the Archbishop of York, H.G. Wells, Professor Albert Einstein, Romain Rolland, Professor Harold Laski and A.H. Tawney. President Roosevelt of America was also reported to have shown interest in the case.

Professor Laski significantly wrote about the case:

"The Meerut trial belongs to the class of cases of which the Mooney Trial and the Sacco-Venzetti Trial in America, the Dreyfus Trial in France, the Reichstag Fire Trial in Germany are the supreme instances. Because they are foreign, we regard them with pious horror. If we learn of what our government is capable, perhaps we shall learn also that we must refrain from criticism unless we shall learn also that we must refrain from criticism unless we are willing to prevent the occurrence of similar instances amongst ourselves." (Preface to *Conspiracy at Meerut*)

The CPGB, the League Against Imperialism and the Communist International kept the world informed of what was going on at Meerut, how the accused were being treated and what fate awaited them at the end. The British Labour Government of McDonald refused to intervene in the case, and was hard put to reply awkward questions asked in the British Parliament by the Labour and other

Left members.

The stage was finally reached when we were called upon by the judge to make our statements, confess or refute the charges brought against us and answer the questions put to us by the prosecution. We had been eagerly waiting this opportunity. We made our statements which were thoroughly imbued with revolutionary spirit and youthful exuberance.

We did not care for the threats held out by the judge, who from time to time warned us that he would punish us for contempt of court. We acted fearlessly in accordance with the resolution we had agreed to earlier. I can say that our statements were an example for other revolutionaries fighting against British imperialism on how to conduct oneself in a bourgeois imperialist court. We were literally fired with the ideal of building a new society based on the working class revolution and were not afraid to speak out on that score.

The statements are too long to be reproduced here, covering as they do 3,092 pages printed in four volumes. They are a mine of information on Marxist-Leninist philosophy, political economy and dialectical materialism. The recording of our statements took over 10 months. Besides individual statements, we gave a common statement explained in it the nature of the Indian revolution, the classes that are to bring it about and the role of the CPI in it. It also delineated our views on Marxism-Leninism and its application in Indian context.

Comrade Phillip Spratt, replying to the charges brought against him, said in his 100-page statement:

“We work under the initial—one may say, fundamental—disadvantage of being tried by our enemy’s court and under our enemy’s law. An almost equally formidable obstacle is the disparity between our opponents’ financial resources and ours...On general grounds such as these we maintain the impossibility of impartiality or a fair trial in a case between the ruling class and the representatives of its political opponents... In the first place, the case was launched at Meerut...Then we had been refused a jury...We have been refused bail. We have found that while the prosecution could bring witnesses from abroad, we cannot...While they have a more or less unlimited staff of CID men and other officials and technical experts and so on to assist them, the people who come to us turn out to be suspicious characters who have been put away under Regulation III. But, nevertheless, the pretence of fair trial and even-handed justice is kept up. Our case, which is already on the way to becoming a scandal, is help-

ing appreciably to expose the gigantic fraud of the civilising mission and impartial justice of British imperialism in India”.

Comrade Ben Bradley, exposing British rulers' hypocrisy and double-dealing with regard to our defence, said: “Thus the position was that while the prosecution with their unlimited resources could bring eight witnesses from England, several from French possessions in India and one from an Indian State, the defence could not even get summons issued for our witnesses... This trial is an attack upon the working class movement and specially the militant trade union movement. The trial as such is a political trial, and political trial of this character only masks the state of panic that the bourgeois have got into, and it has also registered the fact that they are going along the path to their destruction.

I believe that the proletarian revolution will come and that communism will triumph...

“I am confident that the trial will have the very opposite effect to that which the prosecution desires... The British Labour Party is acting as the lackey of imperialism and outdoing even the diehard Tory Party in carrying out a reign of terror in India and throughout the empire”.

Dr. G. Adhikari, defending our national and international politics, said:

“The nature of the present case is such that the question of defending the individual does not arise. The question is to defend the Party, its ideology, the right to exist, its right to affiliate to and be assisted by the Communist International ... We as Communists find it our duty to defend it (C.I.) before the court and the public and place imperialism and capitalism on trial. The prosecution has hurled the vilest abuse on communism, the communists and the C.I. They have said that our crime is not merely against the state, but against society as a whole. I shall treat their abuse with the contempt it deserves; but (also) hurl back the charge of being criminals against human society as a whole, in the teeth of the imperialists and their highly-paid agents themselves. Who are the social criminals, I ask? The blood-thirsty imperialists who carried fire and sword through entire continents, who have instituted a colonial regime of blood and tears, who have reduced the toiling millions of these continents to abject poverty, intolerable slavery and are threatening them with mass extinction as a people; or the Communists who are out to mobilise the revolutionary energies of the toiling masses of the whole world and hurl it

against their wretched system based on ruthless oppression and brutal exploitation, smash it and create in its place a new one and thus save human society and its civilisation from the catastrophe towards which it is undoubtedly heading? The official representatives of social criminals in this case are sitting on the persecution benches.”

In a 350-page statement, Comrade Joglekar hit the nail on the head:

“I must congratulate the Indian Government and their foolish counsellors, the Bombay and Bengal bourgeoisie, for its stupidity in cooking up this case and raising a mountain out of a mole-hill. They have done unconsciously the greatest service to Indian revolution by glorifying and raising our ordinary, innocent, elementary trade union and national emancipatory work to the heights of scientific revolutionary deeds. By prosecuting us they have given tremendous prestige to the cause of communism and have directly accentuated the growth and spread of communist philosophy by kindling a keen desire in the minds of the intelligentsia to dive into the depths of communist principles and philosophy. What we could not have achieved, left to ourselves in 10 years of free activity, we have achieved in three years (1929, 1930, 1931) of prison life”.

My statement followed the same line. In a 70-page statement I said:

“To begin with I want to make it quite clear... that I am not going to retract a single word or a single comma that I spoke or wrote outside, because it is not in keeping with my nature to be a renegade to my principles for fear of imprisonment or even death... The prospect of getting hard labour for years is a foregone conclusion for me. This cannot prevent me from speaking my views strongly because I feel strongly on all the points up for decision in this case.

“Now this is a prosecution, pure and simple, for our communist views and for our being communists. That is to say, we are being tried for our politics. Politics is nothing if it is not an expression of class antagonism and class views in society... The government does not want that these unpalatable views be uttered and they being in power want to suppress these views by hook or by crook. A few books, a few theses and some speeches simply show our opinions; nothing more, nothing less.

“The case (to deprive the King Emperor of his sovereignty in India) is so serious, so very serious, that any man washing his hands of his radical opinions and giving an undertaking like Dharmbir

Singh that he will not be a communist, will never ally with them ... can easily get off scotfree. I abhor to buy my release like this. I, therefore, challenge the British imperialism to do its worst ... etc."

In the Magistrate's Court, Langford James had produced a chit supposed to have been written by me advocating violent armed revolution, and flourishing it in the court he had called me "Honest Mr. Josh". But this chit never saw the light of the day after that. In winding up my statement, I said: "This is the whole truth spoken by Honest Mr. Josh, what remains to be seen is the price I shall have to pay for this honesty".

The statements of the remaining nine Communist leaders exude the same revolutionary fervour, but I am unable to quote even a small part of them, for reasons of space.

The Communist Party of Great Britain took keen interest in the Meerut case trial. It sent us some financial aid, and continuously exposed the inhuman conditions and the hot climate in which we were kept in jail. The progressive press in Britain, and the pamphlet-poster propaganda carried on by the CPGB contributed in a big way to highlight the case internationally and help forge a united front against the British rulers in India. Some Britain MPs also played a helpful role in the campaign against the British India Government for first launching and subsequently casually handling the case.

A big agitation was conducted by Mrs. Mary Knight, mother of Comrade Hutchinson, in England to keep us in the limelight. She kicked up a row because her son's letters to her were withheld, and later opened and censored before being passed on to her. She protested that the letters she received were censored and blacked out, and legal books and the legal advice sent by her from England were not received by her son.

Mrs. Knight sought an interview with the Postmaster-General in this connection. But he refused to meet her, saying "No good purpose can be served by this". But she pursued the matter doggedly and took it to the British Parliament. Even there she could not get justice. Not only that, the British Government sent two clerks from the G.P.O. to Meerut at Government expense to tender evidence on the contents of the letters they had opened. Mrs. Mary Knight was a brave fighter for our cause, keeping the Meerut case issue burning before the British Parliament and the British public.

We were transferred to the Naini Central Jail to be nearer Allahabad for consultation in our appeal before the High Court. With

the permission of the Jail Superintendent, we made arrangements with the Allahabad Public Library to get non-political books inside jail. It was here that I read many books on linguistics and took copious notes.

In the Meerut jail, I had learnt Bengali and Marathi languages, and translated some poems of Rabindranath Tagore, a piece or two from Sarat Chandra Chatterji and some other Bengali stories. They were published in a book form—*Specimen of Bengali Literature*—in 1934, the first to appear in Punjabi in 12-point small letters. I also translated some Marathi pieces which were published in the monthly magazine *Prabhat*.

I also studied linguistics through the books received through the Allahabad Public Library. Later in life I wrote two papers on the subject and presented them in the annual conference of the Punjabi Lekhak Sabha. Later, I wrote a series of articles on linguistics of the Punjabi language. That great Punjabi lover, writer and actor Balraj Sahani had greatly appreciated my articles.



The case dragged on and on. Witnesses came, deposed and went away. Legal wranglings, arguments and sham fights among lawyers continued occasionally—arguments whether the conspiracy was established or not—all bourgeois legal fireworks. We sat through it all, thoroughly un-interested, impatient to know what length of punishment was in store for each of us so that once we finished our sentences we could go out in the world again and spread our activities.

At long last, the judgement was delivered on 16 January, 1933, imposing heavy sentences as long foreseen by all of us.

R.L. York's conclusion was that "these men (Muzaffer Ahmed, Dange and Shaukat Usmani) are a great danger to the state" and "It means even more so than in the case of other accused". The judge took a very serious view regarding the British accused, Spratt and Bradley, and he endeavoured to "make the punishment to fit the crime".

We were then sentenced as follows:

"Muzaffar Ahmad, accused—transportation for life.

Dange, Spratt, Ghate, Joglekar and Nimbkar, accused—each to transportation for a period of 12 years.

Bradley, Mirajkar and Usmani, accused—each to transportation

for a period of 10 years.

Sohan Singh Josh, Majid and Goswamy, accused – each to transportation for a period of 7 years.

Ayodhya Prasad, Adhikari, P.C. Joshi and Desai, accused – each to transportation for a period of 5 years.

Chakravarti, Basak, Hutchinson, Mitra, Jhabwala and Sehgal, accused – each to 4 years' rigorous imprisonment.

Shamsul Huda, Alve, Kasla, Gauri Shankar and Kadam, accused – each to 3 years' rigorous imprisonment".

There was a world-wide furore against these barbarous sentences. A storm of protests and condemnations raged in the Left wing working class throughout the world against the judgement.

The British Press was very outspoken and condemnatory. The *Daily Herald* of London lambasted the judgement as "one of the greatest judicial scandals in the history of the Empire". The *Manchester Guardian* stigmatised it as "a long-drawn scandal of British Justice in India. The Secretary of State for India's telegram of 18 February, 1933 to the Viceroy of India reflected the Liberal and Leftist opinion in Britain. The telegram said:

"I am somewhat exercised in my mind over (the) severity of some of (the) sentences passed in the Meerut case, and I think it is right to let you know that there is a general feeling of uneasiness on the subject in various quarters here...My difficulties here will not be made easier if there is delay in hearing the appeal and possibly another six months elapse before the matter is settled in court. You are no doubt alive to the difficulty of my position, and I shall be glad to learn your views on it".

The British law and justice stood thoroughly exposed. Communists throughout the world were horrified at the severity of the sentences. The Indian Office in London was flooded with protest resolutions from various British trade unions. The Leftist MPs in Britain raised telling questions on the subject in Parliament, and the British Government was hard put to reply in any satisfactory manner.

Even some of the British bureaucrats in India were highly critical of the punishment given to the Meerut accused. Mr. Hailey, one of the British high-ups, told the Punjab Governor that he did not suppose that they could let the sentences stand. They were rather out of scale for that kind of offence, and were much more appropriate for the Bengali terrorists. (29 January, 1933).

The appeal against the judgement was filed in the Allahabad High

Court and heard by Chief Justice Dr. Suleiman and Justice Douglas Young. They took only eight working days to deliver the judgement in a case which had taken four years and a half in the Magistrate's and Sessions Courts. It is near impossible to wade through thousands of pages of prosecution exhibits, defence exhibits, speeches of the accused and statements made by 281 prosecution witnesses in the Sessions Court, 329 witnesses in the Magistrate's Court and three dozen defence witnesses in the Sessions Courts.

The statements of the accused alone ran into 3,092 pages, and the Session Judge's judgement was of 676 pages, apart from the lengthy harangue of Langford James before the Magistrate's Court and the Magistrate's committal order, etc.

It seems the High Court judges heard the arguments of the prosecution and defence side, went through Mr. York's judgement and then wrote out the judgement and delivered it in just eight days.

The High Court drastically reduced the sentences. In their judgement, the judges wrote:

"...The accused persons have not been charged with having done any overt illegal act in pursuance of the alleged conspiracy...It is clear that if there was any offence committed in the nature of conspiracy of a serious character, it was almost nipped in the bud...All that they have done is to hold meetings, study the principles of communism and probably also to make an attempt to disseminate the teachings which are said to be dangerous to society..."

The judges thought that "it would meet the ends of justice to impose considerably reduced sentences." They allowed the appeal of Desai, Hutchinson, Mitra, Jhabwala, Sehgal, Kasle, Gauri Shankar, Kadam and Alve and they were "set at liberty forthwith" and "released from jail".

Chakravarti's sentence was reduced to 7 months and that of Spratt to 2 years' R.I. The sentences of Ghate, Joglekar, Nimbkar, Bradley, Mirajkar, Sohan Singh Josh, Majid and Goswamy were reduced to one year's R.I. each.

Muzaffer Ahmad, Dange and Usmani were sentenced to 3 years each, and the sentences of Ayudhya Prasad, P.C. Joshi, Basak, Adlikari and Shamsul Huda were reduced to the terms already undergone by them. Consequently, they were released forthwith.

This considerable reduction in our sentences was not to the liking of the government. They had expected some reduction, but not to such an extent. They were, therefore, highly dissatisfied with the out-

come of the Meerut Conspiracy Case.

What they had finally achieved fell far short of what they had wanted to, and the government reports expressed this clearly. British Intelligence in 1935 admitted that the "Meerut prisoners...extracted more of advertisement and political capital from their trial than did their predecessors of Cawnpore".

Intelligence Chief Sir D. Petrie's comments on the High Court judgement were: "The tragedy of the case has been the whittling down of the sentences...It is a mistake that may cost the Government and the country dear in future".

Viceroy Lord Irwin, who had launched the case with fanfare, remarked in December 1930 that he "wished to heaven he had never embarked on the Meerut trial". The succeeding Viceroy declared he would never start such a conspiracy case again!

Thus, Meerut Conspiracy Case ended on 3 August, 1933 with appreciable gains for our side. On 17 November, 1933, I was released from the Naini Central Jail. When I reached Amritsar, I was given a warm welcome and taken in a procession on a horseback to Jallian-wala Bagh where a public meeting was held. I thanked the audience for the honour done to me.

I stayed on in Amritsar to receive Comrade Abdul Majid, who reached the next day, 18 November. He too was taken on horseback in a procession and given a warm reception. However, according to the report of British Intelligence, our reception was "indifferent". (18/13/33: November, Second Half).

Both of us then went to Lahore and met our old friends. I stayed with Majid overnight and came back to Amritsar the next day. After a few days of rest at home, I returned to Amritsar and plunged myself in the freedom movement with greater knowledge and understanding gained from the Meerut trial.

21. Rebuilding From Ruins

WHEN I was arrested on 20 March, 1929 in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, I had left behind the Workers' and Peasants Party as a strong growing force with branches in several districts on Punjab, the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (the revolutionary youth organisation) in more than a dozen towns, and a communist cell consisting of Comrade Abdul Majid, Comrade Feroze-ud-Din Mansur (both Moscow returnees), Bhag Singh Canadian and Arjan Singh Gargaj. I was the secretary of the cell, the general-secretary of the provincial Kirti Kisan Party and the president of the Punjab Naujawan Bharat Sabha. Both the latter two organisations were very active and united in their purpose. The Indian Communist Party had actually honoured Punjab by making me the president of the All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party conference in Calcutta in December 1928.

However, the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee was riven with factionalism, and our organisations were very critical of the PCC leadership for its halting and compromising policies. We wanted to reach the goal of national freedom at the earliest by any means, violent or non-violent, and take swift steps towards achieving socialism and making India a heaven on earth. Our line of thinking, no doubt, was utopian and our Marxism crude and immature.

I remained in Meerut and other UP jails for about five years, but during this long period none of the Kirti people ever cared to contact me or Comrade Majid through a letter or personally to enquire about our well-being or requirements or inform us about our organisations and families we had left behind. This was very baffling, as if we had no political or other relationship with them. Only Comrade Arjan Singh Gargaj had come to meet us once in the Meerut Court.

Such behaviour and attitude pained me immensely. I could not understand their cold-shouldering attitude, especially when the Meerut case comrades were fighting for the very cause during their trial for which the Kirti people were supposedly fighting from outside. They not only ignored me, but all the Meerut communists. Our

friends came from Bombay and Calcutta to meet us in the court and in the jail, but not the Kirti people from Punjab.

Our fighting spirit during the trial and the bold statements before the Sessions Judge Yorke, our defence of the Russian Revolution and standing by the communist ideology and the freedom struggles of the revolutionary working class and the peasants fetched laurels for the Meerut communists from the world communist movements, but the Kirti people stayed immune. Our friends in Calcutta and Bombay were proud of us all, but what happened to our Kirti comrades of Amritsar? Something had gone wrong somewhere, but I was at a loss to know the reasons why?

When I was released on 17 September, 1933, not a single soul from the Kirti Party not even Bhag Singh Canadian or Karan Singh Chima came to receive or welcome us; only a few hundred old friends with whom I had worked before my arrest welcomed us back. The same treatment was meted out to Comrade Abdul Majid when he returned the next day. All this puzzled me.

I had no money, while my wife and children had barely been eeking out their existence and survival in my absence in jail. My Kirti comrades had not even honoured their promise to look after my family in my absence. My mother was very sore with me when I returned home, and gave me a piece of her anguished mind. I could understand her legitimate anger and patiently bore with her chidings and pithy language. My wife, who did not observe any "purdah" from anyone, put in only a mild complaint against Bhag Singh Canadian in a manner only she could. Bhag Singh used to often come to our house, and we dined together with my wife serving us. She said: 'Even your friend Bhag Singh never showed us his face after your arrest'.

Somehow, I managed to pacify them by proclaiming that I had dedicated my life to the cause of freedom and service of the working people. With us youth of those days revolutionary work came first; everything else was relegated next. We believed that revolution was round the corner, hence nothing could deter me from giving my life for achieving the objective of winning national freedom through revolution. A few days after my release, I was invited to Lahore for a luncheon meeting by Sardar Harnam Singh Jhalia, an advocate of the Lahore High Court. He was a prominent Akali and an associate of Master Tara Singh and his companions, Sardar Udham Singh Nagoke and Ishar Singh Majhail. It was a small affair, and the lunch

had been arranged on the advice of Nagoke and Majhail to elicit my views on Akali politics and whether I could be brought back to its fold. They had noted the cold-shouldering by the Kirti people and thought that I might have been hurt.

I had seen through their plan. During the lunch, I shot point-blank: Why have you invited me alone, and not my Meerut comrade Abdul Majid? Their reply was : We did not do so because we had prepared *Shatka* meat, and he might have refused to lunch with us. I told them that it was a lame excuse: he should have been invited and only then could they know whether he objected to or not. Soon they found out that I could not be lured back into Akali politics. I had given the go-bye to Akali politics even before the Meerut Conspiracy Case. Master Tara Singh had written to Gyani Hira Singh Dard that he was expecting him (Dard) and Sohan Singh Josh to return to the Sikh Panth one day. But his expectations never got realised. I had embraced communism and stood by it firmly.

After about a month of our arrest, we had smuggled out from the Meerut jail an appeal to our comrades outside. This was published in the Punjabi *Kirti* (in English) in its issue No. 5 of May 1929. The appeal was: "We trust that by the time we return we shall have the opportunity and good fortune to offer our services for a much stronger and grown-up movement, and nothing will please us more than an occasion to put ourselves in the movement as soldiers in the fighting line. Long live free India".

But what we found after our release after five years was quite contrary to our expectations. The whole revolutionary movement seemed disrupted in Punjab, and Comrade Majid and myself stood almost boycotted by our Kirti friends and comrades.

My quick study of the political situation in Punjab revealed that the situation was worse. The Kirti Kisan Party had split into two, with their offices standing opposite to each other on the same street. One called itself the "real" party and the other the "spurious" one, and vice versa. There were two Naujawan Bharat Sabhas, too, fighting and using bitter language against each other. Disruptors and factionalists were having a field day. Government spies like "Parumall" had penetrated into the Kirti movement to become the editor of the Urdu *Kirti*. Comrade Arjan Singh Gargaj has written the full story about "Parumall", who was actually a Muslim sub-inspector in the CID. Some political youth claimed that *Kirti* money was also playing its part in disrupting the movement.

I made up my mind to meet a number of Kirti leaders to get at the bottom of the situation. I went to Chimakhurd in Jullundur district to meet Baba Karam Singh Chima. Though devoted to the cause, he was an illiterate person who was a confidant of the American Ghadar Party which provided the wherewithal for the Kirti party. However, he was unable to shed any light on the then political situation, nor why he and other Kirti colleagues had virtually boycotted me and comrade Majid.

I then contacted Comrade Bhag Singh Canadian, who had been with me on the *Kirti* management. He told me that he was no more in any party or in the *Kirti* management and that Santa Singh Gandiwind of Amritsar district had been sent by the American Ghadar Party to take charge of the paper and the movement from him. Thus, Santa Singh for the past one year has been the all-in-all in the party. But Bhag Singh, who had been the sole in-charge of the *Kirti* for three years before that, could not tell me why the people had not kept in contact with us, the Meerut prisoners and why he had avoided meeting us after our release. Did not the *Kirti* people feel proud of our sacrifices, our upholding of the communist ideology, exposures of British imperialists' objective in starting the conspiracy case, etc. Bhag Singh had no answers to any of these.

But he was bitter in telling me that he had been charged with spending too much money without corresponding political results. The consequences of the changes in the *Kirti* was that whatever we had built up had gone to pieces, and many young men felt demoralised and disgusted leading to all-round disruption. Santa Singh Gandiwind's main adviser was one Gurdit Singh, a struggling gramophone dealer. Gurdit Singh was a chattering arm-chair politician who was steadily losing his business. He maintained a big double-storey gramophone and records shop in the Hall Bazar of Amritsar and paid a heavy rent for it. This clever person had held Santa Singh under his complete sway for quite some time, exploiting him (Santa Singh) financially and politically and simultaneously acting as a disruptor of the movement. He closed down his shop after some time and left Amritsar for Dehradun, never to be heard again.

I was also anxious to get in touch with Santa Singh Gandiwind to find out where he stood politically. I went to Kairon village and persuaded Comrade Jaswant Singh Kairon, a Moscow-returnee like Santa Singh, to accompany me to his village. We reached Gandiwind where he was detained on horseback at dead of night. We woke up

Santa Singh and talked to him. To my surprise I found him ill-literate who was even unable to write a few sentences in his native Punjabi language. With such a linguistic background I could well imagine how much of Marxism he could have imbibed.

At one stage of our conversations, I asked him point-blank: Did you bring any mandate from the Ghadar Party in America that Abdul Majid and Sohan Singh Josh should be ousted from the Kirti movement? But we found him to be politically ignorant who did not understand what was happening in Punjab and why the growing factionalism in the anti-imperialist movement in the province. He gave me some namby-pamby replies. Actually, he had been a mere tool in the hands of some clever and unscrupulous people. We left him at that and came away disgusted.

The sacrifices of the members of the American Ghadar Party for the freedom of our motherland are tremendous and immense in terms of men and money. Their discipline was no less stronger than that of the communists. After the failure of the 1914 armed struggle in India, the Ghadar Party had asked its members to give up their jobs, go to the Soviet Union, study Marxism-Leninism there and return to India to continue the freedom struggle in a new phase. Their staunchness and persistence in our freedom struggle may not have been matched by any political party.

It was quite clear to me that we had to start afresh. The movement we had left behind lay shattered, riven with personal angularities, prejudices and acute factionalism. However, we were politically known by then and also enjoyed some prestige at the rank and file level of workers. Comrades Feroze-ud-Din Mansur, Arjan Singh Gargaj and a few others disgusted with the state of affairs rallied round and we began to consult among ourselves on how to restart our anti-imperialist freedom movement. Comrade Arjan Singh Gargaj narrates the state of political affairs of the time thus: When the two Meerut Comrades (Abdul Majid and Sohan Singh Josh) came, they saw the intense factionalism among the political workers. Matters had reached such a state that the two groups of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha had passed resolutions to boycott each other....”

He continues: “The Meerut comrades wanted to reorganise the movement and I had a great desire to work too. There were other comrades who were neither in the Naujawan Sabha nor in the Kirti Kisan Party but being disgusted with party quarrels and bickerings were merely sitting apart pessimistically. They wanted a united

socialist platform to work for the nation's freedom, and were hoping that with the arrival of the Meerut comrades a united platform would emerge" (Mere Apna Apo, pp. 153-54).

Certain money matters had also set about dissensions in the Kirti Party. Santa Singh Gandiwind had drawn Rs 500 for travelling, and Comrade Inder Singh "Kirti", a member of the account sub-committee, wanted him to provide details of the expenditure, which the former could not. Thereupon, Inder Singh refused to pass the bills. Also, there was an earlier quarrel over some money allegedly given by Santa Singh to Master Gajjan Singh, which the latter denied having taken at all. Although Baba Sandhwan had donated some funds to the Kirti Party, wholtime workers wanted wages which were not being paid. All these had led to charges and counter-charges and mutual abusing. Even government reports of the time had noted that Kirti money was the main cause of the factional bickerings.

But was money really the main or the only cause, or did the British CID had a hand in breaking up the Kirti Party? It appears it had.



A few months before my arrest on 20 March, 1929, a young man named Parumall began to visit the *Kirti* office, showing great interest in the communist movement, the Russian Revolution and Lenin. I was impressed by his talk on communism and felt that he had greater knowledge on the subject than even me. At the same time I harboured some doubts about the man in my mind.

After a few days he asked me whether he could work as a whole-time worker in the Kirti Party. I agreed, and asked him to work for the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. But he never turned up, which strengthened my previous suspicion about his bona fides.

After my arrest this Parumall had sneaked into the Kirti Party and managed to become the editor of the Urdu *Kirti* and began to function as a leader of the party. Comrade Arjan Singh Gargaj's story titled "Faquir? Sindhi?" about him, says: "I do not know what spell that Sindhi cast at that time on the *Kirti* management that it removed comrade Feroze-ud-Din Mansur from the editorship of the Urdu *Kirti* and made him the editor-in-charge."

According to Comrade Arjan Singh Gargaj this Parumall did not attend the *Kirti* office regularly. And when he did visit the office at

odd hours he covered half of his face with a cloth as if he was hiding his facial features from being spotted by the CID. He even arranged with the police a raid on Taran Taran and one or two other places where police parties came as if to arrest him; but he "managed" to escape in time. With such subterfuge he won himself into the confidence of the *Kirti* management and began to play havoc with the Urdu edition of the *Kirti* and *Kirti* money. (*Shaheed Da Bol*, pp 34-41).

His method of operation was, in fact, quite simple. He would send the Urdu *Kirti* for necessary processes and just when it was to be despatched to the readers, the police would raid the office and take away all the printed material. He was actually informing the government on the exact time when to raid the *Kirti* office and confiscate the paper. This happened not once but on more than half a dozen times.

And the articles he wrote were not on Marxism but contained terroristic tones; and no one was vigilant enough to either check his writings or keep a tab on his activities or movements. He thus became the all-powerful master in the *Kirti* establishment. The British government had succeeded in planting its own intelligence man in *Kirti* to disrupt the movement, to squander away the money spent on getting the magazine ready and deprive the readers of their copies of the monthly journal.

The person acting as "Parumall" was in fact Sub-Inspector Ghulam Rasool. He made good his escape well in time to save his skin. It is a known fact that the British Government, like other governments, inducted its intelligence men into the revolutionary movements to disrupt it, and then got them bumped.



Having decided to start afresh, we began to sound our comrades for a meeting of all groups, parties and factions. We still did have a few sincere, dedicated anti-imperialist workers in the field who could rebuild the edifice again.

The response to our efforts was very encouraging, and a meeting was convened at Jallianwala Bagh on 7 January, 1934. Among the 70-odd active workers, the bulk of whom was from Amritsar, who attended were: Munshi Ahmed Din of Nuajawan Bharat Sabha, Gurdit Singh (the musical dealer) of the *Kirti* Party, Hakim Sikander

Khizar, Sohan Singh Sewak, Gurbax Singh (of City Press), Feroze Din Mansur, Arjan Singh Gargaj, Ram Rattan Bhatia, Tej Bhan, Mohamed Tufail, Hari Singh Chakvalia, Mubarak Saghar, Abdul Ghafur "Taish", and others.

Karam Singh Mann, a bar-at-law who had joined us was also present. I asked him what had brought him in the CPI; and he replied "the Communist Party of Great Britain". Mann actually belonged to the "London Group" of three, the two others being Mahmudul Zaffar, the vice-principal of the M.A.O. College, Amritsar, and Shaukatullah. It had been decided that Mann would work in the open while the other two would help incognito.

The Jallianwala Bagh meeting lasted a marathon 30 hours, during which much dirty linen was washed in the open. The factions of the Naujawan Sabha traded charges against each other while the Kirti groups ran down and denigrated each other. The socialist group of Mubarak Saghar denounced everybody. Soon, it became very clear that *Kirti* money was the real cause of the dogfights and quarrels even as the freedom movement in Punjab lay completely disrupted. The British imperialists must have been laughing up their sleeves and showering praise on their intelligence men for having done a "good job".

Many proposals were put forward by us for a reconciliation, but all of them were rejected and mutual bitterness persisted. Our pleas to avoid personal charges and only talk on a political plane fell on deaf ears. Ultimately, we put forward three suggestions before the meeting and asked the invitees to freely express themselves on them. The proposals were:

- (a) Whether we can forgive and forget all previous quarrels and come to an agreement and work unitedly as before our arrest.
- (b) Whether it was feasible to wind up the parent and the rival Naujawan Bharat Sabha as also the two factions of the Kirti Kisan Party;
- (c) Whether a new party uniting all of us could be brought into existence?

These suggestions were discussed threadbare, but rejected by both the Naujawan Sabha factions as also the quarrelling Kirti Kisan parties. Only the non-partisans and the neutrals favoured setting up an anti-imperialist League in Punjab. The final outcome was that the

unifiers themselves got isolated, and the meeting ended up in smoke. (see Gargaj, p 154).

The British CID had the following comments to make of our meeting: "A private meeting of workers of various provincial communist organisations was convened by Sohan Singh Josh of Amritsar on the 7th of January, 1934. The prime object of the convenor was to bridge the gulf between the Kirti Kisan and the Naujawan Bharat Sabhas as a preliminary to an extension of communist activity throughout the province. Prolonged discussions lasting all through the night failed to achieve this result." (18-1-34: Home Political).

The CID report also noted that "the efforts of the three main communist bodies, the Kirti Kisan Party, the Nuajawan Bharat Sabha and the Anti-imperialist League, to amalgamate have not met with much success. None of the leaders of these parties is likely to accept an arrangement in which his present position is in any way assailed. All proposals put forward by the Anti-imperialist League leaders for uniting the communist movement were rejected by the rivals." (18-5-34, May, Second-half).

The *Kirti* faction led by Santa Singh Gandiwind played the most disruptive role at the meeting, and the Naujawan Bharat Sabha group of Munshi Ahmed Din and Mubarak Saghar of the Socialist group did not lag behind. The main Kirti party with the Ghadar Party purse did not want us simply because we belonged to the Communist Party. They hoped to wipe out our group. Comrade Feroze-ud-Din Mansur with his group broke away from them and came over to our Anti-imperialist League. Comrade Gargaj was already with us though he worked on the *Kirti* staff. Comrade Karan Singh Mann also volunteered to join us, while Comrade Fazalilahi Qurban was also with us. Thus, the released Meerut comrades and other like-minded gathered under the Anti-imperialist League flag and began to reorganise the communist movement under its cover.

A government report also put it down thus: "It is noticeable that the inclination of political thought towards communism is becoming more and more marked since the debacle of the Congress and the return to public life of men like K.N. Sehgal, Sohan Singh Josh and Mir Abdul Majid." (The debacle alludes to the Civil Disobedience Movement's failure in Punjab.) (File 18-1-34, Home Political).

We held a separate meeting on 15 April, 1934 and passed a resolution setting up a Provincial Anti-imperialist League. I was elected the secretary, while a five-member team comprising Abdul

Majid, Feroze-ud-Din Mansur, Karam Singh Mann, Arjan Singh Gargaj and I were selected to tour the Province and establish branches of the League in important towns and cities. Our task was also to tell our political and other adversaries that the movement they had disrupted during our absence (involved in the Meerut case) could be rebuilt and put back on the rail again.

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The League Against Imperialism was an international united front of those who were fighting against western imperialism to help the colonies in their struggle for freedom. Its membership was open to anti-imperialists, communists, social democrats, progressive labourites, etc. Left-winger Maxton (ILP), George Lansbury, Miss Ellen Wilkinson, Chattopadhyaya, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mursen Berg, Edo Fimmen, H. Liern, etc., were its prominent members.

The League supported the demand for complete independence for India and called upon the colonial subjects to organise workers and peasants parties in their respective countries. The League opposed any compromise with British imperialism and considered the moves by some Indian leaders as "betrayal" of the cause of India's freedom struggle. It opposed wars and stood for world peace.

The Indian National Congress, the All India Trade Union Congress, the Independence of India League and the Hindustan Seva Dal were affiliated to the League Against Imperialism. In the eyes of the British Government, the League was "communist in inspiration, though not in name....One of its objects is to support all kinds of revolutionary movements in the colonies with the ultimate objective of overthrowing British rule in India". (File No. 10-11, home, Political 1929).

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We decided to implement the League's programme by mobilising and organising the workers and peasants in separate organisations, and set up branches of the League in various towns. But our problem was money as we had no funds at our disposal. Somehow, we managed to raise some money from friends and sympathisers, just enough to cover our incidental expenses. Gargaj has mentioned in his autobiography that he got some money from Vaid Mohan Singh and had contributed his own money as well for our tour fund.

Having already established a League centre at Amritsar, we moved to Lahore and with the help of Abdul Majid held a meeting of the workers, reported them of our efforts to bring about unity of the various groups and reasons for our failure so far in doing so. We were successful in setting up a small unit of the League there. We then moved to Gujranwala, our stronghold where our comrades had welcomed us warmly in December 1933 and taken us round in a procession. Gujranwala youth were our ardent comrades and companions and always responded to the call of the Communist Party. Comrade Bashir Ahmed was our key man there, and the Gujranwala branch of the League, comprising mostly of young Muslims, subsequently grew into a strong unit and stood by us through thick and thin.

We also went to Gujarat, Jhelum and Rawalpindi. The Muslim League had a hold in Gujarat town, but in the districts beyond, Hindu youth were more anti-imperialist and helped us. The Muslims here, under the Muslim League influence, were rather indifferent to the freedom struggle led by the Indian National Congress and dubbed it as "a Hindu movement". Thus, we could not form a League unit in Gujarat.

Jhelum was a timber city of Punjab, most timber business being controlled by Sikhs and Hindus. They were sympathetic to the Congress organisation and helped it financially. They also welcomed us and we held a public meeting where we spoke about Hindu-Sikh unity and warned the audience of the disruptive role of the Muslim League and the efforts of the British imperialists of fomenting a communal divide. In the person of Amrik Singh we had a very active supporter and a League branch was set up at Jhelum too.

The same evening we were entertained to a sumptuous tea party by a Gujarat family, whose members were very patriotic and backed the Congress Party. Inder Kumar Gujral, later our Ambassador to Moscow, was just a schoolboy then.

Earlier in the afternoon we were taken for a boat-ride in Jhelum river, which was in spate then. Water was gushing into our boat, and one of us asked the boatman to be careful lest the entire communist party leadership of Punjab should meet with a watery grave in the swollen Jhelum. The boatman's reply sent all of us in peals of laughter: "Don't worry. Such a tragedy will not take place as my wife is praying for all of us!"

Our next meeting was in Rawalpindi city. Here the socialists

helped us arrange a well-attended public meeting. Among the many intellectuals present was Professor V.D. Chopra who later gave up his teaching job and joined the CPI and worked with us for a long time. Currently he is associated with the daily Patriot and weekly Link published from New Delhi. Prof. Avtar Singh Malhotra also joined us at Rawalpindi. The anti-imperialist movement was spreading rapidly among all sections of the people. One Abdul Aziz, a mere tea-stall holder but a socialist at heart, treated us all with very fine tea at Rawalpindi, for which we all thanked him.

22. Ban on CPI and After

OUR tour of Lahore, Gujranwala, Jhelum, Gujarat and Rawalpindi had stimulated political awareness in many other places as well, and our opponents were also forced to organise similar tours to serve their ends. But paucity of funds forced us to discontinue our plans for further tours. Even a government report had noted that the Anti-imperialist League had been forced "by lack of funds to call off a projected tour of the Province by a deputation for propaganda purposes".

We had simultaneously begun to work among the organised and un-organised peasantry, the purpose being to penetrate the Kisan Sabhas and zamindars' organisations and establish our influence in the countryside. At a conference on 17 July, we decided to form a Kisan League—"a further step", according to a government report, "in their struggle with their rival organisations, the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and the Kirti Kisan Party". (18-8-34, July N.A.D.). We also concentrated on attracting the then existing trade unions and forming new ones of our own.

Our rival organisations had sent a deputation to visit almost the same towns which we had covered during our tour, but they met with little success. Like us, they also failed to set up a unit in Gujarat, the Muslim League stronghold. At Rawalpindi, "they succeeded only in driving some Naujawan Sabha members into the arms of the Anti-imperialist League", according to a CID report (July, first-half).

Our hectic political, trade union, Kisan and youth activities could not but attract the attention of the landlords, the industrialists and the British officials who in one voice began to proclaim that a "dangerous situation" had arisen in Punjab since the release of the Meerut prisoners. They demanded some immediate action against the developing situation lest a civil war should break out in the countryside. They alleged that the communists were propagating a class struggle. The Press too was at the beck and call of our adversaries. This was the juncture when the British Government decided

to crackdown, and on 23 July, 1934 an order was issued to ban "all communist associations", i.e. the Communist Party of India, its committees and branches because they "constituted a danger to public life". For some time, the Civil and Military gazette, the Lahore daily, and the Statesman of Calcutta had been writing a series of articles against the "rising communist menace" and urging the government to take immediate action against the "seditious activities" of the Indian communists.

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While propagating the programmes of the Anti-imperialist League, we had also continued our efforts to unify the Indian communist movement. A committee consisting of Majid, Hakim Sikandar, Khizar and myself had been set up to pursue the matter. Another committee had been set up with two Meerut case comrades and Gurdit Singh to draft the rules and regulations of the League. According to a government report, the objects of the Anti-imperialist League were:

1. To absorb all other communist organisations in the provinces;
2. To secure complete salvation from British imperialism in India;
3. To establish a national democratic republic of labourers and peasants free from capitalist elements.

"The two most important leaders are Sobhan Singh Josh and M.A. Majid, both of whom were convicted in the Meerut Conspiracy Case" (File 7-2-34 – Home and Political and K.W.).

We celebrated the May Day in Amritsar and Lahore Comrade Abdul Majid had organised the Press Workers Union and was busy organising a motor workers union and some others. We were regularly invited by friends from different places to organise league branches in their areas.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was politically very active at that time and was giving the freedom movement a Left orientation. He was pro-Soviet Union, and airing his views freely and unhesitatingly; was politically influencing the youth in a big way. On 17 December, 1933 he declared: The choice before the world today lies between communism and fascism. I am all for the former; the basic ideology of communism and its scientific interpretation of history are sound"

(India in 1933-34, p 9). His address at the Cawnpore (Kanpur) session of the AITUC was dubbed as "didactic semi-communist".

The bold statements of the Meerut case leaders during their trial had made a great impact on the minds of the Indian youth throughout the country, and their statements were in great demand and read in group meetings. Leaders like Yashwant Rao Chavan had admitted this fact in many of his meetings. Even the comrades of martyr Bhagat Singh had begun to give up individual actions and coming round to the Marxist ideology—a fact that was even noted in the CID reports of 1934.

The British Government was getting worried over the spread of communism in India. In the fortnightly reports of its Intelligence Department of 1934, one can find the word "communism" mentioned as the first item with a note of its activities in the previous fortnight. The annual Register (January-June 1933) by Mitra of Calcutta had clearly noted that "the Meerut case represented an idea that had been slowly but steadily taking root in the soil of India. The forceful idea was seeking to right the topsy-turvy of the then social framework produced by an over-stressed capitalism and restore what is called social balance and justice. There is a growing number of younger men and women who would hail it as the deliverer...It will not do to blink or nod it out" (p 29).

Kedarnath Sehgal, one of the Meerut prisoners, was also very active. He had set up an Unemployed Association and was working through it to organise several meetings in Lahore. He was a Left nationalist and had aligned himself with Dr Satyapal group of the Provincial Congress.

While the government through its intelligence agencies kept a close watch on all these political activities of individuals and groups, a big hue and cry was simultaneously being raised by the landlords and other vested interests, inspired by the government or on their own, against our spreading movement. The Muslim landlords in western Punjab were especially vociferous against this "communist menace". Their case was that since the release of the Meerut prisoners class war politics had increased tremendously, that "civil war" conditions had begun to prevail, and that communist activities can lead to a class war and bloodshed.

While the Government of India clamped down a ban on the CPI, its committees and branches on 23 July, 1934, the Punjab Governor on 10 September, 1934 declared the following five associations as un-

lawful under Section 19(1) of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1908:

1. The Anti-imperialist League, Punjab, its committees, sub-committees and branches;
2. The Punjab Provincial Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Lahore, its committees, sub-committees and branches;
3. The Punjab Kirti Kisan Party, Amritsar, its committees, sub-committees and branches;
4. The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha; and
5. The Punjab Kisan League.

As a consequence of the ban, the offices of these organisations and the houses of some of their leaders were also searched. But no arrests were made to avoid the repetition of the communist propaganda like that in the Meerut judicial court. A Government report said: "All the five associations subsequently declared themselves dissolved, and no action has yet been taken against any individual member" (File No. 7/2/34, Political and K.W.).

The only organisation that did not come under the ban in Punjab were the trade unions. The ban was, of course, a big blow to our surging anti-imperialist freedom movement. But the dissolution of our organisation was a strategy on our part. The ban was a panic reaction of the British imperialists, and we viewed it as a tribute to the political work done by us, the released Meerut prisoners. For five years of our trial and imprisonment, the government had succeeded in playing its divide and rule game as a result of which the Kirtis and the Naujawans had been fighting among themselves. But no sooner did we restart our serious political work, the government saw red and tried to throttle our political activities.

Having dissolved our respective organisations, we began thinking about ways and means to continue our anti-imperialist task. Gathering our composure we decided to set up *qarza* (debt) committees as an open cover and continue our work cautiously, trying to fathom the attitude of the British Government against us.



During this period, many batches of Moscow trainees had returned to India. Some of them were arrested on landing or entering India, taken to Lahore Fort for questioning, and tortured to find out their

antecedents, political and otherwise. Then, after about two months, they were either detained in their village or sent to jail for an indefinite period. Some of them managed to land in India incognito and began their political work under some assumed name.

One thing is worth noting about these Moscow trainees. On leaving Moscow, they were individually and collectively told that they should return to India and work there under the discipline of the Communist Party of India which, then, was working underground. However, most of them did not carry out these instructions, wittingly or unwittingly.

Majority of these Moscow trainees were Indian workers in America, who had gone there on economic compulsions. In free America, they had learnt the meaning and value of freedom and of the disgrace and indignities of slavery. They joined the Ghadar Party, learnt the revolutionary poems of the *Ghadar Goonj*, and dedicated their lives for the freedom of India. It must be said to their credit and honour that they remained steadfast in their resolve to fight for India's freedom.

They, however, did not know that the Kirti Kisan communists, under whose discipline they had been asked to work in India, did not represent the CPI. The Kirti Kisan communists opposed the official CPI unit in Punjab and tried to liquidate it with all its might. Thinking the Punjab Kirti unit to be a CPI unit, the Moscow trainees joined it unquestioningly, and the Kirti leaders kept them in the dark to the actual fact. Hence, they fell in line with them in opposing the official unit of the CPI in Punjab.

The dirtiest game the Kirti leadership played to liquidate our unit was to accuse Karam Singh Man, one of our prominent members, of being a CID agent who had got Baba Gurmukh Singh arrested when the latter had gone to the GPO to post his foreign mail in June 1937. This was a pure white lie, and the Punjab Congress Socialist Party leaders were in league with the Kirti people in this dirty game.

The 1937 elections to the Punjab Provincial Legislature raised the CPI unit in people's estimation. Kabul Singh and I had won seats in the Assembly. Harjap Singh Mahilpur, a Moscow trainee who had won unopposed, had joined our group earlier. Bibi Raghbir of the Kirti group also won her seat because of our help—she received the largest number of votes from my constituency. Comrade Harbans Singh Bundala and Lal Singh Sansarpuri, both Ghadar Party trainees, had come over to us and attacked the *Kirti* group for violat-

ing the Moscow instructions. Baba Arur Singh, who was also returned unopposed, was with the Kirti Party. As we were making headway in all fields—labour, kisan, youth and political—the Kirti leadership did not like it. Hence, the shameful accusation against Karan Singh Man to disrupt and liquidate our unit.

Their aim is described by Prof. Tilak Raj Chaddha, who was a CSP leader and one of the confidants of the Kirti leaders and the Babas.

“These people controlled the Kirti Kisan Party and the Relief Committee, and were the chief propagators of communists in Punjab. They claimed that they were the real communists and not members of the other group, which used the official label. They even tried to set up, on the strength of their money, a separate Communist Party and intended to approach Moscow for recognition”. (*A Study of the Communist Movement in the Punjab*, p. 5).

Comrade Man had nothing to do with the arrest of Baba Gurmukh Singh who got caught because of his own folly. On the day of his arrest, only Achhar Singh Chhina was walking along with him on the opposite side of the road, and as soon as Gurmukh Singh was posting his letter at the GPO, he was caught. Achhar Singh had himself refuted the accusation against Man, but the Kirti people and Congress Socialist leaders did not want to accept the word of their own man.

Such anti-CPI tirades continued for a long time. Another person Preetam Singh Sargodha was named as having provided tips to the police that resulted in Baba’s arrest. The Government report had noted that “Harjap Singh, MLA, Kabul Singh, MLA and Sohan Singh Josh, MLA, had exonerated these two persons”. (July, second half).

In a short note on his own life in Punjabi, written after his release in 1947, Comrade Man has referred to his arrest.

“In 1934, Gopal Singh Khalsa saw me in Lahore. He reported to the British Government that I was working for the Ghadar Party and was receiving *Dak* from it and was sending letters to it. One day I and Achhar Singh Chhina were going (to the Central Post Office). I separated from Chhina and went inside the post office to post the letters. The CID which was alert due to Gopal Singh Khalsa’s information and was on the look-out for me, arrested me there and then”. (This note was given to me, and it is still with me -- SSJ).

“But Babaji,” I had asked Baba Gurmukh Singh “you have named

Karm Singh Maan as the person to cause your arrest”.

“I was forced by the Socialists and a few *Kirti* leaders to name him as the person whose information got me arrested,” he admitted shamefacedly.

This particular episode was a setback to the entire political movement in Punjab. We left the Congress Socialist Party and set up a new organisation called the Punjab Socialist Party. Our new party was bitterly hostile to the CSP and the *Kirti* leaders for having levelled false charges against us. Later, when the charge against Man was cleared and withdrawn, Prof. Tilak Raj Chaddha apologised to Man for falsely implicating him, and Baba Gurmukh Singh admitted that he was forced inside the jail to name Man as being responsible for his (Baba's) arrest. We rejoined the CSP, but this unity did not last long as the policy of the *Kirti* Party to liquidate the CPI remained. That was the reason why we had to ally with the Gopichand Bhargava faction inside the Provincial Congress Committee to defeat the Satyapal faction along with its allies, the CSP and the *Kirti* group.

Our struggle for existence and our rivals' efforts to wipe us out continued for some time. Gurcharan Singh Sainsar in his autobiography *Those too were the Days* has explained the efforts by the *Kirti* Party to become the de facto CPI unit in Punjab. He writes:

“With the incoming of these Ghadar Party workers (Moscow trainees) and with the money supplied by the Ghadar Party, we overshadowed the political firmament of Punjab. What to talk of Josh (Sohan Singh), we did not care a penny for Joshis (Puran Chand, General Secretary of the CPI) and Adhikaris (Polit Bureau Member of the Party), and their anger against us was due to this forte of ours” (*Ghadar Party and its Money*, p. 123).

The hatred and contempt expressed against our party in the paragraph is self-revealing: one does not speak in such a language about a party one wants to unite with. Gurcharan was never for unity with our Party, but for its liquidation. The arrival of a number of batches of Moscow trainees in India, and the abundant Ghadar Party funds at their disposal had turned the head of likes of Gurcharan Singh and others in the *Kirti* Party, who thought that they could drive out the CPI unit from Punjab and replace it by their own unit.

Gurcharan notes: “Our group and Josh group continued fighting for six-seven years against unification.” (p. 116). He makes a false claim about having fought “for unity”. Why? Because the *Kirti* Party

people had been sending request after request to the Third International through Bhai Rattan Singh to recognise them as the “genuine CPI” in India but their requests “brought no response from him” (Rattan Singh). This silence (on his part) also began to irk us. On account of this we thought among ourselves that in order to force the historical need of unity on Josh, Joshi and Adhikari, the matter should be taken by ourselves to the (Third) International in Moscow.” (p. 119).

During this period, they also launched a virulent campaign against us in India, whose sum and substance was: The CPI is affiliated to the Third International through the Communist Party of Great Britain, while a false case was being made on behalf of the Kirti Party that the latter was directly affiliated to it. The impression intended for the ignorant and gullible was that the CPI was affiliated to the Third International through Great Britain—our enslavers—and hence theirs was not a genuine CPI. On the other hand, the Kirti Party, being affiliated directly to the International, was its real representative in India and hence the real CPI.

Such a propaganda line did pose some problem for us for some time. Communist youth began to question us in this regard. We had to explain to them by quoting from the rules of the Third Internationalism, which assigned to the Communist Party of a ruling imperialist country the task of creating a Communist Party in a colonial country under its imperialist rulers, rear and nourish it and represent it in the Third International. The CPGB was fighting its own imperialist government to overthrow it, and also working to free the colonies, including India, from the imperialist yoke. It was doing a great service by instilling communist ideas amongst Indian students in England, many of whom later became either members of our party or its sympathisers and strengthened the movement for overthrowing British imperialism and freeing their motherland.

The propaganda that the CPI was influenced by British imperialism through the CPGB was crude indeed, and our actions put it to flight.

But the Kirti group did not give up their attempt to secure direct affiliation from Moscow. They decided to “go to Moscow with an appeal for unity and Comrade Ram Kishan B.A. (National) was assigned the duty for this task”. Spending a lot of Ghadar Party money, they sent Ram Kishan to Kabul to get across to the Soviet Union. But he got stranded there because the Soviet representative would not

grant him a visa. Then, Achhar Singh Chhina was sent to Kabul to get over the hurdle, but he too did not succeed. Both of them then decided to cross over to Soviet Russia without any visa, and while crossing the Anu Darya, Comrade Ram Kishan was drowned. A valuable comrade was thus lost in a wild goose chase. It was elementary that the Kirti Party could not get affiliation to the Third International over the head of the CPGB. The Kirti effort was a gamble that was bound to fail.



Once I went to meet one of the newly returned Moscow trainees in village Viram Dattan in Gurdaspur village. Ram Singh Dutt was detained in his village after having been questioned in Lahore Fort. Once very active, I found Ram Singh idling away his time in his house. I was surprised to see him in that defeatist attitude. I bucked him up and asked him to do something in the village even while under detention. But he was at a loss for ideas.

I told him: Call the young men of your village; tell them what you have learnt at the Moscow University, put before them the ideas of national revolution, of fighting against British slavery and of winning freedom of our motherland, and so on. Bring out a poster that on such and such date a public meeting will be held in village Viran Dattan, which will be presided over by Sohan Singh Josh and "see the birth of a peasant movement".

He accepted my advice and mobilised half a dozen young men who spread the news about the meeting. In fact, these young men were filling virgin soil, putting forward peoples' grievances and asking them to unite to fight against British slavery. Their propaganda evoked great enthusiasm in areas surrounding Viran Duttan. I presided over the meeting attended by hundreds of people. But I found that Dutt's personal propaganda had dominated over the programmatic propaganda, because the simple villagers, men and women, first went to Dutt's house to have his *darshan* and then attended the meeting! Dutt began to be worshipped as a great patriot of the area and beyond. When later I met him in his house, he was a changed man, thanks to the meeting.

He was one of the men who later became leader of the Kirti Party, and whenever the question of unity of the Kirti Party with the CPI came up, he always opposed it tooth and nail!

Comrade Bhagat Singh Bilga of the Kirti Party, who was then working underground, disputes what Gurcharan Singh Sainsara had narrated. He says that the Kirti workers outside were not properly carrying out the party instructions. The underground Kirti leadership was not fighting against the person of Sohan Singh Josh; it was fighting for the Kirti Party to be recognised as the CPI unit over the head of the official unit. But the Kirti workers, being politically immature, were attacking Josh personally.

The Kirti leadership had utterly failed to understand the political significance of the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case, which was an expression of their political bankruptcy and immaturity. The Communist prisoners had done a great job of boldly putting across and spreading communist ideas through an imperialist court, thereby placing communism for the first time on the political body of India. This was no small achievement.

The bold defence of the Russian Revolution and its ideology had brought praise for us from the international Communist movement. The INPRECORR (International Press Correspondence) noted it appreciatively. It published the constitution of the Communist Party of India in 1934, showing that the CPI had been duly affiliated to the Third International. Kirti Party's efforts to get affiliation from the Third International had duped the Kirti rank and file.

According to Gurcharan, Teja Singh Swatantar's letters smuggled out from Campellpur jail wanted the Kirti Party unit to "throw aside all prejudices and differences, make up with the Josh (CPI) group even at the cost of (Kirti group) prestige and respect". According to Gurcharan, this purged us of all spite that we had against the Josh group". (p. 130).

It was during their detention in the Deoli camp jail in Rajasthan that the Kirti leaders and the Ghadar Party Babas witnessed the strength of the CPI, had talks with CPI leaders like S.V. Ghate, B.T. Ranadive, S.A. Dange, Z.A. Ahmad and others, and decided to merge the Kirti group with the Communist Party. During the unity talks, I saw to it that not a single Kirti worker remained unadmitted into the CPI. This has been endorsed by Gurcharan Singh Randhawa, who later became the acting secretary of the Punjab unit of the CPI-M.

When the Kirti leaders in Deoli jail sent out the message to Kirti leaders and workers that the latter should join the CPI unconditionally, Chain Singh Chain and a few other detainees asked: "We cannot

accept your diktat....you shall have to explain to us why you have been misleading us claiming that the Kirti Party was the real party in Punjab and not the CPI unit, the Josh group. Now you say that the Josh group was the CPI group in the Punjab. This requires admission of mistake and self-criticism before us”.

Gurcharan Singh Sainsara, Dalip Singh Jauhal and Bachan Singh had led the game of keeping the two groups divided and keeping the Kirti leadership under the illusion that they could liquidate the CPI unit in Punjab. Finally, reality dawned on them through the Deoli jail Kirti leaders and Teja Singh Swatantar's letters from detention.

Our own weakness lay in the fact that we could not properly place in black and white before our Centre the designs and machinations of the Kirti leadership in trying to liquidate our CPI unit in Punjab. This resulted in insufficient understanding of our attitude towards the Kirti group.

23. 1937 Elections and Punjab Kisan Morcha

THE Indian National Congress won a thumping victory in the general elections of 1937, its economic programme playing a big role in it. The party's 1931 Karachi resolution, despite being unclear in many aspects, had declared that the Congress would fight for reduction of taxes, prohibition of *begaar* removal of duty on salt, protection of workers' rights, healthy work conditions, minimum living wage, unemployment insurance, eight-hour working days and paid holidays. The resolution also assured the people that the National Congress would fight for their fundamental rights, removal of disabilities on account of caste and religion, establishment of Provinces on linguistic basis and development of the national languages. This programme became the Congress election platform, and its manifesto made a special promise to the workers that their working conditions would be improved substantially.

The people, fed up with British slavery, overwhelmingly voted for the Congress candidates and the party won big majorities in six out of the 11 provinces and formed Ministries in Madras, UP, Central Provinces, Bihar and Orissa. The Congress also emerged as the largest single Legislature Party in the Provinces of Bombay, Bengal, Assam and the North-West Frontier Province. Only in Sindh and Punjab, the Congress was reduced to a minority.

The CPI, dead set against the subjugate Constitution imposed on India, was out to wreck it and had decided to mobilise all anti-imperialist, freedom-loving forces and parties towards that end. Only landlords, compradore bourgeoisie and parties representing their interests supported the British imposed Constitution.

The question before the CPI was whether to participate in the elections being held under such an imposed Constitution. After deliberations, the party decided against boycotting the elections. The argument was that the elections provided a great opportunity to approach the masses of the working people, explain to them the nature

and character of the British Act foisted on the unwilling Indians, fight against the Act in the very citadel of British imperialist government—the Assemblies—vent our resentment and anger against it and wreck it by working from within the Assembly, simultaneously mobilising the people to demand complete independence.

The CPI also decided to join ranks with the Indian National Congress and jointly fight the elections. The party being underground, I missed the decision that the Provincial elections were to be fought on Congress tickets.

In 1936 November-end, we held a meeting in Guru-Ka-Bagh (Ajnala), in Amritsar District to consider whether we should fight the election from Tarn Taran (Amritsar) for the Punjab Legislative Assembly. About 30 CPI and pro-party members and workers were present at the meeting. Prominent among those who took part in our discussion were Hazara Singh, Chanan Singh Sainsara, Mohan Singh Bath, Fauja Singh Bhular, Avtar Singh Sidha-Chhiddan, Didar Singh, Anup Singh (of Jagdeo Kalan), Sadhu Singh and Boor Singh of Khutrau Kalan among others.

One of the biggest landlords of Punjab, Sardar Raghbir Singh Sandhanwalia, the Honorary Magistrate of Rajasansi, was contesting the election from Tarn Taran. He belonged to the party of Punjab landlords, known as the Unionist Party of Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan and Chowdhury Chhotu Ram of Haryana (then a part of Punjab). The Unionist Party was dominated by big Muslim landlords.

We discussed all the pros and cons of the contest. Our opponent had huge money-power while we were empty-handed. He could buy speakers to extoll his virtues and hire gangsters to disrupt our meetings, singers and musicians to lure people to his meetings, while we could not afford any of these. But he was not all virtue, and was a known oppressor of peasants of villages in his possession and under his domination, depriving them of their share of irrigation water and harshly realising rents from them. Further, he was a lackey of the British who had never raised his voice against the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre and in fact favoured continuation of the British *Raj*. All these factors provided us with enough ammunition to expose him throughout the length and breadth of the Tarn Taran constituency.

Our meeting decided to use the election opportunity to propagate our politics, and I was chosen as the party's candidate to oppose Raghbir Singh. The others pledged to conduct my election campaign on a wholetime basis.

Thus the election battlelines were drawn. We began our campaign from Minochahal village in Tarn Taran tehsil. Only two members were to be elected from the entire Amritsar District. The voting qualifications were very restrictive; one had to pay land revenue or house rent of Rs. 5 or should have passed primary education. I stood in the last category as a voter!

With bicycles as our only transport, we moved from village to village explaining our mission and country's condition to the Sikh rural voters. From time to time we printed posters mentioning the villages and the dates on which we would be holding our election meetings, and requesting the villagers to attend them. We could not make any food arrangements for us, and depended upon sympathetic villagers to feed us. Village after village listened to us, and looked after our daily needs as well.

We had a young poet named Avtar Singh Sidha of village Chhidan in the constituency. He had composed three or four poems in simple but popular Punjabi language which had political contents. There was humour too in his compositions, which graphically narrated the people's misery. His poems became so popular that children in the countryside learnt them by heart and recited them at random. One of Avtar Singh's poems expressed the sentiments of the people against police persecution and oppression. Another one, which moved people's heart in a big way and held them spell-bound had high political import. Its literal translation ran like this:

*We have to vote for Josh.
 And we are not afraid of any landlord.
 O brothers! Let us coordinate our efforts.
 And cut the nose of capitalism.,
 We are not to follow the bigwigs now.
 We have to weave our separate whoof and wharf,
 The poor people have to sing together this song.
 The time has come for our turn now,
 Together we have to reduce our land revenue.
 We are not to bathe in our own blood.
 We go on foot and vote,
 Throwing aside the comfort of the lorry.
 We have been ruined by the gurdawaras.
 They take bribe and still have spite in mind.
 Friends, skin has come off our backs
 by continuously lifting of the heavy load of patwaris.*

The poem went on to say that these bigwigs drive in cars and dump all the burden on our heads; our hard work brings us no fruit and an unbreakable rope hangs over our heads. It went on:

*We have to renounce trailing behind reactionaries;
 We have to cut asunder the chains of slavery.
 We have to confront the opponent with head erect,
 Our wounds have begun to drip blood.
 Do not get deceived at any time, unawares;
 They will throw wide nets to catch you.
 Do not remain sitting at home at the proper time,
 One is defeated by a single, lonely vote!
 We are unable to pay our land revenue,
 They go to the councils and remain tongue-tied.
 The rats remain terrified of the white cats,
 They always remain in terrible fear of the white ones!
 Follow the patriots, do not run after sycophants,
 The latter will ultimately deceive us.
 The time is come to pause and rethink.*

Avtar Singh Sidha being himself a peasant was conversant with the woes of the peasants lot, and his poems had tremendous impact on the overwhelmingly peasant voters. Our meetings always began with his songs.

Another of his poems was also very popular; this one spoke about police repression.

*Cry, O' cry!
 They have plucked not only our green gram stalks,
 But have beaten us too.*

This short poem was recited twice or thrice in the same meeting on insistent audience demand.

The general routine of our meeting was the same. One comrade spoke about my political antecedents and compared against them those of Sardar Raghbir Singh. Another comrade talked about the local grievances, including complaints of injustice done to the peasantry by the land and crop assessment officers and the police. The question of *begaar*, *thikri paihra*, irrigation and land revenue problems, etc., were dealt with properly. I spoke last, explaining the situation in India, castigating the Government of India Act which kept India bound to slavery, the communal award which kept Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs divided, and the rising of the national forces in India to wrest freedom from British slavery. I told the villagers that

the Congress was working for the freedom of India and the Unionist Party was a landlords' party – the mainstay of British imperialism. In the end I appealed to the voters to vote for me so that I could enter the Punjab Legislative Assembly and undauntingly fight there to safeguard their interests.

I had mentioned earlier that the CPI was banned as a party, therefore, I stood as an "individual communist" in the election fray. The Sikh Nationalist Party of Lahore and its leaders like Gyani Hira Singh Dard, Gopal Singh Qaumi, Sarmukh Singh Chabhal and others insisted that I contest on their party ticket, which I refused. A message from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was also delivered to me saying that I should fight the election on a Congress ticket. But I did not agree to that either and went ahead with my own party and pro-party men.

We made a great impact on the rural Sikh electorate, who had never heard such bold speeches condemning the Government and its departments; especially the police and the land assessment officers for their acts of omission and commission. The popular response to our appeals was very favourable.

Alarmed, my opposing candidate then began to gear up his machinery. He set up his election offices in about 25 big villages, hiring local musclemen of the area to man them. These offices had attached kitchens, where mutton was cooked and wine flowed in abundance. Besides, these musclemen were paid well for their services. These men went to villages in their circles, asked for votes for "Sardar Sahib" and returned to the headquarters to enjoy meat and wine of which there was no dearth.

The election campaign hotted up and "Sardar Sahib" brought out a huge wall poster, accusing me of being an "apostate of Sikhism", because of which I "did not deserve Sikh votes". "Communists are anti-religion, and Josh is a Communist. Hence, no Sikh should cast his vote for him", it appealed.

We replied back in a counter-poster, exposing the excesses "Sardar Sahib" had committed in the villages which he owned; how he had illegally used canal waters meant for the peasants with the connivance of the canal officers; how he had been fraudulently charging more land rent from them than what was due; how he had been fining them as an honorary magistrate for not giving *Thikri Pahiya*, and so forth. The poster also effectively answered the charges levelled against me.

Then, "Sardar Sahib" pitched into the field Sikh singers of popular martial songs, with their *dhadda* and *sarangis*. These singers were very popular with Sikh audiences and attracted crowds wherever they sang. It was okay with us as long as they held their meetings separately. But, then, to disrupt our meetings, they began to organise their gatherings at the same place where we were holding ours. They used loud-speakers, whereas we had no such arrangement because of lack of resources.

The first such confrontation took place in village Bhattewadh. There was a big grazing ground outside the village and we were to hold our meeting there. But to our surprise, we found that our opponents had already "captured" the best patch of the ground and mobilised the singers who were using the loud-speaker. Villagers came in singles or in groups and sat round them to listen to their songs. We were somewhat late in holding our meeting.

We gathered around 11 a.m. and arranged our meeting on the edge of the grazing ground, a clear 1,000 metres away from their meeting place. Of course, we had no loud-speaker with us. About 50 people were present at our meeting, while at least 200 were seated as audience with them. We asked Avtar Singh Sidha to sing one of his poems. As he stood up and began to sing, almost the entire audience in our opponents' camp rose and shifted en masse to our meeting place. Their singers stopped singing because there was none to listen to them. The organisers of Sardar Sahib's meeting were in great discomfiture, while for us it was a great victory. So demoralised were our adversaries that they never again held a parallel meeting at the same place with us!

During the entire electioneering, nobody disturbed our meetings again. Their musclemen dared not interfere with our meetings because the people were solidly with us. Indeed, we marched ahead all along the line.

The Tarn Taran constituency was spread over two tehsils of Ajnala and Tarn Taran. We did not even have sufficient number of men to manage our election booths. We picked men from among the village voters, assigned them the duty to bring voters from the villages, take their voter-number through our election agents, and ask them to cast their votes for Sohan Singh Josh. Although we were inexperienced in the election game, our ad hoc machinery worked superbly because the voters were solidly behind us. Voters in overwhelming numbers came to our camps and voted for us in

the booths.

On the day of counting, I went into the room where counting was being done. The British Deputy Commissioner was in charge of the Amritsar Legislative Assembly constituency. As he saw me, he said: "Why do you worry? You have won".

The final result showed that I had won by a margin of about 12,000 votes. The daily *Tribune* gave a banner headline running through the entire page "A Communist defeats the biggest landlord in Punjab".

I was the only Communist who had fought the provincial elections as a party candidate. Communists in Kerala, Bengal and other provinces had fought on the Congress ticket and won. In Punjab, four Communists had won the election to the Assembly on Congress tickets.

While casting their votes many women and men had put rupee coins or notes in the ballot box, perhaps thinking that the money would come to me. I did not know where such money later went. Besides, women voters gave me dozens of homemade *rejas* of seven yards in length each. I distributed these among my election campaigners. In my election returns to the election officer, I showed a surplus of Rs. 350 after meeting all the election expenses.

Before the election, I was just a district leader. But after I was elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly set up under the British India Constitution, I overnight became one of the leaders of entire Punjab. I was welcomed and honoured everywhere – a Communist getting elected to the Assembly was a big, and new, thing then in the eyes of the Punjabi people. My election not only raised my estimation in the minds of our people, but the election campaign also helped greatly the growth of the Communist unit in Punjab.

The main reason for the Congress not doing well in Punjab was that the western part of the province was under the spell of Muslim feudalism. The Muslim tenants there were completely under the thumb of the Muslim landlords and the religious leaders. They had reconciled themselves to their miserable plight as "god-ordained", and, being illiterate, the political storms that raged in eastern Punjab never touched them. The Congress movement or its programmes were unknown to the common villager there.

It was mostly eastern Punjab which gave 18 seats to the Congress in the Assembly, five of whom were Communists. The Congress sat in the opposition with Dr. Gopichand Bhargava as its leader, while

Sir Sikander Hayat became the Premier of Punjab.

The Indian National Congress was actually worried over the independent growth of the Kisan Sabhas and the working class unions. It wanted to keep them under their control and tutelage, and for that purpose wanted the kisan organisations to adopt the Congress flag. But the All-India Kisan Sabha chose the Red Flag, thus expressing its solidarity with the working class.

The growing strength of the all-India Kisan organisations and the working class trade unions and their mutual collaboration and cooperation alarmed the Congress leadership. They made efforts to split the independent kisan movement and began to set up alternative "Kisan Sabhas". In January 1938, the Congress Working Committee approved a proposal to ban Congress members from working in the Kisan Sabhas, but in February it had to revoke that decision under public pressure. But the small episode revealed how the mind of the Congress leadership was working with regard to the independent growth mass organisations. An amended Congress rule made it clear that the party wanted to extend its primary committees in the village and in the working class quarters in the towns, the aim being to prevent the working people from forming class organisations of their own.

This particular strategy was adopted by the Congress leadership because the Kisan Sabhas in every Province, specially in the Congress-ruled provinces, had started struggles demanding that the promises made in the Congress election manifesto be implemented. The Congress Ministers were dodging the issues and doing nothing to lessen the burden of taxes and money-lenders' debts, etc., on the common man.

The situation under the feudal Unionist Ministry was much worse in Punjab. The struggles of the kisans in eastern Punjab started from 1938 demanding that the Sikandar Hayat Ministry fulfil the promises made during the elections. Nothing had been done towards this in the two years of the Ministry's rule. It was but natural that dissatisfaction and resentment grew against the government and the peasants began to press for their economic demands and forge weapons to fight them. The elections had actually brought a great awakening among the people.

The Unionist Government suddenly decided to enhance the land revenue in Lahore District. For the peasantry already suffering from many fiscal burdens—punitive police chowkis, chowkidara tax and

other taxes and charges—the increased land revenue was the last straw on the camel's back. The peasants decided not to take this new impost lying down, but to fight it to the bitter end.



A big all-Punjab Kisan Conference was held on 3-4 November, 1938 in village Bhangali in Lahore District. Communists, Kirti workers and Kisan leaders all joined their heads and hands to make it a success. The main point on the agenda was to start an indefinite "Kisan Morcha" against the enhanced land revenue till the demands were conceded by the government.

Over 30,000 peasants belonging to all communities and from all nooks and corners of Punjab thronged at the conference. A sea of waving Red flags called upon the government to rectify the situation by rescinding the land revenue enhancement order or face the united struggle of the peasantry. Comrade Yog Raj, general secretary of the Lahore District Kisan Sabha and Comrade Tehl Singh Bhangali had done the main spade-work in organising the kisan conference on such a grand scale.

All the five Communist MLAs of Punjab—Baba Roor Singh, Chuharchak, Master Kabul Singh, Sardar Harjan Singh Mahilpur, Bibi Raghbir Kaur and myself—were present at the conference. From Lahore had come Comrades Fazal Ilahi Qurban and Ehsan Ilahi. A resolution of non-confidence was moved by Ram Kishan, B.A. (National) against the Unionist Government, seconded by everyone, and was unanimously adopted. All the speakers condemned the repressive policy of the Sikandar-Chhotu Ram Ministry, arrest of political workers and suppression of the freedom of the Press.

I moved a resolution condemning the "federal scheme" of the Government of India Act, 1935. In the absence of any record of my speech, I do not recall exactly what I said while explaining the resolution but to the best of my memory, I said something like this:

"It is the Muslim League that advocates a federal structure for India. It may be in the interest of the Muslim community, but not in the interest of India as a whole. There is a British design behind this scheme. The Federal Scheme will divide India on religio-communal basis and will further fuel communal antagonism and quarrels between the Hindus and the Muslims. Further, the scheme allows the

princes to choose whether they want to remain in the British Empire or have separate existences. All this forms part of the slave constitution, and we condemn the scheme. We shall have no truck with it... We reject it totally."

When the resolution to launch the kisan morcha was put before the conference, the enthusiasm of the delegates knew no bounds. A wave of joy swept through the conference. Not a single soul opposed launching of the morcha after making proper preparations and every-one present held up his hand in support. The resolution was accepted unanimously.

The first phase of the morcha was a whirlwind propaganda through public meetings to popularise the Bhangali resolution among the peasantry and the reasons for the demands. The peasants' enthusiasm was over-whelming and everyone was ready for the needed sacrifices. They were all fed up with the working of the Unionist Government and cast their lot with the "kisan morcha".

The morcha was formally started on 3 March, 1939 and it engulfed the peasantry like wild fire. The Punjab Unionist Government clamped down Section 144, but kisan volunteers began to violate the law and get themselves arrested. Lahore was the centre of the morcha, and volunteers began to come from Majha, Doaba, Malwa, Shik-hupura, Lyallpur and other districts of Punjab to defy law and court arrest.

I, being the general-secretary of the Provincial Congress Committee, issued a circular to the district and local Congress Committees to help the kisans in their struggle against enhanced land revenue. Although hardly a few district and local Congress Committees were manned by left-wing Congressmen or pro-Communists, all of them backed the kisan morcha, thus giving it great impetus. The Rural Congress Committees were very active in helping the Lahore Kisan Morcha.

As the struggle progressed and its leadership became more determined and effective, the government repression too became more severe. Active workers and leaders were arrested, cases were slapped against them and they were either detained or sent away to far away place. However, new leaders sprang up to take their places who undauntedly carried on the agitation.

With the increase in government repression against the leaders and volunteers, the morcha grew in dimension, drawing in more areas of the peasantry. It gained momentum as the arrest figures

mounted, and jatha after jatha of volunteers were sentenced. The Press was full of heroic stories of the kisan jathas being sent from villages and the villages lying with one another to send more volunteers. A great upsurge swept throughout the Punjab countryside.

The All-India Kisan leaders took great interest in the Lahore morcha. Professor N.G. Ranga wanted to make it an all-India struggle; in Bihar and other provinces morchas were hotting up against the Congress governments there.

In this kisan struggle, women volunteers did not lag behind their male counterparts. Till 18 July, 1939, more than 1700 men and 200 women had been arrested and sentenced. Unfortunately, four of them died inside jail. Comrade Yog Raj's wife was the first among the women volunteers to court arrest along with her eight-month old son, Gurjeet, who eventually died inside the jail. Bibi Kishan Kaur of Bhadana village also died while undergoing imprisonment. Two other volunteers who died inside jail were Comrades Lal Din and Ram Das. These martyrs to the kisan cause roused anger and indignation among the peasantry and accelerated the speed of volunteer recruitment.

As the morcha was hotting up further, the clouds of World War II were gathering thicker and thicker. The AICC had already decided not to help the imperialists in the impending war. Premier Sikandar Hayat, the British protege and a loyal supporter of the British Government was aware that the British imperialists were already involved in the war, and if the morcha continued, it would affect British war efforts and peasant recruitment into the British India army. To get out of the situation, he manoeuvred a "deputation of kisans" to meet him at Simla on 4 September, 1939. Then, he announced that he had accepted some of the demands, including rescinding of the enhanced land revenue, and solemnly promised to look into the remaining ones. He also appealed to the kisan leaders to withdraw the morcha. After considering the pros and cons of the situation, the leaders of the kisan morcha finally decided to withdraw the agitation.

This was a very big victory for the growing morcha, which enhanced the prestige of the Punjab Kisan Sabha and its leadership and dealt a blow to the high and mighty attitude and arrogance of Sir Sikandar Hayat and his cohorts. The arrested kisan leaders and volunteers were subsequently released.

The kisan leaders were surprised to find during the morcha that

while the district Rural Congress Committees supported the morcha, the Provincial Congress Committee of which I was the general secretary kept mum and remained tongue-tied. This was noted in the Communist and *Kirti* Press as well. Why did the PCC not support the morcha?

24. Organising Workers and Peasants

COMRADE S.V. Ghate, the well-known Communist leader, came to Lahore unannounced from Madras on 18 April, 1937. His mission was to help us politically and organisationally, and to find the party situation in Punjab. But he was arrested by the British authorities under the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1935 as soon as he got down at the Lahore railway station and ordered to leave the province by the first available train. According to a government version, "he left quietly", and the episode received no mention in the Press or elsewhere. Had we known about Comrade Ghate's visit and his subsequent departure, we would have taken up the issue as another example of the high-handedness of the police, and derived some political mileage out of it.

After becoming an MLA, I began to intervene more often in political, trade union and kisan matters. With the rapid growth of the radical movement workers were becoming conscious of their rights. The workers of the Narain Swadeshi Ribbon and Trimming Factory at Chheharta in Amritsar struck work over some of their grievances, and prevented some "loyal" workers from getting into the factory. The government report of the time says: "The dispute was settled by the intervention of Sohan Singh Josh of the Meerut Conspiracy Case. The factory-owner gave way on all the points raised". This was in the last week of February 1937.

However, I mainly worked among the peasants who were oppressed under the heavy land revenue and the growing burden of debts. The Patrol Act too heaped indignities on them. *begaar* extracted by the police had become very common in which non-agricultural workers could be yoked by the police for any work without payment whatsoever. The peasants also feared another rise in the land revenue as a result of the new land assessment and settlement that was in the offing. The common demand of the peasants then was: Recover land revenue on the basis of income.

March-April 1937 was politically a busy period. In Amritsar, Lahore and other places in Punjab, Anti-Constitution Day was observed by the Congress, the Congress Socialist and the Communist Parties. Then, a National Week was observed from 7 to 13 April to focus on the murder of innocent and unarmed people at Jallianwala Bagh and the atrocities committed by the British rulers after the massacre.

We organised a big conference on 3-4 April, 1937 at Chhajjewal in Ludhiana district where Harnam Singh Chhajjewal was our kisan leader. All our MLAs and Comrade Mian Iftikhar-ud-Din spoke at the conference, condemning the police oppression, *begaar* and the Patrol Act. According to a government report, "Communist MLAs since their election have been very busy and they make speeches released from all restrictions".

The lowly-paid sweepers of Lahore organised a sweepers' union and held a conference under its auspices on 10-11 April. Our MLAs were also invited to address the conference, and we gave full-throated support to their cause. We said that their cause was our cause too and offered our services to them. The government also did not miss the connection, reporting that "the interest in the sweepers seems to be another step in the policy of the Communists to secure control of essential services"!

About the same time, the Punjab Rubber Works near Verka was closed down by its owners. We organised a big demonstration by the workers, and sure enough, the government report put that down as: "This once more emphasised the readiness of Communist workers to exploit local grievances"!

A strike took place in the first week of May 1937 in the Modern Woollen and Silk Mills, Kaulsar in Amritsar. I took up the matter with the millowners, negotiated with them and settled the dispute to the satisfaction of the workers. The owners had reduced the pay-scales of the workers, and I persuaded them to restore the old scales. This was considered a workers' victory by our Federation comrades.

The government was getting concerned over the spreading anti-British consciousness among the workers and worried over our growing work among the kisans and the trade unions. It dubbed all our efforts as "communism" to scare away others from joining us, but the fact remained that the working masses were now getting alert over their masters' ruthless exploitation.

On 21-22 August, 1937, we held a kisan conference at Baba

Bakala in Amritsar District under the auspices of the Bandobust Committee at which the main speakers were Principal Chhabil Das and myself. We lauded the work done by the Congress Ministries in other provinces which had released all political prisoners, while the Unionist Government in Punjab did not follow suit under one pretext or the other. We also extolled the rapid progress being made by the Soviet Union under the guidance of the workers and peasants.

A political conference was held at Garh Divala in Hoshiarpur which was addressed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardul Singh Caveeshar and others. We also held a Mazdoor Kisan Conference on 11 October airing our political and economic grievances and urging upon the peasants to participate in a demonstration in front of the Assembly Chamber at Lahore which we had planned. The Riasti Praja Mandal Conference also was held there.

However, the factional fight between the Gopichand Bhargava group and the Satyapal group never ceased in the Congress, even though the rank and file wanted unity in the Party. The Shahidganj Mosque or Gurdwara dispute also embittered the Muslim-Sikh relations, and many murders took place on this issue. This particular communal dispute overshadowed the political scene in Punjab for more than two years.

25. Agrarian Laws and Aftermath

BOTH 1938 and 1939 were years of great awakening amongst the masses in Punjab. The 1937 elections, the non-fulfilment of the promised reliefs by the Unionist Government and above all the repression and additional taxes in one form or another exasperated the peasantry and the working masses. The peasantry fought bitter struggles for their demands during this two-year period.

The Simla session of the Punjab Legislative Assembly began on 20 June, 1938 and ended on 23 July. It was a most significant session politically because it exposed the class character of the parties and individuals elected to the Assembly. The session passed three agrarian bills that were meant to provide some relief to the Punjab farmers, the moving figure behind these bills being Sir Chhotu Ram, the Minister for Development. However, the bills caused a furore in Punjab politics.

After the 1934 ban on all political parties in the Province, the CPI unit had taken the initiative to launch the *Qarza* (debt) Committees in Punjab. The Kirti leaders also started organising such committees. The committees' demands were abolition of all debts of the money-lenders and usurers and a moratorium on debts till the passage of a proper legislation. The demands caught the imagination of the masses and a vast network of *Qarza* Committees sprang up in the countryside, preparing the ground for another peasant mass action.

This was the background in which the agrarian bills were placed one after another in the Assembly by Sir Sikandar Hayat's Unionist Ministry. Through these bills, Sir Sikandar wanted to derive a three-fold gain. First, he wanted to pave the way for the imperialist rulers to secure ample army recruits from Punjab for the impending world war; secondly, he wanted to expose the Congress leaders as agents of the money-lenders and not friends of the peasantry; and, thirdly, to isolate the Congress party by winning over the peasantry to his side.

The urgency of the bills lay in the fact that the Congress High Command had passed a resolution not to help the impending im-

perialist war in any manner, and a successful no-recruitment campaign had been launched throughout the country. The Communists spearheaded the movement which was having a telling effect on the peasantry. The Sikandar Hayat Ministry brought up these bills as a sop to the peasantry and blunt the edge of the movement.

The Alienation of Land (Third Amendment) Bill was passed putting agricultural money-lenders at par with non-agricultural money-lenders. The former were also deprived of the right to acquire land in settlement of their debts. The Bill was called the Restitution of Mortgaged Lands Bill. The agricultural debtor could get his mortgaged land back by paying a reasonable compensation to be determined by the Conciliation Boards. The second bill provided for strict official control over agricultural markets to ensure that agriculturists got fair price for their produce. The third Bill provided compulsory registration of money-lenders. The main edge of these Bills was against the moneylending class, agricultural or non-agricultural.

However, these bills did not go far enough. First, because the money-lenders had very close links with the bureaucracy and the magistracy; secondly, they were pro-British and could circumvent the law with the connivance of the officials through bribes and war funds. But, all said and done, the Bills did provide some measure of relief to the land-owning agriculturists. But the interests of the tenants of the landlords had been completely ignored and neglected. Actually, the landlord ministry had ensured its own class interests.

Great hue and cry was raised against these Bills by the urban Hindus. The first salvo was fired during the discussions on the bills in the coalition ministry of Sir Sikandar Hayat itself. Raja Narendranath, one of the Ministers, made a blistering attack on the bills, and on Sir Sikandar himself. The Raja was a reactionary and senile landlord, who vehemently defended the interests of the Hindu money-lenders and finally staged a walk-out along with his party ministers and members. But Mr Mukandlal Puri, a leader of the Ministerial Party, gave the real bit of his mind in his speech, saying: "It is out-bolsheviking Bolshevik Russia. In this province, we are living in fright and panic".

The main opposition inside the Assembly was Dr Gopichand Bhargava's faction of the Punjab Congress. Bhargava was a rightwing Congressman, while Satyapal led the left-wing group. The former was for defending the interests of the money-lenders. We five of the Communist group in the Congress Legislature Party made it clear to Dr Bhargava that we would support or criticise the bills from a leftist

angle, as we were committed to the peasant movement on these issues. Our hands were strengthened by a mandate sent by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the then all-India Congress president, to support the bills, but advising the Congress Legislative group, if I recall correctly, that the bills should also be attacked from the leftist standpoint.

But Dr Gopichand Bhargava was taking a vacillating position on the bills. The pressure of urban Hindu organisations on the Congress was tremendous. The entire Hindu Press—the *Tribune*, *Pratap*, *Milap*, *Veer Bharat*, etc. — totally opposed the bills and defended the moneylenders' interests. Dr Bhargava's indecisive posture was being criticised harshly by the left Congressmen as well. A big anti-bill movement was manipulated by the urbanite, pro-moneylender Hindu Press. They even observed a "black week" against the bills.

I was the chief whip of the Congress Legislature Party as also the leader of the Communist group. The latter decided to put up Master Kabal Singh to speak on the bills during the discussions in the Assembly. He made an effective speech in defence of the bills, pointed out their shortcomings, and bitterly attacked those Congressmen who opposed them. He attacked the Hindu Press as well and said that Congress leaders did not represent the masses as some were "dictatorial in their methods and capitalist in their outlook". The dominant Congress leadership was dubbed by some speakers as the "Punjab Insurance Control Council"!

Dr Gopichand Bhargava's position became shaky and untenable. On the one side the urban Hindu view was that the Congress has betrayed them, on the other, Congress leftists raised their voice against Bhargava's leadership; Duni Chand Ambalvi being the first person to make the demand.

The rural mass support to the bills was overwhelming. The "subversive" Punjab Kisan Sabha also backed the bills and pulled up those who opposed them. Sir Sikandar Hayat scored a big victory by passing these bills, and in the process exposing and isolating the Punjab Congress and its leadership. He told the Congress leadership that he was following the example of Rajagopalchari who had passed a similar bill in Madras Province.



Even as the Sikandar Hayat Ministry was seeking to give some relief to the agriculturists by passing the agrarian laws, it had decided to in-

crease the land revenue in Amritsar District through new settlements and reassessments. This was a bolt from the blue for the peasantry who could not bear the additional burden being imposed on it. The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha decided to fight it out. The Simla session of the Assembly was still in progress when the Amritsar Kisan Morcha began on 20 July, 1938.

The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha had been agitating for long to ameliorate the grievances of the peasants who were overburdened with debts, taxes, water rates, *chahi* rates, land revenue, *malba* charges, chowkidara tax and so on. The Unionist Government of Sir Sikandar Hayat and Sir Chhotu Ram not only ignored these grievances, on the contrary, it imposed additional land revenue on the Amritsar peasants to augment government revenue. For this purpose, they set up an official committee to reassess the land revenue of the district, as according to the government the district was in a position to pay because of the canal irrigation system which was benefitting the farmers of the region. It was estimated that reassessment of land revenue would put an additional burden to the extent of Rs. four to five lakh on the peasants.

Earlier, on 12 July, a poster in Punjabi had been issued by the Kisan leaders warning that the government wanted to increase the land revenue by Rs. four lakh per annum and that canal outlets were being reduced in a number of villages. The peasants, already groaning under heavy taxes and debts, would be doomed if they did not unite and fight.

The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha could not let this attack on the kisans go unchallenged, and forces were being organized for a *morcha*. The Akalis had improvised a "Bandobast Committee" to keep the peasantry under its grip with a view to later utilising the Sikh peasants' votes to capture the gurdwaras whose elections were due after some months. We were for kisan unity to fight the government reassessment order and force the government to withdraw it. Therefore, we agreed to make Akali Jathedar Udham Singh the leader of the first jatha. The main morcha force came from the Amritsar District Kisan Sabha backed by the Communists—the CPI and the Kirti group.

Jallianwala Bagh was made the headquarters of the morcha. Sardar Pratap Singh and I drafted a statement for the Press setting out the reasons for the struggle. It was decided that the first jatha would consist of 500 prominent Kisan and Akali leaders and trusted men.

The demands put forward were: remodelling of the canal outlets and desilting of canals to ensure water at the tail-ends, no increment, but reduction, in land revenue, cancellation of debts owed to the money-lenders, regular supply of irrigation water, no arbitrary collection of *malba* charges, no *chahi* rates, no *chowkidara* tax, and abolition of *thikari paihra*, etc.

On 20 July, 1938 the jatha marched from the sacred Jallianwala Bagh in a peaceful and disciplined manner in fours. They were to go to the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow and hand over to him the charter of demands of the kisans. The kisans proceeded towards the Civil Lines carrying revolutionary placards, Congress flags and hammer-and-sickle banners and burnt an effigy of *malba*. A day earlier, the Government had imposed Section 144 to prevent the kisans from staging the demonstration and to crush the movement with force.

The *jatha* included prominent men of the freedom struggle and the gurdwara movement—Jathedar Udham Singh, Gehal Singh Chhajjalwaddhi, Rattan Singh Sarhali, Jaswant Singh Kairon, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna (of the Ghadar movement fame), Baba Lal Singh Bhure, and many others. As soon as they reached the Bhandari railway overbridge, they were, according to the official version, "given five minutes to disperse". The *jathedars* told the officials that they wanted merely to present their charter of grievances to the government and had no intention of creating disorder. But the officials refused to listen to these pleadings, and orders were given to the police to disperse them by force. The police charged them with lathis and tried to push them back.

It was a hot day. The members of the jatha were beaten mercilessly, and many were dragged on the road and thrown over the road railings. Many fell unconscious. But the jatha members braved the police lathi-charge. A government version said that "about 300 peasants received injuries and 143 prominent workers were arrested". But figures in government versions in such cases should always be multiplied at least by two. In fact, there was hardly a member in the 500-strong jatha who had escaped brutal police beating. Even bystanders and onlookers were beaten up and arrested.

The *National Front* wrote on 31 July: "What followed is too ghastly to relate. For 15 minutes lathi blows were showered on the peaceful assembly. Hundreds were bleeding. Many had to be removed in vans to the hospital, several lay unconscious on the ground".

The government had mistakenly thought that there brutal violence

would "pacify the revolt". But they had counted without their adversaries. Police brutality only roused the anger and indignation of the peasants, and the Amritsar Kisan Sabha resolved to continue the struggle till the government yielded.

The kisans of Amritsar were not alone in this life-and-death struggle. Even city-dwellers were deeply moved emotionally because of the merciless and brutal beating by the police and blood-letting. In protest against the incident, the grain and cloth markets of Amritsar observed a complete hartal on 21 July. I persuaded Dr Saif-ud-Din Kitchlew, president of the Congress, to extend his party's support to the cause of the peasants, which he did. The Congress appointed a committee to enquire into the lathi-charge. The incident thoroughly exposed the Sikandar Hayat Ministry and isolated it from the people of Amritsar. Public meetings were held all over Punjab to condemn the brute force used on the kisans by a government of *zamindars* (land-owners).

A "war council" was set up to continue the struggle. *Jathas* of 25 kisans were sent daily to defy the ban order. The Government, meanwhile, changed its tactics: instead of arresting all the members of a *jatha*, only the leaders were taken into custody. The movement spread to central Punjab Sargodha and Lyallpur Districts as well, where *jathas* were organised for the Amritsar kisan morcha. Professor N.G. Ranga, general-secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha, pledged his wholehearted support to the struggle of the kisans, and the Press began to expose the Sikandar Hayat Ministry for its failure to solve the problems of the kisans.

Sir Sikander visited Amritsar on 9 and 10 August, primarily to explain his agrarian bills and counter the anti-recruitment campaign launched by the Congress. We decided to hold parallel meetings at the same places and time where he was to address the public. One such meeting addressed by him and Choudhari Chhotu Ram was held in Ajnala tehsil, and we held our parallel meeting just two furlongs away in a field on the Amritsar-Ajnala Road. While the attendance at our meeting was far bigger, primarily only Muslims with a sprinkling of pro-government Hindus and Sikhs attended their meeting.

However, as soon as we began to speak from our improvised platform, lathi-wielding policemen charged in to disperse our meeting, without even a warning. As the people ran into the adjoining fields, policemen pursued them there and beat them up. Many of them

were injured; Comrade Inder Singh of Gumtala suffered severe injuries on his back, thigh and chest. Even as I stood alone on the makeshift platform, no policeman came near me and I was somehow spared.

The second meeting addressed by the two Ministers was held in village Khalchian on the G.T. Road. We also held a parallel meeting in this Sikh peasantry area, which, like the first one, was larger than theirs. Sardar Partap Singh Kairon was here to address our meet. According to the government's own report, "Kisan demonstrations at Amritsar had overshadowed all other forms of agrarian agitations".

Repression failed to check the morcha; rather it gained in strength every day. Finally, the government had to withdraw Section 144 and Sir Sikander Hayat called me and Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, MLA, for talks and a possible settlement. He then conceded our main demand of not levying the enhanced revenue proposed by the settlement officers and postponed its collection for the next five years. Later, he made an announcement in the Assembly too:

When we asked him to release the prisoners, he did not agree, but said "I will release the 'dupes' but not the 'professional agitators'. However, excepting Udham Singh and a few others all Akali prisoners were freed, but he refused to release the communist leaders whom he dubbed as "professional agitators". Later, he released some of them in batches.

This was indeed a big victory for the morcha. The government had beat a retreat because the kisan morcha had spread and the indignation created by the repressive government policies was affecting its recruitment drive for the army in the impending imperialist war.



Like in Amritsar, the kisans of the Lahore district too had to launch a bitter morcha to fight to get stayed the enhanced land revenue imposed on them through a new land settlement. They had been agitating against the nine per cent increase for quite some time, but the government did not pay any heed. The increased land revenue was through a sliding scale, entirely determined by the corrupt and high-handed settlement officers.

The kisans were forced to sell their produce at very low price because the *lambardars* pressurised them to pay up their revenues and threatened to send them to jail if they failed to do so. This was

manipulated by the British grain traders like Ralli Brothers and Co. to enable them to purchase farmers' produce at cheap rates in the harvest season for export to England. In 1938 and 1939 many a *lambardar* had been prosecuted for their "failure to collect revenue", with the result that most others increased their pressures on the poor kisans to sell their produce fast, even if dirt cheap, and pay up. There were instances galore when farmers had to sell every grain to pay their revenue dues, and thus not have enough for themselves for their domestic needs. They had no money to buy grain for their families in the off-season market where the prices had risen meanwhile. This was one reason why most farmers had to send their sons as "cannon fodder" for the British Indian army. So that they could send home some cash.

The leaders of the Lahore morcha, Comrade Tehal Singh Bhangali and Yog Raj, belonged to our group and with our collective decision announced that the kisans would stage a big morcha before the Punjab Assembly hall on 23 March to ventilate their grievances. Kisans living far off were asked to gather near Bradlaugh Hall the night before, and according to government reports, "more than 300 had already gathered by the evening and they continued to pour in from all sides till very late in the night". The government had imposed Section 144 to prevent them from approaching the Assembly. Sikandar Hayat had earlier refused to meet the kisan leaders, saying that "some of them" did not belong to the Lahore district.

The kisans broke the police cordon and forced their way into the prohibited area. According to government reports "103 kisan demonstrators" were arrested, but *Kirti Lahar* of 2 April has it that 137 of the 8,000-odd demonstrators were taken into custody. This was the beginning of the Bhangali struggle, which later was known as the Lahore Morcha.

The movement spread fast, and kisan jathas came pouring in to court arrest. While some big kisan leaders like Baba Kesar Singh, Master Gajjan Singh, Sodhi Pindi Das, Dalip Singh and others were arrested, a number of them went underground to continue the struggle.

I, as the PCC general-secretary, issued a circular on my own asking all the Rural Congress Committees to help the kisan morcha. Their response was great, and even a government report noted that "the Congress MLAs openly supported this open defiance of law".

From the Lahore district morcha, the movement soon developed

into an all-Punjab morcha. Village *jathas* on their way would spread the aims of the movement among the villages en route, thus awakening and rousing the peasantry. The Government too increased its repression, and petty rural officials like *lambardars* and the local police thanas were directed to arrest anyone inciting the kisans to join the morcha. By the end of April more than 1,000 had been arrested and sent to jail. The *morcha* by then had been taken over by the Provincial Kisan Committee. Peasant *jathas* began arriving from as far away as Ambala, Ferozepore, Jullundur on foot, spreading the movement on their way. Women did not lag behind, and many of them were also arrested and sent to jail. The All-India Kisan Sabha lent its full support to the morcha, and decided to observe 4 June as the "All-India Punjab Kisan Day" throughout India to express solidarity with the kisans of Punjab.

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An example of how some clever ministers of the Unionist Government managed their affairs is revealed by Sikander Hayat Khan's development minister Chaudhari Chhoturam, a Jat by caste. He was a clever and shrewd person and was anti-bania because of the latter's dishonest trading methods. He knew that the Unionist Government's agrarian bills helped the landowning classes, and that most peasant Congress MLAs too supported them. He was also aware that the vacillating policy of the Congress Party had cost it much credibility among the urban Hindu moneylenders, the trading classes and the rural peasantry.

Therefore, Sir Chhotu Ram began to concentrate on the Congress *jat* MLAs from the rural areas to win them over to his side. His theme that the "jats have a common interest" as against the moneylending usurers and the corrupt trading classes was well received by the ignorant and the gullible. Thus, Choudhary Kartar Singh, a Congress MLA, began leaning over to him and entertained Choudhary Chhotu Ram while the latter was on a tour. This was resented by the Congress legislature group. As the chief whip of the CLP, a case of violation of group discipline was instituted by me against him. He was later severely reprimanded for this and told to conform.

Sir Chhotu Ram, in his capacity as the development minister, had set up a "Peasant Consolidation Fund" with core money of a few lakh

of rupees. This fund was supposed to help the peasants in need. He had formed a committee of some peasant MLAs of his choice to handle the fund in consultation with him. I was not a member of this committee, nor was I ever informed as such. But suddenly one day I was told to attend a meeting of the fund committee at Simla. I attended the meeting.

During the discussion, I asked a straightforward question: Will any amount of the fund be used to help the kisans whose harvest had been burnt in some mishap, thus depriving him of his livelihood?

Sir Chhotu Ram replied: No, not a single paisa will be given to such persons.

What then was the use of creating such a fund if it would not help an unfortunate kisan? I asked. "Well, he can fend for himself", replied Sir Chhotu Ram.

"In that case there is no use my attending the meeting," saying this I walked out and later reported the incident to our legislative group. Ministers created funds in the name of this or that cause or institution and then had a coterie of favourite members who were summoned to some hill stations, especially in the summers, for such meetings. They drew their daily allowances and travelling allowance, and had a gala time in the cool atmosphere for a week or two. Such meetings also kept these members well disposed towards the concerned ministers.

26. Indian National Congress and Muslims

THE Indian National Congress had been trying for long to interest the Muslim masses in the national freedom struggle. However, Muslim landlords and communalists held majority of the Muslim masses completely under their grip as the latter were backward looking and unlettered. It was difficult to approach the Muslim peasantry in the Punjab countryside without meeting resistance from the landlords, their "food-giver" masters. A number of them, however, had joined the national movement in the Hindu or Sikh dominated areas, but in the Muslim-dominated districts things were difficult. This is not to say that Muslims in general were not patriotic. They were. The British rulers too viewed with suspicion any "outsider" creating political awakening among the Muslim masses; it was in their interest to keep them in darkness and slumber.

Dr Ashraf, Political Secretary of the AICC, and Syed Sajjad Zaheer had come to Punjab to attend the conference of the Congress Socialist Party in Amritsar in June 1937, and they visited Jhelum, Rawalpindi and Lahore to bring in the Muslim masses into the Congress fold. But their success was very limited. It was commonly said then that "God, religion and capitalism" were impeding the advance of the Muslims towards the national freedom movement.

Dr Satyapal had set up a Muslim Contact Committee when he was the president of the Punjab PCC. Munshi Ahmad Din, at whose disposal several thousand rupees were placed, was in-charge of the committee, but he also could not achieve much.

After the Satyapal group was defeated in the elections to the Punjab PCC, we took charge and began putting the Congress house in order. We decided to tackle the problem of Muslim mass contact with vigour and determination, and chalked out a programme for the purpose.

In June 1939, we held several meetings and conferences in Muslim-dominated towns and districts of Punjab. Three conferences

were held—at Thatta (District Attock) on 4-5 June, at Kunjah in Gujarat on 7-8 June, and at Pull Kanjari in Amritsar on 11 June. At Thatta, a huge Congress procession was proceeding peacefully through the village with Dr Saif-ud Din Kitchlew, president, myself (as the general-secretary) and other Congress leaders at the head and the Red Shirts from the Frontier Provinces in the rear when the latter were attacked by the Khattar Muslims of the village. A Red Shirt volunteer was killed and confusion and disorder reigned for 10-15 minutes. I asked Dr Kitchlew whether we should go to the scene of the incident and find out what had happened. But he declined, saying that it would break the procession and add to the confusion. He then ordered that nobody should break the line and that everybody should remain standing till asked to proceed.

On the following day, we condemned the planned attack by the Khattars, and accused the Unionist Party Ministry of complicity and collusion in the incident. A resolution was passed eulogising the peaceful behaviour of the Red Shirts, and urging upon the Government to punish the guilty and asking the Muslims to join the Congress. Many Congress workers were later implicated in the case and sentenced. The Congress party defended them all, bearing all the expenses.

The Kunjah conference was held in a peaceful atmosphere and nothing untoward happened. The one-day Pull Kanjari conference was a great success, which was addressed by Dr Kitchlew, me, Dr Bhargava and others. Dr Surat Singh, a practising doctor, met the entire expenditure of the conference. Not only that, his whole family took keen interest in the conference proceedings, prepared meals for all, as also served it.

Dr Surat Singh had come close to me during the course of my election campaign in 1937. He admired our selfless work so much that he threw open the doors of his big bungalow for our comrades: they could come any time of the day and night, take food, rest and then go. His family remained loyal to us through thick and thin. It was a big loss and cause of great grief for us when he died of heart failure. But his wife and daughters always welcomed us whenever we went there for night rest and food.

In July 1939, we held a conference in Lilla in District Jhelum, about which the Government reports said: "Dr Kitchlew, Dr Gopichand and Sohan Singh Josh made their usual speeches, condemning everything that (Unionist) Government has ever done".

A mass contact week was observed from 15 to 22 August, the main purpose of which was to enlist Muslim support for the national freedom movement. But our efforts did not bite much, because of the false propaganda spread among the gullible Muslims in the Muslim-dominated areas that the Congress was a "Hindu organisation", that it was anti-Muslim and that it had "bought" some Muslims. But the situation was different in the Hindu-Sikh majority areas. Despite all these impediments, our efforts to bring the Muslims into the Congress fold continued uninterrupted.

Meanwhile, the Punjab Provincial Congress Working Committee decided to organise a stronger volunteer corps, enlist able-bodied men in it and to have more whole-time propagandists. A Congress workers' training programme ended on 30 June, and it was decided to hold another such training school to brief them on the Congress political line and the methods of the organisation. A few "kisan schools" had also been conducted explaining to the peasantry how the British imperialists were exploiting them. At the same time, the Lahore Kissan Morcha was on against the new settlement enhancement of land revenue, while the anti-recruitment drive for the army was making a telling impact on the people.

All these Congress activities peeved and angered the Unionist Party Premier Sir Sikander Hayat, who was greatly disturbed by the propaganda against his party and by the successful recruitment programme carried on by the Congress leadership, in particular by Dr Kitchlew and me". The Premier had already declared in July 1938 his willing and unconditional help to the Empire and refused to tolerate the "embarrassment" being caused by the left-wing of the Congress under the leadership of Dr Kitchlew and S.S. Josh." ("Communist Movement in Punjab" by Bhagwan Josh, p. 157). Not only that, Sir Sikander told Lala Sohan Lal (son of Rai Saheb Munshi Gulab Singh and Sons, booksellers at the railway stalls) that Sohan Singh Josh is a very dangerous man and that the government was keeping a close watch on his communist activities". (Sohan Lal's own statement). Thus, the Premier was waiting for an opportunity to put me behind bar.

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The World War II began in September, 1939. We were pushing the anti-imperialist war propaganda through the Congress and our Com-

munist unit. The IACC had sent a circular directing its primary, tehsil and district committees to transform themselves into "satyagraha committees" and asked the Congress units to resign if they were not willing to sign the *satyagraha* pledge. The Congress party also denounced the steps taken by the Government to curb expression of political views and anti-war agitation. The Publicity Department of the Congress in its weekly newsletter said: India was faced with the choice of self-determination through the Constituent Assembly or continued slavery." The Congress was in a fighting mood as all the Congress Ministries had been dissolved. The Government had started arresting Congress leaders for their anti-recruitment and anti-war campaigns.

At this juncture, the political stand of the Congress and the CPI almost coincided. The war was being fought by the Allied Powers to preserve their colonial empires. India should be freed before she could help in the war effort, because as a subject country, she had no country to defend.

On 19 April, 1940 the Congress pledged its members to offer *satyagraha*, and decided to open a central *satyagraha* training camp in May at Lahore to instruct district representatives, who would in turn open such camps in their own districts to train *satyagrahis*.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru opened the Lahore camp on 24 May and in his speech explained the position of the Congress in regard to the war. He visualised that British imperialism was collapsing. The Congress was opposed to India helping Britain in the war and that British imperialists must concede the demand for self-determination for India. Since the British were not doing so, the gulf between the Congress and Britain had become unbridgeable. Only acceptance of the Congress demand would make any such cooperation possible. He exhorted the *satyagrahi* trainees to be ready to make sacrifices for the cause of the freedom of the country.

About 125 volunteers from different cities and districts turned up for the camp. The daily routine was based on Congress' constructive programme – signing of Mahatma Gandhi's favourite communal harmony songs, plying the *charkha* and hearing lectures. Dr Gopichand Bhargava was the head of the camp. In one of his camp speeches, he praised me for being a disciplined *satyagrahi*. He said that though Josh is a communist, he is abiding by the Congress discipline, plying the *charkha* and meticulously following the rules of the *satyagraha* camp.

The government report summed up the end of the Satyagrahi camp as follows:

“Communists and other extremists...stated clearly that the present situation should be exploited to the full to secure India's independence. Their influence at the *satyagraha* camp held at Lahore last month and at a general meeting of the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee was very pronounced and on both occasions they seized the opportunity to urge a revolt against imperialism and capitalism, whole-hearted opposition to any war effort by India and preparation for a mass revolt by a 'no-rent, no-tax' campaign and tampering with the loyalty of the army. Under the cover of preparation for a civil disobedience movement, they hope to pave the way for mass revolution”.

Before the end of the camp, I took the CPI men aside, held a short closed meeting and spoke to them about the situation facing us at that time. I explained that both the sides fighting the war were imperialist powers and that the war was being fought by them for re-dividing the world, i.e. to enslave other peoples in order to exploit them and their material resources and to create markets for their expanding commodities. However, the war provided us with an opportunity to work for the overthrow of British imperialism and win India's independence through a mass revolution. As the Government might arrest us at any time, the comrades should make arrangements for going underground and ardently work for rousing the masses for such a revolution. The response of the comrades to my briefing was encouraging as later events showed.

27. Arrest of Communists and Deoli Camp

SIR Sikandar Hayat, the British stooge, was committed to defending the British empire and fighting its enemies, i.e. the Communists, the Socialists and the Congress *satyagrahis*. The momentum of the anti-war, anti-recruitment agitations was upsetting his plans to help the British war efforts. Thus, in the second half of June 1940, his government decided to act and arrest under the Defence of India Rules all the prominent leaders of the above-mentioned movements; dubbing the Communists as “fifth columnists”, “Russian agents”, etc.

In the first round, the Government arrested “84 of the more dangerous” communists, including the five members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly—Baba Roor Singh, Harjab Singh, Kabul Singh, Master Hari Singh and me. About 40 of them were Moscow-trained communists. Among others arrested were Comrade Makhan Singh Gharjakh (Gujranwala), Comrade Dhanwantri (co-accused in the Bhagat Singh conspiracy case), Mota Singh Bhabalpur, student leaders like Rajbans Krishan, Munshi Ahmed Din, Kartar Singh Gill, Ram Singh Dutt and Dr Bhag Singh. In successive raids, more political workers were sent into detention. All prominent Ghadar Party Babas—Baba Wasakha Singh, Sohan Singh Bhakhna and others—were also brought into jails and made security prisoners. The number of actual detainees far exceeded the one given in the Government report as 1,300.

Communist security prisoners in Punjab were moved to jails in other provinces. Ultimately, they were all lodged in the Deoli Military Camp in Kotah District of Rajputana, (now Rajasthan). The Government had decided to intern all communists, socialists and other radicals of Bombay, Bihar, UP and Punjab in the Deoli camp. Two camps were set up and separated by barbed wires for A and B Class detainees. The classification was not according to any fixed criterion, but whimsical. A Class detainees had a food allowance of 12 annas per day, while the B Class ones were just given half of it.

Once a week we were allowed to mix in the playground, play some games or just sit and exchange views. The CPI detainees from Punjab were mostly in the A camp, while the Kirti Communists were in the B. Comrade S.V. Ghate and a few other CPI comrades were also in the B camp.

In camp A, we consolidated ourselves and comrades B.T. Ranadive and S.A. Dange began to take classes in Marxism-Leninism. Comrade Dange's lectures on state and revolution were very effective. They gave us a new insight and explicitly explained the real nature of a bourgeois state, of suppression of the working class and its exploitation. Comrade Ranadive generally spoke on capitalism and commodity production, which were too obtuse and abstract for most like us. We had an elected committee to keep discipline among the comrades. It discussed camp matters and dealt with complaints, if any, arising out of the camp life. The committee members took up our problems with the Camp Superintendent.

Our "Communist Consolidation" was not liked by Jaiprakash Narain and a few other Socialists who were also lodged in the camp. They were in a very small minority, and generally kept aloof from us. Jaiprakash Narain harboured a grudge against us because of our consolidation.

Life in the Deoli camp was a very eventful chapter, but I have no space here to tell the whole story. But I would relate three incidents in the camp: merger of the Kirti Communists in the CPI; our hunger strike and Jaiprakash Narain's anti-Communist letter which was intercepted by the CID in-charge at the time of his interview with his wife.

The biggest gain of the Deoli detention camp for the Punjab Communists was the unity achieved there. The reader has seen earlier how the CPI and the Kirti people were at loggerheads, retarding and harming the growth of the Communist movement in the province. All efforts by the Kirti group to replace the CPI unit in Punjab had failed, as also their efforts to get direct affiliation to the Third International. We in the CPI unit were alive and kicking, notwithstanding their efforts to wipe us out and at denigration.

The physical presence of the CPI leadership in the Deoli camp was an eye-opener for them.

Here was the great Buddhist scholar Rahul Sankrityayan — simple, straight-forward, bright and bubbling with life who considered it a privilege to be a member of the CPI. Here was Dr Mahmud-uz-Zaf-

far, vice-principal of the M.A.O. College, Amritsar, arrested for his communist activities (he was our unit in-charge while he was a professor in the college). Here was Dr Z.A. Ahmad, Kisan Secretary of the AICC arrested for his communist activity. And, of course, CPI leaders of the calibre of Comrades S.A. Dange and B.T. Ranadive and so many others. The array of CPI leadership did impress the Kirti comrades.

But it was Comrade S.V. Ghate who argued with them day and night, urging them to join the CPI. He explained that there cannot be two Communist parties in India and that they were violating the party principles, etc. Comrade Ghate was very cordial with Ghadar Party Babas – Sohan Singh Bhakna, Kesar Singh, Baba Wasakha Singh. He succeeded in winning half the battle by persuading them to give up their separatism and isolation, join the CPI as also talk others into joining the party. Comrade Ghate's untiring efforts finally bore fruit.

Ram Singh Dutt did create some difficulties at the beginning, but seeing that he was isolated and would be of no use being alone, finally fell in line with the rest. The unification of the Kirti group with the CPI was thus achieved. I had been "insisting all along that not a single Kirti Communist be left outside the CPI" (Marxist Gurcharan Singh Randhawa's statement). This unity was duly celebrated in the camp and full credit for this goes to Comrade Ghate.

The Kirti comrades in the Deoli Camp then wrote to their comrades outside, asking them also to join the CPI as they had done.

The second incident was our hunger strike in protest against the horrible conditions in the Deoli Camp: some of us even called it "a Nazi concentration camp". The camp had no adequate arrangements for water, bath, latrines or lights. But there were more serious grievances than these.

The foremost among them which politically pinched us most was our classification into A and B and keeping us in two separate camps. It was only after a united protest that we were allowed to meet once a week in the playground. But the jail authorities refused to yield on classification. Worse was with regard to providing us with political or even literary works. Even the few pro-government dailies allowed to us were censored to leave out pro-Soviet news. No family allowance was given to us and it was beyond the fiscal capacity of our family members to come to such a distant place like Deoli for interviews.

We had been sending repeated representations and applications

to the government to provide us with more facilities to make our lives a little more bearable. Marxist literature was, of course, completely banned; even books by British authors like John Strachey and Bernard Shaw and American author Upton Sinclair were not allowed. All our requests and petitions fell on deaf ears. We then decided to resort to hunger strike to secure our demands. In our ultimatum to the government we had also asked that we be sent back to our respective provinces.

The hunger strike continued for more than a fortnight. Mr N.M. Joshi, a well-meaning, liberal trade union leader, came to meet us and prevail upon us to give up the hunger strike, assuring that he would do his best to see that some of our reasonable demands were met. But our hunger strike continued; and Mr Joshi came again to inform us that the government had conceded our demand for repatriation.

We detainees were then allowed to meet and decide on our future course of action. There were differences whether the hunger strike should be withdrawn or not, but the majority voted in favour of ending it, although the Punjab members wanted to continue.

The third significant event of the camp was the interception of Jaiprakash Narain's anti-Communist letter. His wife had come to interview him at the camp entrance, and JP tried to pass on the letter to her. A hawk-eyed CID inspector caught it in the process. Later, British Home Minister Maxwell made much out of the incident. The contents of the letter, it was revealed later, were full of venom against the Communists, and their consolidation activities in the Deoli Camp.

28. Hitler Attacks Russia — Indian Scene

HAVING brought almost entire Europe under his jack-boot, Hitler launched an attack on Soviet Russia on 22 June, 1941, tearing to pieces the non-aggression pact which Germany had signed with Russia in 1939. Britain and France were already at war with Hitler's Germany. Hitler's victories in Europe had overawed most people and statesmen of the time, and they speculated that Russian resistance would collapse soon and that Hitler would overrun Russia as he had done over other European nations. But these pessimists proved fake prophets.

The new situation created problems for the Communists in India. So far, the nature of the war had been anti-imperialists, and the CPI line was to create conditions for the overthrow of British imperialist domination over India through a mass revolution, usher in Indian freedom and bring into being an Indian National Government. But, Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union changed the entire scenario and the purview, and a fresh reassessment of the new situation and framing of new programme and tactics became imperative. The CPI just could not afford to sit idle and watch Hitler's hoards stomp over the Soviet soil and capture villages and towns one after another. After all, Soviet Russia was the symbolic mother-country of workers all over the world.

We were in the Deoli detention camp when Hitler attacked Russia. Comrades B.T. Ranadive and S.A. Dange produced a note indicating the line the CPI should adopt in the changed situation. The note was placed before Deoli camp comrades and was generally approved. Subsequently, the note was smuggled out of the camp and sent to Party centre in Bombay which was then working underground.

The change in the party line was bound to come; and it did, although it took a long time. As Hitler's armies advanced into Russia for quite a while in the beginning, everyone of us was worried: what if

the Red Army succumbed? Still, our faith in the ultimate Soviet success never faltered and we were optimistic that the tide would turn, that Hitler would lick the dust, finally.

It was indeed puzzling for us in the Deoli Camp when some of the detainees began having doubts on the Russian army's capacity, and Harjab Singh, Moscow-returned, and Kabul Singh of Punjab joined Master Mota Singh and other anti-party people in shouting "Hail Hitler"! We took immediate action against them and expelled them from the Party.

One of the government reports analysed the attitude of the Indian Communists following the German attack on Soviet Russia thus: "Ever since the outbreak of war, they have gone in for subversive activities designed to hinder the war effort. At the same time, they affirmed their steadfast friendship for Soviet Russia. Now, in their anxiety to help Russia, they feel bound to preach the need of assistance of all kinds. But they do not want to side openly and frankly with their arch-enemy, Britain." (Fortnightly Reports, 18-6-1941, June II half: Home Political).

Our comrades still outside now vigorously began demanding the release of all Communists and other security prisoners. They were anxious to have us with them at this critical hour. Simultaneously, supporting our demand better treatment in the camp, a widespread movement was developed spearheaded by the Party and all mass organisations in Punjab and other states for our release. The simplistic argument being: Is it a crime to believe in the Communist ideology?

In India, the bonafides of the then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill were in question. Many Indian politicians believed that Hitler's Germany had invaded Soviet Russia with British consent in order to rid capitalism from the danger of communism. If Russia was defeated by Hitler, the British would make peace with the latter by allowing the Germans to retain their conquests. While all kinds of rumours were flying around, the British Indian Government believed that whatever the international developments, the Indian Communists were unlikely to give up their anti-British stance.

With the ups and downs during the course of the war, the pulse of Indian people's opinion too rose or fell. When the Red Army put up some great resistance against the Germans, people said that the myth of Hitler's army being "invincible" was being exploded; when the Russian armies fell back in the face of the German onslaught as at Kiev or in East Ukraine, they hailed the Hitler's Germany was un-

beatable! Generally speaking, Indians in 1941 were caught between the devil and the deep sea: they did not wish an allied victory nor did they want that Soviet Russia should lose!

The general Indian hatred for the British rulers expressed itself in many ways. As the British armies were not attacking Germany on land from the Western front, the Indian Communists saw the British dual game – of desiring the see Russia defeated and have Germany weakened. Some Indians thought that the Japanese threat to British India might create conditions for the overthrow of British imperialism and the establishment of a socialist republic in India.

The individual *satyagraha* launched by the Indian National Congress was not making much headway, even Congressmen were dissatisfied with it. People wished or even demanded that Gandhiji make the aims of the *satyagraha* movement more clear, even as the morale of the lay Congressmen was going down. The Communists, until December 1941, still viewed at the war as an “imperialist war”.

A Government report of that time had noted that a strong demand for a land offensive in the West (of Germany) to relieve the pressure on Russia was raised again and again by the people in India. Great admiration was expressed for the high morale and stubborn courage shown by the Russian armies, and there was a general confidence that even if the German drive against Moscow and in the Eastern sector succeeded the Soviet Union would still be able to maintain its cohesion in organisation and command. Such was the faith of the working people in the Red Army's discipline and staunchness.

The Communist leadership in India had prolonged discussions and came down to the view that something should be done to give moral and material support to the Soviet people as the gains of the Russian Revolution were in jeopardy. Thus a Soviet Aid Committee was set up.

In July 1941, Punjab Congress leader Dr Satyapal resigned from the Congress and applied for membership of the Indian Medical Services to help the Red Cross work during the war. His colleagues tried to persuade him to withdraw his resignation from the organisation but he refused, alleging that the Congress had no policy; it should either launch a mass agitation against the British government, or cooperate with it in the war. Another prominent Congress leader Dr Lehna Singh condemned Gandhiji's policy of non-violence and refused to offer *satyagraha*. All sections of the Punjab Press were

against Gandhiji's policy of non-violence. Even as individual *satyagraha* was almost dead, Gandhiji refused to budge an inch on the issue of starting a mass *satyagraha* to the dismay of many Congress leaders and rank and file.

The end of 1941 witnessed a steady rise in the prices of all essential commodities. Cloth was not available in the market while wheat prices were rising continuously. In Amritsar and other places, workers were facing great hardships because of the increase in the prices of yarn. The demand for dearness allowance was becoming widespread, while the poorer sections of the people faced dire distress. Discontent was brewing everywhere. Mian Iftikharuddin was managing the underground Communist activities in Punjab, and the urban Congressmen did not like his activities.

By now, many Congressmen had been released from jail. The daily *Tribune* dubbed this British gesture as "grudging and belated", while Jawaharlal Nehru called for a general amnesty for all political prisoners. Kabul Singh's expulsion from the CPI, ironically, earned him his release from the Deoli Camp. M.N. Roy's line of thought then was that fascism was a greater danger than British imperialism, and that fascism could not be defeated without the help of the British. His attacks on the Congress and the CPI cost him the support of both the parties.

The Japanese forces were active in the Pacific in December 1941. Earlier, they had swept through French Indo-China and advancing rapidly over the whole of the Indo-Chinese Peninsula, landed their forces in Indonesia and later occupied Singapore and Burma. The war was now approaching India's borders and there was concern over the immediate likelihood of Japan attacking our country.

The expected change in the CPI policy did not come while we were at Deoli. But when we were transferred to the Gujarat District Jail (now in Pakistan), we began to see signs of change in the Party policy.

In December 1941, the party decided that with Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union, the character of the war had changed from an imperialist war into a people's war. The task now, therefore, was to support the war effort instead of trying to sabotage it. The entire strategy of the party was overhauled to strengthen the war effort in order to defeat fascism, the greatest enemy of mankind.

In the beginning, Party comrades apprehended that unless they were vigilant the British imperialists would exploit this change of

policy for their own benefit. But the British perspective was that our policy change was inspired not by any sympathy for Britain's cause but that we looked forward to the eventual destruction of imperialism after the defeat of fascism, especially with communist "elements" introduced into the armed forces and other key positions.



The British War Cabinet sent the Cripps Mission to India in March 1942, to enlist the cooperation of the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League and the Indian people in the "common cause" of defeating fascism. The Mission offered Dominion Status to India, but only after a victory in the war. President Roosevelt of America had pressurised British Prime Minister Churchill to get Indian cooperation in the war effort. The Indian National Congress was willing to cooperate provided real power was handed over to it with immediate effect.

The draft produced by Cripps had many flaws from Indian point of view, and contained provisions which would have kept the real power in British hands even after the war was over. For example, it was stated that any province which wanted to remain outside the Indian Union could do so. Further, Indian "native" states would have the same rights and powers as the representatives of British India. On top of it all, the defence of India, as part of the world war effort, would remain completely under the control and direction of His Majesty's Government in London!

The obvious political implications of the draft notwithstanding, the main issue was the transfer of power. The Indian National Congress wanted immediate transfer of power including the country's defence, while Britain was in no case willing to commit that. Negotiations continued for some time, but without any positive outcome.

Meanwhile, Government repression and prosecution had driven the CPI leadership underground. The party had not been formally banned, but for all government purposes it was unlawful! During the Congress negotiations with the Cripps Mission, the CPI had not meddled, hoping against hope that something may still emerge out of these. But the Cripps Mission failed.

In July 1942, Comrade P.C. Joshi sent a radiogram to Comrade Earl Browder, general secretary of the Communist Party of USA, saying: "We are launching a campaign for an all-India national unity

for all-out national resistance, for a united demand for a national government...

“Gandhi’s pacifism is the exception here. Nehru and the rest of the leaders are completely anti-fascist, are willing to help world democracy and to organise armed resistance to the fascist invaders.”

Comrade Joshi asked Comrade Browder to “urge the American people to launch a nationwide campaign to persuade President Roosevelt to intervene to get the British Government negotiate with the Congress to establish immediately a real national government on the basis of the recognition of India’s freedom”.

As stated earlier, America was interested in roping India into active participation in the on-going war effort.

In June earlier, Dr Gopichand Bhargava had gone to Wardha and had prolonged talks with Gandhiji. On his return in July, he declared that Gandhiji was convinced that the Axis Powers would win the war; and that the Japanese would invade India after the monsoon, which would be a favourable opportunity for the Congress to launch civil disobedience. The intervening period could be spent in preparing the ground for the mass movement.

The working of Gandhiji’s mind then was very frustrating for the people. He was tinkering with individual civil disobedience, now taking it up, now giving it up, and refusing to launch a mass civil disobedience. Gandhiji held pro-Japanese views and his articles in the *Harijan* issues of those times are revealing.

In 1942, the rest of the leaders of the Indian National Congress were released from jail without any negotiated settlement in 1942. With no change in Gandhiji’s attitude towards the war, differences between him and Jawaharlal Nehru surfaced on the issue. The latter was opposed to any neutrality on the question of war, as it was naked aggression on the part of Hitler’s hordes against the European countries and the Soviet Union. It was an anti-fascist war and Jawaharlal was opposed to fascism and was for fighting against it.



The Punjab Government unconditionally released eight Communist detenus—four from the Gujarat District Jail and four from the Cambellpur District Jail on May Day. The three released along with me were Feroze-ud-Din Mansur, Fazal Illahi Qurban and Karan Singh Maan. Comrades released from the Cambellpur Jail were Teja Singh

Swatantra, Achhar Singh Chhima, Iqbal Singh Hundal and Bhagat Singh Bilga.

I was taking classes on "Terrorism and Leninism" in the jail when the orders for our release came. Comrades were very happy over our release and they also foresaw their own release coming soon. They all surrounded us and bade us farewell. They requested me specifically to go straight to Lahore and immediately set up a Party office there. While the other comrades went to their homes, I stayed in Lahore till I managed to get the double-storied Lady Fazal-i-Hussain Building on Maclaud Road from the students who were occupying it. The Party office was set up and I wrote to my released comrades to come to Lahore for a meeting sometimes around 12 May.

Only then I went to my village to meet my people and stayed with them for two days. I returned to Lahore before our scheduled meeting. Comrade Daniel Latifi, bar-at-law, was the secretary of the Lahore City Committee of the Party and I had him as my assistant-secretary. He was very appreciative of my dedication, simple habits and staunch party work.

At our first meeting, we discussed how to begin to popularise the new Party line on the war. The central leadership had given a call to support the war effort, demand formation of a national government of representatives of all parties and the release of all security prisoners. The immediate task was to explain to our comrades and convince our mass organisations of kisans, workers and students on the changed character of the war, from an imperialist war to a people's war. We decided to hold kisan conferences and organise public meetings to explain the party line and mobilize them to help the people's war effort. Of course, we were bound to face opposition from the Indian National Congress and the Congress Socialist Party.

The Central Party decided at a Delhi meeting to prevent strikes as far as possible and maintain law and order, but not to give up the workers' right to represent their grievances to the government or the employers. The "war effort" was the joint responsibility of all, including the workers and the employers, and it was for the government to ensure that the employers did not indulge in profiteering at the cost of the workers, that they did not harass them, paid properly for overtime work and DA, etc. The Party stood by the workers' rights which had been won in earlier struggles, but it advised them not to resort to hasty strikes.

At a meeting of the Punjab Kisan Committee on 20-21 May, 1942,

the decision to help war effort was endorsed. Some doubts were raised regarding the party playing into the hands of the British imperialists, etc., but it was explained that we should send our recruit to the army so that the present British Indian Army was subsequently transformed into a national army. According to a government report, some 450 kisan members were present from the central Punjab districts alone at the meeting.

Opposition to our people's war effort campaign came from the Congress and the CSP. But our comrades carried on the party line doggedly. We held an all-India Detenues Release Conference at Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan) where B.P.L. Bedi and I spoke. I called upon the audience to resist the Axis Powers who were then, in a way, knocking at our door, having occupied the Andaman and Nicobar Islands; that we should ask the government to arm our people to fight the invading Japanese, etc. For some time our meeting was disturbed by a few Congress Socialist Party members.

We organised many kisan meetings where Teja Singh Swatantra and I spoke. We called upon our young men to join the army in large numbers in order to transform it into a national army. Our campaign for a National Government of representatives of all parties to defend the country began, to some extent, to lessen the intensity of the edge of our opponents to our war effort. Still, we had to counter the stiff propaganda resistance from the Congress as well as the Congress Socialist Party.

Between 15 and 30 June alone, we convened seven rural conferences. At our instance, a large number of Punjabi recruits were joining the army, which they expected to be eventually turned into the Indian National Army. Response to our campaign was very good in the rural areas, but in the cities, people responded more to the Congress policies, which defended their class interests.

Worried over our success among the rural people, the Congress, the CSP and the Akalis began a slander campaign against us, alleging that we had "purchased our release" from jail on the understanding with the British that "we will further the pro-war propaganda after our release". This was surely foul politics and we challenged them to prove the charge. They could not, yet they went on repeating the charge in public.

The Japanese forces were advancing and capturing city after city in Burma. This set in demoralisation among the Indian city dwellers, and raised doubts over the British capacity to resist the Japanese

march. There were two prime reasons for this scepticism that the Indian people themselves would not help the British rulers and that the British reluctance to open a second front against the Germans was because the Allied forces lacked enough resources at their command.

Demoralisation had set in the army ranks as well and desertions created a serious problem for the army command. The Punjab total of combatant deserters rose from 1,600 in January 1942 to 4,000 in June. The total number of deserters of all ranks in the Province on 30 June "was not less than 15,442" (July 1942 reports).

The British Government was unyielding to the Congress demand for handing over political power and national defence, as that would have eliminated all traces of British rule in India. The British would not have liked to "commit suicide" by accepting the Congress demands, they seemed to say.

In Lahore, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad declared that the Bombay session of the All-India Congress Committee would decide on launching a campaign for non-payment of taxes, for anti-war propaganda, for a general strike to hamper war production, for refusal to evacuate areas required by the military authorities, and for establishment of a "parallel Congress Government".

Only the CPI was an all-India party which was for strengthening of the war effort; all other parties opposed it tooth and nail. But with most of our experienced comrades still rotting in jails, we were making tardy progress in our pro-people's war campaign and agitation. All the time we were raising our voices that all security prisoners should be released forthwith.

Finally, on 14 July, 1941, the Government lifted the ban on the CPI and released the security prisoners. This enabled us to organise our work anew and the central leadership came out in the open and began to guide the party. They brought out a weekly *People's War* which helped strengthen, broaden and unify the party ranks. The Provincial units of the CPI also brought out their own language journals.

In Punjab, we started a Punjabi weekly *Jangi Azadi* on 3 July, 1942 to unify our comrades on the Party line and mobilise people for the people's war. Its editorial staff consisted of Comrades Makhan Singh Gharjakh (Gujranwala), Avtar Singh Malhotra, Jagjit Singh Anand, Teja Singh Swatantra, and me as the editor-in-chief. It was the first political weekly in Punjab, which also raised the standard of Punjabi

language journalism to a new high. Its contribution to the Punjabi language, literature and culture has been acknowledged by great writers like Sardar Gurbaksh Singh of *Preet Lari*, Prof Mohan Singh of the *Panj Darya* and others.

Jangi Azadi was a fearless fighter for the freedom of India. It severely criticised the repressive policies of the Unionist Government, fought for the freedom of the Press, for civil and democratic rights of the people and backed the people's war to fight and defeat the Nazi and Japanese fascist aggressors.

The Unionist Government came down heavily on *Jangi Azadi* for its independent political views, confiscated its deposit and asked for a larger amount. We paid the deposit and carried on with the same policy as before.

Jangi Azadi became very popular, specially among the workers, peasants and students and won over many sceptics to the people's war line, many of whom later joined the CPI.

29. Quit India Resolution

BIG battles waged inside the Soviet Union between the Hitler's army and the Red Army, although, generally speaking, the latter was on a tactical retreat. In May-June, 1942, the Red Army did have some successes in pushing back the Nazi army on the Kharkhov front, but a month or so later the Nazis captured Sabastopol and threatened Caucasus. With the earlier retreats and the fall of Sebastopol, the Congress leadership, already in low spirits, became more demoralised and tended to write off Russia and conclude that Hitler was winning the war against the Soviet Union. May be that was why Mahatma Gandhi was then so outspoken in his writings and speeches as if the Axis powers were emerging victorious, and why Sardar Patel said, in the presence of Ghadar Party hero Baba Prithvi Singh Azad, that "the Soviet Union had been defeated since long" and that "it was only the Soviet propaganda that was keeping the war going".

Excepting for Jawaharlal Nehru and his admirers, the Congress bourgeoisie leadership by and large was unappreciative about the Russian Revolution, the Soviet leadership, its organisations and the Red Army. It generally underestimated the governing, organizational and military capabilities of the Soviet leadership. I doubt if even Gandhiji, Sardar Patel, Babu Rajendra Prasad and the like did, later in their lives, any self-analyses as to why they had such a low opinion about the Soviet leadership, especially when the latter finally smashed the Hitler's war-machine to pieces, and came out with flying colours. It was a gigantic collective mistake on their part, which in no small measure affected their views.

In the last week of July 1942, I received a notice from the AICC office in Bombay to attend its meeting on 7-8 August. We were then in the process of reorganising our party work, allotting comrades on different fronts. It was the first meeting of the AICC after our release from detention, and by then the differences between the Congress line and the Communist Party line were as clear as daylight. Nonetheless, I was eager to attend the AICC meeting.

I reached Bombay on 6 August and straightaway went to the CPI office on the Khetwadi Main Road. The Polit Bureau of the Party was already seized of the draft resolution passed by the Congress Working Committee for the AICC meeting and was considering moving some amendments to the official resolution.

In the afternoon, I visited the AICC office to get a feel of the atmosphere there. I do not now recollect whom I met there or the details of my talks with them. But the general opinion among most Congressmen was that the Allied Powers were losing the war. On being suggested that the Red Army was fighting a defensive war so far, and that it would yet gather strength, launch a counter-offensive and turn the tables against the fascist hordes, they sneered at such a scenario; so convinced were they that the Red Army was already on the run!

The other issue talked about concerned the Japanese aggressors who had already crossed Indian borders. And what did the Congressmen think about them? "We must fight them out; they were not in India to make friends with us but to extend their empire", said one. Asked whether we would fight them with non-violence, he had no answer!

However, with the failure of the Cripps Mission, anti-British sentiments had sharpened. One Congress group wanted to resort to mass *satyagraha* till Britain was forced to yield freedom to India. They were against individual *satyagraha* any more – "get freedom at any cost, non-violent or violent means did not matter", they seemed to say. But they were dead-set against the Communist line which they considered as "surrender" to British imperialism.

I returned to the Party office and reported on the line of thought of different Congressmen. Other AICC members of our Party – we were about a dozen or so – also did the same. By then, the Polit Bureau had decided on the amendments that were to be moved to the official Congress resolution. The Congress leaders summoned the Communist AICC members, explained to them the amendments to be moved and instructed that they should fully back them.

Still, the CPI members moved two amendments to the main political resolution: One on the transfer of power and the other on the operative clause of the resolution. The first part of the resolution, talking about the Provisional Government, said:

"...The Provisional Government will evolve a scheme for a Constituent Assembly which will prepare a Constitution for the Govern-

ment of India acceptable to all sections of the people. The Constitution, according to the Congress view, should be a federal one... (and here the Party amendment is inserted)... in which every federating unit, comprising more or less of homogeneous sections of the Indian people having a contiguous territory on the homeland to which it is attached by historical tradition, having common language, culture and psychological make-up and common economic life would have the right as an equal and free member, to autonomous statehood accompanied by the right of secession from the federation (here the amendment ends). The future relations between India and the Allied nations... etc.”

The principles and rights spelt out in the amendment are the same as applied to the Soviet Union's federated states, which are voluntarily in the Soviet Union of their own free will and choice together with the right to secede.

Did this amount to opposing the main part of the Congress official resolution? It did not. Comrade P.C. Joshi has answered this accusation in his characteristic style thus:

“A very familiar charge against us is that we opposed the 8th August resolution. We wholeheartedly agreed with the main part of the resolution; its flaming anti-fascism, its declaration of sympathy with the cause of the United Nations, the unqualified pledge to organise both armed and non-armed and non-violent resistance to the Jat aggressors and the demand for the National Government, (*Congress and Communists*, p. 8).

He goes on to say “...The discussion in the AICC was not yet over, when Maulana (Abul Kalam) Azad called Sajjad Zaheer, one of the Communist AICC members, and assured him that Gandhiji wanted to see Jinnah Sahab immediately after the AICC meeting and that we should not bind Gandhiji's hands by our amendments. We took the stand that good wishes could not get national unity. Self-determination was either a just and democratic demand or it was not; and if it was, as we thought it to be, then there was no question of bargaining with Jinnah. Gandhiji should go to him with the offer of self-determination, including the right of secession, and then alone would there be good chances of Congress-League agreement.” (p. 9).

In the operative clause of the above-mentioned official resolution, which proposed “to sanction, for the vindication of India's inalienable right to freedom and independence, the starting of a mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale...”, the

Communist AICC members moved the following amendment:

“The Committee, therefore, resolves

(1) That it is absolutely essential in this hour of grave emergency to achieve all-in national unity for the purpose of forging mass sanctions to secure the end of the British domination and the installation of a Provisional National Government, and with this end in view decides to make an earnest effort to effect agreement and joint front with the Muslim League. That the Congress is pledged to such a Federal Constitution of a free and united India as would guarantee to the federating units based on territories with more or less homogeneous population with common historical tradition, language, culture, psychological make-up and common economic life, autonomous statehood with the right to separate, should be a sufficient base for agreement for a united front and for the installation of a joint Provisional National Government.

“(2) That the Congress and the Muslim League, having achieved unity, should bring all parties in India together, securing the broadest possible support for the national demands and demonstrating to the peoples of the United Nations that entire India stands united and agreed in a practical scheme for the immediate installation of a Provisional National Government pledged to organise armed resistance to the aggressors in cooperation with the armies of the United Nations.

“(3) That, simultaneously, the Congress and the Muslim League take initiative to launch a joint front campaign of people’s mass mobilisation to organise countrywide mass demonstrations and rallies demanding immediate transfer of power and the installation of a Provisional National Government to inspire and instruct the masses in the spirit of national resistance to the aggressor and to fight pro-Jap sentiments, to organise joint people’s effort, defend and protect the people, coordinating it with similar effort of the authorities wherever they serve the interests of the people and resisting them where they are coercive.”

The main resolution, popularly known as the “Quit India Resolution”, was moved by Jawaharlal Nehru and seconded by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The main argument put forward by the former was that he could not go with the British because they were “incompetent, stupid, brainless” and described what they had done to Malaya and Burma. They also treated the National Congress as their enemy No. 1. They retreated before the Japanese and resisted India’s

demand. In a do-or-die spirit, he said: "Let us take the dip; we will either emerge free or die buried in the bottomless sea".

Sardar Patel wanted the British to free the Indian people, but the ruler's reply was that they would free India only after the war was over. The Sardar asked: "After the war, will we be in your British hands or those of the Jap? You can't defend us, and we do not want to go the Burma way. We say 'get out', but they don't".

However, by deciding on a "do or die" struggle, the Congress leadership was actually traversing the Burmese way. The Congress was not defending India from the Japanese invaders, but going to jails and just standing aside, leaving India's fate in the hands of those very British rulers whom they called "incompetent, stupid, brainless", etc.

Only about 12 or 13 Communist AICC members attended the Bombay AICC session, although their actual number was something like 50. The Congress Working Committee had suspended or expelled the Malabar and Bengal members of the AICC, and the imperialist bureaucracy had held back some of our Punjab comrades in jail, as also H.D. Bharadwaj of UP. Hence, they could not attend the crucial AICC session.

The party decided that Comrades Mohammed Ashraf, Sajjad Zaheer and Sardesai would move the amendments and speak on them. Comrade Ashraf moved for the deletion of the CWC's plan of action and proposed, instead, a Congress-League agreement and a joint front. Having achieved this, Comrade Ashraf said, they should secure the cooperation of the rest of the parties and the minorities, mobilise them behind the national demand and call on the British government to transfer power immediately for installing a Provisional National Government in order to resist the fascist Japanese aggressor. Putting up the party's case in a cogent and lucid way, he wound up thus: "You talk of national defence as if it was a defence of imperial interests and not of our own land. You refuse to see how successful defence itself is the path to freedom".

Comrade Zaheer, moving the other amendment, said: "In the attitude towards this war and its relation to Indian freedom, the Congress and the Communists stand closer together than ever before. The Congress president (Abul Kalam Azad) himself had stated that this war must be the war for the freedom of every nation. It could only be won as a people's war, i.e., as a war after the model of Russia and China".

Continuing, Comrade Zaheer said: "Instead of uniting the nation to wrest a national government from the imperialist rulers, the proposed 'struggle' would disrupt and weaken the nation and strengthen the imperialist bureaucrats on the one hand and, on the other, pave the way for the Japanese invasion. Only real struggle today was the struggle for the unity of the country to meet the fascist danger... The path suggested by the Working Committee is suicidal. It leaves us helpless in the hands of the bureaucrats and, at the same time, opens the way for the fascists to enslave us".

The third speaker on our behalf was Sardesai, who emphasised self-determination for the Muslims and other minorities as the only basis for national unity. Comrade Sardesai explained the amendments, and stressed that without such an approach Hindu-Muslim unity was impossible. Here was a remedy to kill suspicion at one stroke and unite the nation.

What he meant was: Without national unity no national government; without a national government no successful national defence; without a national defence no national freedom. All these tasks were linked up together.

Much pressure was brought on the Communists to withdraw the amendments, but we refused to budge. The amendments were put to vote and only 12 or 13 hands went up in support, all other non-communist delegates opposed them. We knew all along that our amendments would be lost, but the Party line had been squarely placed before the AICC session, and it was heard with rapt attention. We did suffer unpopularity, but only for some time. Before the session ended, Gandhiji spoke and complimented the Communist members of the AICC for their "courage of conviction".

Early morning on 9 August, 1942, all members of the Congress Working Committee were arrested. It was an insolent, preemptive attack by the British rulers on the entire Congress leadership. Gandhiji had not closed the door on negotiations; on the contrary, he had declared in the session itself that he was "a genuine friend of the British, Lord Linlithgow and his family included" and that he was willing to negotiate. In fact, he would write to the Viceroy to seek a settlement before launching the struggle. Only if a settlement failed, it was to be "do or die".

Maulana Azad too had clearly stated that "the Congress Party desired to prevent confusion and anarchy, and would refrain from making any such demand as might weaken the war effort of the

United Nations”.

It was, therefore, the British Government which precipitated matters, giving no time to the Congress leadership to negotiate. The CPI sharply reacted to this British strike. Comrade P.C. Joshi, general secretary of the Party, in an instant statement said: “The Government is the provocateur. It has let loose forces of anarchy and in its utter blindness, it seeks to create an international anti-Congress front... It is the insolent alien Government that has precipitated the crisis... We, the Communists, will do all we can to force the government to retract. We will rally the people to demand the unconditional release of the national leaders and immediate negotiations with the Congress for a National Government and Indian freedom”.

Having chalked out our line, the entire Party got busy in carrying it out actively. The Congress leaders had no time to plan any action, no time to organise anything, as the government had suddenly swooped down on them and put them behind bars. The result was inevitable anarchy, disorder, confusion, smashing of lamp-posts, burning of houses and police chowkis, disrupting of the railway communications, etc.

The British India police too attacked with vengeance in order to give the movement a short-shift; searching, arresting, lathi-charging and killing even innocent people. They became a law unto themselves, and played havoc with the lives of the patriotic people.

We, a handful of Communist workers, held our own in the Punjab countryside. But most of our comrades were still in jail; the Gujarat Jail detainees had not been released. Some others who were released from other jails were interned in their villages and as such could not join in the task of mobilising the people. Two of our very effective comrades, Ataulah Jahanian and Dalip Singh, working on the kisan front, were rearrested. We did not have much following in the urban areas, though our students and youth bravely tried to stop the wave of disruption and sabotage.

Baba Gurmukh Singh, who enjoyed much respect among the peasants and could have countered the saboteurs, had not been released. Comrades Chanan Singh and Vasudev Singh had been in detention for the past seven and nine years, respectively, in the Campbellpur jail. The Gujarat Jail was still packed with 102 anti-fascist, working-class and peasant leaders, 75 of whom were Communists.

Nonetheless, we organized the first Mazdoor Conference at

Okara in Punjab in a Birla-owned textile mill. Over 5,000 workers attended the meet, most of them pro-Congress. Still, we were heard with rapt attention, as they were impressed by our patriotic stance. The Sikander Hayat Ministry was still in two minds, arresting some Communists here and releasing some there, thereby losing precious time which only helped the pro-fascist elements inside the country and the fascist raiders. And, ironically, it was being proclaimed from housetops that the government was fighting the fascists—Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo and company!

Some time after his arrest, Mahatma Gandhi began writing letters from inside the jail to Lord Linlithgow, saying that the mass arrest of Congress leaders seemed “to have made the people wild with rage to the point of losing self-control...” His reply to Tottenham’s pamphlet was on the same lines. He said:

“...Violence was never contemplated by me or any Congress leader...I had declared that, if Congressmen indulged in the orgy of violence they might not find me alive in their midst... the mass movement was never started by me, the sole charge for starting it was vested in me,...I had contemplated negotiations with the Government, but was to start the movement only on failure of the negotiations, and... I had envisaged an interval of ‘two to three weeks for the negotiations’..

“It is, therefore, clear that but for the arrest no such disturbances would have taken place as happened on 9 August last and after. I would have strained every nerve first to make the negotiations successful and, secondly, if I had failed, to avoid disturbances...

“...the Congress leaders were desirous that the movement should remain non-violent...Whatever violence was committed by the people, whether Congressmen or others, was, therefore, committed in spite of the leaders’ wishes”.

Congress president Maulana Azad, more or less, wrote in the same spirit to Lord Linlithgow, saying: “Both as individuals and in our corporate capacity, speaking on behalf of our organisation, your charge that the Congress organised a secret movement is wholly false and without foundation”.

But all these became public knowledge only two years after Gandhiji was released from jail in May 1944. And during the two years between 1942 and 1944, our countrymen passed through fire and sword—agitators were killed by the British police, sabotage ran riot in the country, thousands upon thousands died in Bengal and

other places due to famine; and profiteers, blackmarketers and hoarders played havoc with the lives of the common people. Only the Communist Party fought almost singlehanded on all these fronts, exposing the British game and all shades of saboteurs.

During these two years of utter turmoil, the British Government tried its utmost to make itself expand its base, by enticing the Muslim League and other sundry groups and reactionary parties and individuals to cover its isolation from the people and justify its own existence before the United Nations. And the CPI consistently laid bare the machinations of the British bureaucracy and foiled them, tried winning over the Muslim League against joining the Government without the Congress and insisted on a Congress-League unity on the basis of self-determination.

In far away America, friends of Indian freedom slashed at diehard Churchills and Amerys in Britain and Linlithgows in India to make peace with the National Congress, release their leaders immediately and hand over power to the national leaders through negotiations.

30. First CPI Congress

ONE big task facing us was to fight defeatism that prevailed in the country then. The series of retreats by the Red Army, the advance of the Japanese hoards towards the Indian borders and the utterances by Gandhiji and other Congress leaders excepting Jawaharlal Nehru and a few others that the Allied Forces were getting defeated played havoc with the morale of the Indian people. The Axis propaganda day in and day out, week after week, exhorted the Indians to rise in revolt against the British rulers, and claimed that they were winning the war and were on the verge of capturing Moscow.

However, the Indian Communists never lost faith in the ultimate victory of the Soviet Union. They were fully convinced that the Red Army may lose a little here and there, but would never lose the war, and that ultimately the Red Army would emerge victorious, the second front notwithstanding.

The Bombay session of the AICC had duly passed the resolution on civil disobedience on 9 August, despite the great fight put up against it by the communist members; their voices drowned by the overwhelming majority of those present. And with the arrest of the Congress leaders and the declaration of the Indian National Congress and its affiliated bodies as unlawful, the fat was in the fire. The Sikander Hayat Government in Punjab had been further isolated from the people, and great resentment against it prevailed among the masses. Our Party Secretariat of eight met at Lahore, discussed the situation arising out of the arrest of the Congress leaders and issued a statement signed by me as the secretary, and Teja Singh Swatantra, Karam Singh Maan, Bhagat Singh Bilga, Achhar Singh Chima, Feroze Din Mansur, Iqbal Singh Hundal and Fazal Ilahi Qurban. It accused the Unionist Government of precipitating the crisis and declared that the Party would force the government release all the Congress leaders and start negotiations with them for the formation of a National Government. At the same time we also charged the

Congress Working Committee with following the "path of national suicide".

Party general-secretary Comrade P.C. Joshi issued the following statement:

"Communists will do nothing to offend the Congress, and will use the campaign to improve their position by anti-British propaganda in the name of anti-fascist front...they will avoid precipitating strikes... Students will follow the Communist Party policy and remember that students can never be anti-struggle".

A few days later, Comrade Joshi instructed the Punjab Party unit to strongly condemn the British Government for the action taken by it against the Congress. The Government was provoking acts of lawlessness in the hope that the resultant chaos and disruption would help it "to disperse and smash the people's strength and retain its domination over the country", he said.

His advice to us was that we must actively address ourselves to the task of checking the forces of lawlessness and anarchy and hold meetings to denounce the government's repression and continued arrest of Congressmen. Thus, in every meeting and speech we raised the demands "Release the Congress leaders and start negotiations for the transfer of power".

We also issued a circular to our Party members, explaining why we were opposed to the Congress resolution on civil disobedience. The main points we made were: a) Civil disobedience was being launched without first achieving the Hindu-Muslim unity; b) Because it will strengthen the bureaucracy; and c) Because disruption would only help fascism.

Meanwhile, the government was keeping a strict watch over the activities of the Communists. In its view the Communists were continuing to take advantage of the legalisation of their Party and building up their mass organisations, the Party workers were making efforts to strengthen their underground organisations and their hold on the workers, peasants and students. The government suspected that we had almost abandoned our anti-fascist propaganda and were instead concentrating on creating secret cells in the villages, factories and within the British India army, waiting for the time when our struggle against fascism would be replaced by the struggle against British imperialism. The British rulers were of the view that... "the Communist influence was undoubtedly helpful in exercising a moderating effect on the Congress campaigns during the critical

phases. It now remains to be seen whether or not Communists have outlived their usefulness." (October-November, 1942).

The Unionist Government in Punjab, actually a stooge of the British rulers, was failing to arrange a steady supply of daily necessities of life for the common man. Price control measures did not work and the blackmarket flourished, causing disquiet and resentment among all sections of the people. The supply situation was such that there was shortage of wheat and other foodgrains in 13 districts of the Province of kerosene, edible oil and fuel in 10 districts, sugar in 6 districts and salt in 4 districts. The Government's supply machinery was thoroughly out of gear.

In November-December, 1942, the Soviet Red Army launched its counter-offensive against Hitler's army and scored some victories. This had its effect on the Indian armed forces as reflected in the decrease in the number of deserters. With more Red Army victories in early 1943, the impression went round that the Soviet Union could now push back the enemy forces and that the invasion of India might not take place. The Congress was producing a lot of anti-war propaganda literature to further its anti-war line. The widespread scarcity of daily necessities in the market also helped the Congress in its pursuit.

A big event in Punjab at that time was the seventh session of the All India Kisan Sabha held in Bhakna Kalan on 3-4 April, 1943 presided over by Comrade Bankim Mukherjee of Bengal. A few days earlier, 10 more Communists had been released from jails and warrants of arrest against five of our underground comrades were ordered cancelled by the government. This was hailed by the comrades who attended the conference.

Bhakna Kalan is the birthplace of Ghadar Party hero Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, who sowed the seeds of patriotism and freedom in Punjab in the 1920s along with other stalwarts like Baba Jawala Singh, Kartar Singh Sarabha, Pandit Kanshi Ram, Baba Prithvi Singh and dozens of others. All of them had become legends in Punjab as well as all over India during our freedom struggle.

The Bhakna Kalan conference was a sort of revival of the kisan movement. Most leaders of the earlier All India Kisan Conferences had faced severe repression at the hands of the imperialist rulers. Prominent leaders like Rahul Sankrityayan, Swami Sahjanand Saraswati, Indulal Yagnik, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna and others were sent to the British dungeons for having fought against the imperialist war.

Many of them were still rotting in jail, while only a few had been released in 1942 after the release of the Congress leaders.

The conference was an inspiring event, in which Comrade P.C. Joshi and other Party and kisan leaders delivered stirring speeches. It also confirmed the Party's mobilising capacity, despite the Congress and the Congress Socialist Party's opposition to it. Through two resolutions the conference declared that the Indian kisan movement was part of the progressive people's movement in the world. The conference also greeted the Red Army and demanded opening of a second front in Europe in order to smash Hitlerism once and for all. In its greetings sent to China, the meet pledged to build an all-in national unity in India, so that on the strength of a national government an early offensive could be launched against Japanese expansionism.

The resolution on the political situation blamed the bureaucracy for the political deadlock in India and called upon the Indian kisans to unite in a campaign to secure Gandhiji's release, join hands to stop sabotage, unite all sections of the people in the common effort to solve the food crisis and promote unity between the Hindu and the Muslim masses to facilitate the formation of a National Government.

Another resolution called upon the government to restore civil liberties, rejecting its argument that the curbs were necessary in the interests of the defence of India. The conference also urged the government to ensure fair prices for the kisans' produce and pledged to fight for their other demands.



The First Congress of the Communist Party of India, held in Bombay from 23 May to 1 June, 1943, was of great significance. The main purpose of the Congress was to iron out the differences, if any, among Party members and to democratically endorse the tactical line of the people's war for the war period. Till then, the centre was responsible for chalking out the people's war line and calling upon the Party comrades to implement it. Now, the line was placed before Party delegates to get their collective approval. By so doing, the centre was discharging its Leninist responsibility and obligation to fulfil the principles of democratic centralism.

Comrade P.C. Joshi proposed the names of Comrades Muzaffer

Ahmad, S.A. Dange, Bhaiyyaji Kulkarni, D.S. Vaidya, Krishna Pillay, Manikuntala Sen and Nargis Batliwala for the presidium. The names were readily accepted with ovation.

The Party Congress was attended by 139 delegates representing 16,000 members. The Party had gained considerable influence and strength among the workers in the industrial centres like Calcutta, Bombay and Kanpur and membership of the All-India Trade Union Congress exceeded 3,00,000. The Party had done considerable work to organise the workers in the trade unions. The All India Kisan Sabha membership did not lag behind either. In Punjab, we were the only Party to organise the Punjab Kisan Sabha and hold huge kisans rallies. The CPI also wielded much influence among students' and women's organisations; the latter having a membership of over 41,000.

The Party had worked in the Progressive Writers' Organisation and attracted many writers of repute under the party's Red Flag. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) did tremendous work to popularise the party line through its plays. The party had also set up Bal Sanghams and had its own volunteer corps.

The keynote of the Party Congress was to mobilise all the forces in the country in the struggle against the fascist aggressors and for the defence of the Soviet Union, its allies and the Russian revolution, thus turning the war into a people's war. Despite tremendous odds, the Party did succeed to a great extent in this task.

The energy we displayed during those days was unprecedented. We could almost make the impossible possible, and in our youthful exuberance thought that an Indian revolution was round the corner.

The people's war line, despite strong opposition from many Congressmen, had also made slow but steady headway among the Indian masses and strengthened the Party's central, provincial and district organisations. The delegates to the Party Congress were in a self-assuring mood and wanted to share their experiences with the Centre, as well as learn from the rich experiences of the latter's fight to carry out the people's war line.

Comrade P.C. Joshi, as the general-secretary of the Party, placed the political resolution before the delegates on May 26 and 27. The resolution exuded self-confidence and analysed the dangers facing the country—the menace of Japanese advance towards India's borders, the famine and near-famine conditions in the provinces, the deepening of the political crisis perpetrated by the British by arrest-

ing the members of the CWC on 9 August, 1942, and the sabotage of the country's defence by a section of the people's opinion-makers like the CSP and the Congress. All this meant that while the menace of invasion was growing, the rear was weakening too. But the Party was confident that with the cooperation of our freedom-loving people it would overcome all these perils.

The Communist Party thus intervened with its campaign for a national unity. Our slogans were: "Release the leaders", "Stop sabotage", and "Accept self-determination and forge national unity". With these slogans we identified ourselves with the patriotic sentiments of the Indian people. Our political line went home and the slander spread by our opponents did not cut much ice with the peasantry and the working class.

Mahatma Gandhi too had written letters from inside the jail to the Viceroy in which he had repudiated anarchy and sabotage, and expressed his anxiety over the food crisis. His correspondences became a powerful weapon for the Party to wean away Congressmen from sabotaging defence efforts.

Comrade P.C. Joshi concluded his report and resolution by saying that the Party's work was a positive factor which did not let the national crisis become a national disaster; and that the basis of our achievement was the healthy patriotism of our people which could be easily roused.

"But the mightiest factor was the sledge-hammer of the Red Army against the Hitlerite hordes and the epic defence and victory at Stalingrad which saved not only the city of Stalin but our own motherland and gave us time to rouse our people to strive to unite them for national defence", the resolution said.

But the national crisis was still there, and we had yet to overcome it.

Our fraternal delegates from abroad, Comrade Harry Polit representing the CPGB, Comrade Earl Browder representing the CPSUA and others appreciated and supported our Party's line and pledged their and their party's solidarity with the people of India. Comrade R. Palme Dutt, Member of the Central Committee of the CPGB and Editor of Labour monthly, Comrade William Rust, Editor of the *Daily Worker* of London and Comrade William Gallacher, Communist Member of the House of Commons in their messages of greetings pledged all efforts for an intensive campaign to rally the Labour Party and democratic opinion in England in order to change

the British Government's policy towards India, adding: "We are confident that the leadership of your convention will rally all Indian patriots for a positive policy of national unity and defence of India, leading to the freedom of India."

Comrade P.C. Joshi presented to the Congress the future tasks for the party in the form of five campaigns – The National Defence Campaign, Release the Leaders' Campaign, Food Campaign, Production Campaign and a Grow More Food Campaign. He called upon the delegates to mobilise the entire party and our people for building the people's unity-in-action for national defence, and the release of all security prisoners, including Congressmen. One by one he also replied to all the slanders and charges made against the Party by our opponents. His elucidation was disarming and convincing, and the Political Report was passed unanimously.

The Party Constitution too was discussed clause by clause for a full day and unanimously adopted. Reports by Comrades B.T. Ranadive, E.M.S. Namboodiripad and Sardesai on production, grow more food and food problem were also discussed and passed.

Comrade Adhikari told the delegates that 10 years back, in 1933, the Provisional Central Committee of the CPI had been set up which took upon itself the task of uniting all the Communist groups in the country and decided to convene the First Party Congress. The Provisional Central Committee was now implementing that decision, as during the past 10 years all party groups in the country had been welded into a single, strong organisation. The last great group to merge into the party was the Ghadar-Kirti group, which had joined as late as 1941. Its leaders Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna and others were present as delegates at the Congress.

Comrade Adhikari told the delegates with pride that during these 10 years the Party had grown from the stage of scattered groups into a centralised and politically unified Party, having passed through vicissitudes. The Party had been declared illegal in 1934, and its leaders had faced repeated repression. But the Party had emerged stronger now, having passed through the fire-test.

The reason for this achievement was that we had remained true to the teachings of the great masters like Marx, Lenin, Engels, and learnt to draw our strength from the toiling and patriotic masses, from the great heritage of our national movement. We had learnt to evolve policies and practices which enabled our class and our party to guide and lead our people even more effectively in the fight for

national and social liberation. Raising his voice, Comrade Adhikari said: "From a narrow group in the Labour movement, our Party and our class have come to occupy the place of an independent national force playing a leading part in moulding the life and destiny of our country and our people... We are ranked as the third great patriotic party after the National Congress and the Muslim League".

Comrade Adhikari wanted the CPI to become the national political force No. 1 which could lead the National Congress and the Muslim League by hand towards unity and a National Government. The responsibility of achieving that objective rested on our shoulders, and it was our duty to create for our country a glorious future worthy of our great and ancient past, he added. This could be brought about only if the Party united the patriotic forces and the people into a "single camp of national liberation".

The Bombay Congress passed many resolutions. Among them was one eulogising the services of the gallant fighters of the Indian army, promising them that our people would rally behind them; one accepting the Comintern's proposal dissolving itself; another sending a message to our Chinese brothers that their lofty example of national unity had inspired our Party; another raising the clinched fist to our martyrs who had sacrificed their lives; and the last one taking a solemn pledge to campaign for the release of those still behind bars.

It was the first occasion when delegates from different provinces speaking different languages had come together under the Red Flag, fraternised with each other, exchanged views on the common party platform and witnessed the Party function as one single body – young men and women bound together by one ideal and one objective of uniting the country, ending the British slavery and bringing freedom to India. Solidarity, determination and sacrifice-readiness were written large on ever delegates' face.

The Congress ended with the signing of the Internationale. The enthusiasm of the comrades knew no bounds. The CPI had grown into the third force in the country and we were all proud of it. Everybody dispersed to their respective places with the resolve to work still harder to make the Party still more powerful to enable it to solve the difficult tasks that lay ahead. We all now belonged to one family, and it was the living thing for us.

However, two things displeased the Kirti Communists – that nobody was taken in the presidium from Punjab; and that Teja Singh

Swatantra was not accommodated in the Central Committee. Iqbal Singh Hundal's inclusion did not please them. Further, the Punjab Party unit was not a full-fledged party unit, it was merely a Provincial Organising Committee. These made them somewhat sour.

These small irritations were blown into a big grouse, which later created differences inside the Party once again. The CID reports noted that "deep-rooted mistrust between the CPI and the Punjab CP has become more clearly marked since Communist rally (Congress) at Bombay at the end of May". The CID, however, made an exaggerated statement when it reported that "increasing tension and suspicion between the Communists and the Kirtis were mostly caused by rivalry for the control of funds and power".

But it was a fact that these tensions did hamper party work, which was very unfortunate.

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We were constantly campaigning for self-determination for the Muslims in India. This roused the Akalis, and they began to demand "Azad Punjab" for themselves. They made it clear to all concerned that they would not submit to "slavery of the Muslims" in Punjab and wanted to carve out a state—Azad Punjab—for the Sikhs. Punjab was their homeland, and they would make any amount of sacrifices to retain it for the Sikhs.

Urban Hindus of Punjab were also opposed to us for our support to the demand of self-determination for the Muslims. They were equally opposed to the Akali demand for Azad Punjab. Thus, both Hindus and Akalis opposed the Communists and were wary of our growing influence in the countryside. The Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) also joined them in their hatred for the Communists. The urban Punjabi Hindus, though in a minority, dominated the Muslim majority on the strength of their money-lending and trading powers. They did not want any change in the financial status quo as they saw danger if changes were made in the boundaries of the Punjab Province. They also knew that Communists were against usury, which the Hindu moneylending class practised to exploit the people of Punjab, whether Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs or Christians. Besides, the food situation was worsening, and the Hindu trading class was indulging in blackmarketing and profiteering. Government ordinances to curb hoarding and

profiteering were hopelessly ineffective.

Meanwhile, a terrible famine overtook Bengal. People, specially women and children, died like flies. The famine was man-made and the perpetrators were the British rulers. Perhaps, Bengalis were being punished for their love for freedom and India. We in Punjab took up their cause and appealed for funds for the famine-stricken people in Bengal. We organised a Punjab Kisan Conference in Chogawar on Lyallpur District and took up two issues—the famine in Bengal and victory on the war front. The people of Punjab liberally contributed money and foodgrains to help the famine-stricken people of Bengal.

A cultural troupe from Bengal visited Punjab and enacted plays depicting the actual but pathetic famine conditions in their province. I accompanied the troupe to some places, introducing them to the audiences and appealing for liberal contributions to alleviate the sufferings of the people of Bengal.

The Party took upon itself to set up food committees and began distributing necessities of life through them. The British smelt rat in everything we did, and our success in our mission surprised them. We wanted that the distribution of sugar and kerosene should also be done through the food committees, but the government refused to hand over the depots to us. "Their criticism of the existing arrangement", the government thought, "is likely to enhance their prestige." In the opinion of the government, we were reorganising and strengthening our party organisation through these food committees and were capturing the trade unions, the students unions, etc.

According to a Government assessment, the Communists were "strongly anti-fascist and equally strongly anti-government. The long-term danger of the Communist policy is fully appreciated". Their reports repeatedly conveyed that the Communist objective of setting up a workers' and peasants' government, through a revolution if necessary, had not been given up by us.

The Red Army was meanwhile, encircling Hitler's armies, capturing their generals and advancing all the time. All freedom-loving people saluted their courage, staunchness and loyalty to the great Soviet land and its workers' revolution. Italian fascist Mussolini had fallen in August to the wrath of the people and was haunted out and killed. But still no second front had been opened by the British High Command. On the other hand, there was deliberate attempt by interested parties to play down Soviet victories.

The delay in opening the second front was politically motivated. The strategy behind it was the policy of "letting the Russians and Germans bleed each other to death". (Truman). The hatred for workers' Russia by the British and American imperialists had not abated despite all the sacrifices made by the brave sons of the Russian Revolution to save the world from Nazi butchery.

31. Peoples' War, and India Partitioned

WHEN Hitler perfidiously attacked the Soviet Union, tearing to bits the Non-Agression Pact he had earlier signed with that country, the character of the war changed — from that of an imperialist war into a war against the working class state, the Soviet Union. Earlier, the war was being fought between two camps of imperialist powers, the British, American and French imperialists on one side and the brutal fascist imperialism and its allies namely Germany, Italy and Japan, on the other. Earlier, Europe lay prostrate at Hitler's feet, and the British imperialists trembled in their shoes at Hitler's ascendancy and the imminent attack across the English Channel.

But when Hitler trained his guns against the first working class state of the world, British imperialists heaved a sigh of relief, and circumstances forced it to become an ally of the Soviet Union along with its friends. Thus, a new alliance was forged between the Soviet Union and the British imperialists along with the latter's allies.

The situation became very complex and complicated. Two natural enemies — the working class state and the imperialist states — had joined hands to fight the most rabid and brutal face of imperialism called fascism. Thus, the CPI, the party of the working class, was left with no other choice but to support the camp in which the Soviet Union, the first working class state in history, was fighting a life-and-death struggle against Hitler's hordes.

Anti-communism comes naturally for any national bourgeoisie. Indian bourgeois leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and others (excepting Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and his friends and followers) blinded by this prejudice could not see, assess or judge the liberating ideas and movements the Soviet Red Army had released; and finally ushered in the victory over the most brutal form of imperialism called fascism on May 8, 1945. These leaders only saw the victory of the British imperialists in the war, which to them meant India's deliverance from British yoke receding into the background.

They could only visualise that British imperialists had attained tremendous power through the victory in the war; and not the fact that it had in fact considerably weakened as the Communists saw it. That the Mahatma, Sardar Patel and their followers were wrong in their judgement was proved by later events.

The victory of Allied Powers demoralised the Gandhian leadership because they had misunderstood the liberating role of the CPSU and its Red Army; because they had mistakenly bracketed the Soviet Union with the colonial role of the British and American imperialists.

On the contrary, the CPI, its followers and the people at large were most happy at the allied victory; in fact they had worked all along for it. For them India's freedom was now nearer. However, the Indian National Congress, its leaders and workers were very critical of the CPI's role during the war, alleging that it had been helping the British imperialists, our bitterest enemy, by calling upon the Indian youth to join the army, contribute towards the war fund and strengthen the war effort.

Gandhiji had sufficiently recovered from his illness to engage himself in public activities again. But Hindu-Muslim unity was still far away. The Communist Party had been pleading for long for a Hindu-Muslim unity on the basis of self-determination, as such unity was a prime pre-requisite for any national front for India's freedom. The British Government had been manipulating the differences between the Congress and the Muslim League to perpetuate its own rule while the CPI strove hard to persuade the Mahatma and Jinnah to meet on the basis of self-determination and end their differences in order to pave the way for wresting freedom from the alien rulers.

They did meet, but could not come to any agreement because they stuck to their respective guns. Both nursed great prejudices against each other. According to Gandhiji, Pakistan did not mean freedom for the Muslims but the country's dismemberment, while Jinnah viewed the Congress freedom movement as only for establishing Hindu domination. The gulf between them was wide and unbridgeable; the Mahatma hated the very concept of Pakistan, but was not unwilling to accept the principle of self-determination.

The CPI came out with the slogan "Gandhi-Jinnah Meet Again" because, according to it, the two had to shed the mutual prejudices they nursed against each other. The CPI wanted that Gandhiji should unreservedly agreed to the Muslim League demand for self-determination, that the two agree to have Pakistan within a United India

and that both the Congress and the Muslim League jointly wrest the country's freedom through a united struggle.

But the Mahatma was opposed to accepting the Muslims as a separate nationality with its own culture, language, contiguous territory, etc. And Jinnah refused to accept Gandhiji as the representative of all the sects in India. The attitude on both sides had hardened, as a result instead of solving the Pakistan question within the boundaries of India, Jinnah began to demand Pakistan by partitioning India.

The British game of dividing the Hindus and the Muslims thus succeeded. It suited them because through partition the British rulers could weaken the rising revolutionary movement in India and divide the country. A separate Pakistan having a weak political movement and dominated by landlords could be easily managed by the British imperialists for their interest.

The British bureaucracy failed to gauge the change that the allied victory and the emergence of the proletarian Soviet power had brought about among the Indian masses; these had caused a rare political consciousness and awakening. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel and others, the bureaucrats also thought that this was a victory of the British government and that they could continue to rule India in the manner of the old. Thus, foolishly, they decided to start a case against the Indian National Army of Subhash Chandra Bose. This further roused the anger of the Indian people and created a stir in the Indian armed forces as well. The movement which began against the INA trial finally dumped the British bureaucracy in India in the ditch.

Politics which dominated the Indian scene at this stage was that of the CPI. Subhash Chandra Bose's brother Sarat Chandra and pro-Subhash workers were, of course, there, raising strong opposition to the INA trial. The Congress came forward to defend their case and deputed their best legal luminaries to do so. But it was the politics of the unity of three flags – the Congress, the Muslim League and Communist – that stood out. It were the Congress and League sympathisers and followers of the CPI who jointly carried the Tricolour of the Congress and the Muslim League flag along with the Communist hammer-and-stickle Red Flag. The Communists, their sympathisers and followers and the Subhashites led the demonstrations which resulted in clashes with forces of law and order. The Congress leadership was not there in the active field. However, the contribution of their leaders

in defending the INA patriots should not be underestimated, they had played a key role in rousing the temper of the masses.

The clashes during the November 1945 demonstration in Calcutta against the INA trial roused the entire nation. Angry masses burnt police and army trucks and faced bullets non-chalantly, many of them getting killed in the process. But undeterred, the anti-trial movement continued getting stronger every day.

This nationalist sentiments affected the army too, and the government realised its fatal mistake. It drew in its horns and withdrew the cases.

Then in February 1946, the RIN uprising took place while "Release the INA" agitation was still surging forward. The RIN ratings captured a Royal Navy ship, imprisoned the British officers in the cabin and came out on the streets of Bombay with their demands. The Royal Air Force followed suit. The three wings of the army were verily getting out of British control.

Here also the demonstrations carried the three flags – Congress, League and CPI – together, and clashes with the law authorities followed. People were mowed down by the British forces. But the movement in sympathy of the RIN ratings' demands for equal status, equal pay and non-discrimination grew stronger. However, despite the Congress flag being shown, the Congress leadership was absent from under its own flag.

The RIN uprising gave a tremendous boost to the revolutionary movement in India. The whole of Bombay was agog, and spontaneously people poured out on the streets waving the flags of the Congress, the Muslim League and the Communist Party. In effect, the people of Bombay were showing the way for the unity of the three major parties. When the British threatened to blow up the "captured" ship, the CPI issued a call to the working class to strike in protest and in support of the RIN ratings.

This mass action shook the British bureaucracy, and made them realise the change that had come about in the political fabric of the country.

The British government was not unaware of the fact that the Communists had infiltrated the army at the time of their recruitment drive. The government was also aware of the fact that the Communists intended to transform the British India army into a national army at a proper time. Despite intelligence reports that these Communist soldiers were behaving in a disciplined manner, the stirrings

in the armed forces had begun to show, and not surprisingly the British rulers began to suspect trouble.

A historian has written: "It is true that the avowed long-term aims of the Communists to plant cells in the services with a view to 'using the sailor, soldier and airman for their own ends,' at an opportune moment did not engage the immediate serious attention of the public." (*Indian Political Parties*, B.B. Mishra, p. 332)

The British rulers saw the writing on the wall, and negotiations started. But the demoralised Gandhian Congress leadership did not see any sign of revolt in these historic developments. Mahatma Gandhi condemned the RIN revolt and uprising. Jawaharlal Nehru might have sensed some signs of the brewing revolt, but he could not even think of any independent action without Gandhiji's advice. He was too tied up to Gandhian apronstrings.

The CPI was the third largest party in the country, and was also the most organised and disciplined. But the party had bestowed so much adulation on Mahatma Gandhi for giving the lead to the country's freedom struggle that it could not conceive of an independent line in the then revolutionary situation.

Civil war conditions were fast developing in the country. Jinnah was playing the game of the British imperialists. His threat that "We shall have India divided or India destroyed," added fuel to the fire. His call for demonstrations in Bengal ended up in the massacre of Hindus in Calcutta and other places. He wanted partition of India, no matter at what cost in life and blood.

The Indian masses were in revolt against the British now. The fear of getting killed by British machine-gun fire had evaporated. The army was refusing to suppress the surging masses, while the police had begun to waver. Anarchy was steadily raising its head.

It was this boiling situation that compelled the British rulers to quit India and depart.

This was also how India was partitioned, uprooting thousands upon thousands of Hindus and Muslims. Thousands got massacred in their homes and on their way across the man-made border, their property was looted on both sides of the line of partition. This was how India won freedom from British rule on 15 August, 1947.

The dream and objective of the CPI to keep India united and even have a Pakistan inside a United India was blown to pieces. Perhaps the dream was not strong enough by itself to prevent the heart-rending tragedy of the partition.

32. Gandhi-Joshi Correspondence

ON 8 August, 1942 the "Quit India" resolution was passed by the All India Congress Committee in Bombay. As an AICC member I took part in that meeting. The very next morning the Congress Working Committee members were arrested by the police and detained in different jails.

Immediately after the news of the arrest of Congress leaders spread, protest meetings and hartals began spontaneously throughout the country. Under the leadership of the Communist Party of India a meeting was organised the same day at the Kamgar Maidan of Bombay in which the CPI line was explained thus:

"Why did the Government strike? Because it does not want to part with power; because it wants the Indian people to follow the dictates of its incompetent bureaucracy for defence against the Japanese. We will not tolerate this. We demand the immediate release of the Congress leaders, lifting of the ban on the Congress party, and immediate negotiations with Congress to settle the question of a national government". It was further emphasised that a national government could not be won and the Japanese could not be fought without a "national unity", without Hindu-Muslim unity. Chaotic outbursts would only provide a handle to the British bureaucracy to strike at the Indian workers.

I was present at the meeting. The people were furious but had no clearcut programme before them, nor was there any leadership to guide them. The police, using lathis and bullets, was having its own way. We held the British Government responsible for the provocation, and accused it of uncalled for arrest of the Congress leaders which had led to the violence. We blamed the Government fully for creating such a situation.

Earlier, Mahatma Gandhi had been considering negotiations with the British rulers, and contemplated launching any movement to wrest India's freedom from them only if negotiations failed. But the Government did not wait for any talks and swooped down upon the

Congress leaders. However, between then and 6 May, 1944, when Mahatma Gandhi was released from the Agha Khan Palace detention because of ill health, the "Quit India" movement had passed into the hands of the Congress Socialists. The latter did their best to disrupt and sabotage all war and defence efforts. They as also the Subhashites and some Congressmen tried to exploit the "Quit India" resolution for their own ends. Mashruwala, a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, strengthened their hands by giving the sabotage line in Gandhiji's paper, *Harijan*.

They disrupted railway lines, destroyed communication services, set fire to post offices and government buildings and egged on the workers to go on strikes and bring factories and mills to a dead stop. They did succeed in their sabotage efforts for some time, before the CPI intervened in the situation with all its organised strength. It gave its patriotic line: Release the Congress leaders at once, negotiate with them and hand over a national government to the national leaders for national defence and victory over fascism.

The tussle and antagonism went on for a long time between the sabotage-the-war effort line and our war-effort-for-defence line. At first we were up against very heavy odds, but our dogged campaign and explanations made a slow but steady impression on the peasantry, the working class and the students. We possessed a most devoted and disciplined party cadre who fought the saboteurs politically and did not let them have their way.

Even before Mahatma Gandhi's release, the sabotage movement was down and out and its protagonists were blaming its failure on us, saying that "the Communists did not join the 9 August struggle and thus betrayed the National Congress". Bombay Congress boss and party treasurer S.K. Patil said: "The... struggle failed in Bombay because the Communists dominated the working class and, therefore, the workers did not strike. But the Communist influence cannot be easily destroyed because the Communist are remarkably disciplined and hard working. Congress workers must become like them, go into labour force and organise it so that it does not betray the national struggle next. The Congress will produce the cash and give guidance." (*Congress and Communists* by P.C. Joshi, p. 18).

The "Do or Die" movement had failed even before Mahatma Gandhi's release, but after doing great harm to the country. It only helped the fascists – our enemies – in several ways. The CPI had, for the first time, successfully opposed the Congress and Congress

Socialists' political line in practice. Earlier, during the 1920-22 and 1930 civil disobedience movements, the CPI had only been sharply critical, explaining to the people the so-called reformist and the anti-revolutionary character of these movements. We were convinced that no non-violent movement could achieve the goal of the country's freedom. And the people also saw some weight in our arguments when they witnessed for themselves that whenever any such movement took on a revolutionary turn, it was withdrawn by the Mahatma and directed into "reformist" channels.

Our successful anti-sabotage line naturally angered the Congress leadership, especially the Congress Socialists who had taken over the reins of the Congress leadership after the mass arrests on 9 August, 1942. The pro-sabotage calls by people like Mashruwala in the name of the AICC only fuelled the fire. The Congress Socialists and others accused the CPI as being "traitors to the country", "stooges" and "paid agents" of the British rulers.

The CPI leadership had anticipated that after Mahatma Gandhi's release, his ears would be poisoned against it by the Socialists and others. Our general-secretary Comrade P.C. Joshi, therefore, wrote a letter to Mahatma Gandhi on the very day he came out of detention, wishing him "speediest recovery" and expecting "the long-awaited lead to the nation against political deadlock, which had resulted in famine conditions and Japanese aggression, and for patriotic unity of all national forces to get food for our people and freedom for our country".

Comrade Joshi further wrote that he would be happy to explain to Mahatma Gandhi "the policy our Party is pursuing today, and report to you the little we have endeavoured to save our nation in your absence".

The correspondence that followed between Mahatma Gandhi and Comrade P.C. Joshi is of historic importance. It showed that the CPI stood by its policy uncompromisingly and firmly, did not yield on any point, and had taken the bull by the horn. The valuable correspondence is worth a careful study.

We had anticipated correctly. When Comrade P.C. Joshi met Mahatma Gandhi after his release, he had to hear from Gandhiji a lot of unpleasant charges against the Party. Comrade Joshi came away, telling him that he would reply to the charges in writing. But Mahatma Gandhi did not let the matter rest at that; and wrote to Comrade Joshi a letter on 11 June, 1944 from Juhu in which he

added more charges against the CPI for Joshi to answer. The main points in the charges were:

1) Meaning of "people" in "People's War"; 2) Our Party funds: Whether he could see them; 3) CPI actively had helped the authorities to arrest the labour leaders; 4) the CPI infiltrating into the Congress organisation with hostile intents, and 5) was not the policy of the Communist Party dictated from outside?

This started a long correspondence between Comrade P.C. Joshi and Mahatma Gandhi. The tell-tale correspondence brings out sharply the political differences between the CPI and the Mahatma. The correspondence is a wealthy mine for researchers and truth-seekers, but I shall deal with the questions raised therein very briefly.

Comrade Joshi had made honest efforts to place the CPI line before the Mahatma, and the manner it was executed in practice while the latter was under detention. Comrade Joshi was careful to be very respectful towards the Mahatma. He had kept in view Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence ideology and was sure that the Mahatma would repudiate all violence committed by the Congress Socialists and Congressmen in his name in the period after the "Quit India" resolution. Comrade Joshi did his best to make the Mahatma understand the political line the CPI during his detention, hoping to convince him of the correctness of our policy or at least to remove the prejudices he was harbouring against the CPI and its policy. The correspondence shows that the Mahatma could not get over his prejudices against us.

Let me take up the slanders against the CPI spread by the Congress Socialist Party people and Congressmen regarding CPI finances. The slander was that the CPI was a "paid agent of the British" and that Comrade P.C. Joshi was a Maxwell (British Home Secretary) boy. Further, that we had thrown aside our earlier party line of the war being an imperialist war and taken on the "people's war line" and had collaborated with the British rulers on dictation from outside. Mahatma Gandhi had wanted to know whether the Party's finances are "subject to public audit" and whether he could "see them".

Comrade Joshi welcomed Mahatma Gandhi's suggestion "because slanders have been poured into your ears on this count". He laid all his cards before Gandhiji, gave him the names of the big donors whom Gandhiji himself knew and respected; names such as Mian Iftikhar-ud-Din and his Begum, Shaukat Ansari and Zohra,

N.M. Joshi, the liberal TU leader, and the like. Comrade Joshi also gave the names of well-known families whose sons were working in the Party, and challengingly asked Gandhiji to send Pyarelal, his secretary, to our meeting where an appeal for Party funds was to be made by Comrade Joshi so that Gandhiji's representative could see for himself how we collected money for the CPI.

After giving him some more information, Comrade Joshi faced Gandhiji boldly and wrote to him disarmingly: "We collect money from the same source as you do — our great people. What helps us to do it is also the same weapon: their patriotic sense. Why should you not think that others too can do what you do?"

In another letter Comrade P.C. Joshi wrote: "Would the Government pay the Party which has been consistently campaigning for your and other Congress leaders' release, which has been fighting the slanders against the Congress being pro-Japanese, which has been popularising the anti-fascist stand of the Congress, which has been demanding settlement on the basis of national Government"?

Gandhiji answered from Sevagram on 30 July, 1944:

"Q. 2: Your answer, as far as it goes, I hold to be *completely satisfactory*. I will not ask you for further proof about your finances." (Emphasis mine).

I, as the secretary of the Punjab unit of the Party, was called by the Superintendent of Police Lahore, in 1943 to meet him. Comrade Achhar Singh Cheema went along with me. The SP told us that the Government was willing to give money to the Party for the work we were doing in connection with the people's war. We refused to accept a single pie from the government as all CPI leaders had strict instructions not to accept any money from the Government.

This charge of party funds was the main slander from which others flowed, directly or indirectly. Despite it being shattered before the eyes of the people of the country, this slander was not given up by the Congress Socialist or Congress leaders because the whole edifice of their slander campaign stood on this untenable bare base.

Regarding the charge of having "actively helped the authorities to arrest leaders and organisers of labour strikes during the last two years".

To this Comrade Joshi's answer was very simple, disarming and convincing. Since Gandhiji had found that we were not paid by the Government, it was easy for him to believe that we could not hand over labour leaders to the police. Further, our Party, except for in

Ahmedabad and Jamshedpur, was the unquestioned leader of the working classes, as the great Indian National Congress was of the Indian people as a whole. Did Gandhi not know that we were, above all, the party of the working class, and that the leaders of the working class could in no case commit the crime of handing over leaders of the unions opposing us and getting ourselves damned in the eyes of the entire working class itself?

Comrade Joshi mentioned the name of N.M. Joshi, the oldest trade union leader of that time who could provide the correct information to Gandhiji. He knew our place in the Indian labour movement better than anyone else, being the general-secretary of the Trade Union Congress. He would tell Gandhiji what was what.

The reason for this slander was that we had given up our strike policy because we considered it anti-national in the then prevailing conditions – it helped the Japanese aggressors on the one hand and aggravated the economic plight of our own people on the other. This was the measure not only of our influence over the Indian working class, but also our Party's capacity to understand the national interests as its own.

Regarding "infiltrating the Congress organisation with a hostile intent."

This was a very queer question coming as it did from the Mahatma who was, for all practical purposes, the real leader of the Indian National Congress. He knew the policy of the CPI which had been placed before the AICC session on 7 and 8 August, 1942 when the "Quit India" resolution was being debated. The Mahatma had congratulated three of our comrades on the courage they had shown in pressing their amendments to a division... and congratulated the 13 friends who had voted against the resolution. "(Mahatma, Tendulkar, Col. VI, p. 191). That was the alternative policy the CPI was carrying on since 9 August.

Comrade Joshi's reply was straightforward: "We have been in the Congress ever since we were born as a party."

The above charge was made against us in the Meerut Conspiracy Case by the Government prosecutor, Mr Langford James, and we had had a hearty laugh over the joke! This accusation was levelled against us by our British enemy to isolate us from non-Communist Congressmen and weaken the National Congress. Now the Japanese agents were playing the same game! Both represented the nation's enemies, trying to confuse the national ranks and weaken the anti-

fascist movement.

But what was meant by “infiltrating the Congress organisation with a hostile intent”? In my opinion, it could mean only one thing: that the CPI was penetrating the Congress organisation in order to weaken it, take it into the wilderness with the ultimate object of destroying it. What an impossible task with shrewd leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru presiding over its destiny!

Comrade Joshi’s reply to this was: It is for our fellow Congressmen to judge whether our intent is hostile or not, and for us to prove otherwise through our practice. The Party had won the love and respect of Congressmen in the past and hoped to enjoy it more and more. Our comrades were elected to leading places in the AICC as well as in many Provincial Congress Committees, etc.

Regarding the charge of the policy of the Communist Party being dictated from outside?

To this Comrade Joshi replied that the CPI decided its policy on its own, as it understood the interests of its own people. He could have straightaway added: We follow Marxism-Leninism and our policy is to fight against the exploiting classes and work for the interests of the working people. If the Mahatma could get “a teacher in Thoreau” whose “Duty on Civil Disobedience” furnished “scientific confirmation of what he was doing in South Africa”; if Britain could give him Ruskin whose *Unto this Last* transformed him overnight from a lawyer and city-dweller into a rustic living away from Durban on a farm, and if “Russia gave me a teacher in Tolstoy who furnished a reasoned basis for my non-violence”, what objection could there be if we had made Marx and Lenin our teachers and learnt scientific socialism from them? (*Mahatma*, Tendulkar Vol. VI p. 177).

Comrade Joshi protested that Gandhiji approached the Communist Party “with suspicion” and wrote back that his “questions pained us because they embody the slander that the enemies of Communism are circulating the world over and are only believed by persons with preconceived prejudices”.

Comrade Joshi further wrote: “We knew you did not like us, nor think much of us. But, after the Congress and the League we have grown to be the third party in the country...We would continue to stand on the strength of our patriotic policy before the people”.

Now, lastly, the first question: What is the meaning of “people” in “people’s war”?

Comrade Joshi did not answer this question in class terms but replied to it in a broad way. This unnecessarily lengthened his answer. In class terms, the answer should have been short. Fascism had thrown the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union to the winds. Hitler had mobilised the best part of his army against the first working class state. On the victory or defeat of the Soviet Union depended the fate of the working masses of the world. If Hitler won, a dark age for the working people could begin in which they would lose all democratic, political, economic and social rights and work as galley slaves under the Jackboot of Hitler's fascism – the most brutal form of imperialism. On the other hand, if Soviet Russia along with its imperialist allies, the Britain and the USA, won, the working class would get strengthened in terms of political, social and economic gains and might come to power in certain other states.

As the party of the working class we cannot be idle spectators. Our fate being in the balance, we must do our utmost in terms of food, cloth, and war material production in the factories and fields in order to help the war effort. The working class could only come into its own with the victory of the Allied Powers, and fall with their defeat in the war. Hence, we termed this war as People's War and in no case could we put hurdles in its prosecution.

The fate of India's freedom was also linked with the victory of the Allied Powers. There were contradictions in the Allied camp between the two imperialist powers, USA and Britain, and between the Soviet Union and the former two. The Soviet Union stood for national liberation movements and freedom of the colonies, including India; the British wanted to hold on to its colonial empire, but the USA wanted the British rulers to settle with the Indian people. Thus, the way to freedom lay through making the war effort succeed. With the defeat of Hitler's fascism, British imperialism was sure to get weakened. The revolutionary atmosphere emerging after the victory would pave the way for our national freedom.

This was the meaning of "people's war" and this was the meaning of the two camps having emerged after Hitler's hordes attacked the Soviet Union.

Rumours were being spread about the Joshi-Gandhi correspondence from Gandhiji's headquarters and by other individuals. Comrade Joshi, therefore, asked permission of Mahatma Gandhi to publish the correspondence. The latter allowed its publication on 3 May, 1945, saying: "You need not await the finale of our correspon-

dence...” and on 24 May, Gandhiji wrote again: “But my opinion is not formed... On the whole I agree with Rajaji that you should refuse to put yourself in the dock. I do not want to pass judgement against a political party” and there ended the matter.

33. Ajoy Ghosh – Some Reminiscences

I met Comrade Ajoy Ghosh for the first time in the Deoli detention camp in Rajasthan sometime in 1940. I had been arrested in October 1939 after the outbreak of the World War II in September in the general round-up of Communists throughout India. All the Punjab comrades were sent to this concentration camp. Simultaneously, or a little later, comrades from Bombay and UP were also lodged at Deoli. Besides the Communists, who made up the largest contingent, there were also a small number of Congress Socialists and independents in the camp. Prominent among them was Jaiprakash Narayan, one of whose secret letters was intercepted by the CID and flashed in the Central Assembly in Delhi, exposing him as a rabid anti-Communist "Socialist", (narrated in an earlier chapter.)

Comrade Ajoy Ghosh was arrested in Bombay in 1940 and along with other Bombay comrades, was sent to the Deoli camp, where he soon integrated himself with the rest of the Communists. He was tall and lank, with a somewhat dark face and had a straight gait. He impressed every one with his no-nonsense attitude.

When Ajoy joined the Deoli camp, the struggle by the Communists was on for better camp conditions and more facilities with regard to correspondence, political literature, improved food and for doing away with the A and B grade camps.

The British rulers treated our demands petition with contempt, and we were forced to go on a hungerstrike to secure our demands. Comrade Ajoy Ghosh, like a fervently loyal comrade, immediately joined our struggle. Our hungerstrike lasted for 19 days, causing breakdown in the health of a number of our comrades. But Ajoy Ghosh suffered the most; in fact, he would have collapsed had the strike gone on for a few days more. Earlier, he had undertaken his first hungerstrike for 63 days along with his comrades Bhagat Singh, B.K. Dutt, Rajguru, Sukh Dev, Jatindranath Das and others in the second Lahore Conspiracy Case. In that strike, Jatin Das had died a martyr's death which had stirred India's soul from Kashmir to Cape

Comorin (now Kanyakumari). This hungerstrike had shattered Ajoy Ghosh's health, making him a victim of tuberculosis.

Ajoy Ghosh was very much interested in the unity of the party in Punjab, and when he learnt that through Comrade Ghate's efforts the Kirti group had decided to unite with the Party giving up its separate entity, he was very pleased. In achieving this, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, Baba Wasakha Singh and others had played a laudable role.

The result of the Deoli agitation was that the camp was closed down and the detainees were transferred to their respective Provinces. The Punjab Communists, Socialists and others were despatched to the Gujarat district jail (now in Pakistan) and Ajoy Ghosh remained with the Bombay comrades.

I was released along with Comrades Feroz-ud-Din Mansur, Fazal Ilahi Qurban and Karam Singh Mann from the Gujarat Jail in May, 1942 and had gone straight to Lahore to set up the party office there. From the Campbellpur jail came out Teja Singh Swatantra, Achhar Singh Chhina, Bhagat Singh Bilga and Iqbal Singh and the Punjab Party centre began to function properly again.

It was sometime in 1948 that the all-India Party centre asked me, as the State unit secretary, whether Comrade Ajoy Ghosh could be sent to Punjab to recoup his health and do some party work. I at once welcomed the proposal. Ajoy Ghosh came to Punjab and stayed with us for more than two years. It was then that I came in close contact with him and became aware at his political antecedents and his sterling qualities of his head and heart.

His efforts strengthened our student union organisation and attracted new students towards our Party. His old colleagues by then had either become fullfledged Communists or on the verge of becoming ones. Comrades Dhanwantri of the old terrorist group straightaway joined the Party and worked along with Ajoy Ghosh. Later, Pandit Kishorilal also joined us on his release from jail.

The Punjab climate suited Ajoy very well, and he recovered his health a great deal to work here till the Second Party Congress. Lahore gave him a beautiful bride in Comrade Litto Rai who stood by him through thick and thin, and became one of the leaders of the peace and friendship movement.

Though the Punjab Kirti group was supposed to have merged in the Party in the Deoli camp, some of their leaders were still functioning factionally in the Punjab Provincial unit. It was a tough job for

Comrade Ajoy to fight against this factionalism, but through his talks and study circles he managed to persuade some of these comrades to change their ways. His efforts in Punjab enhanced the prestige of the Party and we were glad that he could go back to the Party Centre with improved health.

Those were very difficult days as the nationalists were making wild charges of betrayal against us. But we stood our ground and increased our strength on all the mass fronts. In this Ajoy Ghosh's contribution was immense.

Comrade Ajoy Ghosh was elected general-secretary of the CPI in 1951 in the Calcutta Party conference. This was a great responsibility that was put on his shoulders, and it must be said unstintedly to his credit that he came out with flying colours in discharging his tasks of that high office. Till the time of his death he fought with all his might and energy against dogmatism and reformism inside the Party and put the party on the right rails.

Disruptive trends had cropped up in the party during this period. At times these differences came to a boiling point. But Ajoy faced them bravely and convinced the comrades of the correctness of the political line he put forward. Thus, he kept the party united.

In 1957, the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution was celebrated in Moscow. Delegates from many countries were invited by the CPSU to attend these celebrations. India was represented by a delegation of seven led by our general-secretary Comrade Ajoy Ghosh. I was one of the fortunate members of the delegation along with Comrades M.N. Govindan Nair, Bhupesh Gupta, Ravi Narain Reddy, Muzaffer Ahmad and M. Basavapunniah. During the celebrations almost all the top leaders of national parties made speeches in Moscow at various occasions before the Russian working masses. Comrade Ajoy Ghosh spoke on 8 November in the Sports Palace, eulogising the achievements of the Soviet people under the leadership of the CPSU and also mentioned "the great revolution of the Chinese people under the leadership of the glorious Communist Party of China".

On 4 October, just a few days before the 40th anniversary celebrations, the Soviet Union had launched the "baby moon", the first man-made satellite of the earth. It took the world by surprise and at once brought home to the world the superiority of the Soviet Union in the field of science and technology over the US. The capitalist world was shaken to its roots because the achievement shattered America's tall

claims to technological superiority and punctured its inflated self-esteem.

Politically, this was a big blow to American ego. US intellectuals began to accuse McCarthyism for this lag and backwardness in the sphere of science because it had been widely used to curb the US scientists through witch-hunts, suspecting some of them to be pro-Soviet and passing on technical know-how to the Soviets. The US scientists had to prove that they were not indulging in subversive activities.

There was alarm in the USA on the military implications of the Soviet achievement. A chorus was raised: "Get man on the moon, Ike." (President Eisenhower).

"Our Sputniks are circling the globe," said Comrade Khrushchev jubilantly in his report to the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution, "and waiting for the American and other satellites to join them and form a community of moons. Such community, such competition, would be better than the arms race, than the production of lethal weapons." (*New Age*, November 10, 1957).

An event of worldwide importance on the occasion was the Conference of 64 Communist and Workers' Parties held in Moscow. The Conference endorsed two historic documents – a manifesto on peace and war, and a declaration analysing and assessing the world situation and tasks accruing therefrom. Our delegation also took part in that historic conference. Comrade Ajoy Ghosh characterised the august conference as "an event of profound significance for the international Communist movement and for the whole of progressive mankind". Continuing the analysis he said: "The events of the 40 years since November 1917 have witnessed the progressive decline of capitalism and the growing power and strength of socialism". He explained that many new formulations were made in the documents, but two outstanding among them were: that "the balance of world forces had changed in favour of socialism" and two, that "the main content of the epoch we live in is the transition from capitalism to socialism." Comrade Ajoy explained the quintessence of the two documents in a long article in the *New Age* issue of 29 December, 1957.

Under Ajoy's leadership, a CPI delegation went to meet Comrade Mao Tse-tung in the Kremlin and listen his views on world developments. Comrade Mao had expressed certain differences he had with certain formulations in the Moscow declaration, but he

subsequently put his signature to the two historic documents which were passed unanimously. In those differences lay the seeds which made him subsequently oppose the Soviet Union and later repudiate what he had himself said during the special session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 6 November, 1957 in Moscow. In that address, Mao had expressed the following noble ideas:

“We regard it as the sacred international obligation of all socialist countries to strengthen the solidarity of the socialist countries headed by the Soviet Union.”

“It (October Revolution) proves that different nations of the world are completely capable of living together amicably once there is no imperialist oppression.”

“The US imperialists obstinately try to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries... They are particularly rabid in interfering in the internal affairs of those countries situated in the area between the United States and the socialist camp” and so on.

But later, Maoism and its followers completely abdicated these high principles and became anti-Soviet and staunch friends of that hangman of the liberation movements in the world, US imperialism. This was a complete turnabout from what Mao had preached earlier.

The Indian delegation actively took part in the discussions on the two documents adopted by the Conference and they became our own decisions not only because we believed in proletarian internationalism but also because we were a party to the principles and concepts incorporated in them. Hence, they became our Party’s property.

The declaration said: “The forms of transition to socialism may vary for different countries. The working class, its vanguard—the Marxist-Leninist Party—seeks to achieve the socialist revolution by peaceful means. This would accord with the interests of the working class and the people as a whole, as well as with the national interests of the country”.

Further, “in the event of the ruling classes resorting to violence against the people, the possibility of non-peaceful transition to socialism should be borne in mind.” (*New Age*, 1 December, 1957).

Our Party took upon itself the task of acquainting its members with those principles and concepts, and concretised them in the preamble to the Party Constitution and resolutions of the Party Congress held in Amritsar in 1958. Writing on the Amritsar Party Congress, Comrade Ajoy Ghosh said:

“What has evoked most widespread comments... is the declaration in the Preamble of the Constitution that the Communist Party strives to achieve socialism by peaceful means and that in socialist India the right of political organisation will be enjoyed even by those who are opposed to the Government so long as they abide by the Constitution of the country”. He added: “But if the ruling classes will resort to arms with a view to thwart the will of the majority of the people”, then the majority could not remain silent spectators because the Party did not accept “non-violence as a creed”.

Replying to the charge of “extra-territorial loyalty”, Comrade Ajoy said: “What, however, are the facts? No Communist Party desires to interfere in the affairs of the party of another country. Every Communist Party is sovereign and independent in the sense that it determines its line of action on the basis of its own understanding of the situation in its country. At the same time, no genuine Communist can subscribe to the so-called theory of ‘national communism’.

These amendments in the preamble to the Constitution of the Party made the CPI grow faster than ever before. During the 11 years of his general-secretaryship of the Party, Ajoy Ghosh made the CPI a great and nationally loved party, a party to be reckoned with, a party which became the second party in the country after the Indian National Congress. Congress and Socialist leaders were envious of CPI’s growing strength, prestige and sweep.

This is what Comrade Ajoy Ghosh proudly said about it in an article entitled “Long Live the October Revolution” in *New Age* special number dated 7 November, 1957: “The Communist Party has grown to the stature of the second party in the country, the main party of opposition in the Indian Parliament, with 12 million votes in the last general elections and leading the Government in the State of Kerala. The ideas of the October Revolution have won millions of adherents, thereby refuting the thesis that Marxism-Leninism has become outmoded and has no validity for our country”.

During his general-secretaryship, differences, sharp and serious, arose time and again inside the Party. But Ajoy Ghosh’s wisdom and sagacity never failed to find a formula to solve all these differences. His main forte was to listen to all points of views very patiently, ponder over them deeply from all aspects and then evolve a solution acceptable to all. That merit of his was acknowledged by one and all inside the party. As long as he was alive, he kept the Party as one

solid whole. In fact, he incarnated the unity of the Party in himself.

One can imagine, speculate or surmise that had he lived two or three years more, the CPI would not have split; it would have remained solidly united and would have made tremendous strides as the second party in the country. It would have crossed many a hurdle on the way to gaining power at the Centre and the hodge-podge Janata Party would perhaps have never come into existence and gain power.

Even today, if the two parties, the CPI and the CPI-M, come together in a Left and democratic front, launch an all-India campaign to win over the Naxalite groups, the Leftist and democratic elements or groups in the Congress and the Janata Party and work together to forge a broad Left and democratic front, the third alternative to oust the bourgeois parties from power can emerge. History will not forgive those who let this opportunity slip.

Comrade Ajoy Ghosh was a staunch, dedicated, selfless and exemplary Communist. He died in harness on the 13 January, 1962. I attended all the Party Congresses held under his general-secretaryship and watched him working singlemindedly heart and soul for making the Party great. It goes without saying that he *did* make the party great.

Comrade Ajoy subordinated his bodily comforts and health to party work and responsibilities. For him Party work was his primary task, and every other thing came later. He fought tirelessly to bring the working masses into their own. The principles and idealism of Marxism-Leninism inspired him so much that they became his very life-breath.

I salute him, his memory and his immortal work for unity. He will remain enshrined in our hearts for ever.

(Note: This piece was written by the author on 7 February, 1979 Ed.).

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