

## Homage to Shaheed Udham Singh on his Eightieth Death Anniversary (31 July 2020)

COL. BHUPINDER SINGH, (RETD.)\*



"He is a mad man" - said Gandhi.

"His act was a sense-less deed" - said Nehru.

"We con- demn his act of terror and apo- logise and hope we are not punished for it" - resolution passed by Congress.

The man in question was **Shaheed Udham Singh**. The 'senseless deed' he did was that he shot dead Michael Dwyer on 13 March 1940.

Udham Singh was born as Sher Singh on 26 December 1899, at Sunam in the Sangrur district of Punjab. His father Sardar Tehal Singh was a watchman of a railway crossing. He became an orphan before he attained the age of seven and was admitted along with his brother Mukta Singh to the Central Khalsa Orphanage at Amritsar on 24 October 1907. Both the brothers were administered *amrit* or the Khalsa baptism at the orphanage and became Udham Singh and Sadhu Singh respectively. In 1917, Udham Singh lost his brother and was left all alone to fend for himself in this vast world. He passed the matriculation exam in 1918 and left the orphanage in 1919.

### Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar (Punjab)

After the protest against the Rowalatt Act and rioting, rampage and arson that broke out on 10 April 1919, the army was called in. Brigadier General Reginald Edward Harry Dyer (09 October 1864 - 24 July 1927), commander 45 Infantry Brigade marched from Jullundur to Amritsar with Gorkha troops and armoured cars and arrived in Amritsar in the evening on 11 April. The Brigadier General proclaimed a state of emergency and declared all meetings illegal (majority of the citizens were unaware of this declaration). Meanwhile the local Congress had already announced a meeting at Jallianwala Bagh at 4.30 pm for the *Vaisakhi* fair on 13 April.

\*Email: raibhupy@gmail.com

From the early hours of the morning on 13 April, a large number of people mostly Sikhs, had poured into the city from the surrounding villages for the *Vaisakhi* festival (first of *Vaisakh* being the birth anniversary of the Khalsa). These Sikhs, ignorant of the announcement went to the nearby Bagh to pass time till it was cool enough to return home. As soon as Brigadier General Dyer received news of the meeting, he marched a platoon of infantry to Jallianwala and on reaching there at about 5.15 pm; he occupied the only entrance/exit to the Bagh and without giving any warning to the crowd to disperse, opened fire on the innocent and unsuspecting gathering with .303 rifles. The firing lasted for about 20 minutes, in which 1650 rounds of ammunition were fired. The official figures of the casualties were 379 killed and 1200 wounded, whereas the unofficial figures were much more. Brigadier Dyer imposed a curfew in the city and returned to his camp leaving the dying with the dead without any possibility of help reaching them.

Hundreds of unarmed, defenseless Indians had been murdered in cold blood by a senior British military officer, in the heart of Amritsar, the holiest city of the Sikhs, on a day sacred to them. It was indeed a black Sunday. When the news was conveyed to **Sir Michael O'Dwyer** (1864 - 1940), the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, he fully approved of the action. **Udham Singh and revolutionaries; his songs motivated and his friends from the orphanage were involved in administering aid and serving water to the wounded and dying. The massacre of over a thousand people had a life-long impact on his conscience and psyche and the Nankana Sahib tragedy of 21 February 1921 affected him equally.**

This incident turned Udham Singh on the path of revolution. Soon after, he left India and went to the USA and became involved in revolutionary politics; He was influenced by the militant activities of the Ghadar Party and the Babar Akalis in the early 1920s and returned home in 1927. He had secretly brought revolvers with him and was arrested by the police in Amritsar; he was sentenced to four years imprisonment under the Arms Act. On release in 1931, he returned to Sunam, but harassment by the local police forced him to return to Amritsar and there he opened a shop as a signboard painter, assuming the name of Ram Mohammad Singh Azad. This name, which he was to use later in England, was adopted to represent the three major religions of Punjab (Hindu, Muslim and Sikh) and Azad for his anti-colonial sentiment.

Sardar Udham Singh was profoundly influenced by Sardar Bhagat Singh's ideology and politics and invariably referred to him as his guru; he was also very fond of the songs of Ram Prasad Bismal, the leading poet of the revolutionaries; his songs motivated and aroused him. Udham Singh made his way to Kashmir, where he was able to evade the police and

escape to Germany. In 1934, he reached London. Privately he made plans to assassinate Michael O'Dwyer, the former lieutenant governor of Punjab when the Amritsar massacre took place.

The opportunity came after waiting for 21 years. At 4.30 pm, on 13 March 1940, Michael O'Dwyer was scheduled to speak at a joint meeting of the East India Association and the Central Asian (now Royal society for Asian Affairs) at Caxton Hall, London. Udham Singh hid a pistol in a book in which he had carved out a place for it. He sat in the front row and after the lecture was over, he fired at Michael O'Dwyer, who was hit twice and fell down dead; Lord Zetland, the Secretary of State for India, who was presiding over the meeting, was injured. Udham Singh made no attempt to escape and was immediately arrested.

On 01 April 1940, Udham Singh was formally charged for the murder of Sir Michael O'Dwyer. On 4 June 1940, he was committed to trial, at the Central Criminal Court, Old Baily, before Justice Atkinson, who sentenced him to death. An appeal was filed on his behalf which was dismissed on 15 July 1940. On 31 July 1940, Udham Singh was hanged in Pentonville Prison in London.

#### **POST SCRIPT**

What was the aftermath and what happened to the characters that played such a dramatic role in the whole saga of tragic events.

**Brigadier General Dyer** - After the Jallianwala massacre, martial Law was clamped in Punjab, the agitations and demonstrations all over the province of Punjab took a very ugly turn. There was arson, looting, riots, rampage and assaults all over. The army administrator Brigadier General Dyer had Amritsar city's water and electric supply cut; in the street where the missionary lady had been assaulted, he made Indian passers-by crawl on their bellies; specially constituted courts tried and summarily sentenced people to death and terms of imprisonment. All over the province there was public flogging and many other humiliating atrocities committed on Indians. In the seven weeks that Punjab was administered by martial law nearly 1,200 people were killed and at least 3,600 wounded.

Few know that Dyer was born on 9 October 1864, at Murree, Pakistan and raised in Punjab or that he was as well-versed in Hindustani as in English. Brigadier General Dyer tried to win over the Sikhs as best he could. He threatened the *sarbarah* (manager) of the Golden Temple and Majithia and asked them to use their influence with the Sikhs in favor of the government. He sent out movable columns through Sikh villages to wean them away from the influence of mischief makers and to prove that '*sircar*' was still strong.

Priests of the Golden Temple invited the general to the sacred shrine and presented him with a *siropa* (turban and kirpan). There was an agitation and demand for removal of *sarbarah* gathered momentum day by day. Ultimately Sardar Arur Singh, the *sarbarah* bowed to popular will. He not only resigned the office of *sarbarah* but also tendered a public apology for his acts of omission and commission relating to management of shrines under his charge at a meeting in Jallianwala Bagh, sometime in August 1920.

The Hunter Inquiry Committee (named after its chairman, Lord Hunter) held Brigadier General R.E.H. Dyer (nicknamed the Butcher of Amritsar) guilty of a mistaken notion of duty, and he was relieved of his command and prematurely retired. He received a sum of 26,317 pounds from his English admirers who called him, 'The man who saved India'. Brigadier General Dyer lived over eight years after his retirement and during part of this, he was wheel chair bound. He was looked after by his daughter-in-law and niece. He had two strokes in a short time before he died of cerebral hemorrhage and arteriosclerosis in 1927. After his death, most unexpectedly he was given a military burial with full honours. The Union Jack that flew over the Jalandhar Headquarters was specially brought in to wrap his coffin, this speaks volumes of the British society who thus honoured a cashiered soldier who lived his life without any retirement benefits or pension.

**Sir Michael O'Dwyer**, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, an Irishman had fully approved of the action of Brigadier General Dyer. This is precisely what he said, "I approved of General Dyer's action in dispersing by force the rebellious gathering and thus preventing further rebellious acts ..... speaking with perhaps a more intimate knowledge of the then situation than anyone else. I have no hesitation in saying that General Dyer's action that day was the decisive factor in crushing the rebellion, the seriousness of which is only now being generally realized." Hunter Committee Report, *Disorders Inquiry Committee Report*, p. 48.

Sir Michael O'Dwyer, who claimed that Brigadier General Dyer had saved the empire, had in fact dealt it the most grievous blow by alienating all Indians, including its staunchest supporters, the Sikhs. "No British action, during the whole course of our history in India, has struck a more severe blow to Indian faith in British justice than the massacre at Amritsar," wrote the Westminster Gazette. **The sun had begun to set on the British Empire. Rabindranath Tagore renounced his British Knighthood.** Sir Michael O'Dwyer, as mentioned earlier was shot dead by a Sikh, Udham Singh, at a public meeting in London on 13 March 1940.

During his trial Udham Singh had made a request that his ashes be sent back to his

country, but this was not allowed. However, in 1974, his remains were exhumed and repatriated to India at the request of MLA Sadhu Singh Thind. Mr Thind accompanied the remains back to India, where the casket was received by Indira Gandhi (prime minister), Shankar Dyal Sharma (president) and Giani Zail Singh (minister for home affairs). Udham Singh was later cremated in his birthplace Sunam in Punjab and his ashes were scattered in the River Sutlej. Some of these were retained and are kept in a sealed urn at Jallianwala Bagh. Every year on 31 July marches are held in Sunam by various organizations and tribute is paid to every statue of Shaheed-I-Azam (the great martyr) Sardar Udham Singh in the city with flower garlands.

Following his conviction, Udham Singh made a speech which the judge directed should not be released to the press. However, political activists who had set up the Shaheed Udham Singh Trust and working with the Indian Workers Association (GB) ran a campaign to have the court record of his statement published along with other material. This proved successful in 1996, when his speech was published along with three further files covering the trial, and the *Ghadar Directory*, a document compiled by British intelligence in 1934 detailing 792 people regarded as a threat including Udham Singh.

The speech of Sardar Udham Singh was largely a denunciation of British Imperialism. He said the British rule amounted to nothing but atrocities and enslaving Indian people. He called the British 'bastards' and 'dirty dogs'. He further said that he had nothing against the English people but was against the British government and that he was not afraid of dying. The judge refused to hear any more, but Singh continued and said that he had been asked to speak and say what he wanted to say and now that he was speaking they did not want to hear what they were doing in India. He ended his speech by shouting "Down with British Imperialism! Down with British dirty dogs!" and turned to leave the dock, spitting across the solicitor's table. Udham Singh remained bold, defiant and fearless to the very end.

When this material was published, it was reported in both British and Asian press, the statement was translated into Gurmukhi script and distributed at the Sikh Vasakhi Festival in Birmingham, April 1997. John Major, the prime minister at that time remarked: "The Amritsar Massacre was an unhappy episode in Indo-British relations which was controversial in both countries. Today [8 October 1996] I am glad to say, our relationship is excellent. India is an important partner and a close friend of this country

Jallianwala Bagh was acquired by the nation for a sum of Rs 5, 60,472/- on 21 August

1920 and today it is a memorial (the monument that was constructed after India's independence was inaugurated by Dr Rajendra Prasad, the first President of the Republic of India, on 13 April 1961).

The reactions to Udham's Singh's actions were different at different platforms i.e. official, public and media. Officially, his actions were deplored and condemned in India, Mahatma Gandhi referred to Singh's actions as "an act of insanity", stating: "The outrage has caused me deep pain. I regard it as an act of insanity ... I hope this will not be allowed to affect political judgement." Ironically, it was Gandhi who coined the term 'Dyerism' to describe brute force and violent suppression, thus making General Dyer the most referred name in that context. He described untouchability as 'Dyerism of Hindu religion'. He also drew a parallel between General Dyer's acts of cruelty with murder in the name of cow protection.

Gandhi even forgave General Dyer again and again, even as he warned people against 'Dyerism'. At that time Mahatma Gandhi was trying to show the country a different path – a path of non-violence and forgiveness. Gandhi even wrote that Dyer "merely destroyed a few bodies but the others tried to kill the soul of a nation." He said that "the fury that has been spent upon General Dyer is, I am sure, largely misdirected". (Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 18, p.46, *Young India*, 14 July 1920). This was perhaps confusion of the mind and hypocrisy. For him everyone except him was a misguided patriot.

Pandit Jawhar Lal Nehru wrote in *The National Herald*. "[The] assassination is regretted but it is earnestly hoped that it will not have far-reaching repercussions on [the] political future of India." In March 1940, Indian National Congress leader Jawhar Lal Nehru, condemned the action of Udham Singh as senseless, however, in 1962, Nehru reversed his stance and applauded Singh with the following published statement: "I salute Shaheed-i-Azam Udham Singh with reverence who had kissed the noose so that we may be free." What hypocrisy! The deft and subtle art of chicanery and shrewdness was inherent in this wily man.

Many Indians regarded Singh's actions as a response to some brutal aspects of British colonial rule. The Hindustan Socialist Republican Army condemned Mahatma Gandhi's statement, considering this to be a challenge to the Indian Youth. In its 18 March 1940 issue, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* wrote, "O'Dwyer's name is connected with Punjab

incidents which India will never forget". The Punjab section of Congress in the Punjab Assembly led by Dewan Chaman Lal refused to vote for the Premier's motion to condemn the assassination. In April 1940, at the Annual Session of the All India Congress Committee held in commemoration of 21st anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the youth wing of the Indian National Congress Party displayed revolutionary slogans in support of Singh, applauding his action as patriotic and heroic. Singh had some support from the international press. The Times of London called him a "fighter for freedom", "his actions" an expression of the pent-up fury of the downtrodden Indian people." Bergeret from Rome praised Singh's action as courageous. .”

In India, Congress had condemned his act. Gandhi and Nehru had abused him for making British angry and they forced Congress to pass a resolution against killing of O'Dwyer. They were very busy those days helping British recruit Indian soldiers for World War - II and they didn't want Punjab to get upset with the British. Meanwhile, like other freedom fighters, except in his native place, this patriot is almost forgotten in India. No textbooks talk about him. Few people know about him. But the story of *Shaheed-I-Azam* (the great martyr) Sardar Udham Singh is truly an inspiring one; his legacy lives on; he will be remembered forever, even if it is by a few, and his immortal name will live till eternity.

- A charity dedicated to Udham Singh operates on Soho Road, Birmingham.
- A museum dedicated to Singh is located in Amritsar, near Jallianwala Bagh.
- Udham Singh's weapon, a knife, his diary, and a bullet from the shooting are kept in the Black Museum of Scotland Yard.
- He has been the subject of a number of films: *Jallianwala Bagh* (1977), *Shaheed Udham Singh* (1977), and *Shaheed Udham Singh* (2000).
- Mayawati, former CM , Uttar Pradesh named a District (Udham Singh Nagar), in Uttarakhand - a new state created out of the state of Uttar Pradesh - after him in 1995.
- There is a Shaheed Udham Singh Chowk in Anupgarh (Rajasthan).
- His statue was installed at the Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar in March 2018.
- Singh is the subject of the 1998 track "Assassin" by Asian Dub Foundation.
- Singh is the subject of the 2015 music video and track "Frank Brazil" by The Ska Vengers.
- The death anniversary Sahaheed Udham Singh is a public holiday in certain places in Punjab and Haryana.

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