



## LALA LAJPAT RAI



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A versatile personality—politician-social worker, writer, journalist, orator and parliamentarian—Lala Lajpat Rai, popularly known as ‘Punjab Kesari’ was born on 28 January 1865 in village Dhudike in Ludhiana District of Punjab. His father, Shri Radha Kishan was a teacher of Urdu and Persian and was endowed with a deep love for learning and possessed a lofty moral character. His mother, Smt. Gulab Devi, was a very religious minded lady. Lajpat Rai inherited from his father the virtues of duty, responsibility, frankness, honesty of purpose, spirit of sacrifice and independence and from his mother, the virtues of charity, large heartedness, tenderness and devotion.

Lajpat Rai received his elementary education partly from his father and partly from his school teachers. While in school, he usually held the top position in his class. He had the honour of winning numerous prizes too. He won the affection and admiration of his teachers.

Lajpat Rai studied at the village school and the Mission School, Ludhiana and Ambala. He distinguished himself at every stage of his academic career notwithstanding weak health and unfavourable circumstances. Right from his school days, he acquired a passion for reading, writing and speaking which continued throughout his life. He took keen interest in extra-curricular activities and showed qualities of leadership even as a school boy.

In 1880, he joined the Government College at Lahore and simultaneously joined the Law College. He took the licence for *Mukhtiarship* in 1883 and started legal practice in the Revenue Court at Jagraon Tehsil, Ludhiana District of Punjab. In 1886, he qualified as a Lawyer by passing the Pleader’s Examination of the Panjab University and set up his practice at Hissar. Soon he made a name for himself as a lawyer.

Lajpat Rai was baptized in the cult of Arya Samaj in 1882 and soon became one of its foremost leaders. The two years of his college days were pivotal in taking this course. At Rohtak, he was appointed Secretary of the local Arya Samaj. During his stay at Rohtak, he made it one of the most prominent centres of Arya Samaj activities.

Lajpat Rai made the Arya Samaj a practical social service organization. He gave ample proof of his solicitude for the masses during famines in different parts of the country. By devoting his energies to relief work, he demonstrated that nothing could achieve as much as self-reliance and self-help.

Lala Lajpat Rai was an energetic social worker, a very generous philanthropist and a champion of people's cause. During the famines of 1896, 1899-1900 and 1907-08 and the earthquake in Kangra in the year 1905, this untiring servant of his countrymen left no stone unturned in relieving the people from the vicissitudes of nature.

A very persuasive social reformer, he worked for the abolition of untouchability and lent powerful support to the campaign launched by the Arya Samaj towards this end. Later, when Mahatma Gandhi started his work in this field under the banner of *Harijan Sewak Sangh*, he began to work for this organization as it pin-pointed the problem in a better way. He declared that this social reform, like other important movements in the world, has to make a great struggle for getting the national sanction.

In his bid to raise the depressed classes to a respectable position in the social set up, Lalaji even bought a large plot of land at Lahore for building a Central Home and a Central School. A portion of the balance of the Famine Fund raised by Lalaji in 1908 was used for the upliftment of the depressed classes. Some primary schools too were maintained for their benefit out of this Fund.

As a social worker, Lala Lajpat Rai's life was a catalogue of social experimentation of far-reaching consequences. He was a great socio-economic theoretician as far as the amelioration of Hindu society in general and its untouchables and women folk in particular, were concerned. As a famine relief organizer and worker, his crusading zeal found its ramification in almost every conceivable activity. His scheme of setting up orphanages for destitute children won praise and recognition even from the authorities. On this score, Lalaji stood on a much higher pedestal as a social reformer than perhaps any of his contemporaries.

A great educationist, Lalaji, devoted a substantial part of his life, time and energy for the cause of education. Arya Samaj and its educational programme provided the means for the fulfilment of his aspirations and DAV College proved to be the centre of his educational activities. He was intimately associated with the DAV College from its very inception. For him, education was of utmost importance as one's entire future hinges on it. The end and object of education, in his opinion, was progress and the test of the progress was the growth of freedom.

As a writer, Lala Lajpat Rai wielded a facile pen. He expressed himself in varied fields and created a great impression on his contemporaries. During the period (1895-1900), he wrote biographical books on Mazzini, Garibaldi, Shivaji and Swami Dayanand. He took Miss Katherine Mayo, an American writer, to task for her book, "Mother India" which in Gandhiji's words was a drain inspector's diary and which constituted indiscriminate vilification of Indian civilization and culture. He made a befitting reply to her infamous propaganda in his book, "Unhappy India".

In 1905, the Indian National Congress Committee having recognized in him an austere, sincere and selfless worker devoted entirely to the country and its cause, selected him as one of the delegates for the purpose of placing the political grievances of the Indian people before the British public. Alongwith Gopalkrishna Gokhale, he carried on the political campaign in various parts of England and brought home to the mind of the Britishers the evils of unsympathetic bureaucratic Government under which India was labouring. With great eloquence and with supporting facts and figures, he espoused the cause of 'the half starving and half-dying people of India'. His utterances created tremendous impression on the 'English people'. Later, he went to USA where he saw for himself the working of numerous educational institutions.

Lala Lajpat Rai's ideal was Indian nationalism for which he worked, suffered and ultimately laid down his life. He gave to the nationalist sentiment his own stamp and a new meaning and to the Nationalist Movement a new turn. To him "patriotism" meant an immense love of liberty and justice and a matter of self-respect.

At the Banaras Congress Session in December 1905, Lalaji vehemently opposed the repressive measures adopted by the Government to suppress the agitation in Bengal. In the aftermath of partition of Bengal, the Lal-Bal-Pal had come to symbolize the 'Trinity of Indian Politics'. Lajpat Rai's group in the Congress took a hard stance.

It was Lala Lajpat Rai and the Nationalists who, in the classical Indian value system, first visualized *Swaraj* as India's birth right. This goal indeed was the legacy of the *Sher-e-Punjab*.

As the Movement for *Swadeshi* had started catching up, Lala Lajpat Rai put his heart and soul into it. He preached the message of *Swadeshi* and made it very popular amongst the people of Punjab. This enraged the bureaucracy and he came to be regarded as a 'revolutionary' by the British and the Anglo Indian Press. He opposed the Punjab Colonisation Act and enhancement in the irrigation rates. The prosecution of the '*Panjabee*'—



a newspaper which exposed the misdeeds of the Government roused the feelings of the Punjabis. The Government was so frightened that on 9 May 1907, it arrested Lala Lajpat Rai and put him in Mandalay Fort.

As the British Government was indulging in false propaganda against the nationalist movement in foreign countries, Lala Lajpat Rai, in order to nullify this propaganda, went to England in April 1914. Soon thereafter, the First World War broke out and he went to USA where he started counteracting the propaganda, undertaken by British agents who were active in America too. There was a great need to enlighten the Americans about the autocratic manner in which the British were governing India and its ill-effects on Indian people.

While Lala Lajpat Rai was away from India, the British Government, considering him to be dangerous to its interests if he returned to India particularly in view of the World War in which Britain was involved, barred him from coming back into the country. Though he was forced to be in political exile for five long years, his mind and soul remained with the suffering people of his soil. Lajpat Rai worked passionately for the freedom of India from the alien rule and believed that without political freedom no improvement in economic and social conditions would ever be possible.

In 1916, when Tilak and Mrs. Annie Besant started the Home Rule Movement in India, Lala Lajpat Rai on his own initiative started the "Indian Home Rule League of America" headed by him with its headquarters at Broadway, New York. The objectives of the League were firstly to support the Home Rule Movement in India and to cooperate with the Home Rule League and other such organizations in India and America; and secondly, to further all kinds of friendly relations—social, cultural and commercial—between India and America.

After the return to India in 1920, his plan for establishing a school of politics materialized and it was named after Tilak. The practical training was to be imparted by the Tilak School of Politics through a Society of Life Members organized on the model of the Servants of India Society, Poona\*.

The Servants of the People Society had done commendable work in the field of politics, social welfare, Harijan uplift, rural reconstruction, education, etc. It gave to the country a solid bunch of top ranking personalities, namely the late Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri, Shri Purushottam Das Tandon, Shri Balwant Rai Mehta and

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\*Now known as Pune.

many other eminent people. Lala Lajpat Rai's society was a rich mine of public-spirited men who put their heart and soul in the service of the nation.

In the special session of the Congress held in Calcutta\* in September 1920 Lala Lajpat Rai was elected President by the All India Congress Committee. It was under his leadership that the Congress adopted the resolution of Non-cooperation with the British Government after the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. He was arrested in 1921.

After his release and the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement, Lajpat Rai joined the Swarajya Party founded by C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru.

The Government of India Act of 1919 had provided for the appointment of a Statutory Commission within ten years of its working and as a consequence Simon Commission was appointed in 1927. Indians vehemently opposed its all-white composition and in December 1927 the Indian National Congress passed a resolution for its boycott.

The Government had imposed Section 144 to restrain the people from showing their resentment at the way the Simon Commission had been constituted. Lala Lajpat Rai led the procession to demonstrate against the Simon Commission. While leading the Boycott Procession at Lahore on 30 October 1928 he received Lathi blows on his chest, which ultimately brought about his death on 17 November 1928. What he had said about the incident became prophetic:

Every blow aimed at me is a nail in the coffin of British imperialism... I do not know whether I shall remain but you should never worry. My spirit after me will go on exhorting you to make more sacrifices for liberty.

While the nation was paying rich and glowing tributes to Lala Lajpat Rai, Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, said:

Lalaji means an institution. His patriotism was no narrow creed... his activities were multifarious... it is impossible to think of single public movement in which Lalaji was not to be found..... He suffered for it when suffering had not become customary or fashionable.

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\*Now known as Kolkata.