

Commoners make history!

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Almost all the historians tend to ignore episodes like Komagata Maru and Ghadr movement because they find it hard to swallow that common people too could make history all by themselves.

“Could such ordinary villagers being illiterate or at the most semi-literate living in remote villages of Punjab, mostly ‘roadless’ and ‘railless’, would dare to sail, in hundreds and thousands to the farthest end of the globe, and above all in course of time leave their imprint on history by posing a serious challenge to, the then super-power United Kingdom, who used to boast that the sun never sets on their Empire...?”

May be not till the advent of the twentieth century which globalised trade, industry and travelling thereby facilitating inter-continental migrations across the Atlantic and later Pacific oceans.

This situation in the words of Martyr Bhagat Singh provided an opportunity to the men of the moment to be converted into an achievement, perhaps initially for the fulfilment of their short term ends which later, did somehow develop into something like a struggle against injustice and slavery.

In all likelihood, this is how the commoners also could make history.

How precisely did our village folk in Punjab dream of migrating to the remotest end of earth to prosper? It may have been set into motion by the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Queen Victoria’s rule during 1897, when our foot soldiers and horsemen, were shipped to London for a grand show of Empire’s might, much like our Republic Day march past at India Gate: While they sailed to U.K. via the shortest route through Suez Canal, their return journey was routed through Canada’s far-eastern port of Montreal, landing there to traverse by train to the western most port of Vancouver from where they were to be shipped back to India. The rail journey across the vast fertile virgin soil spread over a few weeks made them fall in love for the country since back home they suffered from chronic land hunger. Since they were already used to serve and stay in far-off lands, many of them made up their minds to instantly seek discharge from their coveted soldiery and rush back to their ‘dream land’.

Starting with a trickle of 100 in 1900, the number of entrants into Canada totalled around 8000 by 1907 when some restrictions began to be placed on their entry, which led to the struggle against this discrimination culminating in the historic voyage of Komagata Maru in 1914.

The Privy Council vide its order No. 920 of 9th May 1907, proclaimed that now onwards only those entrants would be allowed to land who travel from their country of origin on a direct journey on through tickets. Since no such facility was available to Indians, it dealt a direct blow on their ambition to emigrate there.

The excuse for this apparently discriminatory rule was provided by a patently-racial body “Asiatic Exclusion League’, a brainchild of the rogues’ lobby which went full blast against Chinese, Japanese and above all Indians, even to the extent of plundering

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their residential localities. But since Japanese and Chinese hailed from independent countries, they could fall back upon diplomatic support from their respective governments. As for the Indians, many of whom had risked their lives as soldiers defending the British Empire, who regarded their rulers as 'Mai Baap', their Government not only turned a deaf ear to their protestations, it stooped to the extent of implicit support to the Canadian authorities responsible for their exclusion.

But why on earth the British rulers of India should connive at the maltreatment of their own loyal subjects?

An explanation may be found in the shrewd (secret) observation of a top police cop Petrie to the effect that: "It is a matter of common experience that Indians too often return from abroad with tainted political views and diminished respect for their white rulers."

It also deserves a mention that on 1st November 1913 in U.S.A. Ghadr Party had started publishing its weekly 'Ghadr' in Urdu, Punjabi-Gurmukhi which was being circulated all around the world among the Indian community, and had also started finding its way into India, which induced the Indian authorities to assume that any Indian entering Canada-American was a potential rebel against their rule in India.

Martyr Bhagat Singh in his little known article on Bhai Balwant Singh of Khurdpur-Jalandhar, a Ghadrte Martyr and first Granthi of Vancouver Gurdwara, written in Hindi under the pen-name 'Mukand' and published in 'Phansi Ank' of Allahabad's Hindi Monthly 'Chand', during Nov. 1928 which was instantly banned, writes:—

"The Sikhs were robust and hard working. Their entry in the labour market devalued the white labour. Moreover, they were cheaper, and thus preferred. So from day one, white workers started assaulting them now and then, here and there. But Sikhs could not be deterred, which provoked still more anger among the rioters. Then Sikhs organised themselves by founding a Gurdwara which took care of the new comers. Hence the Canadian government began looking for some excuse to get rid of the future entrants by imposing the condition of direct journey.

"Those who had already settled were mostly single, which impelled them to bring along their wives and children to join them. At the first instance Bhai Bhag Singh of Bhikhi Wind — Lahore and Bhai Balwant Singh came to India and went back with their wives and children. With a lot of efforts they were allowed to land and stay only till their representation was decided by the Canadian authorities, which was, expectedly declined evoking a violent reaction among the Sikh community at Vancouver. But the issue yet remained as it was."

An official publication "Ghadr Conspiracy Report (1913-1916)" by Isemonger and Slattery, compiled in 1922 had dealt with these developments in precise details based on then intelligence sources.

Efforts made by the Canadian Sikhs to bring families in 1911 have too been mentioned thus:—

"During 1911, when Bhai Balwant Singh, Bhai Bhag Singh were stranded for months at Calcutta and Hong Kong they told their problem whomever they met and they addressed the congregations in the Sikh temples. They suggested

that unless they have their own ship company direct from Calcutta to Vancouver, they could not land in Canada.

“At that time they were fighting on one front to bring their families to Canada.

“This time in **1913** the delegation (Bhai Balwant Singh, Bhai Narain Singh, and Bhai Nand Singh Sihra) travelled all over Punjab, held several public meetings and openly suggested to have their own shipping company to run between Calcutta and Vancouver. The Government of India laughed at their wishful thinking.

“At Ferozepur they put up with Bhai Takht Singh, Manager of Khalsa Girls School (Kanya Mahan Vidyalaya). They lectured in the city but made no attempt to enter Cantonment.”

Sardar Harchand Singh of Lyallpur, Bhai Dewa Singh, Secretary of Singh Sabha, Amritsar, and Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid of Tarn Taran whole heartedly supported Bhai Balwant Singh's point of view.

Bhai Takht Singh of Ferozepur was so enthusiastic about the idea of having their own steamship company that when the delegation stayed with him he offered the services of his own secretary Bhai Daljit Singh, and assistant secretary Bhai Vir Singh for this purpose states the report:—

“It will be remembered that at this time the delegation was in Punjab and it is curious to find out that when Gurdit Singh returned to Hong Kong and chartered the ship, he was joined by an individual named Daljit Singh who just prior to this was assistant editor of the ‘Punjabi Bhain’ a monthly publication devoted to the subject of female education and the official organ of the Sikh Kanya Mahan Vidyalaya (Sikh Girls School) at Ferozepur. The latter institution is managed by Bhai Takht Singh by whom the delegates were entertained when they visited Ferozepur. Daljit Singh became Gurdit Singh's secretary and subsequently took a prominent part in all his doings.”

From above paragraph it is crystal clear that Bhai Takht Singh and Baba Gurdit Singh must have conferred with each other about the steamship company long before Bhai Balwant Singh had left India.

There is another fact that when Komagata Maru was on the port of Moji – Japan, Bhai Balwant Singh boarded the ship and travelled in the ship from Moji to Kobe – Japan.

As per the report:—

“...at the end of 1913 there were a number of Indian emigrants held up at Hong Kong, Shanghai, Manila and elsewhere waiting for an opportunity to gain an entry with the forbidden land (Canada). There is reason to believe that the leaders of Indian community at Vancouver, of whom Balwant Singh, Bhag Singh and Hassan Rahim were the most prominent, were anxious to send a large number of Indians to Canada with a view to bringing the grievances of Indian emigrants to a head and to force the British Government to action. Indeed this very project is believed to have been discussed by Sikh delegates from Canada while in Punjab.

“At the same time an idea appears to have been generally prevalent among Indians in the far east that if they could get to Canada before the 31st March 1914,

they would not be debarred from entering that country and this belief was strengthened by information sent from Indians at Vancouver.”

As for Baba Gurdit Singh, he had been since long in Malaya as a Contractor. He belonged to village Sarhali near Tarn Taran, close to the famed Dadehar (Sahib) the village of (Sant) Baba Wasakha Singh, the Saint Crusader.

The challenge before him was to give practical shape to the projected ship voyage. Having failed to find a suitable ship at Singapore-Malaya he went to Hong Kong where he hired a Japanese Ship ‘Komagata Maru’ through a German agent. The ship left Hong Kong on 4th April 1914 for Shanghai, and then Nagasaki to pick up passengers and was able to leave for Vancouver with 376 passengers.

As hinted above by now ‘Ghadr’ and ‘Ghadr-di-Goonj’ had started circulating all over the far-east, as also in India the Government of India were alive to the possibility of the likely refusal by the Canadian authorities to the entry of there passengers and the denial being exploited by Ghadrites.

Hence, they ‘planted’ an ex-Indian Medical Officer Dr Raghunath Singh as the Medical Officer on the ship, who from day one conspired to instigate passengers against Baba Gurdit Singh and managed to land at Vancouver along with 22 of his trusted supporters and later appeared as a prosecution witness against Ghadrite supporters of the Komagata Maru venture.

The ship arrived at Vancouver on 23rd May 1914. The ship was not allowed to touch the shore and no one was allowed to leave or enter the ship. Baba Gurdit Singh was not allowed even to report to the Harbour Master the arrival of the ship, which was mandatory for him to do as the Charterer of the ship.

Above all the Charter money of the ship was due for payment, which the Baba had intended to pay after disposing of the extra-supply of coal, which he had got loaded on the ship.

A mass meeting of Vancouver Indians was held under the auspices of the Khalsa Diwan Society and the United India League at the Dominion Hall on Sunday, May 31 to raise funds to pay charter money of by Baba Gurdit Singh and his party of 376 Indian passengers.

Official version:

“Excitement among Indian in Canada

On the 31st May a mass meeting was held at which Hassan Rahim presided to discuss the situation. Gurdit Singh sent a message to the meeting representing the harassing obstacles placed in his way by the British authorities, which he said, had caused serious delay to him on the voyage and had also led to financial difficulties. At the meeting Balwant Singh was the principal speaker. He stated that India of the present day was not the India of a few years ago, but that her present condition more nearly approximated to that which existed in 1857. He said that during his visit to India he had noticed that all the people had united against the British, and if within the next few years Government did not grant Home Rule there would be a revolution. He enlarged on the injustice shown to British subjects arriving in Canada and deplored the fact that the Indian Government was not strong enough to support the claim of Indians to be admitted to the colonies. He referred to the Indian history and to the time of Sikh wars against the

English and called upon his audience to take an example from the Sikhs of that time and not to submit to tyranny.

“It was decided to raise a fund to meet the charter obligations and arrangements were made to raise subscriptions for the purpose....”

Having failed in all their legal efforts to gain entry, the passengers offered to go back if they were provided with food, coal and other needs; the immigration authorities refused point blank and ordered the ship Captain to start the ship. When the Captain tried to start the ship, the passengers forcibly prevented him from doing so, whereupon at late night hours at 1.15 A.M. on 19th July, 160 policemen and immigration authorities tried to force their entry into the ship to enforce their order for departure of the ship. The passengers fought back with coal, water-pipes, and rods making the assaulters retreat.

Unashamedly, the Canadian govt. got ready 204 Militia men at 8 A.M. on 21st July to force their entry into the ship and also deployed a naval ship ‘Rainbow’ a few yards off the ship at 10 A.M. Meanwhile thousands of people gathered on the shore to watch the event.

Ultimately an agreement was arrived at by intervention of Hassan Rahim and Mit Singh, to the effect that the ship would return if sufficient provisions were supplied by the authorities.

It is believed that when the Vancouver Indians learnt about the deployment of Rainbow, many of them swore that in case of any such assault they would set the entire city on fire overnight by sprinkling kerosene oil. That is why the authorities yielded.

Eventually the ship set on its return journey on 23 July at 5 A.M. “accompanied” by ‘Rainbow’ and ‘Sea Lion’.

Ironically during their entire return journey, the passengers were treated as prisoners; the ship was not permitted to touch the shore on any port and entry-exit of persons was made practically impossible.

Since on 25th July 1914 the World War began and on 5th August, the Ghadr Party in U.S.A. had sounded the bugle of their war of liberation, through their ‘Ailan-e-Jang’, the Government issued an Ordinance on 20th August 1914 which empowered the Indian authorities to detain every person entering India from abroad irrespective of his nationality.

On the other hand the Ghadr Party deputed its President Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna to deliver 100 pistols, ammunition, and Ghadr literature to the Ship Committee at Yokohama, which he did. Interestingly, the task of loading these weapons on the ship, which was to carry Baba Bhakna, was assigned to youngest Ghadrite Kartar Singh Sarabha.

Before the ship was to reach the Indian shores near Calcutta, the authorities had intercepted a telegram, which was to be sent to Sardar Harchand Singh of Lyallpur, Surendra Nath Banerji, Editor of ‘The Bengali’ that they should receive them at Calcutta and were asked to ‘move government to appoint Commission of Inquiry to investigate grievances’.

This set the alarm bells ringing at Calcutta and (then capital) Simla.

The ship touched the coast on 27th: Upon a thorough search of the ship luggage, personal belongings of passengers, and persons of the passengers themselves, nothing ‘objectionable’ was found.

The authorities had the prior information about the identity of ship committee members and the authorities conspired to isolate the leaders, secretly detain them at Calcutta and deal with the passengers at will. They in fact, had decided to detain all of them under the Ordinance but without making their intention known to the victims.

For this purpose, a 'Special Train' had been arranged at Budge-Budge railway station (about 40 kms. from Howrah) which the passengers were ordered to board. The passengers on the other hand desired to go first to Calcutta, where besides else, they also intended to leave the Holy Granth Sahib at a local Gurdwara with due reverence.

Ultimately, police being found inadequate, army was called; there was a clash resulting in death of about 20 Indians, one Britisher and two policemen. Many passengers were wounded; most of them were arrested and detained at least for 6 months but 28 including Baba Gurdit Singh were able to escape arrest. Ironically, 9-year-old son, Balwant Singh of the Baba, too was detained for 6 months like the rest of the passengers.

It evoked a strong national protest, unprecedented in history of national awakening in the country. So much so that even a conservative newspaper like 'The Tribune' extended unstinted editorial support to the Ship passengers even before its departure for Vancouver till the end. Ironically, the so-called Sikh leaders, like Sardar Bahadur Rur Singh, the contemporary custodian of Holy Akal Takht, Amritsar issued an Edict (Hukam Nama) on 6th October 1914 excommunicating the Budge Budge martyrs as 'Non-Sikhs'. It was the same 'Sardar Bahadur' who later bestowed a 'Siropa' (Robe of Honour) upon Gen. Dyer soon after he had butchered hundreds of innocent men, women and children on 13th April 1919.

Lest it may be viewed as incidental, it needs be noted here that 'Khalsa Advocate' mouthpiece of the super-loyalist Chief Khalsa Diwan in its two editorials dated 26th June, and 18 September 1915 distorted the history of Sikh Gurus to attribute comments to Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib and Guru Gobind Singh Sahib to the effect that any Sikh who chooses to oppose the white masters would be incurring their displeasure (Original microfilms are available at Nehru Museum Library and Library, Teen Murti, New Delhi).

To cap it all, when I represented to the Govt. of India in 2003 to extend recognition to passengers of Komagata Maru as 'freedom fighters', it cut no ice. As an Advocate I filed a P.I.L. on Dec. 9, 2003 against the Govt. of India, which in its affidavit dated 14 Feb. 2004 declined to do so stating that "Merely because occupants of Komagata Maru left the country in 1914-15 and spent some amount and suffered some sort of assault does not establish that they participated in the freedom movement or there is any connection with the freedom struggle. Hence, writ petition filed by the petitioner is liable to be dismissed."

It took another 7-8 years of efforts for the petition to succeed.