

# The Ghadar Movement an Early 20th Century – An Empirical View

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to study how following the outbreak of World War I in 1914, some Ghadar party members returned to Punjab to incite armed revolution for Indian Independence. Ghadarites smuggled arms into India and incited Indian troops to mutiny against the British. This uprising, known as the Ghadar Mutiny, was unsuccessful, and 42 mutineers were executed following the Lahore Conspiracy Case trial. From 1914 to 1917 Ghadarites continued underground anti-colonial actions with the support of Germany and Ottoman Turkey, known as the Hindu–German Conspiracy, which led to a sensational trial in San Francisco in 1917. Following the war's conclusion, the party in the United States fractured into a Communist and an Indian Socialist faction. The party was formally dissolved in 1948. Key participants in the Ghadar Movement included Bhai Parmanand, Vishnu Ganesh Pingle, Sohan Singh Bhakna, Bhagwan Singh Gyanee, Har Dayal, Tarak Nath Das, Bhagat Singh Thind, Kartar Singh Sarabha, Abdul Hafiz Mohamed Barakatullah, Rashbehari Bose, and Gulab Kaur. Although its attempts at overthrowing the British Raj were unsuccessful, the insurrectionary ideals of the Ghadar Party influenced members of the Indian Independence Movement opposed to Gandhian nonviolence. The Ghadarites saw social and national emancipation of the peoples of India as the most decisive condition for a prosperous and happy life. Therefore they concentrated all their efforts and energies and urged all the peoples of Hindustan to do so irrespective of their creed, colour, language, or caste. They wanted dignity and honour for all in and outside of Hindustan, and the necessary condition for this was the liberation of India from the rule of the British and their collaborators. To liberate India from the shackles they called upon all the Indians to return to India and overthrow the British rule.

*Key words:* Ghadar movement; British rule; historical consciousness; colonialism; social theory;

## Introduction

Nationalist sentiments were also building around the world among South Asian emigres and students, where they could organize more freely than in British India. Several dozen students came to study at the University of Berkeley, some spurred by a scholarship offered by a wealthy Punjabi farmer. Revolutionary intellectuals like Har Dayal and Taraknath Das attempted to organize students and educate them in anarchist and nationalist ideas. RasBihari Bose on request from Vishnu Ganesh Pingle, an American trained Ghadar, who met Bose at Benares and requested him to take up the leadership of the coming revolution. But before accepting the responsibility, he sent Sachin Sanyal to the Punjab to assess the situation. Sachin returned very optimistic, in the United States and Canada with the aim to liberate India from British rule. The movement began with a group of immigrants known as the Hindustani Workers of the Pacific Coast.

Ghadar di Gunj, an early Ghadarite compilation of nationalist and socialist literature, was banned in India in 1913. The Ghadar Party, initially the Pacific Coast Hindustan Association, was formed on 15 July 1913 in the United States but before a decision to create headquarter at Yugantar Ashram in San Francisco was taken at a meeting in the town of Astoria in the state of Oregon in USA under the leadership of Har Dayal, Sant Baba Wasakha Singh Dadehar, Baba Jawala Singh,

Santokh Singh and Sohan Singh Bhakna as its president. The members of the party were Indian immigrants, largely from Punjab. Many of its members were students at University of California at Berkeley including Dayal, Tarak Nath Das, Maulavi Barkatullah, Harnam Singh Tundilat, Kartar Singh Sarabha and V.G. Pingle. The party quickly gained support from Indian expatriates, especially in the United States, Canada, East Africa, and Asia.

The party was built around the weekly paper *The Ghadar*, which carried the caption on the masthead: *Angrezi Raj Ka Dushman* (an enemy of the British rule). "Wanted brave soldiers", the *Ghadar* declared, "to stir up rebellion in India. Pay-death; Price-martyrdom; Pension-liberty; Field of battle-India". The ideology of the party was strongly secular. In the words of Sohan Singh Bhakna, who later became a major peasant leader of Punjab: "We were not Sikhs or Punjabis. Our religion was patriotism". The first issue of *The Ghadar*, was published in San Francisco on 1 November 1913.

As Kartar Singh Sarabha, one of the founders of the party, wrote in the first issue: "Today there begins 'Ghadar' in foreign lands, but in our country's tongue, a war against the British Raj. What is our name? Ghadar. What is our work? Ghadar. Where will be the Revolution? In India. The time will soon come when rifles and blood will take the place of pens and ink."

Following the voyage of the *Komagata Maru* in 1914, a direct challenge to Canadian anti-Indian immigration laws, several thousand Indians resident in the United States sold their business and homes ready to drive the British from India. The British government responded by passing the *Immigration Act, 1914*. However, Har Dayal

### **1912**

Rashbehari Bose and Sachin Sanyal staged a spectacular bomb attack on Viceroy Hardinge while he was making official entry into the new Capital of Delhi in a procession through Chandni Chowk in December 1912.

### **1914**

During World War I, the British Indian Army contributed significantly to the British war effort. Consequently, a reduced force, estimated to have been as low as 15,000 troops in late 1914, was stationed in India. It was in this scenario that concrete plans for organising uprisings in India were made.

In September 1913, Mathra Singh, a Ghadarite, visited Shanghai and promoted the Ghadarite cause within the Indian community there. In January 1914, Singh visited India and circulated *Ghadar* literature amongst Indian soldiers through clandestine sources before leaving for Hong Kong. Singh reported that the situation in India was favourable for a revolution.

In May 1914, the Canadian government refused to allow the 400 Indian passengers of the ship *Komagata Maru* to disembark at Vancouver. The voyage had been planned as an attempt to circumvent Canadian exclusion laws that effectively prevented Indian immigration. Before the ship reached Vancouver, its approach was announced on German radio, and British Columbian authorities were prepared to prevent the passengers from entering Canada. The incident became a focal point for the Indian community in Canada which rallied in support of the passengers and against the government's policies. After a 2-month legal battle, 24 of them were allowed to immigrate. The ship was escorted out of Vancouver by the protected cruiser *HMCS Rainbow* and returned to India. On reaching Calcutta, the passengers were detained under the Defence of India Act at Budge Budge by the British Indian government, which made efforts to forcibly

transport them to Punjab. This caused rioting at Budge Budge and resulted in fatalities on both sides. A number of Ghadar leaders, like Barkatullah and Tarak Nath Das, used the inflammatory passions surrounding the Komagata Maru incident as a rallying point and successfully brought many disaffected Indians in North America into the party's fold.

### Outlines of mutiny

By October 1914, a large number of Ghadarites had returned to India and were assigned tasks like contacting Indian revolutionaries and organisations, spreading propaganda and literature, and arranging to get arms into the country that were being arranged to be shipped in from United States with German help. The first group of 60 Ghadarites led by Jawala Singh, left San Francisco for Canton aboard the steamship Korea on 29 August. They were to sail on to India, where they would be provided with arms to organise a revolt. At Canton, more Indians joined, and the group, now numbering about 150, sailed for Calcutta on a Japanese vessel. They were to be joined by more Indians arriving in smaller groups. During the September–October time period, about 300 Indians left for India in various ships like SS Siberia, Chinyo Maru, China, Manchuria, SS Tenyo Maru, SS Mongolia and SS Shinyo Maru. The SS Korea's party was uncovered and arrested on arrival at Calcutta. In spite of this, a successful underground network was established between the United States and India, through Shanghai, Swatow, and Siam. Tehl Singh, the Ghadar operative in Shanghai, is believed to have spent \$30,000 for helping the revolutionaries to get into India.

Amongst those who returned were Vishnu Ganesh Pingle, Kartar Singh, Santokh Singh, Pandit Kanshi Ram, Bhai Bhagwan Singh, who ranked amongst the higher leadership of the Ghadar Party. Pingle had known Satyen Bhushan Sen (Jatin Mukherjee's emissary) in the company of Gadhar members (such as Kartar Singh Sarabha) at the University of Berkeley. Tasked to consolidate contact with the Indian revolutionary movement, as part of the Ghadar Conspiracy, Satyen Bhushan Sen, Kartar Singh Sarabha, Vishnu Ganesh Pingle and a batch of Sikh militants sailed from America by the SS Salamin in the second half of October 1914. Satyen and Pingle halted in China for a few days to meet the Gadhar leaders (mainly Tahal Singh) for future plans. They met Dr Sun Yat-sen for co-operation. Dr. Sun was not prepared to displease the British. After Satyen and party left for India, Tahal sent Atmaram Kapur, Santosh Singh and Shiv Dayal Kapur to Bangkok for necessary arrangements. In November, 1914, Pingle, Kartar Singh and Satyen Sen arrived in Calcutta. Satyen introduced Pingle and Kartar Singh to Jatin Mukherjee. "Pingle had long talks with Jatin Mukherjee, who sent them to Rash Behari" in Benares with necessary information during the third week of December. Satyen remained in Calcutta at 159 Bow Bazar. Tegart was informed of an attempt to tamper with some Sikh troops at the Dakshineswar gunpowder magazine. "A reference to the Military authorities shows that the troops in question were the 93rd Burmans" sent to Mesopotamia. Jatin Mukherjee and Satyen Bhushan Sen were seen interviewing these Sikhs. The Ghadarites rapidly established contact with the Indian revolutionary underground, notably that in Bengal, and the plans began to be consolidated by Rash Behari Bose and Jatin Mukherjee and the Ghadarites for a coordinated general uprising.

## The legacy of Ghadar

Ghadar Party of 1913 failed to achieve its motives. It was not a successful armed rebellion for more reasons than one. But the movement became a milestone in Punjab's history of the struggle for freedom. Ghadar leaders and their 'spontaneous acts of bravery' became a part of Punjab's folklore and continue to be so even today.

The rebellion – successful or not– set into motion various important events that marked India's struggle against the British. The Pagdi Sambhal Jatta movement, led by Ajit Singh was one such event. Ajit Singh was closely associated with the Ghadar Party. In 1907, his fight for the rights of peasants in Lyallpur was an outright revolt against exploitative taxation policies of the British.

The Ghadar movement had a strong impression on Bhagat Singh as well. It is a widely known fact that Kartar Singh Saraba, the youngest member of the Ghadar party – who was 19 when he carried out bombings inside army cantonments – had been one of the most inspiring figures for Bhagat Singh, Ajit Singh's nephew. It is also said that Bhagat Singh carried a photo of Kartar Singh Saraba in his front pocket at all times.

The Rowlatt Act and the massacre that followed at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 had a strong bearing of the Ghadar movement too. After the provisions of the Defence of India Act expired, the British feared the mushrooming of nationalist revolutionary organisations once again. This fear was the precursor for enabling the Rowlatt Act as a legislation. "They didn't want Ghadar to happen once again," said Parminder Singh, a retired professor of English literature and general secretary of the Ghadar committee in Amritsar who was present at the festival.

## Conclusion

The Ghadar Movement was formed in 1913 by expatriate Punjabis in the United States with shared leadership from Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims. The goal of the movement was to assist in overthrowing British colonial rule in India. The publicity that the group attracted in the United States was used as further justification for anti-Asian discrimination and suspicion. The Ghadar movement organized to print pamphlets and even to send arms and volunteers for a revolution in India. Some Punjabis returned to India to participate in unsuccessful and misguided revolutionary missions. International Ghadar activity in Germany and elsewhere eventually led to what the press touted as the "Hindu Conspiracy" trial in San Francisco in 1917–18. By this time Har Dayal had already left the United States. The shooting of Ghadar's other major Hindu leader, Ram Chandra, during the trial left the movement almost entirely in Sikh hands.

The arrests, the trial, the shooting, and deportations all attracted sensational publicity from the American press which heightened suspicion towards Asian Indians. In the 1920s, however, the Ghadar Party was reorganized and it continued as a focal point for Punjabi and Sikh identity until the time of Indian independence in 1947.

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