

# **Two Revolutions: The Ghadar Movement and India's Radical Diaspora**

Maia Ramnath

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# Contents

INTRODUCTION	4
I. THE RADICAL DIASPORA	7
II. HINDUSTAN GHADAR 1913–1918	10
III. BENGALI GHADAR	15
IV. PUNJABI GHADAR	19
CONCLUSION	24

“Exile has its privileges. It is the price paid for the right of preaching the truth as it appears to us...We may pay homage only to our conscience and defy all the governments of the world to make us deviate a hair’s breadth from the path of Duty and Righteousness.”<sup>1</sup> –Har Dayal

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<sup>1</sup> From the Indian Sociologist, 1908, published in Paris. Quoted in Emily Brown, Har Dayal: Hindu Revolutionist and Rationalist (University of Arizona Press,1975), p. 74.

# INTRODUCTION

In 1914, an alert went out from San Francisco. It's time. Are you ready to die for freedom? The call traveled around the world to Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tokyo, Yokohama, Manila, Rangoon, Panama City, Seattle and Vancouver, summoning the Indians home. 8,000 would-be independence fighters— Sikh veterans of the British Army from around the Pacific Rim; Punjabi laborers from the farms and lumberyards of the west coast; and the Bengali student radicals who'd been training with their guns in the hills outside Berkeley— all retraced their diasporic steps to cast out the British from India.

Indian political radicalism had flourished both within and beyond subcontinental boundaries since around the turn of the century, with activity shifting into a transnational network as repression increased inside British domains. With the eruption of World War I, Indian nationalists throughout Europe and North America seized the opportunity of British vulnerability and German aid to foment insurgence in Britain's most vital colony. Revolutionary activity now cohered into a cluster of ambitious schemes combining armed invasion, mass uprising and coup. This relative coherence was knit together by the circulation of a newspaper from San Francisco, which bestowed its name upon the communities to whom it gave voice: Ghadar, which means mutiny, uprising, revolt.

Ghadar is part of the literatures of both American and Indian history.<sup>1</sup> However, it is little more than a tangential curiosity in relation to the former, while remaining largely offstage or behind the scenes in relation to the latter. Today, the North American Sikh community deploys Ghadar as part of a patriotic hagiography, retrospectively claiming the story as its contribution to India's independence struggle. Indian leftist historians include Ghadar as part of the narrative of the Extremist version of the Indian independence struggle, in a larger project that would restore to view and even glorify the militant revolutionary aspects of a complex and many-stranded process

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<sup>1</sup> For the American context see S. Chandrasekhar, ed. *From India to America: A Brief History of Immigration; Problems of Discrimination; Admission and Assimilation* (La Jolla: Population Review Publications, 1982); Joan M. Jensen, *A Passage from India* (Yale University Press, 1988); Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); H. Brett Melendy, *Asians in America: Filipinos, Koreans and East Indians* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977); Malini Sood, "Expatriate Nationalism and Ethnic Radicalism," (Ph.D. diss., SUNY Stonybrook, 1995). For the Indian left context see Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876–1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Gadar Party* (People's Publishing, New Delhi: 1977 (vol 1)/1978 (vol 2)) and *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1975); R.C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India* vols. 1 and 2 (Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1963); Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973). For the transnational political context see Don Dignan, *The Indian Revolutionary Problem in British Diplomacy 1914–19* (New Delhi Press: 1983); T.R. Sareen, *Indian Revolutionary Movement Abroad* (New Delhi: Sterling Press, 1979). For invaluable Ghadar-specific material see Brown; Robert G. Lee, "The Hidden World of Asian Immigrant Radicalism," Chapter 9 of *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, eds. (State University of New York Press: 1996); Janice and Stephen MacKinnon, *Agnes Smedley: The Life and Times of an American Radical* (University of California Press: 1970); Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization and Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press: 1983).

of resistance, which much of western and Indian official discourse tends artificially to flatten, homogenize and moderate. Here though, Ghadar is cast in a more or less supporting role in relation to militant political activities within India. But the standard narratives of nationalism and ethnic pride are not ones I am particularly interested in telling. What intrigue me are the stories that occurred between these sites, outside the national frames. I would question the inevitability of the colonialist/nationalist mirror image, and seek non-nationalist anti-colonialisms. There is considerable space, both physically and conceptually beyond nationalism, in which to undertake such exploration and resistance. This is the space in which Ghadar thrived, along with the other transnational political communities with whom it was in personal and epistemic contact.

I began by exploring the Ghadar movement as a phenomenon of hybrid radicalism possible only in the context of diaspora. Both physically and conceptually, it spilled far beyond the bounds of national territory, or a unified vision of a national government. Its readership literally spanned the globe, as did its eclectic– not to say opportunistic– array of strategic contacts. Ideologically too, it exceeded the definition of nationalism. Inspired by the nationalist movements of the previous century, particularly Mazzini’s Italian Risorgimento, it had close ties of solidarity with Irish and Egyptian opponents of British colonialism; as well as with Pan-Asianist and, more problematically, with Pan-Islamist movements against western imperialism. Hooked into networks of anarchists and socialists in Europe, Japan and North America, with a Bengali tradition of Kropotkinism as well as guerrilla militance, components of Ghadar overlapped with the radical left; in its second incarnation after World War I and the success of the Bolshevik revolution, it was subsumed into the orbit of the Comintern. Combining at different points elements of nationalism, left radicalism, religious or ethnic revivalism, Ghadar chronicler Harish K. Puri refers to it as an “ideological hold-all.”<sup>2</sup> But I propose that this is less due to the incoherence of the Ghadar ideology, than to the multiplicity of ideologies which Ghadar harnessed into an ephemeral, bright and fast-burning coalition.

In particular, Ghadar was the volatile offspring of a combination of two elements: a small group of middle class radical intellectuals, mostly from Bengal; and a large number of Punjabi peasants, of whom about half were Sikh veterans of the British Army. The first group staffed the printing press, propagandized, theorized and lectured. The second, which comprised about 95% of the active membership, provided the mass of fighters and funded the operation through donations and subscriptions. Between these two, chronic tension rankled regarding the ownership of the movement, identification of leadership, and ways of conceptualizing liberation. In particular the Bengalis fused western-influenced rationalism and anarchist-tending left radicalism to a newly militant cultural practice and spiritualized nationalism. Meanwhile the Punjabis found that the egalitarian and agrarian traditions of Sikhism lent them an affinity first with liberal democratic nationalism, and eventually with the peasant movements and anti-colonial analysis of communism.

As such, I began to understand that I had made a mistake by losing myself in diaspora without taking proper care to ground the movement in the contexts of its migratory participants’ points of origin and arrival. Who they were, where they were from, their social and cultural backgrounds, their location in a colonial economic structure, all affected their diasporic experiences. The same factors also affected the motives and visions that defined their participation in the struggle for Indian independence. Each group arrived at the point of militant radicalism

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<sup>2</sup> Puri, p. 6.

via a different route, and developed a different way of framing the anti-British struggle. Puri's application of the Gramscian terminology of organic and professional intellectuals to the relationship between Bengali and Punjabi emigrants is apt. So is his stress on the need for translation between the two, for which achievement Ghadar editor and rhetorical architect Har Dayal is generally credited. In this essay I explore both ideologies and seek their interactions. But in order to do this I must situate them within their specific contexts. Thus I will first sketch the make-up of the diasporic community, and then provide a brief narrative of Ghadar activity from 1913 to 1918, in an attempt to illustrate their emerging relationship. Finally, in presenting both the Bengali and the Punjabi visions of Ghadar and its significance, I will argue that although it was the Bengali elite intellectuals who nurtured a uniquely Indian-inflected radical-left theory and praxis of revolution in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and who considered themselves the mentors of a laboring mass audience ripe for their catalyzing rhetoric, it was the Punjabi organic intellectuals whose theory and praxis ultimately proved more durable, nursing Ghadar into its second reincarnation as part of an international communist movement.

# I. THE RADICAL DIASPORA

“Wherever there are Indians,” one idealistic militant claimed, “there is Ghadar.” At the peak of its circulation, thousands of copies of the weekly newspaper in Urdu, Gurmukhi, and later English and Hindi were smuggled and read greedily throughout the Pacific Rim among army veterans, emigrant laborers, students, and political exiles.

**Soldiers:** The sun never set on the empire; the British Army had troops stationed around the globe. This meant that Indian soldiers shared that global presence, entrusted with securing Britain’s interests in South and East Africa, the Near East— notably the Iranian oil fields and the Suez Canal— and the Far East. Significant numbers of Sikh soldiers fought for the British in the Boxer Rebellion, and the British military police forces that patrolled Hong Kong, Shanghai, and the other Chinese treaty ports thereafter were largely Sikh with a smattering of Punjabi Muslims. So were the various regiments stationed in Burma, Malaya and Singapore. All of these were a pool of potential Ghadar recruits with military training. In the early years of the twentieth century, discharged soldiers began increasingly to seek lives and livelihoods in North America, seeking economic opportunities there rather than returning to their insular villages. So they joined the Sikh laboring communities abroad, where their cosmopolitan experience relative to their compatriots tended to nudge them into community leadership roles.

**Laborers:** Although the veterans’ specific trajectory makes it necessary to consider them as a separate category, they can also be considered a subset of the workers, of which they comprised about half. Others from similar backgrounds came directly to North America without the military detour. Britain had begun to recruit coolie labor for its sugar plantations in Trinidad, Jamaica, Guyana, Surinam and Fiji in the 1830s, following the abolition of the slave trade. Indian coolies entered South Africa in large numbers from around 1860; in 1896 contractors recruited 19,000 of them to build the Uganda Railroad. After Chinese emigration dropped, in part due to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States, steamship companies began recruiting contract labor from India to come to North America. They settled first in Canada, which kept them still officially within British dominions, until legal and extralegal discrimination drove them southward. In the Pacific Northwest Indians first gravitated to the lumber industry and railroad construction on the Northwest, Canadian Pacific, South and Western Pacific lines, ultimately settling into agricultural labor in the central valleys of California. Compared to Chinese, Japanese and even Korean immigration to the U.S. their numbers were small, never reaching more than 2000 in the peak years between 1907 and 1910. Even through the 1920s there were never more than a few thousand Indians in the U.S., of whom the vast majority were on the west coast, and over three-fourths in California.

**Intellectuals:** Students began to travel to London and Tokyo around the turn of the twentieth century. Tokyo was to remain a key stronghold for the Indian independence movement abroad, and the earliest host site for an international community of radical pan-Asianism, anarchism and socialism. The flow of students from India increased notably after 1905 following two politically catalyzing events, namely the Japanese victory against Russia which increased Asian

confidence in opposing European powers, and the British partition of Bengal which gave Indians an immediate and emotional motive for such opposition. Thereafter, Viceroy Curzon urged that Indian students should be discouraged from going to Japan where they were “likely to become imbued with sentiments tending towards discontent and even disloyalty.” All too often, the Viceroy warned, they left seeking access to modern technical training in what one of them described as “industrial machinery and western methods of production,”<sup>1</sup> only to end up publishing anti-British articles. Several prolific and influential future Ghadarites spent time among the student radicals of Tokyo.

**Radicals:** Aside from Tokyo, London, as metropolitan center of the British Empire, provided an early hub for nationalist students. There in 1905 Shyamaji Krishnavarma founded India House, which quickly became the nerve center for the Home Rule Movement, attracting those in favor of “extremism,” as opposed to MP Dadabhai Naoroji’s rival camp which favored constitutional moderation and diplomacy within the colonial system. It was at India House that Har Dayal, having abandoned his Oxford scholarship for political reasons incomprehensible to his professors, was first nurtured as a vocational revolutionary. But after another young student named Madan Lal Dhingra assassinated India Secretary Lord Morley’s assistant Sir William Curzon Wylie in 1909– a textbook case of propaganda by the deed, for which he was hanged– London became a far less hospitable place for Indian radicals.

The center of activity then shifted to Paris, where prominent socialists and anti-colonialists S.R. Rana and Madame Rustomji Cama presided over a well-established political circle. Their *Bande Mataram* newspaper, which Har Dayal edited from 1909–11, soon became the international voice of Indian revolution. Paris was also the paramount meeting place for continental revolutionaries, where, T.R. Sareen writes, “the Indian[s] had no difficulty in collaborating with the Irish, Egyptian and anti-Tsarist [political exiles] whereby they learnt from them the technique of revolutionary propaganda and method.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, members of the Russian *Narodnaya Volya* (People’s Will) party, whose assassination of Tsar Alexander II was revered by Asian radicals, were some of the most influential of these exiled mentors.

Following India’s harsh Criminal Law Amendment in 1908, aimed in part at suppressing the rural unrest in the Punjab which had peaked the year before, many political agitators forced into exile for their “seditious” activities fled to Paris or America. Once outside British territory they could take advantage of a free press and a thick web of international contacts, including their compatriots who had preceded them. In the United States, politically active Indians had formed organizations advocating political independence and social change on both coasts as early as 1906. The pattern was to establish an equivalent to India House, publish a newspaper, and hold educational meetings to discuss social and political issues with laborers. Aside from New York, Vancouver was the first major North American site for Indian political work, followed by Seattle, Portland, and ultimately San Francisco. According to Darisi Chenchiah, a young Berkeley scholar, the Bay Area by 1912 hosted “Revolutionary Societies” from China, Japan, Turkey, Ireland and Russia, from whom the Indians received help in the printing and distribution of revolutionary literature, as well as tips on recruitment and training. By 1918, when some of those imprisoned in connection with Ghadar activities faced deportation, the Indians had won the vocal

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<sup>1</sup> See Dhan Gopal Mukherjee’s autobiographical *Caste and Outcast* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), p.133. Curzon is quoted in Sareen, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> Sareen, p. 37.



support of many prominent American socialists, civil libertarians, labor organizers, left liberals and theosophists, who united briefly through the Friends of Freedom for India or Tilak's Home Rule League.

Within the diaspora there was significant overlap between these four groups, particularly between the first two and the last two. But how were the interests of all of them fused together? A brief account of the Ghadar movement in its wartime cycle of active revolution offers some opportunities to observe this interaction.

## II. HINDUSTAN GHADAR 1913–1918

The exact moment of Ghadar's birth is hard to pinpoint, in part because parallel mobilizations were underway, arising from dual processes of political ferment. The publication of Ghadar marked the place and moment where these fields intersected. In meetings from October to November 1913 a group of politically active immigrants including Sohan Singh Bhakna and Taraknath Das founded the Pacific Coast Hindi Association, coordinating branches throughout the Sikh farming community. They soon recruited Har Dayal to take charge of propaganda, as he had swiftly built up a reputation in the San Francisco area through his high-profile activities within the larger radical milieu.

Soon, outreach workers were moving through Indian settlements organizing, educating, and soliciting funds. They also set up armaments workshops and guerrilla training. But the top priority was perhaps the publication and distribution of the newspaper at the party's San Francisco headquarters, dubbed the Yugantar Ashram. Thus when the first issue of Ghadar came out on November 1, 1913, the name of the paper became popular name became popularly attached to the PCHA, by extension with the movement as a whole, and by even further extension, to the politically radicalized diaspora. Under Dayal's editorship, the circulation of Ghadar forged what was more or less a prototypical Anderson-style print community throughout the diaspora; without the paper, Ghadar did not exist. "Our name is identical with our work," declared Dayal in an early issue.<sup>1</sup>

The voyage of the Komagata Maru from March to September 1914 was the next key politicizing moment, an opportunity which the Ghadar party astutely identified in deploying its literature and propaganda to guide rising unrest that stemmed from race/class-based colonial oppression. Gurdit Singh, a wealthy contractor in Singapore, had originally chartered the Japanese ship to bring several hundred Sikhs from Hong Kong to British Columbia. He had conceived the enterprise as a direct challenge to the continuous voyage statute, a law requiring immigrants to have arrived directly from their country of origin— a near impossibility for Indians, since most trans-Pacific ships embarked from Japanese, Chinese or Filipino ports. In this case, since the passengers lacked the requisite \$200 each upon arrival in Canada, they were prevented from disembarking at Vancouver. There followed a two-month standoff in the harbor, during which the

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<sup>1</sup> This and other oft-quoted Ghadar excerpts appear in most secondary sources, with slight variations in wording. The United States Department of War did English translations of Ghadar, culled specifically for use as incriminating evidence. These can be found in the National Archive research library at College Park, MD, along with extensive court transcripts and documentation of surveilled activities. For obvious reasons, given the government's bias and motivation, it is prudent to take these very selectively focused archival sources with a grain of salt. On the other hand, the Special Ghadar Collection housed at UC Berkeley's South and Southeast Asia Library contains a trove of personal memoirs and political writings by Ghadar members. See [www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEALS](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEALS). Personal letters of Har Dayal are contained in the Van Wyck Brooks Papers, Van Pelt Library Rare Manuscripts Collection, University of Pennsylvania; and the David Starr Jordan Papers, Hoover Library, Stanford University. See also Har Dayal, *Writings of Lala Hardayal* (Benares: Swaraj Publishing House, 1923?); *Letters of Lala Har Dayal*, Dharmavira, ed. (Ambala Cantt: Indian Book Agency, 1970); *Forty-four months in Germany and Turkey, February 1915 to October 1918* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1920).

angry passengers took over the ship and defended it from being boarded in occasional skirmishes. Nevertheless, as provisions grew short, they were finally forced to sail back to India.

World War I broke out in July; by August the Ghadar had issued its call to arms, catching the ship en route with its most frequently quoted headline: "WANTED: Fearless, courageous soldiers for spreading ghadar in India. Salary: death. Reward: martyrdom. Pension: freedom. Place: the field of India."<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the incident as an inflammatory rallying moment for all Indians on the west coast at the time, prominent Ghadarites including Bhagwan Singh and Mohammed Barakatullah set off bearing guns and literature to meet the disgruntled passengers in Japan, and encouraging them to revolt when they arrived back in India. But the British authorities, prewarned, were ready to meet the returnees. The ship docked in Calcutta only to face yet another police stand-off, which soon devolved into a shoot-out. Some twenty passengers and a few police were killed, and some two hundred more arrested. The rest disappeared or went underground, a few to resurface later in their villages. But close in the wake of the Komagata Maru came other ships bearing would-be rebels, propaganda and weaponry. Meanwhile back in San Francisco, mobilization continued as surveillance increased under British behest.

Yet as far as Ghadar is noticed at all within American history, it is usually reduced to the Hindu-German Conspiracy case. On the eve of war, the German government had become intrigued by the potential for weakening Britain through its vulnerable colonies. The goal was to create domestic unrest within Britain's most economically indispensable and geographically strategic possession, while also thereby keeping significant numbers of the Indian troops so prominent in the British army out of the European theater. Thus, in an attempt to harness the various international organizations working for Indian independence, the German foreign office recruited the most prominent Indian nationalists then active in Europe, as well as some dozen of those rather intriguing radical intellectuals from California to form the Berlin India Committee in 1914. Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, a.k.a. Chatto, formerly a member of the Paris circle and of the French Socialist Party, was the chairperson.

But the relationship between the BIC and Yugantar Ashram community was strained, racked by conflict of interest regarding jurisdiction and organizational goals. Despite the steep power differential between the Indians and the Germans, both were using one another temporarily to further their own ends. Strategically speaking, the Germans prioritized their Ottoman alliance and the Central Asian theater, and thus placed a far greater emphasis on pan-Islamist movements than the Californians might otherwise have sought out. Moreover, the oddness of a situation in which an imperial power found itself in the position of supporting an anti-imperialist movement was lost on no one. Nevertheless, for the moment Dayal could write in the Ghadar of November 15, 1913 that "the Germans have great sympathy with our movement for liberty, because they and ourselves have a common enemy (the English). In future Germany can draw assistance from us and they can render us great assistance also."

One scheme orchestrated by the German consulate in collusion with Yugantar Ashram was the 1915 affair of the ships Annie Larson and Maverick, which was to become pivotal for U.S. authorities in cracking the conspiracy case. It involved smuggling arms and ammunition from one ship out of San Francisco onto another off the coast of Mexico, and thence to Batavia in the Dutch Indies, chosen as a transmission point outside easy reach of British interception. There German agents would facilitate the pickup by a Bengali point man— the young M.N. Roy, fu-

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, pp. 176–177.

ture father of Indian communism. But through a series of missed connections, the ships never managed their rendezvous. The mutineers already inside India waited in vain for the promised arms. When they didn't come, the Ghadarites decided they'd have to arm and fund themselves by dacoity (political banditry), raiding police stations, or co-opting military units.

Once in India— at least for those not arrested immediately upon arrival— the insurgents' two-fold priority from late 1914 to early 1915 was to establish contact with the Bengali revolutionists whose militant record they idealized, and to enlist support among the military in the north-west for open mutiny and guerrilla war in Punjab. In addition to a smattering of unrealized mutiny schemes, they also set about the somewhat incompatible tasks of gathering arms and funds, and procuring or manufacturing bombs, while also pursuing educational and political outreach among the peasantry. Some carried out sporadic assassinations of those identified as spies, informers, or traitors. Indeed at this time those targeted as individuals were more often than not Indians deemed to be collaborators or compradors, rather than British. The tactic of dacoity, although ostensibly based on the precept to "rob from the wealthy and show mercy to the poor," remained controversial. Other mutineers proselytized among the various army units; since the best source of reliable weaponry was in the possession of the military, there was a double need to forge alliances. So Ghadar was a something of a tactical as well as an ideological catchall. Its array of approaches drew upon its members' backgrounds in the tradition of peasant uprisings in Punjab, as well as the more recent tradition of guerrilla activity and dacoity in Bengal.

The day of the major uprising was scheduled for February 21, 1915. But due to the tightness of the British information regime, the plot was found out and put down, despite a last-minute shift of date. But despite British confidence that the movement had been crushed following a series of conspiracy trials in Lahore, in the course of which scores of Ghadar members were executed or imprisoned, other plans were still in the works, some instigated by Berlin, some by San Francisco. Between 1914 and 1916 agitators fanned out from California to incite mutiny among Britain's Indian troops in East Asia. Although one attempt at revolt by the 130<sup>th</sup> Baluchis at Rangoon in February 1915 was preemptively crushed, the all-Muslim 5<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry in Singapore revolted shortly afterward, apparently incited by propaganda from Ghadarites as well as from emissaries of the BIC-allied Turkish Khilafat. The mutiny was sustained for 3 days, during which those killed included 8 British officers. Thereafter, the British moved swiftly to "insulate" the other units against "revolutionary contamination."<sup>3</sup> The Siam-Burma scheme in the fall of 1915 resulted in another disappointment. According to this plan the arms, money and personnel collected throughout Southeast Asia were to be assembled in Bangkok and thence taken over the mountains into Burma. But one of the conspirators was tricked into betraying the plot. The Ghadar operatives were captured, tortured and interrogated, and eventually transferred to a Calcutta jail.

Simultaneously, another plan was underway for a march from Istanbul across Iran to Kabul. There the Germans hoped to make an alliance with the Amir in order to establish a base in Afghanistan for military training of Indians for an armed invasion across the Northwest Frontier. But the Amir had already pledged his neutrality to the British. Nevertheless, within a few months of reaching Kabul in October 1915, the mission proclaimed itself an Indian provisional government in exile, with the quixotic Raja Mahendra Pratap as president and Ghadar founding member Barakatullah as his prime minister. Pratap's government sent elaborate messages

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<sup>3</sup> Puri, pp. 108, 196.

of alliance to Indian princes, the king of Nepal and the Czar of Russia while soliciting a Turkish call for anti-British jihad among the frontier tribes. Thus, far from hewing to an ideological line, propaganda was tailored to target audiences ranging from opportunistic monarchs to religious warlords. Nevertheless, these communications too were intercepted before the scheme could be set in motion. By mid-1915 dissension was racking the core Ghadar group, largely on account of what some perceived as a betrayal of ideals in deference to German priorities. The original prominent figures were no longer in California. Instead they were either in Berlin, in India, or on missions throughout Central or Southeast Asia. A new batch of recruits was staffing Yugantar Ashram; founding member Gobind Behari Lal lamented that they were all pawns of the Germans. In particular, some of the faithful deemed Dayal's editorial successor Ram Chandra a sell-out and German sycophant, and indeed whenever he deviated editorially from a strictly pro-German and pro-Ottoman line, Berlin ordered him to cease and desist publication. Bhagwan Singh had returned from mobilizing in the Far East in October 1916 and promptly organized an anti-Ram Chandra faction with its own rival publication called the Yugantar, operative through the early months of 1917. In addition, many Ghadarites accused Ram Chandra as well as BIC liaison Chandra Chakrabarty of pocketing German funds for themselves. Building on such distrust, the constant pressure of surveillance took its toll as undercover agents deliberately stoked long-brewing tensions. Between 1914 and 1917 the California Indian community was internally disrupted by several murders targeting those suspected of being spies or informers. By the middle of 1916, both the British and German governments had received reports from their agents that the Ghadar party was crumbling.

There is some irony, given the weakness of the movement, that in 1917, after years of increasing pressure on U.S. authorities from the British government, the crackdown on Ghadar finally came. Now that the United States stood poised to enter the war against Germany, authorities eagerly found legal justification for their intervention in the Indians' political activities by accusing them of conspiracy to violate neutrality laws which forbade the launching of military expeditions from U.S. soil against, or enlistment in a foreign army at war with, a nation with whom the U.S. was not in declared conflict. By the time the arrests were carried out in April, just before the official declaration of war on Germany, British agents had already processed and assembled most of the evidence, which they now held in readiness for a damning presentation. The luridly publicized Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial in San Francisco then stretched between November 1917 and April 1918. 36 of the 105 accused were Indian Ghadarites, who had polarized into two hostile camps with separate defense counsels, casting mutual recriminations back and forth. On the last day of the trial, a member of the Yugantar faction named Ram Singh killed Ram Chandra with a gun smuggled into the court room, only to be rapidly tackled and shot dead in turn by a U.S. marshal. After such drama, the verdict was almost anticlimactic: leaders Santokh Singh, Bhagwan Singh and Taraknath Das received eighteen to twenty-two month sentences, while the other defendants received less than a year each.

Why this shift in tolerance toward politically radical Indians? For a time, the United States had appeared as hospitable a place as any for an emigrant revolutionist. Indian political exiles and idealists had sought out the destination for its cachet as the birthplace of anti-British rebellion, and its reputation as the haven of political refugees from around the world whose cause was freedom and democracy. But already by the early twentieth century, cracks were beginning to show between this cherished American self-image, and the realities of U.S. political and economic ambition on the global scale; not to mention the realities of racism. Ram Chandra

argued in the Hindustan Ghadar of May 10, 1917, that “America is a liberty giver to the whole world. She is an enemy of kings and a friend of republics... We have not said these few words because England is an enemy of India, but because British rule is the enemy of republics.” A few months later Bhagwan Singh’s *Yugantar*, which he claimed was the true heir of the Dayal-era Ghadar, challenged, “Is America in this war for the freedom of slave nations?... When a nation which keeps in subjection the Philippines and Puerto Rico, then her claim appears a matter of astonishment to the whole world” Indeed, by the time of the United States’ entry into the First World War, its ascendancy as Britain’s successor as global hegemon was underway. The years immediately following the war marked a peak in the severe repression of political radicalism as well as of Asian immigration. Nevertheless, despite the failed war-time uprisings and the heavy repression of 1917 to 1918, a few Ghadar members quietly but faithfully tended the flame. By the early 1920s they had achieved a retrenchment and resurgence, drawing new recruits as well as veterans of the original movement, now emerging from prison or prudent obscurity.

As Puri points out, the domestic and international political situation had changed drastically since before the war. U.S. government policies now forcibly discouraged both dissent and immigration, at the very moment that elsewhere the Russian Revolution was proclaiming a new vehicle for anti-colonial movements. Just as World War I had tended to channel anti-colonialism into nationalism, diffusing internationalism, the Communist International would channel what might later have been called Third World nationalism into left-inflected anti-colonialism. Moreover, the unexpected victory of the Bolsheviks channeled the anarcho-syndically tending international left, with which Ghadar had been connected, into stringently centralized Leninism. Having pragmatically identified the Communists as the most promising force in their favor on the world stage at that point, most committed Ghadarites now identified as Communists.

The American Communist Party sponsored Ghadar members to study in Moscow, where the post-war remnants of the BIC had also relocated. Ghadar sent delegates to the Third Congress of the Comintern, to Ho Chi Minh’s 1925 International Union of the Oppressed Peoples of the East, and to the 1927 League Against Imperialism in Brussels. Ghadarites in China published the *Hindustan Ghadar Dhandora* in Hankow, forged links with the leftist faction of the Guomindang, and called on the Sikh troops in the region to abandon the British Army and fight for the Chinese revolution. Going beyond the merely moral, this support included arming a GMD unit of eighty Sikh watchmen— payback in some way, perhaps, for the diasporic movement’s years of advice and support from Sun Yat Sen? Finally, in the late 1920s to 1930s other former Ghadarites went on to organize peasants’ and workers’ movements in India, as well as speaking out for Dalit and women’s rights. Among them PCHA ex-president Sohan Singh Bhakna, freed after sixteen years in Indian jails, was notable for his founding contributions to the Kisan Sabha and Communist Party of India. So tactical and ideological priorities evolved. But let me backtrack for a moment, to recapture the political moment of Ghadar’s pre-war emergence.

Once the attempted uprising of 1915 was underway, and the would-be freedom fighters had boarded their ships to India, I doubt there was much discernible difference in the experiences of the Bengalis and Punjabis, the students and the farmers. They had all transformed themselves simply into revolutionaries: they undertook the same missions, were judged in the same courts and kept in the same jails. Yet in the ways in which they understood their missions still varied considerably. In the next two sections I will describe the two or more ghadars that were being fought under the capacious umbrella of solidarity in resistance.

### III. BENGALI GHADAR

Although the pressing goal of the insurgency was the national liberation of India, and although its participants sought strategic alliance with German imperial, Japanese Pan-Asian and Turkish and Egyptian Pan-Islamic forces, I would argue that this version of Ghadar fit squarely into the fold of the contemporary international left.

**Swadesh:** Many of the radical intellectuals who arrived on the west coast between 1907 and 1913 had been inspired by– or were hardened veterans of– the Swadeshi (Self-Reliance; linked to the concept of swaraj or self-rule) Movement which had flared up in response to the administrative partition of Bengal in 1905. As the seat of the British colonial government until its transfer to Delhi in 1912, Calcutta possessed India’s highest concentration of western-educated elites, English-speaking civil-servants, and a consciously modernizing bourgeois/gentry community. Intensive cultural revival characterized this sector from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century; Hindu reform movements like the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj laid the groundwork for modern nationalist and nascent feminist movements, as well as producing a literary renaissance that included Rabindranath Tagore and Bankimchandra Chatterjee, both of whose work became enshrined in the nationalist canon.

At the same time a network of service-oriented cultural organizations called samitis emerged, whose projects encompassed providing village uplift, education and infrastructure as well as fostering mental and physical self-improvement in training schools or akkharas. In reaction to the collective humiliation of being ruled unfit for fighting by the ethnic taxonomies of the British, the Bengali movement for cultural revival and modernization at this time included a compensatory stress on physical violence. Although the samitis spanned a range of views and methods, the more extreme of the akkharas were linked to militant revolutionary cells which carried out assassinations, bombings and dacoities. One of the most notorious, the Anusilan Samiti, produced several seasoned veterans such as Taraknath Das and Jatindranath Lahiri who would play important roles in Ghadar.

By the time Lahiri arrived at Berkeley in 1912, he had not only carried out a number of violent missions for the Samiti, but received a degree in chemistry at Calcutta University. Now he was studying explosives for his Master’s of Science at the University of California, where he and Darisi Chenchiah led a study group focusing on the comparative analysis of revolutions, political and economic theory, and the glories of India’s past. As in Bengal, the program also included self defense, fencing, shooting, and guerrilla techniques. But the ideological motivation of Bengali revolutionists like the notorious Jatin Mukherjee, mentor to several future Ghadarites, had been relatively simple: get rid of the British. Radicalism or “extremism” in this context referred to methodology, not necessarily to political theory. Furthermore, ideologically speaking, the Bengalis drew upon a number of key influences, not all of which appeared immediately compatible.

For example, Italian nationalist Mazzini, who called for the unification of disparate entities through armed revolt toward the goal of an independent, democratic republic, was constantly cited as a model. But this type of nineteenth century republican nationalism was mingled with

other ingredients, in a fusion of western-inflected radicalism with uniquely Indian traditions. The ideology of Bengali nationalism began at this time to assume an intense spiritual aspect, as the cult of shakti— i.e. divine power in female form— fused with the cult of Bharat Mata, Mother India personified as the goddess Kali, for whom devotees were willing to kill and die. Bankimchandra’s novel *Anandamath* sketched the ideal for the band of uncompromising servants of this implacable mother; samiti members consciously modeled themselves upon these characters.<sup>1</sup>

Juxtaposed to such spiritualized nationalism, the ominous epithet “anarchist” occurs not infrequently in official communications regarding key Ghadarites and their allies. British authorities deployed the term to play up the absolute dangers the rebels posed to the stability of government and empire; but it seems clear that in their minds the word denoted “bomb-throwing assassin” rather than “libertarian socialist,” just as “Bakuninism,” even to its avowed adherents, at least initially tended to describe a methodology more than an ideology. By 1907 the Bengali revolutionists had determined that they must seek out Russian anarchists as tactical trainers. So the samitis dispatched Hem Chandra Das, Mirza Abbas and P.M. Bapat to Paris to learn the trade of bomb-making under the tutelage of Nikolai Safranski of the People’s Will party. The infamous bomb manual Das then produced traveled duly back to India where the Bengalis applied it to the training of guerrilla revolutionists. Bengali militant Ganesh Savarkar was carrying a pamphlet called “How the Russians Organize a Revolution” when arrested in 1908.<sup>2</sup>

But even though self-avowed followers of Bakunin provided the Bengalis with methodological mentorship, they didn’t necessarily provide the necessary guidance for the shape of the swaraj to come. Instead, militant Swadeshi workers derived the visionary aspect of their program from Tagore as well as from Kropotkin, both of whom appeared on lists of the Extremists’ intellectual gurus. Tagore was one of the most prominent and beloved of literary and cultural figures at the time, and a participant in the Swadeshi movement, although he preferred to distance himself from political radicalism in favor of a more humanistic and spiritual focus. Shantiniketan, the school and utopian community Tagore founded in 1901, was strongly influenced via his direct correspondence with Tolstoy, whose own intentional community Yasnaya Polyana also contributed to Gandhi’s vision for Sabarmati Ashram a few years later. Idealized village republics such as these, with their idyllic pastoralism and cultural efflorescence, were in a sense the validation of Tolstoy’s and Kropotkin’s writings. Correspondingly, the latter’s template for a decentralized, de-industrialized society, with a subsistence-based cottage economy based on mutual aid and providing for the creative development of full human potential, struck a resonant chord in Bengali reformist or restorationist thought of the time, which recognized in it a compatible ideal (regardless of their translation into or previous existence in reality).<sup>3</sup>

Among the diasporic communities in Tokyo, Paris and San Francisco, particularly among Har Dayal’s circle, radical students even further embraced ideas derived explicitly from western anarchism. However, this is not to say that such ideas were passively received through pedagogical

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<sup>1</sup> This tendency to spiritualize political extremism has had chilling implications in independent India, fueling the rise of volatile rightwing Hindu fundamentalism in recent years. This form of radical politics also depends upon a diasporic network in order to function inside India, drawing most of its funding from expatriate Indians with a heavy concentration in Silicon Valley; thus reflecting Ghadar’s geographic though not its ideological profile.

<sup>2</sup> Steven G. Marks, *How Russia Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 31–33; Peter Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India 1900–1910* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See Adi Doctor, *Anarchist Thought in India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964); M.K. Gandhi, “Hind Swaraj” in *The Penguin Gandhi Reader*, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, ed. (New York: Penguin Books/Ahmedabad: Nivajivan Trust, 1993), pp. 1–66.



contact with European militants; but rather were innovatively reinterpreted and recombined with compatible elements within the Indian intellectual tradition. The results did not simply ape the western versions. For example, unlike many western radicals, the theorists of Indian revolution did not reject spirituality out of hand as a valid component of modern thought. Rather they drew upon Hindu spiritual traditions even while casting them into modern secular applications. For example, prior to his withdrawal from politics into full-time religion, Aurobindo Ghose had used yoga as a keystone of the dedicated militant's mental and physical regimen. The image of the ascetic sage burning with inspiration was easily transferable to the ideal of the singleminded, ascetic revolutionary, to which Har Dayal had always committed himself.

This progression from militance to spiritual retreat, or at least to a more introverted focus on the transformation of consciousness, was a recurrent pattern among Indian freedom workers. Aurobindo had studied in England from 1879 to 1892 and was part of the militant nationalist movement from 1906 to 1910, when he was imprisoned. But he abruptly abandoned active politics after his release— following a visionary conversion experience while incarcerated— to found a utopian spiritual community. Student radical and celebrated writer Dhan Gopal Mukherjee also moved through the political mode with which he had flirted while living with American anarchist cronies in the Bay Area circa 1911 to 1912, to focus instead on a more internalized, spiritual approach toward liberation. Even Har Dayal would eventually shift his obsessions from open revolution to moral transformation. To those catechized in the stages of the Hindu life cycle— that is, the passage from chaste student, to civic-minded householder, to renunciatory forest sage— the pattern was perhaps not unfamiliar. However, the diasporic Ghadarites of the 1910s were determinedly secular in ideology, even if their expression of secular ideas was inflected through cultural practices rooted in Sikh and Hindu traditions. As Sohan Singh Bhakna declared, “We were Hindustanees; our religion was patriotism.”<sup>4</sup>

**Har Dayal:** Har Dayal was a brilliant if erratic thinker whose political philosophy, according to Don Dignan, “was a distinctive amalgam of western anarchism and Hindu revivalism, [which] did not prevent him from welding together into the first purely secular Indian revolutionary organization a cross-section of very disparate groups and individuals who comprised the hitherto unorganized and sporadic revolutionary movement.”<sup>5</sup>

He first publicly articulated the principles of what biographer Emily Brown shorthands “Har-dayalism” circa 1907, and published them in the *Paris Bande Mataram* in 1909. The program called for three stages toward a completed revolution: first, moral and intellectual preparation, by which “the spirit of the slave must disappear;” secondly war, by which “the debris of the old regime must be removed” and the “way... declared for the establishment of a free and sovereign state managed by the people;” and finally independence, in which “the work of reconstruction and consolidation commences.”<sup>6</sup> After a few peripatetic years of soul searching, which included studying both Marxism and Buddhism in Martinique and Hawaii — where he supposedly had the requisite encounter with Sun Yat Sen— Dayal arrived in San Francisco in 1911, where he had been invited to help mold the disaffected laborers and radical students into a powerful unified movement aiming for “social acceptance and economic equality,”<sup>7</sup> presumably within the U.S. context. Having agreed to undertake the task, Dayal simultaneously accepted a lectureship in Indian phi-

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, pp. 75–6.

<sup>5</sup> Dignan, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Puri, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, p. 85.

losophy at Stanford until his discomfort with the restraints thereby placed on his controversial political activities led to his resignation in 1912. The university then disavowed all connection with him, not least because of his public statements in support of young people practicing free love in defiance of the oppressive institution of marriage.

Between 1911 and 1914 Dayal also gave regular lectures on labor and revolution at the San Francisco and Oakland IWW halls, reportedly serving the Wobblies for a time as the San Francisco branch secretary. He founded the Radical Club (a.k.a. the International-Radical-Communist-Anarchist Club) as a meeting place for an eclectic array of social, political and intellectual non-conformists, as well as the more specialized Bakunin Club. A supporter of the Magon brothers, Dayal also encouraged his Ghadar readers to learn from the examples of the Russian and Mexican revolutions. Although I do not know if he ever encountered the Magons personally, many local IWW members had recently participated in their invasion of Baja California, in some ways a political control case for the same military expedition prohibition which would come to haunt the Ghadarites. Finally, Dayal established what he called the Bakunin Institute on land donated near Oakland as a “monastery” for his proposed Fraternity of the Red Flag. Calling on members to pursue personal development through voluntary renunciation and self-discipline, its formal principles stated its dedication to the ultimate abolition of capital, private property, government, religion, race-feeling, patriotism, and marriage, since it led to the subjugation of women. Regarding the latter, Lahiri and Dayal both advocated that any revolutionist who was already married, rather than keeping his wife at home, should encourage her to pursue education and training as an equal worker for the cause. But given the dearth of females among the California student radicals, this declaration remained rhetorical.

Chenchiah recalled an occasion on which Lahiri publicly berated Dayal for wasting his time dabbling in anarchism, free love and social philosophy when he should have been focused solely on liberating India. But Dayal maintained all along— as would Gandhi— that this immediate political goal was only one component of a much more comprehensive social, cultural, economic and philosophical transformation. Insofar as Ghadarites identified with this phase of Dayal’s ideas, and insofar as these ideas were influential in shaping the movement, it was a vision of an anarchist society. Still, even among the diasporic radical intellectuals, revolutionary ideology was not monolithic. Har Dayal’s name was associated with anarchism and M.N. Roy’s virtually synonymous with Indian communism, while Barakatullah’s linked Ghadar to progressive Pan-Islamism. Taraknath Das, with his comprehensive geopolitical analysis, connected it to Pan-Asianism. But the addition of the Sikh factor introduced even more multiplicity to the character of the movement.

## IV. PUNJABI GHADAR

The farmers who emigrated from rural Punjab experienced diaspora through a different entry point than the Bengalis, and accordingly they had a different framework for describing what their movement toward national liberation stood for. Their motivating ideologies layered several influences: the intellectual leadership of progressive Sikh priests, the claims to justice articulated by Sikh army veterans, and finally the political awareness generated directly from the lived experiences of Punjabi immigrant laborers. These were the organic intellectuals whose version of Ghadar I argue bestowed a more lasting legacy than that of the Bengali professional elites.

**Priests and soldiers:** Unlike the Bengalis, many of the Punjabi emigres did not share the militant political stance they developed abroad with the kin they had left behind. Aside from occasional periods of unrest, Punjab up to this point had largely remained a bastion of loyalism, due first to influential Sikh granthis who viewed the British empire as a benefactor and preached loyalty to the sovereign as a religious duty; and second to the heavy representation of troops from this region, resulting in networks of veterans whose loyalist warrior ethic had been conditioned by such preaching. Yet both these groups, who had taken such pride in their loyalty back home, became lightning rods for anti-colonial agitation in North America. Initially, the British had secured Sikh loyalty through co-opting the cultural discourses of fidelity and honor in battle, which the Sikhs themselves understood as the expression of orthodox religious precept. It was a relatively simple matter to transfer the object of loyalty from clan or Khalsa to the British ruler. Hence the significance of Taraknath Das's Free Hindusthan masthead, which turned this precept upside down by declaring that "Resistance to Tyranny is Obedience to God."<sup>1</sup> After all, an equally valid way of interpreting Sikh tradition has emphasized the values of liberty, equality and fraternity over that of loyalism.

Decorated army veterans arrived in Canada with the assumption that their natural rights as subjects of the empire would be recognized. But the expectation of reward for military service was followed by disillusionment when they were not accepted as equals. Had they not proven themselves to be capable of defending and by extension of governing their own country? Had they not fought alongside British brothers-in-arms? The implication of such civic participation was that they had attained the maturity which the tutelary discourse of liberal imperialism projected endlessly into the future. Thus their initial demands for political autonomy focused on their rights as British citizens, loyal subjects of the King-Emperor who were entitled to British standards of justice, rather than on a more radical demand either for national independence outside the empire, or for a more comprehensive social and economic transformation. In short, rather than demanding the right to withdraw from the British institutional and epistemic regime, they were demanding that it to be applied to them. Thereby they called attention to the discrepancies in, or exceptions to, the liberal political philosophy used to justify colonialism. In reality,

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<sup>1</sup> Puri, p. 80.

the rhetorical values of equality, fair play and democracy in which they had been indoctrinated conflicted with the requirements of colonial economic extraction.<sup>2</sup>

**Organic intellectuals and colonial labor:** Punjabi emigration in the early twentieth century illustrated perfectly the global movement of labor within the colonial economy. The same local conditions which stimulated recruitment into overseas military service, also generated the pressures behind the movement of labor. Inflexible colonial policies exacerbated recurrent famines by commandeering food production for commercial export, while efforts to restructure land tenure systems in a direction more conducive to capitalist agriculture forced many small landholders into mortgage and wage labor. This economic destabilization also contributed to a wave of popular uprisings in 1907, which in turn produced a vicious circle of repressive legislation, including the new Criminal Seditious Act of 1908.<sup>3</sup>

The Indians entering the United States and Canada prior to 1946 were almost exclusively male. Partly this is because of the high number of emigrants who came by way of the military, a thoroughly homosocial environment. As for those men who arrived straight from their villages, most entered as ostensibly temporary laborers to send money back to extended families squeezed by colonial economic policies in Punjab, not to stay and naturalize. Many of these were younger sons sent by the family's collective decision; some left wives and children behind. When any did attempt to bring wives and children to join them in North America, the families were barred entry. This situation led many Punjabi men to marry Mexican women who shared their socio-economic position and according to miscegenation law, their racial classification. Nevertheless, upon arrival as single men, many of them lived in what might be described as labor and living co-ops, in which groups often based on village or kin relationships found lodging and work, split wages, shared expenses, made joint investments, cooked and ate together. For each work gang, one who was able to speak English might be designated the "boss man," meaning that he took responsibility for finding jobs for the group, negotiating contracts and terms, transmitting instructions, and so on.

Students also served some of these mediating functions for the laborers, particularly where legal matters were concerned. In organizing for Ghadar activity, many students took for granted their intellectual superiority as the motivating force for an inert mass. After all, the assumption of functional specialization had been entrenched in Indian society and reinforced by the British codification of caste/ethnic character. However, among the North American immigrants there was movement across these lines in both directions. Most students paid their tuition by working as dishwashers or seasonal agricultural laborers. Meanwhile, the Ghadar newspaper empowered many previously illiterate and inarticulate workers to express their grievances in the form of political statements. So the conscious became workers and the workers conscious. According to Josh's biography of Sohan Singh Bhakna, the Ghadar journal inspired a cultural flowering among the Punjabis. This meant that issues of the paper might include the poignant lyrics of Punjabi freedom songs as well as more academic commentaries arguing statistically-based cases against British rule. As an example of this tonal range, compare these excerpts from Ghadar, allowing for the poor rendering of translated verse in the latter: "Within the last sixteen years eight million

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<sup>2</sup> See Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (University of Chicago Press:1999); Laura Tabili, "We Ask For British Justice": Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> See Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich, eds. *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States Before World War II* (University of California Press: 1984).

have died from plague; it is estimated that the mortality per thousand has risen from twenty-four to thirty-four. In the native states great pains are taken to spread dissatisfaction and to inculcate the doctrine of loyalty to the British Government.” And, “A plant which is touched by the British, how can water and manure make it green? Where people look anxiously to learn speaking, how can freedom appear there?”<sup>4</sup>

Yet peasants who like Sohan Singh Bhakna had arrived in the U.S. from Punjab following the unrest of 1906 and 1907, did possess an incipient political awareness. Even so, it was in the U.S. that Bhakna had the opportunity to further develop his vision of the overthrow of the British government, to be followed by, in Puri’s words, the “establishment in India of a [secular] democratic republic based on liberty and equality.”<sup>5</sup> As I suggested above, these principles were quite compatible with Sikh tradition, as well as having been transmitted within the British colonial military milieu. The very appeal of the United States for immigrants had stemmed largely from its image as the cradle of resistance to British colonization, and its reputation as the prototypical liberal democracy.

The question then would be not how Punjabi laborers adopted liberal ideas, but how their ideas evolved toward communism. Aside from the contributions of the students, perhaps at least a partial explanation lies in the Sikhs’ imminent discovery of the fallacy within U.S. liberalism, as the U.S. began to emerge upon the colonial stage. This fallacy echoed the discrepancy in application which underlay the British imperial project: race. Race was a highly politicized and always slippery categorization where Indians were concerned, as the U.S. government vigorously discouraged Indian naturalization. All South Asians were designated as “Hindus” regardless of religion in order to distinguish them from Native Americans, and their racial status was debated in several court cases to determine their eligibility for citizenship or to own land, culminating in the landmark case of *U.S. vs. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923. The judge ruled that while “Hindus” might plausibly make a legitimate claim to be Caucasian, as Thind did, they were indisputably not white, and their unassimilability therefore self-evident. The case thus established that Indians were ineligible for citizenship; now Indians who had held land for many years had to forfeit their property retroactively. Moreover, sanctioned vigilantism compounded legal exclusion. In the anti-Indian riot of 1907, several hundred Punjabis were beaten and driven out of Bellingham, Washington. Union organizers had instigated the lynching as the finale to a Labor Day parade, with calls to drive out the cheap labor.

Thereafter, Asian Exclusion League agitations drove Indians out of most urban areas. Whether dealing with immigration office bureaucrats, seeking work or purchasing land, they faced harassment and discrimination. But unlike the Japanese and Chinese immigrants who shared similar experiences, the Indians found that they had no home government willing to defend their rights as citizens, and were thus denied dignity as free people and free laborers. Thus, significantly, rather than reacting to the local white citizenry who were the immediate cause of their legal and extralegal oppression, they transferred their anger to the British colonial government. In contrast, the North American mainstream labor movement’s chronic attacks on immigrants indicated the opposite state of awareness: namely the inability to locate domestic race/labor relations within a transnational economic structure, with the corresponding failure to link capitalism to colonialism. I am convinced that this failure lurks behind the shortsighted racist protectionism

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<sup>4</sup> Ghadar, May 10 and April 29, 1917.

<sup>5</sup> Puri, p. 75.

endemic to organized labor's agenda throughout the twentieth century; I am also convinced that this blindspot lies at the root of the analytical fallacies of Euro-centric leftist discourse.

Despite its habitual paeans to the international proletariat, the left wing of labor organizers in the United States was as staunchly hostile to Asian immigration as was the AF of L. At the international Socialist Party congresses of 1907 to 1912, American delegates engaged in heated debate over whether Asian immigrants on the West Coast functioned in collusion with capitalist interests in the attempt to extract cheaper labor; and thus whether, since the Asians' arrival had been coerced by said capitalists, they should be simply shipped back to their primitive homeland. The crux of the matter hinged on whether the Asians were organizable as part of the American labor movement, or whether they constituted a hopeless drag on the forward progress of labor's march toward its advanced goals.<sup>6</sup>

But what organized labor missed— and what it continues to miss— was the question of why the immigrants had arrived; namely, that their migration was conditioned by the global structural inequities of a colonial economy. It was no accident that the acquisition of overseas colonies by the United States coincided with growing anxieties about an influx of brown and yellow immigrants at home. Furthermore, racial anxieties on the domestic front harmonized easily with fear of destabilizing ideas that might threaten imperialist/capitalist goals overseas. The passage of newly exclusionary immigration policies between 1917 and 1924 corresponded precisely with the timing of legislation repressing political dissent. Simultaneous with the Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial, hundreds of assorted socialists, pacifists and anarcho-syndicalists were also undergoing persecution for their anti-capitalist and anti-war agitation. Some IWW members, after their own 1918 mass trials in Fresno and Sacramento, formed bonds with prominent Ghadarites while in jail.

The Industrial Workers of the World, unique within the labor movement for its policy of racial inclusion, provided the exception to the anti-Asian line. Moreover, the IWW's prime sites of activity coincided with the geographical and occupational location of the Punjabis. But although it is possible to glean some documentation of the relationship of Har Dayal and other Bengali students with the IWW, did the Punjabi laborers have such a relationship? The familiarity which Berkeley student Dhan Gopal Mukherjee evinced with the Wobblies circa 1911 to 1912 suggests that the English-speaking, politically radical student-laborers were more likely to be involved with IWW activities than were the relatively insulated, non-English speaking full-time workers. But although the Punjabis were in all the right places at all the right times to coincide with the peak of IWW activity, their tendency to live together in separate enclaves perhaps made them less likely to be part of any mass multi-ethnic labor mobilizations. Still, although seldom mentioned in accounts of IWW-instigated agitations, a few sources mention that Indians were singled out to bear the brunt of repression during the Wheatlands strike of 1913. Indians also participated in the Tacoma railroad strike of 1907, where their quarters were especially targeted for searches.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, at this point I can only speculate about the Punjabis' degree of participation in the left-radical labor movement in the United States. Nevertheless, these organic intellectuals managed to independently identify, via their own immigrant experience of racialized labor exploitation, some of the same links between colonization and the global division of labor which Comintern

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<sup>6</sup> Sally Miller, ed., *Race, Ethnicity and Gender in Early Twentieth-Century American Socialism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 175–220.

<sup>7</sup> Sucheta Mazumdar, "Colonial Impact and Punjabi Emigration to the United States" in Cheng and Bonacich, p. 574; Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Gadar Syndrome: Ethnic Anger and Nationalist Pride" in Chandrasekhar, p. 51.

strategy regarding Asia would later echo and elaborate. Thus the trajectory from Ghadar's first radical incarnation to its second as a communist movement seems quite logical; as do the personal trajectories of the survivors from the wartime Ghadar party to the Communist Party of India.

# CONCLUSION

Was Ghadar a nationalist movement? Not by the conventional definition. I argue that while it gathered the forces of transnational radicalism toward the immediate goal of national liberation, it also envisioned that project as part of a larger cultural and economic transformation. Thus, while certainly an anti-colonial movement, Ghadar included other ingredients which were at least as important as nationalism in flavoring its resistance.

Was Ghadar even a single, unified movement? I argue that it was at least two, and that these currents of resistance converged out of the distinctive experiences of two specific groups that entered the diaspora. Although one was pressed into migration by economic exigencies, while the other was afforded the privilege of cosmopolitan education, nevertheless both achieved by means of such movement an experience and a perspective which were not available to those who had remained behind within the borders of British India.

Ghadar crystallized at a moment of zenith for political and cultural radicalism in the United States. At the same time, the North American immigrant work force was beginning to link its grievances of labor exploitation compounded by racial discrimination to its position within a global political-economic structure. Within these contradictions, the Ghadarites parlayed the experiences of peripatetic intellectuals and immigrant laborers in early twentieth century California into a revolutionary anti-colonial movement. Ghadar's first incarnation, romantically brief, did not survive the war years and the accompanying legal repression. With the group's resurgence after the war, anarcho-Hindu ascetics yielded the stage to ascendant communists, many of whom were to play foundational roles in the peasant, Dalit, and worker movements of India, as well as the ongoing struggle for colonial liberation.

**Postscript:** In recent years, Ghadar is being rediscovered and reclaimed by progressive South Asians in the United States and Europe, as part of a heritage of political radicalism and a commitment to social and economic justice. For example, the South Asian Magazine of Action and Reflection (SAMAR collective), and the Forum of Indian Leftists (FOIL), both of which are self-consciously diasporic, have a sophisticated approach to locating oppressions of race, gender and class within the political and economic conditions of global capitalism, as well as within the entrenched religious, caste and ethnic tensions specific to South Asia. Both acknowledge the history of the word ghadar, which is once again, thanks to FOIL, the title of a publication distributed to a radical diaspora.<sup>1</sup> "Our name is identical with our work," said Har Dayal in 1913. Neither the name nor the work has ended.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.foil.org](http://www.foil.org); [www.samarmagazine.org](http://www.samarmagazine.org); [www.proxsa.org](http://www.proxsa.org); [www.cgpi.org](http://www.cgpi.org).



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*Published in Radical History Review in winter 2004–5. An even more long and pedantically documented version served as my second master's thesis en route to a PhD in history at UCSC.*

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