



Hunger Strike of Bhagat Singh and his Comrades

Dr. Kuldeep Kaur Dhaliwal

Principal,

Mata Ganga Khalsa College, Manji Sahib, Kottan.

In view of life sentences having been awarded to Bhagat Singh and Dutt on 12.06.1929 in the assembly bomb case their being sent to Punjabi jails was certain: whereas while being kept in a European ward in Delhi jail, there was excellent arrangement for board but loading quite contrary to this, the Punjab jails were like hell and being were very well aware of this, they had intimated the jail authorities of Punjab, upon leaving Delhi, about their going on hunger strike. On 15-16 June Bhagat Singh was sent to Mianwali and Dutt to Lahore jail.¹ The British officer who travelled with them was a kind man. Bhagat Singh convinced him emotionally that B.K. Dutt is his best friend, and he do know, whether they will meet again or not. So, they wanted to travel this last journey together. The officer gave them permission to travel together and they discussed the important facts. They planned their hunger strike for the reforms of the jail. In the way, they both went on hunger strike from 14th June 1929 in their respective jail. This was not the first chance for Bhagat Singh when he was in jail. Once he was arrested in May 1927, when he was crossing the garden in Lahore. He did not feel zeal that time. He remained in jail for one month that time where he was told that he had thrown a bomb on a crowd of Dusshera.

Till then, Indian political prisoners used to be given inhuman treatment with the exception of British offenders and a few congress leaders, rest of the political prisoners were kept like ordinary prisoners. Not only attempt was made to provide them with no facilities of washing, bathing, reading, writing, they were on the contrary, made to do hard labour and they were treated with contempt and humiliated by the jail authorities. They used to offend the revolutionaries. The convicts of Kakori case had also gone on hunger strike and they were given the same facilities as were given to the British offenders while in custody on grounds of health. But they had been convicted and sent to different jails, these facilities were withdrawn.²

The worst display of Britishers ruler and Indian slavery could be seen in the jail. Bhagat Singh read all this in 1919's Jalianwala episode, case. He had read about the hell like pain of life of Lala Lal Chand Falak, Dr. Satpal Ram Bhaj Dutt, Dr. Saif-ud-din Kitchlew, Divan Mangal Sen, Lala Harkrishan and Achet Rai Kolhatkar, in Jail. Bhagat Singh heard about the stories of the harassment of the revolutionaries in Andaman-Nicobar Fort, from Professor Bhai Parmanand ji, in his student life, that the jails of British rule were those factories.

Where government succeeds in breaking the confidence of the weak hearted activities by exploring their cases, why in such difficult situations the revolutionaries stand against their own co-workers by giving acceptance statements.

This question also disturbed Bhagat Singh all the time. But answer to this was even found, in bad condition of the jail. That the harassed people who wanted to get rid of jails opted to become the witnesses for the government.

With the secret decision of Indian Government Bhagat Singh and B.K Dutt were sent in different jails. Bhagat Singh was sent to Mianwali jail and B.K Dutt was sent to Lahore Borstal jail. Back in jails, Bhagat Singh decided to take up the issue again. He however, was convinced that the government would not respond until the prisoner's organ agitation. He also wanted to prove to Gandhi that the revolutionaries also knew how to go through the rigours of fasting and the torture of approaching death..They too could suffer the pangs of hunger, something which the followers of non-violence visibility demonstrated.³ Bhagat Singh and B.K Dutt decided to go on hunger strike in Borstal jail on June 15 and he would do in the same in Mianwali jail. In Mianwali jail Bhagat Singh met with the leaders of Gadar Lehar, Babbar Akali Lehar and Anti group of Marshal Law, who were sentenced for prison, they were detained for political reasons, being treated as criminals. Even bare necessities were denied to them in the way it was flung at animals in cages; and the authorities were also abusive in their language.⁴ Consequently Bhagat Singh wrote a letter to the Inspector-General, Punjab Jails, Lahore through the Superintendent, Mianwali District jail, on 17 June 1929.

“However, before we started our hunger strike, Jatin, who was the only comrade among us with previous experience of hunger strikes, warned us all:’ By venturing on this strike, we plunging into a prolonged or deal, which is far more challenging than the fight with pistols and revolvers..... It is far easier to die of a police bullet or by going to gallows than perishing away ‘iota by iota’ inching towards the demise; and once having entered into the arena, to retreat there from would be prejudicial to the esteem of the revolutionaries.....’ In such a scenario, it would be desirable not to undertake it at all.

He also said that’ as far as he was concerned, he, once having started it, shall not compromise till the government accepts our demands charter. He advised us all that we should, have its first hand experience by abstaining from food 24 hours to assess themselves, and if anyone finds himself lacking in his capacity to carry it to its assurance that those comrades, who opt out of hunger strike, would continue to be worthy of his equal regard as he has for the rest.”⁵

Public cooperation, from outside and inside jail was increasing. Government did not bother and the behavior got strict, towards strikers. They started giving diet, forcefully. To which Bhagat Singh and his companions tried to cease. Bhagat Singh wanted to show Gandhi that activities can also bear the pain of a fast and can bear a woe of death. They can bear that pin of starvation, for which the non-violent leaders proves. This hunger strike became a question of reputation for the government. So they resorted to forcible feeding.

In execution of the decision of the Central Committee mentioned above, Bhagat Singh in a letter to the Home Member submitted the following demands:- We as political prisoner should be given better diet and the standard of our diet should at least be the same at all. All books, other than those prescribed, along with writing materials, should be allowed to us without any restriction. At least one standard daily paper should be supplied to every prisoner. Political prisoners should have a special ward of their own in every jail must be kept together in that ward. Better clothing and toilet necessities should also be supplied.⁶

Bhagat Singh's other comrades – under- trails in the Lahore Conspiracy Case – namely, Sukhdev, Jatinder Nath Dass, Ajoy Ghosh, Shiv Verma, Gaya Parshad, Jai Dev Kapur, Raj Guru and B.K Sinha were lodged in the Lahore Borstal jail. On coming to know about the hunger strike of Bhagat Singh, they also followed suit in July 1929. After his hunger strike on the 15th June, 1929, Bhagat Singh started losing weight. From 133 lbs on the 15th June, 1929, he came down to 119 lbs on the 9th July, 1929. Similarly, the weight of his comrades began falling, but they kept up their fight. Their hunger-strike aroused wide public sympathy. News appeared daily in the press. Numerous public meetings were held to condemn the attitude of the Government. Under the joint auspices of the City Congress and the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha,

A meeting was held at Amritsar on 30th June, 1929 in Jalianwala Bagh at 8 p.m. under the chairmanship of Dr. Saif –ud-din Kitchlew to celebrate Bhagat Singh Day.⁷ Bhagat Singh and his comrade's actions were praised by Deoki Nandan Charan and Master Mota Singh. They both regarded Bhagat Singh as “the real devotee of the nation” and “Love of the country.”

“This resolution was, of course, readily carried. A like celebration i.e. Bhagat Singh day celebration were held by the Lahore branch of the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha on the 21th, July 1929, which were attended by about 10000 people. The government report mentioned that it was “the largest gathering that has attended any political meeting for some political meeting for some considerable time post.”⁸ Bhagat Singh took up their cause and proposed a hunger strike in protest at Gandhian way. He wanted to prove that the revolutionaries were willing to employ any method to fight the British.

On the other side police had collected important proofs against Bhagat Singh. In the raids of Saharanpur and Lahore, police got bomb, pistol and some cartridges 22bombs were found at Bhagwati Charan Vohra's place, at Macleod road Lahore. Some bombs were recovered from Jhansi. It was clear that someone from inside revolutionary had leaked the information. The worst thing was that their co-workers Jai Gopal and Hans Raj Vohra became witness against revolutionaries.

This hunger strike lasted 63 days. Bhagat Singh continued with his reading, writing, washing and attending the court, drafting documents, making statements, joking and laughing and humming and singing songs, as usual. During the trail, Bhagat Singh and Dutt had been kept and despite being on hunger strike used to come to Borstal jail every Sunday.⁹ Shiv Verma reminded that when on 10th July; the learning of our case started, Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt's physical condition was too much weak. They were taken on the stretches, for hearing in the court. The transfer of Bhagat Singh to Lahore central jail gave a turning point to

move of hunger strike. When the Lahore Conspiracy Case under trails met Bhagat Singh on 10th July, 1929. Jatin Das was at first adverse to hunger strike, because he regarded it as a dangerous game to play.

The enthusiasm of the rest forced him to join the strike, but before doing so he warned that he would not compromise until their demands were fully satisfied. Hence, from 13 July 1929, when the under trails, especially Jatin Das, confirmed their resolve to plunge into the fight, the struggle began to assume a grim aspect.¹⁰

When they were being taken in the court, the procedure of tying their hands was not genuine. One hand of the prisoner was tied to the constable so that the accused must not run-away with hand-cuffs. Bhagat Singh opposed this injustice and said, “This kind of treatment with us is an insult. We are soldiers for just 5 rupees. We will not bear this.” Bhagat Singh wanted to continue the strike peacefully. So, he wrote a letter to the home - ministry’s members. This was published in a weekly newspaper ‘People’ in Lahore on 25th July. Denouncing the special Magistrate, he stated: “Mr. Magistrate, we take it to be fair to us, you have not listened to any of our complaints. We have no confidence in you because you are completely controlled by the police in every matter. How can you take notes being handcuffed in the manner in which the police want to handcuff us? How can we talk to each other about the case or consult each other?”

“We do not expect justice from this court. Why enact this force? Are you or is K.B. Abdul Aziz (a police official) the presiding officer of the court? “The magistrate took it as an “assaulting attitude and an act of rowdyism,” and suggested to the superintendent of the jail in a letter that disciplinary action to be taken against Bhagat Singh.¹¹ as stated the report of the superintendent, central jail, Lahore, sent to the Inspector General, prisons. Bhagat Singh told him that they would not accept those concessions, unless the diet, scale was published in gazette as a notification to the effect that “this is the scale for all political prisons.¹²

The government decided to force feed them and thus prolong the agony. The hunger strike wants a quick decision; the government on the other hand, has everything to gain by postponing a decision. The strikers decided not to take any medicine (the theory is to die only of hunger) and denied force feeding.¹³ the authorities tried to convince the strikers in every way.

For example, while looking a cell they would put milk inside so that the aroma might convince the prisoner to break his solemn vow. But the revolutionaries breaking the pitchers containing milk. Finally the jailor gave way and water was supplied in the cells. Bhagat Singh and his comrades adopted touching methods to daft the government. Kishori swallowed red pepper and boiling water to cause sore throat, so that the passage of the tube led to such coughing that he had to be taken out, lest he might die of suffocation. I swallowed flies immediately after forced feeding to induce vomiting.¹⁴

When the Punjab Government saw that the strike had presumed importance, they wanted to apply the same trick by which the Kakori prisoners had been duped (deceived). The Lahore Comrades rejected to be taken in. The hunger strike was attracting great attention As soon as the hunger strike and the strike is for a general

cause and not for them. Mr. Vidyarthi has himself seen the scars of wounds inflicted on strikers, during face-feeding operations. As soon as the strike gone so long, without any solution then Jawaharlal Nehru met these revolutionaries and said worryingly, “I was very much pained to see the difficulties of the heroes. They have staked their lives in the struggle. They want that political prisoners should be treated as political prisoners. I am quite hopeful that their self-sacrifice would be crowned with success.”¹⁵

Mohammad Ali Jinnah raised his matter in central legislature. He said in his speech, “They are not treated on the basis of caste, rather at the parameter of behavior is done, which was adopted for Europeans in terms of need for food. This is not only the question that they wanted to be treated like Europeans, Jinnah said satirically, “As I know, Bhagat Singh and Dutt wear hats and when they came in the court, they were in the half pants too. So they should be treated like Europeans.

But the government did not move, rather the other members in jail got ready for strike. On 28th July 1929, Jatinder Nath Das’s condition got deteriorated, Bhagat Singh sent message in Bostral jail that all the prisoners from that jail should dismiss the strike. But they did not bother and Jatinder Nath Das’s condition got worsted, Instead of continuous efforts of the officers, he did not get ready to take any kind of diet.¹⁶ Doctor handled Dass in the end after being relieved from other prisoners. He wanted to deal with him at leisure.

When the first phase of wrestling and forcibly pinning down was over he inserted the tube through the other nostril. Dass began feeling suffocated. Even then without opening his mouth he tried to stop the pipe from reaching his stomach. Instead of the stomach the second pipe went into his lungs. The doctor was in a hurry. He did not look at his face and proud about a sees(about a Kg) of milk into his lungs and in ecstasy of being successful left him writing in pain and went away.¹⁷ By that time, Bhagat Singh and Dutt had completed 81 days and other 53 days. As their comrade Jatinder Nath Das was almost on his death bed, Bhagat Singh and other could not feel victorious. Therefore two days, later i.e. on the 4th September 1929, Bhagat Singh, Dutt and three others resumed the strike on the ground that:

1. Jatinder Nath Das was not unconditionally released, and
2. That the two convict prisoners, Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt, who are under trail prisoners in the Lahore conspiracy case were not allowed to associate with non-convict prisoners in the same case.¹⁸

Consequently on the 2nd September, 1929, Bhagat Singh and his comrades, expect Jatin Das abandoned the strike.

It is mentioned in the tribune Newspaper:

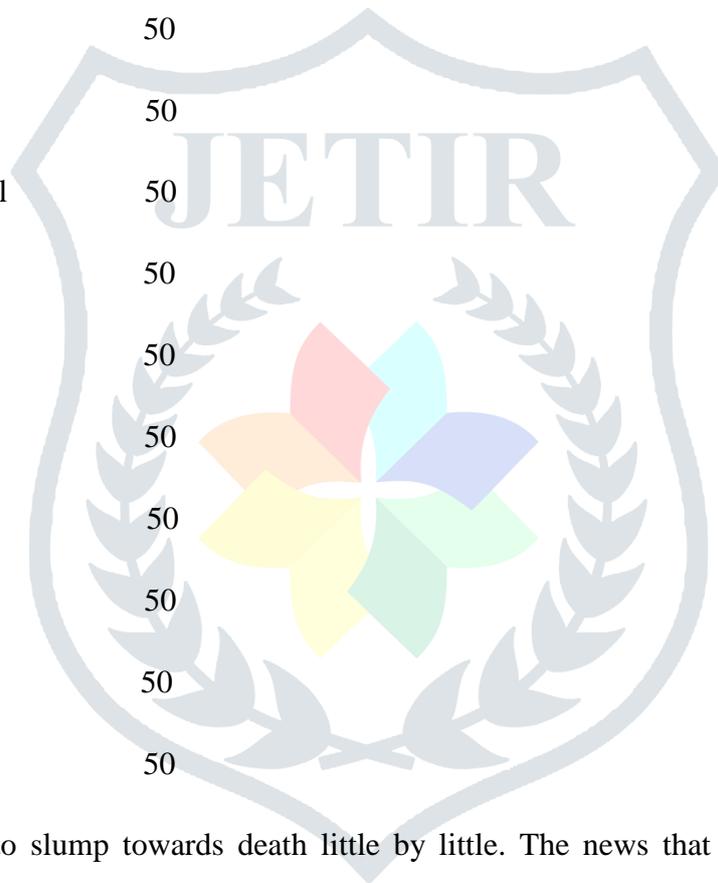
The Tribune, 4 September 1929:

AT LAST

Lahore September 2,

Today, as a result of certain assurances given by members of the jail enquiry committee, the under-trial prisoners in the Lahore conspiracy case agreed to the Lahore conspiracy case agreed to discontinue the hunger-strike. They had been on strike for the number of days noted against their names:-

| Names | Days |
|--------------------------|------|
| Sardar Bhagat Singh | 80 |
| Mr. B.K Dutt | 80 |
| Mr. Jatinder Nath Das | 50 |
| P. Kamal Nath Tewari | 50 |
| Mr. Ajay Kumar Ghosh | 50 |
| Mr. Jitendar Nath Sanyal | 50 |
| Mr. Gaya Prasad | 50 |
| Mr. Jai Dev | 50 |
| Mr. Shiv Verma | 50 |
| Mr. Mahabir | 50 |
| Mr. Agya Ram | 50 |
| Mr. Kishori Lal Rattan | 50 |
| Mr. Bijoy Kumar Sinha | 50 |



From that day he began to slump towards death little by little. The news that the condition of Dass had worsened, spread like wild fire in Lahore and now the whole city flocked to see him for the last time. The respect that his body received in Lahore and while carrying him from Lahore to Calcutta on every station on the way is incomparable in the history of the country. Except C.R.Dass, Bhagat Singh, Gandhi, Rabinder Nath Tagore and Pandit Nehru hardly any other person has received so much respect from the people at his demise.¹⁹ Gandhi kept mum over the whole affair, and when he did speak after a few days, he most in opporunately spoke of violence. He tried to prove that Jatin Das did not belong to the 'School of Violence'. The revolutionaries had a good laugh at Gandhi, because they knew that Jatin was an ardent revolutionary.²⁰ On the 13th September, 1929, at about 9 a.m., Dass took a turn of worse. 'The Lion of Bengal' breathed his last at 1:10 p.m at the altar of the nation and for his principles.²¹ This young patriot burning with the love of the nation had sacrificed himself by 64 days of fasting. He did it for the securing of a better treatment for

political prisoners. After Das's death the civil surgeon examined the records and gave a certificate saying that the death appeared to be due to inanition and that no post-mortem was necessary.

In this connection the secretary of state in London reported telegraphically to the Viceroy on 17th September concerning his funeral procession. "It is said about the Calcutta procession that it was the record size procession in which five lack people participated"²²Subhash Chandra Bose sent Rs.600 from Calcutta to K.C. Dass, brother of Jatindra Nath Dass who was at Lahore, he paid it for the transportation of the body to Calcutta. The body was given up to K.C Das. It was taken in a procession which brought through Lytton Road, Anarkali, Lahore Gali, Paper Mandi, Macchi Hatta, Rang Mahal, Dabbi Bazaar and old Kotwali. This procession was headed by Dr. Gopi Chand, Kitchlew, Sardul Singh, Keveesher, Kishan Singh and other leaders, they reached Delhi gate at 8:30 pm. Here a public meeting was held under the president ship of Mohammad Alam and rich tributes were paid to the departed soul. Lacks of people gathered at the station of Lahore to pay their last homage to the great patriot. Jatin Das's body, accompanied by six attendants which were taken from Lahore by the Howrah Express on 14th September, 1929.

Viceroy reported the secretary of Govt. like this – "The procession of Calcutta was historic in the sense of gatherings, where millions of people participated. The crowd was undoubtedly huge. The meetings in favour of Dass and criticizing the Government are organized at many places. But there is not any information with the clash of Government at any place."

The death of Jaytinder Nath Das raised country –wide protests, public meetings and mass demonstrations were held to criticize the 'dilly-dallying and shilly – shallying character of the government', as Pandit Moti Lal Nehru preferred to call it and paid mighty tributes to the self-sacrifice of Das. Reporting on the impact of Das death, the Deputy Commissioner of Lahore said, "Undoubtedly the courage and endurance which J.N.Dass has shown has extracted sympathy and admiration."²³

After the martyrdom of Dass Pandit Moti Lal Nehru moving the adjournment motion in central assembly on 14th September 1929, said that his "..... Change was that in dealing with such matters the government has lacked human spirit, The charge is that when a human being was dying slowly the government was not doing anything which was its duty to do....". Every day the news came that Das's life was slipping away that he would die anytime. The news was that hunger strikers were also in a critical condition.

What was the government doing all this while? Sir, it is said when Rome was burning Nero was playing his violin. Our merciful government has marched one step ahead of Nero."²⁴

In the favour of resolution, Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya, put his views, "I want the government to keep in mind that what character is of the accused. These people are not common criminals. They all are motivated from the high feeling of their country love. They are holding a burning fire for the freedom of their country in their hearts. Government has failed to give proper attention towards this fact, that these people who are kept in Lahore jail often propping them criminals for making govt's case strong, are the people of high ethics.

Amar Nath Dutt of Bengal speaks out the poetic lines of Ravinder Nath Thakur, who got emotional while speaking in favour of resolution.

Bojha Tera Bhari ho,

Doobe ve teri Khana,

The meaning of which is,” your sins will prove to be heavier and your boat will definitely sink and your flag will fall early.

Another jury member said, “The Home Minister Dyre and O’Dyre’s family, so, he wants to avenge the revolutionaries. The resolution on criticism got passed with 55votes over 45. Naujawan Bharat Sabha had organized a Sarv Hind conference. On 26, 27 December 1929, at Lahore, Commarade Sohasini Numbyre had represented this conference. This conference passed the resolution, paid homage to the sacrifice of Dass and put responsibility of all this on the government. Bhagat Singh was deeply feeling the loss of Jatin Dass. He was so emotional and cried loudly. He opened his diary and wrote,” The innocent had died, “They are buried un named and at the barren places. Nobody drop tears on their death. The stranger took them to the graves. No ‘cross’ was put on their graves. There is just a grass, growing over it. The waves of the sea are only witness to their struggle but even these waves could not send their goodbye to the faraway places. Indian nationalist newspaper wrote editorials adoring and applauding the sacrifice of Jatinder Nath Das and his power of endurance against the pangs of hunger and thirst.

For instance The Tribune of Lahore (now of Ambala) thus, wrote on Jatin’s death: “ If ever a man died a hero and a martyr in a noble cause, that man is Jatinder Das and the blood of martyr has in all ages and countries been the seed of higher and noble life, better social and political order.”²⁵

Das’s death made the revolutionaries more strong and they think that mourning is useless. We have to prepare for the real test. After Das’s death, the jail Inquiry committee sent its recommendations providing facilities to political prisoners. As a consequence, Bhagat Singh and his comrades dismissed the hunger strike. But the government started accepting delaying tactics in the execution of the recommendations of the jail inquiry committee. Bhagat Singh, the high-spirited courageous lad that he was, not arranged to take those dilly-dally tactics lying down. Therefore he sent a telegram through a special magistrate to the government that government seems too Denny on 25th January, 1930 he sent an application to the home minister. It was as following:

“Suspended hunger-strike on assurance given by the jail committee that the question of the treatment of political prisoners was going to be finally settled to our satisfaction within a very short period. Copies A.I.C.C resolutions regarding hunger strike was held by jail authorities. Authorities refused congress deputation to meet the prisoners. The conspiracy case under-traits were assaulted brutally on 23rd and 24th October, 1929, by the order of high police officials.”

Sd/Bhagat Singh, ²⁶

Dutt and others

The Government had answered this application by saying it was a result of foreign interference. The complaint of 23, 24 October attacks was dismissed on the basis that those people were taken to the court forcefully. And by this Bhagat Singh and his followers succeeded in giving a good treatment to the political prisoners. Because the Government was forced to make the new rules for giving facilities to the prisoners. Dass's death made the revolutionaries more strong and they think that mourning is useless. We have to prepare for the real test. After Dass's death the jail enquiry committee sent its recommendations. In which the facilities for the political prisoners were demanded.

i

- 
1. Malwinderjit Singh Warriach and his comrades, 2017, p 92.
2. Hans Raj Rahbar, op cit, p 217
3. Kuldeep Nayar, op.cit...P.80-81
4. M.M Juneja, op.cit...p 92.
5. Bhagat Singh Aur Unke Sathion Ke Dastavej, edited by Jagmohan Singh & Chamanlal (Delhi, 1986), p.299-300
6. Home Department (Political), Government of India, 1930 File No. 130 and K.W page 13(of the file)
7. Home Department (Political), Government of India, 1930, File No.130 and K.W.,P.55(of the file)
8. M.J.S.Warriach, Bhagat Singh the Internal Rebel, p.195
9. M.M. Juneja, op cit, p. 93
10. G.S. Deol, op.cit...p.67
11. Home Department (Political), Government of India (1930), File no.36/IV, page 20(a) of the file
12. Manmathnath Gupta, Bhagat Singh and his times p 68
13. Ajay Ghosh, Bhagat Singh and his comrades, Bombay, 1945, p 10
14. Manmathnath Gupta, op.cit..p 17
15. Kuldeep Kaur Dhaliwal, op.cit.p
16. Shiv Verma ,Reminiscences of Fellow Revolutionary,Chandigarh,2013,p.108
17. G.S Deol, op.cit.. p 70
18. Home Department (Political), Government of India (1930), File no.137, petition from Bhagat Singh, B.K Dutt and others accused in Lahore conspiracy case about treatment-page 2 (notes)
19. Shiv Verma, op. cit..p.111
20. Ibid

21. Manmath Nath, op.cit...p.176

22. G.S. Deol,op..cit.. p.71

23. Home Department (Political) Government of India,1929 File no. 21/63 D.O .Letter from the Deputy Commissioner of Lahore, dated the 14th September,1929

24. Shiv Verma, op..cit...p.112

25. G.S Deol, op.cit, p73

26. Home Department (Politicals) ,Government of India (1930) , file no. 137,p. 26

