

Revisioning of Sikh Consciousness and the Formation of Gadar Movement in North America

The English had become the supreme power in the Indian sub-continent after having conquered Punjab in 1849. But after eight years the simmering discontent in some parts of India against the British rule exploded into a great rebellion which is variously called 'the sepoy mutiny', 'gadar' or the 'First War of Indian Independence'. This great rebellion by some of Indian princes and the soldiers of the British Indian army spread like a wild fire in almost all parts of India except the Punjab. It was only because of the unstinting support rendered by the Sikhs from British Punjab and its Cis Sutlej states that the British were able to quell the rebellion after a prolonged gruesome war. But the British victory put an end to the rule of the East India Company and the country now came under the direct rule of the British Crown that was to last towards the middle of the 20th century.

Apart from the British who were overall rulers of India, there were other more than five hundred princely states under the native kings and kinglets. But the British had assumed the status of Paramount Power for the entire country, the native princes being subservient to them except in the local matters which too remained under the strict gaze of the British. After taking over the Punjab, the English streamlined the revenue system of the province and made a permanent settlement of land relations as per the requirements of the British colonial order. The farmers of Punjab were now supposed to pay land revenue in cash and not in kind as was the practice during the Khalsa Raj. Since Punjab had huge water resources, the British exploited them by building canals that spawned sprawling canal colonies, which guaranteed huge revenue to the rulers. These colonies also produced large quantities of raw materials, like cotton for the British industries in England. Apart from the land revenue other land taxes were also imposed which were very harsh for the small and middle farmers. Consequently a large section of peasantry, nearly 90 per cent was caught into debt trap laid by the moneylenders under the British tutelage, who were notorious for exorbitant interest rates and account book manipulations.

The British had an insidious design to pauperise the peasantry of Punjab by levying harsh taxes. They had learnt about the hardy nature and fighting spirit of the farmers of Punjab. So they were deliberately making it hard for the farmers to survive on the land alone. In fact they needed them more for their armed forces so that they could defend their colonial

empire and if possible add more to their possessions which were already spread over one fourth part of the globe. Consequently, hordes of Punjabi youth became the cogs in the British colonial military machine and were used by the English as cheap cannon fodder in their global wars. Nearly sixty per cent of the British soldiery consisted of the Punjabi youth. In the beginning of 20th century the wage of an Indian soldier in the British Army was nine rupees i.e., nearly three dollars a month. Some of these soldiers would leave the service after a stint of five to seven years. They would usually go back to their farming. But in the beginning of 20th century a large number of boys started leaving their homes and hearths for the eastern English colonies like Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai and so on. Some of them went to East Africa also. Those who went to the eastern colonies learnt about the better prospects in Canada and the U.S.A. In those days Canada as an emerging economy was building its infrastructure for taking the next step on the path to becoming a modern industrial state. America was also industrialising fast, building all kinds of facilities necessary for a modern state. So rails, roads, ports, bridges, dams, electricity projects and so on were coming up all over the country. At this stage of development, an economy needs huge man power resources. Many workers from Japan and China were migrating to these countries where the wage level was about fifteen to twenty times more than it was in the Indian Army. Punjabi immigrant in the Eastern British Colonies heard about these 'astronomical' wages and they became impatient to somehow reach there and earn a huge fortune. So the El Dorado across the Pacific became the ultimate destination of every Punjabi who ventured to leave his country for greener pastures.

Another reason for the miserable condition of the rural folk of India was the prevalence of endemic epidemics like plague, small pox, cholera and so on that took a heavy toll on the population. From the year 1911 to 1914 nearly twenty nine million people died of these diseases. This number was four times the number of deaths that occurred during the four years of First Great War (1914-1918). The British colonial machine was more interested in its colonial exploitation than in the well-being of the people of India. Since the Western Coast of Canada and America were late beginners they required hardy people with grit to clear the forests in that region. The Indian immigration to Canada up to 1908 was not more than 5000 souls. In America from 1899 to 1911 nearly 6300 Indians entered the country. As these immigrants tried to strike roots in these alien lands, they had to face formidable problems associated with settlement in an inhospitable environment. On the Western Coast of

Canada, mainly in the states of Victoria and British Columbia where the Indian immigrants first landed they had to face extremely harsh conditions at the social, political, economic, cultural and psychological levels. Among the Indian immigrants on this Coast ninety nine per cent were Punjabis and among them ninety per cent were the Sikhs. So the Indian immigration to the Western Coast of the American continent may roughly be called the Sikh immigration to North America. The adverse conditions prevailing in Canada led to a prolonged struggle waged by the Punjabis to secure a respectable foothold and identity in their country of adoption. This struggle coupled with the experience of the immigrants in the USA gave birth to the Gadar Movement that sought to overthrow the British Colonial Rule over India through a violent revolution.

Canada being a white British colony with a dominion status was at that time more British than the British themselves. In the beginning of the 20th century the five thousand odd Punjabis, who were able to land on the Western Coast of Canada were constantly persecuted by the white majority for various reasons who wanted to throw them out by hook or by crook. The main reason of such attitude was racial psychology of the Canadian Government that had the covert support of British Imperialism. Though the Crown's Declaration of 1858, made in the form of a firm commitment to the people of India, unambiguously stated that hence forth the natives of India would be treated on a par with the citizens of other colonies of the British Empire yet in practice the English were surreptitiously keeping four of their colonies reserved for the white inhabitants alone. These four colonies were Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The British knew that they might have to vacate India sooner or later but they could retain their white colonies as dominion republics for accommodating their future generations if the need arises. Therefore, the equality guaranteed by The Queen's Declaration was relevant to non-white colonies only. The British gave a lot of freedom to the white colonies to decide their own affairs as per their own perceptions and ideology.

Another reason of the British attitude towards the white colonies could be that these colonies could go the American way and hence declare independence from the British Imperial hegemony. Still another reason for restricting Indian immigration to white British colonies was that the British did not like the Indians to mix up with white races and thus learn about their forte, failings and foibles. The majority of the white population was less laborious than the Indians living there. They were morally weaker than the Sikh immigrants and even unhygienic as compared to religious Sikhs who would take bath every day, do their prayers

and wear simple clean clothes and would not touch tobacco. The British thought that if the way of life and the habits of the white populace were exposed to Indians, they would be further transmitted to native Indians and hence the myth of British superiority would be exploded. Such a situation could lead to weakening of the British tentacles over India and in certain cases expose the white colonial functionaries to the ridicule of the natives.

The colonial rulers also did not want the Indians to have a taste of the sense of liberty and equality in white colonies as they thought that this democratic spirit could 'infect' the Indian minds who could soon demand similar rights for themselves. But the Indian immigrants at that time did not have any other ambition except to secure a right to enter Canada, settle there to work in order to earn a decent wage and lead their lives as per their own cultural ethos.

In the beginning their pleas were in the form of entreaties, petitions and appeals to the authorities in the form of memoranda. They always had the sword of Democles hanging over their heads as they could be deported to their native country any time. Since most of these immigrants were ex-army soldiers of the British colonial army who had fought their wars with sweat and blood, winning decorative medals that hung on their chests so they had thought that being honourable British subjects they had a right to live and work in those alien lands. Canada was also the territory of their King Emperor like India.

But in about half a decade they learnt the lesson of their life. They became aware of the double standards, hypocrisy and the downright deceit of the British colonial masters. The problem of racial discrimination, chicanery, treachery and duplicity directly stabbed their souls since almost all of them were Punjabis who had served the British with their blood. It created a sense of bitter animus against the colonialists and their Canadian cohorts. This state of affairs became an 'existential situation' in the Sartrean sense. Since Indian residents of Canada could easily enter the USA and meet their brethren and exchange their ideas so they were naturally influenced by the freedom and liberal ways of life of the American citizens.

Towards the end of 19th century America's East had become an industrially developed region and the Western part was fast emerging up to catch up with the east. The Punjabis in the USA knew about the American War of Independence against the British. The atmosphere of freedom, equality and the rights of man has a great value for a person from a slave country with almost no democratic rights whatsoever. As the United States developed as an industrial

power, it also needed markets to sell its wares like the English. Unhindered supply of raw materials and marketing of the finished products were the two cardinal requirements for sustaining the colonial structure. The emerging American economy needed the both for its expansion as had been the case with other European powers. Consequently, they tried to tap the Indian market but without success, since the British jealousy protected their colonial possessions for their own business interests. The obvious result of such thinking was that the American businessmen developed a feeling of aversion towards the British. Therefore, the few thousands Indians living in the USA were constantly prodded and even provoked and taunted by the Americans to throw the British out of India. Some of them went to the extent of humiliating the Indians as citizens of a slave country where less than four hundred thousand Englishmen were keeping in bondage nearly three hundred million natives. American papers especially "The Sun" and "The Gaelic American" had been writing about the Indian 'question' severely criticising the British colonial Government. Even President Woodrow Wilson openly expressed anti-British feeling for their colonial policy in India which was deliberately keeping the Indians uneducated, depriving them of any access to technical and scientific knowledge. He even propounded the idea of self-determination for the colonies to the great embarrassment to all the colonial powers.

During this very time Indo-American societies cropped up in some cities of America, that would invite the Indians to come to America to see for themselves the conditions prevailing in that free country. The main objective of these societies was to inculcate pro-India sentiments among the Americans so as to create amiable and fraternal feelings among the American and Indian nationalists and to promote a spirit of nationalism among the Indians in their native country. Some American industrialists visited India and they held meetings with native Indian businessmen. But such meetings were discouraged by the British colonial Government which strongly protested against these overtures by the Americans. Apart from the Indo-American Societies, the New York Bar Association set up 'India House' to help the Indian nationalists and students. Despite all these efforts the Americans could not get a foot-hold in India because of the English opposition. Soon such Societies and Houses closed down.

In Canada such activities had a strong influence over the Punjabi immigrants. So it was here that the anti-British revolutionary feelings started taking roots. In the Imperial Conference of British Colonies (1911), it was resolved that the Indians as British subjects

cannot go to settle anywhere in the white British colonies. The Governments of these Colonies had a right to disallow any such move by the Indians. In most cases the white residents of such colonies did not like to mix up with the coloured people and to give them equal rights. As stated earlier the British Imperial Government had its own fears and apprehensions about the preservation of the British colonial structure. But the Indians who had already landed in Victoria or in British Columbia had started displaying their mettle as sincere workers, so out of sheer jealousy they became the butt end of the hatred of the white workers. Many mill owners particularly those owning lumber mills would prefer the Punjabis for their grit and hard work on low wages. Similarly in other infrastructure activities like clearing of forests, laying of rail lines, building bridges and roads, Punjabi workers had established their supremacy as the most dedicated incumbents. The white workers because of their habits coupled with a sense of socio-political equality with the employers were not very eagerly welcomed by the employers. The obvious consequence was a sense of insecurity that drove them to attack the Japanese and Chinese workers in the first instance, though the fire of jealousy was equally flagrant against the Punjabi workers as well. Since Japan was an independent country and China too was a semi-colony therefore, their ambassadors lodged strong protests against the attacks. An agreement was reached between the Government of Japan and those of Canada and America according to which the Governments of these countries had to reimburse the losses incurred by the victims. The Chinese also could now enter Canada just by paying five hundred dollars.

India and Canada were British colonies yet the Canadian Government wrote to Indian counterpart to put a total ban on Indian immigration to Canada. But at that time British Indian Government did not agree to these proposals for fear of negative publicity in India. Canadian Government deputed their deputy labour minister Mackenzie King to approach the British Government in England so that the entry of Indians to Canada could be completely banned or at least extremely restricted. But Indian immigration to Canada was linked with the demand and supply of cheap labour that the Canadian infrastructure companies needed. So despite official restrictions Punjabis trickled into Canada. But the ruling Conservative Party in British Columbia was dead set against Indian immigration to Canada. They had made it as an election issue. So the Canadian Government warned the Canadian Pacific Company, the main immigration firm in March 1908 not to bring any Indians to their shores.

In course of time the Indian Government also cooperated with the Canadian Government and they threatened the people waiting for ships on the Indian coasts and many of them were forced to go back to their villages. Then the Canadian Government hatched a conspiracy to drive the Indians out from their soil by proposing to send them to Honduras for permanent settlement. But the Indian immigrants saw through this conspiracy and they outrightly rejected this proposal. W.C. Hopkinson, the intelligence officer whom the Canadian Government depended on for dealing with the Indians was the prime mover of this insidious plan. This notorious anti-Indian officer was ultimately shot by Mewa Singh, a Punjabi immigrant right in the premises of a judicial court. Though Indian immigration to Canada almost stopped for the time being, the already settled Indians started fanning out in different professions. Some Punjabis became land developers, some organized big business firms like Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company, Canada-Indian Supply and Trust Company and Canadian Home Builders and so on. They also built elegant Gurdwaras.

Sant Teja Singh at that time was the main adviser of the Indians who prodded them to acquire properties and start business in Canada. According to Baba Jawala Singh, there was hardly any Indian who did not own a piece of land at Vancouver. Almost one fourth of the city land was in possession of the Indians. But this prosperity of the Indians was not to the liking of the Canadian Government or the White Canadian citizens, who were rather jealous of their economic success. That the Indians were now supposed to reach Canada through an unbroken journey and had to show a ready cash of two hundred dollars on landing, this made it almost impossible for them to reach there. At that time there was no direct steamer from an Indian port to any Canadian port. The Indians could not even invite their families to join them. A long struggle had to be waged to secure this right. Many petitions were made to the Canadian and British Governments and also to Secretary of State for India in Britain. Even in India a number of resolutions were passed by different organisations. A number of delegations met different levels of authorities but nothing substantial could be gained. Ultimately, this struggle led to formation of Gadar Party that resolved to liberate India from the British yoke through a violent revolution. Since the Indians in Canada and America had by now come to the conclusion that the main cause of their miserable condition was the diabolic role played by British Imperialism. The English never wanted to see a prosperous India nor did they want to raise the level of Indians' consciousness. In fact England's prosperity was directly linked to poverty of India.

In course of time, both in Canada and America, Khalsa Diwan Societies were organised to guide and educate the Indians, mainly the Sikhs who constituted the bulk of Indian population there. Every Sunday the people would congregate at Gurdwaras and after religious service, they would deliberate on problems faced by the community. They also brought out their papers like the “Sudesh Sewak”, “Aryan” and “Sansar”. The last one had to be closed down for its soft line towards the British. Bhai Bhagwan Singh, Sant Teja Singh and Hasan Rahim, the leaders of the Indians, wanted all the organs to be anti-British. The colonial rulers of India were keeping a watch over all these activities. The voyage of the Komagatamaru in April and May 1914, its fate in Victoria and its aftermath as it reached Calcutta on the night of 26th Septemeber, 1914, is now a part of the folk history of India. In fact the events associated with the Komagatamaru are a milestone in the history of the Gadar Movement that constituted the militant stream of Indian freedom struggle. India’s most celebrated martyrs in the freedom struggle like S. Bhagat Singh, Chander Shekhar Azad, their comrades and horde of others were inspired by the Gadarites, many of whom were sent to the gallows or were incarcerated for decades together in the inhuman jails of the Andaman islands.

As these momentous events were unfolding in Canada, Indian immigration to the USA too had started by the turn of 20th century as has been pointed out earlier. In 1905 Amar Singh and Gopal Singh came to America followed by others like Taraknath Das and Ram Nath Puri. In 1906 more than a thousand Indians landed on the Western coast of the USA. In 1907, the number increased to 1710. But this very year saw riots against Indians both in Canada and America. After this the entry of Indians was restricted, though in 1909 about two thousand Indians were allowed to enter due to shortage of labour. America at that time was making frantic efforts to develop its Western coastal region. During this time, more Japanese and Chinese were allowed to enter the USA. By 1911 Lala Har Dayal, Sohan Singh Bhakna and Pt. Kanshi Ram had also come to the Western coast. San Francisco became the main centre of the Indian immigrants. Almost fifty miles from San Francisco, Holtwill Farm at Stockton also became a meeting point of the Indians who were usually called Hindus at that time. This farm was cultivated by Bhai Jawala Singh, Sant Wasakha Singh Dadehar, Bhai Santokh Singh Dhardev, Bhai Hazara Singh Dadehar and a few others. The farm produced huge financial resources. Bhai Jawala Singh was in fact called the “Potato King” of California. He offered scholarships to students from India and encouraged them to study in

American universities and then return to India to plunge into the freedom struggle of their motherland. Jawala Singh himself gave up all his riches and joined the freedom struggle as a radical fighter. He organised Punjab peasantry in a big way against the British agrarian Policies. But unfortunately he died in an accident in 1938.

In towns and cities along the river Columbia like Astoria, Tacoma, St John, Linton, Portland, Wilham, Woodland, Balingham, Monarch and Everest etc., there were hundreds of Indian immigrants working in lumber mills, railway workshops and on railway lines. These workers would live in groups in Baracks. The first political activity in the USA by Indians started at these centres. These workers readily accepted the political ideology of the people like Sohan Singh Bhakna, Harnam Singh Tundilat, Lala Har Dayal, Pt. Kanshi Ram, Udham Singh Kasel, Ram Rakha Sahiba Saroa and Ishar Singh Marhona. Even G.D. Kumar, Babu Harnam Singh Sahri, Taraknath Das and Sant Teja Singh came here and lived among the workers. Another centre for political activity was set up at Seattle.

In 1911 Indian workers were again attacked by the white American workers just out of spite and jealousy. But this time the situation was different. The Indians were already armed and they successfully beat back any assault. After this the white workers learnt their lesson and did not dare attack the Indian workers. In 1912 a meeting was convened at Portland in which an organisation by the name "Hindustan Association of Pacific Coast" was formed with Sohan Singh Bhakna as president, G.D. Kumar as general secretary and Pt. Kanshi Ram as treasurer. It was also decided to bring out a weekly paper titled the "Hindustan" which could not take off due to the illness of G.D. Kumar who had been appointed its editor. A meeting of delegates of "Hindustan Association" was held at Astoria on 20th April 1913 where the name of the organisation was changed to "Hindi Association of the Pacific Coast of America" which later on assumed the name of "Hindustan Gadar Party". The headquarters of the party named Yugantar Ashram was to be set up in San Francisco. A weekly party organ by the name the "Gadar" was launched to spread the message of revolution in India. Sohan Singh Bhakna was elected as the president of the party while Lala Har Dayal was made the general secretary and Pt. Kanshi Ram the treasurer. Other office bearers were also elected. The aim of the party was to wage a war against British Imperialism in India and throw the British out of the country by force. Many branches of the party were established in different cities and towns of America and Canada. The weekly "Gadar" or "Hindustan Gadar" was published from San Francisco along with series of books like *Gadar*

di Goonj and *Babbar Goonj*. These publications had large international circulation that sent the message of revolution in India. Consequently hundreds of freedom fighters set sails for India in course of time to make Gadar (rebellion) in the British garrisons particularly in Punjab (being the major garrison province of India) at the outset of 1st World War. As the garrison state of India, Punjab was to lead this revolt and in fact Feb 19, 1915 was fixed as the date for making the Gadar (rebellion) in the two main garrison cities of Punjab namely viz. Lahore (Mian Meer Chhawani) and Ferozepur. The soldiers who were mainly Sikhs were to wash the taint of their collaboration with the British during the Mutiny of 1857.

The antipathy and the racial revulsion shown by the white workers towards the Indian immigrants (who were sometimes called coolies) played a role in shaping the consciousness of Indian immigrants. From docile timid workers from a slave country, they became brave militant activists. Many of them determined to lay down their lives in the freedom struggle of India. The Gadar Movement that sent shivers down the spines of the British colonialists played a very important role in that struggle. How the British were so deeply concerned about this Movement is borne out by the details given by Lt. Governor of the Punjab Sir Michael O' Dwyer in his book *India as I knew it*. How the humble workers on the Western Coast of America, particularly the Bay Area were able to surmount all the barriers and encumbrances in the development of their consciousness to become the glorious freedom fighters of India, is in itself a saga of valour and supreme sacrifice. As we track down the path of their cerebral and ideological evolution, we find a pattern that begins with confrontation, leading to their alienation, giving birth to resolution and realisation which again leads to decisive action to plunge into the freedom struggle of India.

The path chosen by them appears in the form of a nationalist revolution not a socialist one in the manner of the Bolshevik revolution of Russia, though socio-economic and political equality was duly emphasised by them. These revolutionaries seemed more in tune with the ideas propounded by Jean Jacques Rousseau, though after the Russian revolution many of them embraced the ideas of Karl Marx and Lenin and they became socialist revolutionaries. However, at the initial stages, mainly being Sikhs, they were inspired by the lives and deeds of the Sikh Gurus and they carried their historical tradition of sacrifice for a cause. The Gurdwaras like the one at Stockton played a very progressive role in keeping their politics on a broad secular track hence contributing to the de-communalisation of Indian politics by strictly following the nationalistic ethos. Sikh consciousness, in the USA and Canada in the

early years of 20th century shaped by the teachings enshrined in the *Guru Granth Sahib* and put to praxis by the Sikh martyrs was the main basis that led to their legendary feats which went down in the annals of Indian history.

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