

## A Forgotten Martyr - Madan Lal Dhingra

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### Abstract

*The freedom of India was won by the blood of hundreds of nameless revolutionaries and their families who faced British barbarity with death, deportation, and imprisonment. One such fiery patriot was Madan Lal Dhingra who sacrificed his life at the altar of India's freedom. Madan Lal Dhingra went to the gallows on 17 August 1909. It is strange that no one in the Indian government has paid any attention to the forgotten Martyr. Therefore, the article talks about that the helpless rebel disowned by his own family due to repercussion of the Britishers and the people in general also not dared to collect information about Madan Lal Dhingra. Only in the seventies with Freedom Fighters Association the interest of writers and the government was invigorated which prompt serious research on the life of the Martyr.)*

Madan Lal Dhingra was perhaps the first Indian freedom fighter to be executed on British soil. While studying in England, he assassinated Sir William Hutt Curzon Wyllie, a British official, hailed as one of the first acts of revolution in the Indian independence movement in the 20th century.

Dhingra was born Feb 18, 1883 in Amritsar into a very rich family. His father, Ditta Mal, retired as a government civil surgeon, held the title of Rai Saheb, given by the British government. Ditta Mal shifted from his village Sahiwal in Sargodha district now in Pakistan, 1850. He had seven sons and a daughter. Three of his sons were trained medical doctors and three were barristers-at-law. One of his brothers, Bihari Lal Dhingra, was a notorious prime minister of Jind state. It was into such a family that the rebellious son was born. He did physical labour while studying science in Lahore, where he got influenced by the "Pagdi Sambhal Jatta" movement of Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh, uncle of Bhagat Singh. He had to work as a clerk, a Tonga (horse-driven cart) puller, and a factory labourer. Dhingra attempted to organise a union there, but was sacked. He worked for sometime in Bombay, before acting upon the advice of his elder brother and going to England for higher studies..

The partition of Bengal in 1905 generated, a wave of xenophobia resulting in rise of national consciousness among the people it charged their emotions, and encouraged them to aspire for the freedom of the country. (Vishva Bandhu, 2008). The congress responded by launching swadeshi and boycott movements. The social base of the movement was now extended to include, besides the elite class, a certain zamindari section, the lower middle class in the cities and small towns, students from schools and colleges on massive scale. Women came out from the homes for the first time and joined the procession. Soon the movement spread to other parts of India and especially the Punjab. In the Punjab national awakening was also gained impetus. Punjab was already simmering with discontent against the imposition of pre-emption bill, the enforcement of Bari Doab water rates, the canal colonization Bill and above all the Land Alienation Bill. The swadeshi fever in Punjab raised its head under the leadership of Lala Lajpat Rai and sardar Ajit Singh. There is every possibility that a sensitive person like Madan Lal Dhingra, who had recently entered the educational arena, might have been

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swayed by the simmering current of discontentment, as Lahore was politically surcharged. Sohan Singh Josh writes that Madan Lal Dhingra was one of the leading participants in the agitation to get these acts annulled. He had begun to take an active part in the political movement of the time. The government was dealing with politically motivated students and he was a new entrant in politics, fallen prey to the government's fury and thus suspended. It annoyed the reputed and loyal father Ditta Mal decided to take back his son to Amritsar. Otherwise a father, so keen to impart education to his children, would not have acted so. In 1906, Madan Lal departed for England to enroll at University College, London, to study Mechanical Engineering. He was supported by his elder brother and some nationalist activists in England. He deeply studied the literature concerning the cause of Indian Poverty and famines and as solution to these problems Swaraj and Swadeshi became key issues.

Dhingra came into contact with noted Indian independence & political activists Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Shyamji Krishna Varma in England. In 1905, Shyamji Krishna Varma purchased a house on 65, Cromwell Avenue, London to be used as the students' hostel. This was inaugurated as India House by Henry Myers Hyndman, President of the Social Democratic Federation and a votary of India's freedom on 01 July 1905. Dadabhai Naoroji, Lala Lajpat Rai, Madame Cama, Harry Quelch of the Justice paper and Mr. Sweeny of the Positivist Review were present at the ceremony. In 1905, Lokmanya Tilak's Kesari carried an editorial about Shyamji's activities in London including his starting of the students' hostel India House. In Pune, Savarkar read about Shyamji's activities in Tilak's Kesari. He also came across an issue of Shyamji's monthly Indian Sociologist, which contained information about scholarships being offered to Indian students by Shyamji. In March 1906, Savarkar applied for the Shivaji scholarship. Tilak gave him a reference and also assured that Savarkar had no intention of seeking government employment. Accordingly, Savarkar arrived in London on 15 June 1906 to study law. But he had other ideas in mind. He wanted to observe at first hand, the strengths of the British people which enabled them to rule over India and also to note their weaknesses and to think of ways of using them to achieve India's freedom. Savarkar also wanted to establish contact with Indian students who came from all parts of India and to enlist them in India's freedom struggle. Such meetings were easier in London than in India. In 1907 there were some 700 Indian students in Great Britain, of whom 380 were in London alone. Savarkar also wanted to establish contacts with revolutionaries of other countries like Russia, China, Ireland, Turkey, Egypt and Iran. He wanted to learn the art of making bombs from them, and put that knowledge and friendship into use for concerted attempts to overthrow the British Rule. He also wanted to smuggle pistols and ammunition into India.

The speed of Savarkar's activities in London was breathtaking. India House was constantly in the news from 1906 to 1910. Savarkar started regular Sunday meetings to discuss various topics related to India's future. It soon became popular among Indian students. Among those who attended India House were Bhai Parmananda, Lala Hardayal (founder of the Ghadar Party), Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (revolutionary and brother of Sarjaini Naidu), Senapati Bapat, Hemachandra Das (who was Transported to Andamans), MPT Acharya, VVS Aiyar, Gyan Chand Varma (secretary of Abhinav Bharat), Dadabhai Naoroji, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipin Chandra Pal, Madame Cama, Sardar Singh Rana, Dadasaheb Karandikar and Khaparde (both Tilak's lawyers), Ravi Shankar Shukla (later Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh), Saiyyad Haider Raza, Asaf Ali, Shapurjee Saklatwala (nephew of Dadabhai Naoroji and founder of the Communist Party of Britain). Interestingly, the young Barrister Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi met Savarkar at India House. Revolutionaries from other countries such as Egypt, Ireland, Russia, China and Turkey used to attend. One such Russian revolutionary who attended these meetings was Lenin. In one of the Sunday meetings at India House,

Savarkar was delivering an impassioned speech on India's freedom. Madan Lal and his friends were creating a ruckus in the adjacent room. The din forced Savarkar to interrupt his speech and peep into the adjacent room. There he saw Madan Lal and his friends enjoying themselves. "What's the matter, Madan? You talk of action and bravery and avoid coming to our weekly meetings. Is this the bravery you keep talking about?" reprimanded Savarkar. The words shamed Dhingra. He quietly left India House and did not show his face to Savarkar for several days thereafter. When he mustered courage to enter India House again, it was to find out if Savarkar was still annoyed with him. When the two met, Savarkar behaved as if nothing had happened between them. He spoke with the same affection. Emboldened, Dhingra asked, "Has the time for martyrdom come?" Savarkar replied, "If a martyr has made up his mind and is ready, it is generally understood that the time for martyrdom has come."

Soon he started making plans to free his motherland. He believed, "the only lesson required in India is to learn how to die and the only way to teach it is by dying alone." The soul is immortal and "if every one of my country men takes at least two lives of English men before his body falls, the mother's salvation is a days work.", Dhingra finalized his plans and discussed with Savarkar. Savarkar said, "Do not show me your face again if you fail this time." Dhingra reassured him that this would not happen. The two friends departed. On 30 June, Dhingra went to India House to meet Savarkar. He met Savarkar on that evening in Bipin Chandra Pal's house. Niranjana Pal was present at that meeting. Savarkar apprised Dhingra of the statement he was to make after assassinating Curzon Wylie. Niranjana Pal typed the statement and Savarkar asked Dhingra to memorize it. Savarkar then gifted Dhingra with a Belgian-made Browning pistol and took his leave. Dhingra looked happy. On 01 July, Dhingra's Sinhalese friend Santiago had gone to Dhingra's residence but did not notice any difference in his behaviour. Dhingra then went to Koregaonkar who was to accompany him to the Imperial Institute. He had an early lunch and afternoon tea at his own residence at 108 Leadbury Street. He left his house at 2 pm armed with a revolver. He bought a brand new dagger with a leather casket and put it in his pocket. He then went to 'Funland' and fired 12 rounds from a distance of 18 feet. Of these, 11 were close to the bull's eye. He then asked his revolver to be cleaned. At 7 in the evening, he dressed in lounge suit and a blue Punjabi turban. He loaded his Colt revolver and placed it in his right coat pocket. He placed one revolver each in another coat pocket and his vest. As he was unable to memorize the statement written by Savarkar, he wrote it in pencil on a sheet of paper and placed it in his inner coat pocket along with some newspaper cuttings. He put 10-12 shillings in his pocket. He hailed the first cab that came his way and left for the function.

On 01 July 1909, Dhingra went as planned to the meeting at Imperial Institute. As luck would have favoured him and he had forgotten to take the invitation pass. However, as he was an Associate Member, he gained entry after signing in the visitors' book. Koregaonkar also arrived armed with a pistol. After the meeting was over, Curzon Wylie seemed ready to leave. "Aji jaao na. kya karte ho!" prompted Koregaonkar to Dhingra. Dhingra now approached Curzon Wylie under the pretext of talking to him. The two opened the glass door and left the hall. As they reached the landing, Dhingra lowered his voice as if he wanted to discuss something confidential. Curzon Wylie brought his ear close to Dhingra. Sensing the opportunity, Dhingra removed the Colt revolver from his right coat pocket and pumped two bullets at point-blank range. The time was 11.20 pm. As Curzon Wylie reeled, Dhingra fired two more bullets. A Parsee doctor Cawas Lalkaka tried to come in between but Dhingra fired at him as well. However, Dhingra's attempt to shoot himself failed and he was overpowered.

During his **trial** he stated that he did not regret killing of Curzon Wylie as he had played his part in order to set India free from the inhuman British rule. *"I am proud to have the honour of laying*

*down my life for my country. But remember we shall have our time in the days to come."*

**In the court Dhingra said,***"I do not want to say anything in defence of myself, but simply to prove the justice of my deed. As for myself, no English law court has got any authority to arrest and detain me in prison, or pass sentence of death on me. That is the reason I did not have any counsel to defend me."*

*"And I maintain that if it is patriotic in an Englishman to fight against the Germans if they were to occupy this country, it is much more justifiable and patriotic in my case to fight against the English. I hold the English people responsible for the murder of 80 millions of Indian people in the last fifty years, and they are also responsible for taking away £100,000,000 every year from India to this country. I also hold them responsible for the hanging and deportation of my patriotic countrymen who did just the same as the English people here are advised to do. And the Englishman who goes out to India and gets, salary, £100 a month, that simply means that he passes a sentence of death on a thousand of my poor countrymen, because these thousand people could easily live on this £100, which the Englishman spends mostly on his frivolities and pleasures. Certainly I am prepared to work for the emancipation of my Motherland. Whatever else I have to say is in the paper before the Court I make this statement, not because I wish to plead for mercy or anything of that kind. I wish that English people should sentence me to death, for in that case the vengeance of my countrymen will be all the more keen. I put forward this statement to show the justice of my cause to the outside world, and especially to our sympathisers in America and Germany."*

*"I have told you over and over again that I do not acknowledge the authority of the Court, You can do whatever you like. I do not mind at all. You can pass sentence of death on me. I do not care. You white people are all-powerful now, but, remember, it shall have our turn in the time to come, when we can do what we like."*

The following are said to be Madan Lal Dhingra's last words, just before he died:

*"I believe that a nation held down by foreign bayonets is in a perpetual state of war. Since open battle is rendered impossible to a disarmed race, I attacked by surprise. Since guns were denied to me I drew forth my pistol and fired. Poor in wealth and intellect, a son like myself has nothing else to offer to the mother but his own blood. And so I have sacrificed the same on her altar. The only lesson required in India at present is to learn how to die, and the only way to teach it is by dying ourselves. My only prayer to God is that I may be re-born of the same mother and I may re-die in the same sacred cause till the cause is successful. Vande Mataram!"*

After Dhingra went to the gallows, the Times, London wrote an editorial (24 July 1909) titled 'Conviction of Dhingra'. The editorial said, "The nonchalance displayed by the assassin was of a character, which is happily unusual in such trials in this country. He asked no questions. He maintained a defiance of studied indifference. He walked smiling from the dock. **Grudging admiration from the British Cabinet** Blunt writes "Again we sat up late. Among the many memorable things Churchill said was this. Talking of Dhingra, he said that there has been much discussion in the Cabinet about him. Lloyd George had expressed to him his highest admiration of Dhingra's attitude as a patriot, in which he shared...He will be remembered two thousand years hence, as we remember Regulus and Caractacus and Plutarch's heroes and Churchill quoted with admiration Dhingra's last words, as the finest, ever made in the name of patriotism..."

Armed with new ideology, he assassinated Curzon Wyllie in London, On 01 July 1909. Thus causes sensation and bewilderment in the western world. The information regarding the murder of William Hutt Curzon Wyllie, began trickling in at Lahore only on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, and was published on July

4<sup>th</sup>, in the Sunday edition of *The Tribune*. It informed that Curzon Wylie, the Political Aide-de-Camp to Lord Morley, the Secretary of State for India had been killed by a student from Punjab one hour before mid night of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1909. (*The Tribune*, 1909)

The Dhingra family went under a great shock after they received the news of their son's misdeed. Immediately it set out to set its score in the eyes of the British Government. Sahib Ditta Mal, lost no time in openly condemning the act of his son and publicly declared him an eccentric since childhood. The *Pioneer* published his letter in which he had expressed his deep regard and gratitude to the deceased Curzon Wylie, and openly admitted, Whom my cursed son killed in a fit of madness. He became an Easy tool in the hands of the revolutionaries who used him for their evil designs. (*Indian Daily News*. 1909). The family snapped all ties with Madan Lal Dhingra and declared, we shall not consider Madan Lal a martyr, as the extremists would desire; we look upon him as a lunatic, who could not be influenced by the traditions and instincts of the family and his act as a detestable. Whereas on the other hand, the medical report of the Brixton Prison (London) submitted by the doctor in the court proves that Dhingra was physically and mentally fit which clarifies the doubt about his insanity.

He was a man who loved his country; he wanted to free his mother land from the clutches of the British, a dream which his family never think. His father wanted him to study like his brothers, where as he wanted to lead an independent life, father wanted him to be loyal to the British regime; he shook his hands with the revolutionaries as he was a born rebel. He did what he loved and loved what he did.

Bhagat Singh wrote about Dhingra in his sketches about revolutionary freedom fighters that the neglect by the society in general, of such rebels, opines, he was not a "Neta", whose biography may have been published and quickly sold. Nor was an "Avtar" descending on earth about whom the pundits and devotees could weave anecdotes of divine hood since his birth, suggesting that he was infact born "different". Nor are we cognizant of any rare feats of Dhingras infancy or childhood on the basis of which we could have said, that "all this foreshadowed greatness." He was a helpless rebel. His own father had disowned him. Even the nationalist leaders like Bipin Chanra Pal who was known as radical showered the choicest abuses on him.(Wariach and Puri,2003).The people in general and family in particular, perhaps feared the repercussion of the British government and the result was, no one dared or tried to collect information or highlight Madan Lal Dhingras early life.(*The Indian Sociologist*).

It was in the seventies that the "Freedom Fighters Association" and few other revolutionaries, who repeatedly request the government to bring back the remains of Madan Lal Dhingra from the prison, Pentoville, in London.(*The Daily Milap*,1975). On December 13,1976, the body of the Martyr was brought to India and on December 20,1976,the remains of Madan Lal Dhingra were consigned to the flames according to the Hindu rites.(*The Tribune*, 1976).

This invigorated the interest of the government and writes in Madan Lal Dhingra and it prompted many to take up a serious research on the life of the Martyr.(Vishwa Nath Datta,1978).Earlier works related to the Martyr were mostly in the form of articles and references ,besides some biographical sketches.

The Punjab government also arose from its slumber and affirmed to install a statue of the Martyr in the city.The monument of Madan Lal Dhingra was installed in Mall Mandi and was inaugurated on 8 September,1992,by the chief minister of Punjab,Sardar Beant Singh.It is surprised to know that the date of birth inscribed under the statue is 18 Feburary 1887.Where as Kesar Singh in

his novel Amar Shaheed Madan Lal Dhingra claims his year of birth to be 1883, on the basis of handwritten note from the diary of Sahib Ditta Mal. (Kesar Singh, Amar Shaheed Madan Lal Dhingra, 1977). The death certificate issued by the General Register Office, London also claims him to be of 24 years of age at the time of execution. (Wariach and Puri, 2003). In the death certificate, the year of birth is missing, but the age has been mentioned as twenty five, which confirms to the year of his birth to be 1884. (The Tribune, July 6, 1909). The contemporary literature does not refer to this omission which becomes more glaring when we try to locate the early life of the martyr. Sahib Ditta Mal was a qualified doctor who had noted the birth dates of all his children in his diary. The noted date of the martyr was 1883.

It is also declared by the then chief minister that the government had undertaken the house of Madan Lal Dhingra and will maintain it as a memorial. And, today the ancestral house of Madan Lal Dhingra, earlier known as "Dhingra Buildings" has been squeezed to a small apartment, is situated, next to "Regent Cinema" in Katra Sher Singh, Amritsar. Whereas on the other hand, the British Government had given away the most coveted and prized place "Baradari" in the heart of Ranjit Singh Palace, popularly known as Company Bagh (Ram Bagh Garden) as a reward to Sahib Ditta Mal in lieu of their family's loyalty. Perhaps the British Government had rewarded the family for helping them out from humiliation and embarrassment by openly declaring Madan Lal Dhingra as insane.

Thus, the above mentioned facts have shown that though he died in London on Aug 17, 1909 and the Martyr's body remains consigned to flames in 1976 (after 67 years) and the martyr's statue got constructed in 1992 (after 83 years). It is strange that no one in the Indian government has paid any attention to it for so many years. Therefore, it is the duty of the nation at both the government and people's level to commemorate the event in a befitting manner for a Martyr who set an example (for other Indian revolutionaries such as Udham Singh, who followed his path in England after 31 years) by sacrificing himself for the cause of freedom.

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