

CHAPTER 4

THE FAST

1913

EARLY in 1913 Sundar Singh went to Rishikesh, via Hardwar, to carry out his long-cherished desire of having a fast for forty days in imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Rishikesh lies between Hardwar and Dehra Dun. Not more than two hours' walk from Rishikesh there is a forest known as Tapoban—the forest of ascetics. In this place there are crowds of Hindu ascetics from all over India performing various kinds of austerities.

Beyond Tapoban there is another forest known as Kajliban. Close to it flows the Ganges, which has been making its mighty way through the Himalayas. The forest in Kajliban is so thick that few people go there. Only those who seek complete seclusion resort to Kajliban. Sundar Singh was always anxious to have privacy for his prayers, so he went to this part of the forest and began his fast. The only people who could see him would be the bamboo cutters who would penetrate even thick jungle for their work. In such dense jungle wild animals would prowl about. But Sundar Singh was never afraid to go into places where there were wild beasts.¹

Sundar Singh made a record in his New Testament² of the day on which he began his fast. He also kept near him forty small stones, one of which he expected to throw away every day to keep track of time. But he became weaker and weaker every day and after several days some bamboo cutters saw him lying down too feeble to move. They put him on his blanket and, carrying him with a bamboo pole, brought him to Rishikesh. The Sadhus there came to know from his name in the New Testament that he was

¹ F. Heiler, *Die Wahrheit Sundar Singhs*, pp. 177–179.

² This New Testament has been lost.

a Christian. They put him on a train and sent him to Dehra Dun.

In the neighbourhood of the Dehra Dun railway station some Christians of the village of Annfield saw him and from his name in the New Testament recognized that he was the same man who had visited their village during the previous year. They decided to take him to their village in a cart. Apparently he was so changed that they could not identify him before seeing his name in the book. He held that the presence of the people from Annfield near the railway station at that time was the work of God. He was so weak that he was not able to speak, though he knew what was going on.

In Annfield he was taken to the parsonage of the Rev. Y. Dharamjit, who was away on leave. But his servant and adopted son Bansi were in the house and undertook the responsibility of nursing Sundar Singh.

Later,¹ Dr. Stanley Jones furnished some particulars of Sundar Singh's recovery from the physical effects of the fast. "I was recently in Gorakhpur when I had a satisfactory conversation with Dharamjit Singh and his servant. The information which I received from him and his servant seemed very genuine. Dharamjit is an impartial man, with a feeling of responsibility, and on certain points is very clear. This is his story:

"He was on holiday in Basharatpur, near Gorakhpur. His servant wrote from Annfield that Sundar Singh had come in a very weak condition and asked for instruction. Dharamjit told him to take care of him until he returned. Sundar Singh had been in Kajliban and had fasted. He had then been brought to Rishikesh by some woodcutters who had found him in a thoroughly weakened condition. They handed him over to a non-Christian Sadhu. Later he came in a cart to Annfield. When Dharamjit returned, he found Sundar Singh still very weak. No entry in a diary was made. There did not seem to be the least doubt that Sundar Singh was not sick but that he was weakened from fasting. No doubt about the whole story ever occurred to Dharamjit because the evidence lay before his eyes.

"When Dharamjit returned, Sundar Singh was being fed on milk and only after eight or ten days was he given any bread. The servant said that when Sundar Singh was brought in, he was so weak that a man had to hold him up. On the first day he could

¹ On March 19, 1927.

not speak; only on the second day did he begin to speak. The servant first gave him milk, then soup and sago. He was not sick but only weak from fasting.”¹

In his little Urdu book about his evangelistic tours (p. 19) Sundar Singh has given a brief account of his spiritual experiences during the fast.

“After several years of service I felt guided to go into some forest where, free from any kind of interruption, I could have a forty days’ fast and ask for blessing on the past work and power for the future. When I first commenced the fast, for several days I experienced great hardship. Afterwards it was not at all difficult.

“But the blood dried up to such an extent that I altogether lost the power of sight and speech. I could hear nothing and by reason of weakness could not even turn myself. But certainly my intellectual powers were sharpened several times over, from which I gathered proof of the true fact that the soul is an entity that cannot cease to exist when the body dies, but goes on living. In that condition I experienced the Presence of God and the fullness of the Spirit, which cannot be expressed in words. In that condition too I had a vision of the Lord in a glorious form, from which I gained the conviction that now He would assuredly keep me alive to serve Him for some time.”

Sundar Singh described to Canon B. H. Streeter and to me at Oxford in 1920 his experiences during the fast, without referring to his printed travel diary or any other written record. The account of the fast which he gave at that time is found in our book, *The Sadhu* (pp. 24–29). The fast played such an important part in his spiritual life that I do not make any apology for quoting that report in full.

“During the early stages of the fast there was a feeling of intense burning in his stomach on account of lack of food, but this soon passed away. In the course of the fast he saw Christ; not, he says, as at his conversion, with his physical eyes, because they were now dim and could not see anything, but in a spiritual vision, with pierced hands, bleeding feet and radiant face. Throughout the whole period he felt in himself a remarkable enrichment of that sense of peace and happiness which has been his in a measure ever since he became a Christian. Indeed, so great was this sense that he had no temptation whatever to give up the fast. As his physical

¹ F. Heiler, *Die Wahrheit Sundar Singhs*, pp. 113, 114.

powers became enfeebled he saw, or thought he saw, a lion or other wild animal and heard it growl; the growl appeared to come from a distance, while the animal itself seemed to be near—hearing apparently being more quickly affected than sight.

“The Sadhu asserts that the fast has left a permanent effect on his spiritual life. Certain doubts he had entertained were finally cleared up. Previously he had sometimes wondered whether his sense of peace and joy might somehow be ‘a hidden power of his own life’, welling up from within himself and not due to the Divine Presence. But during the fast, when his bodily powers were nil or almost nil, the peace increased considerably and became much stronger. This has convinced him that his peace is a heaven-born peace and not the result of the natural operation of his human faculties. Another consequence of the fast was the conviction that the spirit was something different from the brain. He had been used to wonder what would become of his spirit, after the decay of his body. But since during the fast he found that as his body became weaker his spiritual faculties seemed to become more active and alert, he drew the inference that the spirit was something altogether apart from the brain. ‘The brain was only the office where the Spirit worked. The brain is like an organ and the spirit like the organist that plays on it. Two or three of the notes may go wrong and may produce no music. That does not, however, imply the absence of the organist.’

“The fast, he told us, also left a permanent influence on his character. ‘Before I attempted the fast of forty days I was frequently assailed by temptations. When you write your book you ought to write about my weaknesses also. More especially when I was tired, I used to get annoyed when people came to talk to me and ask questions. I still feel this difficulty, but nothing like so much as before the fast. Indeed, I have been told by my friends that it is not noticeable, but even if they are right it is still a weakness which I do not like to have in my life. It has caused me much difficulty and doubt, but perhaps it is given me to keep me humble, like the thorn in the flesh, mentioned by St. Paul, which I sometimes think may have been the same thing. Or perhaps it is partly the result of still living in the body, but I wish it were not so. Before the fast, I suffered also from other temptations. When suffering from hunger and thirst I used to complain, and to ask why the Lord did not provide. He had told me not to take any money with me. If I had taken money I could have bought what I needed.

Since the fast, however, when overtaken by physical hardship I say, "It is my Father's will; perhaps I have done something to deserve it."

" 'Again, before the fast I was sometimes tempted to give up the life of a Sadhu with its hardships, to go back to the luxury of my father's house, to get married and live in comfort. Could I not be a good Christian and live a life of communion with God there also? But then I saw that, though it was no sin for others to live in comfort and have money and home, God's call for me was different; and the gift of ecstasy which he had given me is better than any home.' "

A careful comparison of these two reports, one written by Sundar Singh in 1915 two years after the fast and another given orally by him in 1920 seven years after, is illuminating. The spiritual experiences described in the two accounts are essentially the same. The report in 1915 is quite brief. The report in 1920 describes at some length the same experiences.

It is difficult to decide the exact length of the fast. The only two dates which are definite are January 19 when he gave an address in Indore and February 21¹ when he wrote a letter to Bishop Lefroy. According to his own itinerary as set out in the little Urdu book, he visited various places after being in Indore. If we calculate carefully the time required for these engagements the maximum duration of the fast could have been twenty-three days. I suggest that his movements were as follows:

January 19 and 20	Indore
January 21 and 22	Ujjain
January 23 and 24	Nimach, Bandi, etc.
January 25 and 26	Delhi
January 27	Reached Kajliban
January 28 to February 19	The fast for twenty-three days
February 20	Transported to Annfield
February 21	Wrote a letter from his bed to Bishop Lefroy

¹ I have in my possession a postcard written by Canon E. F. E. Wigram to the Rev. J. Redman in which he says: "Have you heard that Sundar Singh is alive after all? The Bishop of Calcutta has just sent me a letter of his written from Annfield, February 21."

The above is a conjectural reconstruction of his possible engagements. We do not know what trains he took and how long he actually stayed in the places which he visited. For lack of such information, any statement which we may make about the duration of the fast is purely hypothetical.

On January 22 six telegrams were sent from a small station called Nimoda in Central India, on the main railway line between Bombay and Muttra. These telegrams said that Sundar Singh slept in Christ. They were signed "Smith". As far as we know the telegrams were despatched to Bishop Lefroy (Calcutta), Dr. E. M. Wherry (Ludhiana), Canon E. J. Sandys (Calcutta), Canon Wigram (Lahore) and Rev. J. Redman (Simla). The name of the sixth person to whom the telegram went has not been traced.

When these telegrams arrived, the friends of Sundar Singh were greatly perturbed by the sudden and startling news of his unexpected death. A memorial service was held in the Church of St. Thomas in Simla on February 23 and a subscription list was opened for putting up a tablet to his memory. Some articles appeared in newspapers and magazines giving an account of his life and bearing testimony to the great service he had rendered to the Christian Church in India.

In the Church Missionary Society *Gleaner* (London) of February 1913 Canon E. J. Sandys paid a glowing tribute to Sundar Singh. He said: "On 23rd January, 1913, a brief telegram from Central India announced that 'Sundar Singh slept in Christ'. Behind that brief message there lay a story of deep pathos and of unfaltering heroism as would carry us back to the days of Apostolic Christianity. Yet it is a story enacted in this matter-of-fact twentieth century, and proves that the Saviour's touch has lost none of its ancient power."

After relating the story of his conversion and giving a brief account of his evangelistic work, Canon Sandys went on to say: "Calcutta seemed to him a hardened place where people's one thought was to make money. He said, 'I think God wants me to preach from one side of India to another.' This was actually fulfilled. . . . His method was to preach for as many days as he felt called, being lodged and fed by Christian friends; he then went on to the next stage when they gave him the train fare.

"He was a perfect gentleman, refined and cultured in his manners, gentle and courteous, simple and unaffected. He had scarcely

a loud enough voice for bazar preaching, but this method did not seem to appeal to him. He would rather sit and discuss religion with a small group round him.

“From Bombay he wrote: ‘I am sick, therefore I will go the day after to-morrow, on the 13th January, to stay with my friend in C.P. Then from there I will give you my address.’ But the address never came, instead of it the brief telegram to say his preaching was done.

“Had he lived he would have been a power among his own people. While staying with us he read the life of St. Francis of Assisi, which he much enjoyed. He said, ‘This is a good book.’ It evidently appealed to him, for like Francis, his own soul had nothing coarse about it, he was one of Nature’s true gentlemen and the refinement and gentleness of his character was brought out by his conversion to the Christian faith. India will be evangelized by her own sons and in their own way. May many more be raised up like Sundar Singh.”

Sundar’s explanation of the telegrams was this. When he was in Bombay he met a Roman Catholic medical man who gave his name as Dr. Swift. They travelled together on January 22 in the mail train going from Bombay to Muttra. Sundar Singh told Dr. Swift about his plan for observing a fast of forty days. Dr. Swift urged him not to undertake such a long fast and said that it would mean sure death. He also asked Sundar Singh for the addresses of his friends so that they could be informed if he died. Sundar Singh believed in the good intention of Dr. Swift and gave the addresses of six of his friends. Dr. Swift left the train at Nimoda station, sent off the telegrams and caught the next train to Muttra.

In his German book, *Sadhu Sundar Singh*, Pastor Gabler has investigated impartially and minutely (pp. 68–102) the authorship of the telegrams and has come to the conclusion that Sundar Singh had nothing whatsoever to do with them. He did not send them himself, nor did he arrange with anyone else to send them.

Dr. Stanley Jones made some careful enquiries about the length of the fast and came to the conclusion that, while it is wrong to say that he fasted for forty days, he certainly fasted for a long time. The account which the Rev. Y. Dharamjit and his servant gave to Dr. Jones of the period of convalescence clearly indicated that the fast must have lasted for many days.¹

For some time after the fast Sundar Singh gave out that he had

¹ F. Heiler, *Die Wahrheit Sundar Singhs*, p. 114.

fasted for forty days. In later years he said that he fasted but did not know for how many days. Sundar Singh should certainly be blamed for saying that he had fasted for forty days when he had not fasted so long. He had the strong, though naïve, belief that God had called him to undertake a fast of forty days and that therefore He would have helped him to complete it. In a letter to a friend, which Sundar Singh wrote from Annfield on March 3, 1913, and which was printed in *Nur Afshan* on March 14, Sundar Singh said: "As directed by God I kept a fast of forty days from which I derived much spiritual benefit. Exactly on the fortieth day by God's plan a few men came to the forest to cut bamboos and brought me from there. I had become very weak, but now I am able to walk again a little."

Sundar Singh's strong and compelling belief in the overruling Providence of God in all his actions led him to make statements which were not true, judged by ordinary standards of historical accuracy. He could have calculated the length of the fast by looking up the date on which he began his fast (as recorded in his New Testament which he had with him at Annfield) and reckoning how many days had passed before he broke it. In his spiritual enthusiasm he does not seem to have thought of this simple and obvious method.

As soon as Sundar Singh felt strong enough to travel, he left Annfield for further evangelistic work. The fast had been a momentous event in his spiritual life. He resolved to serve the Lord Jesus Christ with renewed vigour. He could never be inactive for long. If for any reason he had to take rest, he reduced this time to the barest possible minimum and started to work as soon as ever he could.

He left Annfield on March 11, 1913, and went to Nahan, where he met the Rev. T. E. Riddle again. Mr. Riddle says: "On March 16, 1913, I was still in Nahan when Sundar Singh, looking pale and worn in his long black robe, came in to see me. I noted in my diary on that day: 'Sundar Singh again arrived: now going to the Tibet border.' Enemies of the Sadhu have not been slow to assert that he himself sent the telegrams relating to his death; that he never fasted at all; and that he went straight to Simla in January. My diary entry, which is supported by the Christians in Nahan, goes a long way to disprove these malicious assertions."¹

¹ *The United Church Review*, July 1946.