

Sikhs on the Cross-Roads: Flows between Punjab, Canada and Calcutta

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The Punjab, Canada and Calcutta, divided from each other by several hundred and thousands of miles, seemed connected in the singular scheme of revolutionaries. The revolutionaries - Ghadarites - had rightfully identified the culprit as British imperialist exploitation of India, which had compelled the Punjabi Indians to go and seek work abroad. On arriving on the Pacific Coast of North America, especially the province of British Columbia, they worked hard, often all hours and at a wage which was lower than that of white settlers. Working in a harsh and hostile environment, with conditions worsening by the day, especially with implementation of several restrictive and discriminatory measures Punjabi Indians began to mobilize for equal rights as British subjects. But the *Komagata Maru* incident and other discriminatory measures sent a clear signal to Punjabi Indians that their future lay in a free India and not in Canada which was quickly moving towards a country for whites only. The Ghadar movement epitomized their aspirations but which could only be realized by waging an anti-colonial struggle to drive out the British.

This paper explores socio-economic conditions of Punjabi Indians in three settings: Punjab under colonial rule, British Dominion of Canada and the Indian port city of Calcutta which was both the embarkation and disembarkation point for all Punjabi Indians, including the *Komagata Maru* passengers who unfortunately failed to make it there. The paper demonstrates how these three spaces were actually intimately connected through flows of people and ideas, newspapers, pamphlets, and importantly, by letters sent back by pioneer emigrants in Canada to awaken their brethren back home and to free India from the 'slavery' imposed by the British.

The Punjab and Calcutta are two distant points on the Indian littoral divided by thousands of miles and yet the name of Calcutta occupies a special place in the heart of all Punjabis, committed to defending the honour of their motherland and carrying the message of energy, enterprise and heroism all over the world. While the Punjabis had invaded the distant shores of all parts of the world in course of their itinerary in the train of military operations of the British, Calcutta was often the port of embarkation for them. The land mass of Punjab lay far into the interior of the country. Familiarity with distant climes excited the spirit of adventure in the Punjabis and they sometimes relocated to another part of the globe in search of better fortunes. Their military assignments in foreign lands brought home the news of better wages for their labour in the more affluent countries. Just as they were required to sacrifice their blood for the defence of His Majesty's Government as equal subjects, they demanded the right to settle in any part of the British Commonwealth where they could get the maximum return from their labour on a footing of equality without discrimination.

Punjabi Settlement in Canada

The Punjabis could make their contributions to the settlement and colonization of Canada, as the country was being opened up and reclaimed from the wild waste in the 1880s. Between 1903 and 1907, Canada was passing through a boom period in its economy and the Federal Government of Canada launched two new railway lines, the National Trans-Continent Line and the Grand Trans-Pacific Line besides the existing Canadian Pacific Line. Railway workers were much in demand to lay down the tracks and for maintenance of these railways. Moreover, the railways absorbed all the coal produced in the mining industries of British Columbia, Alberta and Northern Ontario and thus created a flourishing market for labour. The Sikhs could also put their experience of working in the saw mills of the forest clad districts of Hoshiarpur to good use in the lumber industries of Vancouver, the saw mills and shingle mills of the lower Fraser Valley of the Vancouver region and the Vancouver Island and also in the interior of British Columbia.¹ The Sikhs were also highly in demand as fruit-pickers in the orchards of Sacramento Valley in USA, in the cattle farms and salmon canneries.²

However, this boom was short-lived and from turn of the 20th century white labourers of Canada began to resent unequal competition created by the influx of vast number of cheap workers, which forced them to work for lower wages. An official in the construction department of the South Pacific Railroad Company, who spoke to Dady Burjor, a Parsee engaged by His Majesty's Consul General in San Francisco on the request of W.C. Hopkinson of the India Office, to collect information on the Indian immigrants, was full of praise for the Hindu labourers, who were found to be 'hard working, obedient and pliant'. The usual wages received by them were \$1.60 per day in U.S. gold currency, which was equivalent to about Rs. 4 and 10 *annas*. A Sikh, who had an asparagus farm near Antioch reported that in the picking and packing season some of his fellow countrymen earned as much as three or four dollars a day, which was equal to nine or twelve rupees in Indian currency. It could even go up to 5 or 6 dollars in peak seasons as, for example, in the case of picking beetroots near Chico, California, where the work had to continue from 6am in the morning till 12 and 2 o'clock the following morning as the entire consignment had to be packed into railway freight cars within a specified time. One Government Official expressed his amazement at the physical powers of endurance of the Sikhs and thought that they worked like 'animals'. In fact, these labourers were also able to save a large portion of their earnings because they had a very frugal lifestyle, being able to survive on a meagre meal of '*dal*' and '*chapatis*' and rice, vegetables and a little milk, which would not cost them beyond \$12.00 or \$14.00 per month. Thus in 5 to 6 years, they are able to save 3 to 5 thousand dollars in American currency and bring it home.³ Lured by these prospects, the Sikhs thus tried to enter these high wages zones. However, this created an unequal competition with the white labourers, who were not prepared to lower their wage

requirements to such a modest level. Therefore, the white labourers continued to agitate against the unrestricted immigration of Asian labour from the colonies. Furthermore, the Federal Government was pressed by workers' unions dominated by the white Canadians to bar the entry of coloured immigrants. The presence of Indians was disliked particularly because of their distinct cultural practices, which stood out sharply against western cultural mores. While immigrants from China or Japan showed themselves to be much more amenable to the ways of the country in which they had settled, Dady Burjor reported that Indians continued to remain strongly attached to their religion and their social practices and showed themselves to be inassimilable to the prevalent culture of the country of their domicile. He states:

An Oriental, as a rule, cherishes an undying love for the land of his birth and nativity and devoutly religious and spiritual races like the Hindu never will be assimilated with or be absorbed by the vast white population of ninety million people of this country. ... It is only a race of superior calibre and tenacity that refuses to be engulfed in the vortex of superior force. ... They lay by all they can during their stay in the country and save it to be spent in their own native land.⁴

In 1911, the Ministerial Association of Vancouver set up a Special Committee to go into the question of Hindu (a blanket term for all, largely Punjabi Indian immigrants) immigration. Mr. Stevens, the M.P. from Vancouver, played a leading role in this Committee. Moreover, a special reason for their anxiety was an attempt by the immigrants to bring their families. This, it was suggested, would create isolated enclaves of oriental culture on Canadian land. The local Christian Association passed resolutions against admission of Indian women. The government exerted its utmost power to prevent such a development.⁵ Malcolm Reid, the agent and inspector of the Immigration Department and J.B. Larkin and William Charles Hopkinson, C.I.D. Immigration, together with the local M.P. chalked out a plan to 'export' all the Sikhs to British Honduras (Belize) in Central America. However, the Sikhs were unwilling to migrate to such a low wages zone, where the early immigrants had been brought as indentured labourers.⁶

The Sikhs had organized themselves into a Khalsa Diwan Society in 1907 for the protection of their own interests. The following year, they built the Vancouver *Gurdwara* where they could meet together and decide on a common course of action. It became a rallying point for people of all religions - Sikh, Hindu or Muslim. They appointed two highly literate teachers, Prof. Teja Singh and Hari Singh to represent their case in England and mobilize support in liberal British circles. Later a delegation from the Khalsa Diwan Society led by Raja Singh and priest Balwant Singh of the Vancouver *Gurdwara* approached the Home Government in London and the Viceroy in India for the removal of restrictions on the Sikhs.⁷ This delegation also included Nand Singh, who had arrived in San Francisco from Punjab a year earlier and was considered very

close to Har Dayal.⁸ But in reply to the letter of Raja Singh of the United India League, Victoria, S.H. Slater, Under Secretary to the Government of India, pleaded his inability to press for the entry of persons “other than those who have come on a continuous voyage”. The strategy behind this reply had been worked out as far back as 1908 by the three Secretaries: the Secretary of State for India, the Secretary for the Colonies and the Secretary for Foreign Affairs when W.L. Mackenzie King, Deputy Minister of Labour from Ottawa who headed the Royal Commission enquiring into the methods by which Oriental labour had been induced to migrate to Canada, had visited them. They understood that it was impossible to deny entry to Indian immigrants or their families without a rude jolt to the semblance of equality for all British subjects throughout the British dominions.

The requirement for ‘a continuous passage’ had, therefore, deliberately been woven into the immigration clause to disable Indian immigrants, who could not book a continuous passage from Calcutta. There was, of course, no shipping company in Calcutta which would take them directly to Canada. The passengers from Calcutta always had to disembark at Hong Kong and book yet another passage to Canada. The three Secretaries of State took shelter under this clause to bar entry to Indian immigrants and their families without having to reveal the blatant discrimination that lay behind it. The tacit support of the British government for this stand was made clear by the declaration of the Marquis of Crew, the Secretary of State for India at the Imperial Conference of 1911 of the right of “self-governing dominions” to frame their own immigration policies.⁹ Lord Minto, the Viceroy of India, had clarified his government’s stand yet further in a letter of March 1, 1909 where he clearly denied ‘any intention of raising questions regarding them’. Indian immigrants could neither hope for justice and fair play from the authorities in Canada nor could they get the necessary support from the government of their own country.

This could happen because India was not yet a free country and matters affecting the interests of Indians abroad were not looked after with the same degree of sympathy which could be expected from rulers of their own race. Moreover, the colonial government in India had more concern over the interests of the rulers of these self-governing colonies than about the interests of the downtrodden subjects in India. They did nothing to press the view and concerns of the Indian settlers in Canada. As stated by Diwan Singh, an Indian immigrant to Canada, who wrote to Thakur Singh, Subedar of the 36th Sikhs Dilkhusa Battalion in Lucknow in early 1914:

“What can be done? Arbitrary laws are made to stop the entry of Indians because they belong to an unprotected nation. If other nations have any trouble, their King at once takes steps to remove it. But our King pays no attention to our troubles. Everywhere Indians are governed by arbitrary laws...The Canadians are trying to stop the immigration of Indians entirely, and there is now necessity of union among us”.¹⁰

Moreover, the Canadian, imperial and Indian governments warned all shipping companies against advertising passages to Canada and the lucrative employment opportunities awaiting the Indians in that continent. They were persuaded to withdraw such notifications in *Gurdwaras* which earlier had been their way of circulating information. Many prospective immigrants had reached Hong Kong with a hope to boarding a ship to British Columbia. But no shipping company would sell tickets. They could thus be stranded in Hong Kong for many years and eke out a precarious existence in *the Gurdwaras* there.

The Sikh immigrants were encouraged by the judgement of Chief Justice Hunter of the High Court at Ottawa on 26 November, 1913 which ruled in favour of the 39 immigrants who had arrived by the Japanese ship *Panama Maru* and who succeeded in obtaining writ of *habeas corpus* against the Immigration Department's order of deportation. When Mit Singh, who had been a Secretary to the Khalsa Diwan Society for the past eighteen months, wrote to Bishen Ram, a tailor in village Gojra in Lyallpur district, about the various disputes between the Immigration authorities and Indians and wrote proudly that "Indians reside in Canada by force of shoes through law" he was probably referring to this case.¹¹ However, to neutralize the effects of the Hunter judgement, the Governor-in-Council passed two new orders on 8 December 1913 and 31 March 1914 prohibiting entry of artisans or labourers, skilled or unskilled in any port of British Columbia. The Government of Canada was also trying to discourage immigration even further by raising the minimum amount of money that immigrants should have in their possession when entering Canada. The minimum for new immigrants was raised from \$25 to \$200 in one go creating a huge hurdle.¹²

Baba Gurdit Singh was not aware of these new orders when he chartered the Japanese ship *Komagata Maru* and sold tickets to passengers stranded in Hong Kong, promising to take them directly to Canada by a continuous passage. The ill-fated ship had to beat a retreat and when directed to return to Calcutta, was actually forced to disembark its passengers at Budge Budge Ghat, many miles south of Calcutta. Special trains were kept ready for transporting the passengers immediately to Punjab to prevent their getting further embroiled with local Sikhs in Calcutta.

Sikh Concerns in Punjab

The Sikh question was particularly sensitive to the British because of the close connection of the Sikhs with the British army. Since 1857, the British had been forced to shift their traditional recruiting ground for their Indian *sepoys* from the Awadh/North-West Provinces to the Punjab and the Sikhs had come to constitute the backbone of their armies in India and abroad. But this unflinching loyalty of the Sikhs became suspect after the canal colonies agitation of 1907. The British Government had tried to alter the conditions of settlement of small-holders of canal colony land by an amendment to the Punjab Colonisation of Land Act of 1893 and also introduce a canal water rate of 2 per cent in the Sikh

districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Lahore. The rates were often doubled for cash crops like sugarcane and cotton. The rise in labour costs due to scarcity of workers, caused by a large number of death due to the Bubonic plague was an added irritant. Poor cotton harvests, following the influx of boll worms, proved to be the last straw on the camel's back. The angry Punjab peasant became a ready fodder for the Congress agitators - Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh. On 3rd February 1907, about 10,000 colonists passed a resolution at Lyallpur calling upon Hindus and Muslims to unite with each other against the British. Prabh Dayal, the Editor of the *Jhang Sayal* recited the song *Pagri sambhal O Jatta*, emphasizing the threat posed by the new Bill to the Jat colonists of the region. In a meeting at Rawalpindi on 21st April, 1907, Ajit Singh again called upon the Hindus and Muslims to unite. "We are 30 crore, they are a lakh and a half. A puff of wind would blow them away", he had remarked. He tried to excite the Sikhs in the local regiments and tried to convince them that when the Government could go back on its words with the colonists, it was quite capable of breaking faith with the soldiers and deny them the promised pay and pension. Riots followed in Amritsar, Lahore and Rawalpindi. Deporting Ajit Singh and Lajpat Rai to the Andamans did not bring the situation under control. Finally Lord Curzon's successor Lord Minto had to revoke the new Act on 26th May 1907 and release Lajpat Rai on the request of the Secretary of State on 30th October 1907.¹³

The *Tat Khalsa* movement of the Sikhs tried to rouse the Sikhs against the Chief Khalsa Diwan, the latter founded by the aristocratic and conservative section of the Sikhs with the blessings of the Government in 1902. The *Tat Khalsa* was regarded with suspicion by the Government for the spread of radical ideas among the Sikhs. The emerging middle class and professional men founded Khalsa College, Amritsar, which became the focus of their aspirations. The Government was also worried over the way the students went into rapturous elation while receiving the Indian National Congress politician G.K. Gokhale during the Canal Colonies Agitation of 1907. It, therefore, set up a new Council under rigid Government control, consisting mostly of Government and pro-Government officials, such as the Commissioner of Lahore Division, Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, the Director of Public Instruction, Punjab, the Political Agent, Phulkian States and the Principal of the Khalsa College. The property of the College was vested in a Managing Committee composed of 15 members, of whom 6 were elected by the States, 6 by British districts and 3 were Government nominees. Of the last three, the Lahore Commissioner and the Amritsar Deputy Commissioner were the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman respectively. This provoked a strong reaction among the educated or the neo-Sikhs and the publication of a pamphlet *Ki Khalsa Kalaj Sikhan da hai?* in 1909 authored by Master Sundar Singh of the Khalsa School, Lyallpur, alleging that the Government was trying to undermine the national character of the Khalsa College.¹⁴ In fact, among the persons identified by the C.I.D. with growing radicalism at Khalsa College, Amritsar, were Trilochan Singh, an Arora Khatri and a leading spirit of the *Tat Khalsa* movement; Thakur Singh Giani, a person

with a military background and employed later as a Granthi in Rawalpindi, but later joining Khalsa College, Amritsar, as a teacher; Jodh Singh, Professor of Mathematics and Divinity at Khalsa College, Amritsar, who was in close touch with extremists abroad and circulated an extremist newspaper published from Berlin and other organs published from London's India House run by Shyamaji Krishnavarma and Narain Singh, Head Master, Khalsa College School in Amritsar. The latter was reported to have circulated among students photographs of Master Lachhman Singh, the person accused in the murder of British Officers in Gujranwala. He was also detected by the Government Inspector to be reading out from Arthur Macauliffe's *History of the Sikhs* during a mathematics class. A person by the name of Teja Singh, an Inspector of Singh Sabhas employed by the Chief Khalsa Diwan, was found to be fraternizing with the Aryas and took part in meetings in 1907, where anti-government speeches were made. Jagat Singh, another *Upadeshak* of the Chief Khalsa Diwan was forced to resign for his support to Ajit Singh and Lajpat Rai in 1907, when they came to Amritsar. He praised the *Arya Samaj* for its sympathy to the agrarian agitation of 1907 and was cut short by the President of the Tarn Taran Singh Sabha in the midst of a disloyal speech. He was an occasional contributor to *Sacha Dhandhora*, a Lyallpur newspaper renowned for its radical views. He visited the Khalsa College, Amritsar and got photographed with the students. Yet another Gurumukhi newspaper disapprovingly mentioned by the C.I.D. was *Prem* from Ferozepore, notorious for its Gurumukhi rendering of the writings of Ajit Singh and his *Bharat Mata* 'gang' of Lahore. They were ultimately silenced by a series of press prosecutions in 1909-10.¹⁵

However, many of the *Tat Khalsa* intellectuals like Harbans Singh of Atari, the Vice-President of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, and Bhai Vir Singh, working in the Khalsa Tract Society with Trilochan Singh and publishing the *Khalsa Samachar* from Amritsar, had targeted the Golden Temple of Amritsar as a hot bed of corruption. The income from the land attached with the *Gurdwara* had received a huge boost since the introduction of canal irrigation in these areas and the land settlement by the British had made the *mahant* the owner of this property. With so much money at his command, the *mahant* became debauched and corrupt. The *Dodhara Khanda*, a Gurumukhi monthly published by Suchet Singh, addressed the issue of corruption among the *mahant* and the *pujaris*. They often played into the hands of the Government because they for adding legitimacy to all government orders. Another grievance of the *Tat Khalsa* was the continued worship of Hindu idols with Hindu rituals in the temple premises. Reformers like Labh Singh, himself a Tarkhan, wanted access for *mazhbi* Sikhs in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple. The inclusion of the *mazhbis* among the Sikhs had assumed particular importance because of census operations that were being conducted by the rulers. The *Tat Khalsa* was not impervious to the strength of numbers for the acquisition of all kinds of political privileges under the new dispensation.¹⁶

The tracts authored by these intellectuals sometimes worried the C.I.D. Labh Singh's *A Hundred Years' Calender: Mughal Persecution of Sikhs* seemed

indirectly to refer to British tyranny. Similarly, Jodh Singh's comparison of British rule to Aurangzeb's oppression and call for the sacrifice of heads and property in the name of religion sounded alarm bells in C.I.D. circles. Jodh Singh's book *Jathe Bandi* exhorted the Sikhs to gird up their loins to protect their house against foes through the Chief Khalsa Diwan and the Singh Sabhas. He was probably warning against Government intervention when he used the analogy of a thief entering a house and having a free run of the place. He wanted the Sikhs to steadfastly follow their pristine ideals and pointed out the everlasting nature of these ideals. The valour exhibited by a Sikh lady Daler Kaur against invasion by Mughal troops was the subject of a book of the same title. The purpose of this book was also to remind the Sikhs of their past vigour and to shake them out of the stupor of indolence. This book followed the same strategy of using the analogy of the past to rouse the Sikhs to come forward to fight present day battle for education, service and social progress.¹⁷ Tracts like *Chamak de Lal* based on the exploits of Hari Singh Nalwa, who had terrorized the frontier Pathans in the days of Maharaja Ranjit Singh or *Sachi Yadgar*, narrating the brave sacrifices of the Tenth Guru Gobind Singh were also suspected by the C.I.D. for their attempt to cultivate a spirit of defiance of authority in the Sikhs.¹⁸ Of particular significance for the C.I.D. was the tract *Guru Ke Liye*, which contained the story of the remission of all revenues for the followers of Guru Amar Das by the Emperor Akbar after an attempt at enhancement of the revenue of the Sikh settlements had been tried by Rajput lieutenants of the Mughals. The C.I.D. interpreted it as a tacit encouragement to canal colonists to refuse to pay the enhanced rates.¹⁹

Moreover, the Neo-Sikhs or the *Tat Khalsa* also took the initiative to found a Sikh Educational Conference, which first met at Gujranwala in 1908. The Conference owed its origin to a discussion of Tikka Sahib, a member of the Chief Khalsa Diwan and a representative to the Viceroy's Council with his Bengali and Marathi colleagues in the Viceroy's Council. A Sikh National Educational Fund was set up by the Conference and all were invited to contribute generously for it. However, the Conference soon passed into the hands of more radical elements. Tikka Sahib was later heard to have argued with Trilochan Singh about mismanagement of funds and fanning disloyalty among Khalsa College students. Jagat Singh even went to Berlin to collect funds for this Educational Fund. Attar Singh, a Cheema of Rawalpindi, was a man of little education. But he was a very impressive speaker and toured through *Manjha*, *Malwa* and the Sikh States lecturing on Sikhism and asking women to give up their jewellery. He collected Rs. 5000 for the National Education Fund and paid it during the Rawalpindi Educational Conference. The fund was kept in the Punjab & Sind Bank under the care of Arora Trilochan Singh.²⁰

Yet another source of discontent of the Sikhs was the way the Government had demolished the walls of *Gurdwara Rakabgunge* (purportedly housing the ashes of the martyr Guru Teg Bahadur) in Delhi to make room for a Government house. Initially, the Sikhs had consented but later a protest was registered by the wife of the former *Granthi* of the *Gurdwara* against trespassing on *Gurdwara*

land. Harchand Singh of Lyallpur later made it the subject of a pamphlet and the matter was given wide publicity among the Sikhs as an example of government encroachment on *Gurdwara* properties. The issue agitated the Sikhs so much that the Chief Khalsa Diwan at Amritsar was compelled to call a meeting to discuss the matter. Harchand Singh of Lyallpur took the matter overseas and on 8th March 1914 a big meeting of the Khalsa Diwan was held in Hong Kong to discuss the Rakabgunge affair. The indignation of the Sikhs may be judged by the letter that they addressed from Hong Kong to the *Granthi* of the 19th King George's Own Sikhs at Peshawar.²¹

Activities in North America

These radical and revolutionary ideas were carried abroad by the Sikh intellectuals and students. The free atmosphere of Canada and the United States of America encouraged these students to try to build up a resistance movement to the tyranny of imperialists at home. Men like Har Dayal had already come into contact with like-minded students and revolutionary groups all over the world. In London, the India House of Shyamaji Krishnavarma, the editor of the *Indian Sociologist*, had been the meeting ground for revolutionary men like V.D. Savarkar, an ardent follower of the extremist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Madan Lal Dhingra, who later assassinated Curzon Wyllie, the Aide-de-Camp of the Secretary of State in 1909. Har Dayal had celebrated fifty years of the Mutiny of 1857 along with others with Savarkar's book the *First War of Indian Independence* in 1907.²² Har Dayal had also met the Parsee lady Madame Cama, who had founded the *Bande Mataram* group in France and was in touch with Sardarsinghji Rewabhai Rana. They had attended the International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart in Germany, where Madame Cama spoke for the "dumb millions" of Hindustan, from whom English capitalists were taking away 35 million pounds annually. As a result of this exploitation, the people of India were dying of poverty at the rate of half a million every month. She ended her speech by unfurling the Indian National Flag, bearing the words *Bande Mataram*.²³

Har Dayal was the moving spirit of the Hindusthan Association, founded in the USA, which had about 250 members, mostly students and educated men. Surendra Mohan Bose, a member of this association returned to India to attract more students to the U.S. in order to train them up in nationalist, revolutionary, even anarchist doctrines. Among the office bearers of the Hindusthan Association were men who had earned notoriety for their activities against the British Government like Chandra Kanta Chakravarti, the printer of the *Yugantar* leaflet, M.P.T. Acharya, the printer of the seditious Tamil paper *India*, Tarak Nath Das, Editor of *Free Hindusthan*, and Sarangdhar Das, associate of Har Dayal.²⁴ Surendra Mohan Bose went to Paris to get hold of a manual of explosives and sent it to Victoria through Harnam Singh.²⁵ Kartar Singh of Ludhiana, who had come to study chemistry at Berkeley, also intended to use his knowledge for the manufacture of explosives. He had drawn inspiration from

Krishnavarma's *Indian Sociologist* and *Speeches from the Dock*, containing the speeches of the convicted Irishman Parnell. He had found these books and journals in the library of the *Yugantar Ashram*. Kartar Singh was a classic example of the generation of Indian students in America, tutored in the revolutionary ideology by Har Dayal.²⁶ The name of another person also figures prominently among the agitating students in America; it was that of G.D. Kumar, who went first to Manila and then to Kobe to collect funds for fomenting sedition in India.²⁷

The Pacific Coast Hindu Association, on the other hand, was purely an organization of the labourers. It was built through the efforts of Har Dayal and the Sikh Khalsa Diwan. It had its headquarters at Stockton, California. In an article in the Egyptian Journal *Al Kasas*, published from Geneva, Har Dayal explained what the movement stood for:

The movement is entirely one of the people. The members of the party are peasants or working men. There are only about half a dozen educated men to edit the paper, carry on correspondence and to think out plans.²⁸

For Har Dayal these men of the laboring class were 'men poor in wealth but rich in courage':

When the common people understand something, they want to risk their life in order to realize the ideal. They have no property to make them cowards ... men far and near came to see it and then offer offerings as in a temple. ... They desire economic as well as political freedom. They hate princes, landlords and capitalists. They want a democratic rearrangement of conditions in India.²⁹

They decided to bring out a weekly journal of eight pages, the *Ghadar*, in three languages and smuggle it into China, Japan, East Africa and wherever they could find sympathetic readers. Ram Chand Peshawari, formerly the Editor of *Akash* in Delhi and an intimate associate of Ajit Singh, came to San Francisco on 13th January 1913 to help in the editorial work of the Urdu edition of the *Ghadar*.³⁰ It was proscribed in India but they decided to put it in the envelopes carrying the private letters of the immigrants for their relatives at home and thus bring it to the notice of their brethren in India. 'In California is being prepared the power that will reduce the Empire to dust and ashes.' Har Dayal called it the 'revenge of the exile against the powers of darkness that drive men away from their homes'.³¹

Since early 1914, the postal censor in the various port cities of India began to capture a large number of copies of the *Ghadar* tucked in the envelopes of the letters addressed by the Punjabis to their friends and relatives at home.³² The *Paisa Akhbar* of Lahore dated 19th September, 1914 reported that large meetings were held in 6 different places in California and other parts of America in which Muhammadan and Sikh propagandists lamented the condition of the Indian

settlers in America, Canada and Africa.³³ In May 1914, Muhammad Barkatullah, Professor of Urdu in Tokyo, was persuaded by Bhagwan Singh to come to San Francisco to join the propaganda to urge the Indian settlers to return to their native land and take part in a rebellion.³⁴ Appeals were made for a National Scientific Education Fund and a sum of \$20,000 was collected. Barkatullah was also the author of a pamphlet *Feringhi ki Fareb* (The Deceit of the English), which received wide publicity in Tuticorin (Hong Kong).³⁵ The revolutionaries of the *Yugantar Ashram* presented an explicit threat in a leaflet *An Open Letter to the British Public by the Hindusthanees of North America*, unless the British addressed the problems of the immigrants in the Dominions:

If the Hindusthanees refuse to handle the muskets and to fill the barracks and dignifiedly refuse to be martyrs for the protection of the British Empire, where they are treated no better than slaves, will the Japanese and the handful of British soldiers be sufficient to protect British interests in the Orient? What will be the internal situation in British India if loyal Sikhs who saved the British Empire in India in 1857 and who are now so much ill-treated in the British colonies, especially in Canada, refuse to shoot down their own countrymen for the interests of their overlords who have not the slightest intention of protecting their rights in the British Empire?³⁶

It bore the signatures of nine notorious revolutionaries like Husain Rahim, the Editor of the *Hindustanee*, who had taken over the Charter of the *Komagata Maru* from Gurdit Singh, Tarak Nath Das, Balwant Singh, Bhag Singh and Harnam Singh. The pamphlet then asked:

If these 352 Hindusthanees (in the *Komagata Maru*) returning to Hong Kong can succeed in inducing at least the same number of their friends and relations, who are now serving in infantry, artillery and police force, to desert their posts, what will be the moral effect of such an act?³⁷

Calcutta in the Ghadar Setting

No wonder, the return of the *Komagata Maru* to Calcutta had alarmed the local administration there. Initially, it was unknown where the ship was going to harbour. The reply from the S.P. Faridpur epitomizes the reaction of the provincial administration when the Home Secretary sent urgent messages to the Officers in the districts to alert them of the impending presence of several emissaries of the Hindusthan Association and student League in Bengal:

It is almost utopian to hope that this determined gang won't find some loop hole. The fact is it is the northern races that provide us with our recruits for the Indian army that are the present object of these desperadoes.³⁸

Calcutta, in 1914, had a teeming Sikh population. They were mostly concentrated in Howrah, Burra Bazar and Bhowanipore areas. Extracts from the personal diary of L.M. Sen, a Sub Inspector in the Intelligence Branch and who was engaged in tracing the whereabouts of the Sikhs and to whom a copy of the *Ghadar* had been addressed, gives interesting details of the lives of the Sikh residents of Calcutta and its neighbourhood. The foremost among them was Gul Charan Singh, a Brahmin *Pujari* in a temple in a garden in Narkeldanga. Gul Charan was in charge of the *Guru Granth Sahib* which was placed in the temple. Some eight or nine Sikhs, who were all small shop keepers stayed in this garden and all of them had great respect for Gul Charan. Gul Charan sometimes went and lived with another Brahmin called Ram Singh in 153/54 Mechua Bazar Street, where there was another temple called *Tara Singh Ka Sangat*. Ram Singh was in charge of this temple and had great influence among the Sikhs who visited it. The Sikhs had two other *Sangats* in Burra Bazar - the *Burra Sangat* at 79 Cotton Street, headed by Amar Singh and Man Singh and the *Chhota Sangat* headed by Kalu Singh. These places were visited mostly by Sikh traders and shop keepers. Gul Charan was in close touch with all these men. Another interesting person mentioned in L.M. Sen's diary was Bawa Singh Mistry, who was working in the Kanchrapara Loco Workshop. Some 250 Sikhs were working in the Workshop. Of them, about 100 were directly under Bawa Singh. Bawa Singh's father Sirdar Nehal Singh was a retired military Subehdar. He had served the Loco Workshop as a contractor for some time after his retirement. But he was a man of 'an independent spirit' and left his job there after some frictions with European Officers in the Loco Shop. Thereafter, he went to reside in Kharagpur. In Kharagpur, was living an unusual person - Promotho, a Bengali Brahmin, born and brought up among the Sikhs in the Punjab and a convert to Sikhism. This man had become a Sikh missionary and assumed a Sikh name. He was known to Sardar Nehal Singh, the father of Bawa Singh. He visited Kanchrapara twice in the last year at an interval of six months and held mass meetings among the Sikhs. He also delivered lectures on Guru Nanak and the Sikh religion. While in Kanchrapara, Promothobabu put up with Ratan Singh, a pater maker of the workshop, Chandra Singh and Asha Singh who was a contractor of the workshop. Towards the end of his religious discourses, Promotho suddenly touched upon certain seditious subjects. He got an overwhelming response from the local Sikhs, many of whom greeted him by touching his feet when the lecture ended.³⁹

The Calcutta Sikhs were, however, a volatile lot, having constant communication with their homeland of Punjab. They were often visiting their native villages and relatives in Punjab and sometimes also having properties there. Very often they held agricultural land in their native villages and were often visiting their villages during the *rabi* harvest to claim their share of the crop. If copies of the *Ghadar* reached these people they could be circulated all over the Punjab to their brethren. The official prohibition of the paper to enter India under section 19 of the Sea Customs Act (vide Govt. of India, Department of Commerce and Industry's notification No. 212-C dated 22 December, 1913)

was circumvented by concealing the letters in various ways with personal letters. Every class of Indian had been addressed - villagers, police, members of the Provincial Civil Service, pleaders, barristers, doctors, school masters and even students at colleges in Lahore. The majority of these people were residents of districts which had sent emigrants to America and Canada. The collection of so many names and addresses show a meticulous care and a great attention to details. The message of these letters was quite clear and unambiguous. They underlined the grievances of immigrants as well as those residing in India and exhorted them to rebel. The anonymous letter to Bhagwan Singh, village Narangwal, Ludhiana, for instance, said:

There would be no country to equal ours if the English could only be turned out of it. Kill the white man wherever you meet him. It is admitted that the white people are irreligious. They are cunning and deceitful also. Begin to kill them. Read this paper to other people.⁴⁰

Chanda Singh of British Columbia pointed out in his letter to Harnam Singh of village Chhima Thenbwale in Amritsar, the country's poverty was due to the drain of 50 crores of rupees every year to England.⁴¹ Puran Singh of California in his letter to Pal Singh, Naik, No. 299 B Company Regiment No. 82, Punjabees Nowshera, squarely put the blame for the outbreak of the plague to prevalence of poverty and malnutrition in the country.⁴² The missive addressed to Sundar Singh of village Ruzka Khurd, Jullunder showed the despair and indignation of the writer:

They have taken our grain and money to England and have given famine and sickness to India. The white men have opened their mouths for grain and money, but we will fill them with filth.⁴³

Puran Singh of California also touched upon the grievances of the Sikhs regarding the usurpation of their cultural and educational institutions by the rulers:

The Sikh community has fallen and can do nothing, for the community whose sacred places are taken from them are worthless. The greatest Sikh temple is at Amritsar, and has been taken by the English. Before this the Khalsa College, at which the sons of all Sikhs were studying, was taken away.⁴⁴

Sardar Sundar Singh Majithia was condemned for making an Englishman the Principal of the Khalsa College, Amritsar:

You are a leader of the Panth but you are like Satan. Either drive the English out of the College, raise the nation and prepare yourself to relieve India or your days are numbered. What becomes of the income of the *Har Mandir* (Golden Temple) which was made by the Guru? The wall of the

Gurdwara Rakabganj had been leveled to the ground, but you do not care.⁴⁵

The immigrant revolutionaries wanted the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to work together to face the colonial authorities. Kartar Singh of Victoria, British Columbia wrote to Kher Singh, village Mangeval, Ferozepur how 'these people (white men) eat beef and pork and the meat of sheep and goat and still they rule over us while we quarrel over cows and pigs'.⁴⁶ Syed Ali Khan from Seattle, Washington asked the Editor, *Vakil* to promote unity between communities in the same manner which is done by Zafar Ali, the Editor of the *Zamindar*:

The Sikhs and Muhammadans of this place have sworn an oath to forget the animosities of the past and to live as brothers in the future. We will not rest until we have driven the English tyrants from India and have relieved our Egyptian brothers from oppression.⁴⁷

In another letter to Dr. Feroze Din, village Sasuli, Hoshiarpur, Syed Ali Khan wrote:

We are making preparations here for a mutiny and all Hindu, Muhammadan and Sikh brothers have joined together in the movement. Some of our party has reached Afghanistan and the Punjab and the work has commenced in Bengal. It will soon begin in the Punjab. After killing the English our own Raj will be established on principles of equality. You should preach stealthily and prepare soldiers for the mutiny who will help us on arrival. Our number is increasing day by day. Work on fearlessly; you will get assistance from hidden sources.⁴⁸

Chaudhuri Jaimal Khan of Village Mansurpur, Jullunder was also informed about these 'preparations of a mutiny in America and Canada':

A good deal is being done in Bengal and parties have been prepared. Revenge for Turkey should now be taken.⁴⁹

Lala Devi Chand, Head Master, Arya School, Hoshiarpur was requested to read the papers (*Ghadar*) to the students and teachers and prepare the students for mutiny.

You see how Bengal is improving. Students obtain money for national schools and colleges by committing dacoity and by plundering Government treasuries. These students are trained by their teachers. If you will also preach through several students, the students of all classes will be able to relieve the whole of Punjab.⁵⁰

The letters were so ardent and imploring that they were bound to move their readers to action. 'Do not regard it (the letter) as written on paper in ink' M. R.

Singh wrote to Mit Singh, Havildar, village Bidipur, Jullunder, 'it has been written with the life blood of the heart.' They conjured up a vision of the new dawn and tried to carry with them as many as they could lay their hands on:

This is not the work of one man; lakhs of men are engaged upon this work. There are several workshops where guns and cannons are made. All sorts of work is going on. We shall beat the *Feringhees*, the bastards and drive them to destruction. We will not leave a trace of them in India.⁵¹

Conclusion

Thus the three different locales - Punjab, Canada and Calcutta - divided from each other by several hundred and thousands of miles, seemed to be connected in the singular scheme of revolutionaries. They had rightfully identified the culprit as the British imperialist exploitation of India, which had compelled the Indians to go and seek work abroad. Imperialism squeezed the immigrants dry as long as their services were indispensable for settling the prairie waste. But as soon as the wastes were transformed into flowering gardens, well-connected by a sprawling railway network the need for immigrant labour had been saturated. Canada then wanted to remain 'white Canada for ever'. However, Baba Gurdit Singh had to make his way back home to face bullets from imperialist guns. The *Ghadar* sold a dream of united action by the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, which terrified the imperialists out of their wits. They had pathetically run out of all ideas and could meet the challenge through nothing but only brute force. *Komagata Maru* had raised a storm in the placid waters of the river Hooghly at the Budge Budge Ghat and the blood of martyrs strengthened the resolve of the revolutionaries to break the chains of subjection and breathe the free air of a new dawn.

Notes

- ¹ Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Ghadar Syndrome: Immigrant Sikhs and Nationalist Pride", *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition* (Eds. Mark Juergensmeyer and N.G. Barrier), (Berkeley Religious Studies Series, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1979), pp. 173-190.
- ² Hugh Johnston, "Patterns of Sikh Migration to Canada", *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (Eds. Joseph T. O'Connell, Milton Israel, Willard G. Oxtoby), (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988), pp. 296-313.
- ³ Report of D.S. Dady Burjor, 24 California Street, San Francisco, 30 January, 1914 on "Indian Immigration into U.S." prepared at the

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- instance of His Majesty's Consul General at San Francisco on the request of W.C. Hopkinson, Agent of the India Office: *Home /Political B*, Simla, Records 1 Proceedings of November 1914, File No. 77 (NAI, New Delhi)
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, File No. 77.
- ⁵ Narindar Singh, "Canadian Sikh Identity", *Punjabi Identity in a Global Context*, (Eds. Pritam Singh and Shinder S. Thandi), (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 387-401.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 387-401.
- ⁷ The evening paper *Vancouver Daily Province* reported it on 17.3.1913; Malcolm R.J. Reid, Dominion Immigration Agent to W.W. Cory, Deputy Minister of Interior, Ottawa Immigration Branch, Department of the Interior, Canada, Vancouver, B.C., 17 March 1913: *Home /Political/ B*, Proceedings, File Nos. 37-39, August 1913, (NAI, New Delhi).
- ⁸ W. C. Hopkinson to W. W. Cory, Deputy Minister of the Interior, Canada, Vancouver, B.C. 29th April 1913: *Home/Political/B*, Proceedings, File Nos. 37-39, August 1913, (NAI, New Delhi).
- ⁹ Sohan Singh Josh, *Tragedy of Komagata Maru* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1975) pp.14-15.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
- ¹¹ Diwan Singh to Sardar Thakur Singh, Subedar of the 36th Sikhs (Dilkhusa Battalion) Lucknow in letters intercepted at Bombay on 30th January 1914 in H. Wheeler, Criminal Intelligence Office, Govt. Of India to J.G. Cumming, Chief Secretary to the Govt. Of Punjab in Intelligence Branch (I.B.) File No. 586/1914, S.L.No.47/1914 in Intelligence Branch Records, *West Bengal State Archives*, Kolkata (henceforth *WBSA*).
- ¹² Mit Singh, Vancouver, British Columbia to Bishen Ram, Tailor, village Gojra, Lyallpur in large consignment intercepted at Bombay on 30 January 1914 in H. Wheeler, Criminal Intelligence Office, Govt. Of India to J.G. Cumming, Chief Secretary, Govt. of Punjab in Intelligence Branch (I.B.) File No. 586/1914, S.L.No.47/1914, *WBSA*, Kolkatta.
- ¹³ Translation of the gist of a conversation with Captain T. Yamamoto and Chief Engineer Y. Shiozaki of the S.S. Komagata Maru on the 2nd October 1914 with reference to the voyage of his ship under charter to

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- Gurdit Singh: *Home/Political - Branch A Proceedings*, File Nos. 97-177, November 1914, Proceeding No. 138 Appendix M p.117 (NAI, New Delhi).
- ¹⁴ N.G. Barrier, "The Punjab Disturbances of 1907: The Response of the British Government in India to Agrarian Unrest", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, 1967, pp. 353-383.
- ¹⁵ Memorandum on Recent Developments in Sikh Politics, D. Petrie, Assistant Director of Criminal Intelligence, Simla, 11th August, 1911 in Secret C.I.D. Report in I.B. File No.204/1911, Serial No. 22/1911, WBSA, Kolkata.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, File Nos. 204/1911.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, File Nos. 204/1911.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, File Nos. 204/1911.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, File Nos. 204/1911.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, File Nos. 204/1911.
- ²¹ Weekly Report of D.C.I., 28th April 1914 in File Nos. 137-140: *Home/Political- B, May 1914*, (NAI, New Delhi).
- ²² N.G. Barrier, "Mass Politics and the Punjab Congress in the Pre-Gandhian Era", *The Panjab Past and Present*, Patiala, Vol. IX, Part 2, October, 1975.
- ²³ History sheet of Madame Bhikhaji Rustom K.R. Cama, Criminal Intelligence Office, May 1913: *Home/ Political- B*, No. 61, August 1913, (NAI, New Delhi).
- ²⁴ Weekly Report of the Director of Criminal Intelligence, 5th May, 1914: *Home/Political- B*, Nos. 142-145, June 1914, (NAI, New Delhi).
- ²⁵ Weekly Report of Director of Criminal Intelligence for week ending 13th October, 1914: *Home/Political- B*, File Nos. 218-222, December 1914, (NAI, New Delhi).
- ²⁶ Weekly Report DCI for week ending 12 May, 1914: *Home/Political- B*, File Nos. 142-145, June 1914, (NAI, New Delhi).
- ²⁷ Weekly Report DCI, 27 October, 1914: *Home/Political - B*, File Nos. 218-222, December 1914, (NAI, New Delhi).

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- 28 *Ibid.*, File Nos. 218-222.
- 29 *Ibid.*, File Nos. 218-222.
- 30 Weekly Report of Director Criminal Intelligence, 12th May, 1914: *Home/Political- B*, File Nos. 142-145, June 1914, (NAI, New Delhi).
- 31 Weekly Report of D.C.I., 27 October, 1914: *Home/Political- B*, File Nos. 218-222, December 1914, (NAI, Delhi).
- 32 File No. 586/1914 Sl No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- 33 Weekly Report of the Director of Criminal Intelligence, 22 September 1914: *Home/Political - B*, File Nos.216-17, December 1914, (NAI, New Delhi).
- 34 Supplement to the Weekly Report of the Director of Criminal Intelligence 17 August 1915: *Home/Political- B*, File Nos. 552-556, 1915, (NAI, New Delhi).
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- 36 Weekly Report of Director of Criminal Intelligence, 6 October 1914: *Home/Political - B*, File Nos. 218-222, December 1914, (NAI, New Delhi).
- 37 *Ibid.*, File Nos. 218-222.
- 38 From Home Secretary to C.I. No. 253 Pol. Of 25.5.14; From S.P. Faridpur No. 871 24.7.14 in I.B. File No. 586/1914 Sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- 39 Extract from personal Diary of S.I. L. M. Sen, I.B. 14.7.14 in I.B. File No. 586/1914 Sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- 40 Anonymous letter to Bhagwan Singh, village Narangwal, Ludhiana in Interception of the Newspaper *Ghadr* in private letters mentioned by H. Wheeler, Secretary, Govt. of India to J.G. Cumming, Chief Secretary to Govt. of Punjab, 24 November, 1913 in I.B. File No. 586/1914 sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- 41 Letter of Chanda Singh, British Columbia to Harnam Singh, village Chhima Thenbwale, Amritsar: H. Wheeler, Secretary, Govt. of India to J.G. Cumming, Chief Secretary to Govt. of Punjab, 24 November, 1913 in I.B. File No. 586/1914 sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata

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- ⁴² Letter of Puran Singh, California to Pal Singh, Naik No. 299 British Company Regiment No. 82 Punjabees, Nowshera: H. Wheeler, Secretary, Govt. of India to J.G. Cumming, Chief Secretary to Govt. of Punjab, 24 November, 1913 in I.B. File No. 586/1914 sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- ⁴³ Anonymous letter to Sundar Singh, village Ruzka Khurd, Jullundher in Abstract of Gurumukhi letters captured in Bombay, 9-10th February, 1914: H. Wheeler, Secretary, Govt. of India to J.G. Cumming, Chief Secretary, Govt. of Punjab, 24 November, 1913 in I.B. File No. 586/1914 sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
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- ⁴⁵ Anonymous letter in mail of 20th February, 1914: H. Wheeler, Secretary, Govt. of India to J.G. Cumming, Chief Secretary to Govt. of Punjab, 24 November, 1913 in I.B. File No. 586/1914 sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- ⁴⁶ To Dr. Feroze Din, Village Sasuli, Hoshiarpur district from Syed Ali Khan, c/o L.Danz and Sons, 211 Occidental Avenue, Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. in Letters captured in Bombay, 13th March, 1914 in I.B. File 586/1914, Sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- ⁴⁷ I.B. File 586/1914, Sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- ⁴⁸ To Lala Devi Chand, Head Master, Arya School, Hoshiarpur from J.Ram, c/o L.Danz and Sons, 211 Occidental Avenue, Seattle, Washington, USA in I.B. File 586/1914, Sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- ⁴⁹ Letter intercepted in Bombay, 30th January 1914: I.B. File 586/1914, Sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
- ⁵⁰ Gurumukhi letter captured in Bombay, 10th February, 1914: I.B. File 586/1914, Sl. No. 47/1914: *WBSA*, Kolkata.
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