

# SADHU SUNDAR SINGH

## The Apostle with the Bleeding Feet



**Sadhu Sundar Singh  
(1889 - 1929)**

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. Many missionaries and even Indian Christian leaders regarded him as a highly eccentric person, 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 word "indigenization", 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 it is indigenous to Indian needs, aspirations, and faith. He remains one of the permanently significant figures of Indian Christianity.

Sundar Singh was born on September 3 1889 into an influential and rich landowning Sikh family in Patiala state, North India. Sundar Singh's devout mother took him week by week to sit at the feet of sadhus, ascetic holy men, who lived in the jungle some miles away. She also sent him to a Christian mission school where he learned English.

Her death when he was fourteen plunged him into violence and despair. He turned on the missionaries and persecuted the converts, and ridiculed their faith. In final defiance of their religion, he bought a Bible and burned it page by page. Unable to quench the peacelessness and void in his soul, he retired one night determined to commit suicide on a railway line the following morning.

Just before dawn Sundar became aware of a bright cloud of light filling the room. Within the cloud it seemed he saw the similitude of a cross and a man hanging on it. "Why do you oppose me? I am your Saviour. I died on the cross for you" said a voice from the cross. Sundar then asked, "Who are you Lord?" "I am Jesus" came the reply filled with love. Sundar then fell at the feet of the Lord Jesus. When he arose, his heart was filled with an indescribable peace beyond human understanding.

He then ran and awakened his father to announce that he had seen Jesus Christ in a vision and heard his voice. His father and his relatives pleaded and begged him to renounce his faith. Sundar was unrelenting. Sundar's father, Sher Singh, then gave a farewell feast for his son before being excommunicated by the family. A few hours

later, Sundar realised that his food had been poisoned. By the grace of God, his life was saved only by the help of a kind Christian family.

On his sixteenth birthday he was publicly baptised as a Christian at the St. Thomas' Church in Simla, a town high in the Himalayan foothills. Then, in October 1906, he set out wearing a yellow robe and turban. 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 he sat in silence mediating in the jungle or some lonely place. Sundar Singh had also chosen the sadhu's way, but he would be a Sadhu with a difference. "I am not worthy to follow the steps of the 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 the love of God."

The 16 year old Sadhu began his ministry northward through Punjab, Kashmir, Afghanistan 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". He was stoned, arrested, and left to sleep in a way-side hut with an unexpected cobra for company. From the villages in the Simla hills beyond the long line of the snow-capped Himalayas, lay Tibet, a closed Buddhist land that missionaries had long failed to penetrate with the gospel. Ever since his baptism, Tibet had beckoned Sundar. In 1908, at the age of 19, he crossed the frontiers of Tibet, the land of snows. Any stranger entering into this closed territory dominated by Buddhism, risked both terror as well as death. Sundar Singh took the risk for the love of Christ which constrained him. The state of the people appalled him. Their airless homes, like themselves, were filthy. He was ridiculed when he bathed in 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 the lower Tibet just across the border from India.

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 was approachable and humble, with a sense of fun and a love for nature. This, with his illustrations from ordinary life gave his messages 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 a profound and deep intimate life of prayer. In 1918 he made a long tour of South India and Ceylon. The following year he visited Burma, Malaya, China, and Japan. 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.

Sundar Singh visited the West twice, traveling to many nations in Europe, the United States, and Australia. He was welcomed by Christians of many traditions,

and his words searched the hearts of people. Sundar was appalled by the materialism, emptiness, and irreligion he found everywhere in the West contrasting it with Asia's awareness of God, no matter how limited that might be.

His gifts, his personal attractiveness, the relevance of Christ as he presented Him to the 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 kind. He lived to introduce his own people to Christ Jesus.

In 1923 Sundar Singh made the last of his regular summer visits to Tibet and came back exhausted. His preaching days were obviously over. During the next few years, in his own home or those of his friends in the Simla hills, he gave himself to meditation, fellowship, and writing several books. All his writings are based on the deeper Christian life. He authored eight books during his lifetime.



In 1929, against all the advices of his friends, 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 Mount Kailash, one of Hinduism's holy places hundreds of miles away. Where he went after that is unknown. Whether he fell off a precipitous path or died of exhaustion or retired as a recluse to spend his remaining life in prayer and meditation will remain a mystery. Sadhu Sundar Singh had been one of the most treasured figures in the development and story of Christ's church in India