

Genesis of the Ghadar Movement

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As the British advanced towards the North in the wake of their Indian conquest, they had to follow a distinctly different policy towards the Sikhs than the one they had designed for the vassals and satraps of the decadent Mughal Empire as also the Marathas and Rajputs who gave in without much resistance. It was because the Sikhs were then emerging as a coherent power and had staked their claim to sovereignty over the Punjab. Others were engaged in desperate internecine warfare to survive with their kingdoms and principalities under the British protectorate. Recognizing the relevance and importance of Sikhs on the north western Indian frontier, the British identified Ranjit Singh as the one who could weld Punjab into a sovereign state and they thought it prudent to enter into an agreement with him in C.E. 1809 that demarcated the spheres of influence of both Ranjit Singh and the British. Ranjit Singh, on the other hand thought of the benefit of identifying his possible areas or regions of expansion by signing this treaty.

It has to be noted here that Ranjit Singh ever remained conscious about his sovereign status north of Sutlej and he was always ready to assert this position to the extent possible. He demonstrated this full well in his diplomatic relations with the British whenever an opportunity arose. The Rupar- meeting between Ranjit Singh and William Bentinck marred by protocol wrangling and also Murray's oft-repeated observations to this effect are examples that prove the point. He showed only one weakness at Rupar – his anxiety about Kharak Singh's recognition. That was unnecessary. The British kept a watchful eye on the composition of Khalsa Darbar and

particularly on Hari Singh Nalwa, to assess the relative position of the court personalities. Hari Singh Nalwa who led a diplomatic mission to Simla received special attention and was extended protocol meant for the commander-in-chief of a sovereign power. The British conceded this status to Lahore Darbar till C.E. 1845. Thereafter, Rani Jindan, the Queen mother, became a symbol of this status.

Liquidation of the Sikh kingdom in C.E. 1849 marked a watershed in history of British India. The British deliberately called it 'annexation' and not a conquest : (A) due to Sikh sensitivities; (B) special position of Duleep Singh Maharaja according to the treaty of Vairawal (the Sikh Maharaja did not accept paramountcy of the British); (C) Lord Dalhousie was conscious about the hurt caused to the Sikh psyche due to British perfidy. On their part, the Sikhs as a people, never accepted it as a defeat. They called it usurpation of their sovereign kingdom by the British through deceitful strategies and intrigue and they continue to say so till date. The Sikh psyche refuses to forget this fact.

C.H. Payne rightly recorded, "The splendid bravery and fervid patriotism displayed by the Sikhs throughout the Punjab wars will always be remembered by the British with admiration and respect".¹

Throughout the course of expansion of British power in India, no sovereign state was conquered by them, be it in consequence of the battle of Plassey or the Anglo-Maratha war of 1818. The only sovereign power they faced on the battlefield was that of the Sikhs in 1845 and 1848 which shook the very edifice of the British Empire to its roots.

¹ Quoted by S.R. Sharma, The soul of Indian History, 201. Bhartya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1969. This very fact made the British – Sikh relationship very special and the British remained conscious of this till they left India in 1947.

During the period 1845-49, total defiance of the British by Rani Jindan and her refusal to accept the British as paramount power remained the major British concern. Her banishment from Punjab, escape from the impregnable Chunar fort to Nepal and her proposed royal reception in the Nepal Darbar baffled the British. Though living in self-imposed exile at Khatmandu (Nepal) far away from Punjab, she remained active till she agreed to join her son in England out of her motherly affection. The uprising of 1857 gave her an opportunity to inspire the Sikh chiefs in Punjab to make a bid to throw out the British from Punjab. She contacted the Punjab chiefs and also the disbanded soldiery and even Dewan Mul Raj and Chattar Singh Attariwala who had been imprisoned in Allahabad jail² to make an uprising possible in Punjab.

The mutiny of 1857 was destined to fail. It threw up no capable leader except Rani of Jhansi, Tantia Tope, the last valiant Maratha warrior of school of Shivaji,³ and Peshwa Nana Sahib of Bithoor. The Mughal royals also could not project any one to inspire the people. Moreover, the revolt was confined to the Gangetic Doab and some territories of modern Madhya Pradesh. The Sikhs on their part regarded the sepoys of Hindustan as the ones who had fought as mercenaries against them and thought that they possessed no patriotic instinct. Hence, they gave them no support. The Sikh support about which the British trumpeted especially, was symbolic as well as strategic. Kapurthala and the Cis – Sutlej Sikh Chiefs were made to appear as a face for the Sikh

² M.L. Ahluwalia (Ed. Prithipal Singh Kapur), Maharani Jind Kaur, 113, Singh Bros., Amritsar, 2001.

³ Savarkar, The Indian War of Independence, p.209.

support. Still V.D. Sarvakar unfairly called it Sikh treachery.⁴ In fact, in the wake of restructuring of the British Indian army after the collapse of the mutiny, the Sikhs came to possess an important position and this factor continued to influence the writers of Savarkar's ilk and the tidings of Sikh politics in Punjab until 1947.

II

It might sound repetitive but it has to be kept in view that the Sikhs never reconciled to the loss of their sovereign power. The tight embrace of British imperialism shattered the Punjab economy in consequence of the integration of Punjab into the imperialist market economy after C.E. 1858. This led to empowerment of new Sikh landed aristocracy created by the British and some others from the urban trading classes. The peasant - proprietors slipped into indebtedness and the consequent fall in food production which caused repeated famines. Six famine visited Punjab before the end of the nineteenth century. The relief measures did not meet the gravity of the calamity. The worst affected peasant proprietors were mostly Sikhs. This was followed by the outbreak of the epidemic of plague. The cause of this misery was attributed by the people to the fall of kingdom of Ranjit Singh. There was some respite when the British decided to recruit Punjabis in military services. The introduction of the concept of martial race for recruitment came as an added benefit for the Sikhs. This was in consequence of the realization on the part of the British that maintenance of the traditional army by Ranjit Singh identified the Sikhs with the state and also ameliorated the economic condition of the Sikhs.

⁴ V.D. Sarvakar, *The Indian War of Independence 1857*, p.158. See also "The Sikhs did not wish well to the revolutionaries even at heart", p.496. First published by Phoenix, London, 1909. (Reprint 1947, Phoenix, Bombay cited).

The British initiated some other measures like augmenting irrigation facilities that could bring some relief to the Punjab peasants, to win their loyalty. But there was hardly any let up. The adventurous Punjabis looked around to find other avenues – emigration to foreign lands seemed to provide some opportunities although the readily available option there was only labour. Soon after the annexation of Punjab, quite a number of Sikhs ventured to emigrate to Far East where they got jobs as policemen and security guards. Some also took to money lending and hawking. After the royal proclamation of 1858, some more enterprising Sikhs thought that they would be treated as citizens of the British empire after the Queen's proclamation, 1858 (East India Company's hegemony having ended). Moreover, the prospects appeared to be tempting when advertisements began to appear in Punjab newspapers on behalf of shipping companies and labour contractors from the Pacific coast of Canada and North America. Initially, some of the Sikhs who were in the Far East thought of shifting to Canada and the U.S. The early immigrants to Canada were engaged in clearing jungles, levelling ground, working in lumber mills, loading wooden sleepers for railway tracks etc. etc. Those who got engaged in labour, settled near Vancouver in British Columbia. Others who went to USA settled on the farms in Sacramento Valley in California or around Oregon and Washington on lumber mills. Soon these Sikh immigrants earned reputation of being honest and hard working but in the process they also became victims of jealousy of the whites who considered them rivals in getting jobs. The interesting point to remember here is that the Sikhs even when face to face with such deplorable conditions, refused to forget that they had been sovereign rulers of the Punjab and their kingdom was usurped by the British. Such was indeed the *Khalsa*

Raj syndrome. Moreover, they did not carry any race/colour complex with themselves, either.

But these Sikhs got the worst shock when they became victims of worst type of racial discrimination. They had gone to Canada and the U.S. in search of greener pastures. But their presence in Canada aroused acrimony against them. The Canadians shouted at them with slogans like ‘White Canada for ever’.⁵ The Americans were also not far behind in the matter of racial discrimination. They described the Sikh presence in America as ‘*turban invasion*’. They would often taunt the Sikh immigrants by saying “50 Britishers rule over 26 crores – what a humiliation”. This was too much for those who had been shouting taunts at those whites (Europeans) who joined service with the Khalsa army after Napoleon’s humiliating defeat.

By and large these groups of immigrants were turbaned Sikhs and men of faith. They have had the feel of misery as also the breeze of reform that had started blowing in their own country. They worked hard, earned money and yearned to return to live better life in their sacred home land. They were aware about the spread of education and the onset of Singh Sabha reform movement. Such were the people whom we now call the earliest Sikh diaspora, conscious about their filial and fraternal bonds in the land of their Gurus who had given them prowess and dignity. The community back home also remained anxious to keep the diaspora Sikhs closer to the main stream. They kept the overseas community reminding that to fight a grim battle for racial justice is to fight

⁵ To oriental grasp and greed we’ll never surrender,
no, never our watchward be,
‘God save the king’
White Canada for ever’.

for basic human rights in accordance with the basic tenets of Sikh faith. The grace of Guru Nanak – Guru Gobind Singh had to be invoked, and they remembered that the inspiration to fight for the causes righteous was ingrained in the sermon delivered by Guru Gobind Singh on the eve of the creation of the Khalsa at Anandpur Sahib in C.E. 1699. This had sustained the Sikh community throughout their eighteenth century struggle against the Mughals and the Afghans.

III

In the early twentieth century, the Sikhs were in the midst of regeneration. Khalsa schools were being established in a big way in the rural areas. The Khalsa College, Amritsar had come into being. Before the end of the first quarter of the century another two Khalsa colleges started functioning at Gujranwala and Lyallpur. The Sikhs found feet to stand on their own to face the on-slaught of the Christian missionaries and the Arya Samaj. Namdhari movement had put focus on the British oppression and the need to revive the spirit of the Khalsa. Intellectual activity reverberated to interpret the Sikh gospel as enshrined in *Gurbani*/Guru Granth Sahib. Professor Sahib Singh had started his work on *Gurbani Viyakaran*. A new missionary college *Khalsa Parcharak Vidyala*, Gharjakh, Gujranwala (now in Pakistan) had begun to churn out well trained missionaries oriented by the new system of education to meet the new challenges. Bhai Bhagwan Singh trained at Gharjakh (Gujranwala) rose to be a prominent leader of Ghadar movement. He had earlier served as a distinguished *Granthi* at Hongkong Gurdwara before proceeding to Canada. During this very period Bhai Vir Singh started his literary career and launched The '*Khalsa Samachar*'. Sant Attar Singh, a popular Sikh divine of the time, was undertaking intensive tours in the length and breadth of

Punjab to inspire the Sikhs to look unto their Gurus and establish new educational institutions to discover their great heritage. He got associated with the Sikh Educational Conference and earned a name as an enlightened Sikh missionary (although he himself had never been to a school for formal education). In the process, he spotted one Niranjan Singh Mehta (hailing from Gujranwala district) who had served as Vice-Principal of Khalsa College, Amritsar. He baptized him, renamed him Teja Singh and encouraged him to go abroad and thus drafted him with a mission to prepare the ground among the Sikh diaspora to rise against the discrimination meted out to them and uphold the righteous causes.

On arrival in England Teja Singh's first concern was to keep the Sikh Identity intact. He and his three associates, Amar Singh, Dharmant Singh and Hari Singh resolved to keep their hair intact whatever the difficulties or adverse circumstances. Teja Singh wanted to join the Cambridge University only to facilitate the admission of turbaned Sikh students in this great seat of learning. Mr Jackson; the tutor of Downing College, Cambridge who allowed him admission despite resistance of some teachers asked him to ensure that he wore the college gown while supporting the turban. Teja Singh was the first turbaned young Sikh who got into the Cambridge University. Soon other Sikh students joined and **the Khalsa jatha of British Isles** came into being. These events got publicity back home to encourage the rich and well placed parents to send their sons for higher education to England without inhibitions.

Teja Singh was a restless soul, full of religious zeal and enthusiasm to serve his community. He was keen to proceed to USA. He had got admission for M.A. (Harvard). He wrote to Sant Attar Singh to permit him to proceed to USA and even visit Canada to

help Sikh brethren whose plight was becoming a matter of concern for the Sikhs in Punjab. Meanwhile, he also got admission in Columbia University, Teacher's education course. Sant Attar Singh sent his consent. But Sunder Singh Majithia, (then a prominent Sikh leader) ever conscious of his own position, cautioned Sant Teja Singh not to meddle into the affairs of overseas Sikhs. But that was not to be.

At Columbia, Teja Singh impressed his teachers, particularly a visiting professor from Canada with whom he interacted during one of his lecture. He suggested to Teja Singh to deliver a lecture on Contemporary India. Teja Singh instead delivered two lectures – one on Contemporary India and the other one on 'Nanak - the founder of Sikhism'. Teja Singh left a lasting impact on his audience, some of whom carried the news of his arrival in the U.S. to B.C. Sikhs. Bhai Balwant Singh, *granthi* of Vancouver gurdwara was in search of some such person. As such, he contacted Teja Singh without any loss of time and invited him to Vancouver. Teja Singh agreed readily. This four week visit to Vancouver gave Teja Singh an inside view of the life and conditions of Sikh immigrants in Canada. He returned to New York via Seattle, Portland, San Francisco & Chicago. Destiny took (Sant) Teja Singh to Canada, a second time in a bid to help one of his white acquaintances, Mr Crawford. On way to Vancouver by rail, he heard horrible tales from a Canadian passenger about the plight of Sikhs in B.C. and plans of the Canadian Govt. to settle them in Honduras, a Pacific Island where the work conditions and wages were poor and climate inhospitable. On reaching the Vancouver Gurdwara, Teja Singh also learnt about the hostile media propaganda, maligning the Sikhs as 'dirty and idle'. Teja Singh decided to counter this propaganda by calling a conference wherein he forcefully contradicted this disinformation media campaign

against the Sikhs. He talked about Sikhism being a 'young and dynamic faith with a noble mission'. The effect of all that Teja Singh did was singular. He intensively campaigned against Honduras proposal. Consequently, the British governor of Honduras reported to the 'home government' that there could be adverse reaction of the Sikhs in the British Indian forces against any arbitrary decision on Honduras plan, which was finally shelved. This was aptly described by the diaspora Sikhs as their singular victory. The Guru Nanak Mining Company, which Sant Teja Singh got registered to help Mr Crawford and refurbish the image of Canadian Sikhs went a long way to make the WHITE Canadians look towards the Sikhs as enterprising people. After this, Teja Singh busied himself in the task of preaching Sikhism exhorting the Sikhs to get Khalsa initiation. He visited various Sikh habitations; addressed congregations, appealing the Sikhs to maintain their distinct appearance and keep their hair unshaven. He even organized *amrit parchar* wherein 20 Sikhs were baptized and a plan to raise a Gurdwara in Victoria was also given concrete shape. From Victoria Teja Singh and his jatha went to Seattle. He delivered a lecture in a Washington University meeting where many Indian students were present among the audience. Here, he also met Swami Sat Dev. It is said that Teja Singh initially met with jeers even from some of the Sikhs when he pleaded with them to keep their distinct identity intact and get baptized. But he ignored such people. By and large, the activities of Teja Singh in Canada and America galvanized the Sikh immigrants and enabled them to face the ordeals with forbearance and fortitude. The establishment of Gurdwaras gave them not only places of worship of their faith, but also community centres and even provided them with platform for effective and cohesive secular activities. Before Teja Singh decided to return back to

Punjab, a Gurdwara had been inaugurated in Victoria with great enthusiasm and celebrations among the Sikh diaspora community of Canada. Besides this, the entire layout for a scheme to establish a Gurdwara at Stockton (USA) had also been finalized and effective steps taken to raise the Gurdwara.

Sant Teja Singh possessed a highly intellectual personality who was a participant and witness to many a crucial development in the Sikh diaspora. His assiduous work among the Sikhs of B.C. and Stockton (USA), made him, their well known sophisticated interpreter and encouraged them to rally round a common cause to effectively counter the negative propaganda campaign launched against the Sikhs by the media. In fact, it was Sant Teja Singh who consolidated the Sikh public opinion and gave them strength to look ahead. As a result, Hopkinson a govt. spy was drafted to keep a close watch on him. The likes of Tarak Nath Das Hardyal and G.D. Kumar became wary of his religious zeal. In fact, they felt jealous of him because their sporadic rhetoric had been effectively countered by Sant Teja Singh. But later on Tarak Nath Das admired Teja Singh's organizational skills. Sant Teja Singh inspired the diasporic Sikhs to stand on their own, not to be apologetic about either their being Sikhs or Indians. By doing so he was unconsciously preparing the ground for the impending Ghadar Movement.

IV

While Teja Singh was amidst the Sikh immigrants in Canada and the Pacific coast areas of USA, there was an influx of young Indians converging on famous educational institutions of England. Prominent among the early arrivals was V.D. Savarkar; who became famous for his book 'The Indian War of Independence 1857'

published in London in 1909.⁶ He called his work a re-interpretation of the uprising of 1857.⁷ Most of the young Indian students coming to London for studies etc were nationalists and were captivated by the idea of independence. Some of them were often characterized as 'extremists' by the Britishers. Shyamaji Krishna Varma was one such brilliant person whose mastery in Sanskrit was recognized by Sir Monier Williams, Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. Shyamaji got his B.A. and M.A. degree at Oxford. It was he who established India House, London which became the hub for the Indian youth. He also founded India Home Rule Society. The British regarded India House as a sinister and evil institution. Shyamaji Krishna Varma, on return to India, served in princely states and got involved in strong conflicts with British officials. Thus, his 'extremist' stance got blunted. But his lasting contribution was India House in London which remained a shelter/home for many Indian national activists. Savarkar on the other hand was a man with a mission hailing from Maharashtra. Like Shivaji, he was a devotee of goddess Durga. Soon after, Tarak Nath Das, a Bengali devotee of goddess Kali, joined him. Both in Maharashtra and Bengal, political terrorism was closely connected with the revival of Hinduism.⁸ Savakar organized a youth organization, called it *Abhi-Nav Bharat Secret Society* through which he expounded his theory of *Swadharma and Sawaraj*. This theory linked Indian patriotism directly with Hindu religion and this became the starting point of what is now termed as Hindutava as also the communal tangle of India. Others formed an Indian Association headed by Dada

⁶ The book was originally written in Marathi. It was translated into English by a few brilliant Maratha students who were then in London for ICS examination and were members of the *Abhi Nava Bharat Revolutionary Society* founded by Veer Savarkar. The work was supervised by V.V.S. Aiyer.

⁷ Savarkar V.D. *The Indian War of Independence*, ix-x, Phoenix, Bombay, 1947.

⁸ Khushwant Singh, *History of the Sikhs*, Vol.II, 190 O.U.P. Delhi, second edition, 2004.

Bhai Naroji. Har Dayal, during this very period, was in England on a Govt. scholarship and was in his first term at Oxford. He was the first North Indian; who got this scholarship. But Har Dayal's sharp intellect did not let him pursue his studies peacefully. He came under the spell of Savarkar, Lajpat Rai and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He prepared a sketch of a complete political movement for emancipation of India, wherein he did not rule out 'diplomatic, military or other means'. He even thought of Bomb explosions. He returned to India, met Lajpat Rai at Lahore but he was never at peace with his mind. Therefore, he returned to England on the advice of Lajpat Rai where he had to live in dire poverty. At last, he decided to proceed to the U.S. Emily C. Brown; his biographer shall like us to believe that (Sant) Teja Singh persuaded him to "provide leadership to thousands of Punjabis working on fields and in factories on west coast of USA for social acceptance and economic equality".⁹ But this statement does not stand scrutiny because Hardyal had no sympathy for the Sikhs. In one of his articles sent to Modern Review, he describes the Sikhs only as "a dominant group among the emigres". He does not define them in their religious or social context but looks towards them as "peasants, timid shabby and ignorant"- a description close to the one that their white hosts gave them. He goes on to say "No one could live in the U.S. without being lifted to a higher level of thought and action". How could a person with such an opinion about the toiling Indians be an 'inspirational genius', for the founding of Hindustani Association or the Hindi Association in Astoria?¹⁰ Here it has to be kept in mind that the fight against racial discrimination had to be fought in a different manner. Canadian whites still maintained affinity with their 'mother country'. Their emotional

⁹ Emily C. Brown, Har Dayal, Hindu Revolutionary and rationalist, 31. (Manohar, New Delhi, 1976)

¹⁰ Harish K. Puri, Ghadar Movement, A short history, XI.

bonds with the British remained intact. The British Indian Govt. also plumped for them. This fact became a major cause of dischantment of the Sikhs/Indians with the British who relented only in case of colonization of Honduras Island. The U.S. on the other hand had fought for independence against the British and expressed their anguish openly and in due course their source of inspiration became the French Revolution. Here the Sikhs in California had lived and experienced an aura that enabled them to imagine and see through 'the glow of freedom'. Such was the inspiration of those veterans who came forward to organize the Hindi Association (later known as Ghadar party), launched a newspaper, named it Ghadar and hired the services of Hardayal as editor. This was also in consonance with the initiative of their brethren in Canada who had earlier started publishing *Sudesh Sewak* and *Sansar*¹¹ to counter racial discrimination. No doubt that Har Dayal was named as Secretary of Ghadar party with Sohan Singh Bhakna as President but it is role of these so called London revolutionaries that brought the whole movement to a naught. The idea of seeking German support during the war against Britain proved to be disastrous. The misappropriation of funds by Ramchandra, Chakarvarty or Gupta brought bad name to the movement. Fortunately, the Sikhs on the whole proved to be honest, selfless and disciplined during the course of the movement.¹² To sum up, it has to be pin pointed that Ghadar Movement was the pioneer movement that set a clear goal before the Indians to attain independence. The vast majority of those who participated in this movement were Sikhs. These adventurous people combined religious fervour with radical politics and welcomed all and sundry to contribute towards the cause. Most of

¹¹ Giani Kesar Singh (compiled), *Ghadar Lehar di Vatik*, 63-64 (P.U.P. 2008).

¹² Khushwant Singh, *History of the Sikhs*, Vol.2, 189 (footnote), Oxford University Press (2nd ed.) 2005.

their literature was printed in *Gurmukhi*. For the first time, this movement gave a secular face to the struggle for independence. Still the role of the Pacific Khalsa Dewan Society and Gurdwara Stockton towards the rise of the Ghadar Movement cannot be belittled.

In view of the above, I am of the opinion that on this auspicious occasion of the centenary of the Khalsa Dewan Society, Stockton Gurdwara Sahib and the Ghadar Movement, we should decide to conceive a project for indepth research work to be undertaken by an eminent scholar to highlight Stokton Gurdwara the Ghadar Movement and the Sikh struggle for survival and racialism in Canada and the U.S.A.

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