

Komagata Maru — A Challenge to Colonial Rule

— Four sources which deserve some more attention here —

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A poser:

“Could such little read rustic populace from ‘roadless’ and ‘railless’ villages of Punjab would dare to sail that too 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, and travelling thereby facilitating inter-continental migrations across the ‘endless’ oceans, in pursuit of dollars.

Starting with a trickle of 100 in 1900, the number of Indian entrants into Canada swelled to 8000 by 1907 when some restrictions began to be placed on their entry, which led to the struggle against this discrimination culminating in the chequered voyage of Komagata Maru instancing how a constitutional agitation acquires a revolutionary complexion when none of the rivals is willing to yield.

FOUR SOURCES:

I. Ghadrates’ trial proceedings: 1914-17, before the Special Tribunals—

These trial records though primarily focussed on the Ghadrates *per se* also throw meaningful light on the ship episode both by its insightful observations and also quite a few factual details otherwise not available: They pin point the precise role of some of Ghadrates who also were its major players.

These proceedings have only recently been published that too in part and are yet to be fully brought into the public domain. The extent to which these publications have been accessed by the researchers till date is an open question.

Parenthetically, when eminent jurist-historian Mr. A.G. Noorani published his path breaking work “The Trial of Bhagat Singh — Politics of Justice” in 1996 it came to light for the first time that till then no record relating to trials even of national icons like Bhagat Singh and his comrades has been published: Only a shade less surprising was the eminent authors’ assertion in the introductory note that 1929 Lahore Conspiracy Case was the ‘first of its kind’. Mercifully, the learned author gracefully corrected himself in this regard upon going through the judgements of Lahore Conspiracy Cases (Main and Supplementary) of 1914-15 trial provided to him vide my first publication “War Against King Emperor”. In 2001 and suitably modified his earlier introductory note in the second edition of 2005. Amazingly, all this happened whence all these records were in the public domain to the extent that Bhagat Singh could procure at least four such judgements, thoroughly study them and muster relevant material to write truthful bio-sketches of a

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number of Ghadrites and Babbar Akalis from such judgements.

As for their reliability they, by and large, corroborate the first hand accounts of leading Ghadrites as recorded in their memoirs/autobiographies. What lends them yet more objectivity in their highly prudent diction which scrupulously abstains from holding Ghadrites anything beyond conspirators, seditionists or revolutionists notwithstanding their murders, dacoities and above all their pet salutation '*Maro Firangi Ko*'.

Significantly, re Komagata Maru that hold that:—

“Constitutional agitation may easily drift into intemperate agitation, intemperate agitation into sedition and sedition into active revolutionary methods.”¹

Another apt instance:

While dwelling upon the proposal of returning Ghadrites for a press in India it observes:

“The success is seducing people the *Ghadr* (paper) had in America was sufficient encouragement for this course to be adopted and it is common knowledge that Indians are commonly swayed by that which is in print and that the press is everywhere in India a favourite weapon for exciting disaffection.”²

About the unfolding of Komagata Maru story 1908:

The idea of returning to India for expelling the British from their motherland, if their grievances were not redressed is shown to be present right since the aborted plan of Indo-Canadian authorities to settle the incoming Indian emigrants in the ill famed English Colony — The British Honduras in 1908. A visit of two Indian delegates from Vancouver was stage managed by undercover English spy Hopkinton to the colony whose feedback infuriated the local Indians.

“The only incident which appears to have disturbed the outward serenity of life there was a project in 1908 to induce Indian labourers to go to **British Honduras**, where apparently labour was needed.

“According to P.W. Bela Singh ‘(Bhai) Balwant Singh and company an active part in opposing this proposal, and he adds that it were they who first mooted the idea of expelling the British from India if the transfer was insisted upon.’

“This incident no doubt did create some bad feeling, as we find that in the memorial prepared at the Bradlaugh Hall meeting in 1913, to which we will have to refer later, this British Honduras scheme is referred to as ‘a scheme to effect the wholesale transporation of Indian settlers to British Honduras.... by offering them plausible terms, which were not only to reduce them from free immigrants to the level of indentured coolies, but also to considerably reduce their earnings. Indians saw through the trick...’, and in the same memorial the scheme is described as ‘a measure adopted by the Canadian Government to make things as uncomfortable as possible for those already settled in the country’.

“Now the said Balwant Singh was one of the delegates who inspired the Bradlaugh Hall meeting, and though we are not, in the absence of further evidence, prepared to accept the statement that forcible ejection of the British from India was proposed in 1908, it is clear, notwithstanding the present denials of Balwant Singh and Battan Singh, that the incident did give rise to some agitation, *agitation which may have been quite within constitutional limits, even if intemperate*. Both these accused in their written statements refer to the proposals and show that Indian feeling in Canada was

opposed to them, and would have nothing to do with the projected transfer.”³

As for the Canadian immigration rules resented by Indians it states:—

“It is no place of ours to discuss the reasons which may have made these regulations necessary; all we are concerned with is that, though they do not appear on the face of them to be directed especially against Indian emigration they were *regarded by Indians in Canada as directed against themselves*.

“This conception appears to be based on the fact that, in common with apparently nearly every part of the British Empire, through tickets from India to Vancouver, were not procurable, as no through services exist.

“At any rate in 1911 the wife of accused (3) (Balwant Singh) and the wife of Bhag Singh, *granthi* of Victoria- a person who became one of the most active revolutionists in Canada, and was shot dead in his *gurdwara* later on by the witness Bela Singh in self-defence,- came to Canada, and were admitted into the country by the Canadian Government, after, it would appear, some difficulty.

“Bela Singh (p.24), who, we may note, was employed in the Immigration Department in Vancouver, states that it was at this time that Bhag Singh, Balwant Singh, and others started lecturing to Indians to the effect that if the children of settlers in Canada were not allowed to land, Indians should return to India and expel the British.”⁴

“Affairs in 1913

“In 1913, however, matters became critical. There is no doubt that in that year feeling in Canada was running high.”⁵

“Balwant Singh in India

“While this agitation was proceeding Balwant Singh (3) was admittedly in India. He appears to have come to India, after being in London, with a deputation consisting of himself, one *Nand Singh* and one *Narain Singh*, with the express object of representing the grievances of Indians in Canada to people in India and to the authorities.

“His pocket book (p. 65-B) shows he left Vancouver on 14th March 1913, was in England from 29th March to 28th May, and in Paris for 2 days, but it does not show the date of his arrival in India.”⁶

“Police Report: The Bradlaugh Hall Meeting

“In report there is a record of an illustrative *parable*, which concluded with the statement that the only way to save oneself from a snake is to seize it by the neck, and rub it against thorns.”⁷

“We find, however, from the reports which the defence themselves have asked us to read that the limits of constitutional agitation were strained in that meeting, and though we do not say that the meeting became seditious, an *atmosphere of intemperance* was most certainly created.

“We find that Indians are alleged to be subjected to ‘inhuman’ laws in Canada, and the audience has listened to a ‘harrowing story of wrongs’ from the delegates, and the grievances of Indians are referred to as a ‘wrong than which no graver can be done by one part of the Empire to another.

“These are words of *hyperbole and intemperance*, and when, as we know, this agitation developed into action, an action which aimed at forcible resistance to law and an attempt to subvert Government by means of rebellion, in conjunction with enemies at

war with the King, and by rapine and the murder of peaceful and law-abiding citizens and servants of the Crown, the intemperance can only be regarded as regrettable.

“We do not hold that meeting was seditious, or consider that those engaged in it became amenable to the courts, but we do think that it was not without its effect, unintended and never contemplated by most of those who took part, in encouraging more violent spirits in the career of deplorable crime which they embarked upon.”⁸

“Komagata Maru

“Dr Raghunath Singh tells us that when the *Komagatu Maru* arrived at Moji, accused (3) (Balwant Singh) came on board, and he admits he went on board, and informed the passengers what had passed between the Viceroy, and the delegates. The witness tells us that, besides referring to the actions of the delegates, he gave two speeches, in one of which, which witness heard, he said every one in India was in opposition to Government, and that they were awaiting a favourable opportunity to strike a blow against Government.”⁹

“The Komagata Maru in Vancouver

“It is admitted that a Shore Committee was formed, but the evidence before us would appear to show that the object of the committee was to raise funds to assist the passengers, and fight test-cases as to their right to land, objects in themselves perfectly legitimate and that, as a Committee, it did not act illegally.”¹⁰

“Bela Singh (p.25) tells us he attended a big meeting at the Dominion Hall, Vancouver, where, among others, accused Balwant Singh and 5 other accused spoke, and, after raising subscriptions for a test-case, it was urged that, if the ship was sent back, Indians should go back to India.”¹¹

“This evidence is supported by the evidence of the *Hindustani* itself. We have before us the issue of the 1st June (p.5), and it contains an account of the meeting held in the Dominion Hall on the 31st May, the chair being taken by Rahim, the editor of that paper, and accused (3) (Balwant Singh) is reported as saying that if the Canadian Government persisted in excluding Indians, the British Empire must collapse, as India would not tolerate the position; and we find too that the audience was informed that all Britain gave to India, while draining it, was famine, the drink habit, and insolence, an interesting echo of the *Ghadr* teaching.”¹²

“The Komagata Maru started on its return journey about the 22nd July with, as Raghunath Singh tells us, a resolve to rise in India; but we are told that, before its return, efforts were made to secure arms for them.”¹³

“The outbreak of war

“On the outbreak of war, just as happened in the United States, it was hailed as the opportunity for the proposed *Ghadr*, and men began to troop back for that purpose.

“Raghunath Singh (p. 21) was in Vancouver at the time. He tells us a *United Indian League* existed in the *gurdwara*, and there were weekly meetings there, one of which he attended and there saw accused (3) (Balwant Singh) and (11) (Kartar Singh). The principal speakers were Bhag Singh and Mewa Singh, and they enlarged on the theme that Government was oppressive and that, as their ship had been sent back, and the occasion of the war was favourable, it was the duty of Indians to return to India for mutiny. This was the advice given by accused (3) and (11), who had all arrangements in

their hands, and witness states many Indians proceeded to India with the express object of carrying out the design of warring against Government.”¹⁴

The Special Tribunal in its Judgement regarding Baba Sohan Singh Bhankna had underscored his role in delivering pistols and ammunition to Gurdit Singh during Komagata Maru's return journey to India. Approver Nawab Khan had revealed in his testimony, "That about *December 14th, on the way from Jandiala to Lahore, accused Kartar Singh told him that this accused had been sent by the "Yugantar Ashram" with 100 pistols and cartridges to Gurdit Singh of the "Komagata Maru", which had been duly delivered.*"¹⁵

Similarly, the Tribunal in its judgement about Kartar Singh Sarabha refers to his own confessional statement that "How he returned to India with an anarchist Gupta and an American anarchist named 'Jack', paying a visit to Gurdit Singh on board the 'Kamagata Maru' at Kobe."¹⁶

II. Contemporaneous records in National Archives —

These records which by and large stood classified as 'Top Secret', 'Secret' and 'Confidential' contain verbatim records of exchanges between the Canadian-British and Indian governments as also about the mutual perceptions vis-à-vis the passengers and these Government *inter se*. By all means this is a primary source worthy of notice. Parenthetically, the extent of its having been lost sight of is apparent from the simple fact that when I looked into these files during 2003-2005 only a few of them had been examined just randomly.

The Komagata Maru

Pertinently speaking there were no arguable grounds for at least the Indian Government not to extend a helping hand to their loyal Indian subjects, among whom there were numerous ex-soldiers who had, unhesitatingly staked their lives for the safety of the Empire in China, Middle East and Europe.

The probable clue:—

"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."

(Chief Cop Petrie — in his report on Budge Budge 8.10.1914)

So much so that the Indian Government planted Dr Raghunath Singh an I.M.S. officer as an under-cover *agent provocateur* in the guise of the ship Medical Officer for Komagata Maru, which was mandatory under the rules. He had won over a willing tool in the person of a passenger Bhan Singh who played his nefarious role to the hilt.

For public consumption however the Imperial Government insisted upon its helplessness in the matter of admission of emigrants as citizens of the respective Dominions like Canada, vide its letter dated 21st July 1914 addressed to the Vice President of the London All India Muslim League on the issue.

Downing Street
21st July 1914

Sir,

I am directed by Mr. Secretary Harcourt to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 18th of June relating to the Indian emigrants who have proceeded to British Columbia.

2. Mr. Harcourt presumes that the reference in your letter is to the case of the Indians on board the steamship "Komagata Maru," whose claim to enter the Dominion of Canada

has been under the consideration of the immigration authorities of the Dominion in accordance with the Immigration Act of Canada.

3. The matter has received the attention of the Canadian Government and of His Majesty's Government, but, in so far as the question is one of right of British Indian subjects to enter Canada, I am to remind you that at the Imperial Conference of 1911 (vide Cd 5745, P. 395) the Marquess of Crewe explicitly declared on behalf of His Majesty's Government that the view that every subject of the King, whoever he may be or where ever he may live, has a natural right to travel or still more to settle in any part of the Empire, is one which **cannot be maintained, and further recognised as beyond dispute the right of the self governing Dominions to decide for themselves in each case who are to be admitted as citizens of the respective Dominions.**¹⁷

However, juxtaposed to the said communication, here is a letter addressed by the undercover English spy Hopkinson addressed to the Canadian Minister of Interior which spills the beans:

Letter from W. C. Hopkinson, Esq., to W. W. Cory, Esq., C. M. G., Deputy Minister of The Interior, Ottawa, Dated Vancouver B.C., The 30th June 1914.

In continuation of my letter of 17 instant file 38/49, I now beg to enclose herewith the confidential report of Dr. Raghunath Singh re "Komagata Maru" enterprise.

The report is in the "Urdu" language, and will have to be sent to India for translation. We do not wish to secure a translation locally as it will not be to our interest to do so, in view of the confidential nature of the document and also the likelihood of the information leaking out, in which case the doctor would be placed in a very peculiar position.

From my conversation with this officer, it appears that Gurdit is not the man of means he is represented to be, and the whole of this undertaking is a successful bluff, as far as his position is concerned with the passengers. As I have already stated, the whole enterprise was undertaken with a view of self-aggrandisement and a national position in India.

The doctor has given the detailed information on the whole situation and when transmitted will, I think, be of much interest to all Governments concerned.

P. S. This matter needs immediate attention, and the enclosed document should be transmitted to England at once for the translation.¹⁸

Keenly viewed, this reflects the innate trust placed by Indian Government in Dr Raghunath Singh's word which questions Baba Gurdit Singh's financial status, his standing in the eyes of ship passengers while attributing to him "self aggrandisement and political ambitions".

How misleading was this 'intelligence' was realised by the authorities concerned, *after* the Budge Budge tragedy lamenting that "There was one point, however, **on which Raghunath Singh's letter led us to a wrong conclusion.** A perusal of it certainly led us to believe that we should find the majority of the passengers heartily disgusted at the treatment they had received at the hands of Gurdit Singh and only too glad to meet Government half way in its endeavours to help them. **This, as events have proved, was a complete misconception,** and as I shall show presently, we soon realised that **Gurdit Singh's authority was far more complete and his following far more compact than we had ever imagined.**¹⁹

In anticipation as the ship departed from Vancouver a letter was sent by Hong Kong Governor to Canadian authorities on 25th July 1914 urging them not to let the ship halt at Hong Kong since: "Not only it is probable that the greater number of them (passengers) will not find employment here, but they are all now apparently disaffected, and it would be highly undesirable to have them in this Colony, where they may **CONTAMINATE** the Indian troops and the agglomeration of Indians who find

employment as private watchmen.”²⁰

Consequently, throughout their return journey of two months, the passengers were virtually treated as prisoners and the boarding or disembarking on the ship was made extremely arduous.

Red alert:

No. 2738-S., C. & I., dated Simla, the 25th August 1914

From—The Hon’ble Mr. R.A. Mant, Financial Secretary to Government, Punjab.

To—The Secretary to the Government of India, Commerce and Industry Department.

In my letter no.* 2153-S., C.& I., dated Simla, the 6th instant, it was represented to Government of India that many of the passengers from the “Komagata Maru” would probably be returning to the Punjab shortly, and that it was possible that **attempts would be made to get up a serious agitation among the Sikhs.**

2. The Lieutenant-Governor has reason to believe that there may be at the same time be an influx of other malcontent Punjabis from America and Eastern Asia. Information to which His Honour has been given access shows **that even before the outbreak of war there was a considerable ferment among the Punjabees (chiefly Sikhs) in the United States., Canada and the Chinese ports. This feeling was fomented by the revolutionary and inflammatory articles in the “Ghadar” which appears to circulate largely among Indians in those countries, and the impression was given to ignorant emigrants that some sort of rising in the Punjab was imminent. The result apparently was to create a movement of the disaffected persons back to the Punjab.**

This tendency will probably be strengthened by recent events, as **some of these men think that the war in which the British Empire is engaged will give them an opportunity of stirring up a trouble in India.** The present temper of the Punjab is good, but there are elements of danger, especially from the classes referred to, which cannot be ignored, and His Honour is strongly of opinion that it would be most inadvisable **at the present juncture to give free access to a stream of agitators from beyond the sea. It is very desirable to obtain early information of the return of ill-disposed emigrants, to keep a watch on their movements, and to control them where necessary.**

3. For the above reasons Sir Michael O’ Dwyer (Punjab Governor) would urge on the Government of India the necessity of special legislation enabling the Government to regulate and restrict the movements of all emigrants returning to India from America and the Far East. **A specific reference to this class might however arouse suspicions and excite comments,** which at present it is desirable to avoid. If the Government of India accept the principle of the proposal, they will no doubt be able to decide on the most suitable manner of giving effect to it, but a possible method which has suggested itself to His Honour is that the Ordinance no. III of 1914, which was published in the Extraordinary Gazette of India of the 20th instant, **should be extended so as to apply to all persons arriving in India by sea.**
4. As far as the Punjab is concerned, what appears to be necessary, is that Punjabee emigrants returning from America, Canada and Chinese ports **should on or before landing in India be required to give to the authorities an account of themselves and of their antecedents; those who were able to give satisfactory accounts of themselves (probably the large majority) would be allowed to proceed to their destinations—the local authorities being informed of their names, addresses, etc., in case any further surveillance should be necessary; while those whose conduct or antecedents were found to be suspicious would have their movements restricted or**

- regulated as might be necessary.**
5. The Lieutenant Governor has no knowledge of the movements of the “Komagata Maru” since she left Vancouver on her return journey to Hong Kong, and as she is a Japanese vessel it is possible that the outbreak of war between Japan and Germany may lead to her detention in a Japanese port, or to delay her arrival in Hong Kong. In any case it would much facilitate enquiries on this side if in this — and perhaps in the **case of other vessels bringing back Punjab emigrants to an Indian port a nominal list of these (the names being duly numbered) with such further details of father’s name, residence, caste, etc., as may be ascertained, could be obtained in advance and forwarded to this Government, which would then, after such investigation as was possible had been made, be in a better position to decide on the action to be taken in each case.**
 6. A copy of this letter is being sent to the Government of India in the Home Department.²¹

I have received anonymous letters from two passengers, stating that the Indians intend to make trouble on arrival in India, and I think it highly desirable that sufficient guards to remove any fear of disturbance should be on board. In fact the master of the ship asked me to telegraph to Calcutta asking that a strong guard should be sent down to him on board the boat bringing the pilot.²²

Weapons with the Passengers — Ship Captain Yamatotos’ version:

“At Yokohama a lot of fight took place between Gurdit Singh’s followers and Bhan Singh’s followers and thereafter the relations between the two parties became more and more strained. Some of Bhan Singh’s followers told me at Yokohama that 2 or 3 boxes full of automatic revolvers had been brought on board during the night....”²³

“Before reaching Diamond Harbour one of Bhan Singh’s followers told me that a lot of pistols had been thrown overboard during the night.”²⁴

“The Captain said that the Sikhs had five pistols that most of these, along with presumably objectionable literature had been thrown overboard after the ship left Singapore.”²⁵

“It may be said that nothing was found of any importance (after a thorough search of passengers baggage and persons); there were no fire arms (or) anything that was objectionable, as often happens, that was on the border line.”²⁶

A VITAL TELEGRAM FROM BABA GURDIT SINGH TO S. HARCHAND SINGH OF LYALPUR AND ‘BENGALI’ NEWSPAPER OF CALCUTTA INTERCEPTED —

TELEGRAM: “Indian leaders should meet Komagata Maru passengers arriving at Calcutta on or about 28th: Move Government appoints Commission of Enquiry to investigate grievances.”²⁷

This innocuous communication set the alarm bells ringing at Calcutta and Simla.
Punjab C.I.D. report on post-Budge Budge public reactions:

Events following the arrival of the ship at Budge Budge

Based on official records, a compendium of sorts is being presented hereunder:

What goes to the root of the matter is that at no stage the passengers were informed or fore-warned that they are hereby being interned under Ingress to India Ordinance. Factually speaking, even for imposition and enforcement of a mild constraint like under Section 144 Cr.P.C. an effective public announcement as a forewarning is mandatory, which was much more called for in this scenario which denoted internment.

The official version re number of Komagata Maru passengers:

The Status of passengers as on 11th October 1914:

Total	321
Left for Punjab in special train	59
Left behind, women and children	3
Balance	259
Killed at Budge Budge	16
Died from wounds in hospital	2
Found drowned	1
Balance	240
In hospital in Calcutta	9
In jail in Calcutta	168
In jail outside Calcutta	24
Total	201
Balance still to be accounted for	39

The Character of Budge Budge occurrence**Damage on the Official side due to riot**

Killed = 3 police personnel + 1 Railway employee, presumably due to army firing. Injured = 16 (5 due to bullet injuries and others due to non-firearms injuries)

A melee

In a communication from Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy, to the Bengal Governor in connection with the release of detentes, it was observed that those who had been detained primarily because they had suffered injuries in the occurrence, may in fact be innocent since in a melee such as took place, it is quite as likely as a guilty man to have been wounded, perhaps more so."

The Unfolding

"After some conversation with Sir William Duke, who had gone out and persuaded the Sikhs to return to Budge Budge, we went forward on foot and arrived at the Railway Station just as the Sikh reached it and were sitting down. They occupied the road parallel to and on the west side of the railway from which they were separated by an iron railing about four feet high. Macdonald, on arrival, asked for Gurdit Singh who was pointed out to him at the end of the crowd next to the station. It was rather dark by this time, but it was possible to see a man's features if one looked closely. Gurdit Singh showed no disposition to move, and one or two European sergeants stepped forward, presume to fetch (read apprehend) him. Immediately all the Sikhs near Gurdit Singh sprang to their feet and closed round him. The excitement seemed to be spreading to other people who were farther away and who could not possibly have known the cause of it. I moved off several paces to my own left, attempting to pacify these people and asking them to sit down and keep calm; immediately a shot was fired. The flash caught my eye and I should say it came from behind Gurdit Singh and to his right that is nearer to the level-crossing. No sooner had the first shot been fired, than a large number of others followed. The European sergeants started firing. The crowd broke and swayed, some of them charging forward to attack the police. I had a Browning pistol in my pocket and I

drew it and fired seven shots at people who were advancing on me. I was standing near the level-crossing and a good deal of hot hand-to-hand fighting took place between Sikhs and some men of the Punjab Police. It was in this early part of the scuffle that I received two bullet wounds, one in the right forearm and other one in the upper thigh. The next impression I have is that the Sikhs' were gathered in force round the huts on 'the left hand side of the road as one goes from the level-crossing towards the river. They were tearing away the 'bamboos' of which the huts were composed, presumably to use them as *lathis*. A good many shots were fired from about these huts. After making one or two abortive rushes forward, the Sikhs broke and fled. The troops had been standing in columns of fours some short distance behind at the time the riot commenced, and from the confident and the daring way in which the Sikhs attacked I feel sure that they were not aware of the presence of soldiers. In my opinion some 40 or 50 shots might have been fired by the rioters and they may have used about 10 or 12 pistols. I saw no Winchester rifles and no swords, but as the rioters were grappling with men of the Punjab Police it is quite possible they succeeded in capturing one or two swords from injured policemen." (D Petrie)

Were there any firearms with the passengers?

From the perusal of the entire report, all that had been found in evidence regarding recoveries, one 38 pistol from the spot with some empties of the same bore, which according to the report could have belonged only to the passengers since neither the troops nor the army had any weapon of that bore. Additionally one pistol of the same bore was recovered from one of the: passengers at Midnapur which could have no palpable link with the said 'riot'.

But what is left unsaid is that none from among the police officials including D Petrie had seen any of the passengers wielding a firearm. The simple recovery of a particular weapon from the spot could mean many things. Above all, had the passengers such kind of weapons, and had then fired from point blank range, as per the scenario of a melee, the casualties on the government side would have been many more. In the facts and circumstances of the case, the officials hit by firearms were so hit, primarily because in a melee a bullet having hit one man can penetrate through and through causing injury to a second person particularly in case of high velocity weapons like a rifle. Besides, the accuracy of a weapon like a pistol is very limited. Hence, the bullets which hit the officials were in all likelihood fired from their own side. Expectedly, there is no word about the kind of bullets recovered from the bodies of victims on the official side which indeed is the clinching proof in the realm of ballistics.

The context bares it all

The bare facts narrated above shall fall into place once we peep into the mindset of the authorities in the matter:

1. The steps taken from time to time to meet the purpose of the Government, led to the riot. From the statement of the objects it can be seen that these steps were well calculated to give effect to the 'wishes' of the Government.
2. According to D Petrie, the Punjab police Chief had heard Gurdit Singh arguing (on 29th September morning) "that none of them (passengers.) would go ashore at

Budge Budge; he also said if they had done anything wrong; a judge should be sent for to take their statement, after which the government could shoot them or do what it chose; if there was any question of dying they would all die together, and so on”.

3. “It is a question of common experience that Indians too often return from abroad with tainted political views and diminished respect for their white rulers”. And finally.
4. “That while some of the more ignorant (passengers) may have been persuaded that the disembarkation at Budge Budge was for some sinister purpose, yet the ring leaders and Gurdit Singh used it simply as an excuse **because they had been foiled in their attempt to make a demonstration at Howrah**, as they had sent telegrams from Singapore expecting a demonstration when they arrived at Calcutta”. (Emphasis added — Ed.)

So all it boiled down to, was a proposed demonstration of sorts on the arrival of passengers at Calcutta, which possibly in the eyes of the authorities had to be preempted ‘at any cost’. So the passengers must have to be huddled into the prison bogies of the railways to be dumped at chosen places in India at scattered places so as to prevent them from lodging **even** a peaceful protest over an issue in which they were nursing a legitimate grievance.

The aftermath:

“Weekly Report of the Director of Intelligence dated 6th October 1914.”

(Note:— It is recommended that this report may be burnt and not kept on record.)

Sikh Politics — The report castigates a Sikh paper of Lahore “The *Sher-e-Punjab* which outrightly condemned the Government, and eulogises Sardar Bahadar Arur Singh *Sarbrah of Akal Takht*) in getting a resolution passed by a gathering at the Golden Temple to disassociate themselves from the rioters’ action and reassure Government of their unflinching loyalty and devotion to British Crown.”²⁸

III. Ghadr Conspiracy Report (1913-16) by Isemonger and Slattery —

This report though basically dealing with Ghadr movement also provides some vital clues about the pivotal role played by Khalsa Diwan Vancouver and United India League under the leadership of Bhai Bhag Singh, Balwant Singh and Hassan Rahim since 1910 right upto its final denouement in August-September 1914, besides the decisive conclave at Ferozepur Kanya Vidyalaya during the 1913 visit of the Canadian Delegates, Bhai Balwant Singh, Nand Singh Seehra and Narain Singh wherein the proposal to float own shipping company was finalised. This may contribute to the realisation that the Komagata Maru episode was more broad based, and multi-layered than it is commonly understood to be.

Pertinently, unlike in the case of Ghadr’s trial proceedings as also in the case of National Archival records, this report is almost exclusively focussed on Ghadr Conspiracy *per se* which provides just hints about Komagata Maru, which call for interpretation or elaboration, which of course must at least be plausible if not ‘beyond

reasonable doubt' in the given context.

Captioned "Grievances of Indian Emigrants in Canada, the first para alludes to the 1910 Ordinance, rendering the entry of Indians to Canada *de-facto* impossible. ... "The fact that more lenient treatment was accorded by the Canadian Government to Japanese and Chinese had also been a subject of discontent."²⁹

"In 1911 a deputation of Sikhs went to Ottawa to represent their grievances before the Canadian authorities, but without result. In 1912 the general discontent was given a strong fillip by the action of the immigration department in refusing to admit the wives of two prominent members of the Sikh Community at Vancouver, namely, Bhag Singh and Balwant Singh."³⁰

"At the end of the year (1909) Balwant Singh returned to India and when going back to Canada in spring of 1911 he took along his family with him. Bhag Singh, another Granthi of the temple, and a third man were also accompanied by their families. Balwant Singh and Bhag Singh were admitted, but entry was refused to the women, whose deportation was ordered. There was violent agitation among the immigrants against the inhumanity of separating husbands from their wives and children."³¹ (Emphasis added)

Moving on to 1913, it reads "On the 22nd Feb. 1913, owing to the dissatisfaction caused by he failure to obtain redress from the Canadian Government, a man meeting of Indians was held in Vancouver, at which it was decided to depute three delegates to visit England and India in order to represent both to the Government and the people the disabilities under which Indian emigrants were suffering."³²

The resolution adopted in the meeting, *willy nilly* set into motion a chain of events which culminated on 29th September 1914 at Budge Budge. "Resolved that whereas the Dominion authorities have turned a deaf ear to our petitions and delegations requesting them to admit our families into Canada, we, *Hindustanis of Canada* assembled in a mass meeting under the auspices the United India League and Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver appoint Mr. Nand Singh Seehra, Balwant Singh and Narain Singh as delegates to approach the Home Government in London to secure the *primary, elementary and vital* condition of our domiciled existence in this country, and to remove the disabilities on immigration, and further to seek the co-operation of Indian Government and various other public organisations of India such as Indian National Congress, the All India Hindu Mahasabha, the All Indian Muslim League, the Chief Khalsa Diwan and the Indian public at large."³³

This signified a paradigm change in the whole affair — firstly giving up once for all the trust in bonafides of Canadian Government and secondly seeking the cooperation of the widest spectrum of civil society in India making a passionate appeal to the public at large, through a whirlwind tour particularly of Punjab.

The Report: "At the time (1913) the exact importance of the visit of these delegates to India was not fully realised, but it is now apparent that it formed a distinct step in the development of the revolutionary movement and was intended to establish a link of sympathy between Indians at home and emigrants abroad."³⁴

In particular the Lahore Bradlaugh Hall meeting of 18th August drew the ire of Punjab Governor Sir Michal O'Dwyer, particularly since some persons who owed loyalty to the Crown too were present.

Further: "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 the Sikh delegates from Canada while in Punjab.”³⁵

Re Ferozepur Conclave: “...it is curious to find that when Gurdit Singh returned to Hong Kong (in Jan 1914) and the Canadian delegates were still in Punjab, he was joined by Daljit Singh, who just prior to this was editor of *Punjabi Bhain* an official organ of the Sikh Girls High School Ferozepur managed by Bhai Takhat 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.”³⁶

IV. Contemporary press, and other sources reflecting public opinion—

These sources reveal a universal and vocal support of the passengers’ cause by the public at large even by traditional loyalists juxtaposed to the negative attitude towards the Ghadrites who suffered from a gross neglect on the one hand and hostile propaganda by hard-core loyalists, branding them as apostates on the other.

‘Press’ and ‘public opinion’ both being extremely unwieldy, the choice herein in case of both shall admittedly, be arbitrary.

Atypically, the first available press report, an editorial in *The Tribune* of 29th October 1913, coincides with the public tour of the trio of Bhai Balwant Singh, Narain Singh and Nand Singh Seehra, the three delegates deputed by Indians in Canada for this mission; such a dyed-in-the-wool Empire loyalist papers’ sticking out its neck on such a contentious issue ought to be taken to signify the strength of public sentiment as also its audacity.

Wonder of wonders, this editorial’s captioned “Deportation of Hindus from British Columbia” denotes deep involvement of the paper with the fate of 39 Indians who had landed at Victoria harbour of British Columbia on 27th October 1913, but were taken into custody by the Canadian immigration authorities to be deported back. When they were produced in the court in response to the writ of *habeas corpus* in the Court of Chief Justice Hunter, whereby they *inter se* also challenged the legality of Order-in-Council by virtue of which they had been debarred from landing in Canada.

The Chief Justice declared:

- (1) That the Order-in-Council exceeded the authority conferred by the statute
- and (2) The instant government order exceeds the power conferred in the act.

On the basis of the petition, the 39 passengers were released. A telegram was sent to Bhai Balwant Singh (in India). Incidentally the news was flashed in Rangoon Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai. The result was that everyone was ready to proceed to Canada.

After a ‘silence’ of the paper for six months, the editorials followed in quick succession, thereafter that is, 20th May, 29th May, 3rd June, 6th June, 10th June, 19th June, 5th July, 9th July, 11th July, and 23rd July 1914.

These editorials, *inter alia* updated the Indian readers about the press-comments in Canada, with its own sharp observations.

While the ship was on its return journey, in an editorial dated 10th September captioned “The Problem of Indian emigration”, the paper, however, appears to have been taken in by the Indian Governments’ version on the venture which “blamed the

Komagata Maru enterprise and seemed to think that the persons who organised the journey.” Mercifully, the Indian Government had also shed some ‘synthetic’ tears as well for the Indian emigrants.

Post Budge Budge: In its editorial dated 7th October titled “Anglo-Indian papers and Komagata Maru passengers”, it takes exception to a few “violent remarks of some Anglo-Indian papers on the deplorable riot at Budge Budge”. ...“We leave it to the Government to see that nothing is done to unjustly misrepresent persons who were probably mistaken and to whom unnaturally a novel and unusual restraint on their movement in their own country seemed in explicable.”

Apropos one of the said papers’ allegation that “among the returned emigrants were men who had imbibed anarchical ideas in America and Japan”, the paper repudiates any such suggestion by contending that how could persons like Gurdit Singh who “valued British citizenship and claimed a right of entry to British Colonies as equal subjects of His Majesty the King Emperor” be attributed any such attribute.”³⁷

Cumulatively viewed, these editorials can very well be taken simultaneously as a measure of public sympathy as also an effort to mobilise more public support for the cause of Indian emigrants.

Juxtaposed to the public-social support which Komagata Maru passengers evoked in sharp contrast to the Ghadriles a vital gap would be found in matter of press reports espousing the cause of the former and the total absence even of news coverage *qua* the latter.

In case of Ghadriles, there are a number of instances where ordinary village folk joined the police in chasing the Ghadriles fleeing after an ‘action’.

The indifference bordering on apathy had been well brought out by an eminent Ghadrile (Baba) Sajjan Singh (Narangwal-Ludhiana) a life-convict in Lahore Conspiracy Case — Supplementary, while describing his co prisoners’ group’s journey from Multan jail to Hazari Bagh (Then Bihar — Now Jharkhand).

“Since their movements were kept confidential, and they were denied the facility of postal communication with their relatives (permissible under Jail Rules) he looked forward to the arrival of their train at Ludhiana station, his home district to find someone who could convey the news of his transfer to a far off place.

“To his utter disappointment, everyone tried to avoid even an eye-contact. When he called someone to listen to him, he, instead, moved away.

“Later it dawned upon the Baba that it was due to the widespread hostile propaganda by the loyalist lobby of ‘Sardar Bahadurs’ of Chief Khalsa Diwan who lectured in Gurdwaras and public platforms demonising them as dacoits and murders.”³⁸

Notably, the *Khalsa Advocate* the mouthpiece of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, in its editorial dated 18th September, 1915, welcomed the 13th September 1915 verdict of Special Tribunal sentencing 24 of the 51 Ghadriles to death: Re the failure of the Ghadriles insurrection of February 1915, it pontificates “Now if these *cannibals* had succeeded in any of (even if not in all) of their infernal designs, the loss of lives consequent thereupon and the universal consternation and horror it would have caused, can better be imagined than described! But thanks to the Omniscient *Waheguru*, the bubble of the evil burst and the secret leaked out only a couple of days or so before the date (22nd February 1915) fixed for the general rising. And this testifies to the benign British Government being acceptable to the *Creator Who* is always the most particular

about the safety of His creatures. The Press (Indian as well as Anglo-Indian) is unanimous in condemning, in the strongest possible terms, this most contemptible movement ever witnessed in India, as well as in agreeing to the *appropriateness of the sentenced awarded*, though some (particularly the *Panjabi* and the *Bengalee*) have recommended mercy as best suiting the magnanimity of the humane British Raj. But that some of the prominent conspirators have also been recommended to mercy, proves that the *conscientious commissioners* have not erred on this side.”³⁹

“And it would not be out of place to assert here that those unfortunate men that have acted upto their fiendish instructions *have conducted themselves against what the Singh Sabha propaganda has been so particularly and loudly preaching for the past 40 year!* The Singh Sabha set it forth as a formulae (basing it on the religio loyal teachings of the Sat Gurus) *that whosoever disobeys the 10 Gurus and misbehaves himself in any way against the blessed British Government, is not a Sikh.* The enormous literature so far published by the late Khalsa Diwan, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, the present leading and representative body of the Panth, the Khalsa Tract Society, the Sikh Educational Conference and the so many Singh Sabhas, Associations and Diwans, contains nothing but expositions and expostulations of this very formulae.”⁴⁰

“Is their still a room for doubt or denial that these internal incendiaries proposed extirpating the long and firm established British Empire putting to fire and the sword the Government buildings and innocent subjects respectively, looting the public and private houses, seducing the faithful armies, and what not? If not, why then to show any the least sign of regret at the sentences awarded to such enemies of mankind and humanity?”⁴¹

“Thus though the Government may not refrain from doing mercy by commuting the sentences in all or some certain cases; but there can be no doubt in the thoroughness of the trial and appropriateness of sentences. In that case we would most respectfully suggest that preference be given, to those who acted as mere tools, over the instigators. Verily it is a good lesson for those that still stagger on the path of loyalty, to learn!”⁴²

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