



# SHAHEED BHAGAT SINGH CHOWK SHADMAN

Lahore, Pakistan

31.5377916, 74.3264313



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## Executive Summary

Commonly known as *Fawara Chowk* (Fountain Roundabout), the formal name, *Shaheed Bhagat Singh Chowk* roundabout, has been the source of contestation since 2016. The roundabout is directly adjacent to the former prison where Sikh Marxist-Revolutionary Bhagat Singh was executed in 1931 by the British. Since then, the prison has been demolished and replaced with a commercial centre and a large market. There has been a small memorial to Singh at the centre of the *Chowk* since the construction of the square. This case analyses the conflict around the memorialisation of a man whose religious and ethnic identity is perceived to be at odds with the characterisation of Pakistan today.

## Introduction

Bhagat Singh is a Pakistani figure shrouded in significance and symbolism within popular culture and memory. Executed in 1931 by British Authorities for the assassination of a British police officer alongside associates and fellow freedom fighters Shivaram Rajguru and Sukhdev Thapar, Singh rapidly became a revolutionary icon. This was striking, considering Singh was not ideologically aligned with the orthodoxy of the National Congress Party leadership. Rather than embracing Gandhi's doctrine of non-violent non-cooperation (Ahimsa), Singh was an atheist Marxist revolutionary who believed in the necessity of violent resistance.<sup>1</sup> It was a process of remembrance and memorialisation, rather than his actions, that propelled his name into collective memory – imbuing it with an essential degree of symbolic potential.

## Background

### *The Making of the Shaheed-e-Azam*

On September 27, 1907, Bhagat Singh was born in the village of Banga in the Lyallpur district of Punjab in what was then British India and is today Pakistan. As a child, he always had aspirations to become involved in progressive politics, modelled by his father and uncle.<sup>2</sup> In 1923, Singh joined the National College in Lahore, founded in response to Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, which encouraged Indian students to avoid and not participate in schools subsidised by the British Indian government.<sup>3</sup> In December 1928, as Singh's involvement in the Indian independence movement grew, he joined an associate, Shivaram Rajguru, whom he met in the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, in shooting a junior British officer, John Saunders, in Lahore, Punjab – what is today Pakistan. They mistook Saunders for the British senior police superintendent, James Scott, who was their original target due to their involvement with the death of Indian nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai.<sup>4</sup> Another associate of Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad, shot dead Channan Singh, an Indian police officer, who attempted to chase after Bhagat Singh and Shivaram Rajguru as they ran.<sup>5</sup>

For months after, Singh and his associates were on the run. In April 1929, he and Batukeshwar

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Elam, "Commonplace Anti-Colonialism: Bhagat Singh's Jail Notebook and the Politics of Reading." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39, issue 3, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Jeevan Singh Deol, "Singh, Bhagat [known as Bhagat Singh Sandhu]," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online ed.), Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Moffat, "Experiments In Political Truth," *Revolutionary Lives in South Asia: Acts and Afterlives of Anticolonial Political Action*, Routledge, 2016, 83, 89.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 73-89.

Dutt, another associate, set off two low-intensity homemade bombs amongst some benches of the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi. Immediately afterwards, they allowed the authorities to arrest them.<sup>6</sup> The arrest revealed Singh's complicity in the John Saunders case and gained him public sympathy. Awaiting trial, he joined another defendant Jatin Das in a hunger strike, where they demanded better prison conditions for Indian prisoners. The strike ended in September of 1929 when Das died from starvation.<sup>7</sup> Bhagat Singh was convicted of the murder of John Saunders and Channan Singh. In March of 1931, at 23, Singh was hanged alongside his associates, Shivaram Rajguru and Sukhdev Thapar, at the Lahore Jail, next to the currently contested fountain presented in this case. It is reported that the trio's last words were '*Inquilab Zindabad*' ('Long live the revolution') and 'Down with British Imperialism.'<sup>8</sup> The executions were widely reported by the press worldwide. Singh became a national folk hero, appearing in popular art and literature and sometimes referred to as '*Shaheed-e-Azam*,' or 'great martyr' in Urdu and Punjabi.<sup>9</sup>

### *A Controversial Act of Memorialisation*

The addition of the posthumous title of '*Shaheed-e-Azam*' to Bhagat Singh's name speaks of his importance and the potent political and cultural symbol he became after his death. The leader of the National Congress Party movement and future Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote 'the act was forgotten, the symbol remained, and within a few months each town and village of the Punjab region, and to a lesser extent in the rest of northern India, resounded with his name.'<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, Singh's contestation revolves less around his actions than his religious and ethnic identity. Singh was an atheist Punjabi Sikh. This makes his legacy complex in post-partition Pakistan. From his birth in 1907 to his death in 1931, Singh lived and operated within the unified Punjab, which was divided between Muslims (53% of the population), Hindus (29%) and Sikhs (19%). His status as a 'Pakistani' is unclear given the process of religious homogenisation that occurred in 1947 when Punjab was split into predominantly Hindu/Sikh India Punjab and largely Muslim West Pakistan.

### *The Hero of Two Nations*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>7</sup> Abhishek Bansal, "Bhagat Singh's Hunger Strike In Jail Lasted 112 Days," *InShorts*, August 14, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Economic Times, "Remembering The Men Who Shook Up The British Raj," *Economic Times*, March 23, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 107.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel J. Elam, "Commonplace Anti-Colonialism: Bhagat Singh's Jail Notebook and the Politics of Reading." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39, issue 3, 2016..

Singh's legacy in the post-partition era is further complicated by the 'two-nation theory,'<sup>11</sup> first proposed by Allama Iqbal (1877-1938), a renowned Muslim poet, writer, philosopher and politician and the first central political figure to suggest the idea of a separate homeland for Muslims. Iqbal suggested that there could be no possibility for peace until the Muslim population had their own nation.<sup>12</sup> In the annual session of the Muslim League at Allahabad in 1930, Iqbal states that India is a 'continent of human beings belonging to different languages and professing different religions,' therefore demanding a 'Muslim state for the Indian Muslims.'<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan who served as the leader of the All-India Muslim League from 1913 until the inception of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, believed that the creation of Pakistan would be 'the awakening of Muslims.'<sup>14</sup> Jinnah became the newly-founded Pakistan's first leader, which remained under British control until 1956 as the Dominion of Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> In 1956, the country became the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Subsequently, in 1971, the eastern part of the country became independent as the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Contemporary tensions between India and Pakistan have further exacerbated this process's stark religious divides. These tensions increasingly manifest themselves in public spaces. This is exemplified by the drive to 'Islamify' public spaces in Pakistani political discourse.<sup>16</sup> Speaking to the increasing interaction between religious and national identity in Pakistan, many are reluctant to honour a non-Muslim in public space through either naming or memorialisation. Various stakeholders, ranging from political organisations such as the Islamic Aid group Jamaat-Ud-Dawa (JuD) to influential clerics, believe that naming a public space after a non-Muslim, let alone an atheist, is an attack on 'Pakistani' ideology.<sup>17</sup>

More specifically, it provides insight into Lahore's complex legacy and sense of identity. Lahore traditionally functioned as the Punjabi cultural centre and primary economic hub. Its complex legacy involves Sikh, Hindu, and, most significantly, Mughal governance; Between the late 16th and 18th centuries, the city was at the epicentre of the Mughal empire.<sup>18</sup> As Pakistan's second-largest city with a population of 13.5 million, Lahore has a long and complicated history of multiculturalism.<sup>19</sup> Still today, it is considered the most tolerant and multicultural of Pakistan's

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<sup>11</sup> To know more about the two-nation theory, please consult Ali Shafique Khan, *Two Nation Theory: as a Concept, Strategy, and Ideology*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. Karachi: Royal Book Co (1985).

<sup>12</sup> Stanley A. Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 47-48.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel J. Elam, "Commonplace Anti-Colonialism: Bhagat Singh's Jail Notebook and the Politics of Reading." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39, issue 3, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Holy War Against India", *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1988.

<sup>15</sup> Akhilesh Pillalamarri, "When Elizabeth II Was Queen of Pakistan," *Diplomat*, March 17, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Salman Masood, "New Ideological Battle in Pakistan: Traffic Circle's Name," *New York Times*, March 30, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>19</sup> World Population Review, "Lahore Population 2022," *World Population Review*, 2022.

metropolises: It continues to have small but significant religious minority populations, including several Christians representing approximately 6% of the population and Shia Muslims.<sup>20</sup>

The complicated relationship between state and religion continues to press on and create contradictions in Pakistan citizens, even those engaged in the contestation of Singh's memorialisation. Dr Mazhar Abbas asserts:

Thought [Singh] fought against the British imperialism and exploitation of capitalism for justice, equality and rights of the downtrodden irrespective of their religion, colour, and greed, [he] remains largely excluded from our collective heritage of anti-colonial struggle because he was not Muslim. He declared himself an atheist, socialist, revolutionary, and divorced religion, but he is being punished in the name of religion.<sup>21</sup>

The conversation surrounding Singh's legacy in Lahore and Pakistan encapsulates the difficulty with which the nation is coming to terms with this history in the age of sectarian politics. While divisive, some think that the discourse signals a transformation in Pakistan's relationship between religion and state. Journalist Haroon Khalid, who documents Pakistani historical and cultural heritage, writes that the increase in the 'voice to appropriate Bhagat Singh in the Pakistani narrative' is symbolic of a broader change in Pakistan. He optimistically reflects that it is a 'demand to embrace the non-Muslim heritage of Pakistan [...] for the state to shun its monolithic identity and replace it with a more pluralistic one [...] a rejection of religious extremism and demand for tolerance.'<sup>22</sup>

## History of the Contestation

### *Protests and Calls for Renaming of the Roundabout*

In 2010, the *Chowk* was renamed after Chaudhry Rehmat Ali, a student who coined the name Pakistan in the late 1930s.<sup>23</sup> However, at a candlelit vigil in September 2012 commemorating the birth of Shaheed Bhagat Singh, calls were made to rename the roundabout. Largely orchestrated by the Bhagat Singh Memorial Foundation (BSMF), which lawyer Imtiaz Rashid Qureshi leads, they organised and sustained protests to forge a broad coalition of peace activists, educated Punjabi elites, and academics.<sup>24</sup> One such figure is Taimur Rehman, a musician and

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<sup>20</sup> Khalid Hasnain, "Pakistan's Population Is 207.68m, Shows 2017 Census Result," *Dawn*, May 19, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Mazhar Abbas, "A hard call -- IV," *News on Sunday*, September 26, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Haroon Khalid, "Bhagat Singh Lives On In Pakistan Today. And He Is The Unlikely Hero The Country Needs," *Scroll.in*, March 23, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Salman Masood, "New Ideological Battle in Pakistan: Traffic Circle's Name," *New York Times*, March 30, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

academic from Lahore, who framed the renaming of the roundabout as a 'cultural counteroffensive'<sup>25</sup> against the perceived 'Islamisation' of public places in Pakistan, stating:

Since the '80s, the days of the dictator Gen. Zia ul-Haq, there has been an effort that everything should be Islamized — like the Mall should be called M. A. Jinnah Road... They do not want to acknowledge that other people, from different religions, also lived here in the past.<sup>26</sup>

As a response to these protests, municipal authorities, led by a senior district official, agreed to start the process of renaming the Chowk in September 2012 in response to the sustained campaigns led by the BSMF.<sup>27</sup> As part of this, the public was invited to come forward with any objections to the proposed renaming.

### *Criticisms Against Renaming*

From September 2012 to March 2013, a public consultation was carried out by the district administration and the Dilkash Lahore Committee, formed explicitly for the role of naming significant roads, intersections, and underpasses after renowned figures of the Indian subcontinent who played a significant role in the history of Pakistan and its formation. The consultation sparked significant complaints from a variety of stakeholders. The most significant objections were posed by a local trade group, Traders of Shadman Market (TSM), led by Zahid Butt – of the calls to rename the site. Butt stated, 'If a few people decide one day that the name has to be changed, why should the voice of the majority be ignored?'<sup>28</sup> Amongst the objectors were also influential local clerics and, most importantly, the head of the Islamic Aid group Jamaat-Ud-Dawa (JuD). JuD is widely acknowledged as the political and 'charitable' arm of the militant group Lashkar-E-Taiba, which has repeatedly orchestrated and claimed responsibility for attacks in India/Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>29</sup>

In November 2012, the Lahore High Court deliberated on a petition submitted by TSM calling for the municipal authority to rescind its decision. Municipal authorities, in response, stalled the proceedings, leaving the site in a legal limbo situation. The district officer for special planning, Umme Laila Naqvi, explained that the renaming process had not been halted but had instead been put on hold.<sup>30</sup> Some committee members proposed renaming the site after famous post-independence Muslim poet Habib Jalib instead, in response to pressure from Islamist

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Express Tribune, "Bhagat Singh: 'Plan to rename chowk not dropped, just on hold,'" *Express Tribune*, December 18, 2012.

groups.<sup>31</sup> However, this proposal was scrapped in the face of opposition from pro-Singh campaigners.<sup>32</sup>

Passions on both sides of the debate have sometimes led to violence. On March 23, 2013, municipal police forces were called to break up heated clashes between competing protester groups on the anniversary of Singh's death.<sup>33</sup> Manifestations of the contestation continue to occur regularly to the present day. The site is repeatedly vandalised with graffiti. Street signs are 'renamed' after Singh with spray paint. Impromptu vigils and protests are regular occurrences; For instance, JuD erected a banner above the chowk labelling the attempted renaming 'An attack on Pakistani ideology.'<sup>34</sup>

After the BSMF re-submitted a petition in February 2018 to the national government, calling for the case to be resolved.<sup>35</sup> The Pakistani High Court became involved, directing the Mayor of Lahore to make a final decision on the square in September 2018. The High Court ordered compliance under Article 199 of the Pakistani Constitution, detailing the court's jurisdiction over local districts.<sup>36</sup>

The Lahore District administration's response has primarily remained ambiguous and reserved. Yasser Latid Hamdani, a lawyer representing the activists calling for the renaming, stated:

The government's defense in the court has been very halfhearted... The government lawyer did not even present his case during earlier court proceedings.<sup>37</sup>

While this case has not been resolved, there have been some inclinations by officials towards renaming the chowk. In a letter dated March 21, 2019, issued by the office of deputy commissioner Lahore, which detailed the security arrangements to be put in place for the annual Shaheed Bhagat Singh tribute event, the additional deputy commissioner wrote,

I have been directed to request that appropriate security arrangements may be ensured for 88th anniversary of great revolutionary leaders Bhagat Singh and his companions Shivaram Rajguru

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<sup>31</sup> PakistanToday, "Shadman Chowk won't be named after Bhagat Singh," *Pakistan Today*, June 3, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Salman Masood, "New Ideological Battle in Pakistan: Traffic Circle's Name," *New York Times*, March 30, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Haroon Khalid, "A visit to Bhagat Singh's Lahore, where a chowk can't be named after him because of his religion," *Scroll.in*, October 11, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> PTI, "Fresh plea filed in Pakistan's Lahore High Court over Bhagat Singh's case," *New Indian Express*, December 12, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Divya Goyal, "In a first, Pakistan acknowledges the area where the three were hanged as 'Bhagat Singh Chowk'," *Indian Express*, March 24, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Salman Masood, "New Ideological Battle in Pakistan: Traffic Circle's Name," *New York Times*, March 30, 2013.

and Sukhdev Thapar on Saturday 23rd March, 2019 at Bhagat Singh Chowk (Shadman Chowk), Lahore to avoid any untoward incident.<sup>38</sup>

This is the first time that the name 'Bhagat Singh Chowk' has been used in an official government document to refer to the site, and it was perceived as progress by the activists involved. Qureshi, leader of the BSMF, stated to the *Indian Express*:

It is for the first time that any official document of Pakistan government and Lahore district administration has acknowledged and recognized Shadman Chowk as Bhagat Singh Chowk. This is a big victory for Bhagat Singh's followers in Pakistan who are trying to keep his spirit, values, teachings and philosophy alive amid the tension between the two countries. We are hoping that soon an official notification will also be issued announcing renaming of the chowk. We are also trying to get statues of the martyrs installed at the chowk as it is demanded of common people of Pakistan...It will be highly ignorant and unfair if people in Pakistan forget that Bhagat Singh laid his life not only for India but us too. He dreamed of seeing an independent India which also included Pakistan. This the land where he breathed last. Let's not divide his martyrdom into two halves. People of both India and Pakistan should respect his sacrifice and remember him fondly.<sup>39</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

The site demonstrates how official municipal policy and law interact with individual beliefs, as it continues to be referred to differently by different stakeholders. This speaks to the difficulty of shaping and resolving historical contestation with top-down policy.

The Lahore District Government's ambiguity and refusal to resort to arbitration inflamed tensions. The limbo situation led to confrontation and the necessity of police involvement in March 2013.<sup>40</sup> The refusal of the government to take a clear decision exacerbated contestation rather than resolved it – the issue has been the repeated target of press scrutiny over the past five years.<sup>41</sup> The involvement of the supreme court in 2018 and the interchange between local and federal government also speaks to the complexity of this case.<sup>42</sup> The naming of the site as Shaheed Bhagat Singh Chowk in an official document in March 2019 has led to hope amongst activists, but whether this indicates progress in the resolution of the dispute remains to be confirmed.

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<sup>38</sup> Divya Goyal, "In a first, Pakistan acknowledges the area where the three were hanged as 'Bhagat Singh Chowk'," *Indian Express*, March 24, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Salman Masood, "New Ideological Battle in Pakistan: Traffic Circle's Name," *New York Times*, March 30, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> PTI. "Fresh plea filed in Pakistan's Lahore High Court over Bhagat Singh's case." *New Indian Express*, December 12, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

In March 2021, at the 90th death anniversary of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev, held by the Bhagat Singh Memorial Foundation (BSMF), a resolution was adopted which gave tribute to the trio. As part of the resolution, BSMF demanded that India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistan's premier Imran Khan bestow the highest civilian award, 'Bharat Ratna' and 'Nishan-e-Pakistan,' respectively, to Singh. Moreover, it asked the British Queen to visit Shadman Chowk, offer a public apology for the murder of the trio, as well as 'pay [the families of the freedom fighters] pecuniary compensation for the unjust killings.'<sup>43</sup> In addition, it requested the Queen to apologise to the families of the victims of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.<sup>44</sup> The resolution also solicited the Pakistani government to issue coins, postal tickets, and roads to commemorate Bhagat Singh and his comrades. Finally, the resolution called for naming a major road in Lahore after the three men and that their acts be part of the school syllabus.<sup>45</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

So far, local decision-makers have unanswered calls by activists to rename Fawara Chowk to Shaheed Bhagat Singh Chowk. Decision-makers are attempting to manage a complex issue where activists are fighting for the renaming, and conservative trade and alleged Islamist organisations are against the renaming. This case raises questions about how responses to disputes over memorials can interact with deeper structural issues at the heart of the construction of the idea of the nation in countries where questions of religious identity are conflated with issues of patriotism.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, it illustrates how disputes over the memorialisation of individuals can intersect with debates about national memory and the exclusion and marginalisation of communities considered contrary to the state.

Research Contributed by Finnian Dunbar-Johnson, Zobia Haq, and Ngoc Tram Nguyen

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<sup>44</sup> Amit Chaturvedi, "Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: What Happened On The Dark Day 103 Years Ago," *NDTV*, April 13, 2022. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre took place on April 13, 1919. British Colonel Reginald Dyer ordered the shooting of a peaceful crowd protesting against the arrest of pro-Indian independence leaders Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr Satya Pal. In total, 379 people, including men, women, and children, were killed, and 1,200 were injured.

<sup>45</sup> PTI, "Lahore holds event in memory of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev," *Deccan Herald*, March 23, 2021.

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## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

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## Contact information

Marie-Louise Jansen

Program Director

+33 66828327

contestedhistories@euroclio.eu

www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat Riouwstraat 139

2585HP The Hague The Netherlands

secretariat@euroclio.eu www.euroclio.eu

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