

# Remembering Komagatamaru

Ananda Bhattacharyya

Hugh Johnstone<sup>1</sup> has persuasively argued that the Komagata Maru incident in 1914 and the Ghadar movement were more closely linked with the Indian revolutionary movement. The event of 1914 was connected with a longer story. According to Johnstone, the episode of Komagata Maru was “a foreshadowing of the future for the British Empire—which appeared to be at its greatest when its days were actually numbered”. But colonialism, the migration question and the objective conditions of living affecting a considerable number of the Punjabi Sikhs were at the root of the incident. However, neither the demand for the right of Indians to live in a British colony nor the demand that British rule should end in India was accepted, understood or even considered by a majority of colonial rulers, whether in India or abroad.

The Komagata Maru episode of 1914 forms an important chapter in the history of India’s struggle for freedom. The attempt made by Baba Gurdit Singh of Amritsar to take a batch of Indian emigrants, mostly Sikhs, from different places in the Far East to Canada where they might live in comparative comfort was foiled by the Canadian authorities, afraid of the growing influence of the revolutionary Ghadar Party of Indian settlers in the United States and Canada. Such was the price of patriotism which Baba Gurdit Singh and an adventurous and hardy band of Sikhs had to pay for their attempt to settle in a British Dominion across the seas whose government felt unnerved by the growing influence of a small group of Indian revolutionaries already settled there. As was to occur in the case of the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, the British troops did not hesitate to open fire on an almost unarmed group of Indians who had already undergone much hardship, and resented the British Government’s attempt to restrict their freedom of movement in their own country. The unwarranted show

of force only served to embitter the relationship between the British Government and their Indian subjects, and the Sikhs who were forced to go back to the Punjab became. Though the Komagata Maru story has been shrined in national narratives, both Canadian and Indian, it may be argued that the 1914 confrontation was a historical moment in which a heterogeneous, diasporic movement for social justice became a wellspring of a trans-border, anti-colonial upsurge. Entangled in the maw of virulent settler racism and the emerging British-American alliance for global White supremacy, the Komagata Maru saga was to have profound repercussions that continue to be felt to this day.

Pacific coast settlers on both sides of the US-Canada border shared a long history of anti-Asian racism. British Columbia and California were centres of this anti-Asian agitation that would have both national and transnational effects. Canada, as a dominion of the British Empire, was also part of a transnational racial network that included other settler colonies, viz., Australia, New Zealand among others. Substantial Indian migration to Canada and the United States began in the early 1900s.<sup>2</sup> By 1906, this influx had swelled into thousands. Seema Sohi’s study<sup>3</sup> of this phenomenon begins at the turn of the twentieth century, as migrants from the Indian subcontinent flocked to the west coast of North America. The reasons for the sudden influx are many. Some employers of the sparsely populated Western regions realized the utility of cheap Indian labour<sup>4</sup>, which could weaken the bargaining strength of the local trade unions. Besides, the monsoon had been poor in Punjab between 1905 and 1910, and this gave emigration an added incentive. As a result, by 1908, about 3500 Indians had settled down in British Columbia, and, nearly as many in the western states of the United States of America. Their immigration was encouraged, first by the reports of their comrades returning through Canada from the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria’s reign in London,

\* Assistant Director, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta.

and thereafter by the prosperity and encouraging statements of their predecessors, who had returned home to collect their families. In order to placate the White population of Canada and to please the Asiatic Exclusion League which had earlier taken out a protest march in the form of 'Anti- Asiatic Parade' in 1906-7 against the Asian immigrant, the then Government of Canada passed an order in the Vancouver Council in 1908 as a step to ban Indian entry into Canada. Next, the Canadian government took the initiative to send the Indians out of Canada to another British Colony – British Honduras<sup>5</sup>. The ground on which the existing immigrants based their strongest protests was, of course, the cruelty of preventing their wives and families from joining them<sup>6</sup>.-There can be little doubt that the real strength of the agitation was directed against the prohibition of future immigration into a colony offering such prospects of profit as Canada, and against the stigma thereby placed on Indians as a class.<sup>7</sup> A report prepared by some Sikh delegates on the poor conditions in the Honduras was publicly read in the local *gurdwara* in front of the huge congregation of the Indians present. This marked a watershed, the political rise of the community, whereby the *gurdwaras*, originally set up only with the motive of worship, emerged as a common meeting point of all Indians irrespective of their religion to discuss important issues. British officials had good reason to fear the circulation of anti-colonial tracts addressed to Sikhs, particularly in North America, where nearly 50 per cent of migrants had served in the British Indian army or as police officers in colonial territories across East Asia. These *gurdwaras* were the key sites of Ghadar activity.

One Gurdit Singh established the Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company to use the capital of economically successful Indian migrants to fund commercial ventures and provide financial support for those migrants seeking employment. He showed himself frequently at the *gurdwara* at Hong Kong. Gurdit Singh pressed them to do what he could to attain this object. Thus, Hong Kong and Vancouver *gurdwara* turned into a hotbed of sedition and it was thought by the Canadian government to watch 'disloyal' Indians<sup>8</sup>. The British labelled women and most colonized people as fragile, passive, and emotional but characterized the Sikhs as martial/masculine. The centrality of the *gurdwaras* along the Pacific Coast to the Ghadar Party, and their connections to *gurdwaras* across the Pacific, was especially evident during the Komagata Maru affair in the summer of 1914, when 376 Indians sailed into the Vancouver harbour to challenge restrictive Canadian immigration laws. As Gurdit Singh stated

'when I came to Hong Kong in January 1914 I could not bear the trouble of those who were in the *gurdwara* waiting to go to Vancouver. He spoke at the *gurdwara* on 3 January 1914 during a commemoration to mark Guru Gobind Singh's birthday. He had an office in the Hong Kong *gurdwara* from where he conducted his business. Gurdit Singh also resolved to take the aspirant immigrants to Vancouver under any circumstances. The party which was formed centering round the *gurdwara* had its headquarters at San Francisco, with branches at leader of the Komagata Maru expedition came to Hong Kong after having spent 25 to 30 years in Singapore and the Malay States, where he carried on business as a contractor and was supposed to have acquired considerable wealth. Tokyo, Shanghai, Hong-Kong, Jakarta, Sumatra and Malay States and various other parts of South-East Asia, from Chiangmai in the north, to the remote island of Mindano in the Phillipines<sup>9</sup>. Even some shipping agencies and their unscrupulous agents in India sought to make a profit by enticing the sturdy Punjabi peasants to emigrate with tempting assurances and travel facilities. To restrict the huge influx of the Punjabis in Canada and also in the continent the Canadian government responded with an exclusionist policy to stop the 'Brown Invasion'<sup>10</sup>. These laws included a stipulation that all arriving Indian immigrants are bound by law to have an amount of \$200 with them to enter Canada and they must come through a direct route. Discrimination against Indians bred defiance and stirred a political awakening.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in the years before the First World War, various home-grown institutions arose to defend and assist Indian communities in the Americas. The Indo-American society, the Indo-American National Association, the Hindustan Association<sup>12</sup>, the United League, and Sikh centres of worship developed an international network to combat schemes like the Canadian government's attempt to relocate them to British Honduras in 1907. This network became a fertile ground for Indian nationalists. After Indians chose to resist anti-immigrant violence against their new American homesteads, they realized that they should be arming their compatriots to resist oppression in India too. Pamphlets like '*Maro Firinghiko*' ('Kill the Foreigners') had already been circulating on Indian communities when White labour resumed the attacks in 1911. In Vancouver, also, in 1907, the Khalsa Diwan Society was founded for social service with several branches. British authorities kept a close eye on the Khalsa Diwan Society and later considered it to be extremely dangerous because of its support to the Ghadar Party and its alleged deployment of religious preachers, whose primary function, they believed, was to 'disseminate revolutionary ideas'.<sup>13</sup>

Sohi had shown how the Indians fought back by hiring lawyers to defend their rights, by forming their own self-help organizations, and by petitioning the British Government to defend its subjects abroad. Rather than support Indian migrants, the imperial government channeled its resources into spying on them. Alarmed at the work of radical activists like, Taraknath Das and HarDayal,<sup>14</sup> who had used the United States as a revolutionary base, British officials supported local efforts to limit Indian emigration to the Americas. HarDayal, as the symbol of this mass awakening and self-confidence, stood forth as the undisputed leader of Indians there. As a consequence, thousands of Indian farmers and workers became convinced that the only path to better treatment abroad was to gain freedom back home in India. British Imperial policy radicalized Indian migrants. Their radicalism in turn fed a growing surveillance regime: British, British Canadian, and American. A secret British intelligence paper concluded that 'continued friction between Indians and immigration authorities leads too much ill-feeling and prepares the ground for disloyal agitation'<sup>15</sup>.

The Ghadar Party was organized in USA in 1913 for the purpose of organizing an armed revolt in India to overthrow the foreign British rule. The weekly *Ghadar* in its inaugural issue of 1 November 1913 audaciously proclaimed: 'Today there begins in foreign lands . . . a war against the English rule in India.' Returning to India; launching a *Ghadar* (mutiny) in India within a few years was a categorical objective, 'because the people can no longer bear the oppression and tyranny unleashed under British rule'.

The passengers of the Komagata Maru, on the other hand, were desperate to enter Canada for labour opportunities. In spite of the knowledge of racial discrimination, slights and insults these passengers had staked everything on that dream. Many of the Indian immigrants there had done well, earned lots of wealth, purchased properties and wished to bring their families and settle there. They had by then grown confident about dealing with incidents of racial discrimination against them. The Ghadar Party<sup>16</sup> set out to mobilize overseas Indians into a revolutionary army. Factories and teams of railway workers each elected committees to work under the headquarters' command, propaganda departments published a weekly organ called *Ghadars*<sup>17</sup> with ads that featured 'martyrs' for freedom, regular dues were collected (one dollar per month) to finance operations, and 'a three number cell was formed out of the executive committee to deal with political and secret affairs'.<sup>18</sup> Discussion of religious subjects by committees, which could trigger interval division, was prohibited. As the

movement picked up momentum, *Ghadar* weeklies published in Urdu, Hindi, Pashto, Bengali and Nepali were distributed from the Americas to Indian communities in the Philippines, Fiji, Sumatra, Japan, China, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma and East Africa, where the masthead, 'Enemy of the British Government', surely caught the eye of German intelligence officers. Sohi charts new territory in documenting the interlocking world of rebellious migrants and the government officials that monitored them. She convincingly argues that anti-immigrant repression played a key role in the larger story of anti-radical movements and the growth of surveillance state in North America and India. By tracing the links between Punjabi migrants, anti-colonial activists, immigration officials, intelligence operatives, diplomats, and high officials, Sohi demonstrates how grassroots-level history and the history of the state intersected locally, nationally, and transnationally. Even when the *Komagata Maru* traversed the Pacific en route to British Columbia, the Ghadar Party leaders boarded the ship at various ports to meet up with the passengers and impress upon them the ship's significance in context of the struggle against racial discrimination abroad and British colonial subjugation in India. In Moji, Balwant Singh, the *granthi* of the Vancouver *gurdwara* came abroad to meet with the passengers. Bhagwan Singh of Hong Kong *gurdwara* was arrested twice for preaching sedition to Sikh troops and Mohammed Barakatullah boarded the ship to distribute the most recent copies of *Ghadar* and deliver a rousing speech to the passengers, warning them that their chances of being landed by Canadian authorities were slim.<sup>19</sup> The *Report of the Komagata Maru Enquiry Committee* reveals the fact that Gurdit Singh 'had considerable sympathy with the American revolutionary movement,' which was common with the Ghadar Party.<sup>20</sup> The Indians along with Hussain Rahim and Bhag Singh also met at Vancouver *gurdwara* and collected a fund of \$3,000 besides the mobilization of the local people with the help of the Khalsa Diwan Party. Balwant Singh<sup>21</sup> warned that if the Canadian governments excluded Indians, the British Empire would collapse in the near future. Bhag Singh and Hussain Rahim encouraged the Indians not only by collecting money but sent a message to both the Canadian and British governments that the '*Komagata Maru* was not only about 376 Hindustanis on the ship but the fate of 330 million Indians'<sup>22</sup>. Thus, the Canadian immigration officials and Indian informants closely monitored Indians in Washington and British Columbia as because the Indians were organizing seditious political meetings, in which they were linking immigration cases to plans for revolution. To their eyes



the *Komagata Maru* voyage was a revolutionary act with a political motivation from the very beginning. In fact, the Khalsa Diwan Society was working as the Indian revolutionary society. Sohi has rightly pointed out that W.H. Hopkinson had to admit that the Indian agitators were under the impression that such disaffection and anger would lead to the consummation of their plans, namely a mutiny in India to which end they had been working for some years. The Ghadar leader's warnings about how the ship's passengers were going to be treated in British Columbia were ringing true and the ship was becoming a fertile ground for the spread of revolutionary doctrine. As the *Komagata Maru* made its way back to Hong Kong, the British officials were anxious about surveillance reports which suggested that Ghadar revolutionaries may have managed to get on board and were leading the 'ship of revolution' back to India<sup>23</sup> and 'might cause mutiny among the Sikh regiments stationed there'. While Tatla discussing the Sikh psyche on the future effect of the *Komagata Maru* affairs had to agree that the many Sikhs believed their history of loyalty to the British crown should guarantee them the right to settle in any part of the empire and the treatment of the passengers on board the *Komagata Maru* signaled a failure or unwillingness of the British Indian government to protect its most loyal subjects.

Even in August 1914, soon after the outbreak of the First World War, Jawala Singh, a wealthy California farmer also known as 'Potato Singh', donated his property to a revolutionary political party and sailed back to India to fight British imperialism. Singh was not alone. The organization that inherited his land, the *Ghadar* Party, had gained the support of thousands of Indian migrants up and down the coast of North America. The party's supporters rebelled against British rule in India, but as Seema Sohi in her book had shown that the ghadarites were equally focused on opposing oppression in the U.S. and Canada. Nico Slate has rightly said, while reviewing her book, that 'by telling the story of the *Ghadar* Party and other radical South Asian American political movements, In her work Sohi has brought into productive dialogue two disparate literatures: the history of political radicalism and the history of migration. At the heart of her story is the rise of anti-radical and anti-immigrant state repression'. Though the *Ghadar* Party had focused mainly on publishing and distributing radical publications in its first year, the outbreak of war pushed the party into revolutionary action. At least 1,000 Indians from British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California joined Indians from Panama, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Shanghai and boarded ships bound for India fired up with the desire of overthrowing British rule. As

*Ghadar* declared, 'now [was] the time for establishing independent rule in India and of bringing the Indians into the rank of the living nations'. Ghadar Party leader Ram Chandra addressed the group: 'your duty is clear. Go to India. Stir up rebellion in every corner of the country. Rob the wealthy and show mercy to the poor.... Arms will be provided you on arrival in India'. The Ghadar Party extended its activities across the world. Party leaders tapped into global currents of radicalism and exhorted Indians to follow the example of the revolutionary movements in Russia, China and Mexico. The uprisings these intellectuals envisioned reflected the global scale of their efforts, which extended to Siam, Burma, Singapore and India. Besides the collections of money and arms, meetings were held and lectures were delivered in every village and town in America where Indians were living, inciting them to go to India without delay. Many gave false names to avoid arrest and, once released, they went to the local *gurdwara*<sup>53</sup> where they met several Indians who had come from Canada. British authorities later identified the Hong Kong *gurdwara*, which opened its doors in 1902, as an organizing centre and meeting zone for Ghadarites traversing the Pacific. Reid and Hopkinson continued to believe that Ghadar Party leaders in Seattle and San Francisco were involved in the *Komagata Maru* case. Their suspicions were confirmed when, in mid-July, U.S. Immigration authorities at the Washington-British Columbia border picked up four Sikhs from Vancouver – Mewa Singh, Balwant Singh, Bhag Singh and Harnam Singh – bearing pistols and ammunitions.

Mewa Singh was arrested with a revolver and 500 rounds of ammunition on him, and he subsequently gave a statement that the object of the party in purchasing the revolvers was to smuggle them on board the *Komagata Maru*. The men had travelled to Washington to meet with Taraknath Das. The Hindus on the shore at Vancouver had been attempting to purchase revolvers at different shops and made enquiries about automatic pistols and bombs. They also procured some revolvers and small arms from the Yugantar revolutionaries of San Francisco including Taraknath Das. Reid and Hopkinson were convinced that Das had provided the arms and ammunition for these men to smuggle on board the *Komagata Maru*. Das had taken on an active role in the *Komagata Maru* affair and also publicizing the rights of the ships' passengers and emphasizing the global significance of the incident. As Das argued, the ship's plight illustrated 'that a desperate fight is going on between the Canadian officials and the negligent attitude of the British Indian and imperial authorities on one side, and the party of 376 Hindustanees on board the *Komagata Maru* aided by a handful of Hindustanees of the Pacific Coast of North America'.

According to Gurdit Singh, news of the passengers' 'defense of the ship against Canadian authorities 'spread like wild fire... all over the world'. The series of German intelligence plots that became known as the German Hindu Conspiracy involved activities in Mexico as well as Canada and the United States. Most plots emanated initially from the San Francisco, California and would later migrate into activities in Mexico and Latin America. The Conspiracy's name was a misnomer, since the majority of conspirators seem to have been Sikhs, not Hindus. By 1915, several thousand Indian immigrants, mostly Punjabi Sikh farmers, artisans and discharged soldiers, had settled along the Pacific Coast of British Columbia in Canada, and the States of Washington, Oregon and California in the United States, with centres in Vancouver, Victoria, Saint John, Seattle, Portland, Stockton and San Francisco. Labor movements in Canada and the United States stirred up racist, anti-immigrant fervor against these cheaper foreign workers, and, by 1908, had been successful in inspiring legislation to prevent the entrance of more Asians.

Asian immigration became the targets of blatant discrimination and violence. The frustration of Indian immigrants grew into anger as new immigration laws prevented them from bringing over their families. According to a *Report by the East India Sedition Committee*, Punjab was 'by far the most recruiting ground for the Indian Army,' and during the First World War, Sikhs comprised less than one-hundredth of the population but supplied 'about one-sixth of the fighting forces of the Indian empire'.<sup>24</sup> The martial valor of the Sikhs led the British Empire to consider them as exceedingly dangerous.<sup>25</sup> As M. Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty have argued, militarized masculinity played a strategic function in the reproduction of colonization. Besides, one has to keep in mind the publication of a series of anti-colonialism on the Pacific Coast<sup>26</sup>. In 1908, C.J. Stevenson Moore, Director of the Department of Criminal Intelligence in India warned the British Government that Puri's 'revolutionary' paper, which by this time had been appearing across India, was designed to appeal to the Indian labourers on the Pacific coast, 'a large number of who are Sikhs', and thus was capable of working a good deal of mischief. An alarming article of Taraknath Das that confirmed British fears of Sikh subversion in North America appeared in *Free Hindusthan*. Das boldly opined that the Sikhs were nothing better than slaves and serving the British Government in perpetual slavery. In order to defend Das's opinion Sohi referred to his opinion voiced in the Vancouver *gurdwara* on 3 October 1909, that 'no member of the Executive Committee of the Sikh temple should wear any medals or insignia

which might signify that he was a slave to British supremacy. The audience unanimously accepted the proposal, and many Sikhs in Vancouver discarded their medals, certificates, or any other evidence that they had fought on behalf of the empire'. After settling himself at Vancouver, Das in his bi-monthly journal, *Free Hindusthan* urged Indians to resist exclusion in Canada and warned the British imperial government that continued injustice against Indians would lead to 'an upheaval which will rend the Empire into pieces'. Like Das, the Khalsa Diwan Society realized that the treatment of Indians in North America could shake imperial stability in India. In order to have their grievances abroad addressed, Indians in British Columbia began linking racial discrimination abroad to potential revolution at home, warning that racial discrimination in British Columbia was known all over India and would be a strong weapon in the hands of those preaching succession.<sup>60</sup> Canadian authority warned that the main slogan of the *Free India* was to create the impression among Canadians that there will be serious danger to the Empire if Hindus 'are shut out of Canada as they are shut out of Australia'. Sundar Singh's *The Aryan* issued similar warnings about Sikh disillusionment with their treatment in North America. Similar warnings were also forwarded about Guru Dutt's *Swadesh Sewak* which was circulated in North America. It initially focused on challenging Canada's restrictive immigration laws, but the tone of the paper became increasingly objectionable to British authorities when Kumar shifted from merely presenting the grievances of his countrymen in British Columbia to recommending that revolutionaries in India purchase arms to defend themselves and, as J.C. Ker reported 'unite and rise up from their slumber'. By the spring of 1913, there were three main Indian organizations in the United States: the Hindustan Association of the USA, the Khalsa Diwan Society, and the Pacific Coast Hindi Association (PCHA) in Oregon, all of which channeled their support to the Ghadar Party. In the spring of 1913, PCHA invited Har Dayal to join them in Oregon. 'It has, after fleeing from the Punjab of slavery, founded another free Punjab in California, where brothers are free to talk, to deliver lectures, to publish newspapers ... from here they must now carry on war against the enemy'.<sup>62</sup> Ghadar leaders delivered the following message: the wealth of Britain had been built on the labour and exploitation of its colonized territories, and it was time for the British to be expelled.<sup>63</sup> On 23 March 1914, the ship anchored at Burrad Inlet, and an intense legal battle between Indian lawyers and the authorities ensued which finally ended with *Komagata Maru* being forced back from Canada on 23 July 1914 with only 24

passengers allowed to stay back in the country. Still, there was a movement among the Sikhs settled in Hong Kong and elsewhere for obtaining passages for the Indian immigrants. Thus, gradually, a movement was started for obtaining the special services of a ship which would be used solely for the conveyance of Indians to Canada. Of course, the movement was also under the close scrutiny of the British intelligence. The Ghadar movement was beginning to cause alarm as its members organized training in weapons, bomb-making and flying. The British infiltrated the movement with informants, and tried to have its leaders arrested, but the rebellious hydra simply grew more heads. In New York, Home Office Agent Cunliffe Owen had been generating reports about Indian nationalists in the East Coast since 1905, but had lost touch since they barred Whites after a security breach in 1910. Meanwhile, the rationale behind the old adage 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' spawned links between the Ghadar network and the German Intelligence network. On 27 December 1914, the German ambassador in Washington, Johann Heinrich Von Bunstroff, received coded instructions from Berlin to render support to Indian nationalists in the United States: 'You should, in conjunction with Gupta [Heramba Lal], but without attracting attention, take steps to have such Indians as are suitable for this purpose instructed in the use of explosives by some reliable person'. It was a synergistic partnership: the Ghadar movement provided recruits, and German intelligence provided weapons training, money, and logistics expertise. Consul General Von Bopp's team of intelligence officers, agents (including officials of Hamburg American and North German Lloyd Steamship lines) and mercenaries had been evading U.S. Port authorities to slip supplies out of German vessels via mid-sea rendezvous for several months. Now they applied their expertise to arms smuggling for the Ghadar movement. Meanwhile German and Ghadar operatives in the San Francisco area assembled a substantial shipment of arms and ammunition – 8,000 rifles and four million cartridges – to fuel insurrection against British authorities in India. It was these incidents that led to the famous Komagata Maru incident. By the time the ship left Vancouver the first sparks of war were already visible, and almost everyone felt that the long-expected Anglo-German showdown would soon take place. The belief gained ground that it only required the return of a few thousand revolutionaries, and India would be up in flames.

When the news of *Komagata Maru* heading towards Canada reached the continent, the Vancouver daily province carried a story with the heading 'Boat Loads of

Hindus on Way to Vancouver'. While on the other hand Indians made preparations to welcome *Komagata Maru*, the Canadian authorities took steps to prevent it from docking. H.H. Stevens, the local conservative member of Parliament, who had been working closely with Reid to prevent the *Komagata Maru* passengers from gaining entry, wired Canadian Prime Minister Richard Borden that the 'Hindus' on board the ship were 'desperately revolutionary and determined to defy law'. Writing about the confrontation years later, Gurdit Singh recalled that 'the warships were preparing for action and . . . we were preparing for death. It was a grand scene on a blue stage with thousands of spectators. On behalf of the government, the commander sent the message, 'Leave our shores; you uninvited Indians or we fire'. Our reply to this command was that if Canada will allow us to provision the ship we will go, otherwise, fire away. We prefer death here than on the high seas'. Gurdit Singh said that he had no ill-will against the Japanese, but he had against the Whites, and that he knew perfectly well they would never be allowed to land at Vancouver, but he wanted to make this a basis for stirring up a revolution. The immigration authorities at Vancouver, however, claimed that these people had not complied with many of the requirements, such as having health certificates or 200 dollars in cash, and none except the ship's doctor or those already domiciled in Canada was allowed to land.<sup>66</sup> Even on 21 June, protest meetings were organized against the heartless attitude of the immigration and port authorities, and even many Canadian socialists participated in it. The Government of the Punjab addressed the Government of Bengal in their letter no. 3499, dated 17 September regarding the disappointed emigrants who were returning by the *Komagata Maru* to Calcutta and expected to arrive on the 27 September.<sup>68</sup>

Mr. Slocock was associated with the reception of the *Komagata Maru* passengers. The Calcutta Police received a cipher wire from the Superintendent of Police, Amritsar, to the following effect 'Detain Gurdit Singh of Gurgali, leader, *Komagata Maru* expedition . . . these men left money for following telegrams signed Gurdit Singh addressed to Bengalee, Calcutta, and Sirdar Harchand Singh, Lyallpur. Indian leaders should meet *Komagata Maru*'. Frequent searches were made by the authorities from the Criminal Intelligence and the Police in the cabins, storage, and the passengers' luggage, looking for arms, ammunition, and copies of *Ghadar*. Fearing that stories of their treatment in Canada would inflame rising anger against British rule in India, British officials instructed the ship to dock at Budge-Budge. According to a report of the committee appointed to investigate revolutionary conspiracies in India during the First World War, the passengers were 'full of the seditious doctrines which they had been taught on the



journey, and had been led by Gurdit Singh to believe that their ends could only be gained by force'. It was proposed to allow all the passengers except eight to proceed by the special train. These eight were Gurdit Singh, Kehar Singh, Harnam Singh, Pohloram, Mir Muhammad, Jawahir Mal and Narain. Harnam Singh had written a diary of events at Vancouver which showed a strong undercurrent of disloyal feeling. Pohloram had been twice previously deported from Canada. Mir Muhammad had been mentioned by the Hoshiarpur authorities as likely to cause trouble. Jawahir Mal shared Gurdit Singh's cabin and was considered by the captain as a mischief-maker. Jawahir Mal, Narain and two other Sindhis had gone abroad in Japan under suspicious circumstances. Superintendent Eastwood appeared at Budge-Budge with 38 sergeants, a fire-engine, a motor-van, and motorcar. The passengers refused to set foot on a ship that had come to symbolize their imprisonment and subjugation under British rule. Gurdit Singh later claimed that as they prayed, police forces attacked them, prompting the passengers to forcefully resist and culminating in a massacre that left twenty Sikh passengers, two local Indian residents of Budge-Budge, two British, and two Indian policemen dead. Hundreds of passengers fled the scene, including Gurdit Singh, and authorities organized a massive search of the vicinity. The rural people around the place helped the Sikhs and Punjabis whole-heartedly and in order to keep them isolated from the common people a reward of Rs.100 was offered for providing information about them. Gurdit Singh protested against being treated as a common criminal by the police. Gurdit Singh had reason to be suspicious because Budge-Budge was on the wrong side of the river and there were no railway bridges at Calcutta or below. But one of the Sikhs replied on interrogation that 'I am not a criminal. Why did the police want to restrain me?' Another elderly Sikh said, 'We were going to Calcutta to ask justice from the Governor'. But they were forced to go to Budge-Budge. Gurdit added that it would be sacrilegious to take the *Guru Granth Sahib* to Howrah for keeping it at the *gurdwara* there.

Sohan Singh Josh claimed that Eastwood fired twice after his *lathi* was grabbed from him. He shot Thakur Singh and fired a bullet through Harnam Singh's headgear. Musha Singh snatched the pistol from him and killed Eastwood then and there. However, Bishen Singh told Sohan Singh that Bhai Singh of Mundapind, Amritsar, fired the first shot, killing Eastwood. The remaining 260 were met on road about 4 miles from Budge-Budge. It is this incident which has gone down in history as a major rebellion by natives against their foreign rulers. In spite of such profound discrimination against Sikhs in Canada, they continued to emerge as a strong power in the local milieu of Canada. The *gurdwaras* played the

most important role in coordinating the activities of Sikhs in Canada and served as a place for gathering support for the Sikhs in their struggle against the immigration ban for Indians. This finally resulted in the immigration ban being overturned and the families of the legal migrants were allowed to enter the country. The departure of the Komagata Maru set off a wave of violence in Vancouver, where Indians directed their anger and hostility toward Hopkinson and his Indian informants. The treatment of the Komagata Maru passengers both in Vancouver and Budge-Budge 'had caused considerable indignation throughout India'. But it minimized the revolutionary aspects of the Komagata Maru story and vilified Gurdit Singh, describing him as solely interested in making money by providing a transportation line for thousands of Indians seeking to cross the Pacific. Though the committee exonerated the Government, Indians across the Diaspora did not. Rather, the Komagata Maru impelled thousands of Indians from across North America and East Asia to return to India determined to overthrow the very government that would commit such a series of unjust acts. Out of the fugitive Sikhs, Surain alias Ratan Singh stated the fact that just before the disembarkation Gurdit Singh handed out 40 revolvers and had said that they should make use of these weapons if any force was used towards them. Subsequently he said that he only knew that the pistols had been brought on board by a Japanese sympathizer at Vancouver but that some of the passengers had said that there were more. Another Sikh who had a revolver and nearly 50 rounds of ammunition had been prosecuted for the possession of arms without a license. Two weeks after the Komagata Maru was forced out of Vancouver, Hopkinson had travelled to Portland and Astoria to meet with Indian informants, who reported to him that Indians were leaving Oregon by the hundreds and making their way to San Francisco, where they planned to sail for India and begin a revolution to overthrow the British Raj. Indians in British Columbia were also planning their return to India. Malcolm Reid was now anxious to prohibit them from leaving as he had been earlier to keep them from entering. Hopkinson sent Bela Singh, his chief informant, to the docks at Victoria and Vancouver and Bela Singh reported back that 45 Sikhs had boarded ships bound for India in late August. Hopkinson immediately notified British authorities in London and India which incoming Sikhs he considered seditious. In the late summer of 1914, Ghadar Party leaders Ram Chandra, Bhagwan Singh, and Muhammad Barkatullah travelled from the Canadian to the Mexican border framing the *Komagata Maru* as a symbol of the powerlessness of a colonial people and using Indian resentment over the treatment of the passengers to implore the Indians 'of America, Canada, Africa, and

other foreign parts to return to India to mutiny'. The Ghadar Party used the incident to mobilize Indians on the Pacific Coast, and its ranks grew in response to the ship's plight. As Ghadarite Darisa Chenchiah later wrote, 'although the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* were simple peasants who had left their hearths and home in search of a living, the insults that were heaped upon them, the atrocities that they had to face, the inspiring sympathetic touch they received from the toilers of the world has given them a new outlook of life. A deep hatred against the Britishers was created'. According to Sohan Singh Bhakhna, the British governments' refusal to protect the rights of the *Komagata Maru* passengers inspired thousands of Indians to join the movement to end British imperialism and work towards Indian freedom. As Bhakhna explained, Indians on the Pacific Coast had done all they could to aid the passengers of the *Komagata Maru*, 'but this inhuman and insulting treatment of their fellow countrymen put an end to their endurance', and many came to believe that 'a government which made the *Komagata Maru* incident possible had no moral right to exist'.

While British liberalism promised Indians equal status as British subjects in theory while denying it in practice, the *Komagata Maru* affair was a critical turning point during which many in North America ceased viewing imperial citizenship as emancipator. The Ghadar Party highlighted the unsuccessful attempts of Indians to assert their rights as British subjects abroad as proof that Indians did not and never would, have equal rights and protection as subjects of the British crown. Indian anti-colonialists began to argue with greater urgency that without their own independent nation – and a national government that would protect their rights abroad – they would continue to be enslaved. The ships stopped in East Asian cities en route to India, where passengers routinely visited local *gurdwaras* to see fellow countrymen and have a respite during their journeys back home. By this time, the British authorities had identified the Hong Kong *gurdwara*, which had opened its doors in 1901, as an organizing centre and meeting zone where *ghadarites* from the United States, Canada, Manila, and Shanghai crossed paths as they traversed the Pacific.

British and Canadian officials acknowledged that the *Komagata Maru* affair, followed almost immediately by the outbreak of war in Europe, had greatly assisted 'the campaign of sedition and revolution which was being actively conducted at this time on the Pacific coast by the Ghadar Party'. During official investigations of the 'war-time conspiracies' that would erupt in India during the next year, British officials emphasized that revolutionary activity in Punjab 'could be traced directly to dissatisfaction over the *Komagata Maru* affair in British

Columbia'. Further, officials reported that the anger of Indians on the Pacific coast 'strengthened the hands of the Ghadar revolutionaries who were urging Sikhs abroad to return to India and join the mutiny which they asserted, was about to begin'. As such, the *Komagata Maru* and the Budge-Budge massacre 'clearly showed the necessity for strong action in dealing with revolutionary suspects from America and the Far East'.

There were some looting scares and the Marwaris of Calcutta were the only ones who had been really disturbed by the incident. Sikh residents in and around Calcutta had shown little interest in the affray and no signs of disaffection or dissatisfaction had been noticed. A few individual Sikhs had shown opinions favourable to the rioters; but as a whole the community had condemned the action of their co-religionists. A meeting was held on 8 October in the Sikh temple at Harrison Road. At the meeting resolutions were proposed expressing the loyalty and devotion of the Sikhs to the British government and condemnation of the action taken by the Sikhs who returned on the *Komagata Maru*. The promoters of the meeting, who moved entirely of their own accord, were Pandit Sunder Lal Missir, an honorary magistrate, Bhai Nath Singh, custodian of the Sikh temple, Sardar Nehal Singh, a commission agent, and Pandit Amar Nath Sharma, an auctioneer. Even Hon'ble Sardar Daljit Singh and Chiranjit Singh of Kapurthala interviewed the leading members of the Punjab community residing in Calcutta for the welfare and benefit of them.<sup>76</sup>

In the aftermath of the *Komagata Maru* incident, Taraknath Das declared that Indian independence and freedom from racism required an end to 'Anglo-Saxon imperialism in the world'. Das identified the organic racisms connecting British and American imperialism reflected their experiences in the United States and Canada. With the outset of First World War hundreds of Indian expatriates had abandoned the Pacific Coast to return to India in response to the *Ghadar's* call for an insurrection against British rule.

Chattopadhyay<sup>27</sup> rightly said that *Komagata Maru* set the template for a colonial strategy to suppress Punjabi Sikh laborers and other emigrants. The Punjabi Sikh emigrants became formal targets of the colonial repressive state apparatus as an ethno-linguistic-religious segment, and representing a distinct class fraction.

## Notes

1. *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, Vancouver: UBC Press 1989.
2. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality*, Cambridge University Press, 2008 and Jeremy



- Matins, 'A Transitional History of Immigration Restriction: Natal and New South Wales, 1896-97', in *The Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 34, 3 (September 2006): 323-44.
3. Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anti-Colonialism in the Transnational Western U.S.-Canadian Borderlands' *The Journal of American History*, 98, no. 2 (September, 2011): 420-36. This aspect has been reflected in wider context in Sohi's recent work (*Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Anti-colonialism in North America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014).
  4. While their labor was welcomed by business elites, migrants from India encountered widespread racism on both sides of the United States, Canada border. Sohi has termed it in this way that 'White-only labor unions joined forces with xenophobic group to lobby for an end to migration from India. Anti-Asian racism that had long targeted the Chinese was broadened to include the 'Hindoo menace' (Seema Sohi, 'Repressing the "Hindu Menace": Race, Anarchy and Indian Anti-Colonialism', in Vivek Bald, Manabi Chatterji, Sujani Reddi and Manu Vimalahassery (eds.), *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power*, New York University Press, 2013: 50-74). The term 'Hindoo menace' has been argued as 'a distinctly anti-radical racial formation' conceived in collaboration between U.S. domestic anti-Asian and anti-radical politics and British policies of imperial defence against Indian dreams of freedom (review of *Echoes of Mutiny*) by K.S. Johnson, *The Journal of American History*, September 2015: 582-3.
  5. The groundwork for the convergence of resistance to discriminatory immigration policy and British rule preceded the formation of the Ghadar Party, but once the leadership of the party swept across the Pacific Coast delivering rousing speeches from British Columbia to southern California, the representation of anti-colonialism in North America became a priority for British officials.
  6. Memorandum on the voyage of the Komagata Maru at Budge-Budge, based chiefly on information in the office of the Director, Criminal Intelligence (Home Political) files 3(22/1914 and 354/1914), West Bengal State Archives (hereafter referred WBSA).
  7. F.G.A. Butler to lord Stamfordham, 12 June 1914 (British National Archives, CO 42/979); Governor-General to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 10 June 1914 (British National Archives, CO 42/ 979); Stamfordham to Butler, 14 June 1914 (British National Archives, CO 42/ 979).
  8. Seema Sohi, 'Sites of "Sedition," Sites of Liberation: Gurdwaras, the Ghadar Party, and Anti-colonial Mobilization', *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, Routledge, vol. 10, no. 1, 2014: 5-22.
  9. A. Didar Singh and S. Irudaya Rajan, *Politics of Migration: Indian Emigration in a Globalised World*, Rutledge, New York, 2016: 95-100. This incident was followed by strengthening the Khalsa Diwan Society in 1909 through the following lines, viz., to appoint ministers of the Sikh Religion to officials in the province of British Columbia and elsewhere.
  10. M.S. Sidhu, 'Sikh Migration to Malay (Peninsula)', *Journal of Sikh Studies*, vol. X, no. 1, February 1983 : 110-12; S. Swarup, 'Indian Historical Relations with Southeast Asia', *The Modern Review*, vol. CXVII, no. 5, November 1965 : 365-9; A.M. Dali, 'Ghadar Movement in Southeast Asia', paper contributed at the 17th Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, Dhaka, December 2002.
  11. Jamie Bisher, *The Intelligence War in Latin America, 1914-1922*, McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, Jafferson, North Carolina: 58.
  12. Hopkinson's move to California coincided with the formation of this association which called for the overthrow of British colonialism in India (John Price and Satwinder Bains, 'The Extraordinary Story of the Komagata Maru: Commemorating the One Hundred Year Challenge to Canada's Immigration Colour Bar', *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 11, issue 29, no. 1, July 2013: 1-10).
  13. F.C. Isemonger and James Slattery, *An Account of the Ghadar Conspiracy, 1913-1915*, Lahore, Superintendent Printing Office, 1919: 9-10.
  14. Har Dayal wired to Taraknath, a young revolutionary of Jugantar Ashram, in San Francisco, in New York, on 11 January 1913, to attend a meeting of the Hindusthane Association at Berkeley on the 13th instant. There Govind Bihari Lall took the side of Taraknath and Har Dayal, and their policies and programme of action were affirmed and accepted by all present (History Sheet of Har Dayal, Home (Political), WBSA). Most Indian students in California had sympathy for the revolutionaries. This further strengthened the revolutionary group among the local Indians. For a better organization of their campaign, a meeting of Indian leaders in the U.S.A. was summoned at Astoria by Sohan Singh Bhakhna on 13 March 1913. It was decided here that the central office of the party would be located in a rented house at 436 Hill Street, San Francisco, and should be named *Yugantar Ashram*, in memory of the famous revolutionary group and journal in Bengal. It was also decided that its own office building would be built at 5, Wood Street, San Francisco (Randhir Singh, *Ghadar Heroes*:: 8-9; Khuswant Singh, op. cit.: 123-4).
  15. 'As compared with Har Dayal these men (Taraknath Das, Guru Dutt Kumar and Barkattullah, etc.) had receded to subordinate positions'.
  16. The Story of the Ghadar Party has been well documented by scholars like Harish K. Puri, (*Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, Strategy*, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 2013 (rpt.); Maia Ramnath (*Haj to Utopia*, Berkeley, California University Press, 2011) and John M. Jensen and Vijay Prashad who have broadened our understanding of the South Asian American experience.
  17. There are some copies of *Ghadar* in the rare section of the National Library, Kolkata.
  18. Declared a seditious publication, it was banned in Canada and postal authorities began to intercept it. Postal authorities later received word that sympathetic Chinese Canadians in Victoria and Vancouver, members of the Nationalist Party of Sun-Yat-Sen, were receiving and forwarding *Ghadar* in order to subvert postal scrutiny (R.O. Montgomery to H.F. Bishop, Postmaster, Victoria, 23 July 1915 (British Library, L/PJ/ 6/ 1395/ 3292).

19. It is evident that the *Ghadar* movement in the Punjab came very close to causing widespread bloodshed (*East Indian Seditious Committee, Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate Revolutionary Conspiracies in India*, 1918).
20. H. Rahim, 'Mass Meeting of the Hindustanees', *The Hindustanee*, 1 June 1914, Rare Section, National Library, Kolkata.
21. Bhag Singh and Balwant Singh, both of whom were prominent members of the Sikh community of Vancouver.
22. Darshan S. Tatla, ed., *Voyage of Komagata Maru or India's Slavery Abroad*, Chandigarh, Unistar Books: 26; *The Hindustanee*, 1 June 1914; Eric Morse, 'Some Aspects of the Komagata Maru Affair, 1914' *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report*, May 1936.
23. Ranadhir Singh, *The Ghadar Heroes: Forgotten Story of the Punjab Revolutionaries*, Bombay, People's Publishing House, 1945: 12.
24. In this context, I would like to mention the *gurdwara* situated at Stockton, California, which came into existence in the year 1912. They celebrated their 100- year anniversary on the occasion of the centennial of Komagata Maru episode during 22 and 23 September 2012. They used to print weekly revolutionary publication, *Ghadar*. Banned in India immediately following the publication of its inaugural issue was nonetheless circulated around the globe.
25. Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in South Asian Diaspora*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011: 17. For more on British colonial constructions of Sikh masculinity, see Doris Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning, and Identity*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2003: 58-9.
26. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talade Mohanty, 'Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements', in M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, and Democratic Futures*, Routledge, New York, 1997: xxv. So far the gender is concerned, one should consult Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The Manly Englishman and the Effeminate Bengali in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995. Even how the male power was linked to racial domination particularly through the discourse of civilization, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, University Press of Chicago, Chicago, 1995.
27. Suchetana Chattopadhyay, 'Closely Observed Ships', *South Asian Diaspora*, Routledge, March 2016: 1-20. She mainly dealt the aftermath of *Komagata Maru* affairs from various perspectives.