
The Influence of Ghadar Movement on Bhagat Singh's Thought and Action

_____ Harish K. Puri

Shaheed Bhagat Singh is one of the few heroes who continued to excite interest among scholars and the common people in both parts of Punjab. He was born and brought up in this part of Punjab and received his education here in Lahore. All the major events of his political activity, his trial in what was named Lahore Conspiracy Case, his imprisonment, the legendary hunger strike for the rights of political prisoners that he and his comrades went through, and finally his execution in the Lahore Central Jail were all centred here. So indeed was a major part of the history of the Ghadar rebellion that was the subject of First Lahore Conspiracy Case of 1915. A visit to Lahore for participation in this conference becomes for a researcher of that period of modern history of Punjab, a sort of pilgrimage.

Bhagat Singh's birth centenary celebration last year became a reason for a revival of research interest in Bhagat Singh, in his thought and action and in issues related to the history of his time. One would also notice a degree of fresh interest in the Ghadar movement among the Punjabis settled abroad those in the two Punjab in the wake of the movement's centenary celebration in 2013. The influence that the Ghadar movement had in the making of Bhagat Singh and his movement has been a less closely studied subject. It was in a deeper sense the question of the attitude they brought to the understanding of the social and political conditions of their times and to what, to borrow the words Barack Obama, is called "the audacity of hope". The historical political context of the post WW1 decade was vastly different from that of the preceding decade. Bhagat Singh's political ideas and actions reflected a transaction between those of the Ghadarites and the new ones thrown up by the post-war political turmoil in India and by the message of the Russian revolution.

My argument here is that both in his thought and action Bhagat Singh's struggle may be viewed as a continuation of the Ghadar movement. His conscious articulation of rationalism and scientific socialism did not as much constitute a break or a shift as an advancement of that struggle in an altered historical context. The *Kirti Ghadris* were also grappling with their erstwhile cluster of ideas and beliefs. In his many writings available to us, Ghadar movement was clearly upheld as the first genuinely revolutionary struggle for the freedom of India. Besides the courage of conviction and tremendous sacrifices of the Ghadarites, what amazed Bhagat Singh was the manner in which these semi-literate Punjabi workers and farmers in America had absorbed transformative revolutionary ideas floating in the world in such a short time. Their rejection of orthodoxy, the tendency towards socio-cultural radicalism and their intense nationalism alongwith a spirit of internationalism impressed him. It was no less a question of a refreshingly new attitude of mind they brought to all kinds of social and political issues. Bhagat Singh was inspired by the revolutionary potential of the movement – the kind of revolution that was possible. The romance of anarchist principle of 'propaganda by deed' and of the grandeur of self-sacrifice appeared to exercise a stronger pull on his mind in the face of the long and difficult preparation for a proletarian revolution. However, he had meanwhile given a new meaning to the anarchist methods and to personal sacrifice.

1

The militant Ghadar movement was the first openly declared political struggle for complete independence of India. Launched among Indian immigrants living on the Pacific coast areas of USA and Canada in 1913, its clear objective was the overthrow of British Rule through an armed insurrection. The sense of victimhood caused by racial insults and hatred was a big factor. The political orientation of the Ghadarites was, however, shaped in a peculiar environment of political liberalism in USA and radicalism of the Indian revolutionaries that was inspired by anarchist and syndicalist ideas. Har Dayal's pamphlet "Philosophy of the Bomb" published by the Ghadar Press advocated anarchist type of nationalism. The bomb thrown in

Delhi on Viceroy Lord Harding was for him a great occasion of celebration. "Hail! Hail! Hail! the Bomb of 23 December, 1912", he wrote in *Yugantar Circular*, "Harbinger of hope and courage, dear re-awakener of slumbering souls . . . concentrated moral dynamite . . .the *Esperanto* of revolution" (Puri 1993:67).

The choice of the name, *Ghadar* (mutiny), signified an audacious re-enactment of armed insurrection, like that of 1857 Mutiny in India. Its weekly propaganda paper, edited by Lala Har Dayal, was named *Ghadar*. On top of the front page of that paper was given its identity line: "*Angrezi Raj ka Dushman* (Enemy of the British Rule). So was its agenda: "Fifty six years have elapsed since the Mutiny of 1857; now there is urgent need of a second one." A major source of inspiration in Har Dayal's writings in the *Ghadar* was V D Savarkar's history of that rebellion, *Indian War of Independence*, published in 1909. Excerpts from that book were published the paper. It was explained that the rebellion of 1857 was suppressed by the British because sections of Indians, such as Sikh rulers and big Zamindars, betrayed India and supported the British in a big way. Now they must unite all Indians for another armed insurrection. The wily British divided the Indians. The Ghadar party would unite the Hindus, Muslims and Sikh; their religion was *deshbhagti* (love of the nation). Marathas, Bengalis, Punjabis, all sons of the motherland, were brothers. Free from the constraints of village and kinship norms, the rejection of orthodoxy was not difficult.

They imbibed a spirit of secularism, even though unlike Har Dayal, they were not against religion as such. The objective was complete independence. Independent India would be a Republic --- named the United States of India. Indian wealth would then remain in India. Then there would be prosperity. Darkness and illiteracy would disappear. The children would not die of hunger. It was necessary to educate and awaken the common people in India. They were asked to get ready; to acquire arms and military training and to approach Indian soldiers in the Army for rebellion against the oppressor. The *Ghadar* dealt with these issues and explained complex ideas in the language these workers could understand. As copies of the *Ghadar* started reaching the Sikh Punjabis settled in a vast number of foreign

lands, public readings of the exhortations inflamed anti-British passions. No less inspiring was the Ghadar poetry in Punjabi on a whole range of issues.

*Sade paise naal sada sir kuttade
Zalam farangi lai gaye des lutt ke*

*Kha kha golian raj nun keeta kaim
Zalam Nazar Aaya daghedar sanoon*

*Deson kadheaiy chall ke gorian noon
Dekho pher hunde malla- maal kyon nahin*

*Mareeye aap jaaN dushmanaN maar laeeye
gallon tauk ghulami da laah daeeye*
(Cruel foreigners have looted away our country
with our own wealth they hit us hard;
Taking bullets on our bodies we established the Empire
The Tyrant appeared a cheat to us;
Retuning {to the country} (let's) expel the Whites from our land
Then you will see how we become rich and prosperous;
By dying or by killing the enemy, (we) should take the yoke of
slavery off the neck)

When the First War erupted in August 1914 it was considered the most opportune moment for thousands of Ghadarites to return to India to launch a war against the British rule. The treatment given to passengers of Komagata Maru had already provoked calls for a revolt. Practically all of them were Punjabis; predominantly Sikhs from the then central Punjab districts. The rebellion was to start from there .and They had little knowledge of political situation in the Punjab and there was little preparation. But the passions were high. Many were ready to sacrifice their lives. They could not wait. The leaders addressed meetings. the focus was on collection of weapons and contacts in Sikh regiments. The *Ghadar* gave an open call. "Hindus Go Home to Fight in Revolution", a banner line of report by *The Portland Telegram* was typical of the reports flashed by newspapers of Portland and California.

Within 2 to 3 months hordes of them started arriving in India in ships. Lt. Governor of the province Michael O'Dwyer reported the return of 8000 during the War period. About a quarter of them had a Ghadar connection. Most of the leaders were arrested or detained on arrival in India or ordered to be confined to their villages. Kartar Singh Sarabha was prominent in organizing scattered groups, building contacts in the regiments, collecting funds and arms. The uprising was foiled and led to arrests on a large scale. Over 275 were tried in a series of 8 Conspiracy trials and another 8 relating to Arms dacoity and murder. Forty six of the convicts were executed; the youngest of them was Kartar Singh Sarabha. Seventy Ghadarites were imprisoned and transported for life and 125 were punished to other varying terms of imprisonment. A large number of the rebellious sepoys were executed following court-martial. The price paid for the patriotic passion was terribly high. Bhagat Singh had heard about that quite early in life.

Bhagat Singh's family was known for their activist radical nationalism. He was only 8 years old when Kartar Singh Sarabha and a few other Ghadarites used to visit his father for advice and money. Many of those heroes were executed soon thereafter. He regarded the martyr Kartar Singh Sarabha as his hero. Among the three of his favourite radical teachers was Bhai Parmanand who was instrumental in the first visit to address a big meeting of Indian immigrants in Portland in USA in May 1913 which led to the founding of the Ghadar party. He was awarded imprisonment for life in the Lahore Conspiracy trial for his close association with plans of Ghadar rebellion, but was released in 1921. *Bandi Jeewan* by Sachindranath Sanyal, which was the first historical account, by an insider, of the plans and activities of the rebels, was "a basic text book" for nationalists which he and his friends read and discussed. The Rowlatt Committee Report of 1918, containing the British Government's secret intelligence version of the Ghadar movement, was another. Bhagat Singh was familiar with subsequent sufferings of the families and children of these "desh-bhagats" and with their amazing steadfastness in the midst of exceptional tribulations.

A Hindi magazine *Chaand* brought out in November 1928 a special *Phansi Ank* (Executions Special edition) that included a total of 54 articles on the Indian martyrs martyrs in the cause of

freedom. Twenty seven of these were on Ghadar martyrs. (Lokgeet 2006). Practically all of these were authored by Bhagat Singh though published under different names. Many of these were published earlier in the *Kirti*. These provide a fairly good idea of the extent to which Bhagat Singh seemed mesmerized by their convictions and deeds. Kartar Singh Sarabha, was lovingly described as his guru, a friend, and a comrade. “One is amazed to think of what he at the age of 19 was able to do . . . , wrote Bhagat Singh. “Such courage! Such self–confidence! So much of self–denial and passionate commitment has been rarely seen earlier. There have not been many people born in India who could be, in real terms, described as *Baghi* (rebels). But among those few leaders Kartar Singh’s name is on top of the list”. (ibid. 117)

What came out prominently in these writings was Bhagat Singh’s fascination for their religion-like spirit of nationalism, anarchist orientation and a very emotional fondness for acts of individual heroism and sacrifices, particularly martyrdom. The Ghadar party, as he wrote was composed of those who “offered their heads” at the altar of the “goddess of freedom”;

“Like a hurricane they came from somewhere, stoked the fire. . . of rebellion and were ultimately themselves consumed by it”. (ibid)

Bhagat Singh recognized the fact that “deficiency of organisation” became a major reason of failure of that movement. But more significant, to him was their self-sacrificing passion. *OhnaN de rag rag vich inquilabi jazba smaya hoye si*”. (Revolutionary sentiment ran in every vein of theirs)

The political goal of Hindustan Republican Army founded by Sachindranath Sanyal in 1924 was, like that of the Ghadarites, the founding of a federal republic of the United States of India. Close study of its programme of action pointed to its similarity with the one adopted by the Ghadar Party in 1913. The revival of Naujawan Bharat Sabha in April 1928 by the Kirti organization in collaboration with him provided for closer association of Bhagat Singh with the former Ghadarites. The Kirti Ghadarites, many of whom had received new education and training in Soviet Russia, represented a shift in their conception and method

of revolution. The impact of the Russian Revolution, reading of communist literature and the contact with Kirti Ghadarites led Bhagat Singh and his comrades towards a fresh thinking on their objectives and methods.

In his recollections of that time Sohan Singh Josh wrote that Kartar Singh Sarabha was, for all young men of that time, “the model of death-defying audacity, fearlessness and burning hatred against the British Raj. Bhagat Singh’s lectures on ‘Sarabha Day’ celebrations and at other occasions at the conferences of Naujawan Bharat Sabha and the Student Union inspired the youth. Ajoy Ghosh, who became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India recalled later, “I literally worshipped him’, and that “to hear someone talk inspiringly about my hero was a great pleasure. I began to feel a liking for Bhagat Singh”. (cf. Josh 1976: 16)

Writing about that phase in Bhagat Singh’s thinking, Shiv Verma recalled Bhagat Singh’s fascination for anarchist ideas. He found that “Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev in particular were more influenced by the Russian anarchist Bakunin”. (cf. Hooja 1994:27) Similar was the observation of Principal Chhabildas. The Ghadarites, as was mentioned above, were also inspired by anarchist writings of Lala Har Dayal in the *Ghadar weekly*. ”Anarchist ideas had a dominant place in the thinking of Har Dayal”, observed Harnam Singh Tundilat. (Puri 1993:171)

II

Beginnings of a new way of looking at things may be traced from Bhagat Singh’s contact with the *Kirti* and the revival of Naujawan Bharat Sabha in April 1928 with the efforts of Sohan Singh Josh. The *Kirti*, as Josh observed, “represented *the continuation of the Ghadar Movement in a new way*”. (Josh 18 : 13) The historical conditions in the late 1920s were very different from those of the First Great War. Given the new political orientation towards socialism, it seemed appropriate to go into the weaknesses in the Ghadar project and the reasons of its failure and to draw necessary lessons. It was becoming clear that individual heroism or terrorist action could not bring about a

revolution. They needed to work among peasants and workers for a long time and to organize them.

Shiv Verma, one of the closest comrades of Bhagat Singh, described it as “a shift from anarchism to socialism”. Given a degree of new political orientation and training at Moscow, the Kirti Ghadarites were themselves looking at their earlier ideas and strategy in a critical manner.. Ideologically committed to proletarian revolution for the ultimate objective of socialism, they wanted now to awaken and organize the peasants and workers by rejecting the path of individual heroism and terrorist action. Shiv Verma, recollected later that “The credit to bring Bhagat Singh from anarchism to socialism goes to two persons -- - Comrade Sohan Singh Josh and Lala Chhabildas”. Josh impressed upon Bhagat Singh the futility of violent or terrorist methods and its counter revolutionary impact.

The shift at the level of ideas at the meeting of Hindustan Republican Army held in September 1928 was symbolized by the addition of the word “Socialist” to the existing name. Appreciating that “Criticism and independent thinking are the two indispensable qualities of a revolutionary”, they came to review the weaknesses which contributed to the failure of Ghadar movement. Besides lack of a proper organization and absence of required secrecy in the working of the Ghadarites, Bhagat Singh pointed in his “Letter to the Young Political Workers” to something even more important. That was: “the ignorance, apathy and sometimes active opposition of the masses”. So he advised, that “The party should start with the work of mass propaganda. It is very essential”.(cf. copy in Gupta 2007:47)

Two of the most important tasks, Bhagat Singh told Shiv Verma and other comrades in an intimate meeting at Kanpur, were to connect with the people and to organize them. “*Sangathan ka Janavaadikaran*”; that was an objective he placed before them. However, as we notice in the choice of their activities and preparations, the hold of ideas of dramatic militant action, individual heroism and self sacrifice remained strong.

Josh wrote about his meetings and discussions with Bhagat Singh during December 1928. According to him,

“After a few months of functioning of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha two main trends emerged in the body. One trend was

represented by Bhagat Singh and his comrades. It was a minority trend as it became very clear after my discussion with him. Bhagat Singh wanted to do something quick,, through the use of bombs and pistols in order to politically awaken the slumbering youth and students . . . something spectacular that would make them sit up and do something . . .”. Political education of slumbering masses was long process.

“Our young hot blood cannot wait for that long’, he would assert. His main line of argument was that ‘a single deed makes more propaganda in a few days than a thousand pamphlets’. (Josh 1976:16-17)”

Principal Chhabildas made a similar observation. In the ideologically divided Naujawan Bharat Sabha, as he observed, one group favoured the Soviet path. Bhagat Singh belonged to the group that supported the path of Irish revolution which focused on collection of weapons. He and his comrades believed that no revolution was possible without the use of weapons and bomb explosions. (Dewan 2006: 40)

Josh admitted that he could not oppose Bhagat Singh’s line of thought and action because he was not yet well-versed in Marxism.

I too was raw and immature. I did not know so much of Marxism then as to differentiate between terrorism and Marxism Secondly, the Ghadar Party ideology of armed struggle *and Ghadar heroes’ unprecedented sacrifices had a firm hold on my thinking.* (Josh 1976:17)

Bhagat Singh’s comrades, Yash Pal and Shiv Verma observed separately that though socialism was accepted as the ideology of HSRA, that did not mean they had come to understand Marxism or historical materialism. “In practice we stuck to our old individual style of actions. Our decision to organize the peasants and workers remained only a pious wish”. (ibid)

Indeed, during his stay at Calcutta during December 1928, Bhagat Singh’s major effort was focused on persuading Jatindranath Das to help the HSRA in training his men in Bomb-

making and setting up factories for that purpose. By February 1929 Agra had become a centre for manufacture of bombs. The raiding police party which arrested Sukhdev, his comrade and chief organizer of activities of HSRA for Punjab, in April 1929 from their bomb-making house at Lahore, found bombs they had prepared and also bomb-making material. Bomb factories were also established at Saharanpur and Rohtak.

It seemed that two conflicting imperatives continued to jostle in their minds for attention. The message that Bhagat Singh and BK Dutt sent to the Punjab Students Conference on October 19, 1929 symbolised the one. It stated categorically:

Today we cannot ask the youth to take to pistols and bombs. . . . In the coming Lahore Session the Congress is to give a call for a fierce fight for the independence of the country. The youth will have to bear a great burden in this difficult time in the history of the nation. . . . They have to awaken the crores of slum-dwellers of the industrial areas and villagers living in worn-out cottages (cf. Gupta 2007 :36)

The other imperative was reflected in the opening words of the 'Manifesto' of HSRA circulated at the December 1929 Congress Session: "The food on which the tender plant of liberty thrives is the blood of the martyr". On December 23 an attempt was made to blow up the special train of the Viceroy Lord Irwin. Gandhi's criticism of that action ("Cult of the Bomb") was followed by a cogently argued defense of the action in a pamphlet 'The Philosophy of the Bomb'. It concluded with the words:

We shall have our revenge --- a people's righteous revenge on the tyrant. Let cowards fall back and cringe for compromise and peace. We ask not for mercy and we give no quarter. Ours is a war to the end --- to Victory or Death". (cf. *ibid*: 152)

It is believed that Bhagwati Charan's draft had been shown to Bhagat Singh in Jail. Vaishampayan's eye-witness account, of the death of Bhagwati Charan Vohra while testing a bomb on 28 May 1930, pointed to a vigorous activity by Bhagat Singh's comrades for preparation of bombs. (Verma: 1967:165-67)

Meanwhile two of the prominent Kabul-based Kirti-Ghadarites, Harjap Singh and Gurmukh Singh, had in a special article in the *Kirti* monthly of February 1930 squarely condemned the emphasized on the futility of terror creating methods of killing British officers. The intent clearly was to caution Bhagat Singh and his radical comrades.

“A few years earlier we ourselves were supporters of that path. The lesson we learn from the revolutions in other parts of the world is that terrorism, instead of helping towards revolution, had proved to be harmful”. (*Kirti* 1930; 9-13)

In a somewhat similar vein, Sukhdev, in his last letter to Bhagat Singh, dated 9th October 1930, questioned the sense and utility of the bomb outrages by their comrades after the arrest of both of them. (cf. Waraich and Singh 2007: 205-07)

It appeared that a more concentrated and serious study and reflection by Bhagat Singh on the correct path for revolution followed in the solitude of the prison cell after his conviction in the Saunders’ murder case. And we notice an impressive churning in Bhagat Singh’s mind --- in his three most important writings in Jail during the last 6 months of his life.

Talking about the turning point in his revolutionary career, in his *Why I am an Atheist*, Bhagat Singh wrote candidly about the transition in his thought since the Kakori Conspiracy Case.

“Up to that period, I was only a romantic idealist revolutionary. Then “I began to study. My previous faith and convictions underwent a remarkable modification. The romance of the violent methods alone which was so prominent among our predecessors, was replaced by serious ideas. No more mysticism, no more blind faith. Realism became our cult. Use of force justifiable when resorted to as a terrible necessity; non-violence as policy indispensable for all mass movements” (*Why I am an Atheist*)

That was also the burden of his argument in the Introduction to *The Dreamland*, written by his senior comrade and a former Ghadarite, Ram Saran Das.

“The revolutionaries know better than anybody else that the socialist society cannot be brought about by violent means”.

Our movement is passing through a very important phase at present”, he told in his “Letter to the Young Worker” dated 2nd February 1931, less than 50 days before his death. Mahatma Gandhi was released from Jail on 26th January 1931 and reference was made to the points relating to constitutional reforms on which the Congress was likely to make a compromise. Bhagat Singh tended to educate “the Young Political Workers”, that compromise was not a bad thing; in fact it was a step forward in the struggle.

Revolutionaries may feel disgusted, he cautioned, but that would be wrong. “Leave sentimentalism aside”, he advised. “Be prepared to face the facts. . Revolution is a very difficult task. It is beyond the power of any man to make a revolution”. “ Letter to the Young Political Workers)

And then he emphasized:

“Terrorism is a confession that the Revolutionary mentality has not penetrated down to the masses. It is thus a confession of our failure. . . . Its history is a history of failures in every land --- in France, in Russia, in the Balkan countries, in Germany, in Spain, everywhere. It bears the germs of defeat within itself. . . . It is aloof from the life of the masses and once installed on the throne runs the risk of being petrified into tyranny. . . .

The inspiring ideal for all and sundry workers should not be that of dying for the cause but of living for the cause and living usefully and worthily.. . .

You shall have to be very sober. *The programme requires at least twenty years* for its fulfillment. . . . It requires neither the emotion nor the death, but the life of constant struggle suffering and sacrifice. Crush your individuality first. (ibid.)

It appeared that through that letter written in the solitude of the prison cell, Bhagat Singh was trying to settle scores with his own erstwhile fixations. That is what Noorani referred to when he observed that Bhagat Singh “had the capacity to brood and to torment his soul over the past”. (Noorani 2005:258)

At the same time Bhagat Singh seemed, however, to feel a sense of fulfillment.

“My name has become a symbol of revolution. The ideals and sacrifices of the revolutionary party have raised me very high. So exalted is my place that in case I continued to live I can in no case rise higher than this. . . Who could be luckier than me? I am proud of myself these days”. That is what he was reported to have told a group of his comrades in the same jail on 22nd March 1931, a day before he was executed. (Sandhu 1977:97-98)

His passionate admirers would celebrate the sacrifice of the martyr as glorious in itself, but ironically, regret the absence of a possibility of organizing themselves for revolution. “In the aftermath”, as Noorani observed, “there was depression all around. The Lahore Conspiracy Case dealt a death blow to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association”.(Noorani 2005: 254)

III

The worldview and ideas of Bhagat Singh and his close comrades represented both a shift from and a continuity of the Ghadar framework of ideas. The Ghadarites were men of action, not thinkers. They were not tormented by demands of making a neat choice between diverse or conflicting political ideas and methods. “*Jiwen dao lagge tiwein laa laeeye*” was in deed a shared impulse at the time of action. Bhagat Singh, on the other hand, was professedly a man of reason. He appeared to reject terrorism and felt that living for a cause was more important than dying for a cause. There was a conscious effort at the level of ideas to move from utopian socialist ideas to scientific socialism (*Dreamland*), from romantic revolutionary nationalist ideas to those of Marx and Lenin and from anarchist and terrorist cult of the bomb and ‘propaganda by deed’ to the priority of awakening

the masses and organizing workers and peasants for mass struggle. Yet as a man of action he could not be doctrinaire. He also recognized the contribution of the Gandhian struggle for awakening and mobilizing vast numbers including the workers and peasants, while rejecting his non-violence a creed. In fact he wanted his organization to work as a militant wing of the mainstream national movement in order to save it from the vested interests. However, the romance of the violent methods and of the grandeur of self-sacrifice -- the spell of revolutionary nationalism of his model, Kartar Singh Sarabha remained irresistible. But he had meanwhile ensured and convinced himself in a rational fashion that the cause of awakening and rousing the people for political action would be better by his self-sacrifice.

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