

The *Ghadr* Movement: Revolutionary Upsurge of 1914-15

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“Bugle of War” “Ailan-e-Jang” is sounded-of armed revolt against slavery, by thousands of Indians mostly Sikhs, settled in Canada, U.S.A. and western coasts since early years of the century...

“Fifty seven years have passed since the *Ghadr* of 1857,

And another mutiny is badly needed.

Today we start the War against the British Rule.

What is your name? ‘*Ghadr*’

What is your task? ‘*Ghadr*’

Thus proclaimed the ‘*Ghadr*’, the mouthpiece of the Ghadr Party in August 1914, aptly titled “*Ailan-e-Jang*” (Declaration of War). Indeed it was spontaneously responded to by thousands of Indians in America who flocked to India, discarding their hard earned dollar wealth, the original purpose of their immigration and donned the robes of Martyrdom while reciting:

“*Challo Challiye desh nun yudh karan,*

Eho bachan te farman ho gaye.”

(Let us go to our country to fight,

This is our ultimate compact and command)

Was it not a matter of wonder that those very dollars or “dollars” for which they had travelled to the other end of the globe seemed nothing! Then, for years after they immigrated they had wailed and cried:

“*Desh pain dhakke bahar mile dhoi naa,*

Sada pardesian da des koi naa”

(Humiliated back home, no solace abroad,

For us aliens no refuge around.)

Is it not one of the wonders of history as to how these semi-literature ‘rustics’, many of them ex-servicemen, the proverbial ‘yes-men’ rose like a tornado!

Of course it was not purely incidental, not purely! It was a particular scenario, which impelled them to correlate their predicament in America not to the will of God but the hard fact of their Nation being Slave. But mere desperation may just demoralize, unless it is coupled with some positive will to respond to the challenge of the circumstances.

The slogan, “Like 1857” signified a joint endeavour of masses and soldiery: To boost them, Veer Savarkar’s book extolling “1857” as the First War of Independence was at hand: excerpts from the book were serialized in ‘*Ghadr*’ paper regularly.

Its mouthpiece paper was named “*Ghadr*” also because its ideology was ‘*Ghadr*’. The founding President was Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, vice president Baba Kesar Singh Thathgarh, General Secretary Lala Hardyal (succeeded by

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Bhai Santokh Singh in March 1914), cashier Martyr Pandit Kanshi Ram Marauli.

The party though predominantly consisting of Sikhs, while Gurdwaras like those of Vancouver and Stockton being the virtual storm centres of the Party, it was secular to the core. The religious persuasion was declared to be purely private which had no niche in the organization. In those days of orthodoxy in the matters of sharing a kitchen, all used to dine in the common kitchen. There was no remuneration for even the whole timers who stayed in the “Yugantar Ashram” and only a pocket money of one dollar a day were given. Baba Sohan Singh had written in his autobiography “Jeewan Sangram” that once an Irish revolutionary stayed there and when he found the food we took, he was almost shocked in disbelief and propounded that for us, the day of liberation could not be far off!

Their war cry was “Bande Matram” adopted from the famous novel in Bengali by Bankim Chander Chatterji which denotes ‘Mother I bow to Thee!’ and it was inscribed invariably on the top corners of the front page of ‘Ghadr’ and in the middle the inspiring lines from the sacred writings of Guru Nanak Dev ji:

“*Jau tao prem khelan ka chao, sir dhar talee galee moree ao*”.

(If you seek to engage in the game of Love, then step in my way with head on thy palm.)

Above all, the *Ghadrites* in their own homespun diction improvised poetry, which without mentioning the name of authors, was regularly published in ‘Ghadr’. Later it was compiled in compilations named ‘*Ghadr Goonj*’ serialized and published.

Seldom in history such wonders had been wrought by “Poetry”! Practically, every *Ghadrite* had memorized a bunch of these poems to be recited by singing or otherwise and literally it was like ‘spitting fire’. Shorn of oratorical talents, this was indeed the communication weapon to motivate villagers, soldiers in barracks and the students in hostels for *Ghadr*.

All said, the party failed to attain its avowed objective of overthrowing of alien rule. On arrival many of the top leaders were nabbed on ports itself since their arrival and mood was too well-known to the police. Recovering from the shock, they managed to put their act together and collaborated with veteran revolutionaries like Rash Bihari Bose and entrusted him with the leadership. This is itself a rare quality, i.e., not to bother about ‘leadership’ so rare even among revolutionaries.

Having managed to build a ‘formidable’ organization according to the Judgement of the *Ghadr* trials called ‘Lahore Conspiracy Cases’ the proximate cause of failure of their plans was Kirpal Singh a spy who managed to penetrate the top rungs of its leadership.

Expectedly it was followed to trials before “Special Tribunals” where no “Vakil” (Counsel), “Daleel” (pleadings) or “appeal” was entertained. So dozens were sentenced to death and hanged secretly and their ashes/remains till date remained cremated/buried anonymously under the debris (now demolished) Lahore Central Jail, presently a shopping complex. Those spared death were consigned to Cellular Jail in Andaman, a veritable hell on earth.

This account of the movement would remain incomplete without reference to a related episode, namely, Koma Gata Maru. The Canadian Government in connivance with British Government was hell bent to stop Indians' entry. So they cleverly imposed a condition on Asian immigrants of "direct voyage" from their own country being fully aware that no such ships start from India. To circumvent this handicap, Baba Gurdit Singh contracted a Japanese ship Koma Gata Maru and booked around 400 passengers to Canada. They were left stranded in the Canadian coast of Vancouver for two months on arrival, assaulted, starved even of water but not allowed to land. They were only provided with rations for return voyage. Enraged they sailed back but in the meantime First World War had started. Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, the party president was entrusted with a consignment of pistols and ammunition plus the *Ghadr* literature to link up with the passengers, which he did at Yokohama in Japan. The British Government in India treated all the passengers as dangerous and disallowed any one of them to disembark on the way. Ultimately the ship arrived at Budge Budge port near Kolkotta, where, on 29th September 1914 the army and police 'welcomed' them with indiscriminate firing, resulting in at least 20 deaths and many injured, the rest being put in jails.

The *Babas* who survived these trials continued to struggle in all mass movements and organizations working for freedom and justice.

To conclude, in the words of Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, Ghadr Party has the distinction of being a trail blazer in demanding freedom, liberty and equality for Indians, in which did not succeed, but it left behind a rich legacy to inspire a succession of revolutionaries including legendary Bhagat Singh who regarded young Hero Kartar Singh Sarabha his role model, 19 years old lad fondly remembered by Baba ji till last breath in December 1968 as "My General".

Long lives the *Ghadr* spirit!
