

# **Ghadar Movement: Its Origin and Impact on Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and Indian Freedom Struggle**

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The Ghadar Movement that originated in 1913 and Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar on April 13, 1919 are significant and inseparable events in the modern India history. Even though the original Ghadar movement started and ended before the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre and had waned significantly after 1918, it continued to have some impact until 1947. The impact of the Ghadar movement peaked with the murder of Michael O'Dwyer (the former Governor General of Punjab who had ordered the massacre of the Punjabis) at Caxton Hall in London on March 13, 1940 and eventual freedom of India from the British. Both these events created political turbulence that had worldwide consequences. Both these events shook the very foundation of the British Empire in India and had impact in other countries as well.

## **Reasons for Sikh Emigration to Canada and US**

The Sikhs and other Indians came to Canada and US for better life and opportunities for themselves and their families. They did not have any political agenda at that time. Most of them were marginal farmers and artisans in Punjab and were Sikhs. There was a series of droughts in Punjab after the British took over. Many Sikh farmers had lost quite a bit of their ancestral lands to Hindu moneylenders, were in a financial trouble. Drought and failed crops had sapped the energies of the general population and the farmers. They had heard about better opportunities abroad and by their very nature, not afraid to take risks. However, they never thought they would face discrimination, inequity, and injustice. They experienced this firsthand in Canada and US. Thus the Sikh discontent grew out of discrimination in foreign lands. Their 'King Emperor' did not do a thing to alleviate their misery.

The first Sikhs to ever enter British Columbia were on an official trip as part of the Hong Kong army regiments who were traveling through Canada in commemoration of the Queen Victoria of England's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Following this initial visit, a second contingent of Punjabi soldiers visited British Columbia in celebration of the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902. They liked the land and vastness of the country and some of them stayed there and invited their relatives and friends.

The Canadian government not only wanted to stop the Sikh emigration to Canada, they wanted to get rid of the Sikhs and tried to persuade them to move to British Honduras (now an independent tiny country known as Belize) and permanently settle there. It is bordered by Mexico on the north and Guatemala to the south. An Indian delegation went to British Honduras and found out that the climatic conditions were very poor and wages were too low

and some Indian families over there were living in miserable conditions and abject poverty. There was a great danger of malaria and yellow fever. The Sikh did not agree to move to Honduras in spite of great pressure by the Canadian government.

The Indians were not allowed to bring their wives and children. To add insult to the injury, the Canadian government came up with another plan to keep the Indians out. They used a three prong approach: 1) Put a condition on all immigrants that their sea voyage should be direct and continuous from India and they must not change the ship at any port between India and Canada; 2) Made it mandatory for each passenger coming from India to show \$200 cash; and 3); Worked up the Canadian public against the Indians and spread hatred against them. That put a great stress on them and their families and created hatred towards them in the minds of the majority community. Similar plan was put in place in the US to ban any Indians from coming to the United States by passing specific laws

A Canadian immigration law was specially designed to keep the Indians out because there was not direct ship voyage from India to Canada. Most people could not afford to show \$200 for each family member. The Komagata Maru ship incident of 1914 is a textbook example of such extremely biased and unfair treatment of the Indians. The Komagata Maru was a Japanese ship, which was hired by Gurdit Singh in 1914. He wanted to bring Indians to Canada. Komagata Maru reached the Hong Kong, which was to go to Canada via Japan as per plan. 376 travelers on the ship were Indians, out of which 340 were the Sikhs. The Komagata Maru ship was not allowed to reach the Canadian shore and the ship was forcibly returned to India from Vancouver. When the passengers reached at Calcutta at the Baj Baj *ghat*, about 17 km from the Calcutta port, a train was waiting for them to take them directly to Punjab. The Sikh insisted upon taking their holy book Sri Guru Granth Sahib to a local Gurdwara and not all of them wanted to go back to Punjab. They were fired upon by the police. As a result many people were injured and killed.

### **Ghadar Movement, Its Origin and Development**

“Ghadar Party’s root organization was the Pacific Coast Hindustan Association, which was formed in 1912 in Portland, Oregon in the United States. Sohan Singh Bhakna, G. D. Kumar, and Pandit Kanshi Ram were its president, secretary, and treasurer, respectively.”<sup>1</sup> Later a branch of this organization was established in Astoria, Oregon after Sohan Singh Bhakna and Udham Singh Kasel were removed from their jobs in Portland and joined Bhai Kesar Singh. They used to publish an Urdu newspaper called “The India.” Ghadar Party had branches in 18 different

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<sup>1</sup> Wadhawa Singh, *Introduction to the Sikh Temple Stockton and Ghadar Party*( Stockton: Sikh Temple Stockton, 1983), 45

countries. About half a dozen of them were underground, especially in a country that was under the British rule.

The seed of discontent that manifested itself as Ghadar movement was actually sown in Canada as early as 1907 with the establishment of Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver. It provided a place of worship, communal consciousness, camaraderie, rallying point, and even practical help by providing food and housing. This was the place where the Sikhs discussed their issues and took important decisions. Most of them worked in the lumber mills and farms and other agriculture related businesses and construction where they often encountered, jealousy, racial slurs and even physical attacks from the whites. In 1907 racial riots broke out in Bellingham, about 20 miles south of the Canadian border in the Washington state. All the Sikhs and Indians were driven from their homes by the white mobs. All of these factors solidified the unity of the Indians regardless of their faith.

### **Role of Lala Har Dayal**

Lala Har Dayal was born in Delhi in a Hindu “Kaisth” family in 1884. He was a brilliant student who He received his M.A. in English from Government College Lahore and an M.A. in History the next year. The he went to Oxford University for further studies. He came back to India in 1908 and returned to England where he published the *Bande Matram* newspaper. Later, he came to the US and became a professor of Philosophy and Sanskrit. On March 30, 1913, he reached Saint John, Oregon state along with Bhai Parmanand at the invitation of Sohan Singh Bhakna. He was appointed the General Secretary of the Ghadar Party and the Chief Editor of the Ghadar newspaper. He had lectured on anarchism at Stanford University before he joined the Ghadar Party which was against the American Government. His arrest warrants were issued and he was on a bail. He jumped bail and went to Switzerland. According to Giani Wadhawa Singh, the former Head Granthi of Stockton Gurdwara, “After this Lala Har Dayal did not have any correspondence or connection with the Ghadar Party. He died in Philadelphia in 1939. There is no doubt that the foundation of the Ghadar Party was laid down before he joined the party, the work of the party went on with full force after he left, but the office work that he did for the party and the work he did for the newspaper for five-and-a-half months will stay alive in the history of the Ghadar Party.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, “After the German defeat in [World War I](#), Har Dayal settled in Stockholm as a professor of [Indian philosophy](#) and wrote *Forty-Four Months in Germany and Turkey*, in which he related his wartime experiences with some distaste, arguing that if the weaker countries of Asia could not gain their independence, then British or French

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<sup>2</sup> Wadhawa Singh, *Introduction to the Sikh Temple Stockton and Ghadar Party*( Stockton: Sikh Temple Stockton, 1983) ,127

rule over them was better than that of Germany or Japan. In his later years Har Dayal decisively rejected his earlier revolutionary viewpoint. He abandoned his Anglophobia, advocated the mixed British and Indian administration of his country, and became a firm admirer of Western culture and values.”<sup>3</sup>

Here are the views of Michael O’Dwyer about Lala Har Dayal,

“He arrived in the United States early in 1911, and established himself at Berkeley, California, where seditious movement had been at work for some years to corrupt the Indian immigrants, chiefly Sikhs, of whom several thousand had settled since 1907 along the Pacific coast from Vancouver to San Francisco.

Har Dayal found the ground prepared and at once set to work to sow the seed... The infamous Ghadar newspaper, which openly incited to murder and mutiny and urged all Indians to return to India with express object of murdering the British and causing revolution by any and every means, was started by Har Dayal in 1913.”<sup>4</sup>

Ghadar Party published the first issue of Ghadar di Gunj in November 1913. Kartar Singh Sarabha wrote in the first issue: "Today there begins 'Ghadar' in foreign lands, but in our country's tongue, a war against the British Raj. What is our name? Ghadar. What is our work? Ghadar. Where will be the Revolution? In India. The time will soon come when rifles and blood will take the place of pens and ink."

Khushwant Singh, while paying a tribute to Har Dyal writes, “What made his reputation impregnable was the fact that he was also a revolutionary who spurned government patronage, directed the Ghadar Movement in its early years in the US and Canada, became the principal adviser of the German Government’s attempt to foment a revolt against the British Raj during World War I. Then like his equally distinguished contemporary Veer Savarkar, he took a complete somersault, apologised for his past errors and pledged loyalty to them... He became an ardent admirer of the British as a "truthful people... who had a moral and historical mission in India." The British government had his pronouncements translated into Hindi and distributed free in India.”<sup>5</sup> This pretty much sums up his commitment to the Ghadar movement and the cause that he so dearly espoused.

### **Ghadar Movement Operations and Plans**

Even though the Ghadar movement originated in the US, its operational field and primary target was India. It is often said that the Sikhs have been making history, but they have been

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<sup>3</sup> Brigadier General R. E. H. Dyer, *The Raiders of the Sarhad* (London: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1921), 18

<sup>4</sup> Sir Michael O’Dwyer, *India As I Knew It* ((London: Constable & Company, 1925), 186

<sup>5</sup> Khushwant Singh, *The Tribune*, Singh, August 16, 2003

careless in preserving it. This is also true of the Ghadar movement. The Ghadar movement was conceived and organized by the Sikhs in North America, but the communists of India, who were not even on the scene for many more years, have tried to misappropriate it and steal its thunder. The Ghadar movement was not a communist inspired movement at all. Some communists joined it much later. They were allowed to join it because of the secular nature of the fight against the British. The fact is the original Ghadar movement was practically dead before some communists joined the organization.

### **Plan to Infiltrate and Attack Military Cantonments**

The Ghadarites had infiltrated at least 20 military cantonments in Punjab, UP and other parts of India. However, their first targets were the Lahore and Ferozepur cantonments in Punjab. The soldiers of 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment had asked for an earlier date. The soldiers also had another reason to be piqued at the British government. They are being sent to other countries as fodder in WWI for the British. The expectation was that once the revolt is launched at these two military bases, it was going to spread in other military bases in India. The first target was the Ferozepur base. The date for the army revolt was set for the night of February 21, 1915. Contacts were made with the army men in these bases. Due to the treachery of one Kirpal Singh, the plans to revolt was leaked to the police. As a result, most of the Ghadar leaders were arrested and the plan was dead.

Various groups of revolutionaries had gathered at Ferozepur in large numbers. Bhai Randhir Singh (founder of Akhand Kirtani Jatha) arrived at Ferozepur railway station with a party of about 60 men with him to participate in the revolt. They were singing hymns with harmonium as they passed. The white policemen thought they were a singing party and let them pass without any problem. Bhai Randhir Singh was arrested and sent to jail by a special tribunal in the Second Lahore Conspiracy case. He was sentenced to death along with other 23 people by this tribunal. However, due to the intervention of the Viceroy of India Lord Hardinge, only six people were hanged including Kartar Singh Sarabha. Bhai Randhir Singh, along with other 17 people were sent to prison for life. This account is provided by Lord Hardinge himself in his biography, *My Indian Years 1910-1916*.

“The Lahore Conspiracy gave me much trouble at this time. No less than twenty-four men were condemned to death by a Special Tribunal. I went to Lahore to see the Lieutenant Governor, Sir M. O’Dwyer, and told him categorically that I absolutely declined to allow a holocaust of victims in a case where only six men had been proved to be actually guilty of murder and dacoity. He recommended that only six of the twenty-four should have their sentences commuted. I agreed to commutation in these cases but submitted the remaining eighteen cases to the judgment of the Law Member. He proved to me conclusively that in the case of all except six actually guilty

of murder and dacoity, they had been convicted under a clause of the penal code which could not entail a death sentence.”<sup>6</sup>

### **“Hindu”<sup>7</sup> Discrimination in California**

According to the official report to Gov. WM D. Stephens, called “California and the Oriental,” published by State Board of Control of California in 1922, makes these comments about the Hindus, (as all Indians were called back then),

“The Hindu, in the opinion of the Commissioner of the State Bureau of Labor Statistics, is the most undesirable immigrant in the state. His lack of personal cleanliness, his low morals and his blind adherence to theories and teachings, so entirely repugnant to American principles, make him unfit for association with American people. These references apply to the low caste Hindu or Sikhs. Reports from official authorities concerning these people on file in the office in the State Board of Control are unfit for publication.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Jallianwala Bagh Massacre**

On 10 December 1917, the Viceroy of India Lord Chelmsford appointed a Sedition Committee, popularly known as Rowlatt Committee named after its chairman. Its charter was to investigate and report on the nature and extent of the criminal conspiracies connected with the revolutionary movement in India, and to advise as to the legislation necessary to deal with them. Harbans Singh writes, “... Based on the recommendations of this committee, two bills, popularly called Rowlatt Bills, were published in the Government of India Gazette on 18 January 1919. Mahatma Gandhi decided to organize a satyagrah (non-violent civil disobedience campaign) against the bills. One of the bills became an Act, nevertheless, on 21 March 1919. Call for a countrywide hartal or general strike on 30 March, later postponed to 6 April 1919, was given by Mahatma Gandhi.”<sup>9</sup>

There were riots in Amritsar and Lahore in April 1919 called “passive resistance” against the Rowlatt Bills that the government had passed. Dr. Saif-ud-Din Kitchlu and Mr. Satya Pal, the two main agitators were called to the Deputy Commissioner’s office, arrested and sent off to Dharamshala (now in Himachal Pradesh) by car. This led to a general strike in Amritsar and mobs attacked some government buildings and banks. They injured and killed a European guard named Robinson. The Town Hall, the telegraph office and the National Bank buildings were wrecked. Two European officials of the bank Mr. Stewart and Mr. Scott were murdered. The crowd was stopped and fired upon near the railway foot-bridge.

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<sup>6</sup> Lord Hardinge, *My Indian Years 1910-1916* (Frome and London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1949), p. 130

<sup>7</sup> A generic name used for all Indians at that times in the US and Canada which included Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims.

<sup>8</sup> State Board of Control of California, *California and the Oriental* (Sacramento” California State Printing Office, 1922), 115

<sup>9</sup> Harbans Singh ‘Jallianwala Bagh Massacre,’ *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*

On April 13, 1919, several thousand unarmed Indians, mainly Sikhs, peacefully assembled in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, to listen to several prominent local leaders speak out against British colonial rule in India and against the arrest and deportation of Dr. Satya Pal, Dr. Saif-ud-Din Kitchlew, and few others under the unpopular Rowlatt Act. Udham Singh and his friends from the orphanage were serving water to the crowd. Michael O'Dyer had declared a martial law which not announced. He probably made some announcements about it in some localities of the city beforehand, but the general population was not aware of it. The political instability made it very difficult for him to stay in Punjab much longer after the Amritsar massacre. He says, "I arrived in India in November, 1885, and was posted to Lahore, the capital of the Punjab. I left Lahore and the Punjab for good in May, 1919."<sup>10</sup>

General Dyer brought in the Gurkha soldiers and opened fire on thousands of unarmed people. All the exits and escape routes were blocked by the army. General Dyer personally directed the fire where the crowd was the thickest or in the direction people were rushing in order to save themselves.

Udham Singh was an eye witness to this horrible event and it had a major impact on him. On 30 August 1927 Udham Singh was arrested at Amritsar for possession of unlicensed arms. Some revolvers, a quantity of ammunition, and copies of a prohibited Ghadar Party paper called "Ghadr-di-Gunj" ("Voice of Revolt") were confiscated. He was prosecuted under section 20 of the Arms Act. It took him another 21 years to take revenge in English after he reached England and shot Michael O'Dwyer dead at Caxton Hall in London on March 13, 1940. Udham Singh did not try to flee the scene and took full responsibility of this act.

There is quite a bit of controversy about Michael O'Dwyer who approved the actions of General Dyer. Michael O'Dwyer writes, "General Beynon told me he was conveying approval of his action to Dyer and asked if he might add mine. I had at first some hesitation, as Dyer's action was a military one, but on fuller consideration I thought it advisable to endorse General Beynon's approval. He then sent the message (by aeroplane, I think) to Dyer." The fact is this massacre could not have happened without the express approval of Michael O'Dwyer.

There was absolutely no trace of any communist activities in this country at that time among the Indian population. The earliest references to any communist inspired movement in the US are found in the intelligence report of August 26, 1926 of about the "Hindustan Association of America" which was purely a student association with several chapters in the US. Even though this association existed as early as perhaps 1914, there is no indication that it had anything to do with communism at that time. A reported some suspicious activities by this associations,

Unfortunately, the historical facts are so twisted by some vested interests that the whole Ghadar movement is presented as if it is brainchild of the Communists or inspired by its

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<sup>10</sup> Sir Michael O'Dwyer, *India As I Knew It* (London: Constable & Company, 1925), 27

principles. The Ghadar movement was started by the Sikhs, but they welcomed any other Indian communities into it fold regardless of religious beliefs or practices. This was a joint effort by the Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus and its primary purpose was to drive the British out of India by force.

General Dyer was a ruthless man who did not hesitate to bend the law or bluff people in order to achieve his goals. So much so that, when dealing with the lawless rebels near the border of Iran and Balochistan 1916 who acted as a general when he was not and used bluff and deceit as it suited him. General Dyer writes,

“Meanwhile, though I was not yet a General I determined to act the part. The 28th Light Cavalry made crossed swords for my shoulders and the necessary red tabs. The former were considerably bigger than the regulation pattern, but were otherwise well made. Then Landon and I went off by car to Nasaratabad.”<sup>11</sup>

The Amritsar massacre is a well-known fact. However, the Gujranwala bombing, which is equally serious is often overlooked by the historians. This occurred during the martial law which was declared by Michael O’Dwyer with the approval of the Indian government (Montagu Chelmsford, Viceroy of India). Michael O’Dwyer had approved General Dyer’s actions as Amritsar.

There seems to be a direct connection between the murder of Michael O’Dwyer and the Ghadar Party of California. The fact is that the FBI was tipped by an Indian about a possible attempt on the life of Michael O’Dwyer which in turn, had warned Michael O’Dwyer in writing about the pending danger to his life from the Sikh Ghadarites in California. In fact, FBI had advised Michael O’Dwyer to stay home if all possible and he must go out, he should do so under a police guard. The murder of Michael O’Dwyer was part of the master plan of the Ghadar party, but it was Sardar Udham Singh who executed that plan very carefully and without divulging any details to any person.

### **Former Ghadarites Joining the Akali Morchas**

26<sup>th</sup> September 1923 Intelligence Report

“6. Mit Singh. – Mit Singh, a prominent member of the Ghadr Party, who recently returned to India from America (vide paragraphs 5, Weekly Report, dated 29<sup>th</sup> August) has been appointed a Jathedar at Muketsar.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> R. E. H. Dyer, *The Raiders of the Sarhad* (Holborn: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1921), 50

<sup>12</sup> Extract from Weekly Report of the Director, Intelligence Bureau of the Home Department, Government of India Dated Simla, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1923

Some Gadharite Sikhs, who returned to India during the peak of the Ghadar movement joined the Akali movement against the British government after the Ghadar movement was faded. There were several Akali morchas or agitation in the 1920s which included Nanakana Sahib Da Morcha, Jaito Da Morcha, Guru Ka Bagh Morcha, Chabian Da Morcha, etc. The CID (Criminal Investigation Department) was keeping tabs on them. The Intelligence Report 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1923 from SImla says,

*“5. Arrival of four Akalis in Shanghai for secret work. – Four Akalis, two of whom named Harnam Singh and Gurdit Singh alias Gopha Singh, were associated with the notorious Gurdit Singh of the Komagata Maru fame, are reported to have been in Shanghai since May last, “with the object of working secretly with the Sikhs”. Harnam Singh is still there, but Gurdit Singh has gone to Mexico. Further inquiries are being made.”*

Even though the original Ghadar movement pretty much died around 1918, some of its elements remained intact. Some British intelligence documents reveal that the murder of Micheal O’Dwyer was the plan of the Ghadar Party which was executed by Udham Singh. One of the secret reports from the British Consulate says, “Local police state that they have received report from an Indian informant that Indian extremists in California may be contemplating attempt on the life of Mr. O’Dwyer. In view of the criminal record of many Indians in California police consider this report should not be disregarded.

I have requested the police to take protective measures but they maintain that it is impossible to guarantee that attack by some fanatic may not take place. I am also consulting F.B.I. In the meantime all reasonable precautions will be taken.

Repeated to Washington telegram No. 62.<sup>13</sup>

There is similar codes message,

“IMMEDIATE.

Your telegram No. 22 [of the 22<sup>nd</sup> March] concerning threats to Mr. O’Dwyer’s life]

If you think advisable arrange for Mr. O’Dwyer to stay in his house or other safe place with police guard until position is clarified. If after consultation with police and or F. B. I. you think Mr. O’Dwyer should take leave local or otherwise you may instruct him accordingly. As we see it no question of prestige is involved. It would be deplorable if any incident were to occur.

Repeated to Washington No. 462.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> No. 23, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1940, Decypher. Mr. Butler (San Francisco) 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1940. This message seems to refer to some earlier communication because the murder of Michel O’Dwyer had taken place on March 13, 1940

In conclusion, the Ghadar movement which lasted only 6-7 years, but it had a lasting effect on the Indian freedom struggle. In just about every Akali Morcha there were ex-Ghadarites who had returned from USA or Canada. Those were the people who fought for the freedom of India, not the communist parties of India who lived off the doles thrown at t

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<sup>14</sup> Outward Telegram – This document is the Property of His Britannic Majesty's Government, and should be kept under lock and key. (A 2127/ /45) Limited Distribution, Cypher telegram to Mr. Butler (San Francisco), Foreign Office. 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1940. 6:30PM No. 4.