

## Workers and Peasants Unite: The Formation of *Kirti* and the *Kirti-Kisan* Party and the Lasting Legacy of the Ghadar Movement, 1918-1928

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Following the Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial of 1917, many Ghadar members from the United States and Canada relocated to the political landscape of Punjab and influenced the rise of the Punjabi left in the 1920s. This article examines how the Ghadar movement inspired the creation of the leftist journal *Kirti* under the editorship of Santokh Singh in 1926, making it one of the first political journals to advocate for both freedom from the British Raj and peasant and workers' rights in Punjab. The publication of the journal was followed by the establishment of the *Kirti-Kisan* Party by Sohan Singh Josh in 1928, a political organization that rallied for the rights of workers and peasants through a Marxist framework. This article demonstrates how both political entities took ideological, practical, and financial influences from the Ghadar movement.

“To fulfill a particular task one should rely upon one’s own efforts.”<sup>1</sup>  
(Santokh Singh, *Kirti*, 1926)

“Proletarians of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!”<sup>2</sup>  
(Sohan Singh Josh, *Kirti*, 1928)

### Introduction

In 1926, Rashpal Singh from *Desh Sewak-Jalandhar* welcomed *Kirti* to the world - a new leftist newsletter published in Amritsar, Punjab, which tackled peasant and labor issues within Punjab and abroad. In honor of its first publication, Singh wrote:

It is with honor that I congratulate the creators of *Kirti*. This magazine was born from the efforts of Hindustanis abroad and speaks of the sacrifices made by the courageous martyrs from Canada and America. I pray for the long life of *Kirti* and hope it attains its highest aspirations.<sup>3</sup>

Rashpal Singh, and many other leftist organizers, acknowledged both the novelty and necessity of organizing for peasant and labor rights within Punjab. Editor and co-founder of the journal Santokh Singh, generated a highly complex discourse between communism, labor and peasant activism, anti-colonialism,

and *Sikhi* (Sikh tradition). While *Kirti*, and later the Kirti-Kisan Party founded by Sohan Singh Josh, are credited for being amongst the earliest communist organizations in Punjab, this article locates their ideological influences and direct associations with the Ghadar movement after 1918.

Many scholars and political writers within Sikh and Punjab Studies have debated whether the downfall of the Ghadar movement was due to the political climate in Punjab at the time. In particular, scholars have argued that the Punjabi public were either carrying a political air of passivity or were outright pro-British in their sentiments towards colonialism.<sup>4</sup> This article interrogates the political climate within Punjab and in particular, it locates the anti-colonial influences the Ghadar Movement had on the formations of the communist journal *Kirti* and later the Kirti-Kisan Party. I argue that rather than being received with passivity by the Punjabi public, the Ghadar Party in the post-1918 context laid the political and ideological groundwork for the rising Punjabi left in the 1920s. These early leftist organizations in Punjab not only took direct influence from the Ghadar Movement and its anti-colonial agenda, they also brought within Punjab a targeted discussion of labor and peasant rights.

Following the two major political trials that occurred in the United States and India, the Lahore Conspiracy Trials of 1915 and the Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial of 1917, many Ghadarites shifted to the landscape of Punjab. This article discusses the dispersal of communism throughout Punjab during the 1920s. Here, we will look briefly at the histories of the *Kirti* journal and the trajectory of the Kirti-Kisan Party, which ultimately aligned with the Communist Party of Punjab in 1942. Navigating the communist history of Punjab, specifically from the Ghadar Movement as a starting point illuminates how the movement shaped the political landscape of Punjab.

### **A Brief History of Ghadar**

In order to understand the context fueling the establishment of the Ghadar Party in 1913, it is vital to examine the socio-political and economic landscape of Punjab prior to emigration in the 1910s. During the colonial period, Punjab was primarily an agrarian region. Gurharpal Singh notes within his study that in 1921, 60.5 percent of the population of Punjab was dependent upon agriculture.<sup>5</sup> Following Punjab's official annexation by the British in 1849, drastic measures were made to conform the peasantry to work and produce within an imperialist market economy.<sup>6</sup> This meant not only implementing new economic and agricultural strategies to increase the production of cash crops, but also the exploitation of the peasantry through increased taxation on land and produce, a rise in land prices, and oppressive money-lending schemes.<sup>7</sup> During this period, approximately 80 percent of large and small landowning families in Punjab were in heavily in debt.<sup>8</sup>

Borrowing money from professional or agricultural money-lenders was dependent upon how much land one owned - the more land one owned, the more you could borrow. This meant that many large landowning families carried tremendous amounts of debt as they risked making profits through crop

production that season. Meanwhile small landowners would turn to repaying their debt through other means of employment.<sup>9</sup> Many turned to the military as a steady means of employment and stable income prior to the First World War. The significant increase in membership of Punjabi men from small peasant families enrolling within the Indian Army from 1892-1914 earned Punjab the title of “the sword arm of India.”

Military ventures took Punjabi troops all across the world. Travel outside of India introduced these men to different forms of employment and labor including working as watchmen, policemen, and caretakers in new spaces abroad such as Malaya, Hong Kong, Thailand, Sumatra, Shanghai, and Manila.<sup>10</sup> They also were known to find work within East Africa and Australia, however, Canada and the United States remained the most sought after by Punjabi emigrants in search in employment due to their promise of higher pay. Of the 6,656 South Asian emigrants who came to North America during 1899 to 1913, many were from the districts of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur in Punjab. Over 80 percent of these early emigrants were Sikh and nearly 50 percent were ex-soldiers from the Indian Army.<sup>11</sup>

While scholars have noted that the allure of life abroad may have been an important motivation for some of the ex-British soldiers during the early phase emigration to North America, many others were prompted by the dismal economic, social, and political conditions they faced in Punjab.<sup>12</sup> Dr. Sundar Singh, published an article in a Vancouver-based periodical in 1911 called *The Aryan*, in which he stated: “it was not for the sake of pleasure that Hindus go to settle abroad,” rather, because of “the sword of famine and plague hanging round his neck most of the time... that the Hindu emigrates to save himself from actual starvation.”<sup>13</sup> These Punjabi laborers first arrived at the ports of Vancouver, British Columbia in Canada and joined the local laborers in lumber mills. Believing they would be given equal opportunities and the same political agency as the white Canadians, considering they were both British subjects, the newly arrived Punjabi laborers faced a rude awakening. Not only did these laborers contend with the brutal racism of their fellow white workers, they were also subjected to racist immigration exclusionary policies from the Canadian Government. Shortly after South Asian emigrants also began emigrating to the United States in hopes of their labor being received more positively. In 1907, the Anti-Oriental Riots in Vancouver, BC and Bellingham, Washington erupted and resulted in stricter immigration policies both in the United States and Canada. By 1909, anti-Asian sentiment was being fully channeled through immigration law and actions, as immigration officials excluded approximately 50 percent of South Asians attempting to seek entry into the United States.<sup>14</sup> Given the collaborative nature of these restrictive immigration policies by the United States and Canada, in her work, Sarah Isabel Wallace argues that South Asian emigration to Canada and the US during this early period should be viewed as one emigration movement rather than two.<sup>15</sup>

Over the next few years, South Asian mill workers in the Pacific Northwest, met weekly to discuss issues such as racial violence and discrimination, economic exploitation, and racist immigration policies. This group called itself

the Pacific Coast Hindi Association (PCHA). In the early summer of 1913, led by mill worker Sohan Singh Bhakna, Punjabi laborers along the Pacific Northwest met in Astoria, Oregon<sup>16</sup> to discuss a matter of utmost importance - revolution. Lala Har Dayal, a philosophy professor from Stanford University was called upon to sit in on this vital moment. Dayal, who had ties with the Industrial Workers of the World and local anarchist groups in California's Bay Area, proposed that the laborers continue to create more scholarships for young Indian men to come to the US for education. He argued that only after such education of growing revolutionaries could they be equipped to return to South Asia and fight for its freedom from the British Raj.<sup>17</sup> The workers immediately countered back with a firm "No." Raising money for scholarships meant waiting too long for freedom, they were ready for action now. Har Dayal conceded and instead he proposed that then they should create a political association built on democratic ideals - one that should resemble the spirit of the 1857 rebellion. Over time, the members came to a consensus that it should be called *Ghadar* (mutiny), and its weekly organ should carry its *gunj*, or echo, throughout the world.

The first issue of the *Ghadar Gunj* was published on November 1, 1913 in San Francisco, California. The paper was sent across the British Empire declaring war:

*Today, there begins in foreign lands, but in our country's language, a war against the British Raj...What is our name? Ghadar. Where will Ghadar break out? In India. The time will soon come when rifles and blood will take the place of pen and ink.*<sup>18</sup>

By the winter of 1913, the headquarters for the movement had been moved to California. Ghadar scholar Maia Ramnath states, "he [Dayal] had begun making overtures to the more than five thousand 'young Sikhs' around Stockton who worked in field, factory, and small shop operations. Despite their habitual distrust of educated elites, these workers responded well."<sup>19</sup> Dayal attempted to negotiate the barriers between South Asian students at UC Berkeley and laborers, who were primarily Sikh, through continual discussions on the oppressions of the working class.<sup>20</sup> While Dayal was initially an influential leader of the party, Sikh contributors, like Kartar Singh Sarhaba, Sohan Singh Bhakna, and others, made deep connections with the Sikh laborers through Punjabi poetry. The party continued its global fight against imperialism even after 1918, when the investigations of the Lahore Conspiracy and San Francisco Conspiracy Trials<sup>21</sup> had caused serious blows to the movement's organization. This article explores the legacies of the Ghadar Movement - spiritual, intellectual, and material - and how Ghadar inspired the rise of the left in Punjab.

### **Ghadar Post-1918 and the Birth of *Kirti* and the Kirti-Kisan Party**

After the success of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, Ghadar members were inspired to bring such revolution to their own rural homeland. As the Ghadar Party had already created valuable networks with Russian

revolutionaries in the past,<sup>22</sup> the key moment of the October Revolution was when those seeds of communication came to fruition. Newly appointed Soviet Russian leader Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, also known as Lenin, was highly aware of the rising anti-imperialist activities in the Eastern colonies. In fact, the establishment of the Third International (Comintern) in Moscow in 1920 was motivated to completely annihilate British imperialism.<sup>23</sup> On July 28, 1920 Lenin presented his colonial theses at the Second Comintern Congress in which he argued that this was the specific moment for what he called a “world revolution” to take over.<sup>24</sup> Following Lenin’s statement, in September 1920 the Congress of the People of the East met in Baku, Azerbaijan during which Comintern President Grigory Zinoviev conveyed the urgency of Lenin’s message as he stated the need for uprisings in the East against the colonial powers. While Zinoviev’s call for revolution in the East inspired organizing activity on the ground in Punjab among former Ghadarites and Babbar Akali members,<sup>25</sup> the British officials in India began increasing security and surveillance of Punjabi communication networks in efforts to repress communist activity as soon as possible. However, agrarian militancy struggles in Punjab remained largely unaffected. In fact, the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922 adopted the “Theses on the Eastern Question” which particularly praised the Sikh militant movements in Punjab:

The struggle to free the land from the the feudal dues and restrictions thus assumes the character of a national liberation struggle against imperialism and the feudal large landowners. Examples of this were provided by the Moplah rising against feudal land owners and the English in India, in the autumn of 1921, and the Sikh rising in 1922.<sup>26</sup>

Communist leaders in India, such as M.N. Roy also found Punjab to be a perfect space for revolution as many Punjabis who trained with the British Army could be convinced to fight in a “proletarian army.”<sup>27</sup> This is not the first time a revolutionary movement has considered turning the Punjabi British soldiers against the British Raj itself. The Ghadar Party also attempted to obtain the support of the Indian troops.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Punjab still remained a space of highest potential for revolution, considering both sectors of its economy: peasantry and military.

While the major economies of the time in the province of Punjab were agriculture and the military, the Ghadar members had returned to India with a wide variety of experiences in different forms of labor abroad. In the United States, considering the racial and labor tensions upon arrival, many Ghadarites had created deep connections with the Industrial Workers of the World, a workers trade union organization formed in the USA in 1905.<sup>29</sup> The Ghadar movement’s initial association with leftist politics in North America originated through its interactions with the IWW. Thus, at the time, the Ghadar Party remained one of the few Indian anti-colonialist movements which also sought to counter labor oppressions, particularly in response to the racial tensions present amongst mill and farmworkers along the North American west-coast.

Ghadar's outlook on labor rights also opened them up to create Russian networks. Though the Ghadar Movement's critique of labor oppressions was not as fully formed as their critique of imperialism, they still introduced to the space of Punjab a unique discourse on peasant and labor rights, as many of these men were peasants in Punjab and laborers abroad.

Though, as previously mentioned, Punjab remained largely an agrarian state, there were other forms of industry present within the province as well that depended on agriculture. Industrial employment in 1921 was at 21 percent and was dominated by the production of textiles, wood minerals, metal processing, and food production.<sup>30</sup> By the early 1920s, Punjab's economy had become highly complex and diverse. However, there still remained a need to both understand and critique how in the different sectors of labor, peasantry, and the military the colonized people of Punjab were being exploited. Thus during this period, the Ghadarites began to communicate more directly with those involved in Russia's revolution.

In the early 1920s the Ghadar Party took interest in the communist agenda and sent two representatives to the Fourth Communist International Congress held in Russia in November of 1922. After their visit to Russia, representatives Santokh and Rattan Singh both recognized that they needed to approach the rising Akali *jathas* (groups) with the communist message. In May 1923, Ghadarite members from the Kabul, Afghanistan center, Gurmukh Singh and Udham Singh were sent to approach the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) in Amritsar, Punjab with a proposal to create a *Sanjhiwal* (unified) Association, a Sikh-reformist organization that would be officially recognized by the Comintern Congress in Russia. Specifically, Rattan Singh served as a mediator between the Third International and local Akali *jathas* in Punjab.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, five Ghadarites from Punjab were sent to Russia to be trained under communist ideologies at the University for the Toilers of the East.<sup>32</sup> Radicals in Punjab who had associations with the Ghadar Party and the Akali Movement maintained their own separate lines of communication with the Third International, outside the purview of more western-educated, elite communist leaders like M.N. Roy.

Also leading the Punjabi-Russian alliance was Santokh Singh, a founding member of the Ghadar Party in Oregon in 1913. Singh played a vital role in attempting to collect arms from the Indo-China region during the Ghadar revolutionary attempt in 1915. However, amidst its failure in 1916, Singh returned to the United States and continued his activist work with the Ghadar movement. Eventually he was arrested and tried during the famous Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial of 1917 in San Francisco, California and was sentenced to twenty-one months of imprisonment at McNeil Island, off the coast of the state of Washington. Later in *Kirti*, he recalls his friendship with an American communist on the Island who shared communist texts and Marxist ideas, deeply influencing his desire to rally for the working class.<sup>33</sup> Upon his release, Santokh Singh began urging other Ghadar members to study Marxist theory and learn Russian - he became an avid supporter of the Revolution in Russia. As he tried to return from his trip to Russia in May 1923, Singh was

arrested during his journey and remained imprisoned in independent territory until December 1923, after which he was sent to serve the remaining two years of his sentence on house-arrest in his village in Punjab.<sup>34</sup> During those two years from 1924-1926 Santokh Singh completely immersed himself in learning about the local political situation and how to best organize a communist revolution in Punjab. In early 1926, he moved to Amritsar with fellow Ghadar members Bhag Singh Canadian and Karam Singh Cheema<sup>35</sup> and collaboratively began the publication of *Kirti*, a monthly magazine written in Gurmukhi which expressed the need for a communist revolution. The magazine combined Ghadar's militancy, the Russian revolution's organization, and *Sikhi's* ideals. The first issue of *Kirti* was published in February 1926.

In January of 1926, Santokh Singh sent out a message announcing the upcoming publication of *Kirti* in which he stated:

A monthly journal called the *Kirti* will shortly start publication from Amritsar. The journal will be the voice of Indian workers living in America and Canada and will be dedicated to the sacred memory of those heroes and martyrs, who awakened sleeping India at the time when the value of the service was far higher than it is now, and whose ideal was regarded by our own people as well as by outsiders as an absolutely vague dream. The journal will sympathize with all the workers throughout the world, the entire female sex, subjugated, the weak and oppressed nations and subjugated India.<sup>36</sup>

Created through funding received from Ghadar members and other Indian workers abroad,<sup>37</sup> the new journal *Kirti* would expand the anti-colonial sentiment of Ghadar to include worker and labor rights issues. *Kirti* thus served as the first organized labor journal in northern South Asia. British Criminal Investigation Department accounts reported that the first issue of *Kirti* advocated heavily for labor causes, as well as, consistently glorifying the Gadarites and the Babbar Akalis.<sup>38</sup> The first issue of *Kirti* was noted to have travelled from Punjab to the US and then to Russia.<sup>39</sup> British officials remained alarmed at how quickly the journal was able to not only reach audiences in Russia, but also how efficiently the Punjabi public were taking influence from its revolutionary message.

What made *Kirti* particularly unique, and subsequently quite popular, among revolutionary and public circles in Punjab was its utilization of *Sikhi*. Since its very first issue, *Kirti's* editor, Santokh Singh made a distinct note of how the preaching of egalitarianism within Sikh thought was very much a leftist agenda; therefore, rather than importing a foreign way of thinking, like Marxism, Punjab should rely upon *Sikhi* to inform their newly rising communist society. The first issue of *Kirti* in February 1926 begins with a *salok*<sup>40</sup> from the *Guru Granth Sahib* which states: "to fulfill a particular task one should rely upon one's own efforts."<sup>41</sup> Also, within this initial issue of *Kirti*, Rashpal Singh writes that *Kirti* is dedicated to fighting for the rights of those who work with honest labor, or as it is phrased within the Sikh tradition *dasan nohan di kirt*.<sup>42</sup> Later in this issue it

is also mentioned that writings of this journal are colored with “*panthic prem, quami dard, and vattan di mohabbet*.”<sup>43</sup> Punjabi historian Bhagwan Josh writes:

To evaluate the ideas of these individuals, especially those grouped around the *Kirti* magazine, we must understand, firstly, that the lives of these revolutionary nationalists had been shaped by the popular principles of Sikhism; and secondly, that these practical men evolved their ideas more under the influence of the achievements of the Russian Revolution than under the influence of Marxist theory.<sup>44</sup>

Here, Bhagwan Josh is referring specifically to the politics of the early contributors to *Kirti*. Later we see how the outlook of *Kirti* changes under the editorship of Sohan Singh Josh.

Within the next five issues of *Kirti* from March to September 1926, Santokh Singh discussed in great detail how land distribution could change the life of the peasant, while also warning how Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement would ultimately fail because it does not challenge the oppressive system of capitalism. In his article titled “The Hardworking Peasant” Singh states: “After careful understanding and thinking one has to accept and say that without a change in the existing division of land, the solution to the problem is impossible.”<sup>45</sup> Through these publications, Santokh Singh attempted to bring communist ideas into the discourse of the everyday laborer - specifically, so they could imagine another way to freedom outside of the Gandhian movement’s agenda. In the August 1926 issue of *Kirti*, Santokh Singh proposes that the solution to the land issue would be to institute large peasant companies that would be co-owned by a small local group, in which profits would be distributed equally and land cannot be rented to others outside of the present company.<sup>46</sup>

Singh’s answer to the agrarian problem, stimulated quite a discussion amongst revolutionary circles in Punjab, and the larger Indian context. Many wrote in questions to the publishing house in Amritsar asking “Who is a Kirti? What are their objectives?” Santokh Singh proceeded to clarify the definition of “kirti” in an article titled, “Current Confusions” in which he states:

Anyone who does his work with his own hands and does not exploit others is a Kirti in the true sense of the word...*Kirti* is the exact translation of the word laborer in English, the word *Kirti* and *Kirti Shreni* have specific meanings. *Kirti* is that person who has no capital and means of production and earns his living by working for others. Similarly *Kirti Shreni* is that class of people who have no capital or means of production.<sup>47</sup>

Further into his article, Singh argues that while *kirti* means laborer, in the context of Punjab he also uses it to mean peasant because both are exploited by the capitalists. Singh is attempting then to unify the struggle of the peasants in Punjab and laborers abroad, such as the Ghadarites, into one class called *kirti*. Thinking through the struggles of oppression of Punjabis at home and abroad, Santokh Singh’s classification of *kirti* allows for a political revolution, as well as an economic one. His goal was to extend the view of the Ghadar movement



to connect the oppressions of anticolonialism and labor. In his text *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh*, Sohan Singh Josh recalls, "After the failure of the 1915 Ghadar revolution, the Ghadar Party leaders were turning towards Marxism-Leninism and wanted to organize the Punjab peasantry and the amorphous working class in order to carry on the national freedom struggle under new conditions."<sup>48</sup> The question driving Santokh Singh's political activism was: How can we support an egalitarian society after independence?

From May 1926 to August 1926, many of Santokh Singh's writings advocated for an organization of the workers of the world similar to the Industrial Workers of the World. However, during this period, Santokh Singh was bedridden due to tuberculosis, causing his writings to be more theoretical, rather than speaking to the material problems of workers and peasants in Punjab. Due to his death on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1927, Santokh Singh was never able to fully bring to life an organization built on communist and Sikh ideals. However, as Bhagwan Josh states: "His [Santokh Singh's] contribution lies in establishing an ideological centre, i.e., the first Punjabi magazine with socialist leanings, which for the first time expressed its concern on world politics, economic policy, and proletarian struggle throughout the world."<sup>49</sup> As Santokh Singh neared the end of his life, Sohan Singh Josh took control of the *Kirti* publication as its editor on January 21, 1927.<sup>50</sup>

According to Sohan Singh Josh: "The *Kirti* represented the continuation of the Ghadar movement in a new way. The magazine was oriented towards Marxism."<sup>51</sup> Sohan Singh Josh's new position as editor of *Kirti* issued in a new era of communist politics in Punjab. Josh himself had quite an active political trajectory in Punjab. In his early twenties he was heavily involved in the Akali movement and was appointed as General Secretary of the Shiromani Akali Dal.<sup>52</sup> However, finding their politics as becoming dogmatic, Josh moved away from the Akali *jathas* and became the first president of the Kirti-Kisan Party, also known as the Workers and Peasants Party, in Punjab in 1928. He also co-founded the Nawjawan Bharat Sabha in 1928, a socialist organization in which renowned Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh was heavily involved.<sup>53</sup> In January of 1927, Josh became editor of the *Kirti* newsletter and brought in a much more Marxist agenda. In 1929, Josh was tried and convicted in the Meerut Conspiracy Trial, in which the British tried anyone whom they labeled as "Bolshevik" under Section 121 of the Indian Penal Code, prohibiting anyone from conspiring against the sovereignty of British India.<sup>54</sup> While in prison, Josh continued to organize around communist ideals, and also included prisoner rights within his agenda. Sohan Singh Josh remained a key figure in the communist struggles in Punjab until his death in July of 1982.

This article proceeds to focus on Sohan Singh Josh's contribution to *Kirti* and his creation of the Kirti-Kisan Party in 1928. Through his early written contributions to *Kirti* we see how Sohan Singh Josh extended the politics of Ghadar into Marxism. In his autobiography, Sohan Singh Josh recalls a bedridden Santokh Singh advising Josh to "Go cautiously" as he entered his role as the newly appointed editor of the journal.<sup>55</sup> Josh interpreted Singh's advice as he must organize workers and peasants collaboratively and with patience.

Though Josh had contributed a few articles to *Kirti* in 1927 while it was still under the editorship of Santokh Singh, they had very little interaction or communication. After he was nominated to be the next editor of the newsletter, Josh studied the writings of Singh in order to understand the essence of the magazine. Josh concluded that:

Comrade Santokh Singh's mission in starting *Kirti*, in my opinion was three-fold: To fight against British imperialism for complete national independence and expose its colonial policies to keep India under its yoke, to keep an eye on international developments and make contacts with other imperialist countries to strengthen our national freedom struggle; To present tenants and principles of communism in a simple and cautious manner in order to create conditions for building up working people's organizations and prepare them to fight both their national and class struggles; and to fight the slanders hurled from time to time by the British bureaucracy and henchmen against the Ghadar Party and its leaders, to explain and publicize the unprecedented sacrifices they had made for the country and inspire the youth by shedding light on their contribution to the freedom struggle.<sup>56</sup>

For Josh, there were many core elements of Santokh Singh's agenda he wanted to preserve under his new leadership over *Kirti*, including its efforts to spread a communist message across Punjab.

However, he recalls his inability to uphold Santokh Singh's associations with *Sikhi* within the newsletter. His views on the Sikh tradition were that it was becoming dogmatic within the Punjabi political sphere of the time, specifically the ways in which the Akali movement framed and confined what it meant to be Sikh was extremely troubling to him. Josh argued that these Sikh political movements were immensely exclusionary. He recalls the first issue of *Kirti*, in which Santokh Singh had included the Sikh scripture: "We shall fulfill our task with our own hands."<sup>57</sup> For Josh this use of direct references to Sikh scriptures carried a particular bias that he felt would divide the working class and peasants and generate unnecessary communal divide. Making his shift to Marxism quite clear, Josh wrote on the title page of *Kirti* a different scripture from Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*: "Proletarians of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!"<sup>58</sup> According to Josh, it was after he eliminated traces of the Sikh tradition and turned more towards Marxism that Hindu and Muslim workers and peasants began seeking out the writings of *Kirti*. Josh's aversion to *Sikhi* and other non-secular traditions ushers in a new era of politics in the Punjab province which are significantly and overtly defined by the colonial secular and non-secular divide. Josh's leadership of *Kirti*, though grounded in Marxism, offered a strong critique of how local Sikh political leaders and organizations were framing Sikh(i) as a unified and singular identity and tradition. He also highlights how the colonial associations of *Sikhi* with the Punjabi language and Gurmukhi script has aided in the confinement of the Sikh

identity.<sup>59</sup> Sohan Singh Josh's writings demanded the need to understand how these concepts are being formulated and influenced by colonial powers.

In his efforts to create a political movement for the rights of workers and peasants, Sohan Singh Josh organized the first Kirti-Kisan (Worker-Peasant) Conference in Hoshiarpur, Punjab on October 6-7 in 1927.<sup>60</sup> Supported by a few Akali leaders and the Indian National Congress, the Conference adopted resolutions to: organize a party of peasants and workers to fight for India's national freedom; create branches in every district of Punjab; support the Chinese and Russian liberation struggles; create a standard for an eight-hour work-day for factory workers; and create solidarity with other labor movements like the Kanpur millworker strike.<sup>61</sup> The conference gained international attention, as the League Against Imperialism sent in a message of its support.<sup>62</sup> Nearly seven months after the initial conference in April, 1928, the Kirti-Kisan Party officially came into existence. The newly formed Kirti-Kisan Party served to unite the many separated political movements into one organization: peasant, labor, and anti-imperialist movements.

A second Kirti-Kisan Party Conference was held in Lyallpur on September 30, 1928, which addressed issues such as: *beggar* (forced labor), worker pay, lack of irrigation water, reduction in taxes and land revenue. Another major dilemma facing the Party was funding.<sup>63</sup> A call for funding was filled by Ghadar members abroad and in Punjab. Through overseas labor these Ghadar Party members proceeded to fund the printing of the *Kirti* newsletters and the efforts of the Kirti-Kisan Party. In fact, for a few years, the Kirti-Kisan Party remained much better funded than the much smaller group at the time, the Communist Party of Punjab. Sohan Singh Josh's editorship of *Kirti* and his establishment of the Kirti-Kisan Party ushered in a new era of communist politics in Punjab. Specifically, his focus on unifying peasant, worker, and prisoner struggles generated new visions of unified organization in Punjab. Also, through the trajectory of Sohan Singh Josh's political career, one can see how secularism is entering the political space of Punjab as a means to critique Sikh religious leadership and state-endorsed institutions. The secular was not always associated with leftist politics in Punjab; however, in late 1920s there is a deepening of the secular and non-secular divide in Punjab.

## Conclusion

In this article, I demonstrate how the Ghadar Party influenced the political landscape of Punjab in the 1920s. In particular, this article challenges the notion that the Ghadar Movement was solely received with political passivity, and instead charts the trajectory of the rise of communist movements after the Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial in San Francisco in 1917. From 1926-1928, the early leftist journal *Kirti* under the editorship of Santokh Singh took the Ghadar movement's anticolonial agenda, Russia's revolutionary practices, and *Sikhi's* ideals to create a message of revolution that was very well received by the Punjabi public. The journal was then not only financially supported by

Ghadarites, but also ideologically supportive of Santokh Singh's demand for peasant and workers' rights.

From 1928 onwards, Sohan Singh Josh joins *Kirti* as its editor and shifted the agenda from being based in *Sikhi* to being based in Marxist theory. This was quite different from Santokh Singh, as he had advocated for taking inspiration from Russian revolutionary practices and not necessarily calling for an application of Marxist theory. Singh had argued that *Sikhi* would remain the ideological drive. However, for Josh, Marxism came to inform many of the ways in which he envisioned a free state of India and served as a means to critique local Sikh political leadership. The August 1928 issue of *Kirti* stated:

Communists wish to establish a real democracy, but we think that a real democracy cannot be attained under the capitalistic social system, nay, both these things are contradictory to each other. What equal right can a poor man have as compared to a rich man at present?<sup>64</sup>

Sohan Singh Josh's call for democracy echoes the early meetings when Ghadar was being created in which the local laborers along the Pacific Northwest demanded a democracy in which all could participate irrespective of color, religion, caste, or citizenship. This article revisits the later history of the Ghadar movement in order to understand its larger impact on Punjab and its struggles for freedom in the 1920s. Tracing the trajectory of these early communist movements in Punjab illuminates how the Punjabi revolutionary was grappling with varying visions of freedom and equality. Throughout these histories of *Kirti* and the Kirti-Kisan Party we can hear the *gunj*, or echo of Ghadar still radiating.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Kirti*. (1926), Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>2</sup> *Kirti*. (1928), Reel Number MF-17984 r.2, Center for Research Libraries; Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1991), p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> *Kirti*. (1926), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries. Translated by Amrit Deol.

<sup>4</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab: A Study of the Movement up to 1967* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1994), p. 19.

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<sup>6</sup> Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, and Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1983), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, and Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1983), 13-15; Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), pp. 2-41.

<sup>8</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, and Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1983), p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, and Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1983), 17-18; Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, and Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1983), p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14 & Sundar Singh, "Hindu Immigration," *The Aryan* (August 1911), MG 30 E281, Manuscript Group 30: Twentieth Century Manuscripts, Kartar Singh Fonds, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

<sup>14</sup> Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Isabel Wallace, *Not Fit to Stay: Public Health Panics and South Asian Exclusion* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> This account is taken from Sohan Singh Josh's *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History*, Johanna Ogden's "Ghadar, Historical Silences, and Notions of Belonging Early 1900s Punjabis of the Columbia River" and Harish K Puri's *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, and Strategy*.

<sup>17</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1977), 158.

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<sup>18</sup> Translation from Urdu to English done by Khuswant Singh and Satindra Singh, *Ghadar, 1915, India's First Armed Revolution* (New Delhi: R&K Publishing House, 1966), 19. Also featured in James Campbell Ker, *Political Trouble in India 1907-1917* (Calcutta: Temple Press, 1973), p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 90.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> The Lahore Conspiracy Trials began in 1915 and charged 82 revolutionaries with conspiracy to overthrow the British Government. While many members were captured upon return to South Asia, others distanced themselves from the movement in Punjab in efforts to escape the clutches of British law. However, as these trials in Punjab could not eliminate the movement within the diaspora, the British government pressured the US government to deport the revolutionaries in California back to South Asia where they could be controlled by British law. The US government thus charged the leaders of the Ghadar movement in California with conspiracy against the British, whom the US was at peace with at the time in the infamous San Francisco Conspiracy Trial of 1917. Many Ghadar scholars consider this to be the moment of the disbanding of the Ghadar Party as factions grew within the movement.

<sup>22</sup> For further reading on the collaborations between Indian and Russian revolutionaries, refer to: Maia Ramnath's *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* & M.A. Persit's *Revolutionaries of India in Soviet Russia: Mainsprings of the Communist Movement in the East*; and Sohan Singh Josh's *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History Volume I & II*.

<sup>23</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 31, April-December 1920* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1966). Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> The Babbar Akali movement was an offshoot movement from the mainstream Akali movement. This was a Sikh-led militant movement which advocated for the use of violence when demanding *gurdwara* reform and freedom from the British Raj. The movement was composed of former Ghadar members and ex-British Indian Army soldiers who did not receive the land grants they were promised during their recruitment for World War I.

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<sup>26</sup> Jane Degres, *The Communist International: 1919-1943 Documents, Volume I* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1971), 386. Found in section of the “Theses on the Eastern Question” titled “The Agrarian Question.” Also mentioned in Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970).

<sup>27</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), 46; Sir Kaye Cecil, Subodh Roy, and Mahadeva Prasad Saha, *Communism in India* (Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1971), p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1977).

<sup>29</sup> Maia Ramnath’s *Hajj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 64. For further reading on the International Workers of the World, see: Eric Thomas Chester, *The Wobblies in their Heyday: The Rise and Destruction of the Industrial Workers of the World during the World War I Era* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab: A Study of the Movement up to 1967* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1994), pp. 20-21.

<sup>31</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), 63. Home Political File No. 41, 1926. National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. The Communist University of the Toilers of the East was established on April 21, 1921 in Moscow by the Comintern. The University trained communist members from across the colonial world.

<sup>33</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), 65. *Kirti*, June 1927.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>35</sup> Mentioned in *Kirti*. (1926), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>36</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), 67. Home Political File No. 235/1926, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>37</sup> *Kirti*. (1926), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

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<sup>38</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), 67. Home Political File No. 235/1926, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>39</sup> Maia Ramnath, *Hajj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> A *Salok* can be defined as the final verse in a Sikh prayer.

<sup>41</sup> *Kirti*. (1926), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>42</sup> *Kirti*. (1926), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>43</sup> “love for the Sikh nation, the hurt of the community, and adoration of the nation,” *Kirti*. (1926), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>44</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), 76. Josh continues to write about how Santokh Singh would in fact be able to recite quotes from memory from Marx’s *Capital* and Sikh passages called *gurbani*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 68; *Kirti*. (1926), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>46</sup> *Kirti*. (1926), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>47</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), 68 *Kirti*. (1926), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>48</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), p. 73.

<sup>50</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1976), 11; Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1991).

<sup>51</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



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<sup>53</sup> The Naujawan Bharat Sabha is one of the organizations that critiqued the persecution of the Babbar Akalis and the defamation of their agenda by Sikh organizations like the SGPC.

<sup>54</sup> This law is very similar to the United States Sedition Act of 1918, which forbade the use of "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" about the United States government, its flag, or its armed forces.

<sup>55</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1976), p. 104.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-6.

<sup>57</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1991), p. 109.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50; N. Gerald Barrier, "Competing Visions of Sikh Religion and Politics: The Chief Khalsa Diwan and the Panch Khalsa Diwan, 1902-1928" states that CKD was a fervent supporter of Punjabi as a Sikh language.

<sup>60</sup> Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), 91. In his autobiography *My Tryst with Secularism: An Autobiography*, Sohan Singh Josh writes: "In fact, the main purpose in starting the magazine was to organize the workers and the peasants around their immediate demands, make them conscious of their ultimate goal and launch their struggles for better living conditions", p.116.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* Sohan Singh Josh recalls receiving a cable: "The League Against Imperialism sends you hearty greetings on organizing the Kirti Conference and hopes that workers' and peasants' parties will be organized and affiliated to the League and thus complete freedom will be gained through the united joint efforts of the oppressed people and classes. Send report your decisions by cable - Gibarlic Andolia, Berlin." This quote is also featured in *Kirti*. (1927), 3. Reel Number MF-17984 r.1, Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>63</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1991), 120. Bhagwan Singh Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (New Delhi: Anupama Publications, 1970), 93. *Kirti*, November 1928 (Microfilm) states: "The Kirti-Kisan Party has been invited to organize its conferences at many places, but money is the real problem now. What can be done by the party people? If money would have been there, this movement would have spread very fast in the Punjab."

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<sup>64</sup> Shalini Sharma, “Communism and ‘Democracy’: Punjab Radicals and Representative Politics in the 1930s” *South Asian History and Culture* (2013) 4:4, pp. 443-464.