

SADHU SUNDAR SINGH - A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Sadhu Sundar Singh disappeared in the foothills of the Himalayas in 1929. As a Christian witness he had been rejected as well as welcomed, persecuted, and even left for dead. By many missionaries and even Indian Christian leaders he had been regarded as a highly eccentric convert, totally out of step with contemporary Christianity as he wandered the roads in his yellow robe and turban. And yet, even though he never heard the later vogue-word “indigenisation,” he had done more than any man in the first half of the twentieth century to establish that “Jesus belongs to India.” He made it clear that Christianity is not an imported, alien, foreign religion but is indigenous to Indian needs, aspirations, and faith. He remains one of the permanently significant figures of Indian Christianity.

Sundar Singh was born in 1889 into an important landowning Sikh family in Patiala state, North India. Sikhs, rejecting Hindu polytheism and Muslim intolerance in the sixteenth century, had become a vigorous nation with a religion of their own. Sundar Singh’s mother took him week by week to sit at the feet of a Sadhu, an ascetic holy man, who lived in the jungle some miles away, but she also sent him to a Christian mission school where he could learn English.

Her death when he was fourteen plunged him into violence and despair. He turned on the missionaries, persecuted their Christian converts, and ridiculed their faith. In final defiance of their religion, he bought a Bible and burned it page by page in his home compound while his friends watched. The same night he went to his room determined to commit suicide on a railway line.

However, before dawn, he wakened his father to announce that he had seen Jesus Christ in a vision and heard His voice. Henceforth he would follow Christ forever, he declared. Still no more than fifteen, he was utterly committed to Christ and in the twenty-five years left to him would witness heroically for his Lord. The discipleship of the teenager was immediately tested as his father pleaded and demanded that he give up this absurd “conversion.” When he refused, Sher Singh gave a farewell feast for his son, then denounced him and expelled him from the family. Several hours later, Sundar realised that his food had been poisoned, and his life was saved only by the help of a nearby Christian community.

On his sixteenth birthday he was publicly baptised as a Christian in the parish church in Simla, a town high in the Himalayan foothills. For some time previously he had been staying at the Christian Leprosy Home at Sabathu, not far from Simla, serving the leprosy patients there. It was to remain one of his most beloved bases and he returned there after his baptism. Then, in October 1906, he set out from it in quite a new way. He walked onto the road, a tall, good-looking, vigorous teenager, wearing a yellow robe and turban. Everyone stared at him as he passed. The yellow robe was the “uniform” of a Hindu Sadhu, traditionally an ascetic devoted to the gods, who either begged his way along the roads or sat, silent, remote, and often filthy, meditating in the jungle or some lonely place. The young Sundar Singh had also chosen the saddle’s way, but he would be a Sadhu with a difference.

“I am not worthy to follow in the steps of my Lord,” he said, “but, like Him, I want no home, no possessions. Like Him I will belong to the road, sharing the suffering of my people, eating with those who will give me shelter, and telling all men of the love of God.”

He at once put his vocation to the test by going back to his home village, Rampur, where he was shown an unexpectedly warm welcome. This was poor preparation for the months that were to follow. Scarcely tough enough to meet physical hardship, the sixteen-year-old Sadhu went northward through the Punjab, over the Bannihal Pass into Kashmir, and then back through fanatically Muslim Afghanistan and into the brigand-infested North-West Frontier and Baluchistan. His thin, yellow robe gave him little protection against the snows, and his feet became torn from the rough tracks. Not many months had passed before the little Christian communities of the north were referring to him as “the apostle with the bleeding feet.” This initiation showed him what he might expect in the future. He was stoned, arrested, visited by a shepherd who talked with strange intimacy about Jesus and then was gone, and left to sleep in a way-side hut with an unexpected cobra for company. Meetings with the mystical and the sharply material, persecution and welcome, would all characterise his experience in years ahead. From the villages in the Simla hills, the long line of the snow-clad Himalayas and the rosy peak of Nanga Parbat, rose in the distance. Beyond them lay Tibet, a closed Buddhist land that missionaries had long failed to penetrate with the gospel. Ever since his baptism Tibet had beckoned Sundar, and in 1908, at the age of nineteen, he crossed its frontiers for the first time. Any stranger entering into this closed fanatical territory, dominated by Buddhism and devil-worship, risked both terror as well as death. Singh took the risk with his eyes, and his heart, wide open. The state of the people appalled him. Their airless homes, like themselves, were filthy. He himself was stoned as he bathed in some cold water because they believed that “holy men never washed.” Food was mostly unobtainable and he existed on hard, parched barley. Everywhere there was hostility. And this was only “lower Tibet” just across the border. Sundar went back to Sabathu determined to return the next year.

He had a great desire: to visit Palestine and re-live some of the happenings in Jesus’ life. In 1908 he went to Bombay, hoping to board a convenient ship. But to his intense disappointment the government refused him a permit, and he had to return to the north. It was on this trip that he suddenly recognised a basic dilemma of the Christian mission to India. A brahmin had collapsed in the hot, crowded carriage and, at the next station, the Anglo-Indian stationmaster came rushing with a cup of water from the refreshment room. The brahmin - a high-caste Hindu - thrust it away in horror. He needed water, but he could only accept it in his own drinking vessel. When that was brought he drank, and revived. In the same way, Sundar Singh realised, India would not widely accept the gospel of Jesus offered in Western guise. That, he recognised, was why many listeners responded to him in his Indian Sadhu’s robe.

There was still sharper disillusionment to come. In 1909 he was persuaded to begin training for the Christian ministry at the Anglican college in Lahore. From the beginning he found himself being tormented by fellow students for being “different” and no doubt too self assured. This phase ended when their ringleader heard Singh quietly praying for him, with love in his tones and words. But other tensions remained. Much in the college course seemed irrelevant to the gospel as India needed to hear it,

and then, as the course drew to an end, the principal stated that he must now discard his Sadhu's robe and wear "respectable" European clerical dress; use formal Anglican worship; sing English hymns; and never preach outside his parish without special permission. Never again visit Tibet, he asked? That would be, to him, an unthinkable rejection of God's call. With deep sadness he left the college, still dressed in his yellow robe, and in 1912 began his annual trek into Tibet as the winter snows began to melt on the Himalayan tracks and passes.

Stories from those years are astonishing and sometimes incredible. Indeed there were those, who insisted that they were mystical rather than real happenings. That first year, 1912, he returned with an extraordinary account of finding a three-hundred-year old Christian hermit in a mountain cave - the Maharishi of Kailas, with whom he spent some weeks in deep fellowship. Other stories were more credible, even if more terrible. He had been sewn into a wet yak-skin and left to be crushed to death as it shrank in the hot sun ... tied into cloths laced with leeches and scorpions to sting him and suck his blood ... roped to a tree as bait for wild animals. At these and at other times he had been rescued by members of the "Sunnyasi Mission" - secret disciples of Jesus wearing their Hindu markings, whom he claimed to have found all over India.

Whether he won many continuing disciples of Christ on these hazardous Tibetan treks is not yet known. For the Tibetan it was Buddhism or nothing. To acknowledge Jesus Christ was to ask for death. But the Sadhu's own courageous preaching can not have been without effect.

As Sundar Singh moved through his twenties his ministry widened greatly, and long before he was thirty years old his name and picture were familiar all over the Christian world. He described in terms of a vision a struggle with Satan to retain his humility but he was, in fact, always human, approachable and humble, with a sense of fun and a love of nature. This, with his "illustrations" from ordinary life, gave his addresses great impact. Many people said: "He not only looks like Jesus, he talks like Jesus must have talked." Yet all his talks and his personal speech sprang out of profound early morning meditation, especially on the Gospels. In 1918 he made a long tour of South India and Ceylon, and the following year he was invited to Burma, Malaya, China, and Japan. Some of the stories from these tours were as strange as any of his Tibetan adventures. He had power over wild things, like the leopard which crept up to him while he stood praying and crouched as he fondled its head. He had power over evil, typified by the sorcerer who tried to hypnotise him in a railway-carriage and blamed the Bible in the Sadhu's pocket for his failure. He had power over disease and illness, though he never allowed his healing gifts to be publicised.

For a long time Sundar Singh had wanted to visit Britain, and the opportunity came when his old father, Sher Singh, came to tell him that he too had become a Christian and wished to give him the money for his fare to Britain. He visited the West twice, travelling to Britain, the United States, and Australia in 1920, and to Europe again in 1922. He was welcomed by Christians of many traditions, and his words searched the hearts of people who now faced the aftermath of World War I and who seemed to evidence a shallow attitude to life. Sundar was appalled by the materialism, emptiness, and irreligion he found everywhere, contrasting it with Asia's awareness of God, no

matter how limited that might be. Once back in India he continued his ministry, though it was clear that he was getting more physically frail.

His gifts, his personal attractiveness, the relevance of Christ as he presented Him to his Indian people could have given Sundar Singh a unique position of leadership in the Indian church. But to the end of his life he remained a man who sought nothing for himself, but only the opportunity to offer Christ to everyone. He was not a member of any denomination, and did not try to begin one of his own, though he shared fellowship with Christians of all kinds. He lived (to use a later phrase) to introduce his own people to “the Christ of the Indian road.”

In 1923 Sundar Singh made the last of his regular summer visits to Tibet and came back exhausted. His preaching days were obviously over and, in the next years, in his own home or those of his friends in the Simla hills he gave himself to meditation, fellowship, and writing some of the things he had lived to preach.

In 1929, against all his friends’ advice, Sundar determined to make one last journey to Tibet. In April he reached Kalka, a small town below Simla, a prematurely aged figure in his yellow robe among pilgrims and holy men who were beginning their own trek to one of Hinduism’s holy places some miles away. Where he went after that is unknown. Whether he fell from a precipitous path, died of exhaustion, or reached the mountains, will remain a mystery. Sundar Singh had been seen for the last time. But more than his memory remains, and he has continued to be one of the most treasured and formative figures in the development and story of Christ’s church in India.

THE LIFE OF SUNDAR SINGH

1889 - Born at Rampur, Punjab.

1903 - Conversion.

1904 - Cast out from home.

1905 - Baptised in Simla; begins life as a Sadhu.

1907 - Works in leprosy hospital at Sabathu.

1908 - First visit to Tibet.

1909 - Enters divinity college, Lahore, to train for the ministry.

1911 - Hands back his preacher’s license; returns to the Sadhu’s life.

1912 - Tours through north India and the Buddhist states of the Himalayas.

1918-1922 - Travels worldwide.

1923 - Turned back from Tibet.

1925-1927 - Quietly spends time writing.

1927 - Sets out for Tibet but returns due to illness.

1929 - Attempts to reach Tibet and disappears.