
Importance and Insights of Historical Ghadar Movement for Indian Independence

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Abstract

Practically all accessible Accounts on the significance of Ghadar Movement in India's quest for independence are limited to its initial, more spectacular and action-filled period of operations between 1913-18. There is barely any research which extended to its function during the second phase when it was resurrected in 1920. Following the thunderclap message of the Bolshevik revolution, contact with Soviet revolutionary leadership and participation by one of its leaders at the Fourth Congress of the Third International in 1922, the Ghadar Party embraced a radically different political agenda. The rise of Mahatma Gandhi and the anti-imperialist mass movement in India after the slaughter at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, also had significant impact on its political philosophy and actions. Whereas there may be several weighty reasons for scholars to focus mainly on the first phase, the virtual neglect of the party's contribution during the period 1920-47 inhibited a complete and rounded analysis of the role of this party in the struggle for freedom and contributed to an unintended distortion.

Keywords: Ghadar Movement, Indian History, Indian Independence, Sikhs, Oppression, Freedom, Rebellion.

Introduction

The Ghadar Party was launched in USA in the year 1913 with San Francisco as the headquarter. Its chief ideologue and leader at that time was Har Dayal who edited and circulated a weekly paper in Urdu, named *Ghadar*, from 1 November and its Gurmukhi edition from 9 December 1913.

Most historical accounts credit Har Dayal as one who went to America with a specific mission of organizing a revolutionary movement among Punjabi immigrants settled on the West coast. Evidence on the state of his mind and activities during the preceding three years-his pursuit of a "life of renunciation" in La Martinitique, desire to found a new religion on the model of the Buddha, mediation in Honolulu-reflected that he did not know clearly what he really wanted to do.¹ During the summer of 1912, he associated himself with radicals on the campus of the University of California and with the Industrial Workers of the World(IWW), wrote articles on anarchism and founded a short-lived Bakunin Institute which he described as the "first monastery

of anarchism”. Influenced diversely by V.D Savarkar and the Buddha, Mazzini and the syndicalists, Marx and Bakunin, Har Dayal showed a marked propensity for shifting but equally fanatic advocacy of the conflicting notions. He was “more impulsive than consistent in his thought and action”. Lajpat Rai who had been in close contact with him regarded him as “an uncertain item”. Har Dayal conceded at a moment of reflection later: “I am too erratic and explosive to be institutionalized”.²

Literature Review

Following Sareen's work is A.C Bose's Indian Revolutionaries Abroad 1905-1922 in the Context of International Developments. In London, Berlin, and Delhi, he examined Ghadar archives in the context of international politics.

Ghadar's goals, objectives, organization, tactics, operational principles, and international connections are well described in Tilak Raj Sareen's book Indian Revolutionary Movement Abroad 1905 to 1921.

Ghadar Heroes: A Forgotten Story of the Punjab Revolutionaries 1914-1915, by Randhir Singh, is based on the author's conversations with a few Ghadar commanders and details the role of Sohan Singh Bakna, a well-known Ghadar personality.

Objectives

1. To explore the role of the Ghadar Movement in India’s Struggle for Freedom.
2. To analyse the distortions in its role in the Indian freedom struggle movement.

Methodology

An interpretive and analytical methodology is adopted for the study, “Ghadar Movement and Its Role in the National Movement of India”. It is primarily a fact finding venture on the basis of exploratory method. This study evaluates the role of the movement in the National Freedom Struggle. The descriptive and historical approaches are adopted to validate the objectives.

Discussion

The decisive choice of a new type of organized political action for liberation of India emerged from the encounter which Har Dayal had with groups of Indian immigrants settled on the west coast of USA, during the summer of 1913. Around ten thousand Indians had migrated from Punjab to the west coast areas of Canada and USA in search of economic opportunities between 1905 and 1913. Most of them came from small peasant and rural servicing class families of five central districts of Punjab. More than 90 percent of them were Sikhs, half of who had served short terms in the British Indian Army. Immigration of such large numbers was symptomatic of their economic distress at home which was accentuated by the British colonial economic policies and administrative measures. They, however, appeared at that time to be innocent of the political

reasons behind their economic and social oppression. In North America they worked as unskilled labourers, farm workers, owner farmers and contractors. They had earned well and gained respect of the employers for their honesty and hard work. But their life conditions-contempt and ridicule of the white labour unions, deep sense of shame on their backwardness and poverty of their country in conspicuous contrast to conditions of their new but foreign setting, discriminatory measures of the local authorities against them and winds of radical political ideas and activities in China, Russia, Mexico, Egypt-had gradually heightened their sense of shame, frustration and anger. In their meetings with Har Dayal, they learnt to link their existing problems with the poverty and oppression back home which had driven them to foreign lands. They came to raise questions about the reasons of their misery and backwardness and learnt about the British colonial interests in India and drainage of wealth to England. There could be no respite from oppression and moral degradation until India became independent. How could the mighty British imperial power be over-thrown? There was only one course: Ghadar, a people's armed struggle with the support of patriotic elements of the army; no half measures. These encounters with immigrants-honest, determined and self-sacrificing, belonging to military strata-aroused in Har Dayal visions of leading a mass revolutionary movement and imparted to these simple folks a new sense of identity.

A small number of other Indian students in USA coming from the urban middle class in India joined Har Dayal as revolutionary intellectuals for propaganda work and for guiding and organizing the largely illiterate immigrant labourers. Their ideas and beliefs were inspired by the dominant ideological thinking that prevailed among the Indian revolutionary exiles of that time such as V.D. Savarkar, Shyamji Krishnavarma and Aurbindo Ghosh. By their orientation they were given more to propaganda work, what they described as political education. But among the large number of those who came forward to join the movement and contribute funds, over ninety-five percent were Punjabi immigrants from the peasant stock. They regarded the movement as practically theirs. Their poets and leaders from the community articulated the new ideas in their own distinct cultural idiom. The character of this movement was therefore, determined by the relationship between these two broadly different elements.

Soon after the *Ghadar's* message began reaching Punjabis settled in different parts of the world, including a few Sikh regiments, they started demanding "more than exhortation to prepare for revolution at some indeterminate future time". Events moved fast. Har Dayal left the scene, jumping bail to avoid deportation in April 1914. The Komagata Maru episode inflamed passions followed by the beginning of the first Great War on 4 August which appeared to provide the awaited opportunity for striking the enemy when he was in trouble. The "organic" leaders among the Punjabi immigrants moved in command, making plans and taking decisions. Organisation, in their conceptual scheme, was akin to spontaneous collective spirit, commitment to the cause and loyalty to the comrades. The student revolutionaries, uneasy in the mindset of ruling passions of what they considered as "illiterate and impulsive Sikhs", stepped back. The former came to India rallying thousands of fellow enthusiasts to launch and impossible revolution, paid an extremely heavy price for their passion and set examples of legendary heroism. The latter including Har

Dayal, turned to join the German-financed and directed Berlin India Committee. They prepared for clandestine shipping of arms to revolutionary groups in Bengal and were associated with other German anti-British schemes based in USA, Afghanistan, Turkey and other centers. Among prominent Indians associated with these schemes were Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, Bhupendranath Dutt, Tarak Nath Das, M.N Roy, C.K. Chakrabarty, Mohammad Barkatullah and Raja Mahendra Pratap. A nominal collaboration was also worked out with the small Ghadar establishment in California as became evident in the well-known Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial in San Francisco during 1917-18.

Distortions

One variety of distortions in the history and role of the Ghadar Party, both at the academic and popular levels, resulted from a more or less arbitrary and subjective selection of facts. In one set of accounts in which the approach seemed to be elitist, the focus remained largely on educated middle class intellectuals.³ The Ghadar Party was presented as one founded, directed and controlled by such intellectuals who were educated and who mobilized that “wonderful human material”-the illiterate Punjabi labourers-as a part of the former’s quixotic scheme. The role of the vast number of Punjabis and their organic leaders was either regarded as subsidiary or more or less ignored. Much too disproportionate attention was focused on Ghadar’s German connection. Interestingly, most of these accounts falling in this category came from Bengali scholars. One of the recent Publications, Anil Baran Ganguli’s *Ghadar Revolution in America*, projected this movement as virtually a Bengali enterprise.⁴

On the other hand, most other accounts presented by scholars and popular writers hailing from Punjab cast the movement in a “Punjabi heroic tradition” framework.⁵ Khushwant Singh, in his *A History of the Sikh*, for instance, went further and presented it as a movement of the Sikhs who were settled on the Pacific coast and which emerged out of the early days struggles waged by Khalsa Diwan leadership in Vancouver and Stockton with Gurdwaras as storm centres of political activity. The specific new direction developed when Har Dayal’s radical advice seemed appealing, more because other immigrants in their dealings with the governments needed spokesmen like Har Dayal who could speak English. This, he says, led to a “dual leadership” in which “friction between Hindu intelligentsia and Sikh workers was inevitable”.⁶ Fitting the things in a mould of stereotypes and viewing people as primarily Hindu and Sikhs, Khushwant Singh ignored how the Ghadarites themselves viewed the leadership, as also the fact that the Ghadar Movement symbolized a bold and challenging departure from the archetype of contemporary social and political movements in the Sikh and Hindu communities in Punjab. The question one needed to raise instead was what was it which let the Khalsa Diwan Society in Stockton and Chief Khalsa Diwan (CKD) in Amritsar to regard Ghadarites as threateningly anti-Sikh, and to launch a virulent crusade against them and why did the CKD volunteer all possible help to the British rulers in crushing the movement.

Another significant distortion emerged from the prevalent framework of viewing a revolutionary political movement in terms of heroic deeds and sacrifices of individuals and explaining setback in terms of conspiracies and acts of spies and traitors. Significantly, even the accounts presented by seasoned communists such as Sohan Singh Josh and Gurcharan Singh Sainisara were cast in that mould. Such an approach inhibited the study of this party's role in terms of its ideology, particularly the operative dimension, and in terms of the pattern of organisation and its strategy and tactics. Equally significant point which may be emphasized is that any deliberate effort to write the so-called "patriotic" history and thus glorifying a movement out of proportion, may not only preclude objective assessment and learning of correct lessons, but may also turn out to be counter-productive.

The role of the Ghadar Movement has so far been viewed mainly in terms of the dramatic mobilisation of large number of Punjabi immigrants in foreign lands to launch an armed struggle against the British at the beginning of the First World War, attempts to win over soldiers in various regiments, sterling patriotism, brave heroic feats of men like Kartar Singh Sarabha, the fiasco of the stipulated uprising, series of conspiracy trials and their sufferings and sacrifices. That was and still remains important. Equally, perhaps even more important in terms of the role of the party in India's freedom struggle during the first phase was the extent to which it succeeded in social and political transformation of a large section of hitherto politically innocent, premobilised and traditional people. When they returned to their villages in Punjab during 1914-15 (from where they had left only a few years earlier) with strikingly revolutionary ideas, beliefs and objectives, most of their country-men thought the Ghadarites were crazy men who had been infected by some "pernicious foreign influence". The party's role may be seen in the new pattern of political socialisation, the beginnings of development of a relatively scientific thinking and political consciousness, which became in course of time a material force in India's continuing struggle for political and social change.

At the time when these people emigrated to foreign lands two prominent influences on their minds were those of religious reform and spirit of community revitalization exemplified by the Singh Sabha Movement on the one hand, and a sense of pride in their being a martial race bound by heroic loyalty to the British empire, on the other. Their early-day social activity and struggles for rights in Canada until about 1912 centred around strong attachment to the empire and maintenances of separate Sikh identity in a corrupting western environment.

But the most substantive and real life experience related to their poverty and backwardness which appeared sharp, conspicuous and humiliating in the strikingly advanced situation of material prosperity and social and political liberty in USA and Canada. The contempt and ridicule, threats and actual attacks by hoodlums, even the condescending sympathy of good souls made their shame and misery glaring. *The Ghadar* raised questions which were closest to the minds of these people. Why were they looked down upon and ridiculed? Was it not a continuation of the misery and oppressions they suffered back home? Only the form and expressions were different. They were oppressed and hated because they were slaves, was the

cryptic answer. How could slaves expect to be treated with honour and dignity! “If the British treated them like dogs at home how could they expect to be treated otherwise any place else in the world!” It aroused a sense of shame which became a revolutionary sentiment. “Harassed in our (own) country and with no respite available in foreign lands, we aliens have no land of our own.” They became acutely aware of the poverty, backwardness, famines, oppression, cruelty of the police and of moral degeneration in India and of its primary reason being exploitation by alien rulers.

What was it which enabled some thousands of the Britishers to subjugate and exploit thirty crore of Indians? They learnt that it was mainly because of the loyal support given by the Indian people themselves, particularly the Indian soldiers in the army, the administration and the police. The Sikh Sardars, Rai Bahadurs and Khan Bahadurs-the toadies who were instrumental in the British annexation of Punjab in 1849 and largely responsible for a manoeuvred loyal submission of the people to the foreign oppressor-became special targets of attack. “They sold us to the British and themselves became the commission agents in the bargain”. Years before Mahatma Gandhi emerged on India’s political scene, the Ghadarities came to grasp the idea that if the common people refused to give support to that government, the British would have no legs to stand. Therefore, political education of the masses appeared to them to be of primary importance. They identified the prevailing leadership of the Singh Sabha and the Chief Khalsa Diwan as enemies of the nation. Actually their anger against that leadership was so strong that they frequently thought of dealing with “traitors” first, and only later with “the whites”.

The hollowness of the false pride in the heroic loyalty of the Sikhs to the British Empire was now exposed. A new awareness appeared to disturb them. Fighting battles for expansion of the empire and giving their precious lives to the advantage of the foreign oppressor was a grave mistake. The existing sufferings resulted from “our own doings”. They proclaimed that they would not be duped any longer and “will never again sing songs of loyalty”. Since most of these immigrants with army background had friends and relatives in various Sikh regiments, great stress was laid on winning over soldiers for the armed struggle. They in fact did succeed during October 1914-February 1915 in gaining support of considerable numbers of army men from various cantonments from Peshawar to Faizabad (United Provinces) for the abortive rebellion.

A very important dimension of change in their perception of things around and their self-image related to the new orientation towards matters of religion and its relation with politics. Most of them were Sikhs and their social maps had been largely charted by their cultural traditions passed on to them through the folklores. It was natural that in their struggle for political change the *Ghadar* poets and leaders stressed upon select cultural and religious symbols of the Sikh community. The fight against the powerful rulers required, in their perception, courage and spirit of sacrifice and for that purpose, allusions were made to the teachings of the Tenth Guru, to the symbolic meaning attached to the Birth of the Khalsa, to the very name „Singh” and to past heroes of earlier battles against the Mughals. Sikhs were therefore exhorted to vindicate their honoured heritage.

Some of the historians viewed it as a tendency among the Ghadarites for a “militant Sikh movement” and for a separate boundary demarcation of the community. Gerald Barrier observed, for instance, that the Ghadar poets did not make a fine distinction between “Sikh nation” and “Indian nation”, nor saw the “inconsistency of stressing Sikh nationhood at the potential cost of effecting Sikh cooperation with other Indians”.⁷ Such views based upon references torn out of the total context of *Ghadar* framework of ideas and the praxis led to a significant distortion in understanding the character and the role of that movement. Even when men are “engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis, they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service”.⁸ When Luther donned the mask of Apostle Paul he was not merely parodying Saint Paul. The significant point was the choice of the symbols and the nature of interpretative mediation in order to create something new. It was precisely because of the new interpretations and objectives that the Ghadarites appeared so strikingly different that the existing institutions and ruling elite of the community condemned the Ghadarites as renegades and *patit (fallen) Sikhs*.

Whereas the *Ghadar* poets referred to the bravery and sacrificing spirit of the Khalsa and Panth and often alluded to the glory of the „Singh” and the great deeds of the heroes, they were reminded that it was not adherence to the five Ks which made a “Singh”. Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa for the defence of the country; for fighting against oppressors of “Mother Bharat”-a fighting force like the Rajputs, the Khans, the brave Turks and the Marathas. The fall of the country was attributed to the degeneration of the Khalsa when Sikh Sardars turned “traitors” and “betrayed the nation” in its war of independence in 1857. The Panth was therefore exhorted to wash off the „stigma” by fighting in the new war of liberation. As against the contemporary emphasis on separate Sikh identity, the Ghadarites called upon all the sons of “Bharat Mata” to unite and asked the Sikhs to emulate the revolutionaries of Bengal and Maharashtra.

The exclusivist concerns of separate community organisations, and preoccupations with matters of religion were ruthlessly condemned as obscurantism. As the leaders proclaimed, the ideology of the *Ghadar* Party dissolved all differences of caste and religion. They put unequivocal emphasis on keeping politics in command. Whereas the British were identified as promoters of communal and caste divisions, the major weakness was seen in the Indian people and the vested interests: “Many amongst us are the dogs of the government who abet religious differences”. Those who managed the Gurdwaras at that time were condemned as “Commission Agents”. “Old scriptures will do no good, forget about going to the Gurdwaras”, the leaders emphasised, “the time has come to wield the sword for freedom of the country”.⁹

Caste was completely rejected and the evidence of Ghadarite Babas as also the records of the British government show that the Ghadarites cared less about unshorn hair or beards or matters of halal and jhatka. Religion, the party decided, would at best be only an individual’s private affair. These people did not understand “secularism” in the sense in which a rational modern man

does. But the whole tenor and emphasis of the Ghadar Party, both in profession and practice, appeared strikingly novel at a time when religious nationalism of Aurbindo Ghosh and Sister Nivedita was the ruling pattern among the militant nationalists in Bengal and Maharashtra. This impact was so enduring that not even one man, who was dyed in the Ghadar Party ideology, succumbed to the pressure of communal politics during the later period of his life. This aspect has added significance in the present context of Punjab politics and underlines the role of ideology in sublimation and transformation of the tradition of a community. Those who tended to see among the Ghadarites the emergence of a “militant Sikh Movement” evidently drew very hasty conclusions from a very superficial reading of a few allusions and completely ignoring the dynamics of change in ideas as also the actual behaviour pattern of those who joined the movement.

Another misunderstanding leading to distortions is related to the organisational character of the party. Already predisposed to think of organization in terms of rational structuring of roles and authority, whether influenced by Weber or by Lenin, most authors used a few statements attributed to one leader or another in order to establish that the Ghadar Party was a very skilfully structured organization for planned revolutionary action. Allusions were made to the establishment of organized propaganda wing, military wing and secret commission, setting up of branches, and coordinated functioning.¹⁰ Given an exaggerated later-day claim of an important organic leader, it was stated by such a seasoned leader and author as Sohan Singh Josh that the working committee of the Ghadar Party in terms of its authority and role was, during 1913-14, similar to the “politburo” of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union or that the party was organized on the principle of “democratic centralism”. A careful study of available records, autobiographical accounts of leading figures and interviews with some of the prominent Ghadarites show, however, that the very conception of organization in their minds was very different from what the writers looked for and claimed to have found. As it comes out, the organization was viewed more as a body of people bound by a collective spirit, committed to shared objectives and norms of behaviour and above all, loyalty to comrades. A handful of those who, in later years, thought of organization in rational structural sense, believed that the Ghadar Party was yet in the preorganisational stage when the decision to launch the armed struggle was hurriedly taken. According to Baba Prithvi Singh, “The first stage was of propaganda; organization was a matter for the second stage and that stage never came”. One typical statement of the editor of *Ghadar*, two years after the formation of the party, is significant. It is as follows:

“The people of this party cannot make the usual arrangements for organisation, register, house etc...Outside the country they wander thirsting, starving, clad in rags, but filled with great enthusiasm. Such is the sacred Hindustan Ghadar Party, which though without any particular place for itself, has its soldiers ready everywhere and at every time...”¹¹

The leaders of the party reorganized the positive value of spontaneity, “an element of unification in depth”. But not yet for creating the basis for a well-knit coordinated functioning and guided political action by the so well imbued patriots. Let alone the cadres, even important leaders

carried conflicting notions of who occupied what formal position or made important decisions.¹² Similarly, the needed attention to strategy and action was overtaken by a predominant emphasis on individual valour, heroism and readiness to lay down one's life for the great cause. The fond notions of revolutionary action ranged all the way from a broad based mass revolutionary movement to anarchist and terrorist action and a *coup d'état* led by patriotic soldiers. "More than that it fostered a particular quality of mind in which brave expressions and courage of desperation appeared as the major mark of the Ghadar Movement's potential for revolutionary change".¹³ An analysis of the objective social and political situation in India or even Punjab seemed less important when the "optimism of will" and courage of conviction directed them to "hack out the way rather than discover it". The expected mass participation in the stipulated armed struggle had little basis outside their fond imagination. Therefore, the heavy sacrifices, these patriots made, appeared tragic, in retrospect.

However, "failure or success" may be inappropriate concept for evaluating the role of such movements. Its major contribution may be seen in setting in motion a process of learning which marked the beginning of the end of an earlier innocence of the politically premobilised people. They began to understand that their poverty and exploitation was not a matter of cruel destiny but result of imperialist rule. Though there was little awareness of the laws of capitalist market economy, a vague sense of the system being oppressive got rooted in their minds. It led the people to look beyond the deceptive appearances to the so far hidden reasons and forces. The Ghadar Party did not present a systematic political theory but generated a thinking which altered their perception of the things around a created a new self-image. Religious or narrow community concerns were considered as obscurantist and reactionary designs of vested interests. The awakening which Ghadar Party's teachings and activities brought to the Punjab country side shook the British badly. The British could no longer take the loyalty of the Punjabis for granted. In fact the over-reaction of the administration to disturbances in 1919 which led to the cold blooded massacre at Jallianwala Bagh was symptomatic of the extreme nervousness of the rulers. The legendry tales of heroic deeds of Ghadarites and of their sufferings in the jails became a perennial source of inspiration to the youth, ranging from the Babbar Akalis and Bhagat Singh's Naujawan Bharat Sabha to the recent time's Nexalite groups.¹⁴ On the other hand, the political ideas of the Ghadarites have been a strong influence on the thinking and behaviour of all the left and secular democratic elements in Punjab as also the struggles of the peasantry.

Conclusion

After being revived in April 1920, the Ghadar Party continued its many faceted struggle for independence of India until it was formally wound up after 15 August 1947. Though broadly rejecting the earlier path of armed insurgency and terrorist activities for a more broad-based political struggle of the masses, the party remained a loose fraternity of groups with diverse programmes. One considerable section of Ghadarites led by Santokh Singh and Rattan Singh, inspired by Bolshevik revolution and linked with the Third International, worked for political education and organization of peasants and workers in India and other countries. The "Kirti"

group in Punjab organized peasants and workers under the guidance of a number of Ghadar Party men who returned to India after their training at the Toilers of the East University in Moscow. Outside India, Rattan Singh and his comrades set up small groups in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Panama and Mexico and developed fraternal relations with anti-imperialist workers organizations in various countries such as China, Egypt and Ireland.¹⁵ A small section of Ghadarites under Teja Singh Sutantar, however, continued to toy with the idea of preparing for guerrilla war against the British for quite sometime. On the other hand, large number of members of the Ghadar Party in USA supported the Gandhian struggle and worked in collaboration with groups of friends of India. Participation in the conferences of the International Union of Oppressed Peoples of the East in Hankow, during the summer of 1925, emphasised the Ghadar Party's share in the international struggle against imperialism. Even though the Ghadar Party was not, during the second phase, either an ideologically homogeneous group or a well-knit organization under one recognised leadership, it served as a broad front and basis for Indian patriots who worked broadly in pursuit of India's freedom. Its major contribution during that period lay in making the struggle for India's freedom a part of the international struggle against imperialism and oppression and it served to subdue possible chauvinistic and narrow nationalism. In that sense, the Ghadar Party set the pace for a continuing struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism. This phase, however, still awaits a historian to fathom a practically unexplored mine.

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