

Relevance of Sikh Ideology for the Ghadar Movement

Dr.J.S. Grewal Former VC GNDU

(An Exploratory Note)

A large volume of literature has been produced on the Ghadar Movement since independence. It is well-known that the Punjabis represented an over-whelming majority of the Ghadarites, and an over-whelming proportion of the Ghadarites were Sikhs. Therefore the ideological moorings of the Sikh leaders of the Ghadar Movement become important issue. Indeed, scholars have taken different views on this subject. We may take notice of a few to illustrate the point.

In his *Ghadar Party Lehar* (1955), Jagjit Singh underlined that the Singh Sabha movement served as a kind a renaissance among the peasants of the Central Punjab. For the first time under colonial rule, the tradition of sacrifice and martyrdom in Sikh history was made popular among the Sikh masses. It had created a social consciousness among the peasants who emigrated to North America and other countries and participated in the Ghadar movement. Though there was hardly any political consciousness among the Sikh peasantry in the early twentieth century, there was an awareness of new ideas with regard to social reform. This background had a great potentiality for inducing them to adopt a revolutionary path.¹

Harish K.Puri completed his doctoral thesis on the Ghadar Movement in the 1970s. It was published as the *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organisation and Strategy* 1983. In his introduction, he talks of 'the relevance or irrelevance of religion in political

violence' as an important issue, and in his discussion of the 'background' he notices that the Singh Sabha Movement had its followers in Canada. They were described in an intelligence report. As a section of 'clannish Sikhs'; their 'jealously and bigotry' kept alive the ill-feeling between the clean shaven and the other Sikhs. Teja Singh was referred to as 'something of a religious fanatic', though he was concerned with 'making life easier for the peasant' as well as with religious conversion.² This appears to suggest that the Singh Sabha ideology had no bearing on the Ghadar.

Indeed, an article published by Harish K.Puri in 1983 makes it clear that in his well considered view the Singh Sabha and the Ghadar movements were two 'divergent patterns of psychological orientations and structures of belief, values and attitudes towards political objects'. The initiators of the Singh Sabha Movement were 'landed aristocrats, mahants, pujaris and priests'. Among them were also the Sehajdharis. The *mahants* and *pujaris* 'condemned the Ghadarites as *patit* Sikhs and enemies of the panth'. General Dyer was 'honoured' and 'initiated as a Sikh' at the initiative of the Chief Khalsa Diwan. The Nirankaris and the Namdharis had aimed at restoring 'the pristine purity of Khalsa norms', with particular emphasis on 'the observance of the five Ks' so that the Sikhs did not get 'assimilated among the Hindus'. Under the leadership of Baba Ram Singh, the Namdhari movement became 'more radical and militant'. The Singh Sabha Movement was 'an alternative' to the Namdhari movement.³ What Harish Puri had in mind was the militancy of the Namdharis and the loyalty of the Singh Sabhas. It may also be added that the Nirankaris did not assign any importance to the Khalsa initiation and the 5Ks.

According to Harish Puri, the British wanted to strengthen 'the loyalty of the Sikh soldier'. They believed strongly that religious orthodoxy of the Sikh soldier in the army was 'crucial for his loyalty to the empire'. Therefore they decided to enlist 'only Keshadharis into regiments'. Simultaneously, the control of Gurdwaras through government appointed *sarbrahs* was sought to be strengthened through priests and *mahants* for promoting 'the desired hegemonic influence'. In this set of conditions, the Singh Sabha Movement was launched. Among its leaders were educated urban Sikhs and trading classes. Their conflict with the Arya Samaj strengthened the urge to assert that the Sikhs were a distinct community. 'In the process, it developed among the community, largely in the urban areas, a distinct political orientation based on separate community interests.' The other two communities in the province were seen as 'threats to the Sikh community'.⁴

The Ghadar movement, on the other hand, developed 'just the contrary structure of political orientations'. The Ghadarite interpretation of the community's heritage was 'very different from, almost contrary' to the one argued by the Singh Sabhas and the Chief Khalsa Diwan and 'what some near to that articulated by the Kakas'. The Ghadarites sought inspiration from the teachings of Guru Gobind Singh for armed struggle in a righteous cause and from the brave Sikh crusaders like Banda Singh Bahadur, Dip Singh, Mahtab Singh, Hari Singh, and Phula Singh. For the Ghadarites the Guru's 'Singh' was distinguished not by 'a ritualistic adherence to external forms, as the Singh Sabha advocated', but by 'the bravery and self-sacrificing spirit to fight the enemy'. The Ghadar poets referred to the Khalsa or the Panth as a force created for the defence of the country and for ending oppression of 'Bharat Mata'. 'The Panth therefore

was to be judged by its service in the cause of the country's freedom'. The stress of the Ghadarites was on 'the primacy of politics and rejection of preoccupation with matters of religion.' At best, religion could be accepted as 'a private affair'. 'Casteism' was completely rejected by the Ghadarites and in their social relations they never cared much for keeping long hair and beards or eating *jhatka* or *halal*. 'This orientation naturally aroused the wrath of the orthodox against the Ghadarites'. In Haish Puri's view, the Gurdwara Reform Movement was a structure of orientations "somewhere midway between the two', the Singh Sabha and the Ghadar movements.⁵

We have outlined Harish K.Puri's well considered view of the irrelevance of the Singh Sabha movement for the Ghadar partly because he has modified his view only slightly by now, but largely because, his view does not appear to find support from the available evidence on the Singh Sabha Movement.

In *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (1990) my view of the relevance of the Singh Sabha Movement for the Ghadar was different from that of Harish Puri. I pointed out that some of the Sikh leaders of the Ghadar Movement recalled later that they had been inspired to live or die heroically by the novels of Bhai Vir Singh and the *Panth Prakash* of Giani Gian Singh. They acquired a genuinely 'national' outlook, but their source of inspiration remained 'almost exclusively Sikh.' They evoked the memory of Sikh heroes and martyrs, and referred to the Sikh past as a struggle for liberation. Not indifference to faith but a secular interpretation of the heritage distinguished them from the Singh Sabha reformers of the Punjab.⁶

In his *Ghadar Movement: A Short History* (2011), Harish K.Puri states at the outset that Lala Har Dyal was the “inspirational genius” of the Ghadar. However, it was mainly a movement of the Punjabi Sikh patriots of India. Their political ideas were shaped by their experience in Canada, USA and other countries of the world. Harish Puri has outlined the historical, social and political context of the Punjab at the time when Punjabis started migrating to North America. ‘The leading figures appeared to have carried with them some of the reformist ideas to the foreign lands’. They kept the outward symbols of conduct associated with Guru Gobind Singh, which inspired respect for them among their brethren. ‘But they did not approve of orthodoxy in such matters’.⁷ This assessment of the situation seems to suggest that even the leading figures among the Sikh emigrants were content with observing the outward symbols of the Khalsa and they had no ideological moorings relevant for the Ghadar Movement.

The socio-religious reform movements mentioned by Haris Puri in this publication are the Brahmo Samaj and its offshoot the Dev Samaj, the Arya Samaj, and the Singh Sabha Movement. Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna was ‘a follower of the Namdhari Guru Baba Ram Singh’. However the influence of the Singh Sabha ideas or attitude is not visible in the case of any Sikh leader. The leader of the Amritsar Singh Saba were *Sanatan* Sikhs who looked upon Sikhism as an offshoot of Hinduism. The leaders of the Lahore Singh Sabha devoted their energy to the assertion of a distinct identity of the Sikhs and their boundary demarcation from the Hindus. ‘Sikhism in danger’ was a major part of their rhetoric. The British military officials were keen to promote separate identity and religious orthodoxy among the Sikhs for their own reasons.⁸

It must be added, however, that in the *Ghadar Movement* Harish Puri noticed in the Sikh Ghadarites 'a romance of *shaheedi* (shahadat; martyrdom) imbibed perhaps from the Sikh tradition'.⁹ The qualifying 'perhaps' indicates that the author is not exactly aware of the Singh Sabha emphasis on martyrdom as an essential feature of the Sikh tradition. Dedication of '*tan, man* and *dhan* (body, mind and money)' comes from the Sikh Scripture. The legendary bravery of the Sikh warriors in the Sikh wars against the British was invoked by Kartar Singh Sarabha and Harnam Singh. There are other such examples, but there is no need to list them. The essential point is that the empirical evidence used by Harish Puri himself bears witness to the relevance of Sikh ideology for the Sikh leaders even though this relevance is denied in his formulation by Harish Puri.

More recently, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna's *Meri Ram Kahani* has been published in a book form. It was originally serialized in 1930-31 in the *Akali Te Pardesi*, started by Master Tara Singh in the 1920s. Master Tara Singh had earned the displeasure of the British done official for helping the deputation of Canadian Sikhs in 1913. He organized large meetings in Lyallpur and the Rawalpindi area at which resolutions were passed in support of the Sikhs in Canada. In any case, *Meri Ram Kahani* presents fascinating evidence on the relevance of the Sikh faith and Sikh ideology for Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna. He was not indifferent to religion. For him, religion and politics were two ways of serving mankind. His observations on religion in general, and the Sikh Panth, and his understanding of Baba Ram Singh' position, call for serious attention.¹⁰

Finally, there is the issue of 'methodology'. The quantum and the nature of evidence, and the question of its interpretation are of obvious importance. For a meaningful interpretation of evidence on the Ghadar Movement it is absolutely essential to study the Sikh movements of the colonial period in some depth, and that too in the light of the pre-colonial Sikh Movement. Impressions formed on the basis of 'secondary' works can be misleading, and remain more or less inadequate.

NOTES

1. Jagjit Singh, *Ghadar Party Lehar*, New Delhi: Navyug, 2000 (3rd. edn.), p.56.
2. Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organisation and Strategy*, Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1993 (2nd. edn.), pp.5,57-8.
3. Harish K.Puri, 'Singh Sabha and Ghadar Movements: Contending Political Orientations', in *Ghadar Movement to Bhagat Singh: A Collection of Essays*, Chandigarh: Unistar, 2012, pp. 44-7.
4. Ibid., pp. 47-50.
5. Ibid., pp. 50-9.
6. J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (The New Cambridge History of India, II.3), Cambridge : Cambridge University press 1990, pp. 153-6.
7. Harish K.Puri, *Ghadar Movement : A Short History*, New Delhi : The National Book Trust, India, 2011, pp. xi-xiii, 14.
8. Ibid., pp. 11-13.

9. Ibid., p. xvi.

10. Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, *Meri Ram Kahani*, ed., Rajwinder Singh Rahi, Samana : Sangam publications, 2012.