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Article

**THE GHADAR MOVEMENT:  
WHY SOCIALISTS SHOULD LEARN ABOUT IT**

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Exile did not suit me, I took it for my homeland  
When the noose of my net tightened, I called it my nest.

Mirza Asadullah Khan "Ghalib" [b. December 1797, Agra, India, d. February 1869,  
Delhi, India]<sup>1</sup>

**I**

In May 2016 Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau formally apologized on behalf of the Government of Canada for the 1914 Komagata Maru incident, a singular event in the anti-colonial struggle against the British Empire launched by the newly formed Ghadar Party in North America. The apology came even as the anti-migrant vitriol in the wider society amplified. In late 2013 and again in early 2014, a memorial for the Ghadar martyrs in Harbour Green Park in Vancouver was vandalised twice within months. Notwithstanding the antagonism against immigrants in the public domain, Trudeau's apology had settled Canada's accounts with history and able to "move on." The Trudeau government appointed Harjit Sajjan, a retired Lieutenant Colonel and war veteran in the Canadian Army as the defence minister, the first South Asian to hold the position. In 2011, Harjit Singh was interestingly made the commanding officer of one of the Canadian Army regiments that was historically involved in preventing passengers aboard the Komagata Maru from disembarking. Harjit Sajjan was deployed in Afghanistan where he used his familiarity with language, culture and traditions of the region in favour of imperialist agendas in the region, the very Afghanistan where the Ghadarites from his home state were instrumental in establishing the first government-in-exile of free India a hundred years ago. The dialectical interplay between diaspora, (neo)colonial and imperialist politics has never been absent since the beginnings of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in (Hyder 2006, 462).

capitalism, imperialism and colonialism. However, in the brave new world of “multiculturalism” and legal “non-discrimination” in the imperialist centres and “decolonisation” and legal independence in the neo-colonies, the conceptual tools and vocabulary for taking on and directly engaging with this dialectical interplay between diaspora, (neo)colonial and imperialist politics have become scarce in contemporary politics, scholarship and discourse. These relationships between diaspora and colonial/imperialist politics is much more complex in the case of South Asians who, for historical reasons, occupy preeminent positions in the institutions of neo-empire as they did in the old empires (Watch Nikki Haley, a Sikh diaspora perform in the UN for the Trump administration and recall too, the princes and maharajas of yesteryears!). The Ghadar movement offers a rich repertoire of concepts, theories and vocabulary for reviving, re-theorising and re-politicising the relationship between diaspora and neo-colonial/ imperialist politics. This special issue on the Ghadar movement hopes to contribute to such a revival in a small way.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain attempted to consolidate imperial governance by forming alliances with “the princes, the chiefs and the landlords” on the one hand and on the other “the small class of highly educated natives” who were “mature, competent, moderate and loyal” (Briton 1967, 70). The need for political alliances and power sharing became necessary after the apparently invincible British Empire was shaken to its very foundations by the Great Ghadar of 1857 – an event that British historiography describes as the Indian Sepoy Mutiny and South Asian historiography as the First War of Independence. The events of 1857 marks what scholars have described as the shift from liberal imperialism to late imperialism (Mantena 2010). The embers of the Great Ghadar, literally the Great Rebellion, never died down on the sub-continent. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the embers leapt up to become another conflagration, on a global scale this time, one from which the British Empire never really recovered. The fact that the Ghadarites of the early twentieth century gave themselves the same name as the Great Ghadar is testimony to the extent to which they were inspired by the 1857 events. Indeed, their call for another “ghadar” (rebellion) was to complete the task that was begun by the Great Ghadar of 1857.

After independence British and Indian scholars alike were reluctant to acknowledge the Ghadar movement’s contributions to the freedom movements in the subcontinent. Official British accounts described the Ghadar movement as the “Punjab troubles” thereby localising the global scope of the movement and later as “anarchical activities” thereby deflecting attention away from agrarian policies and state violence and attributing the causes of the movement to external Russian influences (see: Isemonger and Slattery 1919; Mitra 1921). It was Britain’s agrarian policies however (see: Barrier 1967) that set into motion the out-migrations of agrarian populations from their ancestral homeland in the Punjab, thus fanning diverse migratory routes across the Empire from Burma and Malaya to Hong Kong and Shanghai. The lure of America and Canada was the strongest. On the eve of World War I 15,000 Indians, mostly from the Punjab, had migrated to the west coast of North America establishing settlements in California, British Columbia and elsewhere. The economic crisis and wage-cuts in America in 1907 invited the wrath of the white unionised workers. Racist attacks in the host states on the one hand and the continued supply of

migrant labour by the agrarian crisis in the subcontinent on the other brought about a convergence of the resistances to the agrarian crisis at home and the racial and labour discrimination in host countries.

Many Ghadar activists carried with them their experiences of popular struggles against land colonisation laws and colonial agrarian policies to their new homes in North America. Prominent amongst them was Ajit Singh. Arrested and imprisoned in Burma for his agitations against colonial land colonisation policies, Ajit Singh escaped to Europe where he organised the diaspora, and later travelled to Latin America to expand Ghadar networks across British colonies (see: Pal 1992). Biographies of men like Ajit Singh and others remain to be written. Barring a few exceptions (e.g. Deepak 1999; Deepak 2012; Noor 2011; Sawhney 2008; Yin 2016) very little is known about Ghadar activities in Latin America, Africa, South East Asia and the Middle East. From what is known, it is possible to say that the Ghadar movement was the first *real* international of working people because of its spread across all continents and connections to a wide range of anti-colonial movements. The political mobilisation of diaspora brought about a meeting of the anti-colonial movements in the subcontinent with other liberation movements elsewhere: the Irish, the Egyptians, the Russians, the Chinese. The realisation that imperial expropriation and colonial violence was not limited to Britain or the Indian subcontinent but that it was a wider, more universal phenomenon had a profound influence on all anti-colonial movements. Not surprisingly World War I unleashed unstoppable forces of resistance against colonialism. World War I was fought *by* colonised men and women *for* their colonial masters. *What for?*

If British historiography preferred to ignore the radical strands in the independence movements as actions of unreasonable madmen, extremists and fanatics, post-independence historiography of the independence movement remained equally reticent about acknowledging the role of the Ghadar movement. Recognised as legitimate leaders of the independence movement by imperial administrators, the “small class of highly educated natives” who were “mature, competent, moderate and loyal” became the spokespersons for the subcontinent’s aspirations for freedom from colonial oppression. With recognition came seats at negotiating tables. Recognised as “moderate” and “reasonable” the leaders were perforce required to live up to the standards of moderateness and reasonableness set by imperial administrators. How could they keep their reputations as moderate and reasonable leaders and at the same time reconcile with the memory of revolutionary strands in the anti-colonial movements like the Ghadar movement? Every repressive law that the colonial administration introduced to suppress the revolutionary strands in the freedom struggle was countersigned by the members of the “educated classes.” For example, the Indian members of the Sedition Committee which drafted the notorious and much hated Rowlatt Act (The Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act, 1919) recommended the law that was directly used to suppress the Ghadar and other radicals (Rowlatt 1918). The converse is also true however. It is precisely because the revolutionary strands in the freedom struggle such as the Ghadar movement launched an uncompromising struggle against colonial rule that the “educated classes” found their status as “moderate” and “reasonable” spokespersons for the people of the subcontinent. Their reticence after power was transferred to them in 1947 was not surprising

therefore. The question “*what were these post-independence leaders doing when the Ghadarites and other revolutionaries were being martyred*” continues to loom large in public consciousness decades after independence. In the dominant accounts of the independence movements in the subcontinent the Ghadarites were at best “romantic” and/or “misguided” idealists and at worst “terrorists” who engaged in violence.

The transfer of power came in ways that the Ghadar leadership never envisioned, indeed, it was directly opposed to their vision for a free India. Transfer of power came with divisions of power between the old native elites, the erstwhile “the princes, the chiefs and the landlords” and the new national elite, the “small class of highly educated natives.” After 1857 the two groups had become the principal beneficiaries of Britain’s communal electorates in the name of representative politics and racialised armed forces organised on ethnic, caste, and religious lines (see: D’Souza 2017). In suppressing the Ghadar vision of a democratic and egalitarian India for workers, peasants and the working people of the subcontinent the British administrators, the “educated classes” and the “princes, chiefs and landlords” shared common cause. In the power sharing arrangements after independence, they fell apart. Independence came with bloody partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. The bloody partition was preceded by the equally bloody repression of the anti-colonial movements of workers, peasants, indigenous and working people of the subcontinent amongst which the Ghadar movement was foremost. The sequence in the blood-baths are important. *Could “the princes, the chiefs and the landlords” and the “small class of highly educated natives” have taken over the reins of the colonial state after independence without the first blood-bath?*

The power sharing between elites of the subcontinent was enacted within a wider global transfer of the imperial baton from the British empire to the emerging American empire. The United States which did not so much as have a toe-hold in the subcontinent until 1947, was the first to recognise Pakistan and make it the centrepiece of two military alliances the SEATO and CENTO agreements that gave the US sway over the region throughout the Cold War years. Equally, the US gained access to India’s vast and expanding markets for industrial goods and commercial services, which continued throughout the Cold War and increased after globalisation and liberalisation. The new power-brokers in the divided subcontinent were understandably uneasy about the Ghadar movement, rooted as it was in a universal humanist ethic and an egalitarian vision for society. It did not help the new power-brokers that the Ghadarites recognised them for who they were – power-brokers - and riled against them as traitors and collaborators with the colonial masters. These formative forces, structures and strands in the independence movements are crucial to understanding contemporary politics of diaspora, neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism. The formative forces create the structural contexts which has shaped and nurtured the South Asian diaspora as well as their engagement with struggles for social, economic and political justice at home. Equally the histories of anti-colonial movements in imperial centres are important for the revival of movements for justice, freedom and an egalitarian international order, call it socialism, neo-socialism, decolonisation, democratic-confederalism or whatever else.

Official British histories write about the Ghadar *Party* which they portray as a “terrorist” organisation (see: Isemonger and Slattery 1919; Mitra 1921; Hale 1937). Launched formally in San Francisco in 1913, the organisation was smashed and its members brutally exterminated and hanged between 1914-1916 invoking wartime regulations. Indeed, the colonial government saw their confrontation with the Ghadar movement as a war to keep India. The Ghadar movement is not reducible to the Ghadar Party however. Ghadar as a movement continued to influence in the freedom struggle in myriad ways especially in the Punjab. Ghadar memory was kept alive during the years leading up to independence and partition in 1947 by the political activists themselves who articulated a different vision for free India from the “moderate” leadership recognised by Britain. It is now part of the legend of martyr Bhagat Singh, the Che Guevara of the Indian subcontinent, that he carried a photo of Kartara Singh Sarabha in his pocket when he went to the gallows. Sarabha was a prominent Ghadarite who became politicised in America and hanged for waging war against the colonial state. Ghadar memory was kept alive in pamphlets, hagiographic literature, poetry and local celebrations of heroes after independence. Even before independence there was anxiety that the new power-brokers could well erase Ghadar memories and that memories of the movement need to be preserved for posterity. Randhir Singh’s *The Ghadar Heroes: Forgotten Story of the Punjab Revolutionaries of 1914-15* (1945) stands out as an early example of the refusal to allow marginalisation of Ghadar history by the reformist nationalist leadership.

For historians of the sub-continent, partition brought with it new challenges. Hindus and Muslims, whose histories were entwined for over fourteen centuries and had matured to become inextricable as Siamese twins were suddenly surgically separated in their advanced years. They were now forced to create new identities and lives for each without the other twin. The subcontinent’s history had to be reinvented and retold in new ways (see: Ahmed 2013). Even as historians in India and Pakistan busied themselves writing revisionist histories of their newly independent states, a steady dribble of books by activists, critical scholars and journalists kept memories of the Ghadar movement alive in the two new countries. Published by small local publishers, often by relatively unknown authors, the steady stream of publications throughout the sixties, seventies and eighties, written in local languages as well as English, reminded the people of the subcontinent about the unfinished task begun by the Great Ghadar of 1857 and continued by the second Ghadar at the turn of the twentieth century (e.g. Banerjee 1969; Deol 1969; Ganguly 1980; Izhārulḥaq 1986; Josh 1970; 1977-78; Mathur 1970; Puri. 1983; Sareen 1994; Singh 1966; Singh and Singh 1989). These books may not have succeeded in competing with the official histories written in British, Indian and Pakistani universities, but they did keep the memories of the movement alive among new generations of activists and post-independence social movements in the subcontinent. As the post-independence regimes in the subcontinent faltered and neo-imperialist stranglehold increased so did the relevance of Ghadar histories in popular imaginations.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, fears of new imperial wars, new modes of appropriation branded as “globalisation,” new forms of colonisation, racism, discrimination and

national oppression revived interest in building global solidarities. Against that backdrop there was a resurgence of interest in the Ghadar movement amongst South Asian diaspora as well as social justice activists and critical scholars in North America. The centenary celebrations of the Ghadar Party in 2013 and 2014 helped to organise the resurgence. In India, Pakistan, United States, Canada and United Kingdom, across cities in Vancouver, Victoria, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto in Canada, London, Manchester, Birmingham and Bedford in Britain, in San Francisco and Stockton in the United States, in Lahore, New Delhi and Amritsar events, documentary films, memorial museums, and much else energised the revival. The active role of organisations like the India Defence League in Canada and the Indian Workers Association GB in Great Britain, both founded in the 1930s to support the Indian independence movement, organised commemoration events. These organisations provided a direct link to the Ghadarites who were associated with the organisations during its early years and highlighted the need for renewed solidarities with movements for justice in the subcontinent. The international scope of Ghadar organisation and movement, as well as the continuation of old problems such as racism, discrimination, renewed national oppression and imperialist wars were amplified in the wider context of globalisation, wars and racism. There was revival of academic interest in the Ghadar history. Maia Ramnath's seminal work: *Haj to Utopia: how the Ghadar movement charted global radicalism and attempted to overthrow the British empire* (2011) could not have come at a better time on the eve of Ghadar Party's centenary commemorations. Ramnath was not the only one though (see: Aziz 2017; Grewal, Puri, and Banga 2013; Kaur 2016; Oberoi 2009; Ogden 2012; Puri 2012; Puri 2011; Singh 2013a; Singh 2013b; Singh and Chakravarty 2013; Singh 2014; Sohi 2014; Tatla 2003).

The transfer of Ghadar scholarship from its former custodians: activists and public intellectuals to critical scholars in the academy presents new challenges for describing, evaluating and characterising the movement. In the eyes of the old custodians of Ghadar memory characterising the Ghadarites or the movement was never an issue. They were quite simply heroes who sacrificed their lives for freedom, an undertaking that remains an unfinished task for people today. Hence, the need to know, understand and remember the movement. This simple, yet profoundly inspiring analytical framework, is by its very nature unsuited for academia. Academia is founded on disciplinary, theoretical and epistemological segmentation of the world (see: D'Souza 2009). Within the portals of academia, theoretical framings of the Ghadar movement has become an important problematic in its own right. Scholars attempt to frame the Ghadar movement within familiar theoretical frames such as anarchism, socialism, religious nationalism and secular nationalism (see: Ramnath 2011). How do we hem-in a movement as diverse, complex and global as the Ghadar movement? In 2014, *Sikh Formations* published a special issue on the Ghadar movement. Articles in the special issue explored the influence of religion on the Ghadarites but struggled to hem the movement into religious nationalism as the analytical framework. The articles in this special issue of *Socialist Studies* explores the influence of socialism which competes for a place alongside religious nationalism, secular nationalism and anarchism in framing the Ghadar movement. *Is it possible then to hem-in the Ghadar movement within a socialist analytical*

*framework?* This special issue of *Socialist Studies* on the Ghadar movement highlights the complex relationship between the movement's relationship with Euro-American socialism.

## II

As parallel and concurrent movements at least since 1848, the relationship between socialist movements in the capitalist First World and anti-colonial movements in the (neo)colonial Third World has been a difficult one at the best of times. Whereas class takes a prominent place as a categorical concept and as an organising principle of capitalism in Marxist analysis, the position of colonialism in the constitution of capitalism has remained relatively opaque and on the margins (see: D'Souza 2012). The hey-days for the dialogue between anti-capitalist socialism and anti-colonial national liberation was the period after the second congress of the Third Communist International or the COMINTERN. The Ghadarites were proactively engaged in bringing about the meeting of socialist movements against capitalism and national liberation movements against imperialism. Attempts to revive, retheorise and re-politicise the relationships between diaspora and struggles against imperialism and neo-colonialism in the Third World must necessarily revisit Ghadar engagement with socialist movements therefore. The revival of the dialogue between struggles against capitalism in the First World and the anti-imperialist movements in the Third World is a necessary condition for human emancipation in the present context. However, the need to re-consider socialist orientations of the Ghadar movement does not do away with the problem of theoretical framings. Instead, it exacerbates the problem of theoretical framings. *Whose socialism and what kind of socialism?*

Locating stories of individual Ghadarites like Jodh Singh (Chopra), Sohan Singh Josh (Jan), Udham Singh (Webb) and others within the wider contexts of the anti-colonial struggles, the articles in this volume highlight the ways in which lives of less known Ghadarites intersected with the wider political currents of national liberation and socialism. The articles weave the life-stories of individuals and the historical conjuncture in which they found themselves to exemplify diverse aspects of the movement as well as theoretical approaches. In one way or another the contributors seek to understand the synergy/affinity of socialism in the subcontinent and the Ghadar movement. What comes through is the wide variety of articulations of the conversations between socialism and anti-colonialism. The dialogue between socialist theories and anti-imperialist struggles operate at two levels in this collection of articles. The first is about the problems of theoretical framings within Marxist traditions. The articles in this issue use different Marxist/Critical Theory approaches to address very different aspects of the movement. Whereas Chopra draws on Michel Foucault and subaltern studies to highlight "small voices" of history, Tirmizey draws on Antonio Gramsci and Frantz Fanon to analyse how local social practices are adapted for transformative counter-hegemonic projects. Whereas Jan sees the national liberation and socialist movements as profoundly influential events that by-passed each other, D'Souza

examines the movement from the standpoint of comparative philosophy. Must socialism travel one single road? *Can there be diverse intellectual and theoretical roads to socialism?*

The second conversation is about the encounter between socialism and anti-colonialism, or rather in this case between socialist and the Ghadar movements. For Jan (*In The Shadows of the Ghadar*) the relationship between anticolonial movements and the European socialist movements, Marxism and anti-colonialism in the Punjab more specifically, was a “missed encounter.” The “missed encounter” is examined through the life of Sohan Singh Josh. The “missed encounter” challenged socialism and national liberation and forced the acknowledgement of the other in ways that changed both. The single most important change was recognition of the peasantry as a political subject, something that European Marxism was forced to acknowledge as a result of the “missed encounter.” For Tirmizey (*Learning from and Translating Peasant Struggles As Anti-Colonial Praxis*) far from being a “missed encounter” the Ghadar movement exemplifies Gramsci’s ideas about translation and transformation. The Ghadar movement took from pre-existing forms of rebellion in society such as banditry and dacoity common in peasant societies and “translated” and “transposed” those practices for the counter-hegemonic project of national liberation against imperialism and colonialism. This translation was the result, precisely because of the encounter of the Ghadarites with Western socialists. For Radha D’Souza (*The Conceptual World of the Ghadarites*) it is wrong to assume that progressive politics originates exclusively as reactions to modernity and capitalism. The Ghadarites were attracted to socialism and the politics of human emancipation because of the deeply embedded progressive intellectual traditions in South Asia, what she calls the “Indic Enlightenment” that canvassed equality, justice, freedom and egalitarianism. These traditions addressed the “lower classes” and continues to be remembered by them. If the Ghadarites were attracted to socialist ideologies it is not because of religion per se but because of the traditions of dissent in South Asia that the Indic Enlightenment cultivated in popular consciousness. Rohit Chopra (*The Madness of Jodh Singh*) seeks to retrieve “the small voices of history” by recovering the life-story of the hitherto unknown Jodh Singh from the depths of the archives. Jodh Singh was tried in the US for his alleged part in the Hindu-German conspiracy trials in 1917-18. Chopra uses the “small voice” of Jodh Singh to highlight the plight of individuals in the hands of two competing modernities. The first is the dominant liberal colonialism underpinned by the “juridical-medical-legal framework” during the trial. Equally the “small voice” of Jodh Singh reveals the hegemonic tendencies latent in the national liberation project organised along political party lines and hierarchies of “leaders” and “rank and file” foot soldiers.

Whatever the nature of the dialogue between socialism and national liberation both left indelible marks on politics in the subcontinent. The legacies of the movement are also as diverse and wide ranging as much else is about this movement. Suchetana Chattopadhyay (*Workers and militant labour activists from Punjab in Bengal (1921-1934)*) makes the direct link between the *Komagata Maru* incident in Vancouver and its impact on the labour movement in Bengal. The participants in the *Komagata Maru* rebellion in Vancouver against the discriminatory immigration law that Canada had enacted directly targeting migrants from South Asia, were

forcibly returned to India. Their ship landed in Calcutta. What did they do after returning? Many of the returnees did not go back to their native Punjab fearing state repression and penury. They dissolved into the urban labour classes in Calcutta and became a militant force in the labour movement there. Their experiences in North America and elsewhere brought an internationalist orientation to the labour movement and helped to join the dots between labour movements, national liberation and socialist movements. Sara Kazmi (*Of Subalterns and Sammi Trees*) brings into focus the intersection of the politics of nation-building and the politics of language in post-Independence Pakistan – i.e. the elevation of Urdu as the national language and marginalisation of regional languages such as Punjabi. The marginalisation of Punjabi is as much a class project as a nation-building project. Peasants in Punjab continue to speak Punjabi. Ghadar poetry and writings much of which is in Punjabi is erased from historiographical discourses which focus on Urdu and English literatures. For present-day activists in Punjab, which Kazmi exemplifies by the activities of a street theatre group, Ghadar history is a triple whammy so to speak – it facilitates the revival of Ghadar memory, revives Punjabi language and the peasant idioms that Ghadar poetry uses and takes the nationalism out of Punjabi politics by replacing it with class. Thus, for present day activists, Ghadar history helps to keep Ghadar history alive, bring class politics back to centre stage and problematises the opacity of class in nationalist discourses. Beyond the subcontinent, the legacy of the Ghadar movement survives among the diaspora through the activities of organisations such as the Indian Workers' Association Great Britain as Silas Webb (*"The Typical Ghadar Outlook"*) argues. As new migrants arrived in thousands in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, organisations such as the Indian Workers' Association Great Britain which was born among diaspora as a result of the union of socialist and anti-colonial struggles, would "anchor far left politics and industrial action in London and the Midlands throughout the postwar period and era of deindustrialisation." We are back to where we began: the need to revive, re-theorise and re-politicise the relationship between diaspora and neo-colonial/ imperialist politics.

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