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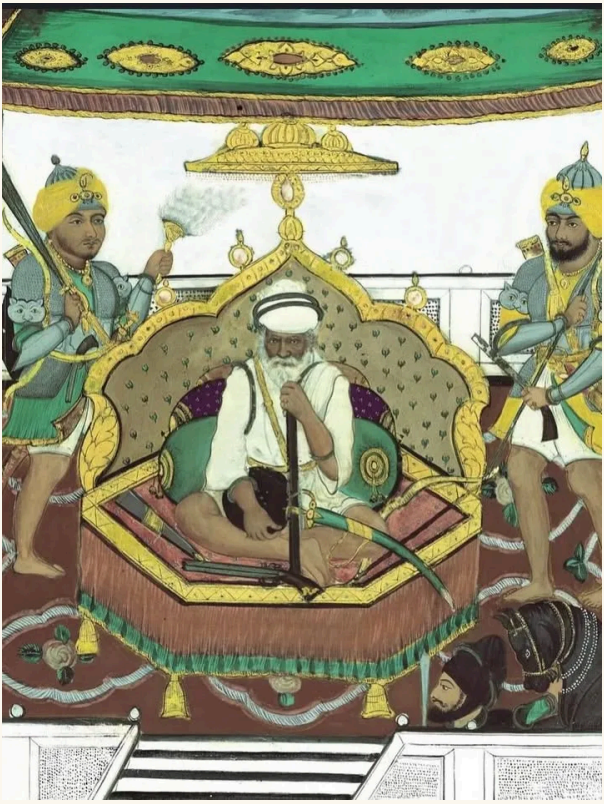
Bhai Maharaj Singh: The Saint Who Resisted the Raj

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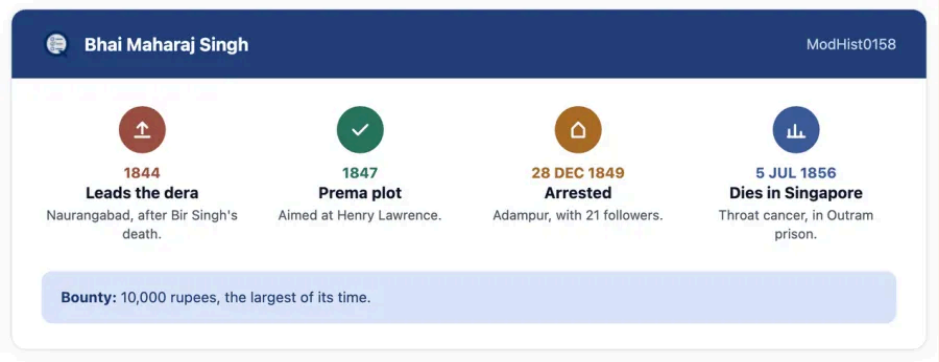
Bhai Maharaj Singh: The Saint Who Resisted the Raj

Bhai Maharaj Singh was a Sikh holy man, not a soldier or a noble. He turned his religious retreat into a base for resistance to the British.

The British feared him so much that they sent him far away to Singapore. He never faced a public trial.



Bhai Maharaj Singh holding court in his darbar. Artist unknown, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Four turning points in the life of Bhai Maharaj Singh.

> **Born.** Nihal Singh, Rabbon village, Ludhiana.
> **Teacher.** Baba Bir Singh of Naurangabad.
> **Bounty.** 10,000 rupees, the largest of its time.
> **Arrested.** 28 December 1849, Adampur.
> **Exiled.** Singapore, 1850.
> **Died.** 5 July 1856, in prison.

Dera: a Sikh religious retreat led by a holy man.

Mahant: the head of a dera.

Karniwala: “the wonder worker”, a name people gave him.

1 Who was he?

He began life as Nihal Singh, a village boy.

- He was born **Nihal Singh** in Rabbon Uchi village, in today’s Ludhiana district.
- His birth year is disputed.
- It fell in the later half of the 18th century.
- He studied scripture and Gurmukhi at a dera.

- He took the Khalsa name Bhagvan Singh.
- People called him “Maharaj” because he called everyone Maharaj.
- The name stuck to him as **Maharaj Singh**.
- He was also called Karniwala, the wonder worker.

> **Quick check 1.** Bhai Maharaj Singh was arrested at Adampur on 28 December 1849. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How did the dera shape him?

The dera at Naurangabad was both a school and a training ground.

- He joined the dera of **Baba Bir Singh** at Naurangabad.
- It is in today’s Tarn Taran district.
- He served in the langar kitchen there.
- Thousands of visitors came to the dera.
- It taught Sikh statecraft as well as prayer.
- Bir Singh sent him to Amritsar.
- Ram Singh, later the Namdhari guru, joined him there.
- Both travelled Punjab warning that Sikh rule was in danger.
- He trained disciples through mock battles and drills.
- Bir Singh died on **7 May 1844**, killed in an attack on his dera.
- That attack was led by the Dogra faction at Lahore.
- Maharaj Singh then became the head of the dera.

3 What did he do in the Sikh wars?

He backed the Sikh cause even when the chiefs gave in.

- After the First Anglo-Sikh War of 1845–46, the British ran Punjab through a Resident.
- He kept in touch with Maharani Jind Kaur.
- By one account, his followers numbered in the tens of thousands.
- Many people saw him as a spiritual leader as well as a rebel.
- In **1847**, he was linked to the Prema plot.
- That plot aimed to kill Henry Lawrence.
- The British tried to confine him to Naurangabad.
- In April 1848, a revolt broke out at Multan under Diwan Mulraj.
- Maharaj Singh went to help, with about 400 horsemen.
- He fought at Ramnagar in November 1848.
- He was also present at **Chillianwala** and Gujrat.
- Sher Singh Attariwala surrendered at Rawalpindi on 14 March 1849.
- Maharaj Singh refused to give up the fight.
- The British annexed Punjab on 29 March 1849.

4 What was his plan after annexation?

He tried to build a new rising from the hills.

- He moved to Jammu and set up bases in the hills.
- He sent secret messages to old Khalsa soldiers and dispossessed chiefs.
- He had a **five-point plan**.
- It aimed to free the young Maharaja Duleep Singh.
- It sought a united force of everyone who had lost out.
- It sought help from Afghan rulers and local Muslims.
- It sought the backing of Sikh and Hindu religious leaders.
- It planned raids and sabotage against British rule.
- The British moved Duleep Singh to Mussoorie after hearing of a plot.
- The Afghan rulers refused help.
- He planned risings at Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar for 3 January 1850.

5 How did it end?

He was caught before the planned rising and sent away.

- A **10,000 rupee** bounty hung over him.
- It was the largest reward for any outlaw of that period.
- He was arrested at Adampur on **28 December 1849**.
- He was found in a sugarcane field, with 21 followers.
- Henry Vansittart made the arrest.
- Crowds visited him in Jalandhar jail.
- So he was moved to Allahabad fort, then to Fort William in Calcutta.
- The British decided against a public trial in India.

- The order to send him to Singapore came on 23 March 1850.
- He was to be held in solitary confinement until death.
- He sailed from Calcutta on 15 May 1850.
- His loyal follower Khurruck Singh went with him.
- He was held in Outram prison in a small, dark cell.
- After three years in solitary confinement, he had gone blind.
- He died of throat cancer on **5 July 1856**.

6 What are the exam traps?

The traps are his title, his place and his fate.

- He was a religious leader, not a royal or army officer.
- He is not the same as Baba Ram Singh of the Kuka movement.
- Both were disciples of Baba Bir Singh.
- He was sent to **Singapore**, not the Andamans.
- He was never put on public trial.
- He fought on after the Sikh chiefs surrendered in March 1849.
- The bounty was 10,000 rupees.
- He is remembered in Singapore at a memorial at Gurdwara Silat Road.
- Read about Baba Ram Singh.
- Read about the Sikh Empire of Ranjit Singh.
- Read about the Company's wars.

> **Quick check 2.** The British put Bhai Maharaj Singh on a public trial in Punjab. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: Born Nihal Singh. Head of Bir Singh's dera at Naurangabad. Fought on after 1849. Arrested at Adampur on 28 December 1849. Exiled to Singapore. Died 5 July 1856.

Think it through: Why send him to Singapore instead of trying him in Punjab?

Crowds of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims had come to see him. A trial or a hanging in Punjab could have made him a martyr. Exile removed him from the country quietly.

Quick check 3. Bhai Maharaj Singh and Baba Ram Singh were both disciples of Baba Bir Singh. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Bhai Maharaj Singh was born Nihal Singh and became a Sikh ascetic. What religious position did he hold before turning to resistance?

A. Chief priest of the Golden Temple

B. Court chaplain to Maharaja Ranjit Singh

C. Head granthi of Anandpur Sahib

D. Head (mahant) of the Naurangabad Dera

See answer ↓

2. During the Second Anglo-Sikh War, Bhai Maharaj Singh planned to free which deposed ruler?

A. Raja Lal Singh

B. Maharaja Duleep Singh

C. Maharaja Ranjit Singh

D. Maharaja Sher Singh

See answer ↓

3. What made the British bounty placed on Bhai Maharaj Singh in 1849 especially notable?

A. At 10,000 rupees, it was the largest reward offered for any individual at the time

B. It included a guaranteed pardon for the informer's family

C. It was the first bounty ever offered by the East India Company

D. It was paid entirely in gold coins, unlike other bounties

See answer ↓

4. Where was Bhai Maharaj Singh imprisoned after his 1849 capture, and where did he die in 1856?

A. The Andaman Cellular Jail

B. Outram Prison, Singapore

C. Fort William, Calcutta

D. Ahmednagar Fort

See answer ↓

5. Bhai Maharaj Singh actively supported Sikh forces at which of these Second Anglo-Sikh War battles?

A. Chillianwala

B. Plassey

C. Panipat

D. Buxar

See answer ↓

6. Bhai Maharaj Singh was arrested on 28 December 1849 at which place in Punjab?

A. Adampur

B. Amritsar

C. Multan

D. Rawalpindi

See answer ↓

7. Which trusted follower was exiled to Singapore together with Bhai Maharaj Singh?

A. Richhpal Singh Purbia

B. Sher Singh Attariwala

C. Bikram Singh Bedi

D. Khurruck Singh

See answer ↓

8. The 1847 Prema plot, linked to Bhai Maharaj Singh, aimed to kill which British official?

A. Vans Agnew

B. Henry Vansittart

C. Henry Lawrence

D. Lord Dalhousie

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** He became head of the Naurangabad Dera in 1844, the religious retreat he later turned into a resistance base. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** He planned to free the deposed Maharaja Duleep Singh as part of his wider resistance effort. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The 10,000-rupee bounty was the largest reward offered for any individual of that period. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** He was deported to Singapore and imprisoned at Outram Prison, where he died of throat cancer in 1856. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** He supported Sikh forces at Ramnagar, Chillianwala, and Gujrat during the Second Anglo-Sikh War. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** He was caught at Adampur, in a sugarcane field, with 21 followers. A 10,000-rupee bounty had been placed on him. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** Khurruck Singh was his most trusted follower. Both men were sent to Singapore in 1850. ↑ Q7
8. **C.** The Prema plot was an attempt on the life of Henry Lawrence and pro-British members of the Lahore court. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

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

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