

# Bhagat Singh, the final hours

- **RK Kaushik, [Hindustan Times](#)**

Even eight decades after he was hanged, Bhagat Singh remains the most iconic - and beloved - martyr in the collective consciousness of India. What has, however, remained fuzzy all these years, is the exact sequence of events and the identity of officials involved in the defining execution in Lahore central jail on March 23, 1931. The British government had kept its officers' names under wraps fearing retribution. There had been two assassination bids - on the then Punjab governor Geoffrey Montmorency and superintendent of police Khan Bahadur Sheikh Abdul Aziz, the investigating officer against Singh, in the month before the hanging.

Last week, Bhagat Singh would have turned 104. This article, based on information gleaned from hitherto inaccessible records in India and Pakistan, pieces together a stirring account of Bhagat Singh's final moments.

The meeting to discuss the law and order situation in Punjab was held at noon on March 16, 1931 at the Governor's House in Lahore. It was presided over by Punjab Governor Geoffrey Montmorency, still in pain from the bullet wounds he suffered after being shot by freedom fighter Hari Kishan Talwar at the convocation at Punjab University in Lahore a month earlier.

Apart from the governor, the then chief secretary of Punjab DJ Boyd, home secretary CMG Ogilvie, inspector general of police Charles Stead, inspector general of prisons FA Barker, deputy commissioner of Lahore AA Lane Roberts and senior superintendent of police GTH Hamilton Hardinge - were among those who attended the meeting.

The meeting digressed into preparations for the impending proposed executions of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev fixed for the morning of March 24. The governor reviewed the arrangements and expressed satisfaction at the law and order situation in the state.

## **Defiant till the end**

A dust storm swept Lahore on the night of March 22. Justice MV Bhide, ICS, of the Lahore High Court, had earlier rejected the petitions challenging the powers of a special tribunal to issue the death warrants. Thus, the executions became inevitable.

By the time dawn broke on March 23, the storm had settled. Jail officials in the central jail spoke in hushed tones in the room of jail superintendent Major PD Chopra. The Punjab government allowed the last meeting with Bhagat Singh at 10am. Pran Nath Mehta, his lawyer, met him. The moment Mehta left, after receiving four handwritten bunches of papers surreptitiously from Bhagat Singh, a team of officers led by Stead, Barker, Roberts, Hardinge and Chopra met Bhagat Singh. Their unsolicited advice to seek a pardon from the British government was contemptuously rejected by Bhagat Singh.

The executions had been advanced by a day and were to take place in the evening of March 23.

The information to Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev was conveyed by senior jail warden Chhattar Singh. A disturbed and grief-stricken Chhattar Singh suggested to Bhagat Singh that

he recite the name of god. But Bhagat Singh was busy reading a book on Russian revolutionary Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

#### Moment of reckoning

Bhagat Singh had asked a Muslim sweeper, Bebe, to bring food for him in the evening before his execution. Bebe readily accepted the request and promised to bring home-cooked food for him. But because of the security clampdown, Bebe was unable to enter the jail that evening.

There was a flurry of activity inside the Lahore jail and outside because authorities feared unrest.

As noon passed and the clock inched towards evening, the district civil and police officers camped outside the jail. They were led by Sheikh Abdul Hamid, additional district magistrate, Lahore; Rai Sahib Lala Nathu Ram, city magistrate; Sudarshan Singh, deputy superintendent of police, Kasur; Amar Singh, deputy superintendent of police (city), Lahore; JR Morris, deputy superintendent of police, headquarters, Lahore; and hundreds of armed policemen.

With the shooting of the governor fresh in their minds, the officers and policemen were anxious about their own security. The investigating officer in the case Khan Bahadur Sheikh Abdul Aziz, SP, special investigation, had been shot and injured a few days earlier but had survived.

Stead, Barker, Roberts, Hardinge, Chopra and deputy jail superintendent Khan Sahib Mohammad Akbar were present inside the jail. The hangman, called Massih from Shahadra, near Lahore, was also ready. The moment the three revolutionaries were taken out of their cells, they shouted inquilab zindabad (long live the revolution).

Pindi Dass Sodhi, secretary, district Congress, Lahore lived near the central jail. The slogans were clearly heard at his house. After hearing the shouts of the three men walking to their deaths, the other prisoners joined them in the sloganeering.

#### Nothing to mask

Deputy commissioner AA Lane Roberts was a loquacious officer of the 1909 batch of ICS. When the three young men reached the hanging site, he spoke to Bhagat Singh. Singh confidently said that people would soon see and remember how Indian freedom fighters bravely kiss death.

They refused to wear masks over their necks. In fact, Bhagat Singh threw the mask at the district magistrate. Singh and his companions hugged each other for the last time, and shouted "down with the British empire".

Massih pulled the lever. Bhagat Singh was the first to hang. He was followed by Rajguru and Sukhdev.

Lt Col JJ Harper Nelson, principal of King Edward's Medical College, Lahore and Lt Col NS Sodhi, civil surgeon, Lahore, were inside the jail at the time of the executions but did not witness the hangings. After the hangings, the three were confirmed dead by the civil surgeon.

A huge crowd had gathered outside the jail, but two vehicles led by deputy superintendent of police Kasur Sudarshan Singh and deputy superintendent of police (city) Amar Singh accompanied by three trucks of soldiers of black watch regiment took the bodies and left for the cremation at 10 pm. Sudarshan picked up a granthi and a priest named Jagdish Acharaj from Kasur and set the bodies on fire outside Ganda Singh Wala village in the night. The bodies were still burning when people from different areas, including Ferozepur, reached there and a ruckus followed.

The bodies were later thrown in river Satluj.

- The author is an Indian Administrative Services officer based in Punjab

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India, an emerging gay tourism hub?

Travel agents are going the extra yard to create LGBT travel packages for same-sex couples, mainly from the US and Europe

Sharon Fernandes

[sharon.fernandes@hindustantimes.com](mailto:sharon.fernandes@hindustantimes.com)

Aluxurious stay at a palace in Udaipur, an ayurvedic massage by the sea in Kochi, a spiritual session with a guru in Varanasi or just a leisurely sightseeing trip across Delhi, Agra or Jaipur, does seem like the perfect holiday plan for any couple. This ideal holiday gets even better if you are gay or lesbian and want a customised holiday for your partner and you, without uncomfortable stares or having to explain why two men need a double bed. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) tourism is an emerging trend in India, thanks to the rise in travellers from the US, Europe and Australia.

According to Community Marketing Inc. (CMI) a communications and marketing agency based in the US, over 80% of 3,865 LGBT Americans that were sampled said they would visit or have visited India and prefer it over other destinations in South Asia. "India ranks as no.2 desired cultural or adventure destination just behind Thailand, but ahead of China, South Africa and Japan," says CMI founder and president Thomas Roth.

For travel operators catering to gay tourists, choosing hotels where the staff understands what being gay is about, or using drivers that don't mind their customers - two men or women - holding hands in the back seat, are small instances that help them make a gay tourist comfortable. Indjapink, a tourism agency that conducts

customised tours for gay men, gets around 2-3 tour bookings in a month that goes up to 10 bookings in peak season (October to March). "Apart from the US and UK, there is a big market from Greece, Australia, South Africa and Mexico," says Abhinav Goel, founder of Out Journeys, which gets around 70-80 clients per month.

Jaipur, Delhi, Agra, Kochi, Tamil Nadu and Goa are hot destinations for gay travellers. Pink Vibgyor, another agency, which has clients from Europe, US, Middle East, China and Thailand, gets a number of requests for "adventure or spiritual holidays" from gay travellers. "They want to do fun activities together over a week or a month. This can be a pan-India holiday starting from the hills in the north to the beaches down south. They love interacting with the local gay scene and we arrange gay parties for them," says co-founder Rajat Singla.

While Nepal has been the popular gay tourism destination this side of the subcontinent, India's rich culture gives it an edge over neighbouring countries. Sunil Babu Pant, a legislator and founder of Pink Mountain tours in Nepal, says gay visitors to India and Nepal are different from those who go to say Thailand and Bangkok. "This is a mature traveller, in his or her 30s who has had his/her share of fun, and now wants a meaningful holiday," says Pant. These holidays are not sex tourism, insists Pant. "We do not provide escorts, there is no sleaze involved. It is a holiday like any other, only the staff is made aware of the needs of the clients and they are made to feel special," says Indjapink founder Sanjay Malhotra.

Mock weddings are a fun feature added to the itinerary of many gay travellers. Both Indjapink and Pink Vibgyor say they can arrange a Hindu wedding ceremony, for the experience, "We do some mock weddings in heritage hotels in Rajasthan, it is a beautiful setting, and something new for them to take from their holiday," says Singla.

While it does seem like a perfect holiday for gay couples, lesbians will have to wait for their share of this gay tourism, as most operators do not cater to women. "We do have some women clients but it hasn't picked up as much," says Singla.

If the power of the pink pound is rising in the UK and 'gay buying power' on the ascendant in the US, the case isn't much different in India. At \$500 for 3 days to \$5,000 for a longer "across India" tour, LGBT travel packages do find many takers here.

Even standard travel operators are tapping into this very lucrative set of "double income and no kids" income couples from US and Europe. Vijay Thakur, President of Indian Association of Tour Operators says, "They understand they have to cater to this market to improve their business and though they may not publicise very openly, most operators go that extra length for these high-profile tourists."