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The braveheart Sarabha

The human heart has always been stirred by tales of valour and adventure, and whenever we hear such stories, we cannot help but look up to those heroes who have chiseled their names onto the stone of history with the weight of their accomplishments. Such legends deserve to be celebrated and remembered for their bravery and all that they have done in the past to make the present better. Here's presenting the saga of one such warrior, **Kartar Singh Sarabha**, who changed the course of history for the better.

WARRIORS of INDIA Part 16

Name: Kartar Singh Sarabha

Born on: May 24, 1896

Died on: November 16, 1915

Position held: A leading revolutionary of the Indian National Movement

Noteworthy achievement(s): Kartar Singh Sarabha was only 19 years old when he was hanged by the British authorities. His bravery, activism, and commitment in the journey of Indian freedom is noteworthy. He became a source of inspiration and courage for the freedom fighters who followed suit. This especially holds true for Bhagat Singh, who saw a role model in the unflinching patriotism of Kartar Singh Sarabha.

Biography to read: Tufan Da Shah Aswar Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha by Ajmer Singh; Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha by Gyani Nahar Singh Grewal

The roots of a warrior

Names of illustrious freedom fighters - Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh to mention just a few - are carved in the heart of every Indian. But there are also a few unsung warriors like Kartar Singh Sarabha whose contribution to the Indian National Movement must be duly acknowledged. Kartar Singh was born in a Grewal Jatt Sikh family to Sardar Mangal Singh of Sarabha village, Ludhiana, Punjab. Since Punjab at that time was wrecked by severe droughts, Punjabis had begun to migrate to places like Canada and the USA for better opportunities. So, when he was just 15, Kartar Singh was also put on a ship bound for America, so that he could study and find work there. The ship reached the American port of San Francisco in January 1912 and at that time, Asian immigrants were put through rigorous rounds of questioning before they were allowed entry into America. Kartar Singh observed that people of European descent were given a preferential treatment and so he asked a fellow passenger the reason for the same. "Indians are the citizens of a slave country. So, they are treated badly," he was told. This incident gave him his first insight into the condition of his homeland.

Even though he was able to enroll himself at the University of Berkeley to study engineering, he had to also work as a seasonal labourer, picking fruits in the vast orchards of California's central valley where the hostility towards Indian immigrants became even more apparent. It was then that he began to fully realise the humiliation of coming from a colonised

land. Indians in America often came together to discuss their problems and share their sorrows. It was through such associations and exchanges that Kartar Singh began to get agitated about his colonisers (the Britishers) in India.

The sword of a warrior

Whether at campus or in the fields, whenever time permitted, Kartar Singh mingled with other Indians and fervently discussed freedom for India. In 1913, he joined the Ghadar Party, an organisation of Indians that wanted to restore the dignity of their people by overthrowing the British regime in India through an armed uprising. Kartar Singh, who believed deeply in the party's cause, took the initiative of putting together the Punjabi issue of the Ghadar newspaper, which was published to spread awareness amongst the Indians there. Kartar Singh's tasks comprised edit-

ing of the Urdu paper and then translating the Urdu matter into Gurmukhi script.

With the start of World War I in 1914, as the British became thoroughly engrossed in war efforts, the leaders of the Ghadar Party published the 'Decision of Declaration of War' against the British in The Ghadar issue dated August 5, 1914. Thousands of copies were distributed among army cantonments, villages and cities. After such a turn of events, Kartar Singh decided to return to India and continue his fight from his mother land. He reached Calcutta via Colombo in November 1914 and was accompanied by two other Ghadar leaders, Satyen Sen and Vishnu Ganesh Pingle, along with a large number of Ghadar militants. Unfortunately, the British got wind of the plans of revolutionaries and they launched massive operations to apprehend the rebels. Several rebels were arrested at the ports itself. But this did not stop Kartar Singh from planning ahead as he went

about preparing the base for the revolution in Punjab. He focused on mobilising Indian soldiers in the British Army to join the movement, especially cantonments of Meerut, Agra, Benares, Allahabad, Ambala, Lahore and Rawalpindi, and simultaneously set up a small scale arms manufacturing unit in Ludhiana. The date for the revolt was set for February 21, 1915, along with senior leaders, including Rasbehari Bose, and a plan was made to attack cantonments of Mian Mir and Ferozepur, while Ambala was being prepared for a mutiny. But unfortunately, a traitor betrayed them a day before the mutiny and several revolutionaries were arrested. Kartar Singh, however, managed to evade the British. Refusing to give up still, he made a last desperate attempt on March 2, 1915, to rouse the Indian soldiers of the 22 Cavalry at Chak No. 5 in Sargodha to mutiny. This time, Rissaldar Ganda Singh of the 22 Cavalry got him arrested. He was sent to trial with other rebels at Lahore in what came to be known as the Lahore Conspiracy case.

The legacy of a warrior

Kartar Singh was only 18 and a half when the trial began. He was unapologetic in court and proudly enunciated his duty of mobilising the people against the British. His unflinching patriotism made the judges severely antagonistic, even though they were impressed by his intellectual skills. The court observed that Kartar Singh was the most dangerous of all the rebels. "He is one of the most important of these 61 accused; and has the largest dossier of them all. There is practically no department of this conspiracy in America, on the voyage, and in India, in which this accused has not played his part. He is very proud of the crimes he has committed. He does not deserve mercy and should be sentenced to death," was one such statement. Kartar Singh nonchalantly said, "You would hang me to death? What else? We are not afraid of that... For my offence, I would either be given a life imprisonment or death by hanging. But I would prefer hanging, so that I may be reborn soon for India's war of freedom. Till India achieves freedom, I desire to take birth time and again, and go to the gallows. And if I am born as a woman in my next birth, then I shall definitely give birth to other such revolutionaries". Sarabha, along with his compatriot Vishnu Ganesh Pingle, was executed in the Lahore Central Jail on November 16, 1915. This young martyr, hence, became the symbol of bravery and sacrifice. The great Bhagat Singh, regarded him as his guru, friend and brother. He is also remembered by a song he wrote and it is widely believed that he died singing it:

*"Sewa desh di jindhiye badhi aukhi
Gallan karnia dher sukhalliyan ne
Jinha desh sewa 'ch pair paya
Ohna lakh museebtan jhalliyan ne."*

*Serving one's country is very difficult
It is so easy to talk
Anyone who walked on that path
Must endure millions of calamities.*

As homage, a statue of Kartar Singh has been erected in Ludhiana. However, the present day generation is oblivious to his contributions and he remains an unsung hero.

