

Struggles that historians forget

Diplomat-turned-author Navtej Sarna revisits Jallianwala Bagh and multiple parallel freedom movements in his new book *Crimson Spring*

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'Jallianwala Bagh, the site of one of the most horrific expressions of colonial oppression anywhere in the world, and certainly in India, has become a touristy spot today,' says seasoned author and former Ambassador to the US Navtej Sarna, who has just penned a novel *Crimson Spring*, based on the massacre of 1919.

The book – Sarna's tenth – is set for launch on July 11.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Sarna talks of the Jallianwala Bagh as an event that changed the momentum and direction of the freedom movement. 'It was an event which changed Mahatma Gandhi's view of British rule in India. We still don't agree on how many people died there. We have accepted the figure of 379, but that's just the official figure,' he says.

Though *Crimson Spring* is classified as a work of fiction, Sarna has taken the opportunity to right some historical wrongs. From Jallianwala Bagh and Udham Singh

who shot Lieutenant Governor of Punjab Michael O'Dwyer, holding him responsible for the massacre, to Brigadier General Dyer, the perpetrator of the massacre and on to Ghadar movement and India's contribution to the First World War, Sarna has focussed on aspects of our freedom struggle "underplayed" by historians.

He feels passionately about multiple parallel freedom movements like the Ghadar that have not been given their due in our history books. Even as the focus is on Mahatma Gandhi's ahimsa and satyagrah, there were other freedom fighters who sacrificed their all for the nation even if they were not averse to the use of violence.

"We as a nation have been unfair to the revolutionaries who sacrificed their lives. Supporting them or writing about them does not mean we are celebrating violence. What we are celebrating is the sacrifice. Bhagat Singh was hanged when he was 23. Udham Singh spent 20-odd years chasing



Navtej Singh Sarna

O'Dwyer. There were several others – Ashfaqullah, Madan Lal Dhingra and others – who did not get the credit they deserved for long years."

"When Udham Singh shot O'Dwyer, Mahatma Gandhi called it an act of insanity. For 34 years, Udham Singh's remains lay buried in an unmarked grave in Pen-

tonville prison. It was only in 1974 that the Government of India made a move to get his remains back," recalls the author.

Similarly, he feels that Bhagat Singh was not fully understood. "Today we see him everywhere, but we are in danger of making a caricature of Bhagat Singh. He was a great man, not a terrorist (unlike terms often used by history books, such as revolutionary terrorist). He was a thinker, writer and a true revolutionary. He thought there was no greater ideal than dying for the country. That needs to be celebrated."

Sarna's book is dedicated to the memory of Bhagat Singh, Udham Singh and Kartar Singh Sarabha. The latter took part in the Ghadar movement and was hanged; Bhagat Singh regarded him as his guru. In turn, Udham Singh regarded Bhagat Singh as his guru.

"I have tried in my little way at restoring the place they should have in public memory," says Sarna, explaining the reason behind

the relatively lesser known contribution of the Ghadar Movement, the Silk Letter Controversy, etc. "These were movements that did not hesitate to use violence. India's freedom movement became globally known for its non-violent character. Hence these movements ended up being underplayed. But there are stories and sacrifices here that need to be recalled and explored," he says.

Sarna's book, set in early 20th Century Punjab, has a revelation on Brigadier General Dyer, the man responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. "He was not a Brigadier General. He was a Colonel, who temporarily held the rank of Brigadier General at the time of the massacre on April 13, 1919. He tried to keep it as an honorary rank after retirement, but this matter was never resolved. He died as Colonel Dyer but both to the people who hated him and to people who supported him, he was known as General Dyer."