

Lala Lajpat Rai



It was the evening of October 30, 1928. Standing on the platform at a crowded public meeting in Lahore City, a person known as the 'Lion of Punjab,' said in an inspiring voice:

"Every blow on our bodies this afternoon is like a nail driven into the coffin of British imperialism."

Terrible blows had battered the chest and the body of the great man who made that stirring speech. The humiliation inflicted by the high-handedness of the British was more painful than the wounds.

On the morning of the seventeenth day after this, the great revolutionary died. Onward along the path he had trodden his followers marched towards freedom.

The great leader cut down by the high-handedness of the then imperialist Punjab Government was Lala Lajpat Rai.

The great patriot Lala Lajpat Rai was born on 28th January 1865 in Dhudika village of Ferozepur District of Punjab Province, His father Lala Radha Kishan was an Urdu teacher in a government school. He belonged to the family of Agarwals, a family noted for its

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love of freedom and self-respect. Although illiterate, Lajpat Rai's mother Gulab Devi was an ideal Hindu woman. It was from her that Lalaji imbibed patriotic sentiments.

Lalaji was a very intelligent student. He won scholarships. Poverty and sickness stood in the way of his higher education. He passed the Entrance Examination of the Calcutta University in the first class in 1880. The same year he also passed the Entrance Examination of Punjab University. Afterwards he joined the Lahore Government College. At the same time he studied law. Because of the poverty of the family his education was interrupted for two years.

The two years spent in Lahore were important in Lalaji's life. As he read the history of the past glory of India and the biographies of her great sons, the boy shed tears. The love of freedom and the keen desire to serve the country took root in him at that time. During those days the Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati was dynamic in social service. It was a time when enthusiastic Punjabi youths were attracted by the progressive ideals and reformist plans of the Arya Samaj. Lalaji was then hardly sixteen. When he joined the Arya Samaj in 1882 his life of social service began. Patriotism was kindled. The idea took root in his mind that the chains of Indian slavery should be broken.

Having passed the first examination in law in 1883 Lala could practice as a mukhtiar (a minor lawyer). He had also to bear the burden of running the family. Eighteen-year-old Lalaji practiced in the revenue court of Jagrav town. After passing the Pleaders'

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Examination he came to Hissar in South Punjab and commenced practice as a lawyer.

He had no thought of making money in his profession and settling down comfortably. He wanted to devote his life to the service of his country. He wanted to read the biography of Mazzini, the brave revolutionary of Italy. He could not get a copy of the book in India. He wrote to a friend in England and got it. Mazzini's bravery, magnanimity and patriotism thrilled him.

His life of six years in Hissar became the apprenticeship for public service. After the death of Swami Dayananda, Lalaji with his associates toiled to develop the Anglo- Vedic College. The three tenets of Arya Samaj are the reformation of society, the advancement of Hindu Dharma and educational progress. Lalaji earned a thousand rupees a month. He kept aside a part of his earnings to keep his father above want and arranged for the interest on it to be paid to his father. One tenth of his income was earmarked for work for the nation. The greater part of that sum was being used for Arya Samaj activities.

When the Lieutenant Governor visited Hissar, Lalaji pleaded that the Welcome Address to be presented to him should be in Urdu. To satisfy the British officer a speech had already been prepared in English. Lalaji's suggestion made everyone nervous. But without a trace of fear, he presented the Address in Urdu and there by invited the wrath of the British.

Most of his time was given to Arya Samaj activities. Working ceaselessly he set up branches of the Arya Samaj. He built up

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educational institutions. But he was not partial towards any community. He was elected unopposed to the Municipal Council from a constituency where there were a number of Muslims.

In 1888, still a lawyer, he entered politics. The Indian National Congress was fighting for the country's freedom. Realizing the dire need for freedom, Lalaji joined the Congress as a freedom fighter. Sir Syed Ahmed who was in the Congress had just then left it. He had begun to argue that Muslims should not join the Congress and that they should support the government. Lala wrote bitter open letters to him in the Urdu weekly 'Koh-i-noor'. The letters earned high praise in political circles. The same year in the Congress session at Allahabad, when Lalaji arrived with eighty delegates from Punjab, he received a tumultuous welcome. His heroic speech in Urdu there had a great effect on the Congress leaders. Lala was a young man of 23 years. His fame spread quickly in Congress.

The small town of Hissar proved inadequate for his growing social work. After qualifying to practice as an advocate in the Punjab High Court, he settled down in Lahore in 1892. The Congress session of 1893 was held at Lahore. The first Indian to become a member of the British Parliament, Dadabhai Naoroji, was the president of the session. Lalaji served as an enthusiastic volunteer.

Lalaji worked like a bee. There was no time for rest. When he was immersed in Congress work there was a split in the Arya Samaj. Lalaji gave a new shape to the D.A.V. College and stood by it.

Lalaji was not merely an outstanding politician but also an able writer. The biographies he wrote in Urdu are memorable. He wrote

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the biographies of the patriots Mazzini and Garibaldi who unified Italy. He also wrote outstanding books about Indian great men Shivaji, Sri Krishna and Dayananda Saraswati. The books on Mazzini and Shivaji contained passages, which encouraged people to fight for freedom. So the government even thought of arresting Lalaji.

The sense of service shown by Lalaji and his devoted endeavor to help the poor, the downtrodden and those in difficulties bestowed luster on his multifarious exertions. A terrible famine struck the Central Provinces in 1896. The draught shook people. No one can forget the part played by Lalaji at the time. Orphans and the destitute were at the mercy of the Christian missionaries and were being converted to Christianity. Lalaji began a movement to help the orphans. He saved 250 orphan children from Jabalpur, Bilaspur and other districts, brought them to Punjab and admitted them to the orphanages of the Arya Samaj. He realized that he did not have sufficient time for both social service and legal practice; so in 1898 he reduced his legal practice. In 1899 a worse famine struck Punjab, Rajasthan, Kathiawad and Central Provinces. Again Lalaji led the movement by the Arya Samaj to save helpless children.

It was a trying time for him. He organized an extraordinary movement. Not only were 2,000 helpless persons saved but they were also provided with food, clothing, education and employment. In this movement sometimes there were clashes with Christian missionaries. Government set up a famine relief commission in 1901 and got Lalaji's views. His account of famine conditions and his views led to a change in the government's attitude to the destitute. Hindus

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and people of other religions were able to establish orphanages for destitute children of their folds.

In 1905 an occasion arose for Lalaji to dive deeper into another matter. There was an earthquake in Kangra district resulting in enormous loss of life and property. The Arya Samaj of Lahore set up a relief committee, as its secretary Lalaji toured Punjab province extensively and collected money for the committee. His service to the people at that time was unforgettable.

The same year general elections were being held in England, the Indian National Congress decided to send two representatives to acquaint the public with conditions in India. Lajpat Rai and Gopal Krishna Gokhale were the two representatives. When they returned from their visit to England, thousands of people welcomed them at the Lahore railway station. Students unhitched the horses and they pulled the carriage.

During his tour of England Lalaji told the people they're about the conditions in India during the British rule. More than this, his reading of the situation was important. It became clear to him that Indians alone could mould their future and for that purpose, the government should be in their hands. He resolved that India should undertake the fight for freedom, the use of articles made in India and boycott of foreign goods. He put forth these views at the 1907 Congress session held in Surat City.

1907 witnessed a high-water mark in the adventurous life of Lalaji. That was a time of revolution when the winds of change were blowing across the country; new ideas and a new zest moved the

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people. There were riots in Lahore and Rawalpindi. In Meerut preparations were being made to observe the fifteenth anniversary of the first fight for freedom (1857). Peasants were upset on account of the proposal of the government to increase the water rates in Punjab. It was a grievous crime in the eyes of the government that Lalaji and certain lawyer's addition to this, there were disturbances, supported the ryots.

Sir Densil Ibbotson was the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab. He wrote to Lord Morley, then the minister in the British cabinet who was in charge of Indian affairs: "It appears that some leaders like Lalaji have sworn to drive the British out of India. An attempt is being made to kindle hatred Against Englishmen and break the government administrative machinery."

Those were days when there was a sense of fear in official circles. A poor Indian was murdered. A factual report appeared in newspapers. An attempt was made to foist the guilt on a Punjabi journalist. The people of Punjab protested against the mischief of the government. In addition to this, there were disturbances, because of unjust laws like the Colonial Settlement Act and Land Mortgage Amendment Act and because of increase in the tax on land and water rates. Sir Densil was perturbed. Without any reason he deported Lalaji and with him Ajit Singh (a relative of the great patriot Bhagat Singh) to Mandalay in Burma.

People all over the country opposed the unjust action of the government. Tilak wrote in the newspaper 'Kesari'- "if the British rulers act like the Russian Czars, the people of India will have to react

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as the people of Russia did." Government had to bow to the vigorous protests of the people and the legal profession; it had no choice. Government realized that the deportation order was improper and illegal; it brought Lalaji to Lahore on November 18 and set him free.

Lalaji was considered one of the famous trinity of the Congress radicals. The three great men were Lala Lajpat Rai of Punjab, Bal Gangadhar Tilak of Maharashtra and Bipin Chandra Pal of Bengal. The country affectionately called them Lal, Bal and Pal. There was a split between the radicals and the moderates in the Congress organization. Lalaji found that it was not possible to bring about an agreement between the two factions; he therefore kept out of the Congress for a few years.

In 1911 he re-entered the Lahore Municipal Council. When he stood for election to the Municipal Council his popularity was immense. Even the deaf, the dumb and disabled' people turned up to vote for him. A dumb voter brought a photograph of Lalaji to indicate that he would vote for Lalaji.

Lalaji re-entered Congress in 1912.

He left for England in April 1914 with the Congress delegation as a representative of Punjab. He had planned to be there for six months. But because of the outbreak of the First World War, he had to change his plans. It did not seem wise to return then. It was likely the British would keep him in detention for a long period. Lalaji went from England to America. His visit to America was a voluntary exile. In America he made a number of speeches about India and conditions of life in this country. He wrote a number of books. As part

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of the effort to develop the Indian agitation he established the Indian Home Rule League in New York. How could there be dearth of work for the Indian hero in America? He set up the 'India Information Bureau'. He started a journal 'Young India' and gave a fillip to the movement. He himself edited the paper. The paper expounded the Indian culture and explained in detail the necessity for Indian freedom. It attracted the attention of everybody. The circulation increased. Through this paper it became possible for not only Indians but also Americans and people of other countries to understand the aims and objects of Lalaji and to sympathize with India's aims. The movement gained support.

While in America he wrote two books: 'Arya Samaj' and 'England's, Debt to India.' His life in America was not bed of roses. He himself cooked his food. He earned money for his living by writing books and articles. Germany was then at war with England. The German Government attempted to take advantage of the dissatisfaction of the Indians by enticing Lalaji. But he refused to be tempted.

While in America, Lalaji found time to visit Japan. In both the countries he made friendship and won the sympathy of influential people. He conducted himself in such a way that both countries came to trust him. Thus he made a name for himself. At the end of the great War in 1919 he wanted to return to India. The British Government would not give him a passport. In India in Jalianwalla Bagh of Amritsar, British soldiers fired on helpless Indians at a public meeting. Lajpat Rai got news of the dreadful massacre even when he was in

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New York. He was eager to join his countrymen. He got the passport at the end of the year. In December 1919 Lalaji came from New York to London. There he met the famous author Bernard Shaw and some socialist friends. Then he came to Paris.

Lalaji thus brought about a revolution in the attitudes of the people of England and America towards India. He returned in February 1920. Lokamanya Tilak, Jinnah and Shrimati Annie Besant accorded a heroic welcome to him. Welcome Addresses were presented to him in Bombay, Delhi and Lahore. He was elected as the president of the special session of the Congress held in September 1920.

Next year Mahatma Gandhi started the Non-cooperation Movement. The movement gained momentum in the country. Lalaji jumped into the agitation with his bosom friend, the revolutionary Ajit Singh. In response to Lalaji's stirring call, the whole of Punjab Province joined the movement. The agitation shook the firm foundations of the government. Government schools and colleges were boycotted. Work in courts and offices came to a halt. The people were firmly united against imperialism. Lalaji himself started a national school in Lahore. Tilak opened a political science institution. Thus enthusiastic youths found guidance. Lalaji undertook a whirlwind tour of Punjab for ten days for that purpose and collected nine lakh rupees. Full of reverence for him, people contributed money enthusiastically.

Lajpat Rai's organizing ability and heroic speeches were inspiring. Government was finding it difficult to face the intense Non-

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cooperation Movement growing day by day. All over the country there were agitation and hartals and the rulers were shaken. Lalaji became a dangerous person in the eyes of the government. In December 1921 Lalaji was arrested. The other leaders of the movement, Motilal Nehru and Chittaranjan Das were also imprisoned. Lalaji was sentenced to 18 months' rigorous imprisonment. Because of the people's protest and the pleadings by lawyers he was released after two months. It was one o' clock in the night when he was released. When he came to the door he was arrested again. He was tried for another offence and was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for two years.

While in jail he fell ill and his health deteriorated. When the public learnt this vigorous agitation was started throughout the country for his release. Government released him. Lalaji went to Solan to improve his health.

As soon as his health improved Lalaji become active again. He joined the 'Swaraj Party' of Motilal Nehru. He was elected to the Central Legislative Assembly. By that time the Hindu Muslim unity move shaped by Mahatma Gandhi had failed.

Lalaji had to turn his attention to communal problems. He was himself influenced by the Arya Samaj and was a staunch supporter of the Hindu dharma. But he was aware of the need for Hindu Muslim unity in the fight for Swaraj. The Non-Cooperation movement was crumbling and ill feeling between different communities was reaching dangerous proportions. In the 1924 Hindu-Muslim riots Hindus suffered much in Kohat of North-West Frontier Province. In two days

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of riots not only were 150 Hindus killed but also 400 persons had also to be shifted to Rawalpindi. Mahatma Gandhi undertook a fast. There was a conference to bring about friendship among the followers of different religions and a national council was set up. But the problem was not solved. The Kohat tragedy pained and disappointed Lalaji. He had to stand by the helpless Hindu community. To counteract associations formed by the Muslims, Lalaji tirelessly fostered movements for 'Purification of Hinduism 'and 'Organization of Hinduism'. As long ago as 'in 1924 Lalaji expressed the fear that Muslims might want a division of India and demand a separate state for themselves. This shows his far- sightedness.

He presided over the Hindu Mahasabha held at Calcutta in 1925. The speech he made about Hindu dharma and the necessity to uphold it woke up the Hindus. In 1926 Lalaji participated in the International Labor Conference held at Geneva as a representative of workers in India. He also took part in similar conferences held in Britain and France.

Lalaji went to Europe in 1927 to improve his health. Katherine Mayo, a foreign journalist, visited India. She wrote a book called 'Mother India'. It was about Indian civilization, culture and life. She saw only sheer ignorance and filth in India and nothing good or decent. It gave a totally misleading picture of India. In an article Gandhiji protested and called it a 'gutter inspector's report'. The book Mayo wrote was published when Lalaji was in London. The book created uproar in India and Britain. People who were opposed to the freedom of India had given money for the publication of the book.

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Lalaji read it. He could not keep quiet. Soon after his return to India the first thing he did was to write a book 'Unhappy India.' He gave a fitting reply to the false propaganda of Miss Mayo.

The non-cooperation movement failed. Therefore there was a lull in political activities. In 1927 the British Government wanted a report on political reforms in India and on amending the Government of India Act. So it appointed a commission. The commission consisted of Sir John Simon and six other members. All of them were members of the British Parliament. There was not a single Indian as member. It was composed solely of White people. The commission was an insult to Indians. These White men were to shape the future of India. The people of India rose as one man against this step. Under Lalaji's leadership, it was resolved to boycott the Simon Commission.

Lajpat Rai moved a resolution in the Central Legislative Assembly in February 1928. "The present constitution of the Commission and its terms of reference are unworthy of acceptance by this House; therefore, this House advises the Government that it should have nothing to do with the Commission." He made an impassioned speech on that occasion. There were several English men and government officers in the Legislative Assembly. It was known that they would vote against the resolution. Lalaji appealed to the Indian members thus: "Let the members understand that they are slaves in the eyes of the British Government and of the world. When they vote on the resolution let them remember that in 1919, because of a single epidemic, many people died in our country. Let them

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remember that in this country ten crores of people do not have even one meal a day."

What right did the British Parliament have to frame a constitution for India? That was Lalaji's fearless question. Only Indians had the right to decide about their future. They were determined about it. The report of Motilal Nehru and his colleagues was ready. It had protested against the British attitude. Lalaji toured the whole of India to give publicity to the Nehru report. He asserted: "Those who oppose the report are the enemies of Swaraj and enemies of India."

The 30th of October 1928 was an evil day in India's political history. The Simon Commission was expected to arrive in Lahore on that day. The rulers had taken precautions to prevent a public protest. Prohibitory orders were enforced. Lalaji was ill that day. Still he led the procession to protest against the Commission.

When the Simon Commission arrived, on one side there were traitors to welcome them. On another side the revolutionaries demonstrated against the Commission. In the protest march youths staged a tremendous show. A hartal was observed that day; there was a sea of black flags. Thousands and thousands of hearts and voices shouted "Simon, go back!" The lion of Punjab, Lala Lajpat Rai, led the procession. When the trains reached the station, the cry "Simon, go back!" hit the sky. Police security arrangements crumbled. The crowd was so thick that movement was impossible. The Police charged with their Lathis (stout sticks). The blood of innocent people began to flow. Lalaji's friends Sukhdev, Yashpal, Bhagavati Charan

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and others surrounded him, in order to protect him. Police officer Scot saw Lalaji and his bodyguards. He ordered the Police to beat the bodyguards. A Police officer named Sanders came forward to do the job. The Police Lathis rained blows on Lalaji - on the head and all over the body. Lala realized this incident would lead to conflict and a bloodbath. He told the huge crowd of revolutionary youths: "Leave this place." The crowd dispersed.

The same evening there was a mammoth public meeting. The despicable action of the Police was severely condemned and the Simon Commission was boycotted. Police Deputy Superintendent Neal was present at the meeting. Lalaji turned to Neal and said in English so that he could understand him: "The blows, which fell on me today, are the last nails driven into the coffin of British Imperialism."

One word from Lajpat Rai to the youths would have been enough; they would have let loose rivers of blood. But Lalaji practiced non-violence strictly. The country had to restrain its anger. In the very week of the incident Lalaji attended the All-India Congress Committee and all-party meetings. He grew weak and returned to Lahore.

Lalaji fell ill and died of a heart attack on 17th November 1928. The whole of India knew that his death was a result of the lathi blows. A deliberate murder by the Police!

More than a lakh of people took up in his funeral procession.

The movement did not abate though Lalaji died. In fact it acquired a new vigor. The Congress Party began the no-tax

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campaign. Punjab could not easily forget Lalaji's death. To avenge the cowardly Whites' attack on their beloved leader, the people of Punjab rose in fierce revolt. The young revolutionary Bhagat Singh murdered the Police officer Sanders, mainly responsible for the attack on Lalaji, in a dreadful manner. This happened on December 17, exactly one month after Lalaji's death. Next year the British sentenced Bhagat Singh to death.

The lesson which the Lion of Punjab Lala Lajpat Rai taught the country was to be brave. To the Indians in the chains of slavery his message was "Begging or prayer cannot bring freedom. You can win it only through struggle and sacrifice." Because throughout his life he fought fearlessly, he was called the Lion of Punjab. The sacrifice of his life was like a warrior's death in battle.

Lala Lajpat Rai the martyr was a store-house of many good qualities. Efficiency, tireless industry and patriotism gave lustre to his personality. He was friendly. For the sake of his country he won a large number of friends both in India and abroad. From the platform he spoke for hours eloquently. His speeches were fiery and galvanizing. People heard him spellbound and his words opened their eyes. He was indeed a lion among men.

He was a brilliant man and he was devoted, in body and mind, to the cause of education. The D.A.V. College, the National College, the Tilak School of Politics and others are living monuments to his patriotism. His service in the field of journalism was no less valuable. He founded the Urdu weekly Vande Mataram and the English weekly 'The People' - and both maintained high standards. In the field of

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commerce too, he will be remembered forever. It was Lalaji who established the Punjab National Bank and the Lakshmi Insurance Company. As a member of the Arya Samaj he worked incessantly. He fought against Untouchability. When Gandhiji started the 'Harijan Sevak Sangh' he worked for it. He was like a father to the orphans. He was responsible for starting numerous orphanages in the country. The Gulab Devi Hospital and the Servants of People Society are living monuments to the memory of that great man.

Lalaji was one of those who sowed the seeds of socialism in India. He was well acquainted with Henry Meyers, Beatrice Webb, Lansbury and others who promoted the growth of socialism in Britain. He was in the vanguard of labor organization. He founded the 'All-India Trade Union Congress' and was himself its president. He started an organized effort to improve the conditions of the working class. He pleaded that a part of the profits of an industry should be given to the workmen.

The people of India were in chains, and they had to be aroused. They had to be organized. Lalaji was the symbol of the power, which did this. As Mahatma Gandhi said: "So long as the sun shines in the Indian sky, persons like Lalaji will not die."

Lajpat Rai once said: "If I had the power to influence Indian journals, I would have the following headlines printed in bold letters on the first page:

Milk for the infants

Food for the adults

Lala Lajpat Rai

Education for all,"

Author - T.K.Rama Rao

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