

Abstract

“Guru Granth Inspired Sikh Revolutionary Movement for Freedom of India: 1907-1918”

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The revolutionary movement that for freedom of India had its roots in the core Sikh belief of freedom of all people and equality of mankind. Even though main function ground of this revolutionary movement was West Coast of North America, its origin can be traced back to uneasy calm and peaceful countryside of Punjab. Sikhs were affected great deal due to Land acts passed by the Colonial Power, the British, to maintain a ruling class of pro-British families.

Sikhs, with growing economic deprivation and inability to move up in social setup, migrated to other parts of the empire. Many Sikhs chose to come to America or Canada via Singapore and Honk Kong. Several thousand Sikhs were settled in the Far East by the beginning of the 20th century. Even though exact numbers of migrant Sikhs to North America are not available, a good source of this information are the Annual Reports of Commissioner of Immigration. These report shed light on Sikh migration with more accuracy than any other data available.

According to data contained in the Annual Reports it is evident that Sikh migration to American was at peak in 1910 and virtually died down by 1915. The numbers obtained provide a story of migration that is directly tied to economic conditions of Punjab. Table I shows immigration of Sikhs to USA from 1900 to 1915 (Source: Abstract of the Report on Japanese and other Immigrant Races in the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain States).

This data also puts to rest the argument that Gadar Party started its functioning in 1913. As Table I shows, immigration of East Indians to United States was at peak in 1910 and drastically declined in 1911 and remained very low due to World War I. During the year of 1913 only 188 and in 1915 only 82 East Indians are shown to have entered the United States.

Early immigrants from 1907 to 1910 were mostly responsible for the Gadar Lehar and its set up and later arrivals from 1911 to 1915 may have only joined the existing organization. There is little possibility that arrivals in 1913 or later were large enough in numbers of economic strength to initiate a strong organization such as Gadar Party. Movement was already at strong footings in 1913 when immigration from India basically dried up.

The 1911 edition of this report makes an interesting while describing “East Indian”. It notes “About 85 per cent of these are Hindus wearing the turban; the others are Mohammedans or Afghans” This is clear indication that majority of the immigrants from India were indeed Sikhs.

The Annual Reports also provide a detailed breakdown of employment of “East Indians” in America. The majority of the “East Indians” were employed as ‘Farm Laborers’. These farm laborers made up about

Migration of East Indians to United States	
Year	Migrants
1900	9
1901	20
1902	84
1903	83
1904	258
1905	145
1906	271
1907	1,072
1908	1,710
1909	337
1910	1,782
1911	517
1912	165
1913	188
1914	172
1915	82

Table I

83 percent of the total population. These were mostly Sikhs as they were the best suited to work in harsh environment of the agricultural economy. This not only provided them with study employment but also with strong financial base to set up and run freedom movement.

An analysis of names appearing on the manifests of the ships arriving at the port of San Francisco from 1906 to 1910 provides another data point to discuss about the early “East Indians” coming to the west coast of the United States. Dr. Harold S. Jacoby, Professor of Sociology at University of the Pacific Stockton, conducted this analysis and he has published his findings in his book titled “History of East Indians in America” (Stockton, 1992). According to his analysis, 80 percent of East Indians coming to San Francisco in the period under study were Sikhs. Actual number is most likely higher as some Sikhs did not use “Singh” as the last name but preferred to be identified by last name. According to the analysis Sikhs made up 80%, Hindus 9% and Muslims 6%.

Occupations of East Indians in USA	
Year	Workers
Farm Laborers	5,658
Professional	362
Students	344
Merchants	229
Miscellaneous	166
Skilled Labor	89
Table II	

Gadar Party members were primarily Sikhs is also evident from the “The Ghadr Directory” published by the British in 1917 and revised in 1934. It provides a list of 616 names of prominent members of the Gadar Party. An analysis has shown that 527 were Sikhs and 54 Hindus while only 35 were Muslims. This makes Gadar Party a truly Sikh led organization that consisted mostly of Sikhs.

Another point to consider about the makeup of early “East Indians” is the fact that Komagata Maru that arrived in Vancouver on May 13, 1914 had Sikhs as the largest contingent of passengers. According to numbers provided by the Canadian Government Archrivals, there were a total of 376 passengers with 340 of these were Sikhs, 24 were Muslims and 12 were Hindus. This shows that about 90% of those travelling on Komagata Maru were actually Sikhs while only 10% were Muslims and Hindus combined.

Sikhs were also the major supporters of Gadar since they felt somewhat at home to fight for justice and freedom as they had a history of struggle for survival. Another factor was the history of travel in many Sikh families, especially rural and farming communities. Many immigrants were themselves well-travelled men during their service in the British armed forces or had a family member who had travelled to other parts of the commonwealth and understood the value of freedom.

One of the most influential figure was Sant Teja Singh, who played a major role in helping promote the ideology of Gadar by helping set up the Gurduara in Stockton. Meetings of the early Gadar Party used Gurduara as meeting place and this Gurduara became a headquarter of Gadar Party until was officially moved to San Francisco. This makes early influence of Sikhs and Sikh philosophy evident on the Gadar and its members.

Since Sikhs formed the majority of the East Indians, they also formed the backbone of the Gadar Party. With this fact known, it is easy to understand why Sikh philosophy had a major impact on the Gadar outlook and policy. Philosophy of Sikhism such as teachings of Baba Farid, who preferred to die rather than live a life of a slave of others (GGS page 1380) or teachings of Guru Nanak that be prepared to sacrifice your life for the freedom (GGS page 1412), was an inspiration to Sikhs who were working in the Gadar Party.

Guru Nanak's message of inspiration was carried on the front page and on top of the Gadar newspaper. This was the message of "You may play this game of love but be prepared to sacrifice" (GGS 1412). This inspiration was instrumental in providing a spiritual foundation for the uplifting spirit of Gadar Lehar.

The poetry of the Gadar Party also reflected the teaching of Sikh philosophy that "when all has been tried, yet justice is not in sight. It is right to pick up the sword, It is then right to fight." (Zafarnama -22)

This message of fighting for one's right is also central to the publications of the Gadar Party. Its publications usually carried a map of India with "mother India" with her hand on the sword, ready to take it out when all has failed.

With these facts known, it is safe to assume that Gadar Party was a revolutionary movement led by Sikhs and supported by Sikhs. It received its inspiration from Sikh philosophy of fighting for justice. Rather than calling it a "Revolutionary Movement" it would be factual to regard it and label it as "Sikh Revolutionary Movement".
