

The Komagata Maru Episode and the Ghadar Party

Dr. Hugh Johnston

After long and persistent lobbying, Canadian Sikhs have won recognition for the passengers of the Komagata Maru. Their victory has come nearly a century after fact and offers less compensation than some Sikhs expected, but it has included an apology by the prime minister of Canada and money for special Komagata Maru memorial projects including publications, a museum, a website and a monument. The monument—a joint project of the Vancouver Parks Board and the Vancouver Sikh Gurdwara— now stands beside the harbour where the passengers of the Komagata Maru rode at anchor during the long summer of 1914. At the unveiling on July 23 of this year—98 years after the passengers started their sad trip back to Asia—a long line of municipal, provincial and federal politicians spoke. Prominent among them were a number of well-known and influential Indo-Canadians. I was in the midst of writing this paper and found it striking, but not surprising, that not one speaker mentioned the Gadar (Rebellion) Party. Moreover, I was aware that for those who knew something about the subject, leaving out the Gadar Party was a conscious choice.

The platform party spoke appropriately against the wrongs committed by the Canadian government in 1914 when it stopped these immigrants from coming into the country; but they avoided the subject of the Gadar because they sensed a profitless controversy—an argument from about the real purpose of the Komagata Maru. And they steered clear of the subject even though it is not that difficult to explain: it is fair and accurate to say that the passengers began their voyage as economic migrants—not as political agitators—and that the radicalization of some came afterwards. Despite this, it has become easier to tell a truncated story and not delve too deeply. That was evident in 2008, when the prime minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, apologized for the treatment of the passengers of the Komagata Maru, describing it as “a sad chapter in our [Canada’s] history.” He carefully kept his statement brief, mentioning only the “detention” and “turning away” of the passengers and the “hardship” they experienced and that the voyage ended for some in “terrible tragedy.” Significantly, he too made no reference to

the Gadar involvement, although it would have been familiar to many in his audience, given the settling in which he chose to speak.ⁱ

This was especially ironic because Harper delivered his apology at a Sikh festival in Surrey, BC, held in the honor of Gadar party patriots and martyrs, including several from Canada who were closely involved with the Komagata Maru. This was the annual Gadri Babian Da Mela, then in its thirteenth year, and while it was remarkable that he should appear and speak at the Mela and not mention the Gadar Party or Gadarites, it was also understandable—as at the later unveiling of the Vancouver Parks Board monument. The Gadar story would have complicated the inclusive and upbeat message tailored for all Canadians that encased his brief apology, so he kept his account simple and left the Gadar part out. He was walking a narrow path because he was simultaneously avoiding the wider attention of a formal apology on the floor of parliament in Ottawa—which Sikhs continue to demand—and seeking to deliver his apology to a targeted audience in a British Columbia constituency in which results turned on Sikh votes. He and his advisors were aiming at maximum political benefit and minimum loss—which proved hard to achieve—and in their miscalculation they provoked the immense and immediate ire of much of their Surrey Sikh audience, including members of the Komagata Maru Foundation and the Descendants of Komagata Maru Society. As a consequence, the apology issue has not been put to rest. Sikhs carry on campaigning for a statement in parliament and the leftwing and centrist opposition parties in Canada are now lending them support. In this public discussion, however, the Gadar connection is still left out. No one of any national political stature has corrected or supplemented Harper on that.

The subject gets different emphasis in India, where the Komagata Maru is remembered as a chapter in the freedom movement. For nearly a decade, a Sikh scholar, Professor Malwinder Jit Singh Waraich of Chandigarh, has been determinedly petitioning the courts for official recognition of the passengers of the Komagata Maru as freedom fighters, seeking to make their families eligible for government pensions. The Government of India at first rejected the claim out of hand, but Prof. Waraich has been staunchly persistent and by stages he has nearly reached his goal. The Freedom Fighter Division of the Home Ministry now recognizes the place of the Komagata Maru in the freedom movement and Waraich's remaining objective is to get the families onto the

pension list. When he started his campaign, the Home Ministry told him flatly that the passengers were economic emigrants, not freedom fighters. But he has successfully insisted that they were transformed into revolutionaries by their treatment by Canada, and that reverberations from their experience shaped the independence struggle in Punjab. Moreover, what he says is a good interpretation of the extensive evidence that, while contradictory in its parts, does add up to a common picture. We can see this and generally agree with him by reviewing what is known. ⁱⁱ

Professor Wairaich's explanation fits perfectly with the well-documented history of Gurmukh Singh Lalton, a passenger on the Komagata Maru who became active in the Gadar after his return to India and who was imprisoned for seven years by the British in India before escaping to the Soviet Union. With Moscow as his base he travelled in and out of Afghanistan and the United States for the Gadar Party until 1934 when he was arrested in India during a surreptitious visit to Punjab, leading to his further imprisonment lasting until India's independence in 1947. As a young man, he had been a graduate of the English medium high school in the Punjab city of Ludhiana. He had failed to get into the army—for medical reasons—and had come to Hong Kong in 1913 before the Komagata Maru was organized. Following his six months on that ship he was a confirmed revolutionary. ⁱⁱⁱ Admittedly, he took a more extreme path than all but a few of his fellow passengers; including his schoolmate from Ludhiana, Puran Singh Janetpura. Puran Singh was a leader on the Komagata Maru, acting as stores keeper throughout the voyage; and he was deeply affected by the bitter experience of the Komagata Maru, but never aligned himself with the Gadar Party or the revolutionary approach. ^{iv} He represented many of the passengers. Although they demonstrated great solidarity right up to the catastrophic end of their voyage, they made their own individual choices and followed their independent perspectives in the aftermath. That could mean becoming an active revolutionary like Gurmukh Singh, or seeking Indian independence by peaceful means, or even adopting a more passive role. We can assume, however, that once they had been turned back from Canada, their deeper sympathies were with the revolutionary cause.

Kartar Singh Mehli was one of the rank and file passengers on the Komagata Maru who never went to prison although, like most of his fellow passengers, he was confined

to his village after he got back to Punjab. The author interviewed him twice thirty-six years ago in Vancouver, when Kartar Singh was ninety-two and in the home and the affectionate embrace of his Canadian Sikh relatives, speaking Punjabi during the interviews and communicating with the aid of a family member who translated. He remembered the events of 1914 with great clarity. He had been thirty years of age and retired from the army when he left his village, in November 1913. After waiting in Calcutta until he found other Punjabi villagers to travel with, he passed through Hong Kong in January 1914 on his way to America without knowing anything about the Komagata Maru. His first attempt to land in North America, at Tacoma, Washington, failed when he got negative results on a medical exam; and he arrived back in Hong Kong in April 1914. It was then that he learned about the Komagata Maru and that it had already left. With a group of fourteen he caught up at Yokohama and he was with the Komagata Maru until the fateful ending of the voyage at Budge Budge. He was one of the ordinary passengers, never close to the leaders, never seeking attention for himself, but quietly of his own mind. He had wanted to farm in America after reading in Urdu papers in Punjab of high wheat yields in the United States.^v That was the ambition that made him so determined to get to Canada or the United States; and it seems to have been the initial ambition of most of the men on the ship to eventually acquire land, even if it almost certainly meant starting as labourers.

For most of these men, it was incidental and unexpected that the ship became a classroom in religion and politics; but that is what happened. Gurdit Singh, the charterer and leader, was an actively religious man who had a gurdwara installed in the forecastle of the spar deck, with a finely carved platform with a canopy for the Sikh Holy Book, as attractively finished as in a major gurdwara. Having a granthi on board was as essential for him as having a doctor, and so he hired Sant Nabh Kanawal Singh from Nabha to lead worship. The chanting of kirtan was a continuing practice for the passengers and it helped their mental and emotional stability and contributed to their cohesiveness throughout their long ordeal. And the gurdwara space was also place for political meetings and lectures. That was the speaking venue for Bhai Balwant Singh, and for Prof. Moulana Barkatullah and Bhai Bhagwan Sing Jakh when they addressed the passengers in Japan on the ship's outward voyage. Balwant Singh—later a Gadar martyr—had arrived at

Moji at the same time as the Komagata Maru and came on board then. He was on his way back to Canada after an absence over a year as a delegate for the Canadian Sikh community, during which he had met with the undersecretary for the colonial office in London, the governor of Punjab and the viceroy of India to protest unsuccessfully Canada's immigration regulations. This he told the passengers when he addressed them in Moji, and when he was later interrogated by police in India, he told them that this was all he said. Barakatullah and Bhagwan Singh visited the ship after it reached Yokohama. Barkatullah—later a Gadar activist in San Francisco—was a Muslim from Bhopal, recently dismissed from Tokyo University and the former editor of an anti-British paper, *Islamic Fraternity* that the Japanese government had shut down. Bhagwan Singh was his temporarily guest, staying with him from the moment he arrived in Japan after he had been thrown out of Canada for his anti-British political activity only months earlier. They were already corresponding with Gadar leaders in California; and when the Komagata Maru reached Yokohama, they brought on board copies of Gadar Party publications for distribution to the passengers.^{vi}

When they reconstructed these events, British officials in India had little doubt that that the Gadar Party was involved with the Komagata Maru and that its main objective was to engineer a confrontation in Canada that would inflame public opinion in India. When the police in India later questioned the passengers, they wanted to know what went on during shipboard meetings, and specifically what people like Balwant Singh had said, and also what the leaders among the passengers had said. Gurdit Singh had two principal secretaries, Daljit Singh and Bir Singh, young men in their early twenties from the same part of Punjab (villages near Muktsar). They were students and they were travelling together on their way to study the United States when they stopped in Hong Kong and got involved with for Komagata Maru. On board, they played leading roles, and Bir Singh in particular was prominent as a speaker and activist. They became confirmed Gadarites while on the Komagata Maru; and when it returned to Asia, Bir Singh disembarked in Japan and took another ship to Shanghai to collect Sikhs for the planned Gadar rising, while Daljit Singh escaped arrest at Budge Budge, found his way back to Punjab, and successfully evaded the police while working for the Gadar Party.^{vii}

British imperial authorities noted—with alarm—the distribution of Gadar publications on the Komagata Maru, the appearances on the ship in Japan of Balwant Singh, Bhagwan Singh and Barakatullah, and the reports by a few passengers of anti-British lectures during the passage to Vancouver. To imperial authorities it had all the markings of an anti-government conspiracy. But it was not proof; and the Lahore tribunal that passed sentence on Balwant Singh and other Gadarites in 1917 stopped short of saying that it was. In Balwant Singh's case, the court admitted that he was within his rights when he spoke at public meetings in Punjab and also on the ship of the grievances of the Canadian Sikhs, or when he agitated to have Canadian immigration restrictions removed. The tribunal imagined that his language had been inflammatory and that it had strained the limits of acceptable protest, but they could not say with certainty that what he had done up to the time he visited the Komogata Maru had been seditious. Instead, they judged him by what followed and in this perspective they saw him going from legitimate protest to intemperate language to seditious action, all within ten months in 1913-1914—the time frame of the Komagata Maru.

This time frame included the outbreak of war in Europe in late July 1914; and that world-shaking event dramatically advanced the Gadar Party timetable. To understand what the passengers and their friends and supporters planned and intended, we have to follow events as they unfolded. The founding of the Gadar party and the planning of the Komagata Maru were nearly simultaneous developments and they took place against a background of dramatically changing circumstances. When the founding members of the Gadar party began organizing in the summer and fall of 1913, they were preparing for an armed struggle for India's freedom that they believed was some distance away. Their main propagandist in the beginning, Har Dyal, spoke at times of as much as decade before the armed struggle would begin, although he also saw the moment that Britain and Germany went to war as the opportune time. Before that, whenever it might be, he believed there was a lot of work to do.

At the end of March 1914, when he was arrested and questioned under threat of deportation by American immigration officials, Har Dyal, described himself as the organizer of a movement, a thinker, philosopher and propagandist who understood very well that his work of preparing for a future revolution could be damaged by any

immediate or associated act of terror whether in the United States or in India. The charge against him was that he was an anarchist who concealed that fact when came to the United States. Under questioning, he freely admitted he was an anarchist but denied that made him dangerous. Rather than incite his associates to acts of violence, he said, he had to control them. His immigration hearing took place on Angel Island in California at the end of March 1914—coincidentally about the time Gurdit Singh chartered the Komagata Maru in Hong Kong. The proceedings against Har Dyal stalled when the immigration department discovered that he already been in the country for three years and had legal residence, but he took no chances and left for Switzerland in May and that took him out of the Gadar circle. Although he was protecting himself from deportation during his Angel Island hearing, his answers have the ring of truth. His work and that of his closest associates in the Gadar at that point was education and propaganda, not action, and their main effort was the Gadar paper from its first appearance at the beginning of November, 1913. Up to the time that Har Dyal left California, the Gadar party had no direct connection with the Komagata Maru.^{viii}

Moreover, the Komagata Maru enterprise grew out of a campaign by legal means that had been going on for more than five years before Gadar party was organized. From this perspective we can see the Komagata Maru's challenge to Canada's immigration regulations as a major chapter in a struggle that had begun in 1908 when Canada first barred immigration from India. Canada's South Asian immigrant community had been contesting this policy from the start: in the courts, through delegations to Ottawa, London and Delhi, and by seeking publicity in Canada and abroad. We can demonstrate the story with one immigrant, Behari Lal Verma , who arrived in Vancouver on early in 1908; and who returned to Hong Kong in December 1913, seeking to charter a ship to bring Punjabi immigrants to Canada. He was an activist whose efforts led directly to Gurdit Singh's decision to hire the Komagata Maru.

Behari Lal Verma was a Punjabi Hindu educated in the reformed Hindu (Arya Samajist) Anglo-Vernacular High School in Hoshiarpur. He had spent four years in the police in Suva, Fiji and was in still in his mid-twenties when he came to Canada on the SS Monteagle from Hong Kong with another 182 Punjabi immigrants. These were the first immigrants from India that Canada tried to reject with a newly instituted continuous

journey regulation—a regulation aimed at Japanese coming via Hawaii and then used against Punjabis coming via Hong Kong. Their case went to court—with Behari Lal Verma heading the list of appellants—and they won and he and the others were landed. That did not open the way for other South Asian immigrants to follow because the government passed new legislation to close the loophole that the court had identified. But it established Behari Lal on the west coast of North America and over the next few years he moved many times to study in Seattle, Oakland and Vancouver and briefly to work in a sawmill in Portland before settling in Vancouver as a real estate broker and court interpreter. In this time he got to know personally the leading activists in the South Asian community in California and British Columbia.^{ix}

Behari Lal was living in Vancouver and was active in local South Asian community in October 1913 when the SS Panama Maru arrived in Victoria, BC with 56 South Asian passengers. This became a court case after the immigration department rejected all but 17 (who already had Canadian domicile) and the local South Asian community came to their defense by hiring a warmly sympathetic and politically committed Canadian lawyer. And it became a victory that seemed to open Canada to further immigration from India when the judge in this case found the regulations that the Canada was using to be invalid. This included the latest version of the continuous journey regulation. The judge made his ruling on very technical grounds; and it was a short-lived victory for the South Asian community because the Canadian government immediately prepared to reissue its regulations with revisions to meet the judge's objects. But the community saw a window of opportunity, and shortly after the ruling came down, Behari Lal left Vancouver on behalf of his countrymen to hire a ship to bring more immigrants to Canada. His arrival in Hong Kong in December 1914 generated excitement among Punjabis there, and that was how the Komagata Maru challenge began.

From Hong Kong, Behari Lal continued to report to the community leadership in Vancouver, but he was not able to obtain a ship and very quickly the initiative passed into Gurdit Singh's hands—that is into the hands of a man who had never been to Canada but who had the experience and personality to put this enterprise together. Gurdit Singh was a successful businessman whose maturity, knowledge, bearing and manner commanded respect. He had spent years in Malaysia and Singapore, with regular returns to his village

in the Amritsar District of Punjab; and for the previous several years he had been living in his village of Sirhali. But he had come to Hong Kong on business in January 1914 and immediately became aware of the talk of Canada among Punjabis there, and the issue of finding a ship. ^x

Gurdit Singh, like Behari Lal Verma, soon discovered that hiring a ship was difficult—British shipping agents in Hong Kong and elsewhere were unwilling to have anything to do with a venture that was so obviously loaded with political problems, given the hostility of the Canadian and Indian governments. It took Gurdit Singh over two months to secure a ship, and he had success only when he turned to a German shipping agent in Hong Kong who provided him with a ship owned by a Japanese firm. Even then the Japanese owners were unhappy when they realized fully what their shipping agent had done. With that, the Komagata Maru venture was launched. The planning had taken place in Hong Kong with information and encouragement from Vancouver—the Vancouver Sikhs were ready for the Komagata Maru with a supportive Shore Committee appointed several days before it arrived. ^{xi} Gurdit Singh, who said the Komagata Maru began as a business undertaking, can be taken at his word. He had no connections with the Gadar Party and no record with Central Intelligence Department in India, although they kept files on all known activists. Gurdit Singh was a nationalist and had no qualms about meeting with revolutionaries like Bhagwan Singh Jakh. But when the two of them talked on board the Komagata Maru in Yokohama, their conversation was about the practicality of the enterprise rather than its political value. Bhagwan Singh, who knew what he was talking about, said that the Canadian government would not let the passengers in; and Gurdit Singh refused to believe him. He thought that the law was on his side.

During the months that the Komagata Maru was in Vancouver, Canadian officials became convinced that a core group of the passengers were dangerously revolutionary. This opinion they passed on to the British and ultimately to the Indian governments. Their main source of information was the ship's doctor, Dr. Raghunath Singh, who early in the Komagata Maru saga became estranged from Gurdit Singh and most of the passengers. Dr. Raghunath Singh was junior medical officer attached to the 8th Rajput Regiment stationed in Hong Kong. He had taken his position on the Komagata Maru

during a two-month leave from his regiment, and he brought his wife and small son with him. When the ship and its passengers were detained offshore in Vancouver, he thought that he and his family should be given special treatment and be allowed to return to Asia on another ship. As the ship's doctor he was permitted by the immigration department to go ashore in Vancouver to purchase medical supplies—while the rest of the passengers were kept on the ship—and he had a number of conversations with immigration officials and the Vancouver Member of Parliament, HH Stevens. It was then that he pressed his own case while describing seditious lectures on the ship and political divisions among the passengers. Eventually he and his family did disembark and after some time he did get back to Hong Kong on a regular steamer to rejoin his regiment. His testimony, given while on the ship and afterwards, was taken very seriously by Canadian and Indian officials who already suspected a seditious purpose behind the Komagata Maru.^{xii}

Suspicion worked both ways because in their time in Vancouver the passengers of the Komagata Maru acquired a powerful mistrust of Canadian immigration officials, especially a mistrust of their promises of food and water for a return journey. On the other side, with the officials, deep mistrust began with a conviction that the passengers had no regard for Canadian law and would do whatever they could to get into the country, legally or illegally. That was a starting point and every hint that the leadership on the ship was militantly anti-Empire and fundamentally anti-British added another vigilant level of antagonism and paranoia with the officials. Gurdit's Singh's public statement after the ship reached Vancouver fed this paranoia in a way that he probably did not intend. When he said that what happened to the passengers on the Komagata Maru would determine whether or not there was peace in the Empire, Canadian officials heard it as a threat while he intended it as a warning. His words encouraged them to think that the Komagata Maru was a deliberate provocation with incendiary trouble as its chief purpose, while he wanted to emphasize the importance for the Empire of conciliating public opinion in India.

In the background, the newly-formed Gadar party was operating from its headquarters in San Francisco and publishing its emotionally worded, patriotic and revolutionary paper; and Canadian and British officials were becoming aware of it and were unquestionably upset by its tone and potential influence. They believed—and

thought they had evidence—that Gadar sympathizers were foremost among the leaders both on the ship and on the Shore Committee, the committee organized in Vancouver by the local gurdwara society to help the passengers. Immigration officials and the influential anti-Asianist MP HH Stevens were quick to assume the worst; and that prevented them from seeing the Shore Committee for what it was—a broad based South Asian community effort, drawing together moderates and militants, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, and the various regional sectors in the Vancouver Punjabi community—Majhail, Malwai, Doabi. The officials were more interested in discovering plots and divisions in the community, which did indeed exist, than in recognizing its common cause which was to support the efforts of the passengers to land in Canada and find work there.

An over-blown story linking the Gadar Party and the Komagata Maru was about the purchase of pistols by members of the Shore Committee while they were on a brief visit to the United States. Canadian officials were sure that these men intended to slip the weapons onto the Komagata Maru, and they may well have, but the incident caused more excitement and alarm than it needed to. It happened only a few days before the Canadian cruiser Rainbow escorted the Komagata Maru out of Vancouver's harbour to send it back to Asia. The passengers had lost their case in court and had agreed to leave Canada but they were refusing to let the Japanese crew raise the anchor until the Canadian government had loaded provisions for the return Pacific crossing. The ship was still in the harbour when nine or ten South Asian community leaders from Canada and the United States gathered in the American border town of Sumas. Among them were prominent activists like Bhagwan Singh and Taraknath Das from California and Bhag Singh, Balwant Singh and Harnam Singh, all members of the Shore Committee, from Canada. While in Sumas three of these men went into a hardware store and bought two semi-automatic pocket pistols and two cheap revolvers and ammunition; and soon after that one of them crossed the border ahead of the others, going through the woods to evade the regular check point only to run into a provincial constable who found the pistol this man was carrying in the crotch of his trousers and the ammunition he had in his pockets. That was how this attempt to secure pistols became known.^{xiii}

Buying pistols and ammunition in a hardware store in the US was not a crime, and no American charges resulted. The only person liable to be criminally charged and convicted was the one who smuggled a pistol and rounds of ammunition over the border into Canada. This was Mewa Singh—later remembered and honored in the Sikh community as the martyr who was hanged for shooting and killing immigration inspector WC Hopkinson. But Mewa Singh was not given a heavy sentence for the act of smuggling a pistol over the border and that was because Canadian immigration officials did not consider him a major player. Still, they passed on information about this weapons shopping expedition to the British and Indian intelligence services, building a case for Gadar Party involvement with the Komagata Maru. In 1917, the Lahore tribunal that tried Balwant Singh saw the Sumas incident as incriminating for him. In his defense, Balwant Singh said that he had crossed the border to see about a plot of land for a gurdwara in Seattle; and it does seem more plausible that a large group—including the Bengali activist Taraknath Das—should get together to arrange a property transfer rather than to buy pistols, which could more easily and inconspicuously be purchased by one or two. Moreover, with the Komagata Maru still in Vancouver, they had much else to discuss, and pistol shopping looks like something done on impulse—the three involved had gone into the hardware store after breakfast on their second day in Sumas and after seeing pistols displayed in the window.

From the day the Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver, some members of the South Asian community had repeatedly tried to buy handguns from local hardware stores only to be refused because they did not have the necessary permits from the city police magistrate. Their desire to get weapons was inspired by the Gadar leadership, which advocated the collection of rifles and revolvers “to rain a sweet shower of guns on Punjab” to arm and train fighters for the coming revolutionary struggle. But this was looking to the future. Even in late July 1914, one could not have predicted that the moment for action was coming so soon—Har Dyal, for one, still imagined it five or ten years away. And arming the passengers of the Komagata Maru was not anyone’s objective. In fact, up to the first week of July, the community hoped and expected that the passengers would win their case and come ashore in Canada, freeing the ship to take on cargo and homeward bound, fare-paying passengers for its return to Asia. The immediate

opportunity of the ship, from the Gadarite perspective, was the possibility of getting weapons back to India. With this objective, Gadarites in San Francisco sent their president, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna to Japan with 100 or 200 American revolvers; and these weapons were taken onto the Komagata Maru at night shortly after it reached Yokohama on its return journey. It was between Sohan Singh's departure from San Francisco and his arrival in Japan that war broke out in Europe. The revolvers that he carried to Japan were secreted on the Komagata Maru only days after the Gadar Party's call to arms. This timing tells us that these revolvers were intended for a rising in a more distant future and it was coincidence that put them on the ship at the dramatic moment when all calculations and considerations changed.^{xiv}

All of the passengers, apparently, knew about the revolvers and it is likely that very few saw anything wrong with having them on board (other than potential trouble with the police in India). But only a handful knew where they were hidden or had anything to do with them directly. What the passengers knew, the police in India—especially at the headquarters of the CID (Criminal Intelligence Department)—also suspected. And the police were more vigilant than ever, and had more arbitrary power over civilians now that war had begun and now that the Gadar Party had urged its supporters to return for the expected uprising. David Petrie, the CID officer who came from Simla to Kolkata to meet the Komagata Maru, was in the police party that boarded the Komagata Maru before the passengers landed, and—searching a crowded ship with no easy way to separate the passengers from their kits, and hesitating to do anything so offensive as remove turbans or examine loin clothes—found virtually nothing, no firearms and just a single copy of the Gadar newspaper that an absent minded or disorganized passenger still had in his kit. (Most of the handguns and literature had been either hidden or jettisoned beforehand.)^{xv}

Significantly—and Petrie had been briefed beforehand by his police colleagues in Simla—he was not expecting the majority of the passengers to be hostile; and at the end of the searches he thought that they were reasonably friendly. Nonetheless, he was surprised by the unity they showed and their strong attachment to Gurdit Singh, even after their months of trial and privation. He had expected a sharp division between a majority and a small group of radicals (or “mischief-makers” as he called them). He

thought that the police could separate the majority from this small group of eight men—as he counted them—but he was wrong and that miscalculation was a major factor in the tragedy at Budge Budge where the passengers disembarked and where twenty were fatally shot in an encounter with police and troops at the end of a long contentious day.

Even after it had happened, an official Committee of Inquiry into the Budge Budge tragedy agreed with what Petrie said of the passengers. The Inquiry Committee had a good chance to form an opinion because it questioned most of the men, those who were held as prisoners in Kolkata and as well as those who had been escorted back to Punjab. While predictably putting the blame for Budge Budge solely on the passengers, the Committee described the majority as “harmless” and focused on just thirteen leaders close to Gurdit Singh whom the Committee judged to be “violent and dangerous characters.”^{xvi} Although the Committee saw no threat with the majority, they were still subject to harsh treatment—first of all at Budge Budge and then detention in the Kalighat Central Jail of Kolkata and finally transportation back to Punjab and confinement to their villages for the next several years.

The passengers received this treatment mainly because British India officials were afraid that—if free to do so—they would instigate an agitation in Punjab.^{xvii} That is what lay behind government actions from the moment the Komagata Maru arrived off the coast of India on its approach to Kolkata. And it lay behind the automatic control—in a country long under press censorship—of news about Budge Budge. The government shut down two Urdu papers in Punjab after they made strong statements about the Komagata Maru. To make matters worse for the passengers, moderate politicians in India were supporting the British against their German enemies in the belief that India would be rewarded with independence when the war was over. The Indian-owned English language press struck a careful balance between mild criticism of the government and censure of the passengers for their “folly” (as one paper put it). And the leaders of the Indian National Congress and even government-friendly Sikh and Punjabi leaders in Punjab and Calcutta criticized the passengers. In the beginning, there was little open support in India for the passengers of the Komagata Maru and that did not change until the Indian public’s attitude to the British soured after the war ended. Only then did Gurdit Singh, having

escaped arrest at Budge Budge, come out of hiding and begin publicizing his account of the Komagata Maru.^{xviii}

Up to that time, only the Gadar Party had publicly taken the passengers' side—praising, condoling with and eulogizing them. It did so in publications that were banned in India and but circulated through expatriate Punjabi colonies and kept and read in Punjabi emigrant homes for years to come. Bhagwan Singh, who had boarded the ship in Yokohama, then briefly assumed the presidency of the Gadar party in San Francisco, and who had met with Shore Committee members in Sumas, was the author of a Gadar booklet on the Komagata Maru circulated in Punjabi in 1915. He wrote in emotive and heroic language, invoking the voices of the passengers in calling for patriotic action. “We have sounded the bugle call and the scattered forces are gathering. Death awaits us all, but when we know not; if it should come in heroic deeds, don't fear it. Arise. Arise.” Throughout 1914, he had been a primary link between the Komagata Maru and the Gadar Party. He had met and talked with Gurdit Singh and he knew the leaders on the Shore Committee and then he had become an early narrator of the Komagata Maru story. Understandably, given his revolutionary aims, he merged his perspective with that of the passenger to create a powerful image that emphasized the political meaning of the Komagata Maru without saying much about it as a business venture. It is his version of the story that Canadian politicians today choose to avoid.^{xix}

The formation of the Gadar Party and the episode of the Komagata Maru were a foreshadowing of the future for the British Empire — which appeared to be at its greatest when its days were actually numbered. The Sikh community leaders who encouraged the Komagata Maru and its passengers to test Canada's immigration laws, and those who spoke and organized against British rule in India have been vindicated by what has happened since. The freedoms and equality that they sought have come to be respected. At the time, however, neither the demand for the right to live in a British country (Canada) or the demand that British rule should end in India, was accepted, understood or even considered by a majority of Canadians. And the suggestion by Canadian officials that the Gadar Party was behind the Komagata Maru strengthened the negative feelings of most Canadians towards the passengers and their ambitions. But the evidence we have seen suggests that the Gadar party was only incidentally involved. A close look shows

that, while the passengers and their leaders had pride of nationality and sympathized with the independence movement, the great majority were first and foremost economic emigrants seeking opportunity in North America.

ⁱ *Globe and Mail*, 14 May, 2008; CBC News, 3 Aug., 2008 <<http://www.cbc.ca/news>>; Harsha Walia, “Komagata Maru and the Politics of Apology,” *The Dominion*, 11 Sept. 2008; Rattan Mal, *Asian Journal*, 18 May, 2012; *Indo-Canadian Link*, 2 June, 2012; *World Sikh News*, 16 July, 2012;

ⁱⁱ “Reinventing History: Komagata Maru’s Role Denied,” *People’s Democracy*, XXVII, 11, 14 March, 2004; Vikas Kahol, Preserving the Past a Labour of Love for Him, *India Today*, 16 July, 2011; “Centre told to produce list of 267 eminent freedom fighters,” *Times of India*, 16 Dec. 2011; “HC seeks Centre’s reply on freedom fighters pension,” *Daily, Post Chandigarh*, 22 February, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harban Singh ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism* (Patiala: Panjabi University, 4th edition 2002); *The Ghadr Directory, 1934*, Compiled by the Director, Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India (Published, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1997); “*Struggle for Free Hindustan: Ghadr Directory*, Punjab Section, 1915 (published New Delhi: Gobind Sadan Institute for Advanced Studies in Comparative Religion, 1996).

^{iv} Author’s interviews with Puran Singh’s grandsons, Raj Singh and Jas Singh Toor, November 2011; *Report of the Komagata Maru Committee of Inquiry*, (Calcutta, 1914); Kesar Singh, *Canadian Sikhs and the Komagata Maru Massacre* (Surrey: Kesar Singh, 1989).

^v Interviews with author in Vancouver, 25 Sept., 1976 and 22 June, 1977.

^{vi} Jaswant Singh, *Baba Gurdit Singh: Komagatamaru* (Jalandhar: New Book Co., 1965), p. 61; National Archives of India, Lahore Conspiracy Case III (Second Supplementary Case, Judgment dated 4 Jan., 1917).

^{vii} *Struggle for Free Hindustan: Ghadr Directory*, Punjab Section, 1915 (published Mehrauli, New Delhi: Gobind Sadan Institute for Advanced Studies in Comparative Religion, 1996); Jaswant Singh. *Baba Gurdit Singh: Komagata Maru* (Jallundhur: New Book Company, 1965), p. 58.

^{viii} Transcript of US Immigration Hearing in Har Dyal Case, 26 March, 1914, copy, Library and Archives Canada, RG 7, G21, Vol. 205, File 332, Vol. 11(b).

^{ix} *Struggle for Free Hindustan: Ghadr Directory*, 1915; Hopkinson to Cory, 27 May, 1914, Library and Archives Canada, Governor General's Files, RG 7 G21, Vol. 200, File 332, Vol. 2 (b); L.W. Crippen to the *Times* of London, 30 March 1908; Jaswant Singh, *Baba Gurdit Singh: Komagata Maru*, p. 40.

^x Jaswant Singh. *Baba Gurdit Singh: Komagata Maru*, pp. 40-51; Harban Singh ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism* (Patiala: Panjabi University, 4th edition 2002), pp.142-43; Ramsharan Vidyarthi, *Komagata Maru ki Sumudri Yatra* (Mirajpur: Kramtikara Publications, 1970), pp. 9-15; Gurdit Singh, *Voyage of Komagata Maru or India's Slavery Abroad* (Calcutta, n.d.), pp. 16-44; Darshan S.Tatla with Mandeep K. Tatla, *Gurdit Singh 'Komagata Maru': A Short Biography* (Chandigarh: Unistar & Punjab Centre for Migration Studies, 2007); *Report of the Komagata Maru Committee of Inquiry*, (Calcutta, 1914).

^{xi} *Bhai Arjan Singh 'Chand' di Itihasak Dairy* (1908-1947), Sunpadak, Dr. Puran Singh (Vancouver), 2008, p. 66.

^{xii} Stenographic notes from conversation between HH Stevens and Dr. Rughunath Singh, 4 July 1914, Vancouver City Archives, Stevens Papers; Lahore Conspiracy Case III (Second Supplementary Case, Judgment dated 4 Jan., 1917) accused no 3), National Archives of India; *Indian Army Quarterly List for 1 Jan., 1912* (Calcutta, 1912), online database.

^{xiii} Hopkinson to Cory, 16 July, 1914, Public Record Office, London, Colonial Office 42/290; Reid to Scott, 25 July, 1914, Vancouver City Archives, Stevens Papers.

^{xiv} Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Deve University, 1993), pp. 91-96, 167, 175, 189; *The Ghadr Directory, 1934*; Sohan Singh Josh, *Tragedy of Komagata Maru* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1975), p. 65; Jaswant Singh. *Baba Gurdit Singh: Komagata Maru*, pp. 68-69; *Report of the Komagata Maru Committee of Inquiry*, p. 23.

^{xv} D. Petrie, "Note on Budge Budge Riot," Exhibit 116, File 5028, Public and Judicial Department Records, Indian Office Library, London.

^{xvi} *Report of the Komagata Maru Committee of Inquiry*, p. 26.

^{xvii} Petrie, "Note on Budge Budge Riot."

^{xviii} *The Bengalee*, 4, 6, 7, 14 October, 1914.

^{xix} Translation of *Gadar di Goonj No. 2, 1915, pp 10-19*, attached to Reid to Stevens, 20 March 1915, Stevens Papers, Vancouver City Archives.