



Shaheed Udham Singh

The Phoenix from Jallianwallah Bagh

Shaheed Udham Singh is a brilliant star in the firmament of Indian struggle for independence. The second of the only two Indian revolutionaries who kissed the gallows in British jail for the crime of striking against tyrant English administration in the way Madanlal Dhingra had done it 40 years before him. A lofty character who, when incarcerated in the Pentonville Jail in Britain in 1940, before being hanged, was showered with the great tribute by a free thinking upright British Police officer : “Congratulations my dear friend! The most heroic manner in which you have avenged your national disgrace: salute to you, my friend, my most respectful reverence...” The anniversary of this distinguished martyr falls on 20th December, this year. In this historic occasion we must recall him with befitting solemnity.

On 13th April, 1919, the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre occurred; which was one of the most hated black spots in the history of British rule in India.

The notorious Rowlatt Act was passed on 18th March, 1919 and the effect it had upon Indian freedom fighters and the general masses speaks for itself. By dint of this Act the authorities were endowed with autocratic power to arrest any person they wanted, to confine him in any place and under any condition or for any duration as were prescribed. Further, ‘dangerous characters’, i.e the revolutionaries as was described by the then rulers, already under control or confinement, could be continuously detained under this Act for indefinite period. On the black day, 13th April, 1919 at Jallianwallah Bagh, a mass meeting was organized in protest of this Black Act. The then Governor of Punjab, Micheal O’Dwyer had imposed moratorium on any political demonstration. Brig.General

Harry Dyer executed the order of Micheal O'Dwyer, most faithfully by cordoning off the meeting place and shooting down hundreds of unarmed men, women and children who had congregated in the protest meeting at Jallianwallah Bagh. Crores across the nation did burst forth against this savage genocide although the authorities had tried to suppress the truth through curfew in Amritsar and strict censorship of press. The accumulated discontent and hatred of the nation found expression in the letter of protest by the great litterateur Rabindranath Tagore to the Governor General Lord Chelmsford, through which he gave up the Knighthood conferred upon him by the Queen. Dyer and O'Dwyer, criminals against humanity, were hailed by the British House of Lords for the 'valiant' manner in which they upheld the honour of the crown! In their vainglorious boasting these heroes showered the dirtiest of slander against India and Indians. The nation's head hung low in disgrace and shame. At the bottom of their hearts all Indians wanted a befitting reply, a pertinent revenge. But who was to execute it? In course of time Dyer had died a natural death; O'Dwyer was withdrawn back to England, in order to save him from the wrath of the revolutionaries. Out of the ashes of Jallianwallah Bagh rose the phoenix: Udham Singh. On that fateful day in April, 1919, a dreamy boy hardly crossing mid teens, escaped unhurt out of the massacre as he was buried among the corpses piling up from all sides. Unhurt, but scarred at the heart for ever, he jolted from his dreamy teenage ruminations into the hard and savage reality of life in an enslaved nation. Gradually there arose in him the finest of determinations: to avenge the brutal massacre, to punish the criminals and show the whole world that Indian youth had spines.

But how to prepare for such an arduous task? He was deeply engaged in freedom struggle. Inflammatory propaganda and anti-government activities landed him in rigorous imprisonment for five years in Indian prisons. But the target: to punish the criminals of Jallianwallah Bagh massacre, always hung like the polestar in his horizon. Being released, in the later half of the thirties he reached the shore of England taking the name Ram Mohammed Singh Azad - as a student in engineering college - as if in search of the royal professional education. The pseudonym he adopted was significant because it represented a union of different communities and religious sects of India. The name itself revealed his desire for a society free from communal bias. However, since 1937, Udham Singh began to shadow O'Dwyer, the lone surviving villain of the massacre, in London. It was a patient, risky and arduous wait. On 13th March, 1940; in the Tudor Room of the famous Caxton Hall in London, the Royal Central Asian Society and the East Indian Association had organized a seminar on political developments, Nazi aspirations in Afghanistan and impact of that on British India. The session was chaired by Lord Zetland. Micheal O'Dwyer was an honoured guest in the seminar, whose 'exploits' in India and subsequent wealth of experience was highly extolled by the British rulers. Udham Singh was also present there, known to all as Ram Mohammed Singh Azad, in abated breath, bidding his moment. Just as the house was breaking up and O'Dwyer was coming out he jumped at his long awaited target. The hall reverberated with the sound of revolver shots: he pumped most of his bullets into the puny form of the most hated criminal Micheal O'Dwyer who collapsed on the spot and the couple of the last remaining slugs were used to ambush Lord Zetland, another hated representative of the imperialist rulers, who was seriously wounded.

While all the heroes (!) ran helter-skelter, Ram Mohammed Singh Azad alias Udham Singh stood his ground and with firm determination gave himself up to the British Police. In his surrender he resolutely declared to the world that the dastardly crime had been heroically avenged. Two long decades and seven seas could not save the criminal from the wrath of the people of a humiliated nation! India burst out in jubilation. The hero was tried in the Old Bailey Central Criminal Court, and was sentenced to be hanged till death. The great revolutionary Udham Singh fearlessly faced the gallows at the Pentonville Jail on 12th June 1940, with his head held high. He was at peace with himself with the pride that he had fulfilled the cardinal mission of his life.

Udham Singh was born in Punjab on 20th December, 1889. He sacrificed his life to uphold the honour of motherland. But those who assumed power after independence - those who descended from the compromising trend of our freedom movement never highlight the valiant characters like Kshudiram, Asfaquallah Khan, Bhagat Singh, Masterda Surya Sen or Udham Singh, the representatives of the uncompromising trend of the freedom movement. Today, amid all pervading crisis of ethics, culture and morality, widespread cowardice among the students and youths, the cultivation of the characters like Saheed Udham Singh is the need of the hour.