

# GHADAR PARTY LEHR

AN ABSTRACT BY INDERIT SINGH

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*Published by Jagjit Singh, Shokar Shah Road, Tarn Taran, Amritsar, (Punjab), 1955*

*Pages: 26+728*

*Ghadar Party Lehr* in Punjabi by late Sardar Jagjit Singh, is dedicated to Sant Vasakha Singh, the pioneer and the patronising force of the Ghadar Party Movement. This book, comprising 23 chapters and 5 appendices besides an introductory preface gives a critical historical account of the origin and development of the Ghadar Party Movement.

The book is an account of the daring historical events of 1914-15 in which thousands of Indian workers, settled thousands of miles away from their motherland, decided to return to their country for a political revolution sacrificing their attractive incomes and properties, compelled by the throbs of freedom in their hearts. At a time, when Indians had hardly heard the name "freedom," and when most of the country lay undisturbed in the stupor of British slavery, these revolutionaries were stirred with the love for freedom to such an extent that they did not care about the probable results of opposing a mighty empire like the British.

The majority of Indians, who enthusiastically took part in the Ghadar Party Movement, belonged to those poverty-stricken Sikh peasantry of Central Punjab, who had migrated to the U.S.A., Canada, and the Far East in the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century to earn their living. In U.S.A. and Canada, the majority of them engaged themselves in work at farms or saw-mills, situated in the areas of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. In general, these workers were warm-hearted, hospitable, affable, hardworking and honest people. They did their utmost to elevate their standards of living. In their personal conduct, they took every care not to antagonise the local population.

The Ghadar Party Movement originated as a reaction to the social environment in Canada and U.S.A. these emigrants faced on their arrival. The national political struggle against the British Empire began in Canada. Later, however, the centred activities shifted to U.S.A.'s more favourable political conditions. The Canadian Government agencies, keeping in view

the interests of the British Empire, adopted a policy of eviction of Indians from Canada, and banned further entry, which catalysed the political campaign of Indians in the American continent. Moreover, the shameless attitude of racial fanaticism adopted by Canadian public intensified this struggle.

The people of U.S.A. inherited the strong traditions of "liberty, equality and unity," and they still sing the praises of these doctrines. But, they hated Asian people. Indians were also at the receiving end of this racial discrimination. However, the U.S. Government under the influence of the progressive traditions, did not interfere directly or openly in the political activities of the Indian workers. ^

The economic situation in U.S.A. also helped in arousing the spirit of nationalism among Indians. During the period of recession, Indians were attacked at many places by white workers; but nobody cared. Such attacks on Japanese workers were resented by the Japanese Government, and the victims were duly compensated. Indians, naturally, felt that this state of affairs was due to the alien occupation of their country. For the same reason, Indians were insulted and taunted in their daily life in hotels, buses, trams, cinema halls, etc. This type of sneering finds frequent mention in the court-proceedings of the cases of the Ghadar Party Movement.

It was under such circumstances, that the Indians in the U.S.A. and Canada, organised the "Hindi Association of the Pacific Coast" in 1913. This was later known as "Ghadar Party" because of the popularity of the *Ghadar* paper, which they started on 1st November, 1913. This newspaper played a very important role in shaping the Ghadar Party Movement and spreading its message.

There is a common misconception that the Ghadar Party Movement was the creation of Lala Hardial and his associates; or that it was the result of a scheme prepared by Hardial liaising with Germans. But, the fact is that this revolutionary fervour had originated spontaneously as a reaction to the political, social and economic circumstances of U.S.A. and Canada, of the brave, simple and self-respecting Punjabi farmers there. Lala Hardial had never visited Canada, where the struggle of Indians started. According to his close associate Bhai Parmanand, he was a person of fickle thoughts, who, having been disappointed, was looking for an ascetic life in the west renouncing worldly affairs.

To overthrow the British domination of India through an armed revolt, with the help of local troops and the support from general public and students, and to establish a republican rule, was the big aim of the Ghadar Party Movement. The situation of a world war, in which Britain was entangled, was considered propitious to start these operations in India. The strategy formulated by the Ghadar Party envisaged a mutiny in India, and its neighbouring countries, so that British force would be scattered in dealing

with them. The Ghadar revolutionaries also planned to post themselves at the front of the revolt-operations in order to set an example of sacrifice, and, thus, to enthuse the countrymen for the revolution. So, as soon as the first world war broke out, Ghadar Party applied all its force in this direction and the bands of revolutionaries moved towards India.

The infamous episode of Komagata Maru had no direct connections with the Ghadar Party Movement, but, no doubt, this accident also made contribution in the Ghadar. Komagata Maru was a Japanese ship which was hired by Sardar Gurdit Singh in Hongkong. Earlier, Sardar Gurdit Singh had failed to hire a ship at Calcutta. This ship departed from Hong Kong on the fourth April, 1914. Sailing via Shanghai and Nagasaki, it arrived at Vancouver on 23rd May, 1914 with 351 Sikh and 21 Punjabi Muslim passengers. Canadian authorities did not permit these passengers to disembark at Vancouver, and forced them to return. This flared the Ghadarites even more. A mutual relationship developed between the passengers of Komagata Maru and the Ghadarites, which is evident from the fact that some passengers of Komagata Maru joined the Ghadar Party activities in India after the incident of Baj Ghat, Calcutta. It is noteworthy that 18 passengers were shot dead and 25 were wounded by British-Indian Army and Police in the tragedy of the ship Komagata Maru, on arrival at the Baj Baj Ghat.

Unfortunately, most of the leaders of the Ghadar campaign, who managed to reach India, were arrested from Tosha Maru and other ships, and interned. As a result, the Ghadar Party Movement in India suffered a serious setback in its very first venture. But, a large number of Ghadarites succeeded to reach India and escaped from internments. The author gives a brief account-of their exploits, sufferings, unparalleled sacrifices and their martyrdom. He also describes the total indifference and lack of co-operation on the part of the public at large, the shameful betrayal by traitors, and even open hostility of the toadies, which brought an abortive end to a great revolutionary movement, which was inspired by the highest ideals of patriotism, national honour, justice and equality. The central figure and source of inspiration for the revolutionary activities was Kartar Singh Sarabha, other prominent participants in this struggle were Bhai Randhir Singh and Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna. The book also makes specific mentions of patriots like Sant Vasakha Singh, Sardar Jawala Singh, Bhai Bhagwan Singh, Sardar Hamam Singh Tundi Laal, Sardar Kesar Singh 'Thathgarh,' Bhai Santokh Singh, Mohammad Barkatullah, Sardar Nidhan Singh 'Chugha,' Sardar Jagat Singh 'Sursing,' Pt. Kashi Ram, Sardar Lachhman Singh 'Dafedar,' etc., and highlights their role.

Those who took part in the Ghadar Party Movement, were prosecuted in the following cases in nine special courts :

1. Lahore Conspiracy Case
2. First Parliamentary Case

3. Second Supplementary Case  
(The above three cases were tried at Lahore).
4. Benaras Conspiracy Case
5. First Mandalay (Burma) Conspiracy Case
6. Second Mandalay Conspiracy Case
7. San Francisco Case
8. Chicago Case
9. Mandi Conspiracy Case

Among the revolutionaries, who were inflicted punishments through these special courts, about 100 were hanged and about 900 were either deported to penal servitude at the Andaman or sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. About 50 Ghadarites were killed in encounters with Police. In addition to this, many Ghadarites were sentenced through trials in general city courts, whose figures could not be available. Nor could the details of the infliction of sentence to such army personnel be available, as were court-martialled for the same.

There is no doubt that the organisation of the Ghadar Party Movement left much to be desired as its leadership was inexperienced. Obviously, they were not aware of revolt tactics, e.g., how to keep secrets, etc. These factors also led to the failure of the Ghadar Party Movement in India. But, the real and main reason for the failure of the Movement was that the country as a whole was not psychically ready for this type of revolt. The expected mutiny by local troops was an essential part of the strategy of the Ghadar revolutionaries. There is no doubt that frantic efforts were made at many places to induce troops to join, in some places with success, but due to leakage of secrets by some confidants, all such attempts failed.

Considering the then political condition of India, the Ghadar Party Movement was definitely a national revolutionary movement in its true sense. In the present-day politics, although the declared objectives of the various public organisations in our country are secular, but due to communal bias of the majority of leaders and members of these organisations, communal considerations dominate in actual practice. Against this, it is a remarkable feature of the Ghadar Party Movement that its spirit was totally non-communal in theory as well as practice. Also, it was not a terrorist movement, because in no manner can the efforts to overthrow a foreign rule from one's own country, with the help of native troops, be described as terrorism.

The chief characteristic of the Ghadar Party Movement from the historical point of view is that, though it failed to achieve its objectives immediately, due to some shortcomings; yet, even in its failure and shortcomings, it clearly showed that to overthrow the British rule through armed revolt was practically possible under specific national and international environment, and that this technique could have been adopted as a practicable

policy. If this conclusion be accepted, then a big obstacle on the way of the historical analysis of the Indian National Movement during British rule is removed; and an important question related to this analysis arises : "Was merely the non-violence of the Congress's agitation the final and decisive force which compelled the British to quit India ?

The question posed by the author is very significant, since objective analysis of the Ghadar Party Movement and the subsequent developments, would clearly point to an answer in the negative. The non-violence of the Congress, seems to have delayed the independence of the country by several decades.

The author was a nationalist to the core. He does not think in terms of relative contribution to the movement on communal lines. In the present-day environment, when politics of the country is dominated by rank communalists, it is difficult to ignore the glaring fact that the Ghadar Party Movement, like most other nationalist movements seeking liberation of their country, was planned and executed largely by Sikhs without any significant contribution or even sympathy from the other communities or the so-called nationalist parties.

The book under review covers a period and a Movement, largely ignored by historians. We should be grateful to Sardar Jagjit Singh, who has recorded the brave deeds of some of the greatest sons of India in the cause of Indian freedom and national honour. Their sacrifices will continue to inspire countless generations to come. But for the timely effort of the author, this golden chapter of Indian history would have been lost to us.

#### FREEDOM

The cause of freedom is the cause of God.

Samuel Bowles

Personal liberty is the paramount essential  
to human dignity and human happiness.

Bulwer-Lytton

For what avail the plough or sail,  
Or land, or life, if freedom fail ?

Emerson