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Interpreting Ghadar:  
Echoes of Voices Past  
Ghadar Centennial  
Conference Proceedings  
October 2013

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Edited by  
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The *Interpreting Ghadar: Echoes of Voices Past* conference held at UFV on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013 brought together scholars and students who presented their work amongst colleagues, friends and the public. Their papers make up this special collection of papers marking the centenary. Special thanks go to all the anonymous reviewers of the papers who read, critiqued, and improved the papers submitted for this publication.

I would like to thank all those that participated in the stimulating event as well as the many people who contributed to its success. Poets who joined us at the end of the conference to share evocative and inspiring poetry that stirred the souls of Ghadarites one hundred years ago, were warmly appreciated. The conference was the culmination of a year's work by the Centre for Indo Canadian Studies (CICS) at UFV to commemorate the centenary of this important movement in Canada. Although the movement actively lasted from 1913-1919 in Canada, its impact and repercussions were felt well up until India's independence from British rule in 1947.

I would also like to thank David Thomson, friend and colleague at UFV who provided us with the support necessary to produce an e-publication for this collection of papers. As well, my colleague and compatriot Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra, Coordinator at the Centre for Indo Canadian Studies, deserves much thanks for providing all the support necessary to successfully complete this work.

Satwinder Kaur Bains, Editor  
Director, Centre for Indo Canadian Studies  
University of the Fraser Valley  
May 2015





INTRODUCTION  
INTERPRETING GHADAR: ECHOES OF VOICES PAST  
SATWINDER KAUR BAINS

This publication is made up of a selection of papers presented at a conference held in Oct, 2013 at the University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada to mark an important moment in North American history. The centennial conference, *Interpreting Ghadar: Echoes of Voices Past* explored the early twentieth century Ghadar (revolution) movement (established in 1913) that began in North America and quickly established itself around the globe wherever members of the Indian Diaspora existed. The movement's revolutionary genesis and goal was to rid India of British rule and to fight for fair and just treatment for those Indian immigrants living in Canada and the United States of America. Using an interdisciplinary approach the conference provided a venue for scholars to present diverse viewpoints on the Ghadar.

The conference papers in this collection attempt to fill the acknowledged void created by a porous and omission-oriented Canadian history of South Asian historical events and movements. The papers are also located within a rich and vibrant year (2013) where many Universities, Cities, organizations, agencies, media and individuals marked the centenary in various ways. Conferences, proclamations, markers, gatherings, poetry readings and academic discourses were part of the centennial year commemorations across North America.

Early Indian migrants to the Pacific Northwest (first recorded arrival was in 1902) arrived without fully realizing the racially hierarchical realities of colonial expansion in North America and the practicing doctrines, ideologies and practices of colonialism in an era of high imperialism (Buchignani, Indra & Srivastiva, 1985) . As well, at that time Irish, German, Italian and Jewish immigrants in the United States and Canada were involved in radical socialist labour movements, demanding social reform in the industrial labour markets (Ogden, 2011). Canada's 'whites only' policy encouraged a west coast racism-fuelled version of European origin settler communities as the order of the day in the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth

century. European settlers believed in the inherent unassimilable nature of Asian immigrants and countered their migration with racist legislation and laws to prevent their entry.

Popular Canadian attitudes led by hostile stereotypes created aggressive, prejudicial and often violent encounters with Indian immigrants. Indian immigrants, who were looking to create new lives in Canada, saw that British colonial rule had created two tiers of citizens and it was made painfully obvious to them that they were in the lower tier. Under the Raj, poor treatment of Indian citizens in India by the British gave them an inferior bargaining position in the new land. The western frontier was the last bastion for colonial expansion, creating immense human mobility from all parts of the world to meet the need for industrial growth. This movement of peoples created a racial tension that would affect the many diverse populations living in North America, like the Punjabi's. As Odgen (2012) points out, "The Punjabis arrived in the midst of this western moment and became for a time its political lightning rod, simultaneously indispensable labour and indispensable political fodder." Much racial strife and outright racism was experienced by new immigrants and their lives were increasingly becoming untenable. The time was right for Indian revolutionary intellectuals to begin to articulate their demands for an equitable and just society (both in Canada and India) in consort with the other marginalized immigrant groups, while striking out on their own by initiating an ideologically secular pro-national movement. Anderson's (2006) concept of an imagined nation provides the frame to understand the impetus how Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims came together with a singular purpose – to work and even die for the cause. As Benedict Anderson in his work on imagined communities (2006) suggests, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (p.7).

Intellectuals and average wage labourers came together in Astoria, Oregon in June 1913 to form an organization that would mobilize Indians all over North America and around the globe to fight injustice against them and their brethren. The founding member's penultimate goal was to rid India of the British and to proclaim self-rule, but they also articulated social reforms to create a more just and equitable

society in North America and India. This movement would span many continents and last for over three decades. According to Puri (1980) the double jeopardy of oppression in a foreign land - racial hostility, fear and a sense of alienation lead to the genesis of the Ghadar movement in North America.

The goal of the conference was to examine and theorize the movement's transnational revolutionary connections across geographies and literatures, transnational historiographies and action towards social reform inherent in the ideals of Ghadarites. The three broad themes were: Ghadar literature and revolution, Colonialism and Social Justice, and Negotiating Transnational Historiographies. The poetics and politics of the Ghadar movement print literature gave voice to the Ghadarite aspirations of a free India and the social conditions immigrants were forced to endure in North America. Pro-Indian independence materials included newspapers, pamphlets, correspondence, photographs, and interviews, posters, letters, handbills, magazine articles, lectures, theses, bibliographies, court documents and revolutionary poetry.

The conference also explored the support given to the Ghadar movement in the west by the Irish and the Germans and in the east by those living in Japan, China and Singapore. As a social justice reformist movement, the Ghadar was an anomaly as it also demanded transnational social and cultural transformation in India and in the west. This transnational movement took its egalitarian and secular resistance struggle to India – hoping to transform India's socio-religiously segregated communities by instilling in them the revolutionary fervor of their movement. Unfortunately the return of Ghadarites to India resulted in martyrdom, prison and exile for many, but it was a global movement that inaugurated anti-colonial resistance which had been the impetus for the voluntary return of Ghadarites to India to fight and if necessary die for self-rule. Such a deep and abiding emotionally charged fervor existed within the Ghadarites that death was exhorted as the ultimate desire for the revolutionary. It is apropos within the discourse on Ghadar to relate to the seminal work by Anderson (2006), who asks how cultural roots of nationalism can generate such colossal sacrifice? (p.7). As Ghadar's literature (Singh, 1966) extolled:

Wanted: Enthusiastic and heroic soldiers for organizing  
Ghadar in Hindustan  
Remuneration: Death  
Reward: Martyrdom  
Pension: Freedom  
Field of work: Hindustan (p.20)

Transnational historiographies charted pro-national movements (some in exile) across the oceans and these resistance struggles were informed by radical social reform from the Ghadarites that impacted India until partition in 1947. The Ghadar transnational movements were linked with Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila, Berlin, Panama, Abbotsford, Vancouver, Astoria, San Francisco, numerous cities in Punjab, Bengal, etc.

The chapters in this publication are organized within three thematic interests. The first two papers offer accounts of Ghadar literature in two very distinct ways. While Sidhu offers an analysis of Ghadar poetry by suggesting that poetry written by the Ghadarites was motivated by the Gurus lives and their writings in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib ji, Singh's paper sheds light on the ideological leanings of the Ghadarites and not on the aesthetics. Both papers propose that the poetry narrative's appeal was effectively developed for exhortation of the largely peasant masses towards a revolution that was philosophically militant, while ideologically secular. As Puri (1980) suggests, "This powerful language of communication appears to validate a hypothesis of Diaz about the Andalusian peasant rebellions that illiteracy of the audience is no insuperable obstacle, provided the idiom fits into their cognitive maps" (p. 56).

The second theme within which the three papers are framed address social justice in the colonial era. These papers discuss the need to recover/discover the lost/untold role of Ghadarite women as well as the Irish support for Ghadar and contemporary movements akin to Ghadar. Johal's anti-racism feminist framework assists in conducting a historical analysis of the role of Indian women in the movement and their racially charged exclusion from Canadian society and their Canadian households in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This factor contributed to the movement's goal to create better living conditions for Indian immigrants in Canada, motivating men to fight for equal rights and justice. Singh's work lays out the foundational reciprocal

desire in the United States for Irish/Indian collaboration in the fight for justice from the British. This desire created the path for alliances that would strengthen their resolve for an armed revolution against British oppression in India and Ireland. Saini's paper's analysis of the genesis of Ghadar allows a foray into contemporary India where the fight for social justice against communal and political oppression makes the prospects of a second Ghadar movement in India possible.

The third theme takes this publication across geographies with transnational historiographies reminding us of the far reach of Ghadar and its ideological appeal. While Englesberg charts the pre-cursor to the Ghadar movement in the Pacific Northwest by presenting the facts behind the 1907 race riots that spread violently across the two borders of Canada and the US, Khan provides evidence of the movement's impact on Ghadarites in Afghanistan. Both papers chart transnational borders that were easily permeable to the flow and ebb of Ghadar ideology largely due to social unrest and racial/religious intolerance in the US, Canada, India and Afghanistan.

Ghadhar formed and developed as a transnational revolutionary movement in response to the political and social climate of domination and oppression in Canada and India. In responding to the economic exploitation of the British Raj in India and similar exploitation of cheap Indian labour in Canada, Ghadarites of various religious affiliations like Har Dayal, Bakhna, Barkatullah, Rahim, Ram, Sarabha, Bose fanned the flames of disenchantment into an effective and highly charged revolutionary movement. Intellectual Ghadarites availed the presses to produce newspapers and propaganda materials, and others used the podium to press their message to Indians all over North America and in far-flung colonies across the globe. The objective to inspire and instill patriotic pro-nationalist feeling was uppermost in the minds of the Ghadarites. This they achieved with much success, however their personal journey into India to fulfill their vision was short-lived as the British vanquished their presence with brutality and complete ruthlessness. Even though the flame was bright for a short time, their ideology informed the nationalist movement that eventually led to the independence of India and equal treatment of Indian immigrants in other countries. The papers in this publication richly highlight the research that interrogates the movement's genesis and its development in the west by freedom-espousing socially-conscious immigrants in a new land at the turn of the last century.

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# **PART ONE**

## **Ghadar Literature**





# The 1907 Anti-Punjabi Hostilities in Washington State: Prelude to the Ghadar Movement

Paul Englesberg

## Abstract

Following months of harassment and threats, on September 4, 1907 a mob attacked and drove out over 200 South Asian laborers from Bellingham, Washington. Most of these immigrants, commonly referred to as “Hindus,” were Sikhs who had recently emigrated from Punjab to Canada and then crossed the border to work in large lumber mills. The goal of the rioters was to expel these workers from the mills and the city. In the months following, anti-Punjabi hostilities occurred in other locations in the Puget Sound region of Washington State, causing many more South Asian immigrants to flee back to Canada or further south to Oregon and California. This paper addresses the conflicts that faced the early South Asian immigrants to Canada and the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. and examines both causal factors and far-reaching consequences of the conflicts, including exclusionary immigration policies in Canada and the United States and the radicalization of many of these immigrants very similar to what was seen in the sentiments of the Ghadar movement.

**Key words:** Ghadar, Bellingham, Sikhs, riot, mob, labourer, exclusion

The forced mass expulsion of Punjabi immigrants by mobs in Bellingham and Everett, Washington in 1907 stand out as some of the earliest challenges that Sikhs faced in North America. Although these events have received far less attention than the more violent and more politically-charged Komagata Maru struggle and Ghadar activism, the 1907 riots were significant in influencing the immigration debates and policies in Canada and the U.S. These events also served as a prelude to an extended period of struggle by Sikhs and other South Asians in North America, inspiring many to transform from farmworkers to Ghadar activists. Historians have emphasized various factors and aspects of the 1907 attacks, including labor strife, racial supremacist ideology, fears due to socio-cultural differences, and reactions to nationalism and

radicalism. More recently, historians have paid particular attention to the legal and political implications and results on a national level on both sides of the US.-Canadian border (Chang, 2012; Shah, 2011; Sohi, 2008; Lee 2007).

An analysis of a range of primary sources on Asian immigration and responses in the Northwest region, and Bellingham, WA in particular, clearly reveals that concerted efforts to harass the Punjabi Sikhs and arouse popular animosity began a full year before the 1907 riot. Building on the research of Joan Jenson (1988), who used both local newspaper sources as well as interviews with key informants, this analysis is based upon local Bellingham archives and newspapers, the author's interviews with descendants, and Canadian and U.S. government documents.

Positioning this event as a prelude to the Ghadar movement involves both the chronological and the causal relationships. The riots of 1907 preceded the formation of the Ghadar movement by several years, and the primary factors fueling the animosity in the region were racial, xenophobic, and economic. Evidence suggests that the Punjabi workers in the U.S. were not involved in political activity or in contact with radical university students at this time. However, many displaced Punjabi laborers became radicalized by these struggles and their experiences with racism, and by 1913 many became supportive of Ghadar ideas and got involved with activities of the movement.

This paper focuses first on the local and historical context going back to the first arrivals of south Asians and reactions in the community, second, how the Bellingham riot and other attacks were portrayed in the press and thirdly, how various individuals and groups responded at the local level. The basic events of the Bellingham riot of 1907 may be familiar because they have been recounted in many histories of Asian Americans, and especially in accounts of South Asian and Sikh migration. However it is important to examine the background behind these events and the wider pattern of hostilities against Punjabi immigrants in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. and British Columbia. In this way the riots can be understood within the broader context of exclusionary politics, deprivation of rights of Asians immigrants, and racial fear and hostility.

Bellingham, the northernmost port on the Pacific Coast of the USA, was surrounded by salmon-rich waters to the west and massive old

growth timber on the slopes of the Cascade Range. At the beginning of the twentieth century Bellingham's location and resources made it ripe for rapid growth. By 1907 the population of the booming city had reached 35,000, steadily increasing due to immigration and expanding employment opportunities. Most of this immigration was from other states, and to a lesser extent from Canada and other countries. By the summer of 1907, the Asian population included approximately 300 Japanese, over 200 Punjabis, a number of Filipinos, and on a seasonal basis some large crews of Chinese workers brought in to work at the salmon canneries and housed in segregated Chinese bunkhouses.

On the evening of September 4, 1907 riots broke out in Bellingham as mobs broke into several houses occupied by Punjabi workers. Groups of rioters threatened; beat and robbed them, chased men along the waterfront, threw rocks, and moved on to lumber mills to attack and round up workers there. Uniformed police, numbering less than a dozen in the city of 30,000, arrived but were unable or unwilling to control the rioters. The goal of the rioters was to drive these South Asian workers out of the mills and the city by using beatings and the threat of violence. Overnight an agreement was worked out with the police chief and over 100 South Asians were herded into the city jail in the basement of the City Hall. Within a few days the goals of the mob were fulfilled; nearly all of the South Asian residents, numbering over 200, had either left by train or steamship for points further south along the Pacific coast or on foot to cross back into Canada. Several of the South Asian workers were beaten, and according to spokesmen for the group of immigrants, many took the threats seriously and were afraid for their lives. Although the local papers downplayed the injuries, a wire dispatch, much criticized by local authorities as grossly exaggerated, reported that six were badly beaten and hospitalized (New York Times, Sept. 5, 1907).

The action was the first in a series of attacks on "Hindus" in Washington State and British Columbia, but it was not the first anti-Asian action in the Bellingham area. In October 1885, an anti-Chinese movement expelled the Chinese residents from the towns that would later combine to form Bellingham. During this period in many communities in the northwest, vigilantes also forcibly expelled, and in some cases murdered, Chinese residents, many of whom fled to Portland, Oregon.

## **Entry of South Asians in North America**

South Asian immigrants first entered Bellingham in January 1906, when two men without immigration documents arrived on foot from Vancouver, BC, and were arrested and turned over to immigration officials. Their appearance was described in detail as strange and curious, and one paper included an artist's drawings of the two men. Their vegetarian diet was also seen as a curiosity, especially when they refused the Bellingham jail food despite having gone for two days without eating (Bellingham Reveille, Jan. 13, 1906, p.6).

Most of the South Asian immigrants to the Pacific Northwest were young male Sikh farmers from the Punjab region of India who arrived in British Columbia in the early part of the first decade of the twentieth century. Finding that employment opportunities were limited in the Vancouver and Victoria area, and hearing of employment opportunities and higher wages in Washington State, many crossed the border in 1906 and 1907. Bellingham, located only 20 miles south of the border and having some of the largest lumber mills in the world, was the closest destination, and several lumber mills offered jobs to willing immigrants during periods of boom in a very volatile economy. The appearance of these men varied, some wore the traditional turban over uncut hair and were bearded, and others had cut hair under Western hats and trimmed moustaches. Although there were reports that a few South Asian women were living in Bellingham, these rumors were probably mistaken (Bellingham Reveille, Sept. 6, 1907, p.1).

## **Beginnings of Hostility**

By September 1906, a year before the riot, at least 17 Punjabi workers were reported to be living in Bellingham, and the expected arrival of many more South Asian immigrants became a frequent theme in the local press. Commenting on the report of Anglo mill workers protesting the hiring of South Asian workers, an editorial proclaimed "the dusky peril of the Hindus" as "the latest to threaten American labor" (Puget Sound American, Sept. 14, 1906 pp. 1; 4). The editorial was followed two days later by an astonishing full page article in the *Puget Sound American* warning Bellingham readers of the "Hindu hordes invading the state" and "floods of Hindus coming." The large banner heading asked "Have we a dusky peril?" with a six

inch question mark, invoking racial fears, as “dusky” denoted non-white. The article surrounded several illustrations of Sanda Singh, one of the 17 East Indian workers in Bellingham, who apparently had posed for Carroll Dibble, a local commercial artist and sign painter known for his caricatures. Dibble’s drawing of Sanda Singh in turban and full beard must have seemed quite exotic and likely threatening to the Bellingham readers, and in the middle of the portraits, Dibble added an even more exotic image of a bearded man with turban and flowing robe charming a cobra with a reed instrument (*Puget Sound American*, Sept. 16, 1906 p. 16). This inflammatory article accompanied by coverage of the first organized effort to expel the Asian immigrant workers occurred at one of the lumber mills (*Puget Sound American*, Sept. 16, 1906, p. 2). Interestingly, 12 months later on the day following the riots, these same drawings were reprinted on page one of the *Reveille* (Sept. 5, 1907), which had bought out the *Puget Sound American*.

Why were 17 lumber mill workers from India and the expected influx of dozens more seen as a threat deserving of an entire page and a hired illustrator? After all, several positive qualities were mentioned and attributed to immigration officials – they were “tall, well-formed, and stand erect” and in general were “intelligent, polite, neat, and clean.” The article offers some explanations of the foreseen peril. Racial antagonism suggested by the term “dusky” was further intoned with a heading proclaiming, “Whites oppose Hindus.” But labor and economic fears were the most prominent – “wages will be reduced if repressive measures are not taken in the beginning,” and they “will act as a brake on the city’s progress” because these Hindus “live cheaply and save their little earnings to return to India to spend them.” Anglo mill workers, the article warned, were making efforts “to oust them, and thus discourage further immigration to Bellingham” (*Puget Sound American*, Sept. 16, 1906, p. 16).

In May 1907 another kind of opposition to the South Asians in Bellingham developed. The newspaper appeared to be the instigator, proclaiming that the “Hindus of Bellingham” were a “public nuisance,” and residents were in “mortal fear for their lives.” By this time their numbers had increased to 50 or 60, and the press repeated diatribes about them being dirty, offensive, and belligerent. Charges against the “brown intruders” and “dark skinned sons of India” included indecent exposure, stealing neighbors’ chickens, and dumping refuse around

their housing, resulting in some calling for the deportation of the immigrants as “undesirable citizens,” a view repeated in subsequent editorials (Bellingham Reveille, May 21, 1907, p. 4).

Over the previous months, several editorials and local news articles included warnings that conflict and antagonism were escalating. Police harassment and discriminatory treatment is evident from the local arrest records, showing that typically when a “Hindu” was arrested for “drunkenness,” a very commonly reported violation, he was fined before being released the next morning, but white violators were usually released with no fines (City of Bellingham Arrest Log).

### **Understanding the riot**

In the days preceding the riot, hostilities escalated with a series of warnings and attacks. After a massive Labor Day parade and gatherings of workers, unnamed speakers issued threats, and several violent incidents against Punjabis broke out. (*Bellingham Reveille* Sept. 6, 1907, p. 1) On the day preceding the riot, workers at one mill had made a plan to attack the South Asians, claiming that white workers had been fired and replaced by Asian workers. On the very morning of the riot, an editorial suggested that citizens had been unwelcoming toward the “Hindu” workers.

After the riot, press reports identified both immediate and long-standing grievances that were attributed as causes. The most commonly voiced reasons were the economic threats to mill jobs and wages, as the South Asian laborers were believed to be willing to work for lower wages than the prevailing rate for European Americans, therefore taking jobs from others. A further complaint was that the immigrant workers spent little, lived very frugally, and saved much of their pay to send to family in India. Immediate grievances mentioned as triggering the violence were several South Asian men refusing to yield the sidewalk to women, boisterous fighting outside of taverns, and a white female tenant being displaced by “Hindu” men. The lumber mill owners who employed the South Asian workers were named as the ultimate culprits by the Bellingham City Council in a controversial resolution (*Bellingham Herald*, Sept. 10, 1907).

The rioters were said to number at least 500, but accounts describe a mob that grew and separated into groups through the night, some

attacking living quarters and other marching to lumber mills. Their composition was sometimes referred to as “white,” but according to newspapers some Filipino and black workers also participated. Some descriptions in the press emphasized participation of boys, but others described the rioters as persons of all ages, with millworkers in the majority. The five persons arrested and jailed were described as working men; police had also handcuffed two others described as boys who were released when an angry mob surrounded the police. As with scores of lawless actions against Chinese immigrants in the 1880’s which in some cases included cold-blooded murder, no one was prosecuted in the end because “no witnesses could be found to swear against the defendants.” The prosecutor claimed that “the officers were unable to find a single person in the city who would swear that he could identify the defendants as participants in the outbreak against the Orientals,” and the defendants were released (Bellingham Herald, Sept. 21, 1907, p. 8). Once the case was dismissed and the last of the Sikhs had left Bellingham, there was little reference to the matter in the press, and there seemed to be a deliberate attempt to forget the embarrassing lawlessness.

The reactions of the two local newspapers and most of the western U.S. press were similar. They disapproved of the lawlessness of the method, but celebrated the outcome of the eviction of these “undesirable” immigrants:

While any good citizen must be unalterably opposed to the means employed, the result of the crusade against the Hindus cannot but cause a general and intense satisfaction. From every standpoint it is most undesirable that these Asians should be permitted to remain in the United States. They are repulsive in appearance and disgusting in their manners. They are said to be without shame and, while no charges of immorality are brought against them, their actions and customs are so different from ours that there can never be tolerance of them. They contribute nothing to the growth and building up of the city as the result of their labors. They work for small wages and do not put their money into circulation. They build no homes and while they numerically swell the population, it is of a class that we may well spare. ... There can be no two sides to such a question. The Hindu is a detriment to the town, while the white man is a distinct advantage (Bellingham Reveille, Sept. 6, 1907, p.4).

The Hindu is not a good citizen. It would require centuries to assimilate him, and this country need not take the trouble. Our racial burdens are already heavy enough to bear. ...Our cloak of brotherly love is not large enough to include him as a member of the body politic. His ways are not our ways; he is not adaptable, and will not in many generations make a good American citizen. Moreover he is not even a good workman...

But such exhibition of man's inhumanity to man as that of last night should not be tolerated. Such lawlessness is an outrage upon American decency.... The uncontrollable riots may mean an end of the Hindu in this community, but the end does not justify the means employed (Bellingham Herald, Sept. 5, 1907, p.4).

Fear of damage to Bellingham's reputation and possible diplomatic and legal repercussions due to the status of the Punjabis as British subjects prompted responses critical of the mob vigilante action. A strong warning was issued by the editor of the *American*, the evening edition from the Reveille newspaper office, who advocated diplomatic measures "prohibiting the Hindus from coming to this country" rather than continued "mob violence."

But so long as these Hindus are here under sanction of the law they are entitled to and must be afforded the protection of the law. Mob violence must be restrained at all hazards and Bellingham must not be known as a community where law and order is disregarded. If the Hindus want to leave this neighborhood, we are willing to speed them on their way, but if they elect to stay here they may stay until legally ejected even if it takes the whole power of the United States government to protect them in their rights... At any and all events mob violence will not be allowed to rule this city for any length of time. It must be ruthlessly suppressed by every means known to the law of the land and if the power of the city is not sufficient then the state and nation must be called upon. (Evening American, Sept. 5, 1907, p.4)

The mayor also publicly denounced the riot, called for additional police assistance, and pledged to protect the residents, ensuring their rights to work and live peacefully.



However, there was widespread public antagonism toward the South Asian population as suggested by the reports of jeering, harassment, in private correspondence and by the public statements and positions of City Council members.

The response of organized labor was mixed. Most labor voices were supportive of the aims and outcome of the anti-Asian movement but not necessarily of the tactics. The following week the Central Labor Council of the city issued a resolution condemning the riots. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which had a very small presence in the Bellingham area, issued a statement denouncing the riot as injurious to the welfare of workers (Bellingham Reveille, Sept. 6, 1907, p.1). Apparently even the IWW was not ready to take a public stand for the rights of Asian workers or advocate organizing them along with other immigrant laborers.

The Japanese and Korean Exclusion League, based in San Francisco and with an office in Seattle, was allied with labor unions and played an important role in creating atmosphere of fear and hostility toward Asian immigrants. The secretary of the Seattle chapter of the League, A.E. Fowler, visited Bellingham just after the riot, and he then traveled to Vancouver, BC for an anti-Asian demonstration on September 7. His speech in Vancouver was seen as a spark for the riotous attacks in the Chinese and Japanese districts there, just three days following the Bellingham riot. However, evidence suggests that the Bellingham action probably caught Fowler by surprise, and it is questionable whether the league had an active organization in Bellingham or had “eight hundred members in the local chapter” as described by Hallberg (1973, p. 170) based on Fowler’s embellishment of reality. Fowler’s organization and the president of the Vancouver Canada branch had been jointly planning for the mass demonstration for September 7 in Vancouver BC with delegates “from all points on the Pacific Coast” (*Vancouver World*, Aug. 26, 1907, cited in Chang, 2012, p. 106). Immediately following the riot in Bellingham the Exclusion League in Seattle issued a letter to President Roosevelt calling for halting Asian immigration to the Northwest, ominously warning that “if something were not done soon the agitation started in Bellingham would spread all over the Sound country and massacres of the Eastern aliens was likely to result” (Bellingham Reveille Sept, 6, 1907, p.1). The league’s Seattle office also publicly distanced itself from the Bellingham riot, calling

it “regrettable,” and its offer to help and provide temporarily housing in Seattle for Punjabis ousted from Bellingham appears to have been only a symbolic gesture to demonstrate its opposition to violent and illegal actions. (Bellingham Herald, Sept. 7, 1907; Sept. 17, 1907).

### Critical Voices

The press accounts described the general public as generally supporting the mob, and street-corner agitators urged others to “help drive out the cheap labor.” However one woman witness was reported as walking “boldly through the thickest of the mob” declaring that is was “a shame.” (Bellingham Reveille, Sept. 5, 1907, p. 3) The Principal of the state Normal School in Bellingham, Dr. Edward Mathes, had opened up his home to a 19 year old student from India, Nabhi Ram Joshi, and was regarded as a “good friend of India.” (Free Hindusthan, April 1908, p. 3). Although he spoke of the riots when he lectured out of state, no public statement about riots was reported in the local press. The major public voices that were recorded in opposition to the expulsion and unlawfulness, and in some sympathy with the Punjabis, were from the clergy.

On the Monday following the riots, the *Bellingham Herald* printed excerpts of several sermons obtained from four local churches of various denominations. (Bellingham Herald, Sept. 8, 1907, pp. 1, 5) These sermons touched upon the general themes of workers’ greed, immigration in general, and criticism of the police. Reverend John Flesher, Methodist, argued that those who rioted did not represent the majority of the workers. Of the four sermons excerpted by the Herald, Reverend William Wark, a Congregationalist minister stands out as the most scathing. He asked his congregation rhetorically, “Must we... refuse these outsiders because they...do not ask the same wages?” (Bellingham Herald, Sept. 8, 1907, p. 5) All four sermons expressed disapproval of the mob outrages as acts of greed and intolerance.

Bellingham’s weekly Norwegian paper, *Nya Varlden*, issued a strong criticism of the mob and the city for not taking stronger action to quell the lawlessness, comparing Bellingham to “the darkest of Russia.” However, the editor, writing in English, made it clear that he was not a “friend of the Hindus,” and blamed the mill owners for employing them (Nya Varlden, Sept. 13, 1907).

The only critical analysis of the racial character of the riot was provided by the editor and publisher of the *Seattle Republican*, Horace Cayton, in a column titled, “Always ready to riot.” Cayton (1859-1940), an African American and former slave who was born in Mississippi, lived in Seattle for most of his life:

Whether it be North, South, East, or West in the United States, it is always a safe bet that the white man is ever ready to do violence to some class of human beings if they happen to have a darker skin than their own. But a few days ago the white folk of Shelbyville, Ind. were driving a number of Negroes out of the town... so common to the Southern states that comment is unnecessary. Another day the report comes that the citizens of Bellingham are mobbing a lot of Hindu people because they not only wanted to work, but were actually working and the Lord only knows what would have been the result if the British flag had not been displayed, the Hindus being British subjects, which alarmed the whites (*Seattle Republican*, Sept. 13, 1907).

### **Role of the Local Press**

This research includes the findings from approximately 100 articles from the Bellingham press published between January 1906 and Sept 4, 1907 pertaining to the Punjabi immigrations and workers, and over 150 published from Sept 5, 1907 through the end of the year. The press certainly exerted a strong influence on public opinion. At the same time, clearly the opinions in the papers also reflected the views of segments of the public. Overall, Wolf’s (2001) characterization of the press coverage seems quite accurate:

[Both newspapers] used their articles to further dehumanize the riot victims... [T]he newspapers both mixed and matched imagery seemingly at whim... The local newspapers provide a key element in discussing the racial attributes assigned to Hindus. These newspapers manipulated racial images of unassimilable Orientals held by the people of Bellingham and in turn helped to modify these images to justify the violence of the riot (p. 22-23).

The influence of the media is always a challenge to evaluate, and after 100 years it is impossible to assess the impact which the press may have had in shaping public opinion about the Punjabi immigrants and in inciting the mob. However, the congruence between the press accounts of the Punjabi immigrants and the views of the public can be examined with the example of the private correspondence of one representative of the educated middle class. A.W. Mangum (1876-1924), a 31-year-old soil scientist, was living and working in the Bellingham area in 1907 surveying the soils of the Puget Sound region. Writing to his mother in North Carolina three days after the riot, Mangum tried to explain the background to the riot and the antipathy felt toward the South Asian workers. His explanation and description was strikingly similar to the views in the press.

These Hindos [sic] are very undesirable citizens. They are dirty and mean and will work for wages that a white man can't live on. I am not in sympathy with the laboring men who started this riot, because they ought to mob the mill men who hire these laborers rather than mob the Hindos themselves. If the mill owners did not hire them, they would not come here in such crowds. They are worse than the Japs and China men and have caused trouble ever since they began to be numerous (Mangum, Sept. 8, 1907).

Although the press and the city leaders generally denied that racial hostility had been a motive for the riot and instead focused on the perceived threats to workers, jobs and wages as well as charges of immoral behavior, the language and tone in many of the newspaper accounts and editorials suggest that race and xenophobia were indeed major factors.

Skin color featured prominently in nearly most news stories and editorials of the period in the west coast press. Sikhs and other Punjabi immigrants were described as “dusky,” “brown,” “dark-skinned” and occasionally as “black.” African Americans were described in the regional press in this period as “negro,” “colored” and sometimes as “black” or “dusky” (Bellingham Herald, Dec. 26, 1906 p.1). Stories also commonly described Punjabi immigrants as aliens and emphasized otherness, especially referring to the turban worn by many of the Sikhs and used terms such as “turbaned,” “foreign,” “Asiatic,” “Orientals,” “sons of India,” and “from India’s coral strands.”

Racial prejudice was acknowledged at times in the press. For example, an editorial about Italian immigrants commented that “As there are no race prejudices against the Italians a few thousand of them might be imported, with advantage to Whatcom county to develop the industry of market gardening on logged-off lands” (Bellingham Herald, April 25, 1907 p.4). Another editorial on the failure of police in arresting an alleged attacker commented that with “too many Orientals on this coast” who “look pretty much alike,” and are “clannish and inclined to protect each other” it was becoming difficult to pursue criminals among them (Bellingham Herald, April 2, 1907 p.4). A sports article entitled “White Athletes Must Wake Up” deplored that “Negroes, Indians, Japs and Chinese are winning athletic honors and palefaces are not given even a look-in, and after citing several examples, concluded, “It’s up to the white athletes to get busy, for the reds, yellows, browns, and blacks are copping all the honors” (Bellingham Reveille, May 2, 1907 p.2).

Although racial terms and general racial stereotypes were frequently used, more nuanced and complex perceptions and responses of ethnic difference were also demonstrated. There had been fears that mob actions would target Japanese and Filipino residents of Bellingham following the movement against the Punjabis, and the attacks on Chinese and Japanese in Vancouver, Canada; and the Japanese community demanded protection from the city and began to arm in preparation. The *Reveille* explained, however, that Filipinos were considered to be “good citizens,” and “nothing but praise of the Filipinos is now heard in the city.” It was reported that some Filipinos had actually taken part in the riot “along with the Americans.” Although the Japanese were not similarly praised, the paper explained that due to their employment in areas not competing with white workers, they were “not disliked strongly enough by any class in the city to make it possible to stir up rabid sentiment against them (Bellingham Reveille, Sept 7, 1907 p.1). In fact, the following day the *Reveille* published what it called “A Word of Solemn Warning” against a similar attack on Japanese residents of Bellingham. It speculated that a riot against Japanese could precipitate a war with Japan and rioters would be severely prosecuted. The editors concluded, “we warn the mob to keep its hands off the Japanese” and instead join with the Exclusion League in pushing for restrictive immigration legislation (Bellingham Reveille, Sept 8, 1907). Several days later the editors publicized the

concerns of the manager of the Pacific American Fisheries Company that if Chinese and Japanese workers were also driven away in fear of anti-Asian mobs, the canneries, which depended so heavily on their seasonal labor, might have to close because few white workers could replace them (Bellingham Reveille, Sept 12, 1907, p. 4).

### **Spreading hostilities**

Several days after the riot in Bellingham, a larger race riot broke out in Vancouver BC in which a mob attacked Chinese, Japanese and East Indian residents. The riot appeared to have been triggered by news of the Bellingham events and by agitation of the Asiatic Exclusion League leaders from Washington State and the local Vancouver leaders. In months following the riots in Bellingham and Vancouver, anti-Punjabi hostilities occurred in other locations in the Puget Sound region of Washington State including Everett and Aberdeen, causing many more South Asian immigrants to flee the region.

Not long after the riot in Bellingham, the dwelling of several Punjabis in Everett was stoned and they appealed for police protection. On October 2, an Everett labor leader issued a veiled threat to Punjabi workers advising them to leave, and on November 2, 1907 an armed mob of 500 rounded up all of the South Asian residents of Everett, who feared they might be shot. The police having been warned in advance used the Bellingham method of sheltering the immigrants in the jail to prevent bloodshed, to release them the next day for a swift departure. (Everett Daily Herald, Nov. 4, 1907 p. 1). As in Bellingham, the local Everett editor expressed disapproval of the means, but applauded the outcome:

While everyone who believes in fairplay condemns Saturday night's anti-Hindu demonstration, there cannot but be a feeling of general satisfaction over the departure of the Hindus from the city as a result. One dislikes to see them driven out in that manner, but once it is done, perhaps we should be thankful that nothing worse occurred (Everett Daily Herald, Nov. 5, 1907 p. 5).

In August 1908 a riot occurred between striking Italian workers and Punjabis at a railroad yard in Tacoma, Washington, and although shots were fired and rocks were hurled, no serious injuries were reported.

This was the first incident in which Punjabis were reported to be armed for self-protection. (Bellingham Herald, Aug. 21, 1908, p. 3; Oregonian Aug. 22, 1908, p. 6). No one was prosecuted in any of these mob actions in Washington State, but when a similar outbreak occurred in St. Johns, Oregon in 1910, several were indicted for inciting to riot, and one was tried and convicted.

The agitation and riots in the Northwest and British Columbia had profound effects on the immigration debates and policies on both sides of the border. In 1908 Canada effectively closed the gates to further immigration from India. The United States Congress held hearings about restricting Asian immigration, and the threat of further riots against laborers from India was one of the arguments made by Albert Johnson, representative from Hoquiam, Washington. But with Canada's action the immigrant flow from India to North America slowed considerably.

Where did the hundreds of Punjabis flee after being expelled from Washington State locales? Some walked north from Bellingham up the railroad tracks and crossed the border to return to British Columbia. Many went south to Oregon and California by train and steamship. In California some worked on railroad construction crews and most eventually found work in agriculture, especially in the Sacramento and Imperial valleys where today there are large populations of Sikhs and other South Asians settled and prospering. Fathe Mohammed, a Punjabi Muslim working at a mill in Aberdeen, left in fear following threats of violence. After relocating to Marysville, California he became a successful rice farmer along with a group of other Punjabi Muslims in the Sacramento Valley (Robert Mohammed, author interview, August 2008).

### **Radicalization and activism**

The experience of being driven out and harassed in Bellingham, Everett, Aberdeen and other communities certainly was a trial for the Punjabis, and for many it seems to have been a radicalizing experience (Juergensmeyer, 1981; Sohi, 2008). They witnessed how the British authorities ignored their plight, in contrast to the Japanese government which protested strongly about the treatment of Japanese immigrants in the U.S. They learned that their status as citizens of

part of the British Empire afforded them no meaningful protection or status in either Canada or the United States. The harsh treatment they received in these northwest communities, the way they were identified and scorned as “Hindus,” “coolies,” and “slaves,” all served to strengthen their group solidarity and their determination to improve their situation (R. Singh, 1945). A nationalist protest song reveals how the discrimination that Punjabis faced in North America fueled this determination:

*Some push us around, some curse us.  
Where is your splendor and prestige today?  
The whole world calls us black thieves,  
The whole world calls us “coolie.”  
Why doesn't our flag fly anywhere?  
Why do we feel low and humiliated?  
Why is there no respect for us in the whole world?*  
(Takaki, 1989, p. 301)

Tuly Singh Johl was one of the hundreds who was “pushed around” in Bellingham in 1907, and cursed in California where he worked on railroad and vineyard jobs. He taught himself to read and write in English and Punjabi, read Ghadar papers and met Indian students working on farms in the summer. Like many Sikh workers he became a Ghadar supporter. When he returned to India in 1914 with other supporters, he and many others were jailed, and upon his release he was placed under house arrest in his village for eight years (Johl, May 28, 1975; August 24, 1975).

South Asians steered clear of Whatcom County in the northwest corner of Washington State for many decades, until well into the 1990's, but just across the Canadian border, in Abbotsford and Surrey, BC there are large communities of South Asians. Only in recent years has the South Asian community in Whatcom County grown to approximately one thousand.

History does not determine the future and cannot provide answers to hypothetical questions. Although Jensen (1988) viewed the Bellingham riot as nearly unavoidable, let us speculate what might have happened if riots had not occurred or if attacks had been curbed in Bellingham, Everett, and other places in Washington State. Perhaps Bellingham and Everett might have become centers for South Asians



in the early 20th century, and like Abbotsford, BC and Stockton, CA gurdwaras might have been established by the communities. And the Ghadar movement could have had its birth in Bellingham or Everett, rather than Astoria, and today these areas in Washington State might have large South Asian communities, similar to those across the border in Abbotsford and Surrey, BC.

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# Rebellious Rhymes: Understanding the History of Radical South Asian Immigrants on the West Coast of North America through the Ghadar Narrative

Gurpreet Singh

## Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the content of Ghadar poetry in order to understand the ideological leanings of the Ghadarites. Ghadar poetry has received its share of criticism for not being aesthetic enough or poetic enough. This paper focuses on the content of Ghadar poetry rather than its aesthetics and tries to establish a guiding philosophy of the movement as represented in these poems. The paper utilizes the Ghadar narrative to trace the origins and expansion of the movement and thereby seeks to understand its successes and failures on different fronts. In doing so, the paper attempts to establish an argument that despite criticism that the Ghadar poetry lacks in aesthetic appeal, it managed to achieve its purpose by exhorting the masses to stand up to British injustice and inspired people to wage war to rid India of British rule.

**Key words:** Ghadar, poetry, ideology, British rule, philosophy

Ghadar poetry assists historical researchers in understanding the genesis of the movement, the circumstances of its genesis, and its mandate and strategy to achieve freedom from British occupation with a goal to form an egalitarian and secular republic after the overthrow of colonial power in India. The movement also aspired to continue the struggle against racism in North America. This paper will analyze the ideological content of the Ghadar poetry by tracing the roots of the movement within the poetic narrative and moving forward towards its action and consequences as documented by the narrators.

For the purpose of this essay, the Ghadar narrative is mainly analyzed through the work of prominent Punjabi scholar Kesar Singh's remarkable compilation of Ghadar poetry. Materials from other sources and books on the related subject have also been accessed to support these analysis and arguments.

In 2013, a group of Punjabi writers held a literary event in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada where one of the presenters critiqued the Ghadar poetry. The speaker was of the view that the Ghadar poetry was “too rustic” and “full of jingoism” and lacked aesthetics. Those who supported his ideas also emphasized that the Ghadar literature should not be put on a pedestal and must be critically examined. This did not sit well with many within the predominantly South Asian audience and some disagreements ensued. With 2013 being the centenary year of the Ghadar Party’s establishment, this kind of unconventional approach was bound to stir a controversy as most South Asians have tremendous reverence for the Ghadar movement. While one may agree or disagree with this question of aesthetics but what scholars miss in general is the power and significance of the Ghadar narrative as a primary document to understand the history of radical activism by South Asian immigrants on the west coast of North America at the turn of the last century.

Personal caveat: The translation of the selective verses from the Ghadar poetry I have undertaken for the purpose of writing this paper is not professional or wholly accurate as it is not a literary piece. The purpose of the essay is to demonstrate the contextual content of the Ghadar poetry. A few examples given here therefore should not be taken as perfect literary translations.

Kesar Singh, who was a participant in the freedom struggle, undertook extensive research on the Ghadar movement (Singh, 2008). Singh passed away in Edmonton in 2006, and some still continue to describe him as an authority on Ghadar history. Kesar Singh authored many novels, including those about Ghadar activists from Vancouver, like Mewa Singh, who was hung in Canada for assassinating the controversial and vilified Immigration Inspector William Hopkinson. Kesar Singh collected and compiled Ghadar poetry from various sources, including publications brought out by the Ghadar Party members. Among them were the collections of Ghadar poetry, titled: *Ghadar Di Goonj* (Echo of Ghadar, 1913). According to him, most of these poems were written under assumed names partly because there was a trend of using pen names among the poets and partly due to security reasons as the great need of the time was to maintain secrecy (Singh, 2005). Notably, some of the writers were in the forefront of various political activities and a few of them were known as Ghadar ideologues. Prominent among those

identified by Kesar Singh were Kartar Singh Sarabha and Karam Singh Daulatpur.

### **Genesis of the Ghadar movement**

The genesis of the Ghadar movement can be traced to 1857, when the first war of independence against British occupation of India was waged in India. This uprising brought people of various faiths and different castes such as Hindus and Muslims together against the British Empire (Josh, 2007). Ghadar poetry repeatedly mentions the war of 1857 as a rebellion which was the result of anxiety among Indian soldiers working for the British army. Prior to this upheaval there had been a general discontent among Indians over heavy taxes and regulatory controls imposed on the local industries, as well as the growing influence of evangelical Christian groups. Indian soldiers were also unhappy with the remuneration they were receiving as soldiers, but what triggered the crisis in 1857 were rumors that grease inside the cartridges used by the soldiers was mixed with animal fat taken from cows and pigs. Soldiers had to tear off the covers of these cartridges with their teeth before loading them in the rifles. Since Hindus did not eat beef and Muslims were forbidden from eating pork, they felt violated and deceived, causing a revolt (Kazimi, 2011). However, the Sikh Chiefs who were largely pro-British helped in suppressing the rebellion (Josh, 2007). Punjab was a garrison state for the British rulers and the region provided the maximum number of recruits for their army. As part of some political calculation or perhaps their notorious divide and rule policy, the British treated Sikhs as a martial race and preferred recruits from this community (Josh, 2007). Many of these men were sent to the British colonial outposts to serve the interests of the Empire. The Sikh clergy too was hand-in-glove with the British rulers. Prayers were often held in the Sikh temples for the success of the British Empire (Bhakna, 1995). Ironically, some fifty plus years later the Ghadar Party biggest following was from Sikhs who constituted the majority of South Asian immigrants to North America in the early 1900's (Bhakna, 1995).

In 1913, in Astoria, Oregon a revolutionary Party was originally formed as the *Hindi Association of the Pacific Coast of America*, which soon came to be known as the Ghadar Party after the launch of its newspaper "Ghadar." The title was taken directly from the first war

of 1857. When the newspaper was launched on November 1, 1913 this fact was clearly mentioned by its founding editor Lala Har Dayal, with a goal to revive the memories of the first uprising (Josh, 1995).

The Ghadar newspaper's poetry not only reminded its readers of the first war of independence, but also provoked them to get ready for the second one. In fact one particular poem is dedicated to the day when the first rebellion took place on May 10, 1857 and passionately goes on to pay respect to its participants (Singh, 1995). Ghadar poetry inspired Sikhs to not repeat the mistakes of 1857 and challenged them to quit their services as soldiers in the British army in order to fight against the British Empire. The poetry reminded them of the sacrifices made for the Indian nation by their tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh. Guru Gobind Singh had fought against the oppression of the Pan Islamic Empire and caste based oppression of the so called untouchables by the orthodox Hindu priest class. Using very provocative language for the clergy, one poem goes on to narrate that while the Sikh Gurus had established the highest temporal seat, its current leaders had sold their souls to the British establishment. Titled as "Appeal to the Panth" the poem mocks the Sikhs for claiming themselves to be brave like lions while in fact "they behaved like foxes" (Singh, 1995, p. 96-97):

*Oh Khalsaji (Devout Sikhs) please think for a moment  
Remember what our Guru taught us  
Think about the cause for which he sacrificed his sons  
Remember the exemplary legacy he gave us  
First Ghadar happened in 1857  
And it happened 57 years ago  
Oh Sikhs  
The second Ghadar is around the corner  
.....  
The whole world taunts us  
Says you ruined India Oh Sikhs  
We would have been a happier nation  
Had we not resisted the Ghadar of 1857  
Oh Sikhs*

*Let's get up and wipe this blot away  
Remember what our Guru did Oh Sikhs  
Let's join hands with Maharashtra and Bengal*

*Also with Hindus and Muslims Oh Sikhs*  
(Singh, 1995, p.186).

### **Occupation and plunder by the British Imperialists**

Although the rumours of animal fat being inside the cartridges sparked the rebellion of 1857 for religious reasons, underneath this revolt was the discontent of the Indian people on account of the economic policies of the British rulers. These policies marginalized the Indian industries and agriculture while contributing to the prosperity of England.

The British government paid no attention to the needs of the people of India, as a result of which many died due to starvation and plague. Local industries were discouraged while cheap raw material produced in India was being sent to England to be manufactured into goods for sale. The East India Company that had entered India for trading purposes gradually expanded its business to further colonial interests of the British. Its members became involved in the plunder of Indian resources, by creating an imbalance between the agricultural and industrial sectors, that reducing Indian farmers and traders to bankruptcy (Josh, 1995). Adding to this plunder, land-tax revenue collection also wreaked havoc on the small and middle peasantry. Rigorous methods were used for collection of taxes and no respite was given even in the event of crop failure. All this led to a rise in land mortgages and borrowings that further increased rural indebtedness (Puri, 1993).

The Ghadar newspaper published a regular column exposing this pillage by giving startling figures to illustrate the loot. It accused British rulers of spending more on the military budget instead of providing basic services to the Indian population. It is estimated that eight million people died of starvation in 16 years under the British rule (Singh, 2013). The Ghadar narrative lists heavy taxes; water levy and other forms of methods employed by the British rulers as instances of plunder, and grievances over deaths due to starvation and the plague.

One of the poems identified the East India Company as an imperialist force responsible for the starvation of the Indian population (Singh, 1995). Another poem recounts how millions died due to

famine, cholera and plague (Singh, 1995). Many other poems also blamed British policies for India's poor economy and the people's starvation. For example:

*With no respite from tariff on farming  
We sow wheat only to get barley to eat  
Heavy taxes imposed by the Englishmen  
Has starved shopkeepers to death* (Singh, 1995, p. 101)

.....

*Englishmen have stolen all the wealth  
Leaving all of you in poverty  
Oppressors have become rich after taking away all the gold  
Leaving you begging for pennies* (Singh, 1995, p. 132)

.....

*Like parasites they have sucked our entire blood  
Like a witch they are eating away all our flesh*  
(Singh, 1995, p. 139)

.....

*Our Burma and Bengal have been reduced to penury  
Oh friends  
Oppressors have sucked the blood of entire Punjab as well*  
(Singh, 1995, p. 247)

## **Migration**

The migration of East Indians to the USA and Canada in the early 1900's was an outcome of the economic hardships suffered by the Indians under British rule. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these conditions had compelled many Sikh farmers from Punjab to migrate to other countries in search for better living conditions. Most of the middle level peasants had mortgaged their lands to the money lenders, while irrigation rates had tripled and land holdings became reduced to small plots of land. As a result of which farmers became compelled to move abroad for better livelihood opportunities. The immigrants first reached Malaya and China and became willing to take any task including lending services to the outposts of British imperialism (Bhakna, 1995). They later learned by way of travelers from Canada and the US that in those countries, a worker could earn \$ 2-2.50 a day; a daily wage that was equal to almost eight Indian Rupees, a big amount as compared to the daily wage of six to eight annas (one rupee



= 64 annas) in India. Eventually, these immigrants in the Southeast also found ways to go to the US and Canada (Bhakna, 1995).

But the initial migration to the west was not confined to economic hardships alone as there were many political refugees who had been living in exile in South East Asia. The political atmosphere in India had started to become volatile on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first mutiny. The Punjab in particular witnessed an uprising in the form of a farmers' agitation in 1907. Some of its prominent leaders like Ajit Singh were forced to leave India. An order was issued to arrest and send him into exile (Josh, 1995). Other leaders like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who lived in England, organized an event to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Ghadar (Waraich & Puri, 2003). Savarkar also wrote an important book on the history of the mutiny of 1857 to counteract British propaganda against the participants of the first uprising. The book gave an insight on the upheaval, but it was banned by British authorities (Waraich and Puri, 2003). The names of both Ajit Singh and Savarkar constantly pop up in Ghadar poetry, with one of the poems mentioning Savarkar's contribution in keeping the history of the first Ghadar alive (Singh, 1995). Political activists like Krishan Verma and Bhikaji Cama who carried on the freedom movement from Paris were also glorified in Ghadar poetry. In a way these exiled leaders had already laid the ground for the Ghadar movement within the South Asian Diaspora in North America.

The Ghadar narrative took into account both political and economic migrations. It not only praised the political migrants or refugees as heroes, but also portrayed the sufferings of the economic refugees in different ways:

*Krishanji Verma sits in France  
Oh Sikhs remember Madam Cama as well  
The lady on the frontline in France  
Is weakening the roots of the British Empire*  
(Singh, 1995, p. 96)

.....

*Children are dying of hunger due to famine  
At the cost of England's prosperity  
Nothing seems to work  
Except struggling for survival in an alien country*  
(Singh, 1995, p. 10)

.....  
*We are forced to struggle abroad*  
*All due to penury in our homeland*  
*Despite hardships and difficulties of migration*  
*There is nothing to repent* (Singh, 1995, p. 245)

### **Racism abroad**

Most of the men who came to Canada as British subjects had previously served in the British army and trusted the fairness of the British Empire. However, they were soon disillusioned when they became exposed to racial hatred and saw that British diplomats in Canada did not come to their rescue in the event of a hate crime. The government of Canada had adopted racist immigration policies with a goal to keep Canada a white man's country. These new immigrants were neither allowed to bring their families, nor were they allowed to vote, having been disfranchised in 1907.

Across the border in the US the social environment was also very hostile towards South Asians. The White labour groups felt threatened because East Indian immigrants were willing to work for lower wages and for longer hours. This had reduced their bargaining power and as a result intimidation of Asian immigrants was on the rise (Bajaj, 2004). Where the Canadian government buckling under pressure of white supremacists, had adopted discriminatory policies, the authorities in US looked the other way during racial violence. In 1907 when Indians were disfranchised in Canada a mob of white workers attacked and drove out over 250 South Asian workers from a lumber mill in Bellingham. Many South Asian men crossed over to Canada to seek refuge in a British Colony. However, the very real spectre of racism followed them to Vancouver (Kazimi, 2011).

In comparison to the Indian immigrants, Japanese immigrants got every possible support from the Japanese government in Japan. The British government did not offer help of any manner to its Indian subjects. In one instance the US government had to compensate for the losses incurred by the Japanese workers when a factory employing them was attacked (Bhakna, p. 14). The Indian immigrants believed that the British government did not want them to come to that part of the world and perhaps they were behind spreading hatred against

the community. The British government, it was felt feared that Indian migrants may get influenced by the free and democratic environment of the US; an influence which might turn them into political activists. Obviously, this was not in the interest of the Empire (Bhakna, 1995). In fact, the Indian immigrants came in contact with Irish revolutionaries while being in America (Singh, 1989). Many of the South Asians were also influenced and supported by the socialists both in the US and Canada (Kazimi, 2011).

The Indian immigrants soon realized that the root cause of their sufferings was “slavery” and foreign occupation back home. Racial taunts and violence hardened their feelings against the British establishment and they gradually turned their back towards an empire whose interests many of them had previously so loyally served. Many moderate Sikhs tried to draw to the attention of the authorities their loyalty towards the Empire during those times. A delegation of Sikhs that went to Ottawa to seek redress for their grievances submitted: ‘with the name Sikh is linked up fidelity and heroic loyalty to the Empire. For instance Indian Mutiny, Africa, Afghanistan, Somalia land; in other words, whenever Empire needed in the past or may in the future need loyal hearts to protect or preserve her honour’ (Singh, 1995, p. 67).

The Ghadar poetry has many references to the racial taunts the new immigrants had to bear. “Coolies” and “Slaves” were some of the common racial abuses hurled at them, and they dared each other to go back and drive out the handful of British rulers from their home country. Underneath their anger as is evident from their poetry was their disillusionment with the Empire in whose fairness they had put so much trust. They strongly felt that they did not receive fair treatment despite their loyalty to the crown. Here are some instances:

*Coolie, Coolie everyone calls us  
Why we lack identity?  
We are assaulted wherever we go  
Why no one becomes our ally?* (Singh, 1995, p. 93)

.....

*All we are called Black and Dirty People  
Where is the dignity of Indians gone?  
We keep begging for our rights  
Where is our spirit to resist gone?* (Singh, 1995, p. 99)

.....

*We are pushed around everywhere  
No refuge wherever we go  
English people call us coolies  
We only get degraded wherever we go* (Singh, 1995, p. 140)

.....

*It's better to die than being humiliated  
Let's wish nobody lives like a coolie or pauper Oh friends  
The one who is not ashamed of deceiving the community  
Is dishonest and a Satan Oh friends* (Singh, 1995, p. 199)

....

*Shame, shame everyone say to us  
There is no peace anywhere we go  
Gone are the days for compromises  
It's time to revolt* (Singh, 1995, p. 193)

...

*Why is it you can't show bravery?  
When all you Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and others  
Boast yourselves to be strong and bullies  
Why Indians do not die of shame?  
When all that white men call us  
Dirty, Hindu Coolies* (Singh, 1995, p. 181)

....

*The world knows us as Slaves  
As we can't give our lives to reclaim our homeland  
While some comrades have returned to fight  
We are still wandering in an alien land* (Singh, 1995, p.182)

.....

*Oh army men you have gone nuts  
Why fight for the sake of others?  
Subordination is worse than the death  
Why you continue to live in shackles?* (Singh, 1995, p. 147)

.....

*You go and fight for whites  
Oh Indians why don't you think wisely?  
You keep on attacking other nations  
Why can't you manage your own territory?*  
(Singh, 1995, p. 126)

## The birth of the Ghadar Party, its mandate and strategy

Due to rampant racism in the West, a strong urge emerged to form a group that would bring all Indian migrants together irrespective of their religious beliefs and castes (Rahi, 2012). Under these circumstances the Hindi<sup>1</sup> Association of the Pacific Coast of America was established on April 21, 1913 in Astoria with Sohan Singh Bhakna, a Sikh as its President and Lala Har Dayal, a Hindu as its Secretary. The Association resolved to launch an armed rebellion against the British Empire and form an egalitarian and democratic republic in free India (Josh, 1995).

On November 1, 1913 the Association launched its newspaper entitled *Ghadar*. Har Dayal, who was the editor of the paper, believed that it would revive the memories of the first uprising within the immigrants from India (Josh, 1995). The Ghadar newspaper was initially published in the Urdu language and on December 8, 1913 the first Punjabi edition of Ghadar was published. Kartar Singh Sarabha translated the Urdu edition into Punjabi and wrote poems for the Ghadar Party. One of the poems widely attributed to him goes like this:

*It's rather easier said than done  
When it comes to serving one's country  
Patriotism is a difficult road  
Whoever takes it, suffers immensely* (Chaman, 2008, p. 68)

The Ghadar newspaper with its radical content soon became popular within the Indian community as it gave an open call for an armed resistance movement. As a result, the Association came to be known as Ghadar Party (Bajaj, 2004). The Ghadar newspaper was being sent to countries wherever Indians had a sizeable population. Among them were British colonies, including India where it was sent discreetly to avoid detection by the British police. The paper reached as far as China, Hong Kong and Singapore (Singh, 2013). The Ghadar Party established its headquarters in San Francisco as it was considered a hotbed of revolutionaries from different countries such as China, Ireland and Russia. The Party office and the Ghadar paper operated through rented accommodation (Sainsra, 1969).

The Ghadar leaders anxiously waited for an opportunity to strike. As the crisis between Britain and Germany was brewing, they were

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<sup>1</sup> The term Hindi represented Hindustanis, a reference to all South Asians.

eyeing an opportunity to start an armed revolt in case there was a full scale war between the two countries. Their own calculations were that the two nations would take several years to go to war and that they would first liberate the Kashmir region of India in 1925 (Sainsra, 1969). With such possibilities in mind many revolutionaries abroad started building collaborations with the Germans for political and military support. Har Dayal looked upon the possibility of a war as a golden opportunity. However, in March, 1914, allegedly under pressure from the British authorities, Har Dayal was served with an arrest warrant for spreading anarchy in the USA. The Party decided to send him to Switzerland and even though Har Dayal's departure was a big blow to the Party, it continued to grow even after he was forced to leave America (Bajaj, 2004). People like Bhakna and Sarabha kept the struggle alive and the Ghadar narrative documented this important episode by describing the serving of the arrest warrant for Har Dayal as the "first assault by the enemy." A poem dated April 7, 1914 gave a detailed account of the incident (Singh, 1995, p. 118).

The Party also had a large following in Canada and soon enough the Ghadar activities in Vancouver came to the notice of Canadian officials. A correspondence between the local immigration officials and the federal government revealed that they were keeping an eye on what was being published by the Ghadar newspaper (Reid to H.H. Stevens, personal communication, February 29, 1916). In fact, ground work for the Ghadar Party had been laid in Vancouver much earlier than it was established in Astoria. The Khalsa Diwan Society had established there in 1906. The body not only governed the Sikh temple but also encouraged its congregation to indulge in political activism and provided space to all the communities, including non-Sikhs to hold public meetings to discuss their political problems (Singh, 1989).

In one of the major development at the time, on October 3, 1909, former Sikh soldiers, who had served in the British armies, burnt their medals, uniforms and certificates at the Vancouver Sikh temple as a mark of protest against the systemic racism and discrimination that they experienced (Pooni, 2009). Clearly, the flames of rebellion were growing.

The Ghadar newspaper regularly published radical poetry written by its followers. Much like the Ghadar newspaper, the Ghadar narrative was highly provocative in nature and gave a call for an armed revolt. A

few Ghadarites from Vancouver also wrote poems which were highly seditious. Among them was Bhagwan Singh, who used the pen name of ``Preetam''. His poems were frequently published in the Ghadar newspaper and he influenced many in the local South Asian community through his fiery lectures and writings (Pooni, 2009, p. 322). Munsha Singh "Dukhi" was another poet and activist from Vancouver whose poetry was prominently published in the Ghadar paper (Pooni, 2009, p. 347). There were a few more, including Karam Singh Daulatpur, who was active in Vancouver area and who openly warned toadies of action in his poetry (Pooni, 2009, p. 125).

The Ghadar poetry not only rejected the policy of non - violence preached by Mahatma Gandhi but also mocked him. In one of the poems, Gandhi was described as a "deserter" of the freedom movement. The poem suggested that the deputations and protests did not work and encouraged people to take to arms (Singh, 1995, page 432):

*We won't plead or beg like Gandhi  
No never  
We won't endure police canning  
No never* (Singh, 1995, p. 400)

Another poem titled, "Ghadar Party talks to Congress" tried to differentiate between the methods of the revolutionaries and Gandhi's moderate Congress Party (Singh, 1995, p. 353). It condemned all peaceful means of struggle, such as boycotts and petitioning and gave an idea of what kind of strategy the Party thought of using to gain freedom. From the content of the poetry it was clear that they planned to go back to India and encourage Indian soldiers to quit the British army and turn their guns against the authorities and toadies. For instance:

*Why are you giving away your lives for the White men?  
Asks Ghadar newspaper  
Why not start Ghadar for your own country?  
As such opportunities are rare  
Get together all the platoons  
Get ready to ambush the enemy  
Oh policemen of Hong Kong and Malaya  
Leave the service that is below your dignity*  
(Singh, 1995, p. 227)

.....

*Deputations won't lead us anywhere  
Its time to pull out swords Oh Sikhs  
If you have courage the victory will be yours  
Trust the power of god Oh Sikhs* (Singh, 1995, p. 96)

....

*Get ready for Guerilla War  
Its time to kill all oppressors  
Instead of leaving homes  
Kill a handful of occupants Oh Brothers*  
(Singh, 1995, p. 112)

....

*No one gets rights with folded hands  
Let's not shy claiming our dues  
Drive away whites from our homeland  
Why fold hands like fools?* (Singh, 1995, p. 135)

....

*First finish off Indian dogs (toadies)  
Those who make the white men rich  
Ghadar Party doesn't need  
Imposters or hypocrites* (Singh, p. 1995, 197)

## **Secularism, Equality and Democracy**

Lala Har Dayal was not the only non-Sikh face of the Ghadar Party. The central committee of the Party included Kanshi Ram, another Hindu as treasurer and Karim Baksh, a Muslim as Organizing Secretary. The Party program clearly stated that religion would be an individual matter of its members and it would not allow any kind of debate on such issues (Josh, 1995).

The Ghadar activists had learned to work together to resist racism and oppression despite differences of opinion, caste or religion. A case in point was the close friendship between Jawala Singh and Wasakha Singh. The two men had leased farm land near Stockton that supplied free of cost ration for the volunteers working at the Ghadar Party Headquarters in San Francisco (Sandhu, 2013). The farm helped newcomers from India by providing them free food and lodging and the two men sponsored intelligent students from India without discrimination (Sandhu, 2013). Whereas Jawala Singh was



not a religious person, Wasakha Singh was a devout Sikh and Jawala Singh was opposed to teaching divinity to the students sponsored by them. He believed that such teaching was a waste of time for students who should be spending more hours on studying their curriculum (Parwana, 2007). In spite of the unconventional ideas of Jawala Singh, Wasakha Singh was very close to him and the two men respected each other. They both agreed to work together and continue their struggle against the common enemy (Ghuman & Singh, 2001).

Both men were held in detention in Andaman jail after the Lahore conspiracy trials and when Wasakha Singh had become frail and weak due to poor jail conditions, a doctor recommended that he eat fish curry. Due to religious reasons he refused to do so, but Jawala Singh convinced him to eat it once for the sake of larger interest of the freedom struggle (Ghuman & Singh, 2001).

Wasakha Singh also wrote poetry that became a part of the Ghadar narrative. We would later see how he documented oppression in the Andaman jail in his poetry during his detention. He had passionately written a poem dedicated to Paramanand Jhansi, a Hindu member of the Ghadar Party who had suffered physical torture in the Andaman jail. In his poem he described Jhansi as a brave man, who did not show any sign of weakness despite repression by the authorities (Ghuman & Singh, 2001).

Jhansi was a die-hard member of the Party who was born in a family of freedom fighters. His father had participated in the Ghadar of 1857. Being a true secularist, Jhansi had participated in a hunger strike that had been launched by the Sikh prisoners, who protested against the jail rule that forced the Sikhs to remove their turbans and wear caps during detention (Sandhu, 2013).

Barkatullah, a devout Muslim also played a significant role in the Ghadar Party. He had tried to connect with Muslims across the world to rope in their support for the revolution. He strongly believed that religion should not be allowed to become a roadblock in a political struggle and should remain confined to the places of worship. He used religious teachings though to encourage Muslims to fight for social justice (Sandhu, 2013). His name too repeatedly appears in the Ghadar poetry.

Casteism also had no place in the Party and everyone was treated equally, with the Ghadar narrative explicitly denouncing caste based discrimination. This policy inspired Manguram Muggowal, a Dalit or the so called “untouchable” to join the Ghadar movement. He had endured caste based oppression since his childhood (Singh, 1989). Muggowal later rose to become a towering leader of the Dalit emancipation movement in Punjab. People were encouraged to leave aside their spiritual beliefs and work in harmony as Indians. Vegetarians or non-vegetarians, beef eaters or pork eaters were treated alike in the Party (Rahi, 2012). The taboos that triggered the Ghadar of 1857 were broken by the Ghadar Party.

The Ghadar narrative heavily emphasized people’s unity and cautioned its readers against the divide and rule policies of the British rulers. The narrative also questioned rituals and blind faith practiced by the priests. The following stanzas from the Ghadar poetry are self-explanatory to understand what they stood for:

*Together with Hindus and Muslim Pathans  
Let's destroy the Englishmen Oh Sikhs  
There is absolutely no difference among us  
We are the all children of the same mother Oh Sikhs*  
(Rahi, 2012, p. 97)

.....

*We do not need Pundits or Quazis  
With whom we would end up as losers  
Temples or Mosques won't get us anywhere  
Forget making gurdwaras either*

.....

*Going after faith  
You are more worried about spirituality and meditation  
You keep fighting against each other  
Over Islam and Hinduism  
They have ruined the glory of India  
By creating a wedge of Quran and Vedas  
Beef or pork cause you pain  
Whites eat all of them without shame* (Rahi, 2012, p. 101)

.....

*Oh brothers let's unite to defeat oppressors  
Untouchability has resulted in destruction  
If you wish to rule*

*Bury these conflicts for the sake of nation*  
(Rahi, 2012, p. 103)

.....

*Despite being born in the same country*  
*We have been divided in factions*  
*By practicing Untouchability*  
*We have proved to be sectarians* (Rahi, 2012, p. 116)

.....

*Neither have we judged people by their castes*  
*Nor we care about Untouchability*  
*All Indians are brothers*  
*We don't follow traditions that are wily* (Rahi, 2012, p. 117)

.....

*Oh Muslims and Hindus get united to become Hindis*  
*Leave aside the feeling of "us and them"*  
*Let's be ready for combat with enemies*  
*Why are you so down and depressed?* (Rahi, 2012, p. 131)

.....

*Let's establish a rule of democracy*  
*Lets' finish for ever autocracy*  
*The wealth that is being looted and taken away to London*  
*Let's snatch it and spend it on our country*  
(Rahi, 2012, p. 215)

## **Consequences**

Against all calculations of the Ghadar Party, which was still taking its time to prepare for a rebellion in India, war broke out between Britain and Germany in August 1914. Seeing this as an opportunity to strike, the Ghadar newspaper gave a call for war against British occupation (Josh, 1995). Declaration of war was made on August 5, 1914 and a series of public meetings were held by Ghadar activists, who resolved to return to India to start an uprising (Chaman Lal, 2008).

Around this time another episode occurred in Vancouver that galvanized the Ghadar movement. On May 23, 1914 a Japanese vessel named Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver with 376 Indian passengers aboard. The passengers on the ship were not allowed to disembark under the discriminatory continuous journey law that was passed in 1908. Those on board had come to Canada as British subjects

as the rest of the Indian immigrants. The ship remained stranded for two months in the inlet with little supply of ration. Finally after two months, the ship was forced to return to India on July 23, 1914. The forced return was implemented after the South Asian community lost its battle with the Canadian government in the courts. When the ship reached India on September 29, 1914, a shootout occurred near Calcutta that left 22 people dead (Kazimi, 2011). Violence ensued in the harbour when the police tried to forcibly send the passengers to Punjab by a special train fearing them to be subversives (Kazimi, 2011).

The Ghadar Party was in touch with the South Asian community activists who were providing support to the passengers during the standoff in Vancouver harbour. The Ghadar newspaper brought out a special issue in solidarity with the passengers (Sainsra, 1969, p. 142). A poem dated October 1914 was also written on this whole episode. Part of the poem depicting the sufferings of the Komagata Maru passengers goes like this:

*We conquered China and Africa for them  
We are suffering for own misdeeds after all  
We fought against our own brothers  
And now paying for that after all* (Singh, 1995 p. 160)

Both the WWI and the Komagata Maru incident encouraged Ghadar activists to return to their home country to seek revenge for all their sufferings from the British Empire. Bhakna was sent to Japan by the Party to connect with the Komagata Maru passengers and hand over weapons to them for a future uprising and then travel to India for the rebellion (Bajaj, 2004). Wasakha Singh's nephew was aboard the Komagata Maru ship and had witnessed the racist and oppressive policies of the Canadian and British government play out first hand. He was one of the survivors of the shootout near Calcutta and upon learning about this episode through a letter sent by him, Wasakha Singh also returned to participate in the uprising (Ghuman, 2001).

On the way to India Ghadar activists recruited supporters for the rebellion from among the police and army officials working for the Empire. Ghadar poetry was read out during the stopovers in the Pacific to incite Indian immigrants for rebellion. The Ghadar propaganda in Singapore culminated in a revolt by the Indian soldiers deployed there by the British government (Sandhu, 2013). On February 15, 1915, the

soldiers, a majority of whom were Muslims, turned their guns against the British authorities. But after much bloodshed the authorities were able to suppress the rebellion that resulted in the killings of 41 rebels and hangings of three, besides rigorous imprisonments to 162 (Sandhu, 2013). A poem titled “Ghadar Singapore” gives rich tributes to the Muslim martyrs this way:

*Rise up and get ready to revolt  
What is stopping you from acting faster?  
When the macho Muslims have done their part  
By raising the flag of Ghadar (Singh, 1995, p. 195).*

Scores of Ghadar activists returned to India to face the gallows or long imprisonments. Those who escaped arrests continued their activities secretly. Both Bhakna and Wasakha Singh were arrested upon reaching India. Some like Sarabha gave a slip to the police and continued to reorganize the Ghadar activists. He was such a daredevil that he went to the extent of approaching Indian soldiers directly with intent to incite them for coup (Chaman Lal, 2008).

When these men returned to Punjab in India the ground realities of their country were completely different from what they had imagined. The people there were not ready for a revolution (Chaman Lal, 2008). So much so, the Ghadar activists were branded as “infidels” by the pro- British Sikh clergy (Bhakna, 1995). The lack of resources and support forced the Ghadar Party members to indulge in robberies for money to purchase arms. People like Sarabha ensured that nobody participated in these acts for personal benefits (Chaman Lal, 2008).

Sarabha was also successful in establishing contacts with revolutionaries from the faraway province of Bengal (Chaman Lal, 2008). The Party had made plans to engineer a coup in the armies in different parts of India on February 21, 1915, but the plot was foiled by the government with the help of their moles in the Ghadar Party. A number of Ghadar activists were arrested and the army cantonments were alerted and Sarabha was arrested in March, 1915 (Chaman Lal, 2008).

At least 82 suspects were charged with conspiracy against the Empire and sedition. These men faced what came to be known as Lahore Conspiracy Trial that began in April, 1915 (Chaman Lal, 2008 p. 29). Twenty four suspects were awarded death sentences,

out of which 17 had not commit any offence in India and had been arrested upon entering the country. Some Indian lawyers associated with the moderate camp of the freedom movement approached the Viceroy for mercy on the basis of this lacuna (Chaman Lal, 2008). As a result of these efforts, the death sentence of Bhakna and a few others was commuted to life imprisonment (The Ghadar Directory, 1997). Sarabha and six other Ghadar activists were hung at the Lahore Jail on November 16, 1915. Among those executed alongside Sarabha was Vishnu Ganesh Pingle, a Hindu from Maharashtra. Ghadar poetry dedicated to the sacrifices made by Sarabha and Pingle read:

*Jagat Ram, Kartar Singh, Pingle*  
*Where have these great men gone Oh people?*  
*They have shaken us out of sleep*  
*By giving their lives Oh people?* (Singh, 1995, p. 278)

Many of those who were awarded long sentences were sent to Andaman jail, which was situated on a faraway desolate island off the east coast of India. The political prisoners detained there were subjected to inhuman treatment and forced to do hard and undignified labour. Often the prisoners would commit suicides (Chain, 2002 p. 34). The food was bad and any defiance would invite physical punishments. The prisoners were forced to live in an unhygienic environment and because of it they were vulnerable to various kinds of diseases. The Ghadar activists resorted to hunger strikes against such barbaric treatment. Wasakha Singh documented these atrocities in his poetry. Here is one example:

*The oppressions we endured in Andaman*  
*We registered them in our memories*  
*We wished for everyone's betterment*  
*For the sake of humanity*  
*We prayed; Oh god punish the oppressors*  
*Those who cross all limits of brutality*  
*They gave us very little to eat*  
*We had no choice but to bear this inhumanity*  
(Ghuman, 2001, p. 95)

Likewise, Ghadar poetry also depicted the sufferings of the families of the activists who were either killed or jailed during the struggle. One such poem that was written to appeal for donations for the families of

political activists goes like this:

*Those who were hanged and died like martyrs  
Their lands have also been seized Oh brothers  
There is nothing left to fill the bellies of their loved ones  
Their kids are now starving to death Oh brothers*  
(Singh, 1995, p. 334).

Although the British government was able to crush the second Ghadar, the spark of activism lit by the Ghadar movement refused to subside. The Party activists who escaped the police dragnet continued their work. Some joined other nationalist movements and carried on the struggle until India gained its independence in 1947.

Bhagat Singh, a towering revolutionary of India who was hung by the British government in 1931 for killing a police officer was influenced by the Ghadar Party. His father Kishan Singh had donated Rs. 1,000 to Kartar Singh Sarabha (Chaman Lal, 2008). Bhagat Singh considered Sarabha his role model and quoted his poetry in an essay he wrote about him (Singh, 2011).

Clearly, the Ghadar ideology remained popular among the radical youth seeking complete freedom through an armed rebellion. The moderate leadership that sought nothing more than dominion status for India was ultimately forced to seek complete independence from the foreign occupation because of the continued efforts of the militants. Sadly, it was the moderate Congress Party that dominated the political landscape of India for years to come. It claimed to have a monopoly over the history of freedom struggle. Its propaganda of having achieved freedom without spilling blood was recognized internationally while the Ghadar history remained obscured. Thanks to the Ghadar narrative the history of the Ghadar movement neither died nor gave up its rightful claim over the history of resistance.

## **Conclusion**

For those who believe that the Ghadar poetry lacks aesthetics it is important to acknowledge that the authors of the Ghadar poetry were mainly political activists and not literary artists. They had no urge to be recognized as poets in the first place. Even though they used assumed names for security reasons, they had maintained restraint over

themselves to keep away a desire to be known as poets. An urge to gain popularity was therefore missing. The purpose of the poetry they wrote, as is clear from several examples above, was purely political. Their foremost purpose was to incite their targeted audience against injustice and occupation of their homeland. They used poetry as an educational tool rather than as a medium to establish their literary credentials. They also affectively used the poetry to document important events, like the arrest of Har Dayal, the Komagata Maru episode and the Singapore mutiny.

Due to its simple and straightforward language Ghadar poetry was able to inspire ordinary people. It was precisely the impact of the rusticity of the Ghadar narrative which some intellectuals find problematic, that it was able to recruit volunteers for freedom struggle from all over the British colonies. The Ghadar poetry had not only influenced the participants of the Singapore mutiny, but also other revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh.

That the Ghadar poetry still continues to inspire the working class and the progressive movements isn't surprising. A prominent balladeer from the Southern India, Gummadi Vittal Rao who continues his campaign for social equality of Dalits is widely known as 'Ghadar'. He chose this name for himself on purpose because the Ghadar ideology made a deep impact on him.

What the intelligentsia needs to critically examine today is that whose interest the literature should serve? Should literature reflect the thoughts and ideologies of the common public, or only those of the ruling classes? How can a small percentage of elite have a monopoly over art and literature? How can such minority alone decide what yardstick should be applied to pass a judgment over the quality of a piece of art or literature? Rather than being judgmental about the quality of the Ghadar narrative, we need to recognize its historical value and strength as a primary document which continues to inspire activism.

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# **PART TWO**

## **Social Justice**



# Gadar Movement and the Role of Irish Americans

Inder Singh

## Abstract

This paper provides an overview of Indian migration USA and Canada at the beginning of twentieth century, primarily for economic opportunities. While local workers felt threatened by the labour competition which led to racial antagonism and widespread hostility against Indian workers, under pressure from labor unions, exclusionary laws were enacted to bar Asians from immigrating to North America. At the beginning of the twentieth century, immigrants from Ireland, Egypt and Mexico had formed organizations to liberate their countries from foreign rule. Indian and Irish revolutionaries had a common goal to liberate their countries from Britain and they formed organizations to achieve that objective. In May 1913, Indians formed the Hindustani Association of the Pacific Coast with a major objective to free India from British rule. Irish revolutionaries started the Gaelic American newspaper to mobilize Irish revolutionaries. Indians started the Gadar magazine which carried articles on the conditions of the Indian people under British rule and also on problems of racial prejudice and discrimination against Indians in the United States and Canada. In a short period of time, the Gadar magazine became very popular and the Association came to be known as the Gadar Party. This paper explores the demise of the movement when many Gadarites were taken captive, while those who managed to escape started mobilizing people for the revolution. They infiltrated some units of the armed forces, but, their plans were foiled and the planned rebellion failed. Most of the Gadarites were arrested and prosecuted in what is known as the Lahore Conspiracy Trials.

**Key words:** Gadar, migration, Irish, anti-British rule, magazine, revolutionary, captive, rebellion.

## **Gadar Movement and the Role of Irish Americans**

The Gadar<sup>2</sup> Movement is the saga of remarkable courage, valor and determination of overseas Indians to free India from the shackles of British slavery. Indians had come to Canada and the United States either for higher education or for economic opportunities. Instead, they imbibed the fire and zeal of revolutionaries and became the trailblazers of the freedom struggle for their motherland of India.

Indians started migrating to the United States and Canada at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1904). India and Canada were both British dominions, so, migration to Canada was relatively easier. The new immigrants found jobs on farms and in factories. They accepted lower wages, worked for long hours and did not expect any additional compensation for overtime work. Some Canadian employers wanted to attract more workers from India and publicized the job opportunities available in Canada. During the first few years, about 2000 Indians migrated to Canada every year. As the number of immigrants increased, the local European origin workers felt threatened by the competition from the hard working ‘Hindus’, as they were known then. Fear of labor competition led to jealousy, racial antagonism and demand for exclusionary laws against cheap foreign workers (Puri, 2011). The local press carried many fear inciting articles against the “Hindu Invasion.”

### **Canada Restricts Indian Immigration, USA Still Open**

In 1908, under pressure from labor unions, the Canadian government required Indian immigrants to have \$200 in their possession upon landing as a landing fee. As well, the Indian immigrants were denied entry if they had not come by “continuous journey” from their country of origin (Deol, 1969). Since there were no direct shipping lines between Indian and the Canadian ports, legal immigration of Indians to Canada virtually ended. The Canadian government also made attempts to expel those Indians who had already settled there (Deol, 1969). The restrictive legislation and ulterior intent of the Canadian government led to growing discontent and anti-colonial sentiments within the Indian immigrant community.

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<sup>2</sup> Gadar is spelled same way as in the Gadar Syndrome by Mark Juergensmeyer, Indian Immigrants in USA by P Vatma

When Indian immigrants saw the doors closing on them in Canada, they started coming directly from India to America which needed people to build new communities. Many Indians from Canada also found jobs in the North West neighbouring states in the United States. They were paid lower wages than others and could only afford to live in the poor squalid part of the town or in the shanty structures provided by the employers. They lived frugally, subsisting on low income that would have been prohibitive for people of European origin to survive on. They maintained low standards of living and many shared crowded lodgings to save money to pay off their travel debt or meet family obligations back in India. Their sub-standard life style was disliked by the American people who did not fully appreciate the difficulties they faced. Within a span of few years, the number of immigrant workers had grown and they started facing widespread hostility. The pent-up frustration of the European origin workers manifested itself in violence against Hindu workers, vandalism of Hindu belongings and hatred towards their religion, lifestyle and living conditions. Like Canada, the United States enacted Asian exclusionary laws to bar Asians immigrating to the United States (Hess, 1982).

While the Japanese and Chinese governments sympathized with their overseas nationals for the loss of life and property in racial riots and negotiated with the U.S. government for compensation, the British Indian Government would not make any such representation to the British or Canadian government for similar compensation for their British subjects. Indians soon realized the difference between the citizens of a “slave” country and those governed by their own people. Racial prejudice by the Americans and lack of concern shown by the British Indian Government gave birth to political consciousness among the Punjabis. As well, several Indian intellectuals had been attracted to seek admission in US universities for higher education at the turn of the last century. However, upon graduation, they were not able to get jobs commensurate with their qualifications. They attributed job discrimination to their being nationals of a subjugated country. They were motivated to get rid of the foreign rule in India and were ready to fight for freedom of their motherland.

## Revolutionary Activities Prior to the Start of the Gadar Party

In 1905, an Indian revolutionary, Shyamji Krishna Varma founded Indian Home Rule Society in London to secure Home Rule for India and to carry out propaganda in England to attain the objectives of the Society. He started India House, ostensibly a residence for Indian students but used for revolutionary activities. It rapidly developed as a centre for intellectual and political activism and became a meeting point for radical, nationalist Indian students and Indian revolutionaries. He also started *Indian Sociologist*, a radical monthly journal, aimed at inspiring opposition to British rule in India (Puri, 2011).

Har Dayal had come as a student from India to study at Oxford University on a government scholarship. In London, he joined Indians who were engaged in nationalist activities, and renounced his scholarship for active involvement in revolutionary activities. After the assassination of an official working for the Secretary of State for India in London in 1907, several people associated with India House, moved to Europe or the United States. The journal, *Indian Sociologist*, was also relocated to Paris.

Bhikhaji Rustom Cama, born in Bombay in a Parsi Patel family, was involved with Krishna Varma's Indian Home Rule Society. She moved to Paris where she formed the Paris Indian Society. She was at the center of nationalist activities in Europe and in August 1907 when she earned the distinction of being the first person to raise the "Flag of Indian Independence" at the Seventh International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart, Germany (Puri, 2011). A few weeks later, she came to America and carried the flag during her travels to various places where she spoke passionately against British rule. Bhikaji Cama started publishing a magazine, *Bande Mataram* to "reflect a vigorous revolutionary policy." The first issue was published on September 10, 1909 with Har Dayal as the editor of the magazine (Puri, 2011).

In Canada, Indian immigrants were very unhappy as the government had restricted migration of their spouses and children. They submitted petitions and memoranda, and even sent delegates to plead with the British authorities in London, to the Viceroy of India as well as to the Governor of Punjab, but it was all in vain. The Canadian government, on the other hand, wanted them to remove them permanently and offered to move them to British Honduras by



taking a delegation there. This suggestion was resoundingly rejected (Buchignani and Indira, 1985).

Tarak Nath Das, a Bengali revolutionary who left India in 1906, joined UC, Berkley as a student. In 1907, he found a job with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and was posted in Vancouver, B.C. There, he formed the Hindustani Association for defending the rights of Indians. In April 1908, he started publishing a monthly magazine *Free Hindustan* in English to promote political education of Indians and to prepare them for the struggle to free India from British rule. The paper criticized the policies of the Canadian and British Indian government and advocated armed rebellion against British rule as a means for achieving independence for India. For his political activism, Taraknath Das was forced to quit his job. He left Canada in May 1908 and moved to Seattle from where he continued the publication of his journal *Free Hindustan* (Gould, 2006).

In Vancouver, G. D. Kumar started publishing a Punjabi monthly *Swadesh Sewak* in January 1910, with an objective to create awareness about the deplorable treatment to which Indians were subjected. The paper also printed articles from *Bande Matram* and *Indian Sociologist*. In March, 1911, the British Indian Government banned the import of the journal as it was found to be Anti-British. Another paper, *Sansar* was started in Punjabi in 1911 (Johnston, 2014) but it did not last long either.

Thus, several attempts were made in the UK and Canada to form revolutionary organizations and mobilize the Indian community to fight for India's independence. But both countries were under British rule, so revolutionary activities were suppressed and the organizations could not survive. In the USA, however, people had political freedom and enjoyed freedom of speech. Some Indians started advocating freedom for India from British serfdom. They formed organizations to collectively assert their birthright for the independence of India. Ramnath Puri came to California at the end of 1906 and worked as interpreter for the Sikhs arriving in California. He started a paper in Urdu, *Circular-i-Azadi* (Circular of Freedom) in 1907 "with declared objective of political education of the Indians." (Josh, 1978 p. 82). It encouraged Indians to seek American sympathy for India's freedom. The paper included extracts from articles published in the *Gaelic American*, an Irish revolutionary newspaper in America. It was among

the first anti-colonial papers published for a few months only on the West Coast. But its shipment to India was prohibited due to its seditious contents. For want of resources, readership or other reasons, these organizations or their newspapers did not survive for long.

### **Role of Irish Americans**

Irish and Indian revolutionaries shared political aspirations. Both had a common goal to liberate their country from the same colonial power, Britain. Americans had fought a war to achieve their freedom from the British and the Irish revolutionaries believed in the same philosophy. When the Ghadar Party was formed in 1913, they too aimed at attaining independence through armed struggle.

Harish Puri, in his book, *Ghadar Movement -- A short history*, suggests that the Irish nationalist link might have been the first international political contact that allowed the widening impact and circle of political friends for the Indian nationalists. Indian revolutionaries were not the only ones in America, seeking ways and means to overthrow the colonists out of their country. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were several radical anti-colonial organizations which had been formed by exiles from Ireland, Egypt and Mexico. They networked with one another and sympathized with each other's freedom struggles. Prof. Mark Juergensmeyer in his article on *Scholarly Interest in the Ghadar Movement*, wrote, "India was not the only country mobilizing (itself) against British colonialism in the early 1900s, and the Ghadar leaders found kinship, especially in Irish revolutionary brotherhood" (sikhpioneers.org).

Irish expatriates founded *Fenian Brotherhood* in New York, as a sister organization of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) which was founded in 1858 in Dublin to achieve Ireland's independence from the United Kingdom. The activities of Fenian Brotherhood created a surge in political awareness among Irish immigrants in America. In January 1871, after his release from jail where he had been incarcerated for his anti-British activities, John Devoy, an Irish revolutionary and *Fenian* leader in Ireland, was exiled to America. He founded *Clan na Gael* which became the most important Irish Republican organization in the United States during the late 19th and 20th centuries (Ramnath, 2011). *Clan na Gael* succeeded the Fenian

Brotherhood and was aligned with the Irish Republican Brotherhood of Ireland.

In America, John Devoy worked for the New York Herald and gained experience as a journalist. He started the *Gaelic American*, an Irish Catholic weekly newspaper which was rated among the foremost Irish ethnic newspapers until the economic downturn in the 1930s. *Gaelic American* was a publication of Sinn Féin, an Irish Republican party, founded in 1905, whose main objective was to end British rule in Ireland and to seek unity and independence of Ireland as a sovereign state. *Gaelic American* was looked upon as the real motivator for the anti-British movement (Puri, 2011).

The Irish and the Indians co-operated with each other to liberate their countries from British colonists. F. Hugh O'Donnell who was an Irish Home Rule MP and journalist, was among the early advocates of solidarity among peoples subjected to British rule. He introduced members of the India House to Mustafa Kamil, the founder of the Egyptian nationalist party Hizb-al-Watan, during his visit to London in July 1906. Indians continued their relation with Kamil's successor, Mohammad Farid (Ramnath, 2011). Indian and Egyptian revolutionaries continued to cooperate with each other for several years to come. "In one sense any blow against the (British) empire, any locus of resistance and unrest, was simultaneously a contribution to their own freedom, the liberation of all peoples subject to British incursion was seen as part of the mission," wrote Mia Ramnath (Ramnath, 2011, p. 110).

John Devoy worked closely with Shyamji Krishan Varma of the India House in London. Varma's *Indian Sociologist* was freely circulated and Devoy reprinted articles from the *Indian Sociologist* in his paper *Gaelic American*. Irish Americans had a much larger population in the USA as compared to Indians who were an insignificant minority. Thus, through *Gaelic American*, activities of Indian nationalists reached out to a larger cross-section of the American population (Puri, 2011).

Maulvi Mohammad Barkatullah of Bhopal came to the USA in 1903 from England where he was associated with Krishna Varma. He was a scholar of Islam and well known for his militant pan-Islamic propaganda against the British. He was an Indian revolutionary and

fiery speaker and his revolutionary writings were published in leading newspapers. In 1906, Barakatullah and Samuel Lucas Joshi (S.L. Joshi), a Maratha Christian formed the Pan-Aryan Association in New York with support from George Freeman who was the editor of the *Gaelic American* newspaper. The association, modeled after Krishna Varma's Indian Home Rule Society, had the stated goal to bring India and America closer. Under the influence of Irish radical nationalists, the Pan-Aryan Association started anti-British propaganda. In October 1906, Barakatullah attended the third National Convention of the United Irish League in Philadelphia where he asked from the organizers to pledge against England for the sake of India. In 1907, the association name was changed to "Society for the Advancement of India." In February, 1909, Barakatullah left for Japan where he started teaching at University of Tokyo's School of Foreign Languages (Ramnath, 2011).

Tarakanth Das after moving from Seattle to New York in 1908, developed a friendship with Irishman George Freeman, editor of the *Gaelic American*. He started printing *Free Hindustan* -- a political revolutionary journal which closely mirrored the *Indian Sociologist*. He used the *Gaelic American* press for the publication of this journal. This arrangement shows that Irish Nationalists provided moral and material support to Indian nationalists who were attempting to gain freedom for their motherland. Several articles in *Free Hindustan* urged a revolution against the British rule in India. In September 1910, under pressure from the British government, the governor of New York directed the District Attorney to look into the contents of *Free Hindustan* for violation of any state laws. The district attorney reported no violation of any state law by the paper. However, he persuaded George Freeman to stop publication of *Free Hindustan* (Josh, 1978).

The Irish collaboration with Indian revolutionaries had made New York an important centre for the Indian movement for some time before the center of activities moved to the west coast. In 1908, Tarakanth enrolled in the Norwich Military Academy in Vermont to receive military training but had to discontinue his studies. By June 1909, he returned to Seattle where he enrolled at the University of Washington to pursue his studies. With Tarakanth moving to Seattle and Barakatullah gone to Japan, nationalist activities of Indians declined on the East Coast of North America while they gradually started increasing on the West Coast.

After America joined the British in World War I, several Indians and Germans were found to have violated the neutrality laws of the United States. They were prosecuted in what is known as Hindu German Conspiracy Trial which lasted from November, 1917, to April, 1918. Some Irish American lawyers made up the core of the defense team. Twenty-nine “Hindus” and Germans were convicted for varying terms of imprisonment on charges of conspiracy. However, the ‘Hindu German Conspiracy Case’ did not mark the end of Indian anti-colonial activity in the United States as many Indian immigrants had a burning desire to liberate India. They adopted the power of the pen and forestalled the concept of an armed revolution of the Gadarites. I would thus suggest that this new group of nationalists centered their activities on the East Coast.

Lala Lajpat Rai, one of the prominent leaders of the Indian Freedom Movement, came to the US in 1914 to elicit American support for the freedom movement in India. He founded the Indian Home Rule League in 1917 in New York and in 1918, started publishing *Young India* as his organization’s mouthpiece. He cultivated contacts with intellectuals and gained the support of a wide audience of Americans sympathetic towards the cause of India’s freedom. He established relationships with many Irish–American nationalists and in February 1919, he attended the third Irish Race Convention in Philadelphia.

In March 1919, Irish and Indian nationalists in New York formed the Friends of Freedom for India (FOFI) with a major objective to defend the rights of Indians in the United States who were facing deportation. A number of Irish Americans were members of the FOFI. Dudley Field Malone served as vice president, while Dr. Gertrude Kelly, served as treasurer (Gould, 2006). Indian nationalists participated in the 1920 St. Patrick’s Day parade in New York, demonstrating their support to the Irish cause.

During a visit to San Francisco in July 1919, De Valera was presented an engraved silver sword and a large silk Republican tricolor by Gopal Singh and Jagat Singh of the Hindustan Gadar party. The FOFI published excerpts from De Valera’s speech in a pamphlet entitled ‘India and Ireland,’ which was banned by the Government of India. The Gadar Party also produced a Punjabi translation of the pamphlet (Plowman, 1999).

Although, there was no organized and sustained collaboration between the nationalist organizations of the two countries, Irish revolutionaries continued to provide sympathy and moral support to Indian revolutionaries in America. Despite the failure of the Gadar movement, the Irish and the Indian nationalists continued to interact and influence each other, but the Gadar Party existed in San Francisco only in name.

### **Har Dayal in San Francisco**

Har Dayal who was closely associated with India House in London and was involved with nationalist activities in Europe, came to the USA in 1911. Here, he felt at home as he associated with intellectuals and radicals at UC Berkley Campus. For some months during 1912-13, he worked as a lecturer of Indian Philosophy and Sanskrit at Stanford University. He continued writing articles which were published in Modern Review. He developed connections with Irish-Americans like John Barry, a reporter with the *San Francisco Bulletin*.

Har Dayal came in contact with many students studying at the University of California at Berkeley. He channelled the pro-Indian, anti-British sentiments of students for the independence of India. Dayal's fervor for India's freedom, however, spread beyond the university campuses, to Punjabi farmers and laborers who had already been victim of racial attacks, discrimination and repression from the dominant community across the west coast of the USA and Canada.

### **Hindustani Association of Pacific Coast**

In July 1912, Indians working in different mills in Portland (Oregon) area formed Hindustan Association with Sohan Singh Bhakna, a lumber mill worker, as president, G.D. Kumar as secretary and Kanshi Ram as treasurer. After a few meetings, G.D. Kumar fell ill, and activities of the organization came to an end. The organizers invited Har Dayal who visited them a few months later (Josh, 1978).

At the end of May, 1913, Har Dayal, along with Bhai Parmanand, visited St. John, Oregon, and addressed meetings of Indian groups in the neighboring cities of Bridal Veil, Linton and Wina and on June 2, went to Astoria along with Sohan Singh Bhakna and others. At a

meeting of several patriotic Indians, Har Dayal passionately spoke about throwing the British out of India and securing liberation by all means. It was at this June 2 meeting that the Hindustani Association of the Pacific Coast was formed with a major objective of liberating India from British colonialism through armed revolution and help establish a free and independent India with equal rights for all. Sohan Singh Bhakna, was elected President, Har Dayal as General Secretary and Kanshi Ram as treasurer (Singh, 1955). Har Dayal provided leadership for the newly formed association and was the force behind the new organization. It was also decided that the Association would start a newspaper called 'Gadar'.

A large majority of Indians in Canada and America were Punjabis who had come to the United States with the high expectations. Several had worked in the British army while others had farmed their own land. But they were disillusioned when they were treated like coolies and menial labourers in the new country and faced hostility, humiliation and racial prejudice from the American people. They were unhappy at the failure of the British Indian Government to provide help when they became victims of violent acts from American hoodlums. When the Hindustani Association of the Pacific Coast was formed, I suggest that Punjabis whole-heartedly supported its objectives of liberating India from colonial rule and enthusiastically became its members by helping financially and willingly agreeing to fight a revolutionary war for the freedom of India.

The headquarters of the Hindustani Association of the Pacific Coast was established at 436 Hill Street in San Francisco and was named Yugantar Ashram. Later, a building at 5 Wood Street was purchased and the headquarters were shifted there. The Association launched a magazine titled *Gadar* to promote the aims, objectives and activities of the organization (Deol, 1969).

### **The Gadar Newspaper**

Gadar means revolt or mutiny. The Gadar journal was published in Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, and other Indian languages, with the first issue of the journal published on November 1, 1913 in Urdu. An edition of the journal was brought out in Punjabi in Gurmukhi script in December, and in May 1914 a Gujarati edition of the journal was

also published (Deol, 1969). The weekly *Gadar* was sent free of charge to over 5000 people in USA, Canada and other countries. It carried articles on the conditions of the people of India under British rule and also on problems of racial prejudice and discrimination against Indians in the United States and Canada. The articles and poems in the *Gadar* awakened the conscience of the readers and roused feelings of hatred against the British. The *Gadar* magazine became very popular among Indians, and its circulation and influence increased rapidly. Over a period of time, the Hindustani Association of the Pacific Coast came to be known as the *Gadar* Party (Deol, 1969).

The effects of the *Gadar* publications started to manifest in India and abroad. Within a short period of time, the magazine became a sought-after periodical for revolutionary and patriotic ideas. Besides *Gadar*, other publications were brought out to raise the consciousness of the Indian people for revolt against the British. One of them was a collection of poems/songs titled *Gadar-di-Goonj* which became very popular among the Punjabis. Ten thousand copies of this pamphlet were published and distributed. The poems were memorized and recited at gatherings and they exhorted people for an armed rebellion to gain freedom for India.

The *Gadar* Movement involved global movement of resources, people and information. It became an international mass movement and symbol of political consciousness of the Indians. The *Gadar* volunteers were motivated to fight for freedom of their motherland. They opened branches of the *Gadar* party in various countries and worked tirelessly to promote the objectives of the party. *Gadar* Party representatives had their presence in Panama, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Brazil, Manila, Tokyo, Yokohama, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Rangoon, Singapore, Indo-China, Java, Sumatra, Kabul, Tehran, Persia, Ankara, Turkey, Moscow, Russia, Berlin, Paris, England and in several cities in the Pacific Coast of North America. The influence of the *Gadar* movement was so powerful that when called upon, 8000 overseas Indians returned to India to fight for India's freedom (Josh, 1978, p. 208).



## **Har Dayal's Exit**

The British government had become alarmed at the popularity of the *Gadar* journal. They used every means to stop its circulation, particularly in India. They also tried to suppress the *Gadar* movement and had hired agents to penetrate the *Gadar* party and watch their activities. Har Dayal used the columns of *Gadar* to caution his compatriots against British spies and the British became convinced that removal of Har Dayal would bring an end to the revolutionary movement. Under pressure from the British Indian Government, Har Dayal was arrested by the U.S. Government, but later released on bail on March 24, 1914. Har Dayal jumped bail and left for Switzerland on April 14 and from there he went to Germany (Puri, 2011).

The sudden departure of Har Dayal did create some vacuum in the organizational structure of the association but it did not cause its demise. Santokh Singh was appointed as the Secretary General in place of Har Dayal. He was a great revolutionary and his active involvement gave fresh incentive to the movement. Ram Chandra Bharadwaj became the editor of *Gadar*, which was renamed as *Hindustan Gadar*. Many committed and motivated volunteers continued to work tirelessly and pursued the planned activities of the Association. Har Dayal “left a legacy of activism and commitment which energized the American branch of the *Gadar* Party” (Gould, 2006).

## **Komagata Maru**

In the early 1900's Indians who were living in Canada were very dissatisfied with the new regulation which prevented Indian immigration to Canada, requiring a continuous journey from the country of origin. An enterprising Indian in Singapore, Gurdit Singh, chartered a Japanese vessel *Komagata Maru* to circumvent the Canadian exclusionary regulations and brought 376 passengers to Canada in May 1914. The Canadian government did not allow the ship to dock at Vancouver. After a two-month long legal battle, only 24 passengers were allowed to land (they were returning immigrants) and the ship was forced to return to India. The action of the Canadian Government created bitterness, frustration and vengeance not only among the passengers but also among the Indian people in Canada and the US. When *Komagata Maru* reached Budge Budge, a port in

the eastern part of India, the British Indian Government wanted to transport the passengers to Punjab while most of the passengers wanted to stay and find employment there. At the refusal of the passengers to board the special train for Punjab, the police opened fire on them resulting in numerous fatalities. The police also arrested over two hundred passengers and put them in prison. The brutal treatment of the passengers of the Komagata Maru generated a wave of resentment against the British government. This incident encouraged new recruits not only from North America, but from all over the world, to join the Gadar cause, and to give impetus to the movement.

The Hindustani Association of the Pacific Coast was still new when in August, 1914, World War I broke out. The Gadar Party leaders started an energetic campaign to exhort Indian patriots to return to India to liberate their motherland. They inspired thousands of Indians to go to India to launch a revolution. Several leading Gadarites left by whatever ship they could get their passage booked and many were arrested upon arrival (Puri, 2011).

### **Indian Independence Committee**

In September 1914, Indians in Berlin formed the Indian Independence Committee (also known as the Indian Revolutionary Society). Its members included Virendra Nath Chattopadhyay (younger brother of politician-poetess Sarojini Naidu), Maulvi Barkatullah, Pandurang Khankhoje, Bhupendra Nath Datta, Champak Raman Pillai and Tarak Nath Das. Har Dayal became its member in January, 1915 but left it in October (Puri, 2011). The Society successfully arranged financial aid from the German government for revolutionary activities and propaganda work in different countries of the world, training of volunteer force of Indian fighters and transportation of arms and ammunitions to reach the Gadarites for a revolt against the British Government in India (Puri, 2011).

### **Indians Not Ready**

Before leaving for India, the Gadarites had hoped that the embers of freedom had caught fire in India too and Indians were ready for a revolution. So when World War I provided a golden opportunity for them to attain their goal, they hurried homeward for rebellion to

overthrow the British Government. Ironically, they found the Indian political leadership openly and willingly co-operating with the British and the people in India fully supporting the British government.

Many Gadarites who reached India, found no arms to start a rebellion. A number of Gadarites including Sohan Singh Bhakna, Kesar Singh and Jawala Singh were taken captives on reaching India while Kartar Singh Sarabha, Nidhan Singh Chugha, Harnam Singh Tundilat, Pandit Kanshi Ram, V.G. Pingley and several others were able to evade arrest. An estimated 8000 Overseas Indians left for India from 1914-18, about 3000 were intercepted; more than 300 were put in jails while many more were restricted to their villages (Puri, 2011).

Kartar Singh Sarabha and other Gadar leaders had come to India to overthrow British rule and wanted to unite and work with all those forces that were working to liberate India. They organized meetings to plan for the revolution, procure arms and arrange funds to carry out propaganda and other activities for the achievement of their goal. Since many Gadarites were retired soldiers, they tried to infiltrate various units of the armed forces, established contacts with their colleagues still working in the armed forces and inspired them to revolt and become part of the rebellious force to liberate India (Lal, 2008).

The Gadar leadership decided to start the rebellion on 21 February, 1915. But the success was dependent on the uprising by the military units in Lahore and Ferozepur cantonments followed by units elsewhere. Two weeks earlier, Kirpal Singh, a British spy met with Gadar leader Nidhan Singh, who knew him from Shanghai. Gadar leaders considered that acquaintance enough to include him in the inner circle. Kirpal Singh wasted no time in alerting the police about the planned uprising. When Gadar leaders advanced the date to February 19, the new date too had reached the police (Deol, 1969). The suspected army units were disarmed or placed under vigilance. Thus, the plans of the Gadarites for revolt were foiled and their dream to see mother India liberated from the British slavery came to nothing. By the end of February 1915, most of the Gadar activists were taken captives.

The Gadarites were prosecuted in batches by the Special Tribunal in what are known as Lahore conspiracy trials. At the end of trials,

as many as 46 patriots including Kartar Singh Sarabha and Vishnu Ganesh Pingle attained martyrdom. Sixty-nine Gadarites were given life imprisonment and 125 were given varying terms of imprisonment (Puri, 2011). In the United States too, several Gadarites and their German supporters, were convicted in the San Francisco Hindu German Conspiracy Trial.

The Gadarites had a flame of liberty lit in their hearts, and did not hesitate to make any sacrifice for the cause of freedom, dignity and prosperity of their motherland. The heroism, courage and sacrifices of the Gadarites inspired many freedom fighters to continue their mission. The Gadarites may have lived ordinary lives but they left an extra-ordinary legacy.

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# A Comparison of the Literature of the Sikh Gurus and the Writings of the Ghadar Party

Amandip Singh Sidhu

## Abstract

The Ghadar party produced a significant amount of literature and poetry which was published under various banners of their own media. The dominant theme of such literature and poetry was the “exposure of exploitation of natural resources of lands under the colonial rule, and the oppression and suppression of the people with the force of guns and the threat of gallows” (Sidhu, n.d. p.1). Ghadar poetry extensively used the themes depicting the life of Guru Gobind Singh as well as other historic Sikh martyrs. This can be seen from poems such as “An appeal to the Panth,” where the poem begins with the incantation of a Salok of Bhagat Kabir from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib: Soora So Pehchanye Jo Lardey Deen Ke Hait (He alone is known to be a warrior, who fights for the sake of righteousness). This same poem refers specifically to Guru Gobind Singh with the verse: “Let’s wage war and justify our faith, and shouldn’t bring bad name to the Tenth Master. With Singh aligned to your name, why to waver, and hide like jackals to save your skin” (Sidhu, n.d, p.20-21). Guru Gobind Singh has a large volume of poetry and writings attributed to him in the Dasam Granth. While there is debate regarding the authenticity and true authorship of some of the writings, this paper uses that literature which has been holistically recognized as authentic by the Sikh panth (community). The three sources used for the purpose of this paper are: the Zafarnama, Jaap Sahib and Chaupai Sahib.

**Key words:** Ghadar, literature, poetry, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, colonialism, oppression, Zafarnama, Sarabha, Jaap Sahib, Chaupai Sahib.

As Canadians commemorate the centenary of the Ghadar movement (1913-2013), the first international revolutionary movement of the Indian Diaspora, this paper reflects on the links and inspirations from Sikh history on the Ghadar movement and its

literature. In this endeavour, I will compare two pieces of literature – the *Zafarnamma* by Guru Gobind Singh and the poem, *On the Way to the Gallows* written by renowned Ghadarite Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha.

To understand the influence of Sikhism on the Ghadar movement, it is imperative to state briefly a synopsis of the Sikh philosophy and history. Sikhism is a “monotheistic religion founded during the 15th century in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent by Guru Nanak Dev and continued to progress through the ten successive Sikh gurus, with the last guru being the Holy Scripture Siri Guru Granth Sahib” (Singh, 2000, p. 17). Sikhism is a spiritual, social, and political system of beliefs which considers spiritual life and secular life to be intertwined (Nayar, 2007). Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru established the system of the *Langar* or free kitchen, designed to urge an understanding of equality between all people and express the ethics of sharing, community, inclusiveness and the oneness of all humankind (Thaker, 2012).

To find salvation Guru Nanak encouraged his followers to live as householders rather than living as ascetics by renouncing the world. Guru Nanak Dev professed the concept of *Kirat Karo*, *Naam Japo*, *Vand Ke Shako*. That is to say, earn a living honestly without exploitation or fraud, meditate on God’s name and qualities, and share what you have with those in need. Furthermore, Guru Nanak Dev spoke vehemently against oppression and was a staunch believer in treating all individuals in a just and compassionate manner. Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh Guru, indoctrinated this aspect of Sikhism by establishing the political/temporal (*Miri*) and spiritual (*Piri*) realms to be mutually coexistent (Marty, 1996).

The subsequent Gurus furthered such concepts and shaped these dimensions for followers of the faith, the Sikhs. The ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur stated that the ideal Sikh should have both *Shakti* (power that resides in the temporal), and *Bhakti* (spiritual meditative qualities). This notion then developed into the concept of the baptized *Sant Sipahi* (Saint Soldier) of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh (Singh, 2008). Sikhs are expected to embody the qualities of a *Sant-Sipāhi*, a concept that inspires one to love God, meditate upon God, keep God in the heart, feel God’s nearness and also be strong, courageous and ready to fight to protect the



weak and oppressed from cruel and unjust attackers (Dugga, 2011). When thinking of the soldier aspect of Sikhism it is appropriate to reflect upon the martyrdom of the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur. The Guru was approached by a delegation of priests from Kashmir belonging to the Hindu faith. They told the Guru that the Mughal Emperor of India Aurungzeb has started a violent campaign to convert the people to Islam. Upon hearing this, Guru Teg Bahadur issued a challenge to Aurungzeb by stating that if he could convert him to Islam, all of India will follow. The Guru then, along with five companions proceeded toward the capital city of Delhi to impress upon the nation that faith was a personal matter, not to be given up under any circumstances. Upon their arrival in Delhi, the Guru was offered luxuries and riches of all kinds to convert. When these offers failed to convince the Guru, Aurungzeb ordered the barbaric torture of the Guru's companions. Even after witnessing the torture and death of his five companions, Guru Teg Bahadur refused to convert, and was tortured and beheaded. The Guru never wavered from his resolve to protect the right of freedom to adhere to the faith of one's choice. Within this back-drop of courage and sacrifice for others, the following verse sung orally is especially meaningful:

*Gur Teg Bahadur Bolaya, Bahin Jina Di Pakardeeyai Sir  
Deejay Bahein Na Chordeeyai  
Says Guru Teg Bahadur*

To whomsoever you have given support by holding his arm,  
Let your head fall, but never let go of that arm. (Kavi Kankan,  
date unknown).

As the above brief phrase demonstrates, there is indeed a martial aspect of Sikhism; specifically, the Saint-Soldier aspect, which embodies a willingness to fight against tyranny. This is in contrast to the mercenary mentality, where the soldier fights for monetary rewards, or to secure gains for an empire.

The Sikh religion evolved through two centuries during a period of oppressive rule by the Mughal Empire. After the Mughals lost their grip on power, there were numerous invasions by the founder of the modern state of Afghanistan – Ahmed Shah Durrani. Durrani surpassed the Mughals in cruelty and oppression as he is “infamous for his genocide of the Sikhs, the destruction and desecration of their holy Golden Temple in Amritsar” (Singh, 1978, p. 144- 145).

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when The British Raj had been firmly established, India was accustomed to foreign rule and subjugation. It had happened many times previous to the establishment of the Raj, including the invasion and foundation of the Mughal Empire by Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur in 1525 AD (Chaurasia, 2002). During this invasion, the Sikh tradition of fighting against social and political injustice took birth:

As a religious leader Guru Nanak did not turn a blind eye to political suppression or consider it outside the realm of religion, but undertook political protest through his writings, speaking out against the cruelty of rulers. Guru Nanak wrote a number of passages about the Mughal invasion of India by Babur and the brutalities that he witnessed firsthand as seen in the primary source, *Babur Bani*. Guru Nanak also spoke out about the suffering of people at the hands of unscrupulous rulers and government officials” (“Babur Bani,” n.d).

Guru Nanak’s verse in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib surmises:

*Having attacked Khuraasaan, Babar terrified Hindustan. The Creator Himself does not take the blame, but has sent the Mugal as the messenger of death. There was so much slaughter that the people screamed. Didn’t You feel compassion, Lord? O Creator Lord, You are the Master of all.*

*If some powerful man strikes out against another man, then no one feels any grief in their mind. But if a powerful tiger attacks a flock of sheep and kills them, then its master must answer for it. This priceless country has been laid waste and defiled by dogs, and no one pays any attention to the dead. You Yourself unite, and You Yourself separate; I gaze upon Your Glorious Greatness.*

*One may give himself a great name, and revel in the pleasures of the mind, but in the Eyes of the Lord and Master, he is just a worm, for all the corn that he eats. Only one who kills his ego while yet alive, obtains the blessings, O Nanak, by chanting the Lord’s Name. (Nanak, p. 360).*

In this poem by Guru Nanak, the torture inflicted upon the general population by the Mughal invader Babar is evident. Babar is referred

to as a worm, and his army as dogs who are defiling a priceless country. The stanza “Only one who kills his ego while yet alive, obtains the blessings,” when studied from a Sikh perspective reveals the concept that killing one’s ego while still alive, i.e. becoming selfless; uncaring about the self, but caring and willing to sacrifice this body for justice and righteousness. A further study into North Indian Classical Music and its etymology would reveal that even the choice of raga in which this Shabad was written has great significance - Asa translates to hope (Punjabi-English Dictionary, 1994). When played, the raga is meant to establish a mood of inspiration. A composition in this raga instills the listener with feelings of courage, determination and ambition. While Ghadar poetry was not written in any particular raga, the mood of Asa is prevalent in their themes more so than any other Indian raga, as the purpose of the poems was to instill courage, a willingness to sacrifice and to express a longing and hope for a free India. This same theme will be seen when one reads the Ghadar poetry.

The historical records of most foreign invaders portray them as magnanimous but their actions and policies prove otherwise. For example, “[t]he British view tended to portray British rule as a charitable exercise - they suffered India’s environment in order to bring to India good government and economic development” (“Living in the British Empire: India,” n.d). In reality, they were oppressive and divisive, clearly discriminatory between the white skinned and the brown. They gained power in India with a divide and conquer approach, and retained it with vicious strength; to quell even those uprisings that asked for the most basic of human needs. For those of Indian descent, the horror stories of pre-independence India and those of partition have been handed down as a legacy of the British Raj. While one may say that public opinion against the Raj is biased and unfounded based on the infrastructure they left behind, a report in a Swiss periodical from 1907 suggests that the Raj was anything but civil:

Previous invaders and conquerors of Hindostan mostly settled in the conquered territory and invariably employed the natives in the highest posts civil and military. Native ability was made use of in every department of the administration. Men of capacity however humble their birth, might and did rise to be the highest functionaries of a Mohammedan monarch or became the heads of considerable Hindoo

Empires themselves. The people were thus not crushed down by successive waves of interlopers who never make their homes in the country and drain away its produce steadily to a foreign land. But under English rule the old system has been completely changed. The result of the great battles of Plassey, Assaye, Wandiwash, Seringapatam and Gugerat has been to deprive 225,000,000 Indians of all control over the policy and administration of their own country and to put even the great Native States, which still retain a nominal independence, increasingly at the mercy of the same despotic power. Up to the time of the mutiny, even to half-a-century ago, this system of complete domination was not so fully worked out as it has been since; and the rule of the famous East India Company which lasted till 1858 was far lighter and more considerate of the interests of the population than has been the Government of the Crown. Not a single one of the solemn pledges given by the late Queen of England and Empress of India, in favour of justice to Indians, has ever been fulfilled and the Indians find themselves to-day, after 150 years of British domination, in a far worse position, in regard to having any control over their own affairs, than they have ever yet been. Here and there an Indian is allowed to creep into the Civil Service on sufferance, or especially servile persons are rewarded by the Government with seats on the Legislative Councils, where they have no authority whatsoever; these, however, are but exceptions which prove the rule (Schmidt, 1907, p. 513-533).

This quote demonstrates an analysis of the British raj through the eyes of a European and an outside observer. Although the British may have viewed their success in India as some sort of victory, others would argue that they robbed the country of its social and financial wealth and further domiciled or handicapped India and its citizens.

I suggest that Ghadar party member's actions and beliefs were most compatible with atheism after my reading of Har Dayal and Bhagat Singh. I corroborate this notion by comparing a Ghadar poem, *On the Way to the Gallows* (1915) with Guru Gobind Singh Ji's, the tenth Sikh Guru's, *Zafarnama* (1705). By doing this, I suggest that Ghadarites were not atheists, but instead were greatly influenced by Sikh history. In many ways they represented the ideal examples of Sikh thought, as deemed from their ability to put discrimination of caste,

gender and religion aside for the achievement of a better society. This includes the non-Sikh Ghadarites such as Har Dyal, Rash Bihari Bose, Barakatullah, Seth Husain Rahim, Tarak Nath Das and Vishnu Ganesh Pingley (Singh, 1961). At this point I would like to reiterate that I have no intention to compare or associate Ghadarite Kartar Singh Sarabha with the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. The comparative study is simply to highlight similarities in the writing, and show a cause and effect relationship between the Guru (teacher) and his Sikh (student).

To show the Sikh perspective, I have chosen a document written by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh – the *Zafarnama*. Written in exquisite Persian verse, the *Zafarnama* or ‘Epistle of Victory’ was a defiant message composed by Guru Gobind Singh and addressed to the despot Mughal emperor, Abul Muzaffar Muhi-ud-Din Mohammad Aurangzeb, (November 4, 1618 - March 3, 1707) – commonly known as Aurungzeb. The *Zafarnama* was written following a series of fierce battles between the Mughal imperial forces and Sikh followers. Despite the ravages of war and the loss of his mother, his four sons and many followers, the Guru felt victorious. In the *Zafarnama* with wisdom and honesty the Guru indicts the emperor Aurungzeb for the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of his empire as exposed by the treachery of the emperor’s commanders in battle. The 111 stirring stanzas in this timeless text form the core of the guru’s spiritual philosophy, all the while highlighting his espousal of morality in thought and action and his deep understanding of the true nature of God and Creation (Sarna, 2011). Furthermore, the *Zafarnama* is important to Sikhs, as well as revolutionaries such as the Ghadarites, because it contains the doctrine of the use of force being justifiable if, and only if all other peaceful means for resolution have failed. This is a foundation of the Ghadar ideology (Singh, 1961).

*Chu Kar Az Hameh Heel-Te Dar Guzasht  
Halal Ast Burdan B-Shamshir Dast*

When all the stratagem employed for (solving) an affair  
or problem are exhausted, (only) then taking your hand to  
the sword is legitimate.

(Singh, 1705, stanza 22)

To present the perspective of the Ghadar movement, I have chosen a seminal poem by the martyr and founding member of the party, Kartar Singh Sarabha. This poem was published in the *Ghadar* newspaper, and

Sarabha reportedly sang it as he was led to the gallows for execution (Vatuk). When comparing the two pieces, converging themes emerge. In its 111 verses, the *Zafarnama* follows the following structure and contains:

-34 verses in the praise of God;

-32 verses dealing with Aurungzeb's invitation to Guru Gobind Singh to visit the Mughal imperial court;

-24 verses describing the Battle of Chamkaur (Dec 21 – 22, 1704);

-15 verses admonishing Aurungzeb and his allied tribal chieftains for their broken oaths taken on the Holy Quran and the Cow, respectively;

-6 verses in praise of Aurungzeb.

Although some parts of the letter are a strong indictment of Aurungzeb and the treachery of his Mughal Generals and forces, other parts of the letter are like words of advice from an older and wiser brother. In these verses, Guru Gobind Singh's piece presents the pain of a brother who has been terribly wronged, yet instead of mourning, he is trying to guide his younger sibling to return to the fold and make peace with his elder brother. These verses take a religious and spiritual tone, where Aurungzeb, who professes to be a true Muslim, is seen as having lost touch with the tenets of his own religion and the message of the Holy Koran.

The Ghadar poem, *On the Way to the Gallows* (Sarabha, 1915) was written in Punjabi and is renowned as a piece of the soul of the Ghadar movement. Written in the first person and addressed to "*Bharat Mata*," or Mother India, the poem passionately describes how even on judgment day, Shaheed Kartar Singh will remain a patriotic Indian, true to his cause. The structure of the poem in all its 27 verses is as following:

-20 verses in praise of being Indian and the duties of being so;

-7 verses as testament to not being afraid of death.

Characteristics that emerge from the comparison are:

Table 1

	ZAFARNAMA	ON THE WAY TO THE GALLOWS
Praise of God	<p>O King of kings, O Giver of Good, O guidance of the Way.                      O One without colour, without form, without equal! (Singh, p.3)</p> <p>O Greatest of the great, Thou art the God of every land:                      Of Perfect Beauty, Merciful and Giver of sustenance! (Singh, p.7)</p>	<p>Concept of Bharat Mata (Mother India):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“an archaic spiritual essence, a transcendental idea of Universe as well as expressing Universal Hinduism and nationhood”*</li> </ul>

\* Interpretation by Bipin Chandra Pal, a freedom fighter from Bengal and also a leader of the Brahma Samaj – a monotheistic renaissance movement in Hinduism

While the word Hinduism is used here, if taken in context prescribed by the reformist movement, the Brahma Samaj, Hinduism describes God as the (nameless) unsearchable Eternal, Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe. This is akin to the Sikh translation and description of God, as seen in the first stanzas of the Sikh prayer, Jap Ji Sahib:

*There is one God. True is His name and He is the performer of all actions. He is devoid of fear and hate. He is immortal, timeless and sovereign. Thru His grace He is met* (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p.1)

With this context, Bharat Mata essentially takes on a secular meaning, which was the intent when the term Bharat Mata was introduced in 1873 in a play of the same name by Kiran Chandra Banerjee, and further extrapolated in the 1882 novel by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee “Anandamath”. The latter includes the hymn Vande Mataram, which became the song of the freedom movement, and was on the lips of freedom fighters of all religions (Brahmo Samaj, n.d.).

Table 2

	ZAFARNAMA	ON THE WAY TO THE GALLOWS
Challenge to those in Political Power	<p>But, beware that the insolent crow Can lay not its hands upon one whose protection is Huma, the Bird of Heaven. (Singh, p.16)</p> <p>He who seeks the refuge of the tiger Can he be harmed by a goat, a deer or a buffalo? (Singh, p.17)</p>	<p>I am a particle of the ravaged India's ruins This is the only name I have The only hallmark, the only address Oh, Mother India this was not be my fate My good fortune That with every movement of mine I could have worshipped your feet</p>

The Huma is a legendary griffin-like bird, prominent especially in Iranian mythology and Sufi fable (MacKenzie, 2005). Guru Gobind Singh metaphorically used this, as well as other strong animals to describe God, with whose protection the Guru has been blessed. On the other hand, those in power and the perpetrators of the injustice referred to in Guru Gobind Singh's verse, are spoken of unfavourably in terms of animals that are traditionally depicted as weak, unintelligent and easy prey.

Kartar Singh's challenge in his poem is in a more abstract form. By lamenting the fact that he cannot serve his country more, he is challenging those powers responsible for his fate.



Table 3

	ZAFARNAMA	ON THE WAY TO THE GALLOWS
Sacrifice for a just cause and declaration of a victory that is outside of the enemies hands	<p>What can an enemy do to him whose friend is God? For the function of the Great Bestower is: To Bestow. (Singh, p. 98)</p> <p>In the time of need, He blinds the enemy, And protects the helpless from all injury and harm. (Singh, p. 100)</p> <p>What harm can an enemy do to him, On whom is the Pleas of God, our Supreme Guide. (Singh, p. 103)</p>	<p>O Mother India If my head is offered My life is sacrificed In your service Then, I would understand Even in my death I will attain A life of eternity</p>

Here, the similarities between the two pieces are more apparent. Both take the form of professing the control of a higher power, under whose shelter, one who fights for justice and righteousness cannot be harmed. With this, service to the higher power eliminates the fear of death, and even after death, the fighter continues to live, inspire and further the righteous cause. Since bodily harm and death are the worst inflictions an individual can bestow to another, and if the oppressor inflicts those, he does not succeed in discouraging the righteous.

I suggest that the legacy of Guru Gobind Singh is an inspiration not only to the Sikhs but to all of humanity. In his 42 years on earth, Guru Gobind Singh saw his father, mother and four sons martyred, earning him the deserved epithet ‘*Sarbansdani*,’ or one who sacrificed everything. He fought a number of battles against the Mughal ruler Aurungzeb, but despite many obstacles in his chosen path, Guru Gobind Singh’s mind and character never wavered away from truth and the acceptance of God’s will. Along with being a great warrior, Guru Gobind Singh was a poet, composer, writer and musician of the

highest degree. He was well versed in many languages. A saint in every sense of the word, at all times attuned to social, political and spiritual reform, he furthered the tradition of fighting for the equality of all regardless of any religious, caste-based or other man-made boundaries – a central tenet of Sikhism and one that his father, Guru Teg Bahadur attained martyrdom for. Guru Gobind Singh’s legacy can also be seen by what others have written about his impact:

“If we consider the work which Govind accomplished both in reforming his religion and instituting a new code of laws for his followers, his personal bravery under all circumstances, his persevering endurance amidst difficulties which would have disheartened others and overwhelmed them, in inextricable distress; and lastly his final victory over the powerful enemies by the very men who had previously forsaken him, we need not be surprised that the Sikhs venerate his memory. He was, undoubtedly, a great man.” (Macgregor, p.101).

“It is extremely rare if not altogether impossible to find all the good qualities in one man. But the Guru was an embodiment of all round perfection. He was a poet, a religious leader, a religious and social reformer, an excellent planner and counsellor and a superb general” (Rai, p. 154-155).

Kartar Singh Sarabha’s legacy is impressive in its own right and realm. As the youngest freedom fighter to be sent to the gallows, Shaheed Kartar Singh, owing on his commitment, character, and steadfastness became a role model for future freedom fighters like Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Shaheed Udham Singh. He was executed at the tender age of 18, but his revolutionary spirit against the oppression of his fellow Indians inspired his fellow Ghadarites to write about him, as seen in the poem below:

*Farewell Poem for Sarabha*

*India is so proud of you, O Kartar,  
That you are marching on the path of sacrifice  
Along with you  
You are talking Jagat and Pingle  
Dear friends, every Indian today  
Swears to your blood  
That we will complete your mission. (Ram, 1914)*

Ninety-eight years after his martyrdom, Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha remains an inspiration, and is celebrated via conferences, journals, sports tournaments, songs, plays, movies and books worldwide. His strong character earned him a Robin Hood like status, as seen from the following anecdote by Bhagat Singh:

One day, they went to a village for the purpose of carrying out a robbery. Kartar Singh was their leader. While robbery was in progress, there was a beautiful young woman in the house. Seeing her, a heinous thought came in the mind of a sinner. He forcefully grabbed the woman by the hand. The woman shrieked out of fear. Kartar Singh immediately took out his pistol, reach that person, and place the pistol on his forehead, disarmed him and shouted, “You wretched man, your crime is very serious, you should be punished to die for that. But the circumstances force us to forgive you. But you fall on the feet of this woman, ask her forgiveness by saying, my sister, forgive me please. Then forgiveness for this fall of mine, If they forgive you, we will let you remain alive, otherwise you shall be shot dead.” He obliged. The matter had not gone too far.

Seeing this, eyes of the mother and her daughter were filled with tears. In an affectionate tone the mother said to Kartar Singh, “Son, you [seem to be involved] in such a heinous work? Kartar Singh was deeply moved. He said, “Mother, we are not doing this because of greed for money. In money for arms. How else can we get that? Mother, we have been forced to do this for the great goal (of India’s freedom).” It was a very painfully moving scene. The mother spoke again, “We have to marry this girl away. It would be nice if you could leave some for that.” Kartar Singh placed all the money before the mother and said, “Take whatever you want.” The mother took some money, placed the rest in the bag of Kartar Singh and gave him blessings, “Go, my son, may you succeed in your mission.” This episode shows that even when Kartar Singh was involved in such a dangerous job as robbery, his heart remained pure filled with pious thoughts and emotions (Singh B. , 1992).

This anecdote provides a glimpse into Kartar Singh's perceived character and his encompassing legend. There is a great amount of information on Guru Gobind Singh and also on Kartar Singh's successors such as Bhagat Singh and Udham Singh. Their stories are often entrenched in Indian folklore. Yet I would argue that the inspirational figure of Kartar Singh, is not as well-known.

It is a matter of great pride that we have not forgotten the heroes of our past. As we celebrate their lives and accomplishments, let us also remember the unity and high moral and spiritual character that allowed those heroes to live so selflessly. It is my hope that through this paper, I have been able to show how one hero, Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha, took inspiration from the life and teachings of his Guru, a hero without comparison, Guru Gobind Singh, and became a foundation stone of a movement that changed history and is alive in our memories one hundred years later.

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# The Ghadar Movement: Revisiting its Genesis and Exploring Prospects of Another Ghadar Movement in Contemporary India

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## Abstract

Though the Ghadar movement is widely regarded as a revolution for Indian freedom, the very genesis of this movement suggests that it was also a movement against various social evils prevalent at the time in India including: communalism, corruption, inequality, unemployment, poor education system and caste related injustice. The Ghadarites worked to initiate an era of universal brotherhood, love and justice and set India free from the British. This paper investigates various causes of the genesis of the Ghadar movement. These reasons are compared and contrasted with contemporary Indian conditions and the prospects of the beginning of another Ghadar movement are explored. The data for this research paper was collected from secondary sources, including various books, biographies, essays and diaries of the revolutionaries of the Ghadar movement. Additionally the head office of the Ghadar society (Desh Bhagat Yaadgaar Committee, Jalandhar) was visited and in-depth informal interviews with the key informants were conducted. It has been concluded that even after a hundred years after the initiation of the Ghadar movement, India has not succeeded yet in eradicating some of its social problems which have haunted its society since the original movement. Despite the best efforts of the Indian government the social conditions are deteriorating day by day, thus enhancing the prospects of a second Ghadar revolution.

**Keywords:** Ghadar, contemporary Indian problems, poverty, unemployment, political system, caste system, communalism

Ghadar is a Punjabi word which means “revolt” or “mutiny”. ‘Ghadar’ was an organization founded by the Punjabis living in Canada and the United States of America with the aim to liberate India from British rule and to fight racially motivated immigration bans in North America against people of Indian origin. Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna,

Kartar Singh Sarabha, Lala Har Dayal, Kesar Singh Thathgarh, Lala Thakur Das Duri and Pandit Kashi Ram Marauli were its key members. The Ghadar movement was one of the foremost movements which shook the British Empire in India in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, many historians have concluded that Ghadar was a purely political movement and its sole aim was the end of British rule in India. Though there is a degree of validity in this statement, the fact remains that civilians of a country do not rise against the ruling government unless they suffer socially and economically. The same case applies to the Ghadrites. Economic life in India was marred by poverty and unemployment and social life was disturbed by the Hindu-Muslim conflicts staged by the British. The foreign rulers destroyed the Indian industry and levied heavy taxes on agricultural products. These conditions put the lives of common Indians in the hands of merciless moneylenders who provided loans at very high rates of interest (Josh, 2007).

The easiest way out for avoiding this miserable situation was to either leave the country or to enrol in the army in order to earn a regular income. But after serving in the army for some time, many Punjabi enthusiasts left their jobs and moved to western countries like Canada and the U.S.A for other opportunities at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In these adopted countries they had to face social stigma in the form of racism (Dhillon, 2012). The situation became even worse when Indians were denied jobs solely on the basis of the fact that their homeland was a slave of the British Empire (Kapur, 2012). The latter factor of unemployment or underemployment worked as a catalyst for the Ghadrites in two ways. They realized that they were going to face constant oppression from people of European origin colonial settlers in the west. They were also aware of the miserable status of their homeland at the global level, which in turn strengthened their resolve to fight for freedom from British rule. Furthermore, some of them could not return to their homeland because they were targeted as revolutionaries by the Imperial government in India. Thus they had a very clear and holistic understanding of the entire socio-economic and political ground realities of India and they concluded that the miserable state of their native country could not be improved without uprooting the British rulers (Josh, 2007). The activists started rising to fight for freedom of their country not only with the sole aim of achieving liberty from the foreign rule, but also to liberate the common



man from the shackles of socio-economic adversities and to usher in a new era of prosperity and well-being.

### **Review of Literature**

Several scholars have presented the early history and foundation of the Ghadar party. Josh (2007) in his work that has been divided into two parts portrays a fulsome analysis of the Ghadar movement. In the first half the author presents the conditions that inspired the Ghadar movement, such as unemployment faced by the future Ghadrates in India, their travel to the North American countries, the racist attitude of Canadian and American citizens towards Indians, the establishing of Pacific Coast Hindustan Association and then the emergence of the Ghadar party. After the establishment of the Ghadar party they faced problems such as the inability to find support from the general Indian masses as well as the threat of British informers within the Ghadar party. These problems are directly referred to as the causes of failure of the Ghadar movement. The British treatment of Ghadar prisoners has also been described in detail. The second part describes how the Russian revolution affected the ideology of the Ghadar party. Some Ghadrates had eye-witnessed the Bolshevik movement during their stay in Russia and they had very good relations with the Bolsheviks as they too were fighting for national and social liberation. So when the Bolsheviks succeeded in achieving their aim it opened great prospects for the Ghadrates (Josh, 2007).

In his book Har Dayal (2008) presents essays which explore the initial phase of the Ghadar movement. They are very helpful in understanding the views which motivated the founders of the Ghadar Party to take the extreme steps towards developing a nationalist movement in the Diaspora. Kapur (2012) describes the role of Sikhs in strengthening British rule in India after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He also compares the works of Lala Har Dayal and Teja Singh and the role of many other personalities in the formation of the Ghadar Party. Dhillon (2012) describes the nature of causes which led to the origin of Ghadar movement. He asserts that the true nature of the Ghadar movement cannot be judged solely from the materialistic interpretation of their history but rather from their ideological motivation as well. He also sheds light on the fact that due to its violent nature, the Ghadar movement did not gain support from the Indian

masses. Another study by Sansra (2006) also highlights the history of the Ghadar Party in which he describes the socio-economic conditions in Punjab which forced them to leave India and the subsequent suffering they faced in western countries such as job discrimination and intense social racism. He sheds light on the establishment of the Ghadar Party and underlines the major events which occurred during the Ghadar movement and also highlights German assistance given to the Ghadrates to carry out their revolt against the British in India. The events which led to the downfall of the Ghadar movement have also been discussed. Singh (2013) debates the issues that led to the failure of Ghadar movement. He asserts that the fight which was started by the Ghadrates against the social and political evils of Indian society still exist in India.

Many authors have also documented the biographies and life events of the Ghadrates. Chaain (2002) compiled the autobiographies of many Ghadrates. These autobiographies are very helpful in understanding the true nature of the problems faced by the Ghadrates in particular and common Indians in general. These autobiographies throw light over the foundation of the Ghadar movement and also on the ranks and duties of various persons associated with this movement. Desh Bhagat Yadgar Hall (2003) published the life history and writings of Bhai Santokh Singh, with several essays written by Bhai Santokh Singh included in this book. These essays reflect the influence of Marxist ideology among the Ghadrates and also present a critique of British activities in India. Singh (1998) provides information on some events which took place after the arrest of Lala Har Dayal, giving valuable insights on the working of the Ghadar Party during the First World War and the hardships Ghadrates had to face in America during that time. The biographies of some prominent figures related to the Ghadar Party have also been included in this literary work and the views of a Ghadrate after the independence of India have also been presented. The reviewed literature has highlighted the various dimensions of the Ghadar movement. The present paper adds to this body of knowledge by synthesizing the historical background of the Ghadar Movement and projecting the conditions in contemporary India that could possibly lead to another such movement.

## **History of Ghadar Movement**

Indian history is replete with numerous examples of revolts and revolutions carried out against despotic rulers but the Ghadar movement has a rather unique history. This movement, though widely regarded as one of the several freedom struggles carried out against the British, was in fact a socio-political movement. Before the foundation of the Ghadar Party Indians living in Astoria, in the state of Oregon in the USA, founded a small organization named 'Hindustan Association of Pacific Coast' in the year 1912 (Josh, 2012). It was a very small league and its geographical reach was also very limited, so it was decided that this organization should be expanded with the help of Lala Har Dayal, who was in California at that time. Lala Har Dayal reached Saint John in March 1913 and held various meetings at Bridal Veil, Linton and Vanna. Consequently the Ghadar Party was founded at Astoria on April 21, 1913 (Sansra, 2006).

Though the official Ghadar movement started in 1913, in reality its roots can be traced well before that time in the minds of Ghadrates. Even the event of leaving their native country for faraway lands was no less than a revolution at the time. Before that very few Indians had left India and those that did had some political power, military service or significant academic credentials. Never before in Indian history had poor Indians emigrated in such a large number as they did at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of them bore a common grudge against British autocratic rule and had faced similar socio-economic difficulties in India.

### **Causes of the Genesis of the Ghadar Movement**

Punjab has been fortunate enough to possess a large portion of India's natural resources, be it the fertile alluvial plains, perennial rivers or one of the hardest working people. Due to this advantageous situation, Punjabi lifestyle has always been affluent and better-off than other parts of India. In addition, Sikhism taught Punjabi's the art of spirituality and sacrifice hand in hand. As a frontier province, the constant attacks from the northwest and enmity with the central Muslim powers had honed their skills as excellent warriors. Ever since Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780 – 1839 A.D.) succeeded in establishing a separate kingdom of Punjab, the socio-economic conditions of

Punjabis prospered and they enjoyed a lavish lifestyle. In a way the sons of Punjab were always masters of their own destiny. But when the British Raj annexed Punjab, Punjabis lost their freedom and were objected to the interference and misdoings of British in all spheres of their life. Slowly, the native population started facing a financial crunch due to the draining of resources by the Imperial government, which eventually resulted in the state of mass poverty.

One can observe the beginning of a new paradigm in the ideology and thinking of the Punjabis when they left their homes for recruitment in the army or for other jobs and moved to western nations (Canada and USA in particular) in search of better economic opportunities. Before this migration commenced Punjabis had been making a self-sufficient livelihood in Punjab, but suddenly they were wandering in contrastingly different societies far more economically developed than theirs. While they experienced immense cultural shock they also noticed many positive aspects of a democratic society. However, due to an economic downturn in their new homelands, they had to face the opposition by the local working classes as they were viewed to be availing employment opportunities that should have been reserved for the European population by accepting jobs for lower wages. Furthermore, they were constantly reminded of the untenable political situation prevalent back home under the British Raj. The major cause of this turmoil according to them, were the malevolent tactics adopted by the British in India to rob it of its precious resources. But that was not the only thing they were worried about. They were also concerned about uplifting the political, economic and social conditions of India and that would only be possible if the British would be forced to leave India. So in order to translate their aspirations into reality they founded the Ghadar Party.

Although Ghadarites created a revolutionary movement in the name of freedom in order to liberate India from tyrannical British rule and to establish India as a self-governing country, that was just a small step towards the fulfilment of their dream of making India a prosperous country in all respects. The main grievance of the Indians was that the British were exploiting Indian resources in a ruthless manner. This exploitation of Indian wealth and natural resources was termed as ‘economic drain’ by Dadabhai Naoroji. It was this economic exploitation of the country that led to mass poverty all over India. Before British, many other foreign powers had attacked India and

looted its wealth, but none of them had left such a bad impact on the general economic and social life of the common people of India. This was one of the main reasons that Ghadrites had to leave their families back in India in search of sources of income outside their native country.

The problems of poverty and unemployment were commonly faced by almost all the men who became Ghadrites while they were in India. According to Singh (1955), the majority of the Indians who took part in the Ghadar party movement belonged to the poverty-stricken Sikh peasantry of Central Punjab, who had migrated to the U.S.A., Canada and the Far East at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century to earn their living. Farming was not a profitable occupation in those days. The situation was such that the producers themselves were starving due to very low agricultural yields and heavy taxes imposed on them by British rule. Finding no jobs anywhere, the only option available to the peasantry was to enlist in the army on petty wages. They gained a lot of exposure while serving in the army and they kept on moving from one colony to the other in search of ideal socio-economic conditions. According to Juergensmeyer (1977) almost 75% of the immigrant males belonging to the Ghadar party had served in the army.

When Indian emigrants reached countries like the U.S.A. and Canada they witnessed a democratic environment for the first time in their lives. However, here too they had to face oppression from the local population in the form of racism and they had to take jobs much below the level of their capabilities and expectations. But they became enlightened and gained first-hand experience about the workings of a democratic society and learned about the rights of citizenship of a country. Even in this context they faced severe opposition from the settlers of European origin. In their autobiographies, many Ghadrites wrote that Americans did not treat them equally, especially since India was a British colony. The North American governments did not come forward to help them with their difficulties since the Government of British India did not demonstrate any support to them. The North American governments however, showed full responsibility towards the wellbeing of other immigrant labourers (ie. Japanese) due to the interests of their respective governments. Such types of incidents were responsible for arousing feelings of nationalism amongst the Ghadrites.

The Ghadar Party was established totally on patriotic lines and the main objective of this league of patriots was to liberate India from British rule so that a new era of development could begin in India. For this purpose they also introduced a weekly newspaper named “Ghadar” and published several books to promote their cause in North America, other Diaspora countries and India. While doing this they took some extraordinary steps and addressed some key issues of Indian society. They were among the foremost Indians who thought above the realm of communalism which was widely rampant among Hindu and Muslim communities. While promoting the idea of Ghadar, the Ghadrites presented views that forced people to think above communalism and see the ground realities. The Ghadrites were in strong favour of creating a secular Indian society and appealed to everyone to remove socio-religious divisions. The Punjab Revenue Department (1980) presented some lines from Ghadar di Goonj (1913) which shows their secular views as follows:

*Though Hindu, Mussulmans and Sikhs we be,  
Sons of Bharat are we still,  
Put aside your arguments for another day,  
Call of the hour is to kill.  
While we were all sunk in stupor,  
The foreigners took over our government,  
In pointless disputes we got involved,  
Like quarrel some whores our time we spent.  
Some worship the cow; others, swine abhor,  
The white man eats them at every place,  
Forget you are Hindu, forget you are Mussulman,  
Pledge yourselves to your land and race*  
(Singh, 1955, p. 192-193).

Thus it can be concluded that the ultimate aim of the Ghadrites was not only to set India free from the oppressive rule of the British but also to eradicate various social evils from Indian society. The biographies and diaries of the Ghadrites spoke of the dreams of the members of the Ghadar Party. From this perspective, the relevance of the Ghadar movement still exists in the present Indian context because most of the social problems which the Ghadar Party dreamt of eradicating are still widespread in Indian society and unfortunately the magnitude of these problems has multiplied manifold.

## **Contemporary Indian Scenario**

After the independence of India in 1947, a new political era began in Indian history. The freedom struggle for India was a hard fought struggle, for which innumerable patriots sacrificed their lives and countless of them faced atrocities at the hands of the British. After accounting for such brave efforts, one would definitely like to comprehend how future generations make use of the opportunities provided to them, the problems faced by the political, social and economic system of the country and the resultant response of the people to the contemporary problems.

In the first democratic elections held after the freedom of India the Congress party emerged as the unchallenged winner due to its mass popularity among Indians and also due to the Party's charismatic leader Jawahar Lal Nehru. This trend continued until 1977 with the Indian National Congress ruling Party both at the Centre and in most of the states. In 1977, the Janta Party (a coalition party) came to the power, thus paving the way for a multi-party system in India. However the Janta Party could not remain in power even for three years due to infighting among the four parties of which it was composed. The main reason for the fall of this conglomerate of parties was internal bickering and factionalism that not only became a major obstacle in its performance but also tarnished its impression in public. The elections of 1980 brought in an era of hegemonic phase in Indian governance, with the dominant Congress party which was identified as Congress (I) after the name of its extremely powerful and undisputed leader Indira Gandhi. During this time the opposition parties started indulging in politics of confrontation due to their inability to oppose Congress on moral grounds. Some of these parties brought in factors like caste to the forefront in order to gain popular support. The Parliamentary elections held in 1989 initiated a multi-party system again at the Centre and the subsequent polls resulted in a decline of Congress hegemony and emergence of a coalitionist phase in multi-party system (Narang, 2003).

From 1989 onwards Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) gained ground and in 1998 formed the government in the Centre. The 2000's saw even more coalitions among various political parties both at the regional and national level. But in this decade a lot of political scandals came to light which overshadowed the entire political development in this

decade. Most of these cases were related to corruption at the upper level of government as these scandals saw top notch Indian politicians indulging in some of the biggest corruption cases that India ever saw in its history: the 2G Spectrum scam (\$5 billion) and Commonwealth Games scam (\$6 billion) are just two examples that reflect the magnitude of corruption in Indian politics.

Another challenge that India is facing today is the problem of communalism. Communalism simply means individual's attachment with the community to which he/she belongs. In this sense the term "communal" is a very positive term. But in modern usage, communalism refers to the tendency of socio-religious groups to indulge in a sectarian exploitation of social traditions as a medium of political mobilization to promote political, social and economic interests of one group at the expense of another group (Narang, 2003). In doing so, one group may consider the other groups as opponents or enemies, a sentiment that has been cleverly manipulated by the political parties in India. They use communalism to strengthen particular vote banks as they raise the issues of religion, caste and language to gather as much support as possible in the shortest time. Quite often such politics result in political violence in which hundreds of innocent people lose their lives. The incidents of the Ghodra train burning (2002); Gujarat violence (2002) and the Babri Mosque demolition (1992) are some of the examples of the seriousness of this issue.

Regionalism and separatism are another two serious issues that are challenging a country that has an enormous diversity of cultures, languages, castes and tribes. All these cultural and linguistic groups are concentrated in certain territorial segments and they share a strong sense of belonging and emotional attachment with these geographical spaces. Before independence, the British were primarily interested in economic exploitation of the country and thus did not follow any planned strategy for balanced development of its various parts. They encouraged various divisions based on religion, region, caste and language (divide and conquer) which resulted in strong regional imbalances and the emergence of group identities. After independence, the country witnessed a continuous increase in the problems of regionalism and separatism due to regional imbalances, non-fulfillment of public expectations in terms of developmental goals and exploitation of the sentiments of common people by political parties to expand their vote banks. Therefore a number of divisive streaks



emerged on the political map of India (Narang, 2003). The public movements that resulted in the call for separate states like Jharkhand in Bihar, Uttarakhand in Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in Madhya Pradesh were because of the underdevelopment of these regions and a feeling of deprivation, neglect, discrimination and exploitation among people. Finally these areas were granted statehood in 2001. Similar separatist movements are going on in Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh, Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, Darjeeling region of West Bengal and in some other parts of the country. These regional separatist movements point to the fact that societies characterized by cultural pluralism have an in-built tendency for conflicts, the solution of which does not necessarily lie in disintegration and separation.

The caste system is one of the most important aspects of Hindu society. Caste can be explained as a group's traditional hereditary association with an occupation. One's caste is determined at the moment of birth simply on the basis of the caste of one's parents. The closed system encourages all members of the same caste to be treated alike. Some castes are still considered low and polluting to the extent of being considered untouchables. The caste system divides the entire Hindu society into a hierarchical position, promotes inequality and contains elements of exploitation and oppression. Nowadays, the most serious face of caste system is present in the form of honor killings because under the principles of caste system one can marry or carry on close relations only within one's own caste. More than 1000 young persons are killed every year in the name of honor in India (Times of India, July 4, 2010).

Illiteracy is another social problem in India that needs to be addressed. Illiteracy gives rise to poverty and unemployment which leads to dissatisfaction among the masses. Widespread poverty is yet another serious issue that Indian society is grappling with. The main goal of the government after independence was to eradicate poverty from the country. Even after 65 years of independence the achievement of this aim seems to be far from reality. According to a report of the World Bank (2010) almost 32.7% of the Indian population still lives under international poverty line i.e. lives on \$1.25 a day. The report also stated that the figures rise to 68.7% when the poverty line is increased to \$2 a day. The entire Indian economy is being controlled by a small group of rich and powerful persons and the total wealth earned by them has been tagged as the representative of the whole

country. Most of the politicians gained from the major flaw in the calculation of the Gross Domestic Product of the country and covered up the real situation of the centralization of Indian wealth. Thus in addition to this, over the course of time, India has become an infamous model of economic disparities.

The Second Annual Employment & Unemployment Survey (2011-2012) shows that almost 3.8% of the Indian work force is unemployed. Not only this, a large number of Indians are underemployed. According to a survey conducted by NSSO in 2009-2010, almost 6 crore (60 million) workers in the Indian work force are underemployed. As a part of this discord, caste and religion play a significant role in determining the nature of job for the person. According to a study conducted by Thorat and Attewell (2007), the applicants belonging to lower Hindu castes and the Muslim community generally have less of a chance to get a job in front of an equally qualified Hindu upper class applicant. In response, many minority groups demand certain privileges from the Government in the form of quotas to check this systemic discrimination and resulting imbalance. Such quotas provide some job opportunities, but these are in turn swallowing the job prospects of the deserving, well-educated and well qualified middle class persons. This unfortunate scenario has led to frustration, disappointment and acts of violence among the common man.

Thus it can be clearly inferred that the problems that Ghadriles once dreamt to eradicate from the country are still prevalent in contemporary Indian society. The only difference in the past and modern day situation is that the magnitude of these problems has increased greatly over time. Even the Ghadriles who were fortunate enough to live long enough to see the independence of India felt dejected. One of the Ghadriles, Harjap Singh, wrote about the dream of the Ghadriles expressing his hopes and desires that all his fellow Indians would one day rise above their sufferings under the British Raj and emerge to be able to enjoy the luxuries of an independent country with superior food, clothing, housing, etc. Harjap Singh goes on to forecast that India should become a place where there is no corruption and beggary would become a thing of the past (Singh, 1998). This was the view of Ghadriles for an independent India. Another famous Ghadrile Bhai Santokh Singh wrote about his Indian dream of an all-round political, social and industrial revolution while he was in an American jail (Singh, 2003).

After independence many movements were carried out in protest against these problems. The electoral upheavals and political crisis was not the only form in which popular discontent expressed itself. During the 1970s, many societal groups like women, students, Dalits and farmers felt that the government overlooked their needs and demands. The increasing awareness and consciousness among rural people resulted in the emergence of organized groups for the protection and consolidation of their interests. These assertions marked the rise of new social movements in India. But most of them lacked the broad thinking of the Ghadrtees because such movements had their own limited regional foci and did not take a holistic view of the nation. Moreover, the objectives of these movements have shifted from social agenda to personal gains. Some of the revolutionary movements which began after independence became the target of bad politics. For instance, the Naxalite movement which started as a resistance to government policies has now turned into a terrorist organization with very little support from the common people outside their respective states. Recently the Anna Hazare movement seemed to revive the interest of the common people in gaining back their long lost rights. But that too seems to have lost its touch with the interests of the common man. The only movements that are making news now are concerned with promoting regional identities in which several minority groups or less developed groups demand separate statehood for their areas. But even the approval of statehood does not ensure improvement in their social strata and economic conditions.

So here a question arises about what characteristics a movement should possess in order to be successful at the national level in the present Indian context. Movements are not about collective assertions or only about rallies and protests. They involve the gradual process of coming together of people with similar problems, similar demands and similar expectations. The first idea that immediately comes forward is that in modern times only a non-violent movement can succeed, because a violent movement would be immediately labeled as a terrorist organization and would lose popular support from the media and common people. Another drawback that can be observed in the previous movements is that although most of them started as social movements, they ended up opposing the government. A clear vision in mind is necessary so that their fight is not only seen to be with the government but rather against social evils.

The next characteristic that a successful social reform movement might possess is similar to the vision of the Ghadrites and their ability to rise above communal discords and caste shackles. The Ghadrites themselves were a part of caste and communal system of India before they went to Canada and U.S.A. But they had the capability to understand the need for change. The biggest challenge that Ghadar movement faced was that it could not ignite a similar type of understanding among the masses in India. The same rule applies in the modern context also. No contemporary movement can become successful unless the people of the country think above the level of communalism and act accordingly. Therefore, in modern times a great movement needs great leaders who can propagate their revolutionary ideas among all castes and religious groups with equal effectiveness.

Thus it can be concluded that although the Ghadrites fought for the independence of India but that was not their ultimate objective. They were against the British because they wanted to establish a healthy and self-sufficient society in India ruled by its own people with equality. After independence the dream of the Ghadrites went unfulfilled and India remained entrapped in the clutches of its social ills and problems. Even after 66 years of its independence, India has not been able to overcome some of its core problems towards which the Ghadrites had started working at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is a need for another Ghadar movement on the lines of the original Ghadar party, but with widespread support of the masses.

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# **PART THREE**

## **Transnational Historiographies**





# His Master's Voice?: Ubayd Allah Sindhi's Re-interpretation of Orthodox Islam as Inclusive Revolutionary Ideology

Mohammed Khan

## Abstract

Maulana 'Ubayd Allah Sindhi (1872-1944) was an important Ghadarite who defies easy classification. A follower of the Deobandi school of thought, he was an anti-imperialist who transcended religious and other barriers in his quest for the liberation of India. His re-conceptualization of eighteenth century revivalist Shah Waliullah Dehlavi's philosophy has invited criticism that doesn't conform to the ideological positions of the latter in particular and Islamic orthodoxy in general. Through an analysis of the ideas of Shah Waliullah, Sindhi and other contemporaries this paper assesses the validity of the above criticism. It is argued that Sindhi was an original thinker and not a mere imitator of his ideological precept. He adapted the methodologies and theories of Shah Waliullah and arrived at conclusions which fit in neatly with the Ghadar's anti-imperialist project.

**Keywords:** Ghadar, Maulana 'Ubayd Allah Sindhi, Shah Wali Allah, Ghadar, Deoband, Pan-Islamism

The Ghadar revolutionary movement transcended the barriers of caste, creed, and religion in its orientation as well as in its membership composition. It was truly, "a revolutionary conspiracy of all communities" (Prasad, 1985, p.148). The academic studies of the movement for the most part, tend to concentrate on its secular and socialist leanings to the exclusion of diverse religious influences which also played an important role. This neglect becomes even more acute when it comes to Muslim Ghadarites, whose faith is presented as irrelevant or marginal to their membership in the movement. Efforts by Muslim Ghadarites to provide a religious basis for their activism are viewed with either indifference or skepticism. This despite the fact that two of the movement's prominent Muslim members were also scholars who were trained and steeped in the orthodox mold.

Maulana ‘Ubayd Allah Sindhi (1872-1944) and Maulana Barkatullah Bhopali (1859-1927) stand out among fellow Muslim Ghadarites for not only being active participants in the revolutionary struggle, but also for providing theoretical and ideological support from an Islamic perspective. Bhopali is the better known of the two because of his sojourns in America, Europe, and Japan and for being a founding member of the Ghadar Party. But Sindhi is also important for his involvement in one of the key Ghadarite projects - the setting up of the Provisional Azad Hind Government in Afghanistan in 1915. Furthermore, his novel ways of interpreting revivalist Islam as an inclusive revolutionary ideology make him an attractive subject of study. A vocal (for some time a militant) advocate of liberation of India from colonial rule, Sindhi attempted to ground his revolutionary ideology in the revivalist thought of Shah Wali Allah Dehlawi (1803-1862). His insistence that he was a true follower of Wali Allah poses a puzzle as the latter is held to be a proponent of Muslim exceptionalism and a promoter of the so-called “theory of distance” from non-Muslims.

Contrary to the prevailing scholarship (Akbar, 2011; Sikand, 2005; Young, 1976) this paper will argue that this puzzle or dilemma emerges due to a selective reading of both Wali Allah and Sindhi. Neither of them was operating in a vacuum and that a holistic appraisal of their ideas needs to be undertaken to understand Sindhi’s fusion of Indian nationalist revolutionary struggle and Islamic orthodoxy. Once we do so the apparent incoherence in Sindhi’s ideological fusion is diminished. The primary aim of this paper is to present a nuanced analysis of Sindhi’s thought by attempting to determine the logic behind what seemingly appears as incoherent or contradictory.

This paper is divided into two parts. First, it will locate Ubayd Allah Sindhi in India’s revolutionary struggle and the Ghadar movement. This section is not meant to be a comprehensive biography and will only provide a brief overview of his associations and work. Second, the influence of Shah Wali Allah on Sindhi will be examined. This section will concentrate on Wali Allah’s views on Muslim relationships with non-Muslims and Ubayd Allah’s engagement with and refinement of them. Key documents and statements of Sindhi will be examined which detail how he intended to achieve a lasting Hindu-Muslim unity in India.

## Locating Sindhi

‘Ubayd Allah Sindhi was born as Buta Singh into a Sikh family in 1872 in the Chainwali village of Sialkot district in the then undivided Punjab. In an autobiographical essay he writes that he was born three months after the death of his father. A prodigious child, he did well at school. He converted to Islam at the age of sixteen after reading a polemical tract called *Tuhfat al Hind*, written by another convert (whose name was also ‘Ubayd Allah ), and the *Taqwiyat ul Iman* of the revivalist-warrior Shah Muhammad Ismail (1779-1831) who was the great-grandson of Shah Wali Allah. He subsequently came under the influence of a Sufi sheikh, Maulana Hafiz Muhammad Siddiq in Bharchundi, Sindh and began affixing ‘Sindhi’ to his name as a mark of his spiritual lineage (Sheikh, 1986).

Sindhi joined the Darul Uloom Islamic seminary in Deoband in 1888 and proved that he was a brilliant scholar. He devoured voluminous texts in a short period of time, completing his education at Deoband, Rampur, Gangoh and Delhi in about two years and four months (Ibid).

At Deoband, Sindhi became a devoted disciple of Maulana Mahmud ul Hasan (1851-1920) who is well known for his anti-British activities and consequent exile to Malta. Hasan had famously declared that ‘hatred for the British’ colonialism is an ‘article of faith’ (Ahmed, 2005). It was this teacher who initiated Sindhi into revolutionary activism. Under his direction Sindhi first formed an old boys association’ of the seminary called *Jamiat ul Ansar* which was to be a resource organization for political and religious activities of Mahmud ul Hasan (ibid). Sindhi was forced to resign from the seminary in 1913 as his revolutionary activities and disagreements with other teachers became problematic for its administrators.

After a brief stay in Delhi, where he founded a madrassa (*the Nizarat al Ma’arif*), Sindhi went into self-exile of nearly a quarter of a century and lived at various times in Afghanistan, Russia, Hijaz (modern day Saudi Arabia), and Turkey. He went on to form several revolutionary parties in Delhi, Punjab, and North West Frontier Provinces, Afghanistan, Russia and Turkey. Some of the organizations he was associated with or formed are: *Junud Rabbaniya*, *Jamna Narmada Sind Sagar Party*, *Sind Sagar Party*, *Jamiat Ulema Sindh*,

*Mahabharat Sarvrajiya Party, and the Indian National Congress.* He was a key founder of the Kabul Committee of the Indian National Congress. He is frequently mentioned in the intelligence reports of First World War as a conspirator (Roy, 2005).

Sindhi rose in prominence in India's nationalist imagination for his role in the 'Silk Letters Conspiracy.' At the urging of Hasan he had written letters to the governor of Russian Turkistan and the Czar asking them to join forces with Turkey and declare war on the British. The letters provide minute details of the proposed organizational structure of an army called Hezbollah and how to recruit Indians for it. The letters were concealed in silk scarves to escape detection. However, they were found, and the British clamped down in India by passing the draconian Rowlatt Act limiting civil freedoms. As a result of this discovery Hasan was also exiled to Malta from Makkah where he had been living (Sheikh, 1986).

Sindhi was closely associated with the Ghadarites not only in their aims and goals but also by becoming party to their activities. His association with the Ghadar Party started with the arrival of the Indo-German Mission led by Mahendra Pratap in Afghanistan in 1915. Sindhi played a leading role in connecting the mission with Afghan officials. The mission was unable to significantly change the neutral stance of the Afghan ruler King Habibullah. They were, however, able to open up secret communications with pro-German elements in the court. While remaining non-committal Habibullah did not limit their movements or place any restrictions in their interactions with Afghanistan's anti-British courtiers and other notables (Shaikh, 1986). In Afghanistan, Sindhi's involvement with the Ghadarite project solidified with the formation of the Provisional Azad Hind Government in 1916. It named Pratap as its president, Barkatullah as prime minister, and Sindhi as the home minister.

The relationship between Pratap and Sindhi was not cordial. The latter considered the former to be a 'biased Hindu under the influence of Malwiya,' who tried to keep Muslims only for consultation and not for the actual workings of the government (Leghari 1980). This was a distinct contrast with the relationship between Pratap and Barakatullah which was very close and remained so until his death.

In Hijaz, Afghanistan, Turkey, Russia, and elsewhere he served as a key link between the Ghadarites and local officials and revolutionaries (Ahmed, 2005). In Afghanistan Teja Singh Azad, who was both a Ghadarite and an emissary of the Akali movement, became acquainted with Sindhi. The latter was highly appreciative of Azad and wrote of him in glowing terms:

Azad is a young Akali who is well-versed in his own religion. His participation in our program for another reason as well, viz; that he considers such a programme even religiously necessary for his Sikh nation (Sindhi, 1926, p.115).

The admiration between the two was mutual. In an interview to a Soviet author Azad described Sindhi as a “remarkable man, a prominent fighter for our independence.” (Mitrokhin, 1988, p.18).

During his Russian sojourn Sindhi critically studied socialism and appreciated some of its finer points for their emancipatory and liberating values. But he also considered it to be inadequate in resolving the issues of the masses. That he believed could only be achieved by implementing the Islamic system of social justice (Sindhi, 1942).

Sindhi returned from self-exile to India in 1936 after convincing the British government that he had shunned violence and would spend the remainder of his life by adopting the Gandhian non-violent creed (Ahmed, 2005). After his return, he devoted himself to resolving the Hindu-Muslim question by positing new ideas of a federal India, distinct from the ones presented by the Congress and the Muslim League. These ideas were first developed by him in 1926 and revised after his experiences in the Muslim world. He died in August 1944 after a brief illness at Lahore.

### **Criticism from Contemporary Ulema**

Sindhi's ideas invited strong reactions from contemporary Muslim scholars. They varied from indifference and understanding to outright rejection. The criticism reached its crescendo when he wrote an article in the *Al Furqan Monthly* on the philosophy of Wali Allah. Amongst his most vociferous critics was Masud Alam Nadwi, a graduate of Deoband's sister seminary at Lucknow. Nadwi said that Sindhi denied the superiority of Islam and presented a diluted

version of Islam by mixing it with Indian nationalism. Sindhi's 'heart and mind' were lost in some valley and that he uses the Quran and hadith only due to some expediency (Nadwi, n.d.). Manazir Ahsan Gilani, a leading Deobandi scholar, in a letter to Maulana Sulaiman Nadwi went further by stating that this particular article of Sindhi leads one to apostasy and that it should be severely condemned (Nadwi, 1954). Other leading scholars, however, advised caution. Manzoor Ahmed Nomani, the editor of *Al Furquan*, said that Sindhi had been misunderstood and that only by speaking to him could the misconceptions be removed. The Islamist ideologue Abul Ala' Maududi, the founder of Jamat-e-Islami and a prolific author, opined that Sindhi was in need of an interpreter and his ideas are often prone to misunderstanding. The Qur'anic exegete Hamiduddin Farahi counted Sindhi among the brilliant men who cared little about what others had to say. He believed that these kind of men often said things which could not be understood by the masses (Ahmed 2005).

A much more guarded response came after his death from Hussain Ahmed Madani, the head of the Deoband seminary. While applauding Sindhi's genius, he also added several caveats. He appealed to the learned not to form a definite opinion of Sindhi unless they have studied his thought under the lens of Islamic principles and the writings related to Sunni belief and practice. Further, he said, "Nor should they consider any of his statements as representing the position of Shah Wali Allah, of Muhammad Qasim, or of Mahmud Hasan (cited in Zaman, 2011 page?) Such a grudging mix of admiration as well as the maintenance of distance from Sindhi continues to remain the practice of Deobandis to this day. While he is acknowledged as a leading figure for his anti-colonial struggle and for being a student of Mahmud ul Hasan, I would suggest that his religious ideas have been ignored if not shunned outright as none of his works are taught or are on the recommended reading list for the students at the Deoband seminary.

### **Influence of Shah Wali Allah**

Shah Wali Allah Dehlawi is arguably the most important Islamic thinker to have emerged in South Asia. The depth and breadth of his scholarship is wide-ranging and he continues to cast a long shadow on modern day Islamic movements in the region. The Deobandis, the

Barelwis, the Ahl-e-Hadith, and to some extent the modernists of the Aligarh movement, all claim him to be as one of their own.<sup>3</sup>

Wali Allah was critical of the decaying Muslim political and intellectual leadership for not keeping up with the changing times. He was especially critical of Muslim nobility for being unable to check the Maratha expansion and the parallel loss of Muslim political power. In his letters to Muslims kings and nobles (especially the Afghan ruler Ahmed Shah Abdali, Najib ul Dawlah, Taj Muhammad Khan, and Nizam ul Mulk Asaf Jah I) he sought their help in the restoration of Muslim power (Muztar, 1979).

Sindhi also called for fresh re-interpretation of the religion. He tried to find a common ground between the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence and proclaimed that the ‘doors of ijtiḥād (independent reasoning) are still open.’ He laid much emphasis on the need for the people to approach the Qur’an directly and not simply rely on the views of past scholars in understanding Islam. He set a relatively new precedent by translating the Qur’an into Persian. He also tried to bridge the differences among the Sufis by innovatively interpreting the contentious doctrine of *wahdatul wujud* (the unity of being) (Chaghatai, 2005).

Sindhi came under the influence of Wali Allah’s views as a student at Deoband. He started reading his works at the urging of and under the guidance of his teacher Mahmud ul Hasan. The Darul Uloom while claiming to be an inheritor of Wali Allah’s legacy didn’t do anything until that time to propagate his views and none of his works were in its curriculum. It was Sindhi who tried to introduce his works both at the upper level classes of the seminary and also by propagating his teachings among the masses. Sindhi took Wali Allah to be his *Imam* in religion as well as in politics and saw his ‘own work as little more than a commentary on the works of Wali Allah’ (Zaman, 2012, p. 56).

This close attachment of Sindhi to Wali Allah poses obvious questions regarding the inclusive nature of his politics. Sindhi believed in close association with non-Muslims in the struggle to expel the

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<sup>3</sup> “The volume and comprehensiveness of his literary output were such that his views have since been asserted, sometimes too uncritically, as the source of every subsequent significant trend within Indian Muslim thinking” (Powell 1993, p. 66).

British from India, whereas Wali Allah called for Muslim exclusivism. Can Sindhi be considered a true interpreter of Wali Allah or is he forcing his own views on his scholarly precept? I will return to this question later in this paper. Before that we need to take a look at what exactly is problematic with Wali Allah, from the Ghadar's inclusive perspective, and a very brief reflection on whether there are alternative ways of interpreting it. This exercise is not meant to be an apologia for Wali Allah but is only an attempt to bring to light the often overlooked conciliatory and humanistic aspects of his thought.

### **Theory of Distance**

Wali Allah was operating in an environment in which the Mughal Empire was on the decline and power of the Sikhs, Marathas and East India Company was on the ascendant. He believed that the political decline, which in his view was itself caused by a loss of religious morality, also negatively affected the religion of the Muslims. In order to arrest this trend he called for Muslims to maintain a distance from non-Muslims in both everyday lives as well as in politics. In one widely quoted statement from his last testament he wrote, "We must not adopt the mores of the Hindus or the people of 'Ajam (non-Arabs)" (Translated by Hafeez Malik , 1973, p.115).

He is claimed to have said that Muslims must live "at such a distance from Hindus that they would not be able to see the light of the fires in Hindu homes" (Cited in Akbar, 2011, p.51). He tried to delink Muslims from India by over-emphasizing their Arabian origins: "We have come here in India as strangers. We took pride at our Arab origin and the Arabic language. It behooves us to stick to the Arab customs and habits and we should never adopt the customs and practices of the non-Arabs and the Hindus" (Cited in Jalbani, 1997, p.154). It is another matter that a majority of Indian Muslims are the descendants of indigenous Indians who converted into Islam.

Statements such as these coupled with the fact that he wrote to the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali to invade India and get rid of the Maratha influence on the Delhi throne make Wali Allah a deeply divisive figure. However, what is often overlooked is that Wali Allah's statements have a context which can only be determined by undertaking a comprehensive analysis of his works. In his last



testament he explains that he is against close contact with Hindus because it has caused ‘reprehensible mores’ like the prohibition of widow re-marriage to creep into Muslim society (Malik, 1973, p.118).

Similarly, an inclusive and humanistic potential can also be detected in his philosophy. We see him expounding on an Islamic theory of natural law: “in every topic there are issues collectively agreed on among all the people of all countries, even if they are far from each other’ (Cited in Black, 2011, p.253). Similarly, most of his political writings addressed common concerns (e.g. the ill effects of high taxation, the need for order, etc.). It should also be noted that he did not declare India *darul harb* (domain of war) even when the Marathas were in power (Misra, 2008, p. XXI). All this shows that Wali Allah’s thought also contains the potential for tolerance and conciliation. It is this potential which was later utilized by his immediate descendants when they tried to forge alliances with indigenous non-Muslim forces against the advancing British (ibid). It came to its full realization by Sindhi.

### **Sindhi’s Appropriation of Wali Allah for an Inclusive Revolutionary Struggle**

Sindhi was born more than a century after Wali Allah’s death. He became acquainted with the latter’s thought while he was a student at the Deobandi seminary at the urging of his teacher Mahmud ul Hasan. He self-identified himself and his work as a continuation of a reform and revival movement initiated by Shah Wali Allah and with that of the Deobandi school of thought. The first thing that Sindhi adopted was Wali Allah’s call for independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) in resolving the religious and political affairs of the day. It is noteworthy that the Deoband seminary adopted many of the positions arrived at by Wali Allah but not the methodology of *ijtihad*. It remained wedded to a strong notion of *taqlid* (imitation of predecessor scholars) at least on religious issues. Sindhi, on the other hand, took a different route, advocating *ijtehad* in all spheres and by calling for a return to the primary sources of the Qur’an and the hadith. As far as their exposition was concerned he took Wali Allah’s *Hujjat Allah Al Baligha* to be adequate enough (Ahmed 2005). The second thing that Sindhi adopted from Wali Allah was *tatbiq* or the resolution of differences between juristic and Sufi schools of thought. The latter had declared that it is “God’s express

will that we should refrain from disagreement and sectarianism” (Black, 2011, p. 251). Sindhi took these two methodological tools (*ijtehad* and *tatbiq*) to be the main pivots of Wali Allah’s thought, and these would remain constant throughout his life and work even when he later adopted positions different than those of Wali Allah.

Sindhi believed the Qu’an to be a revolutionary book and took Wali Allah to be its most erudite exponent in contemporary times. He claimed that earlier works of exegesis, while valuable in their age, had now become redundant. It was only Wali Allah’s exposition, focusing on the possible reasons behind the revelation, which was the most appropriate for modern times. Its benefits were not limited to Muslims alone but to the entire humanity. However, he was quick to add that its full advantages could only be taken by submitting to the one God and rejecting all others (Sindhi, 1947).

Like Wali Allah, he believed that for too long Muslims had been looking at Islam from an individualist lens. He wrote that the community that the Prophet created also needs to be studied in depth, in addition to studying his life. This ideal community’s experience should serve as a model for the creation of a socially just utopia (ibid).

Up to this point Sindhi’s ideas remain in perfect harmony with that of Wali Allah. From this springboard he took a deep plunge into domains which would sometimes become controversial. He not only expanded and refined the meaning of the key concepts of his precept, but also significantly diverged from his ideas whenever he saw fit. Among these ideas was a re-packaging of Wali Allah himself.

### **Sindhi’s Conception of a New Social and Political Order**

The scholarly and spiritual lineage of Wali Allah is generally traced to Ahmed Sirhindi (1564-1624), the great symbol of Islamic orthodoxy who stood up against Emperor Akbar’s attempts at religious syncretism by promoting the *Din-I Ilahi*. In Sindhi’s unique understanding there was a conceptual link between Wali Allah, Akbar and the Andalusian mystic Ibn Arabi (d.1240), who first theorized about the doctrine of *wahdatul wujud* (‘unity of being’). This controversial doctrine posits that God is the only reality and which constantly manifests itself in all creation. This doctrine is criticized by the orthodoxy for allegedly containing shades of pantheism. Ahmed Sirhindi was its most vocal

opponent and as a counter advanced the theory of *wahdat ul-shuhud* (unity in conscience) as a response. Waliullah tried to resolve the disagreements between the two by arguing that they were a result of ‘verbal controversies’ and that the essence of the two is the same (Baljon, 1986). Sindhi treats the subject all the more differently by arguing that *wahdat al-wujud* actually means that the followers of different faiths believe in different manifestations of the single reality. Echoing Wali Allah’s theory of natural law he claimed that they can all agree on common norms even if they arrive at them through different routes (Zaman, 2011). He argued that Akbar’s creation of *Deen i-Ilhai* also needs to be viewed from this perspective. He thought that Akbar had initially tried to create a new social order through this concept but failed as he completely ignored the political aspects of religion and the nation. He thought this movement was correct in its vision but could not find the right people to carry it out and thereafter quickly lost its way (Sindhi’s letter cited in Shahjahanpuri, 1997).

This ideological orientation allowed Sindhi to move away from Wali Allah’s ‘theory of distance’ and adopt an inclusive form of revolutionary activism. He re-packaged Wali Allah as a great symbol of inter-religious cooperation and activism. It also allowed him to borrow from an eclectic mix of ideologies and put forward his own new ones.

In developing his revolutionary ideology, Sindhi placed much emphasis on the idea of universalism and the equality of humanity, while at the same time firmly holding on to his belief of Islam’s primacy and finality over all other religions. His definition of Islam was much more broad based than the one which is traditionally held. Similarly, his definition of *kafir* (generally translated as ‘unbelievers’) was far more restrictive and altogether novel. In his exegesis of the Qur’an, Sindhi argued that the *kafirs* mentioned in Surah 2, v.4, actually represent ‘reactionary conservatives’ (Sindhi, n.d.). At another place he is reported as using the same term for those who want to divide people on the basis of religion, sect, and nation (Sindhi (a), 1995).

He agreed with his Ghardarite colleague Barakatullah that true religion is one and that the variations are a result of misunderstanding and ignorance. The latter believed:

The essential difference of the various peoples of faith is a result of not understanding different terminologies... otherwise they are all seekers of the same thing. For example, Muslims call their sages prophets and saints. Hindus address theirs with *avatar*, etc... The real goal of God's religion (*din-i-elahi*) is to inculcate the love of humanity and to dispel ignorance with the light of spirituality (Reproduced in Rizvi, 2003, p.132).

Barakatullah, however, did not claim the legacy of Shah Wali Allah or the Deoband seminary. He posited his thoughts independently as he thought he understood Islam. Sindhi instead more actively attempted to frame his ideas in the traditional Islamic thought and for this became the target of the *Ulema*.

Sindhi insisted that Islam, as expounded by Wali Allah, has relevance for all regardless of their race and religion. One of the primary aims of Sindhi's conception of revolution is that it should lead to a classless society. A society becomes unstable if only particular classes prosper and the masses are excluded. The concentration of wealth leads to inner rot in the society which can only be healed through a revolution (Ahmed, 2005). He cited instances from Islamic history, showing how such a just society can be built. Based on fatwa on Imam Abu Hanifa (699-767), founder of the hanafi juristic school which is widely followed in South Asia, he stated that landlords should only be allowed as much land as they can cultivate it themselves. Writing in the constitution of Sarvrajya Party he said that all factories must be state owned and run by the workers. The state would also give houses, universal health, and free education until the middle school. In another manifesto he wrote that usury would be outlawed and the rich would be taxed for up to fifty percent (Ahmed, 2005).

Sindhi gained insights from socialism, compared them with Islamic orthodoxy and tried to synthesize the two. He praised socialism for its universal character which is not limited to a particular nation. But he also found that its revolution would be incomplete as long as it rejected spiritualism. Religion, in his view, was much more advanced in this regard and filled a major void of socialism (Javed, 1986). While liberally borrowing from socialist insights he found no reason to convert to socialism as some of the other exiles had done. For him Islam was already antithetical to the capitalist oppression

and was therefore adequate enough for removing the injustices. He thought that Shah Wali Allah had already covered the main points on labour and class mentioned by Karl Marx even though he preceded him by half a century (Ahmed 2005). This critical attitude did not stop him from actively collaborating with socialists. In the *Party Program and Principles of the Mahabharat Sarvarajia Party* he specifically mentions cooperation with socialist parties around the world (Reproduced in Sindhi (b), 1995).

He also had no inhibitions in adopting the democratic and administrative forms of organization from Europe ('Europeanism' in his words). He felt that in order to succeed in this world it was required that these modern tools be utilized. Wali Allah's philosophy and 'Europeanism' would ensure success in this world as well as the hereafter (Ahmed, 2005).

### **A Localised Islam**

Reflecting on the Indian scenario, Sindhi promoted a more localised and context based interpretation of Islam. In his initial stages of activism, pan-Islamism scored high on Sindhi's scheme of things, but over the years its importance progressively waned. This was possibly due to his bitter experiences in the Muslim world during his long years in exile. While in the Islamic holy cities of Makkah and Madina he encountered, what he claimed, was the disregard of Arabian scholars towards not only him but also at Wali Allah and other Indian scholars (Khalid, 1969). Sindhi, in contrast to Wali Allah's preference for an 'Arabian Islam', argued that the interpretation of Islam as practice by India's Muslims was in no way inferior to the Arabian Islam. He called the hanafi juristic school to be the 'Aryan Jurisprudence' as compared to the 'Semitic Jurisprudence' (the shafite jurisprudence) for the Arabs (ibid). In his view both had equal weight and importance based on their utility in the respective contexts in which they operate.

In an address titled 'What Do We Want?' delivered in 1940, Sindhi presented a very unique idea of what it means to be an Indian. He said a true Indian is the one who strives the most to unite India. The Aryans were the first to give a united conception of India. This position was later on taken by Muslims. Therefore, Muslims are the ones who deserve to be called 'Indians' of the first order. In this scheme of things

Mehmood of Ghazni and Aurangzeb, extremely divisive figures in Indian history and the Hindu imagination, become heroes for uniting India and stand shoulder to shoulder with Asoka and the earlier Aryans. The British can also be accorded the status of the 'Indian of first order' if they adopt India as their homeland, as the Muslims and Anglo-Indians have done (Cited in Sindhi (b), 1995).

Sindhi urged Indian Muslims to stop looking for help from outside. In the same address cited above, he argued that no Muslim force had ever arrived to rescue and restore Muslim rule in India. Furthermore, Indian Muslims would resist any attempt by any Muslim nation to invade India in the name of Islam:

We believe that no Muslim power has any right to violate India in the name of Islam in our presence. Aren't we Muslims? Don't we have the right to form a government of our choice in our nation? ... We cannot tolerate any nation trying to capture India. It is our right that we form a Hindustani government in India (ibid).

He also opposed any international religious office which went against the egalitarian principles. In the program of the *Mahabharat Sarvarajya Party* he emphatically stated that it would not recognize any international religious body, such as the Caliphate, unless its opposition to imperialism and capitalism were established (Ibid, p.122)

As early as 1927 Sindhi wanted a *Sarvarajya* rule where all the communities can get an equal share in power. He put forward the idea of a federated India, divided not on religious but cultural lines, which would later on become part of the Asiatic Federation. He thought that the representation in the federation should not only be based on numbers but also on economic resources, cultural advancement, and military-strategic importance (ibid). In this regard he adopted a position which was different from both the two-nation theory of Jinnah and the composite nationalism of Maulana Madani. He thought India could be united even while recognizing the diverse 'nations' contained in it. He recognized that religion was not the only relevant divide in India. He emphasized that class distinctions and geographic and linguistic identities also have a major role to play:

If among the Muslims the natural question of Punjabi, and Sindhi, Hindustani and Pathan, Kashmiri and Baluch is present;

the Hindus are faced with the National problem of Bengali and Behari, Madrasi and Marhatta, Gujarati and Marwari on account of the diversity of languages. Uniformity of religion alone could not smooth down the national differences of these communities. (Cited in Shaikh, 1988, p.159)

In his plan of a federated India he wanted class to be given priority when forming administrative units:

We propose to divide India into such parts, as are inhabited by one nation, members of which speak a common language and have a homogenous socio-economic system. After such a division, followers of every religion get so grouped together that they form the majority of the population of some country or the other and thus the religious dissensions can be eliminated altogether. The right of representation in the Republican Government of such a country is given by us on the basis of class differentiation and not religion; thus various religious minorities shall have their rights safeguarded. (Ibid, p.160)

He wanted educated Hindus, Christians, and others to become conversant with Wali Allah's philosophy. By teaching Bhagawad Gita and the Bible through the Waliullahite prism he was confident a new generation could be created which would work for the betterment of the society. In a similar vein he urged the Muslim youth to read Hindu philosophy while calling on them to usher in a Qur'anic revolution which would be very different from its then prevalent "outward appearance" (Jalal, 2008). He urged Muslims to shun cow-slaughter and other bones of contention with the Hindus. Through such measures he was confident that a true Indian supra-nationality could be built. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A contrast could be drawn here between Sindhi and Hardayal. It is not known if the two ever met but it appears they were aware of each other. In contrast to Sindhi, Hardayal, in post-Ghadar phase, adopted a militant Islamophobic attitude outrightly rejected the idea of Hindu-Muslim rapprochement. In 1925 Hardayal would write: "I declare that the future of the Hindu race, of Hindustan and of the Punjab, rest on the these four pillars: 1)Hindu Sanghatan 2)Hindu Raj 3)Shuddhi of Muslims and 4)Conquest and Shuddi of Afghanistan and the frontiers. So long as the Hindu nation does not accomplish these four things, the safety of our children and great-grandchildren will be ever in danger, and the safety of the Hindu race will be impossible." (Cited in Brown, 1975, p.233)

## Conclusion

‘Ubaid Allah Sindhi is one of those figures who stands on the periphery of Indian and Islamic history and yet whose ideas continue to show their relevance to the modern world. He was in a sense far ahead of his time. His attempts at presenting an inclusive revolutionary, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist politics, grounded in Islamic revivalist thought of Shah Wali Allah, earned him many critics in his lifetime and beyond. But it also shows his brilliance in reconciling eclectic ideologies into a cohesive whole. Sindhi was aware of difficulties he would face in such a momentous task but he was confident that he could do it.

A study of Sindhi’s life and thought apart from showing the Muslim ideological influence in the Ghadar movement also exposes the diversity within it and between its Muslims members. Bhopali, for instance, adopted a different style than that of Sindhi in his articulation of Muslim support for the Indian revolution. He didn’t radically try to re-interpret Islamic concepts or develop new terminology to the extent that Sindhi did. He appreciated whatever he thought was good in other ideologies, without attempting to compare or synthesize them with Islam. Sindhi was much more ambitious. Whenever he found anything noble, he tried to relate it to Islam. He was also not shy at pointing out the weaknesses wherever he found them. As a result he faced criticism from all sides and was marginalized. Despite their differences in approach both Barakatullah and Sindhi remained wedded to Hindu-Muslim unity till the end like most of their fellow Ghadarites.

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# The Ghadar Movement and its Impact on South Asian Canadian Women

Rishma Johal

## Abstract

As academics begin re-analyzing political and historical events to acknowledge how notable incidents may have affected women, I suggest that it is vital to consistently examine history from a new perspective and challenge its preoccupation with men. The Ghadar movement is such a moment that continues to be documented by historians as male oriented. Despite the way that particular instances are documented, it is undoubtable that women have always had a significant impact on men's lives. They affect their decisions as daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, or neighbors. However, the presence of only five women in Canada during the Ghadar movement has been noted, mostly because racist immigration policies prevented their arrival and migration. Consequently, it is these discriminatory laws and South Asian men's disenfranchisement in 1907 that enhanced the community's disillusionment with the government. This paper argues that South Asian women's exclusion from Canadian society heightened support for the Ghadar movement and this history continues to shape South Asian Canadian women's experiences today. By providing an overview of the Ghadar movement, men and women's spheres and immigration laws, I will examine how the Ghadar movement affected the first South Asian women and their contributions towards the construction of the South Asian Diaspora in Canada. Finally, I explore how these past developments maintain relevance for South Asian women who currently reside in Canada.

**Key words:** Ghadar, South Asian women, exclusion, diaspora, immigration laws, Canada.

Academics need to consistently examine history from a new perspective and challenge its preoccupation with men by exploring how notable incidents affect women. Although, Anglo-Canadian feminists contributed to the growth of this literature after the 1960's,

most racialized women's histories remain unknown, including those of South Asian women (Agnew, 2003; Hamilton, 2005; Manhas, 2009).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, despite how particular instances are documented, it is undoubtable that all women, regardless of race, influence men's lives significantly. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, within Anglo-Canadian and South Asian societies, women's role was confined to the domestic sphere but, as daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, or neighbors, they still influenced men's decisions (Hamilton, 2005; LeGates, 2001). They supported men through numerous endeavours such as the provision of necessities, cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, offering moral support, and discussing political events (Gupta, 1994; Hamilton, 2005; Handa, 2003; Naidoo, 2003). Consequently, women's absence had implications for men, which was evident during the Ghadar movement.<sup>6</sup> Historical records confirm that only seven South Asian women may have been present in Canada when the Ghadarites began agitating.<sup>7</sup> A closer analysis reveals that the British government's refusal to allow South Asian women to enter Canada angered South Asian men. This consolidated their support for the Ghadar movement because the exclusion of their wives demonstrated to them that they, despite being British subjects, held an inferior status than their white counterparts. This paper will argue that the Canadian government's ban on the migration of South Asian women increased support for the Ghadar among South Asian Canadian men, and this history continues to shape South Asian Canadian women's experiences. I will first provide an overview of the Ghadar movement. I will then examine how this background affected early South Asian Canadian women and highlight their contribution towards the establishment of this community. Finally, I will explore how past patterns persist among South Asian women in the modern day and age.

The insights of anti-racist feminism will inform this study in its aim to explore South Asian women's relationship to Ghadar. Anti-racist feminists recognize the family as a refuge for women of colour in the face of extensive racism; in fact, they denounce western feminists

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<sup>5</sup> Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* instigated the Second Wave of the feminist movement during the 1960's (Hamilton, 2005; LeGates, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Ghadar means revolution and it was the name of the 1913 Indian freedom movement that began in the colonies.

<sup>7</sup> Members of the Ghadar organization are renowned as Ghadarites (Singh J. , 1982).

for degrading the importance of these relationships within women's lives (Bannerji, 2000; Gupta, 1994; Hamilton, 2005; Ralston, 1991). Anti-racist feminists also acknowledge the oppressive structure that patriarchal relations pose but they explicate that the family and community become a source of strength when racism imposes greater subordination (Agnew, 2003; Bannerji, 1993; Gupta, 1994). This was evident within Canadian policies that reflected explicit racism such as immigration requirements (Gogia & Slade, 2011; Habib, 2003). This paper utilizes secondary sources about South Asian Canadian history, the Ghadar movement, and South Asian women's experiences to form a collective narrative. There are methodological issues with conducting this type of research because there is no way to recount the opinions of those who passed away. In addition, men who overlook women's significance have written many accounts that this paper uses to analyze the Ghadar movement's effect on women. Yet, these facts accentuate the importance of conducting this type of study, despite methodological issues because South Asian Canadian women's stories are entirely missing.

The Ghadar era is a definitive moment that historians remember as male oriented and few English sources on this topic incorporate women's perspectives. Historical accounts of the movement by Hundal (2012), Juergensmeyer (1988), Ramnath (2005), B. Singh (2001), and N. Singh (1994) fail to provide an adequate account of women's relationship to Ghadar. *A Witness to the Ghadar Era* an interview with Kartar Dhillon is the only source to my knowledge that examines a woman's point of view. More recently, scholars have examined South Asian Canadian women's experiences such as Bannerji (1993), Gupta (1994), Handa (2003), Naidoo (2003), Ralston (1991), and Zaman (2006); these vary from immigrations studies, psychology, sociology, and gender studies to research on inter-generational conflict. Agnew documents many of these in *Gender, Home, and Nation: A Century of Writings by South Asian Women in Canada*, yet she asserts that they do not describe the experiences of women who arrived in the early 1900's (2003).

*The Jewel's of the Qila and Zhindagee: The Selected Stories of our First Daughters* are the only sources that provide a glimpse into the first South Asian Canadian women's lives (Johnston, 2011; Manhas, 2009). Furthermore, Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava's *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada*, (1985) Gupta's

*Political Economy of Gender, Race, and Class*, (1994) K. Sharma's *The Ongoing Journey* (1997), and J. Singh's *The Ghadar Party: Political Expression in an Immigrant Community* (1982) portray a correlation between South Asian women's exclusion, and the Ghadar's popularity. Therefore, this paper utilizes a combination of sources in association with tenets of anti-racist feminism to examine the Ghadar movement's effects on South Asian Canadian women.

Gendered understandings demarcated the duties of South Asian men and women. Cultural beliefs about femininity pre-ordained the destiny of those born female. A woman's responsibility was her home and children, particularly among Punjabi families from the upper echelons of society (Johnston, 2011; Manhas, 2009). However, in other regions of South Asia as well as the underprivileged and scheduled castes, women worked outside the home (Rai S. M., 2008).<sup>8</sup> Relationships among the scheduled castes were more egalitarian (Pande, 2007). Furthermore, Rai explains that the British exacerbated the division between men and women in Punjab when they established the *Zamindar System* because it divided labour done for the production of cash crops from that done for the provision of food.<sup>9</sup> The British added a monetary value to men's production work, while ignoring women's contributions, which further devalued their role (Rai S. M., 2008). Nevertheless, many South Asian cultures embedded forms of misogyny and sexism before the British arrived. The ancient lawgiver of Hinduism, Manu, instituted various customs that ordained female subservience.<sup>10</sup> For instance, he argued that one could only obtain *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death) if a son lit their funeral pyre (Buhler, 2011). Although not all Hindus strictly followed these practices, the laws induced son preference and degraded women (Naidoo, 2003). The Sikh gurus sought to end misogyny by emphasizing the importance of women as homemakers and mothers but negative cultural perceptions about women persisted (Singh N.-G. K., 2004). In addition, among most South Asians, it was women's duty to pass on traditional beliefs and gendered customs to their children

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<sup>8</sup> They did this work in exchange for money or goods.

<sup>9</sup> Zamindars (landholders and tax collectors) used to depend on nawabs (noblemen) for their economic survival under the Mughal Empire. The British granted property rights to the zamindars instead through the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that Hinduism also introduced powerful images of women through goddesses such as Durga and Lakshmi (Naidoo, 2003).

(Gupta, 1994; Rai S. M., 2008). Dhillon shares her mother's teachings, "You must remember that a woman is subservient to a man. When she is a child, she obeys her father; if he should die, then she must obey her oldest brother. When a woman marries, her husband is her master. If she becomes a widow, then she must defer to her sons" (1989). This quote portrays the secondary position that women were expected to adopt. Subsequently, South Asian women held a marginal status in comparison to men but this should not underestimate their ability to negotiate better circumstances for themselves.

### **The Early Years**

In 1897, Britain rejoiced as Queen Victoria completed sixty years of her reign. Of course, this was no ordinary regime; rather the Queen's diamond jubilee marked the height of the British Empire but the highlight of these celebrations was the Indian Calvary. South Asian officers in the British army, who had served in various colonies, travelled through Canada to attend this event. Vancouver's newspapers expressed enthusiasm to see these men through headlines such as "Turbaned Men Excite Interest and Awe-Inspiring Men from India Held the Crowds" (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985, p. 6). The excitement re-occurred during King Edward VII's coronation in 1903 when Canadians welcomed these officers as they passed through the country again (Sharma A. K., 1997). More importantly, scholars acknowledge these officers for initiating a substantial movement of Punjabi men to Canada but it was mainly poor financial circumstances that impelled their movement (Basran & Bolaria, 2003; Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Singh J. , 1982). These men informed locals in their home country about economic opportunities on the behest of many labour companies (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Singh B. , 2001). Employers that required cheap labourers recruited Indians by falsely advertising about opportunities in Canada (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985). Thus, the first South Asian migrants to Canada were composed of men searching for a better life.

Many South Asian men worked in British colonies such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, or Singapore before moving to Canada (Basran & Bolaria, 2003). Ninety-five percent of these immigrants came originally from Punjab, a region that expands across current day Northern India and Pakistan (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985).

These men worked on the railroad alongside Chinese and Japanese migrants or in the lumber mills (Basran & Bolaria, 2003; Singh N., 1994). Contrary to the beliefs of Anglo-Canadians who regarded them as a subordinate, disposable labour force, the South Asian men that came to Canada were proud British officers and considered themselves British subjects (Johnston, 2011). Discrepancies among the perspectives of South Asians and Anglo-Canadians, regarding the political status of South Asians fuelled dissonance that accentuated support for the Ghadar movement among South Asians.

The Canadian government held a strong desire to remain predominantly Anglo-Saxon and immigration policies barred the entrance of other racial groups. South Asians succeeded in migrating to Canada only because the government was preoccupied with banning Chinese and Japanese migrants in the early 1900's (Singh N., 1994). South Asian men's presence in Canada grew over the next few years and attracted negative attention (Singh N., 1994). This attention inspired legal policies that revoked South Asian men's political rights in 1907. The government disenfranchised "all natives of India"; barred them from entering specific professions, serving on juries, and buying property in designated areas of Vancouver (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Sharma A. K., 1997; Singh N., 1994). Authorities also prohibited racialized men from bringing their wives to Canada because they were afraid this would create a permanent establishment (Gupta, 1994). There is no documentation of women arriving before 1907 but earliest records indicate that Mrs. Sunder Singh, Mrs. Teja Singh, and Mrs. Uday Ram Joshi were present in 1910; there is no information about how they came (Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava, 1985; Manhas, 2009). Hence, this brief overview displays how the government imposed a subordinate political status on racialized men and women, while exalting Anglo-Canadians.

### **The Ghadar Movement**

After living under British dominance and facing a significant amount of poverty, subservience, and destitution, anger towards the British rose among Indians. In 1857, Mangal Pandey and the Queen of Jhansi led the first war of Indian independence against the British. However, the British successfully crushed the rebellion (Metcalf,



1964)<sup>11</sup>. No substantial opposition transpired again in India until 1907 based on tax increases and government repression (Singh J. , 1982). The British enforced measures to arrest these activists, so many fled to the colonies (Singh J. , 1982; Singh N. , 1994). Coincidentally, the South Asian community in North America solidified during these years, instituting several community organizations and Sikh centres (Singh B. , 2001). These centres soon became the stronghold for Ghadarism as activists that fled India joined these networks and South Asian men recognized their subordinate status (Sharma A. K., 1997). In 1907, revolutionaries from San Francisco published the Urdu periodical, *Circular-i-Azadi* (Circular of Freedom), which criticized British rule over India (Singh J. , 1982). In 1911, one of the most controversial leaders of the movement, Lala Har Dayal migrated to California and the movement expanded as he travelled across the west coast to consolidate support (Singh J. , 1982). Taraknath Das, Pandurang Khankhoje, Sohan Singh Bhakna, and Jatindranath Lahiri actively led this movement (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Singh J. , 1982). In addition, South Asians from Canada and the United States pledged \$2,000 to construct a nationalist publishing centre, which launched the Punjabi revolutionary newspaper titled, *Gadar*, in December 1913. Ghadarites printed and distributed over four thousand copies of this newspaper to the Indian community in North America, Europe, India, and the Far East (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985). The community openly read this periodical in Vancouver's *Gurdwara* (Sikh Temple) (Johnston, 2011). The Ghadar's Vancouver division was led by Balwant Singh, Hussain Rahim, Mit Singh Pandori, Bhag Singh, Sohan Lal Pathak, Sundar Singh, and Kartar Singh-all men (Chandra, 2003; Singh N. , 1994). There were a scarce number of women in Canada at this time and no one has explored whether any participated in Ghadar activities (Agnew, 2003). The only woman that scholars recognize for her active involvement is Bibi Gulab Kaur (Sainsra, 1969). Gulab Kaur began working with the Ghadar movement in Manila, Philippines alongside her husband and continued to participate in Ghadar activities after returning to

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<sup>11</sup> Mangal Pandey, a British Indian army officer, initiated this struggle after he discovered that the British greased gun cartridges with a mixture of cow and pig fat. They used their mouths to open these cartridges and Hindus revered cows, while Islam prohibited its followers from eating pork, so this infuriated the soldiers. Moreover, the British usurped the Queen of Jhansi's kingdom after her husband died without leaving an heir. Thus, these leaders' struggles combined and they revolted against the British (Metcalf, 1964).

India. Gulab Kaur was in charge of the housing for Ghadarites in Lahore and she distributed pamphlets among villages (Sainsra, 1969). Overall, many South Asian Canadians were sympathetic towards this movement in the early years but few joined.

The Ghadar *Leher* (movement) was more than an independence movement and it was made of intellectuals who aspired to improve people's conditions. The outer circle of the Ghadar Party was composed of Sikh labourers from Punjab, whereas, Indian intellectuals dominated the inner circle (Hundal, 2012; Ramnath, 2005). Most advocated for citizenship rights in Canada such as the migration of their wives and the vote (Sharma A. K., 1997). However, many Indian intellectuals were also concerned about sexism, poverty, and racism based on their commitment to equality. For instance, Ramnath (2005) states:

Regarding marriage, Lahiri and Dayal both advocated that any revolutionist who was already married, rather than keeping his wife at home, should encourage her to pursue education and training as an equal worker for the cause. But given the dearth of females among the California student radicals, this declaration remained rhetorical. (p. 22)

Theoretically, Ghadarites sought to incorporate women in the movement but few women's names are associated with the cause, besides Gulab Kaur and Frieda Hauswirth.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, historians remember Hauswirth (a student from Switzerland) exclusively for her personal relationship with Har Dayal (Brown, 1975; Hundal, 2012). Nonetheless, even after the movement collapsed, many of its leaders fought for women's rights and Dalit rights in India because of their commitment to equality (Ramnath, 2005). Conversely, most Ghadarites only paid lip service to their theoretical commitment to women's rights. For example, Dhillon explains that she married Surat Singh Gill because he appeared to be a progressive Ghadarite and promised that she could complete her education. Nonetheless, after marriage, he proved to be conservative and found ways to stop her from furthering her studies (1989). Consequently, the rhetoric that some intellectuals within the movement espoused was progressive for women but in actuality, many Ghadarites continued to view women in terms of their domestic roles.

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<sup>12</sup> Hauswirth wanted to participate in Ghadar activities but Har Dayal never gave her this opportunity.

## **The Exclusion of Women and Discernment among South Asians**

Discriminatory immigration policies increased support for the Ghadar movement, particularly among ex-British officers. The British had always praised their Sikh soldiers and given them preferential treatment in the Indian army (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Sharma A. K., 1997). In fact, no Sikhs participated in the Indian Mutiny of 1857 because British rule had benefitted them (Sharma A. K., 1997). Sikh men expected the same favourable treatment when they migrated to Canada after 1903 but they became disillusioned with the government when they saw that Sikhs had even fewer rights to migrate than other Asians (Singh J. , 1982). Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava (1985) state, “[Ghadar] had committed support among rank-and-file Sikhs, who had been politically awakened by their harsh treatment in North America” (p. 52). On October 3, 1909, these men gathered at the Vancouver Sikh Temple to burn the uniforms and medals that they wore during service in the British army (Indo-Canadian Worker’s Association, 2013). Thus, the British lost their most loyal South Asian subjects and faced substantial opposition from these men.

South Asian men advocated for the removal of the prohibition against their wives’ migration because they recognized women’s importance. Dhillon (2001) explains how Punjabi men fared without their wives and children in North America:

They were the ones who suffered because they didn’t have their families with them. They lived together on farms, the group of them; they did their cooking together. Since they couldn’t own land, they lived wherever housing was available. It was camp life they lived. They set up cots for sleeping, and all the possessions were in a suitcase under their bed. They worked from sunrise to sunset, and on their one day off, they did their washing by hand. Whoever had a car he would share it with others for transportation (para. 33).

Dhillon exhibits how these men looked after themselves without women who traditionally handled domestic affairs for them. Consequently, the difficulties that they encountered in Canada induced many ex-British officers to join the Ghadar movement with fervent enthusiasm (Sharma A. K., 1997). Gupta (1994) explains:

It is interesting to note that in these early years, the banning of wives and children of South Asian immigrants from reunion with their menfolk

provoked the most intense anger and fuel for political organizing in B.C.'s South Asian community. The men realized that without women and children, their community would remain temporary, lacking in stability and stripped of political and social rights in Canada. In this, there was a realization of the reproductive and maintenance role of women in society, which is the essence of gender ideology as it exists today (p. 62).

She is referring to gender roles that South Asians and Canadians ascribe to women until this day as reproducers of the next generation. Most South Asian men understood women's importance in relation to their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers but these arguably valued women.

Most South Asian men's conception of women failed to be progressive by the standards of western feminists such as Firestone (1970) and Beauvoir (1949) but it was advanced for that time.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging women for their gendered position was significant. This conforms to the arguments of maternal feminists and anti-racist feminists who stipulate that women play a vital role based on their feminine position. These feminists argue that female values such as care and nurturance are necessary for the betterment of society and they should be extended to men (Ferree & Tripp, 2006; LeGates, 2001). Moreover, it is inaccurate to apply contemporary standards of women's rights to a society in which they faced extensive subordination. It was revolutionary in itself that South Asian men, who were accustomed to culturally taking women for granted, acknowledged their hard work (Naidoo, 2003; Sodhi, 2002).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, men's introduction to the hardships that women faced, awakened respect and understanding among them but this thought requires further research.

Life was burdensome for South Asian women; they were in charge of childcare, preparing meals, taking care of elders, and completing an array of household duties (Dhillon, 1989; Naidoo, 2003; Rai S. M.,

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<sup>13</sup> Canadian society has overlooked women's importance during many points, especially their contributions as homemakers and mothers before the interference of feminists (LeGates, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Neelabh Bannerji made a cartoon last year for United Nations Women titled, "she is just a housewife," which highlighted the problem of women's unpaid labour. This cartoon conveyed the prejudice that persists worldwide, degrading women who are homemakers, despite the large amount of physical and emotional labour that this work entails (Bannerji N. , 2013).

2008). In western and South Asian societies, men have constructed conceptions of work/knowledge, so a male-based framework informs these understandings (LeGates, 2001; Ralston, 1991). Rai argues that knowledge is power, and illustrates that society mainly considers men's knowledge valuable, re-establishing power within their hands. Furthermore, Rai indicates that women's understanding may be greater than men such as indigenous knowledge about seed production or herbal treatments but it is neglected worldwide (2008). This may appear irrelevant but it contextualizes these notions, exhibiting prejudicial conceptions of women's work/knowledge; it conveys how society devalues and ignores women.<sup>15</sup> Hence, South Asian men's recognition of women's roles and agitation over their exclusion marks an outstanding historical event.

South Asian men zealously appealed to the government to lift the ban on the migration of their wives. Sunder Singh, the popular South Asian activist, protested, "But Christian Canada denies home-life, the birth right of each human being, by shutting out the wife of the Sikh, who is a fellow citizen of the empire" (Agnew, 2003, p. 8). On January 8, 1908, the government instituted the *Continuous Journey* policy, which stipulated that migrants could only stay if they came on an uninterrupted voyage from their country of origin (Kazimi, 2004). The South Asian community sent a delegation to Ottawa in 1913 to dispute the latter policy, yet this delegation's focus remained women through the slogan "Give us our wives and give us our votes" (Singh B. , 2001, p. 118). In 1911, Hira Singh challenged this stipulation by bringing his wife and child to Canada.<sup>16</sup> Officials filed a case against his family but authorities eventually granted them permission to stay as an 'Act of Grace' (Manhas, 2009). A similar situation arose when Ghadarites Bhag Singh and Balwant Singh brought their wives, Harnam Kaur and Kartar Kaur, in 1912. Hence, women's exclusion from Canada became a large cause of discontent as well as political organization among the South Asian community.

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<sup>15</sup> Although, this is outside the purview of this paper, it is important to conceptualize Rai's notion of knowledge and power. Rai explains how international patents over plants such as the neem tree have taken knowledge away from the hands of women who used this as a medical treatment for centuries, devaluing their indigenous knowledge, and ascribed it to predominantly male scientists from the west for 'discovering' it (2008).

<sup>16</sup> The Canadian government ordered the deportation of Hira Singh's wife and child because they had not arrived on a continuous journey from India.

Harnam Kaur and Kartar Kaur immigrated with the political motive of setting a precedent for the migration of other South Asian women. Johnston (1998) elucidates that by migrating to Canada, “They intended to establish the right of wives to join their husbands in Canada and their purpose was well advertised among Sikhs in North America” (para 2). They both travelled with their husbands and tried to enter through the United States because they failed to come on a continuous voyage. American authorities in San Francisco and Seattle denied them entry, so they had to sail to Vancouver (Johnston, 1998). A crowd of 700 supporters greeted them at the port. The government ordered their deportation but the community agitated and appealed to the Supreme Court (Johnston, 2011). The court allowed their families to stay, once again, as an ‘Act of Grace,’ but they verified that this was without establishing a precedent. Nonetheless, they successfully mobilized the community, even if this did not produce the desired results (Sharma A. K., 1997). They fiercely opposed discriminatory immigration policies again in 1914 during the Komagata Maru incident but their efforts failed, concluding with the deportation of 354 voyagers.<sup>17</sup> South Asian men felt consistently betrayed by the government’s failure to adopt ‘Acts of Grace’ as a precedent for other South Asians and the Komagata Maru episode, so many turned towards the Ghadar movement at this point.

### **The Ghadar’s Disintegration and its Impact on Women**

Women’s exclusion from this society may have consolidated extensive support for Ghadar but the movement failed because it had many weaknesses. Ghadarites accurately predicted that Britain would be in a war against Germany and they planned to initiate their struggle for Indian independence when this occurred (Juergensmeyer, 1988). However, they lacked a decisive plan. In 1914, war broke out and Ghadarites headed to India but the British were aware of their plans

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<sup>17</sup> After the Continuous Journey policy was ordained, many South Asians sought to enter Canada, so a man named Gurdit Singh Sarhali charted a ship from Hong Kong and brought these individuals to Vancouver. He thought the community could raise \$200 per person and the government would not renew the ban on artisans and labourers. However, the Canadian government refused to allow the passengers to enter Canada and expelled the ship, despite the community’s attempts at raising this amount. The British thought that those on board were Ghadarites, so when the ship returned they arrested or murdered many at the port, while others fled (Kazimi, 2004).

and arrested them immediately (Singh N. , 1994). Ghadarites also lacked the finances, arms, and equipment to initiate a revolt (Singh J. , 1982). After this setback, previous ruptures within the movement based on social, cultural, and political differences among the Indian intellectuals and Sikh labourers became an acrimonious force. Although, the group had worked past disparities before, they could no longer see eye-to-eye (Singh J. , 1982). Overall, its leaders were unable to justify the loss of so many men to the community and the movement was unable to reconsolidate support.

Nevertheless, Ghadarites haphazardly sought to maintain the independence struggle after the failure of the 1914 exertion in India. Some leaders believed that a lack of ammunitions caused their defeat and allied themselves with Germany to acquire better weapons; this attempt was unsuccessful as well (Juergensmeyer, 1988; Singh B. , 2001). In 1917, only three of the original Canadian revolutionaries, Mit Singh Pandori, Hussain Rahim, and Sundar Singh remained in Vancouver (Singh N. , 1994). Minimal Ghadar activities such as the revolutionary newspaper continued, while the movement slowly disintegrated. Overall, the Ghadar's greatest contribution towards the independence struggle was its rhetorical impact on Indians, inspiring legendary revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh and Subhash Chandra Bose (Juergensmeyer, 1988; Singh J. , 1982). Subsequently, the Ghadar Party's efforts may have failed but it built the impetus for future revolutionaries and the eventual freedom of India in 1947.

The Ghadar's demise also had a significant impact on the migration of South Asian women. Whereas, the community's fervour for political activism was clear at one time and the threat posed by Ghadarites real, the situation drastically changed. By 1919, half of the South Asian population had left Canada (Agnew, 2003). Although the Ghadar movement collapsed, the independence movement in India gained momentum (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985). The British recognized that the ban on South Asian women's migration to Canada had fueled dissonance before 1914 and strengthened support for Ghadar. Thus, in 1919 officials attempted to appease the community by permitting South Asian men's wives and children to migrate (Agnew, 2003). The government believed that these changes might also ease anti-British sentiments in India (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985). Additionally, authorities felt that this was better than eliminating the ban on Indian immigration altogether, while restricting

their migration through other means (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985).<sup>18</sup> The government based this policy on a patriarchal framework that allowed ‘wives’ to enter, acknowledging South Asian women as secondary entities in relation to their husbands. Nonetheless, the culmination of the Ghadar movement formulated a less intimidating community and the British allowed South Asian men’s wives and children to enter Canada for the first time in 1919.

Whether or not they witnessed or participated in the struggle, the Ghadar marked a vital moment for South Asian women. The Sikh pioneer website captures Dhillon’s perspective from the movement’s American counterpart. Similarities between these two communities, in conjunction with excerpts from the first Punjabi Canadian daughters, validate her example. Dhillon’s father, Bakhshish Singh, migrated to California in 1899; her family was the first from Punjab to settle in the United States (Dhillon, 2001). Moreover, her family staunchly supported the revolutionary cause, which affected her political disposition. It also influenced her opinion about her husband, Surat Singh Gill, a Berkeley student involved in Ghadar activities (Dhillon, 2001). She states, “I idolized this man, I had been impressed from the start by his fiery speeches at meetings of the Ghadar Party” (Dhillon, 1989, para 25). In fact, Dhillon wanted to join this movement but family responsibilities obstructed this possibility.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the few women that were in the colonies during the Ghadar era, returned to India with their husbands in 1914 such as Kartar Kaur and Gulab Kaur (Johnston, 2011). Rattan Atwal, Kartar Kaur’s daughter-in law, explains that the British arrested Balwant Singh and he remained in a jail at Lahore, Pakistan until his death (Atwal, 2009). She illustrates how difficult this was for Kartar Kaur who went to visit him from India to Pakistan after the partition of the subcontinent (Atwal, 2009). South Asian women in Canada continued to be educated about the Ghadar movement at home as well as in temples. Kapoor Singh Siddoo, a man connected to the Ghadar, avidly taught his daughters about the independence movement (Johnston, 2011). Likewise, Nsibe

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<sup>18</sup> Numerous barriers continued to halt South Asian men’s wives from migrating. They had to provide proof of marriage and their husbands had to live in an established residence. In fact, few procedures were set to allow these women to migrate (Agnew, 2003). They also had to conduct a medical test upon arrival (Johnston, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Dhillon became pregnant soon after marriage. She was also in charge of caring for her four younger siblings because both her parents passed away (1989).



Kaur Puri's father Bagga Singh, often narrated Mewa Singh's story to her (2009). Mewa Singh assassinated Hopkinson—the immigration official responsible for the Komagata Maru's return and the arrest of many Ghadar Party affiliates (Sharma A. K., 1997). These narratives were important because they formed an integral story that the community cherished among generations. Consequently, the Ghadar's influence on women remained intact through those who passed on the legendary tale.

### **Women and the Making of a Diaspora**

Much to the dismay of the British administration, South Asian men's belief that the presence of women would establish a sustainable population, proved accurate. Family formation among this group commenced after the government granted South Asian men's wives permission to enter Canada (Johnston, 1998). By 1931, 172 women migrated; this was a small number in comparison to the men but the women erected the community's foundation (Singh N. , 1994). For example, in 1948, there were 644 South Asian children enrolled in school, the majority of whom were born in Canada (Singh N. , 1994). Puri explains that the third and fourth generations of some early migrants still reside in B.C., including six generations of her family (Puri, 2009). This demonstrates the importance of early South Asian women in establishing a community and exhibits how their entry led to the emergence of a self-sustaining population but their significance expanded well beyond their reproductive role.

The first South Asian women in North America faced various challenges but they overcame these problems with the same vigour as men who advocated for their rights to migrate. For instance, Dhillon (1989) describes the hardships that her mother faced:

I marvel at her survival as the family trekked around California and Oregon, living as they could wherever my father found work... My mother had no one, no other Indian women to keep her company, no sisters or relatives to give her a hand with the housework. She had to do it all (para 62).

These women also tried hard to succeed in the new environment by learning English or adopting western attire (Puri, 2009). However, most just learned enough English to do shopping or complete other

small tasks (Berar, 2009; Johnston, 2011). They mainly communicated with doctors or school authorities through their children (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Dhaddey, 2009; Puri, 2009). It is also important to note that these women faced a great amount of discrimination. Dhillon explains that the hospitals refused her care when she was pregnant (Dhillon, 1989). Nevertheless, South Asian women refused to succumb to any social challenges and they worked hard to overcome racism.

South Asian women built networks with other women that helped confront some of these problems. The migration of a greater number of women after 1919 eliminated the alienation that many felt before this period.<sup>20</sup> They still lacked the extensive family support that they had in India but they adjusted quickly by forming friendships with other women (Puri, 2009). Puri (2009) states, “They all treated each other as sisters, mothers, daughters, aunts. They never differentiated friends from family” (p. 51). These women also completed labour intensive tasks collectively such as making *varian* (lentil patties) (Berar, 2009). Likewise, Harvant Rai explains that women were always there for one another, especially during hard times (Rai H. K., 2009). Many of these connections lasted generations. These women candidly welcomed guests whether it was family, friends, or politicians by cooking meals and completing household duties (Dhaddey, 2009; Johnston, 2011). Therefore, South Asian women established relationships among themselves and built networks to overcome challenges on a daily basis.

In addition, South Asian women added balance to this society through the retention of culture, which formed a refuge in the face of extensive racism. Women turned towards their own community as a survival strategy and became involved in *Gurdwara* activities, organizing all sorts of celebrations from weddings and birthdays to religious occasions (Dhaddey, 2009; Puri, 2009; Rai H. K., 2009). Moreover, they re-introduced aspects of religious culture that the men had forgotten. For instance, Johnston explains that Kapoor’s wife, Bishan Kaur, brought spirituality back in his life by teaching him the *Japji Sahib*, a set of Sikh prayers recited in the morning (Johnston, 2011). They also continued to act as the emissaries of tradition and

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<sup>20</sup> Most women migrated after 1924 because this is when the government established proper procedures.

taught their daughters to respect elders, care for the young, stay away from boys, cook, clean, and sew (Berar, 2009; Dhaddey, 2009; Puri, 2009; Rai H. K., 2009). Thus, South Asian women instituted values and a community that formed an alternate sphere of support to overcome racism.

### **From the Ghadar Era to Today**

The Canadian immigration system viewed South Asian women as secondary to men, and originally only allowed them to migrate if their husbands or fathers were here; this pattern persists. In theory, the immigration policy today has eliminated discriminatory requirements, so women can migrate as independent applicants. Nevertheless, most South Asian women continue to migrate as dependents. Sharma (1997) states, “The woman is most likely to have migrated to Canada as a relative--dependent on a husband, a brother, a father, a son or a grandson who may have sponsored her” (p. 132). Bannerji (2000) and Gupta (1994) determine that the Points System is an example of systemic sexism and racism that overlooks the reality of women’s lives.<sup>21</sup> They explain that the inclusion of criteria such as employability, education, and experience ignores the fact that many women in third world countries do not have access to these opportunities (Bannerji, 2000; Gupta, 1994). Hence, South Asian women follow the immigration standards set in 1919 and remain entities whose ability to migrate is connected to male citizens.

Community networks and coalition building remain important methods that these women use to overcome barriers. For example, employers often refuse to hire recent migrant women based on claims about lack of English speaking skills and relevant experience (Gupta, 1994). Nonetheless, these women have founded countless organizations to help new immigrants and old citizens such as the South Asian Women’s Centre, India Mahila Association, South Asian Women’s Rights Organization, and Indo-Canadian Women’s Association. These organizations offer English training, employment assistance, battered

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<sup>21</sup> The Canadian government adopted the Points System in 1967, which hypothetically eliminated racial and gendered requirements. It based the primary impetus on skills (education and employment) for immigration. This system has altered over time but its essential character remains the same (Gogia & Slade, 2011; Habib, 2003).

women's shelters, and other services (Indo-Canadian Women's Association, 2012; South Asian Women's Centre, 2010; South Asian Women's Rights Organization, 2012; Zaman, 2006). Moreover, South Asian women collectively oppose discrimination and engage in strikes (Gupta, 1994). Some have coalesced to confront issues across borders such as the elimination of female feticide or rape (Mamta Foundation of Canada, 2010).<sup>22</sup> Hence, South Asian Canadian women continue to support one another and they have furthered community-oriented activism on a global scale.

### **Conclusion**

South Asian women have indirectly played a significant part in the events that strengthened the Ghadar movement. When the British government refused to allow South Asian men's wives to migrate, anti-British sentiments surged and solidified support for Ghadar. Hence, the Ghadar era stands as an instance when men valued women for their reproductive and domestic roles (Rai S. M., 2008). However, the movement's demise made South Asian women's migration to Canada plausible because the British felt that this community was no longer a threat. Unfortunately, immigration policies today still value women in relation to men. Nonetheless, notable South Asian Canadian academics such as Bannerji (2000), Gupta (1994), Naidoo (2003), and Zaman (2006) have exposed how immigration policies hinder South Asian women's ability to migrate as principal applicants. In addition, South Asian women have built a substantial support network through community organizations to counteract racism. In conclusion, the main goal of a feminist approach to history is searching for women's stories and highlighting their contributions. Furthermore, anti-racist feminists have argued that familial and community ties form a basis of support for racialized women, and this analysis has incorporated that understanding. This paper made an effort to apply these insights, while analyzing the Ghadar's relationship to women and its long-term impact on them.

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<sup>22</sup> Female feticide refers to the abortion of a fetus for being female.

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