

Madan Lal Dhingra: A Martyr of India

Hi, Everyone! On August 17, 1909, Madan Lal Dhingra was strung up on the gallows in London for his political assassination of Sir Curzon Wylie. This incident shook the very foundation of the British Raj! While revolutionary bombings and assassinations were taking place in India at this time, this was the first time anyone had dared to so boldly commit such an act in Britain itself. And that it should be Madan Lal who should do so was adding further salt to the wound. Madan Lal came from a very eminent Indian family and was socially accepted in London circles; in fact he had won the confidence of Sir Curzon Wylie himself.

Transcript of the Madan Lal Dhingra's case are found here:

<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=def1-55-19090719&div=t19090719-55#highlight>



Madan Lal Dhingra is most certainly a martyr of India and his role in the freedom movement

cannot be forgotten.

Madan Lal had crossed paths with Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and his life was no more the same. He was stirred into patriotism and a passion to serve his country and was a regular visitor at the India House. Here I am giving excerpts from Dr. Shreerang Godbole's article, *Martyrdom Centenary of Madan Lal Dhingra, Part I & II* which gives details of Madan Lal's sacrifice of his life:

"In the illustrious list of fiery patriots, Madan Lal Dhingra stands out for his sheer courage and supreme sacrifice. Madan Lal Dhingra went to the gallows on August 17, 1909. The centenary of his martyrdom is an occasion for us to remember his immortal saga.

Madan Lal Dhingra was born on September 18, 1883 in Amritsar. His father was an eye specialist and Civil Surgeon of Amritsar. Some say he was the first Indian doctor to reach that eminent position. Madan Lal was the sixth of his seven sons. Two of Madan Lal's brothers were doctors, one was an MRCP (1895); two other brothers were barristers. Madan Lal was married and had a son. If he had desired, he could have lived a life of luxury. But he chose to be a martyr for India's freedom struggle. . . .



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."

Sir Curzon Wylie (October 5, 1848—July 1, 1909):

Dhingra had now made up his mind. In July 1908, he deliberately joined the National Indian Association. This Association was doing its best to discourage Indian students from the militant path. Important British dignitaries attended their functions. Dhingra denounced Savarkar and other revolutionaries in the company of appropriate persons. He soon secured the trust of Miss Emma Josephine Beck, the secretary of the National Indian Association, and came to know the timings of visits of important English guests attending various functions. Eventually the opportunity came and Dhingra took full advantage of it. Having decided on his mission, Dhingra left India House to show that he disagreed with Savarkar. He took lodgings with Mrs Harris at 108 Ledbury Road, London W11 after Easter of 1909. . . .

Preparing for the assassination:

Dhingra was personally acquainted with Curzon Wylie. Wylie had received a letter from Kundan Lal Dhingra (Madan Lal's eldest brother). On April 13, 1909, Wylie wrote to Madan Lal suggesting that he should meet Wylie. Dhingra pretended that he wanted to discuss contents of that letter. On July 1, 1909, several prominent Britishers (including Curzon Wylie) and Indians were to attend a meeting of the National Indian Association at Jehangir Hall in the first floor of the Imperial Institute. The reception was given in the name of Lady Lyall, wife of Sir Alfred Lyall. Madanlal was an Associate Member of the Association. That is how he could approach Wylie. . . .

On July 29, 1909, Dhingra finalised his plans. He met Savarkar on that evening in Bipin Chandra Pal's house. Niranjana Pal was present at that meeting. Dhingra seemed to be in good spirit. Savarkar and Dhingra spoke to each other with great affection. Savarkar apprised Dhingra of the statement he was to make after assassinating Curzon Wylie. Niranjana Pal typed the statement and Savarkar asked Dhingra to memorise it. Savarkar then gifted Dhingra with a Belgian-made Browning pistol and took his leave with great affection. Dhingra was overcome with emotion. 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 July 1, 1909, Dhingra went as planned to the meeting at Imperial Institute. As luck would have it he had forgotten to take the invitation pass. However, as he was an Associate Member, he gained entry after signing in the visitors' book. Koregankar also arrived armed with a pistol. After the meeting was over, Curzone Wyllie seemed ready to leave. Aji jao na. kya karte ho! prompted Koregaonkar to Dhingra. Dhingra now approached Curzon Wyllie under the pretext of talking to him. The two opened the glass door and left the hall.

The assassination:

As they reached the landing, Dhingra lowered his voice as if he wanted to discuss something confidential. Curzon Wyllie 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 Wyllie 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. Even in this situation, Dhingra wrestled with his captors and even brought down one of them breaking his ribs. Dhingra was pinned to the ground. Only after his revolver was taken away did his captors heave a sigh of relief. In the scuffle, Dhingra's spectacles were thrown away. Dhingra calmly told his captors to handover his spectacles. When the examining doctor felt Dhingra's pulse, he was astounded to find that it was 'even'. After his arrest, the Police Officer asked Dhingra, "Do you want us to inform any of your friends of your arrest?" Dhingra cleverly replied, "There is no need. They will know about my arrest in tomorrow's newspapers." The Police were trying to find out if they could implicate any of Dhingra's friends. He proved a match for them. Dhingra was taken to Walton Street Police station.

The trial:

The British Press made some vicious allegations against Dhingra, taking advantage of remarks made by an ex-Army officer at the inquest on Wyllie's death. This was held at Kensington Town Hall before Coroner Mr C. Luxmoore Drew. Dhingra refused to take part in the proceedings. At the inquest, Captain Charles Rollerton, an ex-Army officer of Broadhurst Gardens, Hampstead was present. This witness suggested the possibility of Dhingra having taken the Indian drug called Bhang because of his half dazed and dreamy manner. He added that natives of India very often took Bhang if they were going to perpetrate a deed of this kind. The Coroner asked Miss Beck, the Secretary of the National Indian Association, if she noticed whether Dhingra was under the influence of some drug; but her reply was in the negative. Dhingra, she said, seemed in a normal condition and was quite calm. During the trial, Mrs Harris, Dhingra's landlady, said she did not think he took drugs. Dr John Buchanan of Vauxhall Bridge was the first doctor to arrive at the scene of assassination. Dhingra, said the doctor, was perfectly calm. He seemed the calmest man in the crowd. During his trial Dhingra was examined by psychiatrists to decide if he was mentally subnormal. Their tests were negative.

At the inquest held at Westminster before Coroner Mr John Troutbeck, Dhingra expressed his deep regret for the accidental death of Lalkaka. He stated that had Lalkaka not come in the way he would not have been killed. He had no reason to kill him.

When produced before Mr Hoarce Smith the Magistrate of Westminster Police Court, Dhingra said, " I do not plead for mercy: nor do I recognise your authority over me..." Dhingra was committed to the Sessions Court. Dhingra bluntly asked the Court, "...If the Germans have no right to rule over England what right have the English got to rule over India ?" During the trial Indians were not allowed inside the Court.

In his last days, Dhingra had wished that his clothes, books and other belongings should be sold and the money thus raised be given to the National Fund. However, these were confiscated by the Metropolitan Police (of London). Two trunks were taken away by Chief Inspector McCarthy. Dhingra had given a letter authorising Nitinsen Dwarakadas to be the owner of his personal belongings. But when the case came to Bow Street Magistrate's court on December 31, 1909 it was ruled that as Dhingra had made no will the police were not bound to return Dhingra's belongings to Nitinsen! (London Times, January 1, 1910).

When Dhingra shot dead Curzon Wylie, his brother Bhajan Lal was in London studying Law at Grays Inn. Four days after the event Bhajan Lal attended the public meeting to condemn Madan Lal. On account of that, Madan Lal refused to see Bhajan Lal when the latter visited him in the Brixton prison. Soon after their brother was hanged, his brothers dropped the surname Dhingra, with the exception of Dr Bihari Lal. As their first names ended in Lal they adopted that as the surname. e.g Chaman Lal Dhingra became Chaman Lal. (In a similar manner, many Indian freedom fighters changed their names so that their relations would not be identified and harassed by the British authorities.). When Veer Savarkar went to visit Dhingra, he said, "I have come to seek your darshan". Both were overwhelmed on seeing each other.

Martyrdom!

The day of Dhingra's hanging finally dawned. It was August 17, 1909. Several of Dhingra's friends made efforts to meet him for one last time in the Pentonville prison. At Savarkar's suggestion, J. S. Master gave a written application to that effect. He contended that he was Dhingra's close friend and hence be allowed inside the prison to meet him. He forwarded his application to the Under-Sheriff of London and the Home Office and awaited their response. His request was turned away at both places. Dhingra had assumed that he would die without meeting his friends. However, to the end, he remained calm and composed in the face of imminent death. He enjoyed a good slumber on the previous night and had to be woken-up on the day of his hanging. He performed his morning chores as usual and even had a hearty breakfast. Meanwhile, several Indian youth had mournfully gathered outside the gates of the prison. They were however denied entry inside. Entry was also denied to the waiting journalists. At the stroke of nine, Madan Lal Dhingra began his last journey to the gallows.

A Christian preacher named Hudson walked-up to him to say the final Christian prayer for him. But Dhingra turned him away saying that he was a Hindu. The Deputy Under-Sheriff of London

Metcalf read out the death warrant to Dhingra in the presence of Deputy Governor Hales of Pentonville prison and asked him the usual questions. But Dhingra ignored their questions and walked calmly to the noose. His bravery left the accompanying officers dumb-founded. Officer Pierpoint stood at the hangman's noose waiting for Dhingra. Dhingra smiled at him and ascended the steps to the platform. He himself placed the noose round his neck. Soon thereafter, the wooden platform underneath was withdrawn. Dhingra's body dropped eight feet and lay hanging. As per convention, his limp body was left hanging for half an hour. When his body was brought down, it showed no trace of fear. Master was allowed to be present at the post-mortem examination which was performed by Dr. Wyliss Shroeder and Asst. Medical Officer Dr. Francis Forewood of Pentonville prison. He wrote the death certificate in the presence of five witnesses. Master again requested that he be allowed to claim Dhingra's dead body so that his final rites could be performed. However, this request was turned down. The Times, London of August 18, 1909 reported on page 7 column 2, "Shortly after 9, death was announced. Pierpoint was the executioner. An application for leave to have the body cremated was refused and it will be buried in accordance with the usual custom, within the walls of prison."

Then Master followed Under-Sheriff outside the prison. The correspondent for the Daily Mirror interviewed Master. He asked, "Will Dhingra be considered a martyr by the Indians?" Master replied, "Certainly. He has laid down his life for his country's good. Whether his idea of this 'good' was right or wrong is a matter of opinion."

Madan Lal Dhingra went to the gallows in Pentonville prison in London on August 17, 1909. This prison was built between 1840 and 1842. Two Indian revolutionaries went to the gallows here. Madan Lal Dhingra on August 17, 1909, and Udham Singh on July 31, 1940.

Dhingra wished that his last rites according to Hindu dharma should be performed on his dead body and it should be cremated. Many Hindus petitioned to the Home Secretary Mr Herbert Gladstone that Dhingra's body should be handed over to them, as Brahmins were ready to perform the last rites. This request was denied! The last wish of a man sent to the gallows was denied! His body was put in a coffin, which was buried within the prison premises.

(Note :- The Cremation Society of England was founded in 1874. So, cremation was definitely available in London in 1909.)

After Dhingra went to the gallows, the Times, London wrote an editorial (July 24, 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."

Last statement

As desired by Gyan Chand Varma, Sardar Singh Rana , who was then in Paris, published Dhingra's last testament on a postcard along with his photograph. Below the words Vande Mataram, was written August 17, 1909 (the day of Dhingra's martyrdom) and below this were written the following words, "To the sacred and inspiring memory of patriot Madan Lal Dhingra,

who died for his country." Rana sent copies of these to Veer Savarkar who was in London through Govind Amin. Savarkar in turn sent a large number of these copies to India. The Government soon banned it. Nonetheless, it became public. Madan Lal Dhingra's final statement was as inspiring as his actions. Titled Challenge it read as follows:

Challenge

"I admit the other day; I attempted to shed English blood as an humble revenge for the inhuman hangings and deportations of patriotic Indian youths. In this attempt, I have consulted none but my own conscience; I have conspired with none, but my own duty. I believe that a nation held down in bondage with the help of 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. As a Hindu I felt that a wrong done to my country is an insult to God. Her cause is the cause of Sri Ram! Her services are the services of Sri Krishna! Poor in health 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. Therefore I die and glory in my martyrdom! This war of Independence will continue between India and England, so long as the Hindu and the English races last (if the present unnatural relation does not cease!). My only prayer to God is: May I be reborn of the same Mother and may I re-die in the same sacred cause, till the cause is successful and she stands free for the good of humanity and the glory of God!"

-Vande Mataram

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