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Ghadar Party and its Resistance to Colonial Government in Punjab[•]

Abstract

This article tries to understand the political upheaval in Punjab during the First World War. Although there were many persons, groups, and forces that were working against the British administration during the Great War but the Ghadar Party was the most important actor because it operated not only in Punjab and in India but also stretched its activities to and from the West to uproot the British Empire in India. Therefore, it is important to understand and analyze the origin and development of the Ghadar Party and what repercussions it had in Punjab and beyond.

Keywords: First World War, Sikhs, Resistance, British, Ghadar,

Introduction

In the first decade of the twentieth century, many Punjabis migrated to Europe and America where they faced numerous challenges. Therefore, international environment, biased behavior of foreign countries and revolutionary ideas prevailing at that time, all combined to motivate them for launching a revolutionary movement under the name of *Ghadar Party* for the freedom of their motherland. The party was a by-product of peculiar conditions of India and international developments when Britain was engaged in World War I. This party not only shook the roots of colonial administration in Punjab, the province whose loyalty was taken, most often, for granted by the British government but it also gave a hope to the Indian youth to fight against the British. This work also analyses that the second decade of the nineteenth century was very important, as there was visible change in the temperament of the people of colonial Punjab.

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They were showing visible signs of confrontation with the policies of British government as the country was in the grip of an economic and political crisis. The people in India were feeling crushed, disgruntled, and frustrated. These developments forced them to launch an agitation and indulge in violent movements. This article describes how an atmosphere of agitation in the province and the politically fluid situation led Punjabis to offer resistance in the form of *Ghadar* rebellion.

Impact of International Environment on India

“The true nationalist is an idealist and for this the deeper curse of the unrest is the longing for self-realization. He realizes that nationalism is a duty more than a right and that the duty of upholding the national dharma is incompatible with intellectual slavery and therefore he seeks to free himself and his country with the help of others likes him.”¹

In upper quotation Coomarasawamy has said about spiritual revolt which if tamped down or restricted must in its turn explodes into the physical revolt, a revolt that during the last decades of 18th century and in the early years of 19th century gained much more momentum in Punjab against Brittan Government. The second decade of 19th century was very important, as there was visible change in the temperament of the people of the colonial Punjab. They were showing signs of confrontation with the policies of British government as the country were in the grip of economic and political crisis. The people in India were feeling crushed, disgruntled, and frustrated. These conditions led them towards public demonstrations and towards the formation of various violent movements. One of the most violent one was *Ghadar* movement, which in not only shook the Britain in India earlier but also gave a hope to Indian youth to fight against British.

Changing of political environment and Prologue to the *Ghadar* Movement

Due to war, the Government imposed some curbs, which backfired and delivered fatal blow to British rule. Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh were banished in 1907 since the government understood that Samaj as an organization was not interested in political affairs but offered grounds to people to get off the foreign rule.² The deportation of 1907 did not dampen the spirit of the valiant fighters, it rather sharpened their zeal for national independence. After release, Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh became active once again. Lajpat Rai established contacts with Bhai Parma Nand, a Professor in the Arya Samaj College at Lahore, and through him roused nationalist feelings in the students by distributing books and other propaganda material. In 1909 Ajit Singh disappeared from India and later was found travelling to Persia. After reaching Persia, he went to Geneva, the center of the revolutionary activities. When the war broke out he moved to Rio De Janeiro and established contacts with the *Ghadar* party in San Francisco. Meanwhile some other activists were also working for example Lala Har Dayal, Molvi Brakat Ullah and Ram Chandra etc.

What were the Main Factors of Revolt?

With the increase in the number of family members, evil doings of moneylenders, overall wrong colonial agricultural policies,³ repeatedly occurring of famines⁴ and

because of failing of monsoons forced them to seek other means of employment elsewhere outside their country.⁵ Emigration of several thousand⁶ of these people to foreign land in search of labor opportunities at the beginning of twentieth century was symptomatic of their economic distress. British officials were started to take serious of the developing condition. In 1907, the number of Indian immigrants to America quadrupled and the majority of those who landed on North American soil were Sikh. They were forced to emigrate by a wide spread famine and because of new British land taxation programs, the destination for the newest immigrants was not the universities, but the lumberyards and agricultural fields of Oregon and California in order to work as laborers.⁷

Racism Abroad

In Canada, living conditions for Indian immigrants were extraordinarily poor in comparison to native Canadians, yet most found work in lumber mills immediately after landing. Already bristling from Chinese and Japanese immigration, the rush of Turbans became more than many could bear. This codified racist climate and indifferent behavior of Indian Government performed a crucial part in the formation of the Hindustani *Ghadar* Party in California by the Indian diaspora. In Canada, living conditions for Indian immigrants were extraordinarily poor in comparison to native Canadians and the Government of that state country always favoured the Europeans and introduced many orders limiting the entry of the Indians. Most Sikhs who immigrated did so initially preferred Canada, another part of the British Empire. However, immigration from India to Canada sparked blatant racism against the Indian-riots, media depictions and ultimately legislative action against Indians pushed Indians into the United States.⁸ All these things brought them firm conviction that their sorrows, sufferings and disgrace were due to the reason that their State Government was not their own⁹ because the Indians who were attacked were British subjects, they appealed to the British Consul in San Francisco.¹⁰ Although India was under British dominion, its subjects were not viewed as proper British subjects by Americans but rather as more a conquered people, and Indian residents of America could only turn to an unhelpful British consulate for protection within America.

Origin of *Ghadar* Party

The genesis of the *Ghadar* movement can be found to 1857, when the war of independence was fought against the British capture of India. This rebellion united communities of different beliefs and classes such as Hindus and Muslims against the British Government.¹¹ It became clear to at least one Indian expatriate that the Indians would have to take their safety and defense into their own hands.

Meanwhile due to wild biases in the Europe, a solid desire arose among Indian migrants to establish a society that would fetch all migrants collectively regardless of their spiritual beliefs and classes. Under these conditions, the Hindi Association of the Pacific Coast of America was set up on April 21, 1913 in Astoria with Sohan Singh Bhakna, a Sikh as its President and Lala Har Dayal, a Hindu as its Secretary.¹² The Organization showed its determination to start an armed revolt against the British Government of India to make India an egalitarian and democratic republic in free India. With the belief that Indians in America would be

treated respectfully only after India was free, he inaugurated the Hindustani *Ghadar* Party with the help of Sohan Singh Bhakna, Kartar Singh Saraba, Karan Singh Cheema, Hardyal, Jawala Singh and Wasaka Singh. These people invited the settlers in a conference at Washington. Almost two hundred attended the conference and founded the Hindustani Association which later known as *Ghadar* association. The first President of the party was Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, Vice President was Kesar Singh, Chief Secretary was Lala Hardyal, the Treasurer was Pandit Kanshi Ram and the organizing secretaries were Munshi Kareem Bakhsh of Ludhiana and Munshi Ram of District Hoshiarpur. Members of its executive committee were Baba Arur Singh of Chuhr Chak in Ferozepur, Wasakha Singh, Karam Singh, Kartar Singh, Nidhan Singh, Pandit Jagat Ram Hariana, Barkatulla and Munshi Karim Bakhsh.

Ideology of *Ghadarites*, their Seditious Literature and Organization

Ghadarites believed that violence was a viable answer to the tyranny the British imposed on India. The bylaws of the Hindustani *Ghadar* Party clearly stated that the first order of business was to liberate India from British rule through an armed insurrection.

The *Ghadarites* listed three points in their official resolution that was ratified at the first meetings in Astoria, Oregon in April 1913, and Sacramento in December 1913.

1. The first point was to liberate India from British rule through an armed insurrection;
2. second, self-rule based upon western ideas of freedom, parity, and brotherhood;
3. and third, to establish a communal order in India which would benefit the greatest number of people.

The Hindustani *Ghadar* Party's diverse membership necessitated a kind of secularism in order to ignite the religious passions of each religious group within it. Since Hardayal also attempted to establish unity between differing religious factions within the *Ghadar* Party with poems such as "Echoes of Mutiny."¹³,

"We do not require Pandits and Kazis for we do not want our vessel to be sunk. The hour for Raising the sword has arrived."¹⁴

In October 1913, the second meeting of the Hindi Association decided to bring out a paper of their own, so on November 01, 1913 the *Ghadar* newspaper was started that published simultaneously in Hindi, Gurmukhi, Urdu and periodically Bengali, Marathi and some other Indian languages as well.¹⁵ Besides this other pamphlets were *Ghadar Di Gunj* (Echo Of Mutiny), *Illan-i-Jang* (Declaration Of War), *Nia Zamana* (New Era), and the fourth one was Balance Sheet of Rule in India.¹⁶ Their literature evoked the feelings of devotion, revolt, secularism, harmony, and independence among the readers of *Ghadar*. They had advanced information of the First World War and were wanted to return to India to speed up the rebellion.¹⁷

It is stated that Hindustani *Ghadar* Party's propaganda lacked forethought or structured ideology.¹⁸ However, the Hindustani *Ghadar* Party's multi-pronged approach did not necessarily mean that there was not a structured ideology. Instead, *Ghadar* editors used different approaches for diverse audiences whom they wished to influence in distinctive ways and they created a spark among Indians through physical and literary efforts. On February 15, 1914, a meeting was held at Stockton in which high number of Ghadr Party sympathizers were present. On the spot, everyone who attended the session made a pledge to standby the Party through thick and thin for the freedom of the state. The Ghadr Party organized such public meetings and rallies uninterruptedly throughout America from December 1913 to August 1914 under the control of Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, Kesar Singh, Bhagwan Singh, Lala Hardayal and Barkatullah.

Immediate Factor of Rebellion

Although party enjoyed support of its sympathizers living in Canada, United States, Philippines, Hong Kong, China, Egypt, Turkey and Germany and they helped to spread its philosophy but there occur some incidents which gave impetus to the popularity of the doctrines of revolution. Among such events, the most important was banishing of Bhai Bhagwan Singh¹⁹ who within a short span of time became a very enthusiastic revolutionary. Soon he caught the attention of Immigration Department who sent him back to Honk Kong. His banishment created great stir among the Indian residents of Canada. Incident of Komagata Maru²⁰ and The Budge-Budge Riots²¹ caused outrage among *Ghadarites* and gave realization to the upset Indians that it was essential to launch a revolution during the First World War. Despite of these strict measures some revolutionaries were slipped and some were considered less dangerous but they gave more trouble to Government later in 1914.²² In Punjab, from October 1914 to September 1915, the *Ghadraties* made their existence felt by making gang break-ins and sometimes-wealthy Hindus were murdered to collect moneys.²³

Resistance of *Ghadarrites* to British Government in Punjab

There was great discontentment in Punjab especially among Sikhs regarding various social and religious issues such as proposal to limit the size of Kirpan, incident of Komagata Maru etc. Due to all these facts, they become conscious about Britain intentions and this thing helped them to prepare the ground for the front-runners of the *Ghadar* Movement for prompt action.²⁴ The leaders for *Ghadar* Movement were Kesar Singh, Jagat Singh Ram, Rain Jawala Singh, Mulla Singh, Bhai Permanand of D.A.V. College, Lahore, Rash Behari from Benaras and Ganesh Das joined them later. In the beginning, these persons were active in Amritsar. The leaders met on Diwali occasion, then on annual fair of Nankana Sahib then at Amritsar District, then at monthly affair of Amavas at Tarn Tara and next meeting was at Jhar Sahib²⁵. On these meetings, these made strategies for spreading their ideas and gain sympathy. Some *Ghadarites* were selected to instigate students²⁶ while some were given tasks to visit various villages for the seduction of common masses into their plot.²⁷

Seduction of Troops

Perhaps the most important and undoubtedly the most dangerous step taken by the conspirators, was the seduction of troops from their allegiance to His Majesty. One of the main items of revolt was to convince soldiers to join armed resistance against Britain. Mulla Singh was hired for this purpose.²⁸ *Sepoys* of 23rd Cavalry especially Lachhman Singh made a pledge to join the revolt. Nidhan Singh and Kartar Singh contacted men at Ferozepur. The *Ghadarites* intruded almost 20 military cantonments of Punjab, UP and other parts of India but their first goal was the takeover of Lahore and Ferozepur cantonments. The militias who were ready to go against the British also had a motive to be resentful by the Colonial Government of India that they were being deputed to other states as rations of British for WWI. The anticipation was that when the riot would be hurled at these two cantonments it would spread to other armed bases in India. The first target was the Ferozepur bases so to fulfill the plan during the first two months representatives were sent to all military bases of North India.²⁹

30th November 1914, was fixed the date for general uprising but later this date was postponed.³⁰ It was decided that *Ghadar* leaders would attack to Lahore Cantonment and will secure the cooperation and ammunition of 23rd Cavalry while Kartar Singh, Rndhir Singh and Balwant Singh were to get the assistance of 26th Punjabis and weapons at Ferozepur Cantonment. It was also decided that telephone connections were to be cut and police stations would also be looted to secure more ammunition.³¹

Collapse of the Plot

Meanwhile the time of revolt was ripening, police of Amritsar district came to know about the activities of Mulla Singh because among them a spy of Government named Kirpal Singh was working secretly. Kirpal Singh was also Nidhan Singh introduced a reverted immigrant from Shanghai to Mulla Singh. Both Mulla and Nidhan were doubtful about Kirpal and he proved their doubts correct.³² Kirpal was reporting to police each and everything about revolutionaries so when he heard that the date of the rising had been changed he called in the police who raided the house, which resulted in the collapse of the whole movement. All revolutionaries of Amritsar were got arrested and when frontrunners of the plot had to know about this they further extend the date. This information was again transferred to police and the Government reinforced its writ in all the Cantonments and took defensive actions. On 19th February, 23rd soldiers were remained on service for whole night so no one among them risked leave for revolt. At Ferozepur, Kartar Singh was to assault the Cantonment so a group of about seventy people was prepared and Kirpal Singh was sent to fetch those Punjabi soldiers who had assured accompany them. Nonetheless, soldiers did not show up and party kept waiting for entire night then isolated after knowing that the plan had been out.

Those soldiers who were to assist the revolt were court-martialed and shot. Special Tribunal under the Defence of India Act tried nine batches of conspirators.³³ Twenty-four were condemned to death and their property was confiscated while twenty-six were transported for life. The viceroy himself commuted the sentences and seven were sent to Andamans. Among them were Bhai Permanand, Sohan

Singh Bhakna, Nidhan Singh and others. On 19th November, seven people including Pandit Kashi Ram, Saraba Singh and Kartar Singh were hanged.³⁴

To crush the *Ghadar* movement and its ideology policy of “divide and rule” was adopted by Government. With the assassination of Ram Chandra by a Sikh Ghadr agent for treachery and fund manipulation the Hindus were encouraged and cajoled to leave the party. Similarly, in the badly affected areas of Punjab many local committees were formed by the Government to keep an eye on the internal activities of these areas.³⁵

Conclusion

The seeds of the Hindustani *Ghadar* Party came from two separate but entwined experiences of Punjabis: their emigration to foreign countries and the ensuing racism displayed by the British in India. These two issues separately influenced critical aspects of the formation, life and longevity of the Hindustani *Ghadar* Party, and both issues eventually played into the political perceptions of the Hindustani *Ghadar* Party. It has been observed that one thing all members of the *Ghadar* party had in common was that all of them had originally emigrated from India.

References

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 - ² G.S Chabra, *The Advanced History of the Punjab: Ranjit Singh and Post Ranjit Singh*, (Ludhiana: Parkash Brothers, n.d.), 395.
 - ³ “The 1901 land alienation act by restricting the transfer of land from traditionally landowning groups was designed to prevent the loss of rural control the urban (usually Hindu) moneylenders. Then the 1906 Colonization Bill and Bari Doab canal scheme led to a sharp rise in water rates made the Punjabis frustrated economically. Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire*, (Berkely: University of California, 2011), 14.
 - ⁴ Six famines checked Punjab in the first decade half century of British rule, causing repeated waves of desolation and increasing number of starvation deaths. Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement to Bhagat Singh, A Collection of Essays*, (Ludhiana: Unistar, 2012), 14.
 - ⁵ G.S Chabra, *The Advanced History of the Punjab: Ranjit Singh and Post Ranjit Singh*, 404.
 - ⁶ Only 6656 South Asians checked in the United States from 1899 to 1913. Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 14.
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 - ⁸ Gary R. Hess, *America Encounters India, 1941-1947*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 8.
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- ¹³ *Hindustani Ghadar Party*, Echo of Mutiny (*Ghadar Di Gunj*), (San Francisco: Yuguntar Ashram, 1914), 4-17.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ M.V.Kamath, *The United States And India (1776-1976)*, (New Delhi: Embassy of India, 1976), 16.
- ¹⁶ Ikram ali malik, *A Book of Readings on the History of the Punjab*, 392.
- ¹⁷ M.S.LEIGH., *The Punjab and the War*, (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997), 18.
- ¹⁸ Chaman Lal, "Ghadar Party: The Centenary Year", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.48 No. 29(2013).
- ¹⁹ Bhai Bhagwan Singh went to Canada in 1913 and joined the *Ghadar party*. Ikram Ali Malik, *History of the Punjab*, 392.
- ²⁰ In 1914 a ship was prohibited to enter in to Canada and was forced back to India. On resisting Canadian policemen tried to take control of the ship but they were beaten back resultantly injuring twenty two policemen, however, passengers eventually consented to go back to India. Suchetana [Chattopadhyay](#), *Voices of Komagata Maru: Imperial Surveillance and Workers from Punjab in Bengal*, (Tulika Books, 2018).
- ²¹ After Komagata Maru incident Government of India became more attentive and issued "Ingress Into Indian Decree" on 5th September 1914 to take into custody those people who were arriving into British India through sea or land. On 26th September, 1914 one more ship arrived at Hughli which was brought to the river Budge-Budge to send passengers back to Punjab. On their refusal British police opened fire killing Twenty-one Sikhs. This law was passed by British Government in Punjab as a safeguard measure against the returning *Ghadar* conspirators throughout the war. Michael O'Dwyer, *India as I Knew It: 1885-1925*, (London: Consable & Company ltd, 1925), 192.
- ²² Ibid, 197.
- ²³ M.S.Leigh, *The Punjab and the War*, 18.
- ²⁴ Ikram ali malik, *History of the Punjab* 394.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 394.
- ²⁶ The *Ghadr* in its first issue announces that "young men will be brought up as preachers and to prepare for mutiny." Mallwinder Singh, *Ghadr Movement Original Documents I: L.C.Cs. I and II*, 165.
- ²⁷ One villager told two ghdarite Banta Singh and Harnam Singh came to his village, and told him not to pay revenue. He also told Banta Singh was establishing societies and advising people to boycott the Courts, to refuse to pay revenue to *Lambardars*, and to rob the latter when going to deposit revenue in the treasuries. Ibid, 167.
- ²⁸ He instructed another revolutionary, Amar Singh to interview a resident of Mian Mir Madan Singh, Balwant Singh, a sowar in the 23rd Cavalry and a returned emigrant so it could find out from them how many men could be obtained. Mian Mir where he met

Balwant Singh who told him some *sowars* were ready to join if the full plans were disclosed. Ibid, 181.

²⁹ Ikram ali Malik, *History of Punjab*, 394.

³⁰ Amar Singh and Mula Singh went and reported to Rash Behari Bose that some *sepoys* of his regiment were ready to join. On this report Rash Behari Bose said the 21st February had been fixed for the rising throughout India, and that the attack on the magazine should take place that day. Malwinder Singh, *Ghadr Movement Original Documents*, 182.

³¹ Ikram Ali Mali, *History of Punjab*, 395.

³² Kirpal Singh was directed on the 15th February to get men from the 23rd Cavalry for the rising. He left with the ostensible purpose of going to Mian Mir, but he moved to check police whom he telegraphed that day from Amritsar. He was there seen by Nidhan Singh who became conscious about Kirpal and extended the date for the rising till 19th February. Malwinder Singh, *Ghadr Movement Original Documents*, 182, 183.

³³ It was accepted on 19 March, 1915 and gave the authority to Governor General to form the rule to improve any civil or military administration to control the activities of suspects for public safety or banning the entry of such person in any area. V.N. Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, (Ludhiana: Lyall Book Depot, 1969), 4.

³⁴ Ikram Ali Malik, *History of Punjab*, 396.

³⁵ Secondly the involvement of Sikhs in the *Ghadar* was bringing discredit in the honor and interests of the leading Punjabi Sikhs so on demand of Governor of Punjab, Michael Odwyer these leading persons of Sikh community did cooperate with Government and helped them to curb the situation. G.S. Chabra, *The Advanced History of Punjab*, 416-417. See also Michael O'Dwyer, *India as I Knew*, 204.