

*Vasudev
Balwant Phadke*

LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT
NEW DELHI
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VASUDEV BALWANT PHADKE

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PREFACE

Vasudev Balwant Phadke is one of the revolutionaries in early modern India who took to arms to drive out the British. The flame which this restless spirit kindled developed into a mighty conflagration of the struggle for Indian freedom in which countless Indians fought and fell until the achievement of India's independence. His dauntless courage, lofty idealism and self-sacrifice aided national awakening and quickened the pace of political consciousness. It is in the fitness of things that he should have a niche among the national leaders and freedom fighters. A grateful nation honours the memory of Vasudev Balwant Phadke on 3 December 2004 when Hon'ble Vice President of India will unveil his portrait in Parliament House. To mark the occasion, the Lok Sabha Secretariat is bringing out this booklet containing the profile of Vasudev Balwant Phadke and a few photographs.

We are thankful to Sarvashri Shriram Dandekar and Jairaj Salgaonkar for donating the portrait of Vasudev Balwant Phadke which has been painted by Shri Suhas Bahulkar.

This publication is a humble tribute to the pioneer revolutionary Vasudev Balwant Phadke. We hope it will be found useful and informative by all.

New Delhi,
3 December, 2004

G.C. MALHOTRA,
Secretary-General,
Lok Sabha

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VASUDEV BALWANT PHADKE

- A Profile -

Vasudev Balwant Phadke was undoubtedly among the first brigade of Indian revolutionaries and soldiers of freedom. His life was a saga of toil, sweat, blood and tears, the prototype of many martyrs after him. When even learned Pundits and great political leaders faltered in proclaiming our ideal of absolute political independence, Vasudev Balwant openly proclaimed it. He was the first Indian leader to go from village to village to preach the *mantra* of *swaraj* and to exhort the people to rebel against foreign rule.

Early life

The Phadkes were Chitpavan Brahmins of the same caste as the great Peshwas of Poona*. The family hailed from Kelshi, a village in the Ratnagiri district of Konkan. In the sixteenth century it migrated to Shirdhon in Kolaba district. At the time of Peshwa's final defeat in 1818, Vasudev Balwant's grandfather, Anantrao, was in command of the fort of Karnala overlooking Shirdhon, which he did not surrender without putting up a fight. Though the military command was lost in 1818, the name '*Subahdar*' struck. Both the grandfather and father of Vasudev Balwantrao were known in their circles as '*Subahdar*'.

Balwantrao and his wife Saraswatibai were blessed with a son Vasudev on 4 November 1845. Strong of limbs, he was rebellious by nature from his childhood. He was taken much care of by his grandparents in whose family he grew up. He loved the life in the open, learned wrestling, fencing, riding and later became an expert in the use of arms, but for book learning, he showed little taste.

Vasudev was ten years of age when his grandfather Anantrao breathed his last. This also brought an end to Vasudev's way of life as his father now made his son's attendance at school his own special concern. After spending four years in a primary school in Kalyan, he went to Bombay and Poona and learned English for a couple of years.

In 1859, Vasudev Balwant married Saibai. She died in 1872 after a short illness leaving behind her only daughter Mathutai. He married again in 1873. His second wife, Gopikabai banished all desire for ornaments or thought about personal needs from her mind, and won the admiration of her husband by her selflessness. Vasudev Balwant highly appreciated his wife's good qualities. He was of progressive views in the matter of women's education

*Now known as Pune.

although it was not popular in those times. He ardently wished that Bai should be literate, and at times taught her lessons along with his brothers. Bai consequently learnt the three R's, memorized Sanskrit scriptures and could recite the *Amarkosh* with ease. An adept in wielding arms, Vasudev Balwant also trained his wife in horse-riding, target practice and feats of a straight sword.

When Vasudev completed his education three big ceremonies—thread ceremony of his brother and the marriage ceremonies of two of his sisters took place in his family on a very grand scale, which had greatly depleted the finances of the Phadke family. So, soon after his first marriage Vasudev entered service as a clerk in the Great Indian Peninsular Railway in Bombay. He followed it up by his appointment at the Grant Medical College, one of the oldest medical institutions in India. In 1864, he took another post in the Military Finance Department and in 1865 was transferred to its Poona office.

Temperamentally, Phadke was unsuited to serve in a subordinate position. The exacting nature of the work, the soulless discipline of the office and the domination of his foreign superiors embittered Vasudev's young mind against his employers.

For some time Vasudev Balwant Phadke sought solace in religion. Under the patronage of a learned priest Vinayakbhat Varze he received scholarly instruction in ancient scriptures and Brahminical mantras including *Sandhya*, *Purushasukta*, *Rudra*, and *Payamana* and remained engrossed in the worship of his chief deity *Dattatraya*. He also went to meet many saints in search of the divine truth.

A momentous event in 1870 proved to be a turning point in the life of Vasudev Phadke. On account of delay in getting leave from his office, Vasudev could not be at the bedside of his dying mother. His anger and exasperation knew no bounds and he remonstrated to the authorities in the strongest terms. He was again denied leave a year after to perform the death anniversary rituals of his mother. This further embittered him against the British administration and led to his resolve to strive for the political independence of India.

The new spirit

The resolve of Vasudev Balwant to rise in revolt against the British Government found justification and encouragement in the changing political situation in the Deccan in 1870.

The first political front of popular agitation in India was opened in Poona by the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha (People's Organisation) in 1870. It mainly functioned under the guidance of Madhavrao

Ranade. Ranade delivered his first speech in Poona on 'National Trade' in December 1872. With statistical evidence and analysis he laid bare the national loss sustained by India because of indiscriminate and unrestrained use of foreign goods. His learned discourse attracted a large number of youths, including Vasudev Balwant.

The speeches of Ranade coincided with the beginning of the public life of Vasudev Balwant and added fuel to the fire of patriotism in his heart. As contemporaries, both detested the exploitation of India under foreign rule. But they differed in political ideology. Ranade's remedy for the national malaise remained confined to prayers and petitions to the British Government while that of Vasudev Balwant found expression in immediate armed revolt. Ranade was the father of constitutionalism and Vasudev Balwant the apostle of revolutionary ideology in Indian politics. They thus represented two distinct schools of political thought followed by successive generations of Indians till the country became free.

Deccan famine

The years 1870-78 were the years of growing distress for the peasantry in the Deccan. The collection of revenue was becoming more strict and the assessment at revision time increased the demand on the peasantry by fifty to cent per cent of the old rates. While there had been a steep rise in the revenue demand, the Deccan district suffered from drought for long periods. Parched fields and drying shrubs left little sustenance either for human beings or cattle. The Deccan became a veritable dust-bowl. The acute scarcity of food grains led to an extraordinary rise in prices. The famine relief works initiated by the Government failed to relieve distress. The result was deficiency in food supply and outbreak of cholera and fever in an epidemic form. According to the estimate of the Famine Commission of 1880, eight lakh lives perished in the famine. Government rules and regulations for payment of revenues and settlement of agricultural debts operated in favour of money lenders and the agriculturists found themselves reduced to the position of mere tenants working in their own fields or became landless labourers. Stringent forest laws and reduction of grazing lands made the suffering of the lower castes in the villages and tribals much more acute and heightened the general atmosphere of despair and gloom.

Vasudev Balwant was deeply moved by the growing distress. He attributed it to foreign rule which he felt was ruining Indian industry, neglecting irrigation and making food and clothing scarce for the common man. He thus observed this feeling in his autobiography, as follows:

“Thinking day and night of this and a thousand other miseries, my mind was bent upon the downfall of the British power in India. I thought of nothing else. The idea haunted my mind. I used to rise in the dead of night and ponder over the ruin of the British until at last I almost became mad with the idea.”

Phadke started delivering public lectures on the miserable state of the country. He toured the Deccan districts criticizing the administration in vehement terms. Echoing the words of Thoreau, he thundered that it was the right of all men to refuse allegiance to and to resist the Government when its tyranny or inefficiency were great and unendurable. He told his countrymen that *Swaraj* was the only remedy for their ills and asked them to strive for their independence.

Strategy for attaining liberation

To the educated class, to whom Phadke appealed to rise in revolt against the British, the idea appeared chimerical. He, therefore, turned to the Ramosis, Kolis, Bhils and Dhangars to organise a revolt. These people had been hit hard by the continuous drought and gave a willing ear to the call of one whom they looked up on as their redeemer. He gathered round him a band of about three hundred desperate men and set to work on his objective of overthrowing the British power in India.

The strategy conceived by Vasudev Balwant Phadke was to send his men to different parts of the country to disrupt the Governmental activities and create anarchy. He felt that simultaneous outbreaks in all parts of the country, would create panic. Daks would be stopped, railway lines and telegraphic communications would be cut off resulting in complete blockade in the flow of news from one part of the country to another. In this state of disorder he expected thousands to join his ranks and thus his object of establishing an Indian Republic would be fulfilled.

The storm bursts

For realizing his grandiose design, Vasudev Balwant needed arms and money. He entered into negotiations with the rich people to donate funds needed for the uprising. Phadke assured them that the money was required for attaining *Swaraj* and would be refunded after achieving the goal. The response of the rich, however, belied his expectations, Vasudev Balwant therefore paused to think:

“Means do not by themselves matter. If the rich men do not voluntarily contribute the funds for *Swaraj*, why not forcibly deprive them of their wealth to swell the coffers of *Swaraj*?”

Thus begun the spate of looting and dacoity by the men raised by Vasudev Balwant Phadke of the rich classes in the countryside in a planned manner to strengthen the sinews of war. Nothing could be more welcome to the starving followers of Phadke who saw in this an opportunity to score off their old debts. The first attack came on the evening of 23 February 1879 when Phadke at the head of a large band burst on Dhamari, a village in the Poona district. The houses of the Marwaris were sacked and their accounts books burnt. From Dhamari the group moved on to Davi Nimbgaon, Panmala and Jejuri. Valhe was attacked on 5 March, after which the insurgents entered Bhor territory plundering the rich men in Harnai, Mangdari, Savargoan and Chandkhed.

Phadke waged his war with a high moral purpose. He had issued strict orders to his men that during raids womenfolk must never be molested; children must not be hurt.

The political atmosphere in the country became surcharged with excitement as reports of the revolt of Vasudev Balwant were flashed across in newspapers, and the whole of India struggled hard to comprehend the real implications of the upheaval in the Deccan. By this time the Government had awakened to the danger and had set up a special machinery to track down the rebels. Undaunted, Phadke issued a proclamation in May threatening the Government with dire consequences unless it provided cheap foodgrains, created employment for the *ryots*, lessened the general tax burden and reduced the salaries of its European officers. The offer of reward by the Government for his capture was contemptuously treated by making a counter offer for the heads of the Governor and other officers.

Hot pursuit and arrest

Towards the first week of May 1879, Vasudev Balwant issued his famous proclamation. It was a document denouncing the British policy of economic exploitation of India and demanding economic relief for the *ryots* as a matter of natural right. It constituted the first bold challenge of its kind to the British Government during the Indian freedom struggle.

The Government now moved swiftly to capture Vasudev Balwant Phadke, the leader of the rebels. Major Daniell, the District Superintendent of Police, who stumbled upon the information revealing the identity of Phadke as the rebel leader was assigned to track down and arrest him. He was also familiar with the difficult region of the province.

In the meantime, Vasudev Balwant discovered that the Ramosis, who made up most of his following deceived him. Their only concern was the loot they got. They were not interested in

the grandiose scheme of their leader. Disillusioned with the Ramosis, Phadke turned his attention to the south. He visited the Nizam's territory and tried to enlist the Rohillas and the Arabs for his cause.

Major Daniell promulgated precautionary orders and tightened up security measures all over the province. The measures, however, proved futile. The terror of Vasudev Balwant gradually spread all over Maharashtra and his name resounded throughout the country. He established himself as a legend in every Maratha household.

The police, who were on the track of Phadke, came to know about his presence in the south. Major Daniell arrived in Hyderabad on the evening of 17 July 1879. He drove straight to the British Residency and conferred with Sir Richard Meade, who communicated the purpose of Daniell's visit to the Nizam. The most faithful ally of the British Government, the Nizam readily joined the hunt for Vasudev Balwant Phadke. He was at last captured at Devar Navadgi in Bijapur district on the night of 20 July 1879.

Trial and deportation

On 3 November 1879, Vasudev Balwant Phadke with fourteen of his companions was put on trial at Poona on charges of committing dacoities and associating with dacoits conspiring to wage war against the Queen, collecting men and arms to wage war and exciting feelings of disaffection against the Government. His own diary and the autobiography which he had written during his stay at the Shreeshaila Mallikarjuna a few months back, were the two major documents that were produced as evidence against him.

Ganesh Vasudev Joshi, popularly known as Kaka Joshi, came forward on his own to defend Phadke in the Court and displayed great courage in doing so. Vasudev Balwant unequivocally declared in his statement before the Court:

“It is due to the British rule that India had become a prey to starvation deaths. Our industries are being destroyed. The goods from England are exempted from taxes so that we cannot run any industry in our country... I could only think of one method to save these people from total destruction, *i.e.*, the liberation from the British yoke. Day and night there is but one prayer in my heart; but one thought in my mind. Oh God, even if my life be lost, let my country be free, let my countrymen be happy. I have taken up arms, raised an army and rebelled against the British Government with this single aim. Today, this is the duty of every Indian. I could not succeed. But some day someone will succeed. Oh my countrymen, forgive me for my failure.”

But all the charges were amply proved by his own diary, autobiography and his own confessions, as well as by various witnesses called for the prosecution.

After being pronounced guilty under the charges brought on him by the jury, the Judge, Mr. Newnham sentenced him to transportation for life. The transportation for life in those days was more painful than death sentence.

After the dismissal of appeal against the sentence in the High Court, the way to deport Vasudev Balwant to the Andaman was now clear. But, the Andamans held the prisoners of war of 1857, the number of prisoners there was quite large and the rules admitted of the facility of being released on the islands after a certain period. The Government was apprehensive of the trouble Phadke would stir up in the Andamans with the help of the prisoners, availing himself of the facilities. The place of his transportation was, therefore, changed from the islands of Andamans to the fort of Aden, which was more secure and fortified, less extensive, where the number of prisoners was small and which was under the direct jurisdiction of the Bombay Government.

Despite the tribulations in jail, Vasudev Balwant's spirit remained defiant and undaunted. After about six months he embarked upon his plan to escape from jail. Towards the beginning of October 1880, Phadke gave finishing touches to his plans to escape. On 12 October 1880, he embarked on his plan and soon passed the barrier gate inhaling the breeze of liberty after months of incarceration. His freedom, however, was shortlived. Traversing an alien country he was soon hunted down and captured by his pursuers.

For the next two years and a quarter Vasudev Balwant faced savage tribulations. The atrocious exaction of overwork and close solitary confinement took its toll and he was afflicted with tuberculosis towards the middle of 1881. Even in such a state of health he undertook fast unto death insisting upon the fetters being removed from his person and improving the living conditions.

Vasudev Balwant's condition grew worse on 17 February 1883. On the morning of that fateful day, the doctors lost all hopes of his recovery. At 4.20 p.m. the pioneer revolutionary of India passed away in the fort of Aden.

Homage

Vasudev Balwant Phadke proved to be a perpetual source of inspiration to Indian revolutionaries and nationalists, and sustained the national struggle for at least three generations. Being the first rebel against the British rule before Tilak entered the arena, he was naturally a national hero to almost all the

politically conscious minds and great leaders belonging to diverse schools of political thought from the late Dr. M.R. Jayakar, one of the greatest liberals and constitutionalists to Swatantryaveer Savarkar, the prince of Indian revolutionaries.

Shri Jyoti Basu, the then Hon'ble Chief Minister, West Bengal in his 'Foreword' to 'India's Struggle for Freedom' observed:

"In India the struggle against the British imperialism found expression in two distinct trends; one was the non-violent mass movement and the other was the violent struggle. The country's Independence was achieved as a result of the struggles waged on those two different lines. Naturally those two trends deserve to be given due importance whenever any documentation of India's freedom struggle is attempted. Any move to devalue the contribution of either of the two struggles is thoroughly wrong and misleading..."

The exploits in Vasudev Balwant's romantic career caught the imagination of litterateurs to make use of in their works. His life was dramatized on Marathi stage and the play had attained considerable popularity in Maharashtra for many years.

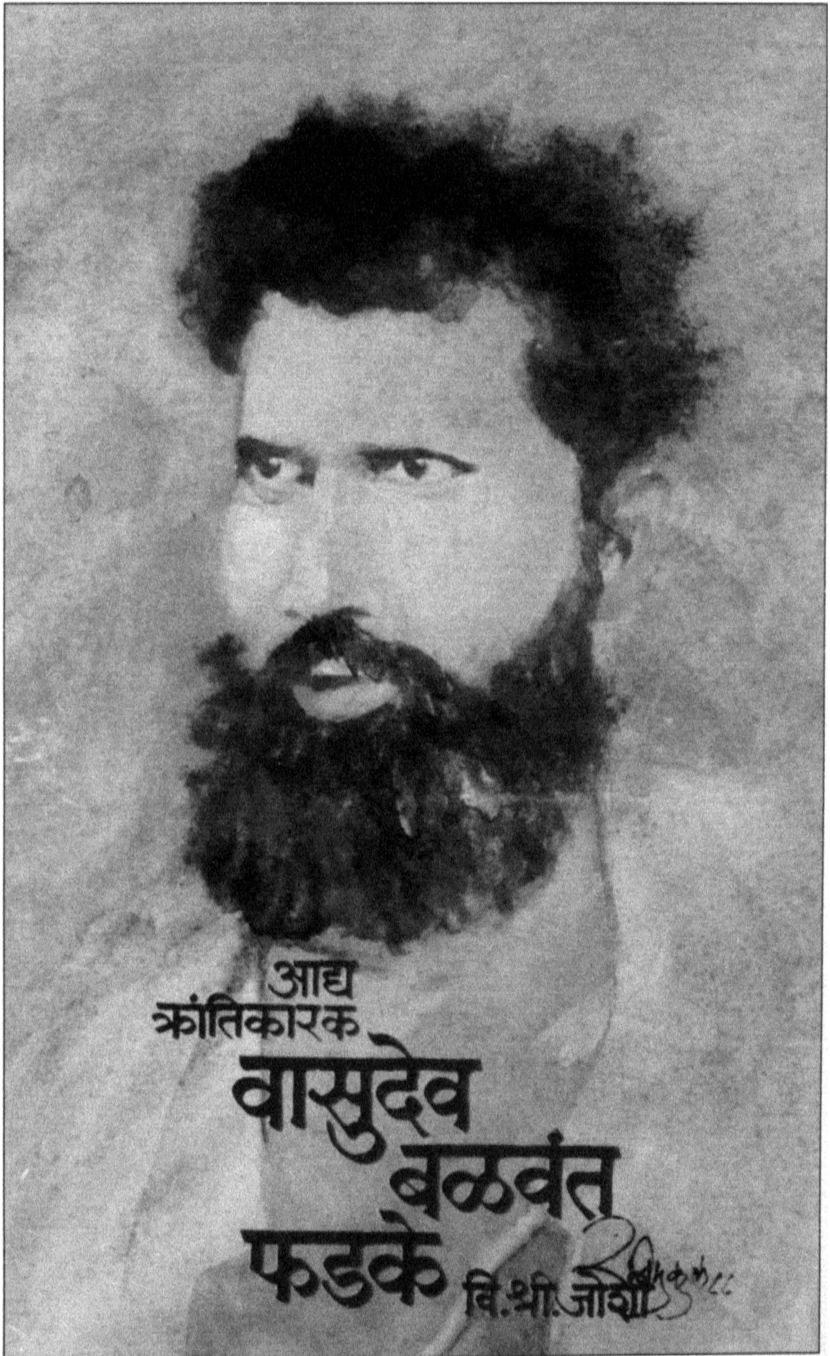
A memorial pillar raised in the memory of Vasudev Balwant Phadke at Shirdhon was unveiled on 14 November 1940 at an imposing function. On 1 February 1943, Savarkar visited Shirdhon. Speaking in front of the memorial pillar, he said, "The flame of the passion for Indian freedom burning in our hearts was lit by that in the heart of Vasudev Balwant. The auspicious lamp burning from the top of the pillar is an appropriate memorial to the martyr. When you need a spark and have to struggle for light the lamp will illuminate your hearts, show you the path".

Prominent newspapers all over India in almost all languages published the life account of Vasudev Balwant and paid glowing tributes to his memory. A Bombay weekly, Blitz wrote in an Editorial, "...When free India sets up a martyrs' gallery she will not forget to bestow a befitting niche to Vasudev Phadke..." The Forum wrote, "...Although the name of Phadke is overshadowed by the other mighty sons of Maharashtra—Tilak, Ranade and Gokhale—yet Phadke claims chronological precedence. He lived and struggled for his motherland at a time when nationalism meant nothing in India. He died even before the foundation of the Congress was laid. Although his ashes lie far away from his homeland his soul has joined the Valhalla of great Indians who have left their foot prints on the sands of Indian history."

As long as the words Indian nationalism and national gratitude for the martyrs of the land last, the name of Vasudev Balwant Phadke would shine forth with unique splendour in the history of the Indian struggle for freedom.

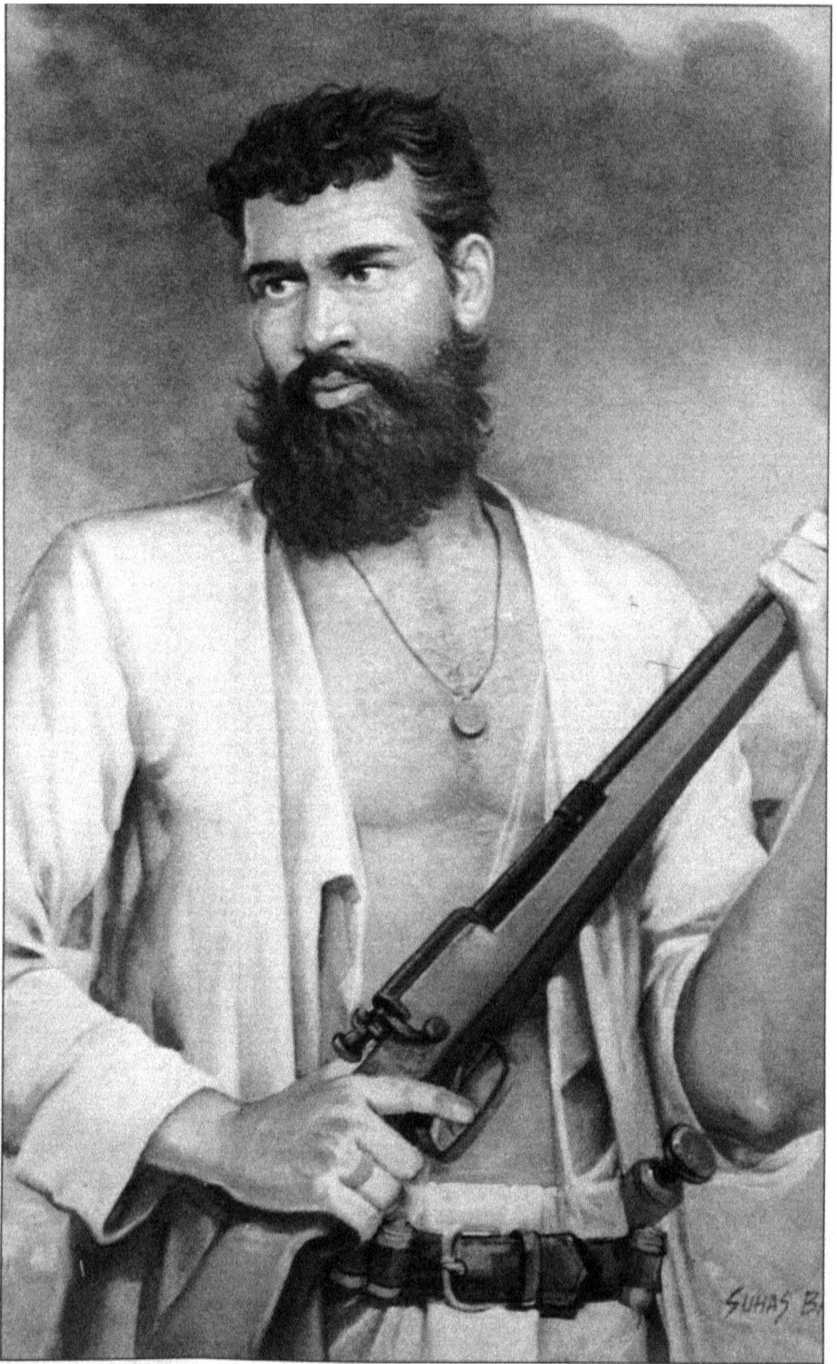
VASUDEV BALWANT PHADKE

- A Pictorial Profile -



आद्य
क्रंतिकारक
वासुदेव
बळवंत
फडके
वि. श्री. जोशी
१९६६

Vasudev Balwant Phadke



Vasudev Balwant Phadke



Pandurang Balwant Phadke—Father of Vasudev Balwant



Main quarrangle of Karnala near Shirdhon the freedom of which was held by Anantrao, grandfather of Vasudev Balwant Phadke



The House where Vasudev Balwant was born



Gopikabai Phadke—wife of Vasudev Balwant Phadke



Shree Datta the Tutelar Deity of Vasudev Balwant Phadke



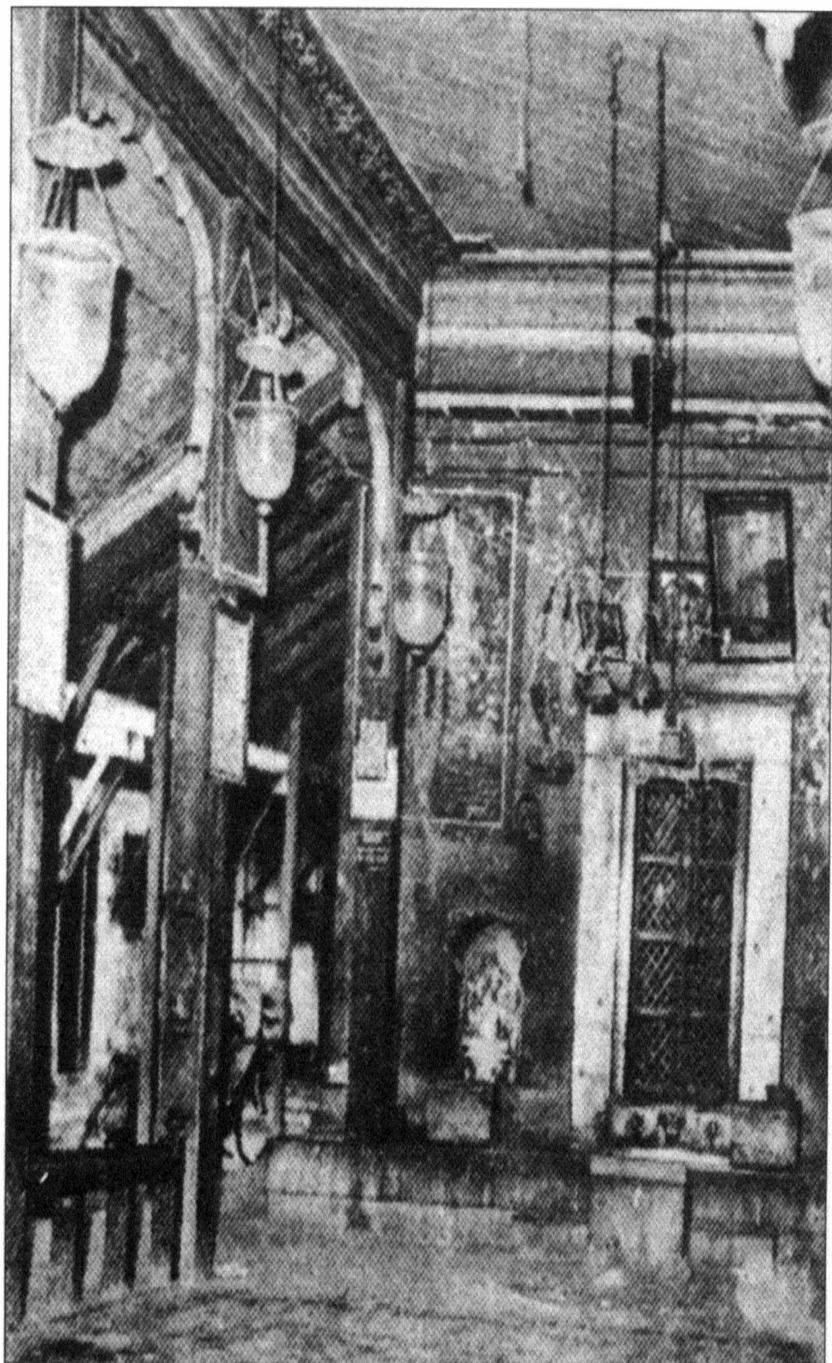
Mathutai Phadke—only daughter of Vasudev Balwant Phadke

वणेपरमार्थ नृसिंहरचती श्रीगुरुनाथ रक्षीलयाचेवंशो वंशी ७० प्रणेसरस्वतीगंगा
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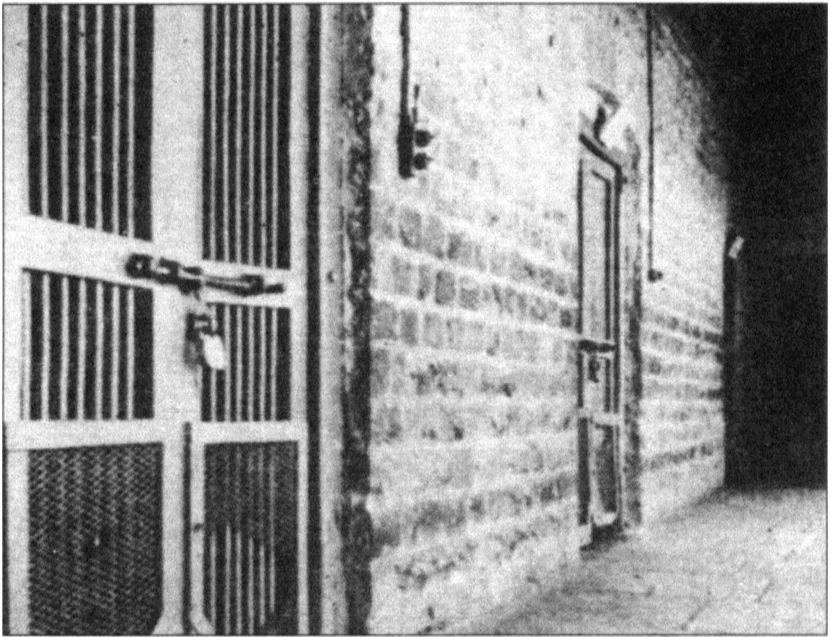
Vasudev Balwant's Handwriting

Vasudev Balwant's Signature (Marathi, Modi script)

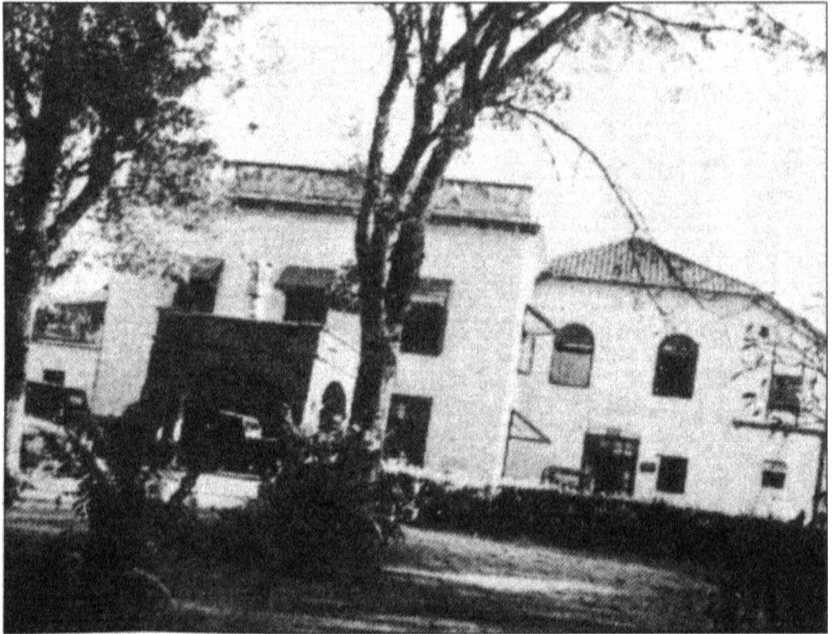
Vasudev Balwant's Signature (Marathi, Modi script)



Evening meetings of Vasudev Balwant were held here



Rooms of the Poona City Jail : where Vasudev Balwant
got inhuman treatment



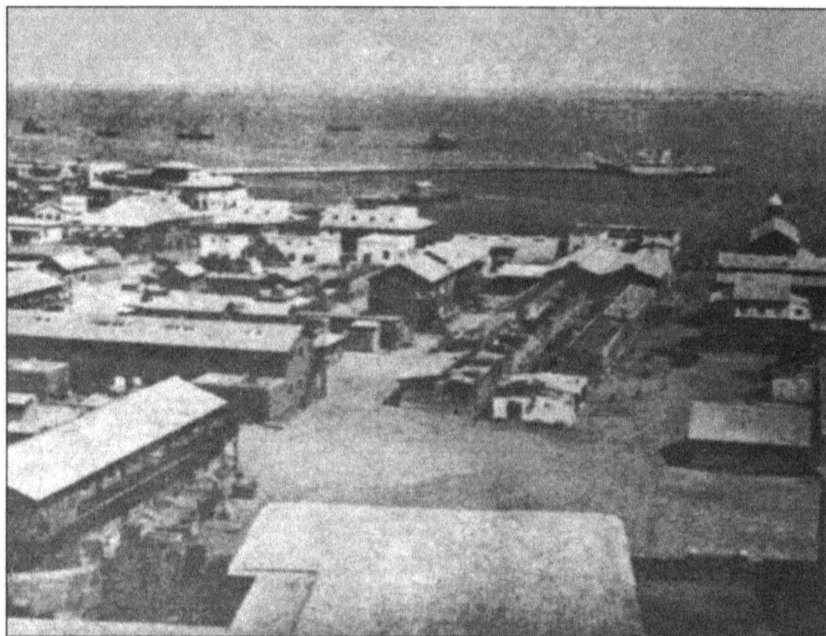
District Magistrate's Court at Pune



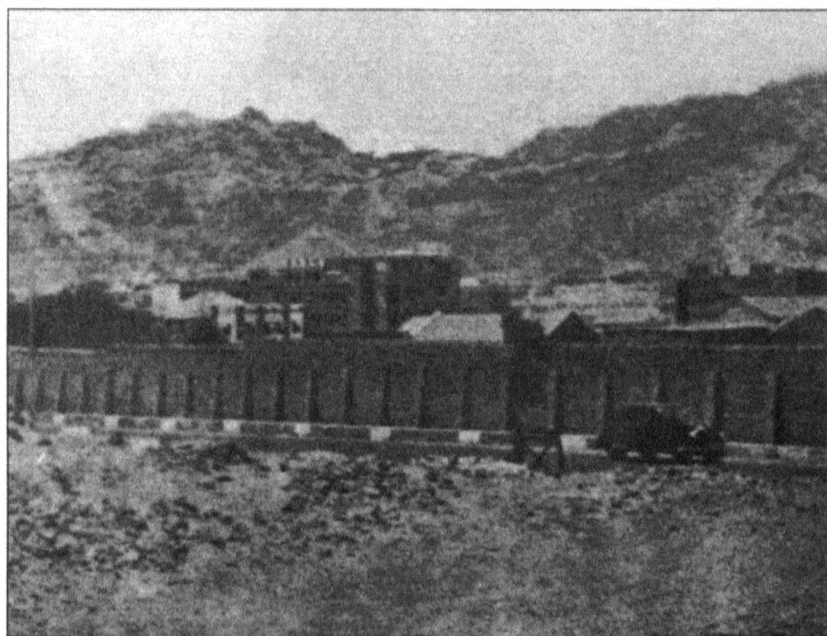
Mahadev Chimnaji Apte supported Vasudev Phadke in Sessions Court



Chintaman Pandurang assisted in Phadke's defence in Sessions Court



Port of Aden



Aden Jail where Vasudev Balwant Phadke was imprisoned
and died on 17 February 1883



Memorial Pillar at Shirdhon