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Bhagwan Ahir: Chief Organiser of the Chauri Chaura Incident

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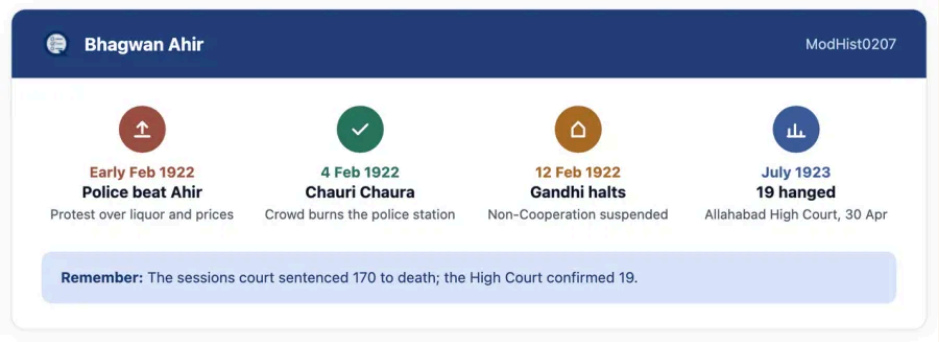
Bhagwan Ahir: Chief Organiser of the Chauri Chaura Incident

A police officer struck an army veteran in a market. Days later, a crowd marched on a police station and set it on fire.

That chain of events took place at Chauri Chaura in February 1922. Bhagwan Ahir stood at the centre of it, and his story is harder than the label “chief organiser” suggests.



The Chauri Chaura Shaheed Smarak, Gorakhpur. CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. No portrait of Bhagwan Ahir is used here, because no verified one survives.



From the beating to the hangings, drawn from standard accounts of the case.

Who. Bhagwan Ahir, a retired soldier and Non-Cooperation volunteer.
Where. Chauri Chaura, Gorakhpur district, in today's Uttar Pradesh.
Event. On 4 February 1922 a crowd burned a police station.
Toll. About 22 policemen and village guards died, plus three protesters.
National effect. Gandhi suspended Non-Cooperation on 12 February 1922.
Fate. Nineteen men, Ahir among them, were hanged in July 1923.

Non-Cooperation: the 1920-22 campaign of peaceful refusal to help British rule.

Sessions Court: the first trial court, which tried the Chauri Chaura accused at Gorakhpur.

High Court appeal: a review of the verdict by the Allahabad High Court.

1 Who was Bhagwan Ahir?

Bhagwan Ahir lived near Chauri Chaura in Gorakhpur district. He was a retired soldier of the British Indian Army. Later he joined the Non-Cooperation work in his area.

The 1923 High Court judgment calls him a drill instructor for the volunteers. It names others too, such as Nazar Ali and Lal Muhammad. So the planning was shared among several men.

Many books call him the chief organiser. The court record is more careful. It shows several organisers and a large crowd.

- A **retired soldier** of the **British Indian Army**.
- A **volunteer drill instructor** in **Gorakhpur** district.
- Others named: **Nazar Ali** and **Lal Muhammad**.
- “Chief organiser” is a **common label**, not a full picture.

> **Quick check 1.** The High Court appeal raised the number of death sentences above the Sessions Court total. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 What set off the march?

Volunteers in the area pressed for lower food prices. They also wanted shops to stop selling liquor. Non-Cooperation had given the movement local energy.

In early February 1922, police beat volunteers near the market. Accounts differ on the exact day and place. One account names 1 February at Mundera market. Another names 2 February at Gauri Bazaar. Both agree that Ahir was among those beaten.

Some volunteers were held at the Chauri Chaura police station. A bigger protest was called for 4 February. Anger over the beating pushed people to join.

- Goals: **lower food prices** and **no liquor sales**.
- Police **beat volunteers** in **early February**; sources differ on the day.
- Some volunteers were **held at the station**.
- A larger march was called for **4 February 1922**.

3 What happened on 4 February 1922?

A crowd of about 2,000 to 2,500 people gathered. They marched toward the market and the liquor shop. Armed police came out to stop them.

The police first fired in the air. The crowd threw stones. Then police fired into the crowd. Three protesters were killed. Several more were hurt.

The police fell back into the station. The angry crowd set it on fire. Most of the policemen inside died. Counts say about 22, and some accounts say 23.

The High Court later looked at the crowd closely. It did not treat every person there as equally guilty. Being at the march was not the same as setting the fire.

- About **2,000 to 2,500** people marched.
- Police fired; **three protesters** died.
- The crowd burned the station; about **22 policemen** died.
- Court looked at **each person's role**, not just presence.

4 What did the courts decide?

Martial law followed, and many people were arrested. The Gorakhpur Sessions Court tried 225 of them. On 9 January 1923 it sentenced 170 to death. Others got shorter terms, and some were freed.

Many people protested. They called the verdicts too harsh. Madan Mohan Malaviya spoke for the accused at the Allahabad High Court.

On 30 April 1923 the High Court gave its final judgment. It confirmed death for 19 men, and Bhagwan Ahir was one of them. Others got life, jail terms or acquittal. The 19 were hanged in early July 1923.

- **225** tried at **Gorakhpur**; **170** sentenced to death.
- **Malaviya** argued the appeal at the **Allahabad High Court**.
- **30 April 1923**: death confirmed for **19**.
- The 19 were hanged in **July 1923**.

5 How did Gandhi respond?

Gandhi was deeply shaken. The movement was meant to be non-violent. On 12 February 1922 he suspended Non-Cooperation across the country.

He also fasted for five days as penance. Many leaders in jail felt the halt was a mistake. They feared the movement would lose its energy.

The local crowd and the national leader made separate choices. One was an act of rage. The other was a decision to pause a mass movement. Students should keep the two apart.

- **12 February 1922**: Non-Cooperation **suspended**.
- Gandhi fasted **five days** in penance.
- Some leaders called the halt **hasty**.
- Read about the Non-Cooperation Movement.

6 What are the exam traps?

Keep the dates and numbers straight.

- The incident was **4 February 1922**; the halt was **12 February 1922**.
- Sessions Court: **170** to death. High Court: **19** confirmed.
- The appeal **cut** the death sentences; it did not raise them.
- Counsel for the accused: **Madan Mohan Malaviya**.
- Location: **Gorakhpur**, **Uttar Pradesh**.
- See the Chauri Chaura Incident and Madan Mohan Malaviya.

> **Quick check 2.** Gandhi suspended the Non-Cooperation Movement on 12 February 1922 after Chauri Chaura. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: Chauri Chaura, 4 February 1922, Gorakhpur. Retired soldier Bhagwan Ahir drilled the volunteers. Sessions Court: 170 death sentences. High Court, 30 April 1923: 19 confirmed. Gandhi suspended Non-Cooperation on 12 February.

Think it through: Why is “chief organiser” too simple a label for Bhagwan Ahir?

The court named several organisers. It also said a large crowd acted together. Drilling volunteers is not the same as planning the attack on the station.

Quick check 3. The court record shows Bhagwan Ahir as the only organiser of the march. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. At Chauri Chaura, after police opened fire on the crowd, what did the protesters do?

A. Dispersed peacefully

B. Attacked a nearby railway station

C. Marched to Delhi

D. Set the local police station ablaze, killing 22 policemen

See answer ↓

2. The Chauri Chaura incident led Gandhi to take which major decision, on 12 February 1922?

A. Call for the Quit India Movement

B. Suspend the Non-Cooperation Movement nationwide

C. Sign the Gandhi-Irwin Pact

D. Launch the Salt March

See answer ↓

3. Following the Chauri Chaura incident, a trial court sentenced 170 people to death. What was the outcome of Malaviya's appeal at the Allahabad High Court?

A. All 170 sentences were upheld

B. The case was dismissed entirely on a technicality

C. Every sentence was commuted to a fine

D. Only 19 death sentences were confirmed, saving 151 lives

See answer ↓

4. Bhagwan Ahir's protest march on 2 February 1922, two days before the Chauri Chaura incident, targeted which two grievances?

A. Railway fares and grain export

B. Land revenue rates and forced labour

C. High food prices and liquor sales

D. Salt tax and forest laws

See answer ↓

5. How many people were arrested and tried at the Gorakhpur Sessions Court over the Chauri Chaura incident?

A. 19

B. 1,000

C. 225

D. 50

See answer ↓

6. In which district of the United Provinces did the Chauri Chaura incident of 1922 take place?

A. Gorakhpur

B. Allahabad

C. Meerut

D. Lucknow

See answer ↓

7. In which month and year were the 19 men condemned in the Chauri Chaura case hanged?

A. January 1924

B. April 1923

C. February 1922

D. July 1923

See answer ↓

8. Before the Non-Cooperation movement, Bhagwan Ahir had served as a retired soldier in which force?

A. The Royal Indian Navy

B. The Indian National Army

C. The Gwalior State Lancers

D. The British Indian Army

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The crowd at Chauri Chaura set the local police station ablaze, killing 22 policemen, after police fire had killed three protesters. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** Gandhi suspended the Non-Cooperation Movement nationwide on 12 February 1922, in response to the Chauri Chaura violence. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** Malaviya's legal defence at the Allahabad High Court reduced the confirmed death sentences from 170 to just 19, saving 151 people from the gallows. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** On 2 February 1922, Bhagwan Ahir led a protest at Gauri Bazaar against high food prices and liquor sales, two days before the larger march at Chauri Chaura that turned violent. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** 225 people were arrested and tried at the Gorakhpur Sessions Court on charges of rioting and arson connected to the Chauri Chaura incident. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** Chauri Chaura lies in Gorakhpur district, in present-day Uttar Pradesh. The incident happened on 4 February 1922. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** The Allahabad High Court gave its final judgment on 30 April 1923. The 19 condemned men, including Bhagwan Ahir, were hanged in early July 1923. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** Accounts describe him as a retired soldier of the British Indian Army. That background helps explain why he drilled the volunteers into marching lines. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

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

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