

PESHAWER CONSPIRACY & CHANDRA SINGH GARHWALI

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ABSTRACT

Chandra Singh Garhwali was born in 1891 in Meason, Patti Chauthan, Tehsil Thalishain district Garhwal. While his early education was at home, but his actual teacher was his experience that he piled up in his wide ranging travels. He faced a long period of imprisonment for the freedom of the country.

Before meeting to Mahatma Gandhi, a feeling of patriotism and nationalism had already influenced his mind. In 1929, at Bageshwar Almora, Gandhiji bestowed Chandra Singh Garhwali a Khadi Topi and he pledged that he will redeem the honour of the topi one day. He also said that he will put all his efforts to make India independent and will make correct use of the post.

A civil disobedience movement was started in North-West province by Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and the people in 1930. The British wanted to abolish the movement at any cost, so they decided to deploy the army. But Chandra Singh Garhwali and his men of Garhwali rifles refused to follow any order of the British Commander to fire upon the unarmed people. On 23 April 1930, thousands of Pathans and Garhwali rifles stood up with a united front against the British Captain. The British Captain warned the Garhwali rifles but Chandra Singh Garhwali said in a bold voice that they are ready to die but they will not fire upon the unarmed people.

Indeed, it was an extraordinary and courageous moment in the history of Indian Freedom struggle. Most of the soldiers were punished, some receiving life imprisonment and Chandra Singh Garhwali was one of them. This incident galvanised the entire freedom movement.

The Garhwali rifles, later on, played a significant role in World Wars and in Indo China War of 1962 and on many other places. More than 25,000 soldiers of this regiment are still engaged on the border to protect our motherland.

If we could have more Indian Garhwali rifles Veer like Chandra Singh Garhwali, the condition of Indian army would have been more sound and better.

KEY WORDS: Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, Chandra Singh Garhwali, Gandhi, Peshawer Conspiracy Case.

In the career of Chandra Singh Garhwali the spirit of nationalist defiance within the army epitomised itself, much to the concern of the ruling establishment. During the first world war, Chandra Singh had been promoted to the rank of Havaldar, but afterwards he was demoted (Rahul Sankrityayan, p. 53). The country was then swept by Gandhi's charisma and non-cooperation movement. Chandra Singh was greatly influenced by Gandhiji and his teachings ([1] Chandra Singh Garhwali, interview, p.556).

Besides, he became an ardent supporter of the Arya Samaj (Rahul Sankrityayan.,p 96). He had started preparing his colleagues for the day when they would all quit the army and join the national Movement on instruction from the congress (Rahul Sankrityayan., p 106).

In 1930, during the Salt Satyagraha, Chandra Singh's Battalion (2/18, Royal Garhwal Rifles) was posted in Peshawar. Chandra Singh often slipped out from his unit and went to the bazaar to collect, those newspapers Banned in the cantonment area. During night he used to relate political happenings to the Garhwali troops (Dev Bhum Saptahik). At Peshawar Chandra Singh was called "Ustadji" by Garhwali Soldiers.

After Martin, the Commander, had told Garhwali troops that they might have to shoot the local Muslims to protect the local Hindus, Chandra Singh warned his men about British designs to foster Hindu- Muslim friction. A secret meeting was organised by Chandra Singh in which nine representatives of Garhwali troops were present. Finally it was decided that the Garhwalis would not fire at the Muslims ([1] Chandra Singh Garhwali, interview).

On April 23, 1930 Capt. Rickett with seventy two Garhwali Soldiers was deployed to the Kissa Khani bazaar of Peshawar. Chandra Singh, writes Rahul Sankrityayan, was purposely left out of the task. The Britishers, somehow informed of Chandra Singh's plan, avoided him. However, Chandra Singh made an excuse that the troops had only a bottle of water each which would not suffice in an emergency. Quarter- master Chapelle was impressed with Chandra Singh's argument and thus under the pretext of taking water for the Garhwali soldiers, he soon joined the advance party at Peshawar town (Rahul Sankrityayan, pp. 126/28). Rahul Sankrityayan's view does not appear to be correct, because if the British had known about Chandra Singh's plan, they would have arrested him immediately and the Garhwalis would not have been deployed to Peshawar. Furthermore, Chandra Singh would never have been permitted to join the other troops. Chandra Singh Garhwali also did not accept Rahul Sankrityayan's view, though he did corroborate the excuse of taking water for the soldiers ([1] Chandra Singh Garhwali, Interview, p. 55)

The Garhwali troops entered the gate of Kissa Khani Bazaar in two files. Down below there were thousands of unarmed Pathans and a sizable number of Khan Abdul Gaffer Khan's followers who

were picketing shops and dissuading the shop keeper from selling foreign foods soldiers ([2]Chandra Singh Garhwali, Interview, p. 55)

Captain Rickett ordered the crowd to vacate the Bazaar, but his orders fell on deaf ears. After this the British platoon fired blank rounds. But still the crowd did not disperse soldiers ([2] Chandra Singh Garhwali, Interview, p. 55)

On witnessing this open defiance, Rickett shouted, “Garhwalis three rounds of fire.” Chandra Singh Garhwali who was standing on his left hand side intervened immediately and shouted, “Garhwalis don’t fire.” The troops obeyed Chandra Singh’s command and put their weapons on the ground (Kanhaiya Lal Misra, pp 79-80).They were then arrested. At the court martial proceedings (known as Peshawer Conspiracy Case), the Garhwalis said, “we will not shoot our unarmed brethren ... you may blow us from the guns if you like” (D .G. Tendulkur, p. 70). Tendulkar is of the view that seventeen men were sentenced, one to transportation for life, another to fifteen years imprisonment and rest to terms of rigorous imprisonment varying from three to ten years (D .G. Tendulkur, p.70) Chandra Singh Garhwali told that for this act of disobedience, The members of the 2/18 Garhwal Rifles was given five years of departmental punishment. Sixty seven soldiers were dismissed and sixteen rank holders were given three to twenty years of imprisonment. Chandra Singh was given death sentence which was later reduced to life imprisonment.

As a sequel to this military disobedience, censorship was imposed on all news from Peshawar, particularly on those about the Garhwal Rifles posted there (March towards freedom 1919-47, Exhibition organized by National Archives of India). General Mohan Singh of the I.N.A fame once said that the two battalions of the Garhwalis joining the I.N.A. were inspired by Chandra Singh’s example. In a letter (Rahul Sankrityayan, p. 337) dated June 14, 1930 from the G.O.C., Eastern Command (Nainital) to the Chief of the General Staff, Army Headquarters, Shimla it was stated that attempts were made to undermine the loyalty of the Garhwalis at Lansdowne and of the Kumaonis at Almora by Congressmen (Home department, 1930, files no. 174, political/secret national archives). After the incident of 1930, the spirit of congress nationalism started affecting all these hill troops to an ever – increasing degree.



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