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**Ghadar Movement after a Century: A Study in its History
and Historiography**

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Ghadar Movement after a Century: A Study in its History and Historiography¹

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At the intersections of the histories of anti-colonial, nationalist, peasants, migrant workers movement exists a revolutionary movement of predominantly Punjabi migrant agrarian workers that aimed at the complete independence of colonial India and declared a war on the British rule when loyalism was the order of the day in Indian politics. These revolutionaries organized themselves into what they called the Ghadar Party which was inspired by the revolt or *ghadar* of 1857 and Savarkar's book published on the same in 1909 which was titled *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*.² The name Ghadar was adopted to send out a clear message about the political character and ambitions of the party. In only a few years since its inception it not only spread across many continents but when the declaration of war was made in 1914 many thousands of migrant workers responded to the call. They gave up their jobs and left for India instantly without any precise idea of their roles or the fear of the consequences. It was a tremendous leap of faith taken by a collective of mostly semi-literate migrant workers scattered all across the globe who had never met each other. How often do we hear that the migrant agrarian workers, living thousands of kilometres away from their homes, conceive a form of revolutionary politics through which they would aim to defeat and oust a mighty empire like the British rule in India even at the risk of sacrificing their lives? In this paper, I shall discuss some important aspects of this movement which will help us understand the coming into existence of one of the most ambitious and audacious political mission in the history of not only Indian agrarian workers but modern Indian politics as well. I shall study it through the lens and contributions of three of its stalwarts Sohan Singh Bhakna, Kartar Singh Sarabha, and Har Dayal. All of them contributed to the movement in their unique ways which shaped up its political character. Har Dayal was not only its most prominent ideologue but also one who moulded the scattered and agitated expatriates into a political group. Sohan Singh Bhakna was its pre-eminent Sikh peasant leader and was responsible for not only bringing to the party majority of its members but also vernacularizing its political idiom. And Kartar Singh Sarabha represented that young revolutionary zeal, instilling in them the spirit of martyrdom and

¹ This paper is a revised version of the lecture delivered on 23rd February 2017 at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti, New Delhi.

² V.D. Savarkar, *Indian War of Independence of 1857*, last modified on July 25, 2017 (https://ia801000.us.archive.org/20/items/ldpd_6260651_000/ldpd_6260651_000.pdf)

converted the group into militant warriors when the call for war was made despite all odds being against them. I shall begin this essay with a short discussion on the context of immigration of Punjabi agrarian workers to North America and their material experience which prepared the background for the party to emerge.

Punjabi Immigration and Experiences in North America

Punjab witnessed a spate of migration from sections of its agrarian population to North America from 1900 onwards. The agrarian condition of Punjab was in distress as can be attested by the works of Colonial administrators like Denzil Ibbetson and Malcolm Darling.³ Additionally, the stories of high wages for agrarian work in Canada, the enhancement of prestige, *izzat*, and the prospect of savings acted as gravitational force. 'More than 75 per cent of these migrants were Sikhs. Nearly half of these migrants consisted of those who had either served small terms in the British Indian Army or had travelled abroad on some kind of jobs in port towns.'⁴ Unlike the Indian agrarian labourers or indentured migrants, these Punjabis were men of cosmopolitan experience and had the self-confidence to test their fortunes in distant lands. They came to be aware of the opportunity to earn some money by laying rail roads or working in lumber mills for the steamship companies and replaced the Chinese workers who were restricted by Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.⁵ Soon the Punjabis were employed by the major landowners of Sacramento Valley for the cultivation of their lands.

There was a belief amongst them that, having served loyally in the British army for many decades, they had earned the right to settle respectfully anywhere in the empire's dominion including Canada.⁶ But these beliefs were shattered when they experienced racial discrimination both by the people and the government. Their colonized status and the popular belief in the inability of Indians for self-government became the pretext for classifying them as second-rate citizens.⁷ These loyal ex-soldiers expected that, as a part of British

³ Ibbetson, Denzil, 2014, *Punjab Castes*, Delhi: Low Price Publications; Darling, Malcolm, 1936, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt*, London and 1934, *Rusticus and Loquitur or the New in the Punjab Village*, London

⁴ Puri, Harish K., 2011, *Ghadar Movement: A Short History*, New Delhi: NBT, p. 9

⁵ This law was an example of pre-existing racist attitude towards Asian labourers amongst the white population in the region and similar laws were soon going to affect the Punjabi migrants as well.

⁶ Josh, Sohan Singh, 2007, *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History*, Jalandhar: Desh Bhagat Yadgar Committee, pp. 53-55

⁷ For a good discussion on these experiences see Jansen, Joan, 1988, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America*, New haven, CT: Yale University Press

Commonwealth, the Canadians will treat them with respect, but were shocked after being at the receiving end of racial slurs and humiliation.

An example of such experiences was the attacks from the Asiatic Expulsion League (henceforth AEL) which had spread its influence all across the western coast. Even in Bellingham, a prospering town where the Sikhs shifted after they were forced to leave Vancouver, very quickly the racial tensions amongst workers flared up and the Punjabis were attacked by mobs of several hundred white workers led by the AEL.⁸ The latter criticized the employers for importing Indian workers on reduced wages and pressurizing the native, white workers. They disparaged the 'Hindus' for being 'filthy interlopers', who desired to usurp the wealth of Canadian natives. They justified their aggressive, violent, and abusive behaviour towards Indian workers which filled the latter with shame and anger.⁹

Despite these attacks the economic and political unrest in Punjab at the turn of the century ensured that the emigration to North America continued. The discriminations intensified as the Canadian economy entered into a phase of depression by 1907 which led to reduced demand for labour. Historians like Karen Leonard, Hugh Johnston, and Archana Verma have studied the conditions of South Asian diaspora during these years.¹⁰ The government threw its weight behind the racist attackers by promulgating a decree which required immigrants to pay \$200 before entering Canada from 1907. The already difficult immigration was made impossible when the 'continuous journey' provision was passed in May 1910. This law allowed entry to only those immigrants who had travelled from the place of origin to Canadian ports without stopping anywhere in between. The officials were well aware that there did not exist any direct shipping lines between India and Canada. At the same time, the British government was becoming increasingly worried about the situation in Canada. 'Brigadier General E. J. Swayne warned in a confidential memorandum that Indians who came as free laborers to Canada were "politically inexpedient" due to the risk that "these men [might] go back to India and preach ideas of emancipation which would upset the machinery of law and order." The fresh air of freedom, it seemed, was a dangerous gas.'¹¹

⁸ Ogden, Johanna, 2012, *Ghadar, Historical Silences, and Notions of Belonging: Early 1900s Punjabis of the Columbia River*, Oregon Historical Quarterly, Vol. 113, No. 2 (Summer), pp. 170-71

⁹ Puri, Harish K., 2011, *Ghadar Movement: A Short History*, New Delhi: NBT, p. 20

¹⁰ Leonard, Karen, 1992, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Johnston, Hugh, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Color Bar*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press; Verma, Archana, 2002, *The Making of Little Punjab in Canada*, New Delhi: Sage Publications

¹¹ Ramnath, Maia, 2011, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 19

One consequence of this situation was the shift of immigration from Canada, which was a part of British Commonwealth, to the USA which was an independent country and was quickly emerging as a haven for radical anti-colonial expats from all across the colonized world. The number of Indian university students and immigrant workers in the USA increased very swiftly by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. The discourse of civil rights and political freedom prevalent in the USA took the immigrant Punjabis by surprise. But as the industrious Punjabi workers spread across California and started earning daily wages up to \$3, the same story of racial resentment and attacks followed. However, the Punjabis were aware that the US government would not necessarily respond to the British government's pressure in the same way as Canadian government did and they could take recourse to the more liberal laws in America. They established mutual support groups for negotiating the challenges of work and life and employed lawyers to fight their legal battles. It was the *Gurudwaras* which became the first centres of collective discussions, articulations, mobilizations and were crucial for the development of solidarity and fighting spirit amongst the immigrant Punjabis. Central to this process of the emigrants standing up for themselves was the role of some important individuals who were imbued with the spirit of defiance and the ethic of collective responsibility. The most striking amongst them was Sohan Singh Bhakna (1870-1968) who was in many ways responsible for the Punjabi labourer politicization and eventual formation of the Ghadar Party. He also embodied, what Harjot Oberoi calls 'alternate cosmopolitanism' of the Ghadarite subjectivity which was comfortable in alien cultural settings and easily allowed the coexistence of different religious faiths and practices within its ambit.

Sohan Singh Bhakna was born to a rich Jat Sikh peasant family near Amritsar and inherited almost 65 acres of land after his father's demise. He was not well educated but he could converse in Persian, Urdu, and Punjabi. In his autobiography titled *Jivan Sangram: Atam Katha*, he recounts the impact of a rural Punjabi spiritual preacher Baba Kesar Singh on his own thoughts. Baba was critical of distinguishing people on the basis of their religious beliefs or caste of birth.¹² He vehemently opposed untouchability and exposed the meaninglessness of religious rituals. Bhakna was completely transformed as a person under Baba's influence and developed ideas of rationalism and cosmopolitanism articulated in rural Punjabi language which eventually became central to the Ghadarite discourse. Bhakna was unhappy with growing religious discord in Punjab's villages and organized community kitchens with free food to Punjabis of all religious dispensation in order to bring them together. Slowly he spent

¹² Sohan Singh Bhakna, 1967, *Jivan Sangram: Atam Katha*, Jalandhar: Yuvak Sewak Parkashan (Punjabi)

away all his inheritance in organizing these festivals and was forced to migrate to Seattle as a labourer in 1909. By the time he joined his Punjabi labour brethren in the USA he had developed a humanist outlook, expressed in the colloquial language, which helped him in playing a central role in uniting the immigrant Punjabi community in the United States and preparing them to fight for their rights. He wrote and inspired many other uneducated Punjabi labourers to write poems in their own language which is a testimony to their radical critique of religious obscurantism.¹³ These poems were later printed in a booklet titled *Ghadar di Gunj*. About these writings, Harjot Oberoi writes that ‘Such hostility to religious leadership, sacred texts, and worship has been a rare event in the history of modern India. If one combines this critique of religious identities, with the hostility that the Ghadarites expressed towards local affinities, we are faced with a powerful project of modernism. It was this inversion of primordialism (under the banner of universalism) and vigorous celebration of hybrid ideologies that has led me to think of Ghadarites in terms of cosmopolitanism was embedded solely in the project of modernity.’¹⁴

In the meantime, Indian students had been making the long trip to the United States since 1905 to enrol themselves in courses such as engineering and chemistry. Some also opted for disciplines such as economics and sociology. Many of these students were Bengalis and had actively participated in and radicalized by Swadeshi movement. They were helped with finances by Indians such as Jwala Singh, the rich potato farmer who provided scholarships to six Indian students in the academic year of 1912-13. Many individuals such as Ramnath Puri, P.S. Khankhoje, Kanshi Ram, and Taraknath Das started different propaganda bulletins and groups at their level to educate Indians with these ideas. Thus, on the one hand, the migrant Sikh workers were uniting in associations and developing a consciousness to fight the racial discrimination, while, on the other hand anti-colonial, western educated students and activists were trying to spread modern ideas of individual rights, citizenship and were developing an ideological critique of colonialism. It was in the midst of all this that they came to know about Har Dayal and invited him to help them organize themselves. Har Dayal’s arrival on the scene made a quick and remarkable difference. In the next few pages, we shall briefly study his political and ideological trajectory in order to fully comprehend his role in the making of the Ghadar Party in the span of a couple of years after his arrival to the United States.

¹³ A good discussion on these writings can be found in the Sohan Singh Bhakna, *Ghadar Party da Itihaas* Punjabi manuscript, Desh Bhagat Yadgaar Library, Accession No. 11152, 11227 and Sohan Singh Josh, 1970, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, PPH, New Delhi

¹⁴ Oberoi, Harjot, 2009, *Ghadar Movement and its Anarchist Genealogy*, *EPW*, Vol. 44, No. 50 (December 12-18), p. 45

Har Dayal: From a Student to a Revolutionary Organizer

It was in Delhi 1884 that Har Dayal was born and by the time he was studying at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, he was getting recognition for his extraordinary intelligence. Soon he won an Oxford Scholarship but what made him unlike others was not this achievement but his eventual response in its wake. A few months before completing his degree at Oxford he wrote to the Secretary of State, British government, renouncing his scholarship and declaring his decision to discontinue his admission. He said that he could no longer bear the burden of his conscience of accepting the scholarship of the state which has colonized his country.¹⁵ 'In an abrupt shift from (being a) "young Englishmen" to homespun patriot, he threw himself into the study of the history of the free, parliamentary institutions, the tenacity with which the British people fought for and defended their individual liberties. Why, he charged, should the desire for national and individual freedom, considered "the supreme social virtue" among the English, be called "madness and sedition" when evinced by an Indian?'¹⁶ He returned to India and stayed for some time at Kanpur where he engaged in an exhaustive study of literature on European revolutions. He was increasingly imbibing what he considered the best ideas of modern Europe with an open mind and was only steadfast in his rejection of British institutions. At the same time, certain aspects of his writings such as his advocacy of cow-protection societies and physical self-strengthening showed striking similarities with the Arya Samaj's discourse. In an essay titled 'Social Conquest of the Hindu Race and Meaning of Equality' published in 1909 in the Calcutta based journal *Modern Review*, to which he had been a regular contributor, Har Dayal wrote, 'The decay of the moral calibre of a nation paves the way for foreign domination which, in turn, accelerates the process of decline by its very existence... The great duty of a subject people consists in guarding the Promethean spark of national pride and self-respect, lest it should be extinguished by the demoralizing influences that emanate from foreign rule.'¹⁷ He believed that foreigners like the Theosophist leader, Annie Besant, in spite of their sincerity, can only aid rather than resist the social conquest of the Hindu civilization and, therefore, only prevent its regeneration. It is interesting that this hint of conservatism and rejection of the role

¹⁵Desh Bhagat Yadgar Library L/P & J//6/822. Owing to some meticulous work by Prof. Indu Banga and Darshan Singh Tatla, the library has collected many files from London and elsewhere which are very important documents related to the Ghadar movement. This particular file contains correspondence of Har Dayal in the year 1907

¹⁶ Ramnath, Maia, 2011, *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India's Liberation Struggle*, Oakland, USA: A K Press, p. 80

¹⁷ Quoted in Zachariah, Benjamin, 2013, *A long, strange trip: the lives in exile of Har Dayal*, South Asian History and Culture, last modified on 25-07-2017 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2013.8246840>), p. 3

of Europeans were visible in his writings even when he was getting increasingly integrated with the European expat revolutionary circles. After he returned to India, his writings started gaining readership and he was set to emerge as a prominent anti-colonial figure when he was implicated in the Maniktola bomb case in 1908. Fortuitously he could escape before the police could get him. He managed a circuitous trip to Paris where he joined the likes of Madame Cama and S.R. Rana. He was given the task to edit their journal *Bande Mataram*. The journal became the platform where Har Dayal steadily articulated his ideas in an organized manner. It has been referred as 'Hardayalism' and envisioned as a roadmap of Indian social transformation in three stages which, he believed, to be indispensable for a colonized country in order to redeem itself. They were 'education, revolution, and reconstruction' and were clearly inspired from the successive political roles of Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Cavour, respectively in Italian political history. The simplified nationalism of his student days had clearly given way to attempts to imagine a comprehensive reconstruction of future of the nation. While Har Dayal seems to be jostling to reconcile his Arya Samajist language with his newly acquired ideas and thoughts, he had to leave Paris and via a fateful detour of the Caribbean, reached the United States in 1911.¹⁸ Har Dayal lived a life of a wanderer in the United States for some time before halting near the University area of Berkeley, California. He was later offered the position of lecturer in Indian Philosophy at the Stanford University for the academic year 1912-13. His writings from that period verify that he was quite impressed by the ideological and material progress of the United States. In an article titled *What the World is Waiting For* he wrote, 'We live in an age of unrest and transition. The old order is changing in all countries and among all nations, but the new is not yet born. The time-spirit is in travail, but the Ideal, which shall be a Messiah unto humanity, has not yet been ushered into the light. We are all looking for some great spiritual force, which should rescue us from the slough of despond and sensuality in which civilization seems to be perishing. And civilization knows it.'¹⁹ In the same article, he wrote, 'Renunciation, and renunciation alone, will save humanity.' One of the temporary consequences of the increased emphasis on spirituality in his writings was that he did not advocate any prominent role of

¹⁸ It has been argued by his supporters and biographers that he wanted to lead a life of an indentured labourer in order to understand their world and struggles. He was found leading a life of a renouncer, on a diet of boiled grains and potato by Arya expat Bhai Parmanand. "Har Dayal explained that he intended to offer the world a new philosophy. Parmanand tried to dissuade him. Surely the world didn't need another creed. Why not go to the United States and teach people about one of the existing schools of Hindu philosophy..." Rannath, Maia, 2011, *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India's Liberation Struggle*, Oakland, USA: A K Press, p. 85

¹⁹ Brown, Emily, 1975, *Har Dayal: Hindu Revolutionary and Rationalist*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, p. 98

politics in his vision of human transformation. It seemed that he advocated that Indians should transcend British colonialism as compared to resisting it.

Har Dayal's ascetic morality was most clearly articulated in his extraordinary essay titled 'Karl Marx: A Modern Rishi' where he critically appraises Marx's ideas in a hitherto most unusual way.²⁰ He was unsatisfied and even critical of Marx's economic analyses and conclusions especially with what he saw as the argument for the abolition of money or, the idea of equal distribution of wealth. On the other hand, he appreciated the ideas of sacrifice in Marx. Har Dayal wrote, 'I repudiate the idea that society is divided into classes by any hard and fast line of demarcation. It is not class-selfishness, but social-cooperation based on the appreciation of a higher ideal, that has been the motive force of progress in all epochs.' He then went on to compare Marx with Christ and Buddha, '...pointing out that Jesus was a leader of fishermen, outcasts, and "erring sisters", and that Buddha preached in the vulgar tongue and drew to himself, ordinary men and women.'²¹ This text in a sense is emblematic of the Har Dayal's thoughts and method and its historiographical reading reflects the problems historians have in understanding Har Dayal as a thinker.²²

In his essay on Marx, Har Dayal did write that, 'Marx admitted the potency of social choice in evolution, but he regarded the 'laws' of progress as predominant and gave a secondary position to human volition. This interpretation of history is vicious and misleading. History reveals no law or process or even a tendency. Change is the only law discernable here. The rest is chaos, which great men try to turn to the cosmos.'²³ Harjot Oberoi interprets this statement as a testimony of Har Dayal's belief in the idea of spontaneous revolution which was inspired by his reading of Bakunin. And the urgency in the formation, activity, and declaration of war by the Ghadar Party does support Oberoi's interpretation. Yet in stressing the impact of Proudhon, Kropotkin, and Bakunin, he seems to neglect the predominant presence of Indian moral and spiritual idioms in Har Dayal at this time.²⁴

It cannot be denied that the influence of western revolutionary and anarchist ideas was strongest on Har Dayal at this point in his life. His writings, speeches, and activities, especially his advocacy of 'free love', was too much for the Stanford University administration to handle and led to his resignation. To be fair to him, he had himself realized that he needed to have a more politically active life as compared to that of a university lecturer and he was not too

²⁰Lala Hardayal, *Karl Marx: A Modern Rishi*, Jalandhar: Desh Bhagat Yadgar Committee Publication

²¹ Ibid.

²² I have done a more detailed discussion on the historiographical reception of this essay in my PhD dissertation titled *Anti-Colonial Resistance and Modern Politics in Panjab, circa 1850 to 1920*

²³ Lala Hardayal, *Karl Marx: A Modern Rishi*, Jalandhar: Desh Bhagat Yadgar Committee Publication

²⁴ Oberoi, Harjot, 2009, *Ghadar Movement and its Anarchist Genealogy*, *EPW*, Vol 44 No. 50, p. 44.

unhappy to resign. First, he attempted to form a new religion by founding the Fraternity of the Red Flag and wrote the pledge called, 'the eight principles of Radicalism' to be taken by every member. This was followed by the formation of Bakunin Institute. These experiments did not create much political impact but resulted in making a political leader out of the thinker Har Dayal and also brought him a lot of fame and notoriety. A testimony to the latter was the invitation to speak at the meeting of the Industrial Workers of the World which he titled 'The Future of the Labour Movement'. The scope of this essay does not allow for its detailed discussion but it would suffice to say that it was one of his most mature speeches till date. At the beginning of 1913, he contributed three articles to *Modern Review*, the third of which titled 'Indian Peasant' was a comprehensive critique of the Congress nationalists, including the 'extremists', for neglecting the aspirations of the toiling masses.

For some time Har Dayal had been in contact with prominent members of Punjabi Sikh Community including the 'potato king' Jwala Singh of Sacramento as well as other organized groups of Indian immigrants at St. John's and Portland. He responded positively to their request for his guidance and leadership. He was still hesitant and unsure about the precise nature of his political role when he received the news of the highly charged incident back home—bomb attack on Hardinge on 23rd December 1912. Har Dayal was very excited and everything seemed very clear to him now. He realized that Indians are increasingly becoming ready for their tryst with destiny. He published a pamphlet titled *Yugantar* welcoming the incident. He had also heard about British police suspecting his involvement in the case which made him realize that his exile was now permanent.

The effect of this event on him was reflected when he commemorated the first anniversary of the above incident by publishing a pamphlet *Shabash*. He exhorted 'Don't sit there. Death hovers near—kill or be killed, do a great deed before you pass on.' He heaped praises on the arrival of the bomb in India's anti-colonial struggle which he believed will rid them of the burden of slavery and humiliation of the colonial past and present.²⁵ With this spectacular exhortation, his transition from being a spiritual anti-colonial thinker to a revolutionary leader was complete. Har Dayal had realized the materiality of terror as a political instrument, its potential to break the stasis, pierce the aura of invincibility around a colonial officer's body, make the state panic and, provide the colonized with that moment of joy and pride which was enough to revive the self-confidence lost for decades. Enthralled with a bomb as a political

²⁵ Har Dayal, December, 1913, 'Shabash', San Francisco: Hindustan Ghadar Party, folder 2, box 2, *South Asians in North America*.

weapon, this erstwhile spiritual thinker now regularly rhapsodized about it and made it a compulsive part of his 'six-step programme' which began with the pen and ended with the use of the bomb. As Oberoi writes, 'The ability of Indian nationalists to use a bomb was for Har Dayal a significant moment of catharsis. In his logic, it cleaned all previous sins of his compatriots for having collaborated with the colonial regime. Liberty, Har Dayal proposed, could only be had by exploding bombs.'²⁶

Establishment of the Ghadar Party

Har Dayal was now completely convinced of the necessity of an uncompromisingly radical political group which would wage an all-out on the British. He believed that Delhi bomb case was the testimony of the fact that the people of India were ready to be organized for a revolution and the expatriate like him have a role to play in it. He had many frantic discussions with immigrant Sikh leaders and radical anti-colonial activists and the platform for the emergence of the Ghadar Party was set. The element of urgency can be gauged by the fact that it was only in October 1913 that Har Dayal, Sohan Singh Bhakna, and Pandit Kanshi Ram with a host of Berkley students and Sikh workers came together to establish the Ghadar Party. Its aim in its initial days was primarily revolutionary propaganda and in order to fulfil this purpose, a printing press was purchased immediately. A newspaper in Urdu and Punjabi was launched which was also titled *Ghadar* and a house was bought in San Francisco which would serve as the publishing and meeting centre and was named *Yugantar Ashram*.²⁷ There is no consensus amongst historians about the precise date of the beginning of the organization but both Har Dayal and Sohan Singh Bhakhna's writings emphasize on the opening of the *ashram* as pivotal to its birth. One of its founder members, Darisi Chenchiah, wrote in his memoirs that, 'The last week of December 1912 saw the birth of the Ghadar movement at Berkeley, USA.'²⁸ The Ghadarites claimed that the Ashram life and activities were truly egalitarian and collective and modelled on the ideas developed by Har Dayal over many years. The practices of the *ashram* give us a sense that the members were keenly thinking about developing the model for Indian society after a successful Ghadarite revolution. Sohan Singh Bhakna's role in organizing the ex-military sikh labourer with the organization cannot be discounted. He was crucial in making Har Dayal understand the value of propaganda in vernacular. Very quickly the *ashram* was

²⁶ Oberoi, Harjot, 2009, *Ghadar Movement and its Anarchist Genealogy*, *EPW* Vol 44 No. 50, p. 44

²⁷ *Ibid* p. 41.

²⁸ See the copy of his hand written manuscript in Darisi Chenchiah Collection, Desh Bhagat Yadgar Library, Jalandhar.

running in full steam and the weekly with the revolutionary ideas of Ghadar was being posted all across America and beyond.

Historiographical emphasis on the Ghadarite obsession with bomb and violence had mirrored the colonial discourse of counter-insurgency and together they have tried to criminalize and infantilize their historical intervention. By this way, the Ghadarite has been denied a political subjectivity in both mainstream political and historical discourses. Even the most sensitive historians have criticised the urgency in Ghadar approach as a sign of 'political immaturity'. This notion of the 'political' as deliberative, patient, non-violent and continuously engaging with the state institutions is the post-colonial common sense which has tried to tame the 'unruly' Ghadarite who, despite, all these attempts at marginalization or co-option, breaks free and asserts his not easily 'comprehensible' alternative notion of the 'political'. The question that must be asked is, if the Ghadarite experiment was so 'irrational and fanatical,' as its obsession with the bomb would imply to some, why did it gain so much traction amongst expats from all across the globe.

In so much attention to bombs, we must not overlook the fact that the Ghadar movement was a spectacular experiment in revolutionary propaganda. Before the actual war, Ghadar (that is, war) against British colonialism was already openly declared at the level of ideas. The opening article of their weekly, also called *Ghadar*, in its inaugural edition of 1st November 1913 was titled 'Our Name and Our Work' and went as 'What is our Name? The *Ghadar*? What does our work consist of? Ghadar—launching an uprising. When will this rising break out? In a few years. Why should it break out? Because the people can no longer bear the oppression and tyranny unleashed under English rule and because Indians are ready to fight and die for freedom. It is the duty of every Indian to make preparations for the rising.'²⁹

Har Dayal contributed extensively with his writings and attempted to make the readers rethink all the aspects of the present, past and future. His writings and lectures stressed on unity between various religious communities of India. Secularism and radical democracy were made the hallmark of Ghadarite thought and it is amazing how its importance in those times when the mainstream Indian politics was corroded from inside by the spreading sectarianism has been overlooked by mainstream historiography on Indian anti-colonialism. An important contribution of Har Dayal was the emphasis on avoiding any conflict with the American government. He stressed that America is the freest country and any mistreatment meted to Indians were because of their own colonial status. Indians will never receive equal treatment

²⁹Puri, Harish K, 2011, *Ghadar Movement: A Short History*, New Delhi: NBT, p. 74

anywhere in the world as long as their country is in a colonized state. Also, strategically it was imperative that the Ghadarites make the full use of American freedom to spread their organization without irritating the American government in any way.

The 1857 mutiny was a favourite theme amongst Ghadarites and excerpts from Savarkar's book of 1909 were extensively used. Also, all the radical attempts or movements since 1857 were made part of what was an attempt to create a genealogy of anti-colonial resistances in India. Colonial consciousness was challenged in many ways, the best instance of which was the critique of Sikh loyalism and martial identity. Harish K. Puri writes that 'Reference was made, for example, to the battle of Chillianwala during the Anglo-Sikh war and to the legendary bravery of the Sikh warriors in that battle. It was a disgrace that people of that community were sitting silently under foreign domination...An important issue related to the alleged accusation (referring to a prevalent belief in those times) that it was because of the Sikh support given to the British that the Ghadar (Mutiny) of 1857 was suppressed. It was regarded as a "stigma" which had to be removed so as to retrieve the honour of the *Khalsa*. They had often taken pride in the role of the Punjabi soldiers in winning the Afghan and the Burmese wars. Now there was a feeling that they had in fact been instrumental in subjugating their brethren—the Burmese, the Afghans, and the Chinese—to the British power. Now they would not join the army; they would not be fooled anymore.'³⁰

Now, these were not Har Dayal's words thrust into the throats of the immigrant ex-soldier but his own. Many articles including the most popular book of poems, *Ghadar di Gunj*, were composed entirely of the working class members as has also been attested in the writings of a crucial member of the organization, Darisi Chenchiah.³¹ The first edition was released both in Urdu and Punjabi with 12,000 copies. The poems talked about anger, betrayal, and shame and exhorted the Indians, especially the Sikhs to rise from their state of defeat. The Ghadarites wrote in their memoirs that they used to sing these poems aloud and it filled them with anger and passion. The moral, emotional exhortations and the passionate tone in the poems were neither a reflection of the ideological weakness of the working class members nor a mechanical trope to merely agitate the masses. They were the political articulation of the lived experiences of colonialism and called for a political resistance to it. What was interesting was that their intended audience was far away and there were no means to verify whether the paper was reaching them. They were aware that the surveillance was strongest in India. Yet they felt that the moment of an all-out war was near and it was not the time to take calculated measures.

³⁰ Puri, Harish K, 2011, *Ghadar Movement: A Short History*, New Delhi: NBT, p. 79.

³¹ Chenchiah, D, *Ghadar Party: Reminiscences*, Parminder Singh(ed), Jalandhar: Desh Bhagat Yadgar Committee

Ghadar movement was also unmatched in its cosmopolitanism and the Ghadarites attempts to imagine themselves as fighters in the global battle for justice. The bulletin published reports and stories of revolutionary groups and struggles from various colonized societies all across the world. The intimate connection that the Ghadarites felt with these groups can be deduced from the fact these groups were described as *Irish Ghadari*, *Roosi Ghadari*, and *Mexican Ghadari* etc.³²

Just like its vision, it also had a stunningly global reach. According to British records, the weekly was circulated from Hong Kong, Manila, Singapore, and Yokohama in the east to Argentina, Brazil, Trinidad in the west; Kenya in Africa to China in Asia amongst Punjabis who were immigrants in those regions. It was on 4th June 1918 that the San Francisco based Ghadar headquarter was raided by the American police and they found almost two hundred thousand copies of Ghadar publications neatly stacked in one of its rooms. Historians have rarely wondered as to what was that chord amongst these Punjabis living in far-off places that the Ghadarites had struck. And such disregard makes it even more difficult to explain that why did, as soon as the Ghadarites declared war on the British, its readers from all across the world followed the Weekly's clarion call like militant followers. It must be stressed that from the very first day the aim of the weekly was not merely to enlighten the readers but to turn them into militant activists. Every reader was addressed as a follower and five specific duties were given to them which were to regularly remit money, to read the paper carefully, make others read the paper, send copies to India and, finally, to be prepared to fight and die in the soon to be declared war against the British. In an interesting way, these dangerous duties and actions became a kind of training module which turned the passive, oppressed, and depoliticized bodies into active political agents. And these actions were very different from the notion of 'political activity' that an average British citizen or even Congress member had. The historian who has inherited this definition of the 'political' has not only found it hard to understand the politics of Ghadar but also declared it as a failure because it could not achieve its desired aim. Historians have to understand that individuals and collectives play a role in history which cannot be deduced from the actors' own understanding of it or that of their contemporaries and definitely not their opponents alone. Ghadar movement was not only a modern, political and uncompromising resistance to the British but also a critique of the colonial/modern project of political subjectivization of the colonized Indian. It was not only a part of the tradition of the radical anti-colonial peasant, tribal, worker insurgency in the pre and post 1857 era but also its

³² Oberoi, Harjot, 2009, *Ghadar Movement and its Anarchist Genealogy*, *EPW* Vol. 44 No. 50, p. 44.

transformation under the influence of global struggles of its kind. An important example of it was the identification of sectarianism and obscurantism as a negative influence and thus articulating a comprehensive critique of it in the pages of the weekly and evolving a composite political subjectivity in its place. Harjot Oberoi makes an important point when he writes that the Ghadarite political vision did not fit in but rather ‘...depart(ed) from (Partha) Chatterjee’s proposal that Indian nationalism’s architecture included a sharp dichotomy, whereby the interior, spiritual, and cultural space belonged to the Indians, and what was surrendered to the British was the outer, material, and political domain. For Ghadar activists, the inner and outer both at the level of rhetoric and everyday life remain unpartitioned.’³³ Their attempt at imagining a comprehensive resistance to colonial modernity and its subjectivity might be the reason why they have been so difficult for our historians to comprehend their politics and locate their political contribution in the early twentieth century.

Declaration of War on the British

A few months after the beginning of the weekly, Har Dayal was arrested on 25 March 1914. He was questioned but could not be kept in prison for long as the American police could not prove any crime. Har Dayal fled out of America but continued to send his writings to the San Francisco office. Sohan Singh Bhakna, Ram Chandra, Bhagwan Singh, and Abdul Hafiz Mohamed Barkatullah of the leadership team took the reigns in their hands after his departure. Radical activists and students like Taraknath Das, Jatindra Nath Lahiri, Gobind Behari Lal and Darisi Chenchiah and most of all, young Kartar Singh Sarabha had developed tremendous leadership qualities by then.

Devoid of Har Dayal’s leadership, the Ghadarites had to respond to two major episodes in mid-1914. First was the tragic episode of Komagata Maru. Sohan Singh Josh gives a detailed study of the episode in his book *Tragedy of Komagata Maru*.³⁴ It was a voyage which was conceived as a purely commercial venture. During the course of its planning, the organizers were made aware of the newly imposed restrictions on immigration in Canada. The journey was made in defiance of the hostile Canadian government as the Punjabis believed that as the loyal subjects of the British Empire they had the right to travel and work in the different regions of the commonwealth. They were also hopeful that the Canadian court and government will eventually agree to their immigration. The whole episode ended in a disastrous manner the

³³ *ibid* p. 45

³⁴ Josh, Sohan Singh, 2011, *Tragedy of Komagata Maru*, New Delhi: People’s Publishing House

description of which is beyond the scope of this essay. It led to 19 passengers being killed and 23 injured in Calcutta. The incident was crucial in exposing British government's oppressive character and many survivors of the voyage including Baba Gurdit Singh, Baba Gurmukh Singh, Sardar Rai Singh and others went on to play an active role in anti-colonial politics.

Second important development in mid-1914 was the declaration of the World War. Har Dayal was not around and Ghadarites had to respond to it. They decided that the time for Ghadar had come. They accelerated their original plan and declared war on the British. It was believed that, despite lack of preparation, the time was right for the declaration which was made through an article 'The Trumpet of War' in the 4th August issue of the weekly. The call was clear: 'Go to India and incite the native troops. Preach mutiny openly. Take arms from the troops of the native states and wherever you see the English, kill them. If you do your work quickly and intelligently, there is hope that Germany will help you. Get help from Nepal and Afghanistan. Start the war quickly. Don't delay.'

Another call in the 11th August issue stated:

'Wanted - Fearless, Courageous soldiers for spreading Mutiny (Revolt) in India.

Salary - Death.

Award - Martyrdom and Freedom.

Place - The Battlefield of India.'³⁵

To many historians and readers this might have seemed naive but let us ask ourselves this question that was the call really so fundamentally different from the call of 'Do or Die' given by Mahatma Gandhi in Quit India Movement or that of a complete boycott of all British goods and institutions in 1905. The difference in the contexts cannot be denied yet the question that stares us in the face is that was it really the difference in context, or, actually the perceived success or failure of its 'impact' that makes historians see the whole project as naive. And what are the criteria for judging the political act as a failure or success? Indeed, most historiographical accounts detail various aspects of mishaps in the Ghadar plan such as lack of coordination, lack of funds, no concrete German support which was promised, British knowledge of the plan in advance due to its stunning spy network and its consequent preparedness etc. Along with it, the intensity of British crackdown and lack of connection with the Indian masses are also seen as signs of Ghadarites' disconnect and premature character. Yet British official records say that over 3,000 immigrant Indians from various parts of the globe might have come back to India to join the Ghadarite call. And even though the majority of the

³⁵ Puri, Harish K, 2011, *Ghadar Movement: A Short History*, New Delhi: NBT, p. 103

Ghadar leadership was arrested very soon, attempts at inciting rebellion in various parts of north India were continued for over two years. Was not such a huge global response and enlistment in an openly declared war on the British with a call for complete Independence unprecedented? Was it not a testimony to the Ghadar's contribution to the radicalization of the anti-colonial movement? Maia Ramnath in her recently published book *Haj to Utopia* has shown how the ex-Ghadarites went to play a leading role in all kinds of political streams in the 1920s and onwards be it nationalist, pan-Islamist, peasant-workers and communist parties or the revolutionary groups like HRA and HSRA.³⁶ Mark Jurgensmeyer has shown how one of the most popular Dalit movement of north India, the Ad Dharm movement was founded and led by Mangoo Ram who was an ex-Ghadarite. In an interview to Jurgensmeyer, Mangoo Ram stressed on the impact of his Ghadarite experience in the US on his ideas and political spirit.³⁷ The story of their struggle after the declaration of war, against all odds, gives us a sense of their political character. Har Dayal's disappearance from the scene was a big loss. Before his volte-face and turn to spiritualism, he tried to stay connected with the Ghadar plan especially the coordination with Berlin which had no real bearing on the movement. His becoming (or making himself) irrelevant in the moment of biggest need was unfortunate and cannot be fully dealt with here. It did leave a void at the centre of Ghadarite leadership. After the *Elan-e-Jang* (declaration of war) many important leaders including Sohan Singh Bhakna tried to enter India immediately and got arrested by the British. Very soon all the plans seemed shattered and successful returnees were clueless and devoid of leadership. It was at this challenging moment that eighteen-year-old Kartar Singh Sarabha took it upon himself to reorganize the movement in India.

Sarabha had left his birth place Sarabha, a village in Ludhiana (Punjab) and come to America on 1st January 1912 to study and very soon got attached to the Ghadarites. He became an integral member of the Yugantar Ashram and took over the responsibility to run the place after the exit of Har Dayal. After coming to India and finding the original plan in shambles, he tried to establish contacts with his school friends and veteran Indian radicals like Bhai Parmanand, Ram Saran Das and the Delhi blast accused Rash Behari Bose. He also tracked down the Ghadarites who had escaped police surveillance and were travelling aimlessly in Punjab. By the end of the year, the young revolutionary had been able to reorganize the party in Punjab and

³⁶Ramnath, Maia, 2011, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

³⁷ Jurgensmeyer, Mark, *Ghadar in Global Context*, New Delhi: ICHR, 2015.

formulate some kind of a plan to continue the Ghadar.³⁸ Rash Behari Bose's presence on the scene was a big boost and he was convinced by Sarabha to take command. The Ghadarite idea of inciting the Indian soldiers was revived in an organized manner under Bose's leadership and Sarabha's vigour. Bose came up with a number of ideas for the reorganized group which included looting treasuries, spread of literature, freeing up arrested Ghadrates from jail, manufacture and procurements of arms and bomb, killing of British loyalists, damaging of railways, police stations, telegraphs etc. and most importantly incitement of armed or commoner Punjabis. The villagers were to be asked to withdraw all support to British including revenue payment.³⁹ They believed that once successful in infiltrating the army, the Ghadarites might be able to win over the support of the Sikh Regiment. Sachindranath Sanyal, Bose's associate who later founded Hindustan Republican Association, tells us in his autobiography, *Bandi Jivan*, that the Bengal revolutionaries could never realistically consider the support of Bengalis who were in colonial armed service. Even the possibility of Ghadarites to enlist Punjabi soldiers to their cause seemed incredible to them. They were aware it was going to be very difficult. A number of Sikh regiments were to be soon sent out of India to the battlegrounds in West Asia and Europe. They had a little time on their hands to execute any plans of mutiny and so a few Ghadarites took advantage of it and got themselves enlisted.⁴⁰ The records show that the Ghadarites were able to infiltrate into numerous army cantonments across north India and the idea was to coordinate a simultaneous revolt at all places. Their success in penetrating the army contingents and spreading disaffections tells a completely different story as compared to one more historiographically popular about the loyal Punjab army willingly taking all the burden to save the British in the world war. These historical studies have often overlooked the peculiar nature of British imperial exaction in Punjab in the form of forced, conscription-like army recruitment which had created enough resentment amongst the Punjabi soldiers. Unfortunately, the impressive Ghadar plans for mutinies were exposed at the last moment and could not be successful. Yet, it was not taken as lightly by the colonial administrators as our historians had made it seem. In his autobiography, Michael O' Dwyer, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, wrote 'In January and February their emissaries were tampering with the troops from Jhelum on the North to as far down as Benares. They had met some success in certain battalions lately returned from the Far East and also in a Sikh squadron

³⁸ See Chaman Lal, Kartar Singh Sarabha, 2011, New Delhi: NBT and Kartar Singh Sarabha Collection at Desh Bhagat Yadgar Library, Jalandhar.

³⁹ Isemonger, F.C. and James Slattery, 1998(1919), *An Account of the Ghadar Conspiracy, 1913-1915*, Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing, Reprint, Berkeley: Folklore Institute, pp. 110

⁴⁰ Puri, Harish K, 2011, *Ghadar Movement: A Short History*, New Delhi: NBT, pp. 121.

of a cavalry regiment at Lahore. We got the wind of this through an informer who was in close touch with the would-be mutineers and related to some of them. We also got information that a general rising had been planned for the night of 21st February...that the idea of the revolutionists was “not fantastic”, for it had penetrated as far as Bengal and was known to the disaffected elements in Dacca.⁴¹ He then goes on to give an account of British success in averting the mutinies. Plans of mutinies in Rawalpindi, Lahore, Ambala, Delhi and even U.P were intercepted and came to naught. Michael O’Dwyer gave a lot of credit to the prominent members of the Sikh committees formed by the Chief Khalsa Diwan and to the village notables in helping the police to arrest Ghadarites. This was an honest admission of an alliance between the conservative and loyalist social elites and the British government against the radical anti-colonials.

Arrested Ghadarites were put up against the most brutal face of British legal system. They were tried under a law, specifically designed to tackle the Ghadar challenge, called the Defence of India Act. The trial started in the month of April 1915 and was wound up in five months. A total of 175 men were charged out of which 136 were sentenced. Death penalties were awarded to 42 accused.⁴² Ise monger and Slattery tell us that half of those accused in these cases had migrated outside India. Many amongst them were local inhabitants, outcasts and this completely flies in the face of the historiographically established claims that the Ghadarites could not find any response from people whatsoever. In fact, the tremendous radicalizing influence which the Ghadarites had on future generations of Punjab was much more than the numbers these accounts give.

Conclusion

The Ghadar movement was fought at a time when, in the wake of British reverses of the initial war years, the disproportionate deployment of Indian soldiers and unequal distribution of grains all across the world and enhanced taxation had devastated the lives of the impoverished majority in the subcontinent. At the same time, the government strangled any form of ‘disloyal’ political activity and passed the draconic Defence of India Act in 1915 to ensure the same. Historians have seldom attempted to explain the enigma of unequivocal support from all across the mainstream of the Indian political spectrum to these British extractions and

⁴¹ Dwyer, Michael O’, 2015, *India As I Knew It*, Chandigarh: Unistar, p. 132.

⁴² Evidence and Judgement, Lahore Conspiracy Case, Home Department, Political, A. NAI; Seditions Committee Report pp 157-160.

repressions. Most of the yesteryears' stalwarts and future Congress mass leaders tried to outdo each other in their show of unswerving loyalty without explicitly demanding any reward in return. No distinction between the moderates and extremists could be made in this regard. The Ghadarites, in such a political context, were exceptional in seeing the war as an opportune moment to weaken the British control over India. They found the Indian nationalist leaders' support to British, in an intra-imperialist war, as hypocritical. Legalized repression under Defence of India Act, limited not only to Ghadarites but all kinds of dissent, was meant to terrorize people opposing forced extractions for British war efforts. Historians have rarely discussed the fact that the biggest Indian nationalist politicians not only did not object to these measures but acquiesced to their implementation over the Ghadarites as a show of their loyalty. The Congress' desire for receiving political reforms and withdrawal of Defence of India Act as a reward for loyal support of the British and opposition to the Ghadarites were soon completely dashed. The end of the war witnessed the constitution of the Sedition Committee (1918), not to facilitate the return to the limited civil liberties of the pre-war era, but to propose the continuity of wartime measures under a legalized cloak. These were summed up as Martial Law passed as Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act 1919, better known as Rowlatt Act. And again ironically the same Congress leaders who had acquiesced to the Defence of India Act now gave a call for India's biggest mass protest till date in the form Anti-Rowlatt agitations. It is very curious as how have we managed to study the history of these events and transitions in India's anti-colonial and nationalist politics in the second decade of twentieth century by totally bypassing the Ghadar movement which played a crucial role in the radicalisation of anti-colonial politics in India, in the heyday of loyalism, by inducing in it the ethics of defiance which gripped the masses in the post-war era. Historians have found it difficult to come to terms with the political character and contribution of this movement. This attitude of neglect is a response to Ghadarites' non-conformism to the mainstream historiographical narrative and mirrors the surprise and incomprehensibility of the British officials and Congress leaders of those times. The notion of a legible and legitimate 'political act' borrowed by the historians from the British Raj's discourse is useless in understanding the Ghadarites. 'Unlike the Indian National Congress, (the Ghadarites) had no discourse of municipal politics, electoral reforms, or an unjust British empire... Similarly, the Ghadarites did not share the theological underpinnings of the Maharashtrian and Bengali school of terror.'⁴³ This misrecognition coupled with the assumption of popular, loyal support to the British war efforts and rejection of

⁴³ Oberoi, Harjot, 2009, *Ghadar Movement and its Anarchist Genealogy*, Vol. 44 No. 50 p. 43

Ghadarite ideas made both the colonial and historiographical discourses to argue that Ghadar's political journey was a failure and insignificant to the larger trajectory of Indian politics. Yet such an analysis leaves a number of questions unanswered. If such was the extent of loyalty then why did the state constitute Seditions Committee? Why did the committee advocate extension of wartime laws of Defence of India Act? Why were those laws extended and passed as Rowlatt Act? And why did the Congress in general and Gandhi in particular completely change their stance vis-a-vis these laws and call for mass protests all across the country? If the people had willingly served the British in the wars then why did they respond to the call for protest against Rowlatt Act with numbers and militancy unexpected by either the government or the Congress? Most importantly for us, why was the avowedly most loyal province, Punjab, meted with a reign of terror under the martial law which eventually resulted in the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre. An attempt to address these questions will necessitate seeing the Ghadar movement in a different light than has been hitherto done.