

Hunger-Strikers' Demands Reiterated

Bhagat Singh

28th January, 1930

The Home Member,
The Govt. of India, Delhi.
Through
The Special Magistrate,
Lahore Conspiracy Case, Lahore.

SIR,

With reference to our telegram dated 20th Jan. 1930, reading as follows, we have not been given any reply.

Home Member, India Government. Delhi Undertrials, Lahore Conspiracy Case and other Political Prisoners suspended hunger-strike on the assurance that the India Govt. was considering Provincial Jail Committee's reports. All India Government Conference over. No action yet taken. As vindictive treatment to political prisoners still continues, we request we be informed within a week final Govt. decision. Lahore Conspiracy Case undertrials.

As briefly stated in the above telegram, we beg to bring to your kind notice that the Lahore Conspiracy Case undertrials and several other political prisoners confined in Punjab jails suspended hunger strike on the assurance given by the members of the Punjab Jail Enquiry Committee that the question of the treatment of political prisoners was going to be finally settled to our satisfaction within a very short period. Further, after the death of our great martyr Jatindra Nath Das, the matter was taken up in the Legislative Assembly and the same assurance was given publicly by Sir James Crerar. It was then pronounced that there has been a change of heart and the question of the treatment of political prisoners was receiving the utmost sympathy of the government. Such political prisoners who were still on hunger strike in jails of the different parts of the country then suspended their hunger strike on the request being made to this effect in an AICC resolution passed in view of the said assurance and the critical condition of some of the prisoners.

Since then all the local governments have submitted their reports. A meeting of Inspectors-General of Prisons of different provinces has been held at Lucknow and the deliberations of the All-India Govt. Conference have been concluded at Delhi. The All-India Conference was held in the month of Dec. last. Over not carried into effect any final recommendations. By such dilatory attitude of the government we no less than the general public have begun to fear that perhaps the question has been shelved. Our apprehensions have been strengthened by the vindictive

treatment meted out to hunger strikers and other political prisoners during the last four months. It is very difficult for us to know the details of the hardships to which the political prisoners are being subjected. Still the little information that has trickled out of the four walls of the jails is sufficient to furnish us with glaring instances. We give below a few such instances which we cannot but feel, are not in conformity with the govt. assurance.

1. Sj. B.K. Banerji, undergoing 5 years imprisonment in connection with Dakshineswar Bomb Case in Lahore Central Jail, joined the hunger strike last year. Now as a punishment for the same, for each day of his period of hunger strike, two days of the remission so far earned by him have been forfeited. Under usual circumstances his release was due in Dec. last, but it will be delayed by full four months. In the same Jail similar punishment has been awarded to Baba Sohan Singh, an old man of about seventy, now undergoing his sentence of life transportation in connection with the (first) Lahore Conspiracy Case. Besides, among others, Sardar Gopal Singh confined in Mianwali Jail, Master Mota Singh confined in Rawalpindi Jail have also been awarded vindictive punishments for joining the general hunger strike. In most of these cases the periods of imprisonment have been enhanced while some of them have been removed from the Special class.
2. For the same offence, i.e. joining the general hunger strike, Messrs. Sachindra Nath Sanyal, Ram Kishan Khattri and Suresh Chandra Bhattacharya, confined in Agra Central Jail, Raj Kumar Sinha, Sachindra Nath Bukshi, Manmath Nath Gupta and several other Kakori case prisoners have been severely punished. It is reliably learnt that Mr. Sanyal was given bar-fetters and solitary cell-confinement and as a consequence there has been a break-down in his health. His weight has gone down by eighteen pounds. Mr. Bhattacharya is reported to be suffering from tuberculosis. The three Bareilly Jail prisoners also have been punished. It is learnt that all their privileges have been withdrawn. Even their usual rights of interviewing with relations and communication with them were forfeited. They have all been considerably reduced in their weights. Two press statements have been issued in this connection in Sep. 1929 and Jan. 1930 by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.
3. After the passing of the AICC resolution regarding hunger strike, the copies of the same, which were sent to different political prisoners, were withheld by the jail authorities. Further, the govt. refused a Congress deputation to meet the prisoners in this respect.
4. The Lahore Conspiracy Case undertrials were assaulted brutally on 23rd and 24th Oct., 1929, by orders of high police officials. Full details have appeared in the press. The copy of the statement of the one of us recorded by the Special Magistrate, Pt. Shri Krishan, has been duly forwarded to you in a communication dated 16th Dec., 1929 Neither the Punjab Government nor the Govt. of India felt it necessary to reply or even acknowledge receipt of our communication praying for an enquiry. While, on the other hand, local government has felt the imperative necessity of prosecuting us in connection with the very same incident for offering "voilent" resistance".
5. In the last week of Dec. 1929, Sj. Kiran Chandra Das and eight others confined in the Lahore Borstal Jail, when being taken to and produced in the Magistrate's Court, were found handcuffed and chained together in flagrant breach of the unanimous recommendations

of the Punjab Jail Enquiry Committee and also of Inspector-General of Prisons, Punjab. It is further noteworthy that these prisoners were undertrials, changed for a bailable offence. A long statement issued by Dr. Mohd. Aslam, Lala Duni Chand of Lahore and Lala Duni Chand of Ambala in this connection was published in Tribune.

When we learnt these and other sufferings of the political prisoners we refrained from resuming our hunger strike, though we were much grieved as we thought that the matter was going to be finally settled at an early date, but in the light of the above instances, are we now to believe that the untold sufferings of the hunger strikers and the supreme sacrifice made by Jatin Das have all been in vain? Are we to understand that the govt. gave its assurance only to check the growing tide of public agitation and to avert a crisis? You will agree with us if we say that we have waited patiently for a sufficiently reasonable period of time. But we cannot wait indefinitely. The government, by its dilatory attitude and the continuation of vindictive treatment to political prisoners, has left us no other option but to resume the struggle. We realise that to go on hunger strike and to carry it on is no easy task. But let us at the same time point out that India can produce many more Jatins and Wagias, Ran Rakshas and Bhan Singhs. (The last two named laid down their lives in the Andamans in 1917 – the first breathed his last after 63 days of hunger strike while the other died the death of a great hero after silently undergoing in human tortures for full six months.)

Enough has been said by us and the members of the public (inquiry committee) in justification of the better treatment of political prisoners and it is unnecessary here to repeat the same. We would however like to say a few words as regards the inclusion of motive as the basis and the most important factor in the matter of classification. Great fuss has been created on the question of criteria of classification. We find that motive has altogether been excluded so far from the criteria suggested by different provincial governments. This is really strange attitude. It is through motive alone that the real value of any action can be decided. Are we to understand that the Government is unable to distinguish between a robber who robs and kills his victim and a Kharag Bahadur who kills a villain and saves the honour of a young lady and redeems society of a most licentious parasite? Are both to be treated as two men belonging to the same category? Is there no difference between two men who commit the same offence, one guided by selfish motive and the other by a selfless one? Similarly, is there no difference between a common murderer and a political worker, even if the latter resorts to violence? Does not his selflessness elevate his place from amongst those of ordinary criminals? In these circumstances we think that motive should be held as the most important factor in the criteria for classification.

Last year, in the beginning of our hunger strike, when public leaders including Dr. Gopi Chand and Lala Duni Chand of Ambala – the last named being one of the signatories to the Punjab Jail Enquiry Committee Report – approached us to discuss the same thing and when they told us that the government considered to treat the political prisoners convicted of offences of violent nature as Special class prisoners, then by way of compromise we agreed to the proposal to the extent of excluding those actually charged with murder. But, Later on, the discussion took a different turn and the communique containing the terms of reference for the Punjab Jail Enquiry Committee was so worded that the question of motive seemed to be altogether excluded, and the classification was based on two things:

1. Nature of Offence; and

2. Social Status of “Offender”.

These criteria, instead of solving the problem, made it all the more complicated.

We could understand two classes amongst the political prisoners, those charged for non-violent offences and those charged for violent offences. But then creeps in the question of social status in the report of the Punjab Jail Enquiry Committee. As Chaudhary Afzal Haq has pointed out, and rightly too, in his note of dissent to this report, what will be the fate of those political workers who have been reduced to pauper’s conditions due to their honorary services in the cause of freedom? Are they to be left at the mercy of a magistrate who will away try to prove the bonafide of his loyalty by classifying everyone as an ordinary convict? Or, is it expected that a non-cooperator will stretch his hand before the people against whom he is fighting as an opponent, begging for better treatment in jail? Is this the way of removing the causes of dissatisfaction, or rather intensifying them? It might be argued that people living in property outside the jails, should not expect luxuries inside the prison when they are detained for the purpose of punishment. But, are the reforms that are demanded, of a nature of luxury? Are they not the bare necessities of life, according to the most moderate standard of living? In spite of all the facilities that can possibly be demanded, jail will ever remain a jail. The prison in itself does not contain and can never contain any magnetic power to attract the people from outside. Nobody will commit offences simply to come to jail. Moreover, may we venture to say that it is a very poor argument on the part of any government to say that its citizens have been driven to such extreme destitution that their standard of living has fallen even lower than that of jails? Does not such an argument cut at the very root of that government’s right of existence? Anyhow, we are not concerned with that at present. What we want to say is that the best way to remove the prevailing dissatisfaction would be to classify the political prisoners as such into a separate class which may further be subdivided, if need be, into two classes — one for those convicted of nonviolent offences and the other for persons whose offences include violence. In that case motive will become one of the deciding factors. To say that motive cannot be ascertained in political cases is hypocritical assertion. What is it that today informs the jail authorities to deprive the ‘politicals’ even of the ordinary privileges? What it is that deprives them of the special grades or ‘nambardaries’, etc.? What does make the authorities to keep them aloof and separated from all other convicts? The same thing can help in the classification also.

As for the special demands, we have already stated them in full in our memorandum to the Punjab Jail Enquiry Committee. We would however particularly emphasise that no political prisoner, whatever his offence may be, should be given any hard and undignified labour for which he may not feel aptitude. All of them, confined in one jail, should be kept together in the same ward. At least one standard daily newspaper in vernacular or English should be given to them. Full and proper facilities for study should be granted. Lastly, they should be allowed to supplement their expenses for diet and clothing from their private sources.

We still hope that the government will carry into effect without further delay its promise made to us and to the public, so that there may not be another occasion for resuming the hunger strike. Unless and until we find a definite move on the part of the government to redeem its promise in the course of the next seven days, we shall be forced to resume the hunger strike.

Yours, etc.
Bhagat Singh, Dutt
& others
dated: 28th Jan., 1930 Undertrials, Lahore Conspiracy Case

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[The Lahore Conspiracy Case (LCC) prisoners had suspended their hunger strike on the assurance that the Government of India was considering the Jail Committee Report and that the jail reforms would be punished for participating in the hunger strike. After the hunger strike was suspended, the GOI, however, resorted to delaying tactics. Disciplinary acting was also taken against hunger strikers in U.P. and Punjab jails (other than LCC prisoners). It was in this connection that Bhagat Singh wrote this letter to the GOI, which was short of a notice-cum-ultimatum for resuming the hunger strike.]

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