

The Holt Farm: Nursery of the Ghadar Movement

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Punjabis, especially Sikhs who migrated to North America found employment in agriculture at an early stage of their settlement. They took land on lease or worked as labourers. One such farm was the Holt Farm near Stockton. In fact, the Farm was a testing site of the Holt family that manufactured agricultural machinery. The family could not maintain the farm. Bhai Jawala Singh and Bhai Visakha Singh took over the farm on contract. They brought in Bhai Hazara Singh, Bhai Naudh Singh and Bhai Santokh Singh. Bhai Jawala Singh emerged as the King of Potatoes. The Holt Farm emerged as a common site for meeting. Soon, it came to be known as *Bhaian Da Dera* (The Home of Brothers). It developed into a nursery of the Ghadar movement. This paper attempts to bring this important, but often ignored, fact into light.

The agricultural policy, which the British rulers implemented after the annexation of Punjab in 1849, resulted in bankruptcy of many farmers by the end of 19th century. In place of farming, they started looking for alternative means of livelihood. In those days, the major occupation was recruitment in the British Indian Army. The youth, who were recruited in the army in the prime of their life, retired with pension well before the old age set in. That age was fit not for sitting idle. Therefore, the British rulers started carrying the able-bodied but economically deprived youth as policemen, watchmen, couriers and small jobbers to the East Asian islands. Inspired by them, others also followed them to these islands, which were halting places for those coming from America and Canada. Moreover, information exchange and discussions about the prosperity of these countries inspired them to proceed further to these destinations. The lure to see new lands acquired during their service in armed forces and tendency to take risks for adventure attracted pioneer migrants to these countries. However, although most of them were without technical education and could not use machinery, they could easily perform heavy and difficult manual tasks. Therefore, the West Coast of the USA was best suited to them to earn their living. Here, there was no shortage of work to clear forests, lay railway tracks, etc. There was no match to them in bodily strength. Therefore, contractors employed them for work. This way many Punjabis, who had arrived in the USA, started working in Stockton, a city in the state of California. At a short distance from Stockton, there was an agricultural farm, known as the Holt Farm, named after its owners, the Holt family. The total area of this farm was approximately 500 acres.¹ The Holt family also had a factory for manufacturing machinery and this farm was used to test their usefulness. During this time, Punjabis had started

arriving to this place in large numbers. Beyond doubt, the Holt Farm also provided employment to some of them.

Punjabi Workers of the Holt Farm

Bhai Jawala Singh (b: 1866) of village Thathian of district Amritsar, arrived in the USA in the first decade of the 20th century in search of employment. He had embraced Sikhism and followed the Sikh *Rehat Marayada* (Sikh Way of Living) while living in India. He was an expert in singing melodiously Sikh devotional hymns (*Ras Bhina Kirtan*). Although the definite date of his arrival in the USA is not known, it was, undoubtedly, at the beginning of 20th century. Thus, his age could be estimated at around 35 years. *Bhai* Jawala Singh had personal experience of poverty and deprivation, as he belonged to an ordinary non-farming village family. The experience changed him into a *messiah* of the deprived and the needy. His experience, over a short time in a free country like America, inspired him not only to think about freedom of his own country but also to engage in an actual struggle for its independence. While in America, he was impressed by the ideas of Tarak Nath Das, an Indian patriot living in North America. In 1908, *Bhai* Visakha Singh (b. 1877) of village Dadehar of Amritsar district reached America. He was groomed in his younger age in the British Indian Artillery. He had also become skilled in the recitation of *Gurbani*. When the farmers' movement started in 1906-07 in the new canal colonies, known as the *Bars*, (now in Pakistan) under the leadership of S. Ajit Singh, he was posted in that area. He joined farmers' gatherings whenever he had time and this certainly inspired him with zeal for freedom of his motherland. Under this influence, he quit his job in the Army in 1907. He spent some time in his village. Then with his companions, he went to China and later on moved to San Francisco in America, where he met *Bhai* Jawala Singh. Both men were from the same district. Moreover, they had a similar disposition. So, intimacy was natural. Dr. Bhag Singh has described the meeting of these two as "meeting of angels."² This also happened to be the time when Mr. Benjamin Holt, the only surviving member of Holt family after the death of his three elder brothers, found it difficult to manage both the factory and the farm. He assigned priority to production of agricultural machines and offered to lease out Holt Farm on a contractual basis. In those days, according to Prof' (Sant) Teja Singh, *Bhai* Jawala Singh and *Bhai* Visakha Singh worked at the Ring Tract near Stockton across the river Sacramento.³ When they learnt about it, they decided to take the Farm on contract. Two other members of their group who co-signed the contract of the Holt Farm were *Bhai* (Baba) Hazara Singh of village Dadehar of district Amritsar and *Bhai* Naudh Singh of village Padhana of district Lahore. They mostly cultivated potatoes and their work was so successful the main shareholder of the Farm, Baba Jawala Singh became famous as 'King of Potatoes' in the area.

Bhai Santokh Singh (b. 1893), a resident of village Dhardev of district Amritsar, reached Canada for education *via* England in 1911 and then went over to America. Even before he could register with any institution for education, he

went over to Holt Farm, to both pass time and earn something. He was a handsome and good-looking young boy in his twenties and his appearance attracted the attention of everybody. They loved him for his friendly attitude, humble speech and his eagerness to help others. Moreover, *Bhai* Jawala Singh required an educated young man for the management and maintenance of accounts of the Farm. *Bhai* Santokh Singh happened to be the most suitable person for this task. So, *Bhai* Jawala Singh took to him too, and made him a partner in the management of the Holt Farm.

The Holt Farm provided free *langar* and boarding to the guests. Sometimes, the number of guests could reach anything up to 100.⁴ In a short time, the Holt Farm became the first choice of every Punjabi worker. For these illiterate or semi-literate persons, language was a major hurdle in seeking work from the whites on the Pacific Coast. At the Holt Farm, however, needs and problems could be easily expressed in their own language. In fact, every Punjabi worker could get work at the Holt Farm and even if no work was available, nobody was refused from staying at the Farm. Due to this helpful attitude of the owners, the farm became very popular among the Punjabis of America. In fact, it came to be known as “*Bhaian da Dera*,” (the Home of Brothers), as word ‘*Bhai*’ was prefixed to the names of Jawala Singh and Visakha Singh.

Establishment of Gurdwara at Holt Farm

The patriot Punjabis of Holt Farm had learnt about the establishment in 1908 of a *Gurdwara* in Vancouver, a city in the neighbouring country of Canada. Moreover, East Indians living in Canada openly discussed problems faced by them and found remedies. Perhaps inspired by this and for fulfilling these needs, they also established a *Gurdwara* at the Holt Farm. This *Gurdwara* was not a traditional place of worship. In the words of *Bhai* Kahan Singh Nabha, a Sikh *Gurdwara* is a multi-dimensional site. It is conceived as a school for students, a knowledge *Acharya* for seekers of knowledge, a hospital for the sick; a provider of food for the hungry and resting place for the travelers”.⁵ The *Gurdwara* at “*Bhaian da Dera*” fulfilled this criteria. However, when news about its establishment spread, devotees started visiting it in large numbers.⁶ In the words of *Baba* Sohan Singh Bhakna, “Whenever our clothes were soiled or we wanted to take rest, we stayed at the home of *Bhai* Visakha Singh *ji* or *Bhai* Jawala Singh *ji* and washed our clothes, as their homes were the happy abodes of the patriots. In my opinion perhaps there was no pioneer in California who had not taken rest for a few days in these homes and shared affectionate meals. *Sant* Teja Singh stayed at the houses of these patriots over a long time. *Bhai* Hardayal also took rest in the summer months at the home of *Bhai* Jawala Singh. Perhaps *Bhai* Parmanand must have spent a few days with them. Even students stayed with them during vacations.”⁷ (*Baba*) Prithvi Singh (*Azad*) who enjoyed the hospitality of this *dera* in January 1913 after reaching America, writes, “It gives me a genuine feeling of pleasure and gratitude to remember *Baba* Jawala Singh and *Baba* Visakha Singh. They welcomed me with open arms and lodged me with them”.⁸ In short, the Holt Farm and the *Gurdwara* established there

emerged as a centre for Punjabi patriots and played a very important role in the emergence of strong patriotic fervor. Out of the five partners - *Bhai* Jawala Singh, *Bhai* Visakha Singh, *Bhai* Santokh Singh, *Bhai* Hazara Singh and *Bhai* Naudh Singh, - the idea of serving their country emerged first in the minds of *Bhai* Jawala Singh and *Bhai* Santokh Singh. Though, *Bhai* Santokh Singh was younger than *Bhai* Jawala Singh, he showed exemplary closeness to him. Perhaps due to this, he has been described as “*Palak Putar*” (foster son) of *Bhai* Jawala Singh in the *Ghadar Directory*.⁹ By mutual consultation, they planned to work for the freedom of the country. *Baba* Visakha Singh also joined them. Then they requested *Bhai* Naudh Singh and *Bhai* Hazara Singh to accompany them. Both readily agreed. Now it was also possible to discuss as how to inspire Punjabis for patriotism.

Next Step: Gurdwara at Stockton

The *Bhais* of the Holt Farm held consultations to ensure the next step was taken in the right direction. The Holt Farm was located away from town and special effort had to be made to reach there. Therefore, it was decided that the *Gurdwara* should be established at such a central place, where means of transportation were available and travel was easy and frequent. To give a practical shape to the above idea, it was decided to hold a fully participatory meeting of East Indians, mostly Punjabis, living in California, especially in the Stockton region. December 27, 1911, was chosen as day of the meeting. It was *Poh Sudi* 7, therefore, also the birth anniversary of *Guru* Gobind Singh. Consequently, it was decided to celebrate the day in a grand manner. There was a large gathering on the appointed day. As expected, Sikhs had also gathered in good number. Moreover, “thirty five Musalmans attended with love and twelve Hindu brothers also attended”.¹⁰ These twelve included *Lala* Hardayal and *Bhai* Parmanand of Lahore. In fact, *Lala* Har Dayal had reached Berkeley, after traveling through Europe, at the beginning of 1911. He had been busy organizing East Indian immigrants residing in America against the British imperialists.

On the first day, the management of Holt Farm presented before the gathering, their proposal for the construction of *Gurdwara* at Stockton. A major reason was to ensure that common gatherings would become easier. The participants unanimously agreed to the proposal. After the resolution was passed, money was collected. Those who had money, donated it and rest promised to send it from homes or asked the management to collect it. The total collection was five thousand dollars. A twelve members Committee was formed for the management of the *Gurdwara*. This Committee had *Bhai* Jawala Singh as the President, *Sant* Tara Singh as Secretary and *Bhai* Visakha Singh as the Treasurer. The political situation in India was also discussed during the next two days. It was decided to work to free the country from the clutches of the British. *Bhai* Jawala Singh also shared with the audience his plan to invite intelligent Indian students to come to America with a view of educating them for the service of the country. After the purchase of a building and the establishment of

Gurdwara in it, this place, rather than Holt Farm, became the centre of later activities of Ghadar.

Secret Activities at the Holt Farm

The Sikh managers of Holt Farm were totally dedicated to the freedom of the country. It appears that the establishment of *Gurdwara* at Stockton by patriots of the Holt Farm, for collective and social activities, was the result of a calculated plan. They wanted to keep the secret activities of Holt Farm hidden from the public. Therefore, with the establishment of *Gurdwara* at Stockton, large gatherings took place there and tendency of pioneers to go to Holt Farm decreased. The isolation of the Farm made possible secret activities such as making bombs and training in the use of weapons. According to *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakana*, "the group for military training was assigned to Master Udham Singh and the training started at the Farm of *Bhai Jawala Singh*".¹¹ While talking about the Ghadar Staff, Mr. Isemonger and Mr. Slattery mention that Amar Singh, son of Uttam Singh Rajput of Nawan Shehar, Jullundur, a close friend of Jawala Singh, used to go to his house to acquire experience about bomb making.¹² In the entry on Jawala Singh, son of Kanhaiya Singh of Thathian, district Amritsar, in the *Ghadar Directory*, it has been mentioned that Jagat Ram, Prithi Singh, Amar Singh and an anonymous person of the United Provinces who knew bomb making, used to meet Jawala Singh. Those four persons made a bomb which, unfortunately, exploded during testing and as a result arm of the person from United Provinces was seriously damaged. Ram Singh Pishawari and Santokh Singh were with Jawala Singh in the adjoining room".¹³

The Holt Farm family was totally committed to the Ghadar party cause. In fact, after the departure of *Lala Hardayal* from America, *Bhai Santokh Singh* was appointed Secretary of the Ghadar Party and he had to leave work at the Holt Farm to stay at the Yugantar Ashram, California. Others gave him equal share of income earned from the Farm.¹⁴ With the establishment of Yugunter Ashram and commencement of publication of "*Ghadar*" from there, the need for several workers to stay there became necessary. To avoid burdening the Ghadar Party, workers would contribute \$1.50 per week. Therefore, it was possible to meet the expenses with only small contributions. Moreover, as potatoes and other vegetables were often brought by Punjabi workers directly from the Farm, contribution of the Holt Farm was maximum from this perspective. *Baba Bhagat Singh Bilga* writes, "Everything for 'langar' was fetched from the farm of *Baba Jawala Singh*".¹⁵

Though, by October 1914, all prominent leaders of the Ghadar Party, including the founder-operators of the Holt Farm went to India except for Nand Singh Ladher of district Hoshiarpur who continued political work at the Farm. According to the *Ghadar Directory*, Nand Singh Lather of Lidhran, Hoshiarpur, organized a meeting of Ghadrates on the Holt Farm on 29th January 1915. He was also the chief speaker at the meeting. The *Ghadar Directory* states that others who addressed the meeting included Kartar Singh, Kedar Nath Sondhi,

Udho Ram, Jagat Singh, Mukand Lal Pathak, Mehar Singh, Mela Singh Bal, Phuman Singh, Puran Singh 'George' and Watan Chand.¹⁶

Apathetic Attitude of Historians towards the Workers of the Holt Farm

From the above discussion it becomes evidently clear the important role played by persons associated with "*Bhaian Da Dera*" (Holt Farm) in the history of the Ghadar Party. Regrettably, historians of the Ghadar Party have not dealt with the comprehensive and detailed role played by Holt Farm that it deserves. In fact, the following points are responsible for lack of proper evaluation of the role of "*Bhaian Da Dera*" in the Ghadar party:

- (1) There are two sources regarding activities of armed struggle by Indians settled in America, i.e. details provided by the Intelligence Department of Government of India and the witnesses of the Lahore Conspiracy Trials. Before going to America, *Lala* Hardayal and *Bhai* Parmanand, were accepted as "leaders" in India. Therefore, the British officials following their activities and accepted them as the leaders who raised peoples' movement against imperialism in America also.¹⁷ Subsequent approvers of these "leaders" also followed a similar line;
- (2) *Lala* Hardayal and *Bhai* Parmanand were educated in English. Therefore, they easily became the focus of attention of American newspapers. Hence, they were given the status of the founders of the Ghadar movement; and
- (3) Punjabi Sikh farmers were of simple mind. While in Punjab, they were close to teachings of the *Gurus* and *gurbani*. After migrating to America, there too, the *Gurus* were their main protectors. In their minds, they had a *gurvak* "*Je jeevai patt lathe jae Sabh haram je ta munh pae.*" Hence, the bitter lived experience in a free country inspired in them the feeling against slavery. Therefore, they sacrificed everything for the freedom of the country. But, they believed in complete humility and effacement of ego. ("*Nivai so gaura hoe*"). Hence, they believed in action and shun publicity.

No doubt, "*Bhaian Da Dera*", the Holt Farm, along with other centers worked as the foundation place of the Ghadar Party. The role played by these selfless Sikh pioneers must be highlighted while writing history of the Ghadar movement with a view to putting the record straight. The deserving must be given their due in the interest of truth and natural justice. However, the argument presented in this paper does not attempt at minimizing the significance and important contribution of *Lala* Hardayal in the organization of Ghadar Party.

Rather, it suggests that researchers of the Ghadar Party should not ignore the critical contribution of others to this movement and who worked silently in the background and never cared for publicity.

Notes

- ¹ Bhag Singh Dr., *Jiwani Baba Bhag Singh*, (Punjabi), (Jalandhar: Desh Bhagat Yadgar Committee, 1987), p. 11.
- ² Bhag Singh Dr., *Jiwani Baba Bhag Singh*, (Punjabi), p. 11.
- ³ Rajwinder Singh Rahi (Ed.), *Ghadr Lehar Di Asli Gatha* (Punjabi), (Samana: Sangam Publications, 2012), p. 79.
- ⁴ Raghubir Singh, "Baba Jawala Singh Thathia and Ghadar Andolan", *Gurmat Parkash*, Amritsar, May 2012, p. 76.
- ⁵ Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, *Mahan Kosh* (Punjabi), (Patiala: Punjab Language Department, 1974), p. 416.
- ⁶ "If ten departed, twenty came in, there was always a gathering. It was famous as 'Dera Bhaian da', everybody knew it" in *Atam Katha Sant Baba Visakha Singh* (Punjabi), edited by Malwinderjit Singh Waraich (Amritsar: Gurdwara Prabhandhak Committee, 1987), p. 52.
- ⁷ Rajwinder Singh Rahi (Ed.), *Meri Ram Kahani: Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna* (Punjabi), (Saman: Sangam Publications, 2012), p.
- ⁸ Prithvi Singh Azad, *The Legendary Crusader*, (Bombay: Bharati Vidhya Bhawan, 1987), p. 32.
- ⁹ Bhai Nahar Singh and Bhai Kirpal Singh, (Eds.), *Struggle for Free Hindustan: Ghadr Directory 1913-15*, Vol. IV, (New Delhi: Gobind Sadan Institute for Advanced Study in Comparative Religion, 1996) p. 48.
- ¹⁰ Malwinderjit Singh Waraich, *Atam Katha Sant Baba Viasakha Singh*, p. 55.
- ¹¹ Sohan Singh Bhakna Baba, *Jiwan Sangram* (Punjabi), (Chandigarh: Balrah Sahni Yadgar Prakashan, n.d.), p. 42.
- ¹² *Ghadr Conspiracy Report* in Bhai Nahar Singh and Bhai Kirpal Singh, (Eds.), *Struggle for Free Hindustan: Ghadr Directory 1913-15*, Vol. IV, p. 13.
- ¹³ Bhai Nahar Singh and Bhai Kirpal Singh, (Eds.), *Struggle for Free Hindustan: Ghadr Directory 1913-15*, Vol. IV, p. 38.

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- ¹⁴ Bhai Nahar Singh and Bhai Kirpal Singh, (Eds.), *Struggle for Free Hindustan: Ghadr Directory 1913-15*, Vol. IV, p. 30.
- ¹⁵ Bhagat Singh Bilga, *Ghadr Lehar de Anfole Warke* (Punjabi), (Jalandhar: Desh Bhagat Yadgar Committee, 1989), p. 24.
- ¹⁶ Bhagat Singh Bilga, *Ghadr Lehar de Anfole Warke* (Punjabi), pp. 81, 76, 77, 87, 108, 111, 112, 112, 117, 117and 122.
- ¹⁷ Mr. C. R .Cleveland Director Intelligence Department, Government of India, mentioned in the *Ghadr Directory*, issued on 11th March 1915, that Lala Hardyal was the leader of Indian movement in America. The succeeding officers repeated the same information. This was the basis of the memorandum "Indian Sedition Movement Abroad", prepared by His Majesty's Government and released on 25th August, 1915. It was also the basis of the judgment of the Lahore Conspiracy trial. The judgment begins with these words: "Our final conclusion put briefly is this, that in May 1913 Hardayal commenced to stir up inflammable material in America into state of hostility towards the British Government." The first sentence of the *Ghadr Conspiracy Report* is, "The Ghadr or Mutiny conspiracy derived its origin from the Pacific Coast of America, its centre being San Francisco and its chief promoter Lala Hardayal'.