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Bhagat Singh: Martyr of the Revolutionary Current

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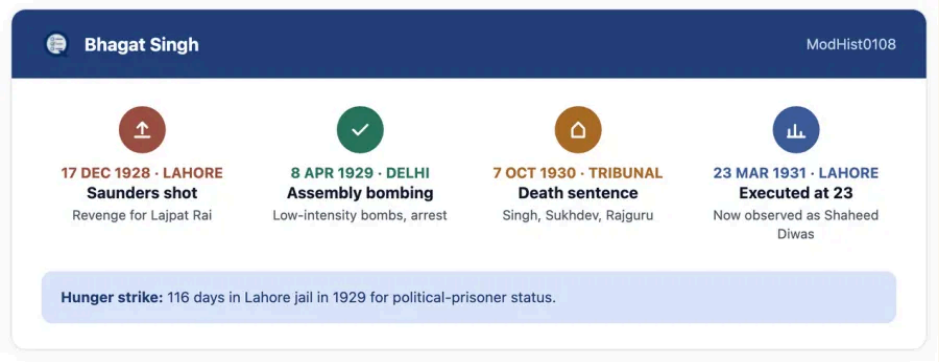
Bhagat Singh: Martyr of the Revolutionary Current

Bhagat Singh had a lawyer, an appeal and a real chance to avoid the gallows. He chose the trial itself as his political stage.

He was hanged at 23. This lesson covers his groups, his two famous actions, his jail years and his ideas.



Bhagat Singh, photographed by Ramnath Photographers, Delhi, in April 1929, aged 21. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



From Lahore in 1928 to the gallows in 1931: four dates to remember.

Born. 28 September 1907, in Banga village, Lyallpur district, Punjab. It is now in Pakistan.
HSRA. Co-founded in 1928 with Chandrashekhar Azad and others.
17 Dec 1928. Singh and Rajguru shoot J.P. Saunders in Lahore.
8 Apr 1929. Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt throw bombs in the Central Legislative Assembly.
1929. A 116-day jail hunger strike. Jatin Das dies during it.
23 Mar 1931. Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru are hanged at Lahore.

HSRA: the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. It added “Socialist” to its name in September 1928.

Political prisoner: a prisoner jailed for political acts. The strikers wanted better treatment for this status.

Inquilab Zindabad: “Long live the revolution.” Hasrat Mohani coined it in 1921. Singh’s circle made it famous.

1 How did he come to the HSRA?

He grew up in a political family and turned to revolution young.

- Bhagat Singh was born on **28 September 1907** in Banga village, Lyallpur district.
- His family was already active in revolutionary and progressive politics.
- In 1926 he helped found the **Naujawan Bharat Sabha** in Lahore.
- It was a youth body that spoke of independence and social change.
- In **September 1928**, revolutionaries met in Delhi and renamed their group the **Hindustan Socialist Republican Association**.
- The new name showed a turn towards socialist ideas.
- Singh was a founding member of the HSRA, alongside Chandrashekhar Azad.
- Azad was the group's military leader.
- For the wider revolutionary current, see Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhar Azad and Revolutionary Nationalism.

> **Quick check 1.** Bhagat Singh helped found the Naujawan Bharat Sabha in 1926. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 What happened in 1928 and 1929?

Two actions made him famous: a killing in Lahore and a bombing in Delhi.

- In 1928, the Simon Commission toured India. Many Indians protested because it had no Indian member.
- Lala Lajpat Rai led a protest march in Lahore. Police charged at the crowd with lathis.
- Lajpat Rai died on **17 November 1928**, from injuries after the lathi charge.

- The HSRA decided to take revenge.
- On **17 December 1928**, Singh and **Shivaram Rajguru** shot dead the police officer J.P. Saunders in Lahore.
- It was a case of **mistaken identity**.
- They had meant to kill Superintendent James Scott. Scott had ordered the lathi charge.
- Singh escaped Lahore soon after. Durgawati Devi posed as his wife, and Rajguru travelled as a servant.
- On **8 April 1929**, Singh and **Batukeshwar Dutt** threw two bombs in the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi.
- The bombs were low-intensity. They were thrown where no one would be badly hurt.
- They shouted “Inquilab Zindabad” and threw leaflets.
- Then they let themselves be arrested. They wanted to use the trial as a platform.
- Exam trap: do not say the bombing aimed to kill. It deliberately did not.
- For the root of the revenge, see Lala Lajpat Rai.
- For the protests, see Simon Commission and the Nehru Report, 1927-28.

3 What did he do in jail?

He led a long hunger strike for fair treatment.

- In 1929, Singh and other prisoners in Lahore Central Jail began a hunger strike.
- They demanded recognition as **political prisoners**.
- They asked for equal treatment on food and clothing, and for access to books.
- The strike lasted **116 days**.
- A fellow striker, **Jatin Das**, died during it after 63 days without food.
- His death raised public sympathy for the prisoners sharply.
- Newspapers across India followed the strike closely.
- The strike made the prisoners' cause a national issue.

4 How was he tried and hanged?

A special tribunal tried him, and he was executed in March 1931.

- The case against him was the **Lahore Conspiracy Case**.
- The government set up a special tribunal under an ordinance of 1930.
- The tribunal tried Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru without the accused present in court.
- It sentenced all three to death on **7 October 1930**.

- Their appeal to the Privy Council was dismissed.
- Singh was hanged on **23 March 1931** at Lahore Central Jail.
- Sukhdev Thapar and Rajguru were hanged with him.
- He was 23 years old.
- India marks 23 March as **Shaheed Diwas**, or Martyrs' Day.
- The hanging came days before the Karachi session of the Congress in 1931.
- Gandhi faced anger over it at Karachi. Many felt he had not saved the three.

5 What did he believe?

Singh was a reader and a thinker as well as a revolutionary.

- In prison he wrote the essay **"Why I Am an Atheist"**.
- He argued that belief in God grew out of human weakness.
- His writings show strong **socialist and Marxist ideas**.
- He wanted more than the end of British rule. He wanted a new society.
- He argued that revolution does not mean the cult of the bomb and the pistol.
- By revolution he meant a change in the whole social order.
- He did not accept Gandhi's non-violence as a method for the freedom struggle.
- He feared that it could swap one set of rulers for another.
- This is one of the sharpest ideological splits in the freedom movement.
- For the Congress's official line, see Jawaharlal Nehru as a Freedom Fighter.

6 Why is he still remembered?

His death at 23 turned him into a lasting symbol.

- His early death made him an icon, especially for the young.
- He appeals to those who prefer a bolder style of nationalism.
- In a **2008 India Today poll**, readers voted him the “Greatest Indian”.
- He ranked ahead of Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose in that poll.
- That shows how far his popular memory has outgrown his short life.
- Shaheed Diwas on 23 March keeps the memory alive each year.

Quick check 2. Singh and Rajguru shot J.P. Saunders because they had chosen him as their target. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: Born 1907, Banga. Naujawan Bharat Sabha 1926. HSRA, September 1928. Saunders shot 17 Dec 1928, by mistake for Scott. Assembly bombs 8 Apr 1929, with Dutt. Hunger strike 116 days, Jatin Das died. Sentenced 7 Oct 1930. Hanged 23 Mar 1931 with Sukhdev and Rajguru.

Think it through: Singh and Dutt threw bombs and then waited to be arrested. Why would a revolutionary choose that?

They did not want to kill. They wanted an audience. The trial gave them a platform to explain their ideas to the whole country. The arrest was part of the plan.

Quick check 3. The jail hunger strike of 1929 lasted 116 days, and Jatin Das died during it. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Bhagat Singh and Shivaram Rajguru shot and killed J.P. Saunders in 1928. Who had they actually intended to kill?

A. Superintendent James Scott

B. Viceroy Lord Irwin

C. Magistrate M.P. Khareghat

D. General Dyer

See answer ↓

2. On 8 April 1929, Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt bombed the Central Legislative Assembly. What did they do immediately afterward?

A. Fled to Lahore

B. Escaped across the border

C. Let themselves be arrested

D. Went into hiding for a year

See answer ↓

3. Bhagat Singh's 1929 jail hunger strike lasted 116 days.

Which fellow striker died during the same protest?

A. Sukhdev Thapar

B. Batukeshwar Dutt

C. Shivaram Rajguru

D. Jatin Das

See answer ↓

4. In prison, Bhagat Singh wrote an essay arguing that religion grew out of human weakness. What is this essay titled?

A. Hind Swaraj

B. Why I Am an Atheist

C. My Experiments with Truth

D. The Discovery of India

See answer ↓

5. Bhagat Singh was executed on 23 March 1931, alongside Sukhdev Thapar and which other revolutionary?

A. Shivaram Rajguru

B. Ashfaqulla Khan

C. Ram Prasad Bismil

D. Chandrashekhar Azad

See answer ↓

6. Which revolutionaries assassinated British police officer J.P. Saunders on 17 December 1928 to avenge Lala Lajpat Rai's death?

A. Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki

B. Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev

C. Subhas Chandra Bose and Rash Behari Bose

D. Chandrashekhar Azad and Ram Prasad Bismil

See answer ↓

7. Lajpat Rai died on 17 November 1928, from injuries sustained in the lathi charge.

Which revolutionary swore revenge, later shooting J.P. Saunders in a case of mistaken identity?

A. Sukhdev Thapar

B. Bhagat Singh

C. Batukeshwar Dutt

D. Chandrashekhar Azad

See answer ↓

8. After the killing of John Saunders in December 1928, how did Durgawati Devi help Bhagat Singh escape Lahore?

A. She impersonated a British nurse to get him past a checkpoint

B. She bribed a British officer to let him board the train unchecked

C. She posed as his wife, with her son, while he travelled by train, disguised and clean-shaven

D. She smuggled him out of Lahore hidden inside a supply cart

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** It was a case of mistaken identity — they meant to kill Superintendent James Scott, who had ordered the lathi charge that fatally injured Lala Lajpat Rai. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** They deliberately let themselves be arrested, choosing to use their trial as a political platform to publicise their ideas. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** Jatin Das died after a 63-day hunger strike during the same protest, sharply increasing public sympathy for the prisoners' cause. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** He wrote "Why I Am an Atheist" in prison, rejecting prayer for personal comfort as a "degradation." ↑ Q4
5. **A.** He was hanged at Lahore Central Jail alongside Sukhdev Thapar and Shivaram Rajguru; 23 March is now observed as Shaheed Diwas. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev assassinated J.P. Saunders on 17 December 1928, in revenge for Lajpat Rai's death. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** Bhagat Singh swore to avenge Lajpat Rai's death. On 17 December 1928, he and Shivaram Rajguru shot J.P. Saunders, whom they mistook for Superintendent Scott. ↑ Q7
8. **C.** Durgawati Devi posed as Bhagat Singh's wife, with her young son, while he travelled by train in disguise, clean-shaven and in Western clothes. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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