Madanlal Dhingra - (1887-1909)



**"I believe that a nation held down by foreign bayonets is in a perpetual state of war. Since open battle is rendered impossible to a disarmed race, I attacked by surprise. Since guns were denied to me I drew forth my pistol and fired. Poor in health and intellect, a son like myself has nothing to offer the mother but his own blood. And so I have sacrificed the same on her altar. The only lesson required in India at present is to learn how to die, and the only way to teach it is by dying ourselves."**Extract from speech in court, July 23rd 1909

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Madanlal Dhingra was born in the holy city of Amritsar, the son of a well respected doctor, who was very loyal to the British. After some time as a civil servant, Dhingra went to England, to study engineering, in June 1906. In England, Dhingra enjoyed the "good life." He used to wear expensive clothes and fragrances, spend ages on his appearance and made many English friends and was very socially active. He was a charmer, but always loved his religion and Motherland as we are about to see.

There was a house in London that was known as India House, on Cromwell Street. This was set up by Shyamji Krishna Verma. The struggle for India’s freedom was under way, and at India house resided one of its great heroes, Veer Savarkar. He used to gather many Indian students, and give speeches and hold discussions to inspire them to serve the cause of the upliftment of India. Savarkar was a skilful orator and many heeded his message. Madanlal heard of India House and decided to pay it a visit. There he heard Savarkar speak, and as he listened, his blood began to boil. Strong feelings of anger and were aroused within him which were difficult for him to control. He became a great friend and devotee of Veer Savarkar, and took the oath of the Abhinava Bharat (meaning "Young India") revolutionary society founded by him.

A few incidents show Madanlal’s endurance and fiery patriotism. Savarkar organised a day in commemoration of the anniversary of India’s 1st war of Independence in 1857 (which the British dubbed as the "Indian Mutiny"). Hundreds of Indian youth went about for the day with a badge titled "1857 - Commemoration," to the annoyance of many English. An English friend of Dhingra tried to grab the badge of him. Dhingra slapped him, punched him to the ground drew a knife, saying "Don’t dare touch the symbol of my country’s honour." The Englishman apologised and fled. One day, at India House, a group was speaking of the bravery and prowess of the Japanese (who had just defeated Russia in a war), speaking of them as the pride of Asia. After a while, Dhingra got angry. "Enough of the praise of the Japanese, do you suppose we Hindus are in any way inferior to them?" In the eyes of many Dhingra was just a pretty boy and joker. Many of those present burst out laughing at his words, and taunted him. Dhingra was infuriated. This escalated, and led to a disturbing challenge being proposed to test Dhingra’s fortitude. Someone sugested in jest that a needle should be put through Dhingra’s hand. Dhingra absolutely insisted on the challenge, despite others now trying to discourage him. The needle was put all the way through the palm of his hand. Blood flowed, those present cringed, but Dhingra just smiled. The secret society started by Savarkar (Abhinava Bharat), were making bombs and procuring arms to send to India. In one bomb making session, the concentration of those present lapsed. Dhingra’s intuition and alertness prevented a serious calamity. He stopped the immanent explosion, but was burnt in the process.

Continually hearing the plight of Indians, and the increasingly oppressive measures that were being taken in the wake of the intensifying freedom movement, Dhingra was enraged, One day he appeared before Savarkar, saying he wanted to sacrifice himself, and asked if the time was right. Savarkar replied that it was nobody else’s decision, but that Dhingra himself would know when the time was right. A long discussion followed, and various plans were thought out. Dhingra’s anger against British occupation of his motherland increased day after day. To top it off, Savarkar’s elder brother was imprisoned and deported to the Andamans (a famous high security prison). Dhingra was determined to make the British taste a bit of revenge. He brought a revolver and practised shooting.

Dhingra began to look for India haters within his site. There was an association in London called the National Indian Association (NIA). Lord Curzon Wyllie was an important member of its committee. He had been a secretary of State in India, perceived to have been responsible for several ills against the Indian people, and the NIA was actively de-Indianising the Indian youth who were part of it, "turning patriotic young men into immoral useless traitors." Dhingra became friends with its secretary Emma Beck and became a member of the organisation, also getting to know Lord Curzon. Dhingra chose the night of 1st of July at a party of the NIA, at Jahangir House of the Institute of Imperial Studies, to be the date of his retaliation against the British. The music session was just over when Curzon Wyllie entered the hall with his wife. Dhingra approached him, and fired 5 shots killing Curzon. Dhingra fired a 6th bullet when Cowasji Lalkaka, a Parsi gentlemen, dashed towards and grabbed Dhingra. Lalkaka also fell dead. Dhingra stated in court that he had no intention of killing Cowasji Lalkaka. The police arrived, and Dhingra willingly allowed his arrest.

Needless to say, England was rocked by the murder of Curzon Wyllie. Dhingra had written a statement, but the police snatched it and it was never again seen. However, Savarkar had a copy in anticipation of the police action. The Indian freedom fighters were overjoyed, but many Indians openly condemned him. Unfortunately these included his anglophile father and brother, who disowned him publicly. A meeting was held in Caxton Hall in London on the 5th July 1909, as a meet up of the prominent Indians who were loyalists to the British Raj, to pass a resolution in condemnation of Madanlal Dhingra’s conduct. Word of this meeting reached Dhingra’s friends, and a band of them attended the meeting. The Aga Khan, who presiding over the meeting moved to pass a resolution unanimously condemning Dhingra. Savarkar’s voice interrupted loudly from the back of the hall. "No, the resolution is not unanimous." The whole gathering was silenced. "Who is that?" shouted the Aga Khan. "It is me Savarkar, and I condemn it" was the reply. A young British man dashed forward and punched Savarkar to the floor. Savarkar was bleeding, and his glasses smashed, but he continued, "Happen what may, I oppose the resolution." Then Thirumalacharya, a fellow revolutionary thrashed the Englishmen who hit Savarkar, forcing him to flee. The Abhinava Bharat would suffer no insult to their beloved Dhingra.

The court case, which followed, was held at the Old Bailey Court on July 23rd. The outcome was a foregone conclusion. But it was perhaps here that was Dhingra’s finest hour. He faced the ordeal calmly and gave a voice to the suffering of his beloved Mother India. Part of his statement (delivered on July the 10th) read as follows:

**"I do not want to say anything in defence of myself but simply to prove the justification of my deed. As for myself I do not think any English law court has any authority to convict me or detain me in prison or to pass any sentence against me... I hold the English responsible for the murder of 8 million of my countrymen in the last 50 years."**

Up to the date of his execution, many friends came to visit Dhingra. His only formal request was very simple - that his funeral should be done in the traditional Hindu manner. Savarkar was determined to do something for Dhingra. He activated his contacts in several countries. There were indeed several non-Indians, even Britishers, who believed in India’s freedom. Dhingra’s statement was sent to major newspapers across the world, all of who published it! This was a very key event in giving momentum to the freedom movement, as many foreign voices now raised their voices in India’s favour. Dhingra certainly didn’t die in vain. In Ireland and Egypt (which were both involved in a struggle against the British), Dhingra was a hero. Annie Besant rightly said of Dhingra "More Madanlal’s are the need of the time." Later on, Madanlal Dhingra’s deeds would inspire the great martyrs Bhagat Singh and Uddham Singh.

On the day of Dhingra’s martyrdom, he had the names of Ram and Krishna on his lips. His friends printed a handout and gave it out on the streets, praising Dhingra’s sacrifice and the injustices being perpetrated against India, together with a warning that the struggle will not subside. Dhingra died with the Bhagwad Geeta in his hands. His parting words were:

***"My only prayer to God is that I may be re-born of the same mother and I may die in the same sacred cause till the Cause is successful. Vande Mataram!"***

Tatia Tope - (1814-1857)



Tatia Tope was a hero of the Indian Mutiny which broke out in 1857 (which should more fittingly be titled as The 1st Indian War of Independence). His role in this achieved him international fame. Tatia was born in a place named Yeswale, near Nasik in Maharashtra. He was the second of eight children. His father’s name was Pandurand Pant. His own name was Raghunath. The Peshwa (Prime Minister) liked the bright boy, and on one occasion gave him a topi (hat) bright with jewels.

"Tatia" is a term of affection in Marathi. People near and dear to Raghunath used to call him Tatia, and because he always used to wear the hat, he acquired the name Tatia Tope, which was to stay with him till the end and beyond. The vast Maratha Kingdom fell in 1818. The disposed Peshwa, and some of his loyal people moved to Brahmavarta. Despite the loss of kingdom, the spirit of the young generation who lived in Brahmavarata was very much grounded in the memory of freedom and a desire to regain it. Many of Tatia’s young friends achieved fame as martyrs in 1857.

In 1851, Nana Saheb, adopted son of Baji Rao II, became Peshwa. He was a much more fiery character than his father and was happy with his family living comfortably on a British pension. Lord Dalhousie became the Governor of India, and was far more oppressive than his predecessors. He plundered India’s wealth, robbed young princes of their crowns, and brought in a large number of Christian missionaries with the express aim of eradicating the "vile culture of the land."

The flame of discontent in the minds of the people, who were born in free India, was ready for an insurrection. A careful plan was hatched to totally drive the British out of India. Tatia and others took the task of enflaming the hearts of the Indians fighting under the pay of the British (such soldiers were termed "sepoys"). It was ordained that 31 May 1857 was the date when many Indian regiments across India would simultaneously rise in revolt. But a famous unplanned incident set of the revolt 2 months before this date, in a costly but brave blunder. The Indian soldiers got the word that their new cartridges for their rifles were greased with cow fat and pig fat. This enraged Hindus and Muslims. A regiment in Barrackpore refused to load their rifles. The British were adamant and said that any soldiers who did not comply would be stripped of their arms. One Mangal Pande could not take these insults and fired at the British captain. The revolt was now on.

Other regiments joined the revolt and moved to the capital with the cry of "Chalo Delhi." They soon captured it. Nana Saheb and Tatia Tope bided their time. they were summoned to help the panicking British, in the city of Kanpur. There they called reinforcements, and at midnight on June 4th 1857 they struck, taking the city and booting out the British. For a time Kanpur was a stronghold of the revolt, but on July 16th the British called in reinforcements and retook it. The morale of the Indian soldiers began to flay. They couldn’t stand up to the superior technology and organisation of the British, and were demoralised that many of their countrymen did not join the freedom movement, particularly the Sikhs. Tatia Tope was entrusted with the momentous task of reinvigorating the Indians, which is when he really came into his own.

Tatia went to Shivarajpur and gathered what forces he could. He fell upon the forces of General Havelock, who was marching from Kanpur to Lucknow, using the infamous guerilla techniques of the Marathas to inflict heavy losses. Tatia’s eyes then fell of Kalpi, which was strategically situated between Jhansi and Latehapur. The wrath of India descended upon the fortress and captured it. It was made into a workshop to manufacture arms. A new life was breathed into the War of Independence. In a swift swoop he captured a series of forts. He secretly reached the Scindhia regiment at Morar, whom he won over to the side of revolution, further reinforcing it. Then Tatia received the encouraging news that Major Windham of Britain, who was in charge of Kanpur was short of troops and resources. Not being one to miss an opportunity, Tatia collected his men, crossed the Jamuna and confronted Kanpur. A pitched battle was fought on the banks of the Pandu, which was eventually won. Tatia’s fame by now had reached all of Europe. His name was in nearly every newspaper. He was a household name of terror in England.

The British media were trying to portray him internationally as a vile evil fiend. True, he had affected the slaughter of a large number of British, but it was little compared with what Britain inflicted upon India, and indeed the other countries it was busy trying to colonise. Tatia Tope was a symbol of the indomitable spirit of India, a symbol of the reason why the Hindus out of all ancient peoples have survived through the long ages and continue to thrive even today.

However, the tide was to soon turn against Tatia and the rest of the rebels. The British retook Kanpur, but Tatia was beyond their reach, and arrived at Kalpi. He tried to again breath new life into the revolt, by trying to win over the native rulers and Princes to the side of freedom. However, most were scared. A few agreed to help in secret. Some stayed neutral. But others were actually rude and arrogant, insulting Nana Saheb, Tatia’s leader. Tatia resolved to teach these rulers a lesson, starting with the ruler of Charkhari. The ruler appealed to the British for help but the forces from Jhansi, commanded by Rani Lakshmibai blocked them, enabling Tatia to score a crushing victory, gaining money and ammunitions. But news of a crushing blow to the rebellion soon reached Tatia’s ears. Delhi fell, and its ruler, Bahadur Shah was taken prisoner. The forces at Delhi should have followed Tatia’s policy and continually harass the British without becoming complacent. But Bahadur Shah got too encouraged with the victory at the capital. This helped the British by allowing them to regroup, and gave them a single, unmoving target to attack.

Still, the brave Rani Lakshmibai kept the flag of freedom flying at Jhansi. Tatia was very proud of the young girl whom he remembered as a child. Even Jhansi was soon besieged. Tatia answered the call for help, marching with a force, but it was of no avail. The remaining forces, including Rani Lakshmibai had to retreat to Kalsi. The rebellion was reaching its final stage, its spirit being gradually crushed. But not the spirit of Tatia Tope. He reached the kingdom of Gwalior, which was formerly part of the Maratha confederacy. He incited another revolt. Those ministers who opposed the revolt had to flee. It is said that Gwalior reverberated with war drums. But it was not to last. The British assault came and a grim battle was fought and lost by Tatia and the forces of Gwalior. Rani Lakshmibai fell in this battle.

All the Indian rulers were now terrified into submission, but the British were not happy, as Tatia was still elusive. They never knew when he would incite another revolt. They launched a mammoth search for him for months. Tatia was now alone. The British offered "pardon" to Indian soldiers who gave up their arms. Many did so. At this hour of despair, Tatia remembered his old friend, Man Singh, a leader in the Gwalior army, who was now hiding with a band of men. Tatia had felt that Man SIngh was the one of the only men he could trust. Tatia was offered a place to stay and protection. The British had caught scent of Tatia’s plan. They contacted Man Singh, offering him pardon, riches and land. The temptation could not be resisted and thus Man Singh was won over.

It was midnight of April 7th 1859 when the lion was caged, in his sleep. Tatia Tope was put on trial, at the camp of General Meadle at Shivpuri. Tatia scoffed at the charges against him. "I am not your servant. I have obeyed the orders of my Peshwa, who is my master. I have shed no innocent blood. I do not ask for any mercy...blow me to pieces on the mouth of a cannon or hang me to death from the gallows."

On April 18th 1859, 2 years after the outbreak of the war, Tatia was hung. He was totally undaunted and unbroken at the time of death. He even put the rope around his own neck to show how unphased he was. He had fought more than 150 battles. Thus passed a very brave and heroic Indian, who lived and died as a lion.

Vasudev Balwant Phadke - (1845-1883)


What the Indian Sepoys tried to do in 1857, the Marathas in three bitter wars and the Sikhs tried in 1840, but failed, one man attempted: to take on the mighty British Empire single handed.

Much of his doings are recorded in his own diary, written while hiding in a Hindu temple from the police. He describes how his feeling were stirred by the terrible famine that gripped western India in 1876/77 and realised that the miseries of India were the consequences of foreign oppressive rule.

Hence in true Hindu spirit he took a vow to stir armed rebellion and destroy the British power in India and re-establish Hindu Raj. For this he did not turn to the effeminate upper classes of India, who could not and cannot revert to such direct action but instead he turned to the sturdy rural Marathas who formed the bulk of the famous Hindu Maratha cavalry that had smashed the pride of Afghans and Mughals and only subsided after three wars with the British.

Here he found ready and able soldiers ‘First of all I went to Narooba Wada to perform my prayers and then coming and going on the road I turned the peoples minds against the British … I wished to ruin them. From morning to night, bathing, eating, sleeping I was brooding on this and I could get no proper sleep.

‘At midnight I would awake and think how the ruin of the western oppressors would be achieved until I was as one mad. I learnt to fire at targets, to ride and sword and club exercise. I had a great love of arms and always kept two guns and swords’

Phadke began to raid and cut the communications of the British and to raid their treasury. From Dhamari to Khed his fame began to collect. With each raid his monetary position increased, as did the numbers of followers in his desperate cause.

‘A child being born does not at once become a man but grow little by little and I saw my struggle with the British as such, from collecting small bands of raiders, to looting the treasuries to raising a band then an army of men for freedom … If I find that there is no success in this world then I shall go to the next to plead for the people of India’

The British government had put a price on his head by now but his following was gradually spreading. At the village of Ghanur he fought an engagement with the British army following which Phadke announced a reward for the killing of each European on a sliding scale depending on that mans position.

For some time he kept up a heroic unequal struggle with the British and their Pathan underlings under Abdul Haque.Eventually after a fierce fight he was captured in Hyderabad on 21 July 1879. He was charged for waging war against the British government which was proved by his own diary and his statements in court. There was great public enthusiasm during his trial and vast crowds collected daily to hear him speak to the point where the British were taken aback by his appeal to the common man.

A newspaper ‘Deccan Star’ in 1880 wrote ‘In the eyes of his countrymen, Vasudev Balwant Phadke did not commit any wrong … he showed spirit in trying to relieve the miseries of his countrymen … [and] by sacrificing himself he has averted the danger which sooner or later must follow intolerable oppression. We must consider him a harbinger of good fortune for India’

Realising that he was far too dangerous an individual to remain in India he was transported for life to prison in Aden. He was fettered and placed in solitary confinement. Nevertheless on 13 October 1880 this undaunted man pulled off the door by its hinges and escaped. Unfortunately, he was shortly captured again. Realising that life was now intolerable and unable to live under the bondage of the hated British he went on hunger strike and this noble son of India died on 17 February 1883.

Here was a single man standing out against what was one the most powerful empires the world has ever seen. The seeds he left grew into a mighty banyan tree with its shoots all over the nation within a short period of time. Soon the guns were booming for freedom all over from the Chaperkar brothers in Maharasthra, the Ghadr movement in Punjab to the revolutionaries in Bengal. He can, with justice, be called the father of militant nationalism and Hindutva in India.