The Ghadar Movement

Aashna Soni and Manya Bachheti

29 May 2024

Introduction

The Ghadar Party, which was established in 1913 and dissolved circa 1948, was a movement of Indians – Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims – that originated in California. During the early 1900s, many Punjabi people migrated to California in search of employment opportunities and established thriving communities anchored by Gurdwaras, or Sikh temples. The Ghadar Movement originated from these Gurdwaras [5]. Within these temples free from British authority, Indian immigrants, including Ram Nath Puri and Taraknath Das, began to speak out against British rule, setting the stage for the formal creation of the Ghadar Party in 1913 [5]. The party's proclaimed goal was to fight for Indian independence from Great Britain by mobilizing native Indians and members of the Indian diaspora. Researching the Ghadar Party and its contributions in the context of global wars and the era of decolonization is important because it disproves the widespread narrative of Indian independence that credits the success of the movement to the work of a few groups of people – most notably, the Indian National Congress and its leader, Mahatma Gandhi [5]. Learning about the Ghadar Party helps illustrate the global nature of the Indian independence movement, which involved groups and communities around the world [5]. Finally, the legacy of the Ghadar Party is particularly important in understanding the historical experience of Indian Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Context and Description of Research Subject

The Ghadar Movement, also known as the Ghadar Party, was formed in the years leading up to World War I, and much of its revolutionary activities occurred in the context of the war, in which India was involved as a British colony. The movement grew as a response to the recruitment of Indian soldiers on the British side of World War I and the subsequent social changes in India [5]. The Ghadar Party took advantage of the situation of the war to destabilize British colonial rule over India by promoting insubordination among Indian soldiers and accepting aid from and collaborating with Germany against their common enemy, Britain [5].

The creation of the movement also coincided with the rise of the Western-educated class in India, familiar with European ideas. The emergence of Western-educated colonial elites occurred in many European colonies and contributed to the rise of decolonization movements whose roots

lay in Western ideologies, particularly those of the Enlightenment. Many key leaders of the Ghadar Movement, for example Har Dayal and Ram Chandra Bharadwaj, were immigrants who came from Western-educated backgrounds. Although the initial leadership of the party consisted mostly of the Western-educated elite, its membership eventually expanded to rural Californian farmers of Indian origin as it became a mass-movement [2].

The establishment of the Ghadar Party occurred alongside the larger global trend of rising non-European nationalism and decolonization. The rise of decolonization movements globally was greatly influenced by the rise of Western-educated classes in European colonies, who used ideologies such as nationalism and those of the Enlightenment to fight for independence from European colonial rule. The Ghadar Party was one such movement arising during this time period and was influenced by instances of decolonization in other parts of the world. Egyptian independence from British rule in 1922, for example, did not come with full liberation, instead leaving Egypt with many restrictions and conditions that benefited Britain [3]. The situation in Egypt served as a warning to the leaders of the Ghadar Party to prevent the same thing from occuring in India.

The Ghadar Party's rise and activities were fueled by the growing globalization of the world in the early 20th century. The increasing interconnectedness of the world facilitated the migration of many Western-educated Indians across the world, including San Francisco, California, where the Ghadar Party was formed [2]. The development of technologies such as telegraphs, railroads, and steamships transformed communication and transportation, allowing the Ghadar Party to claim branches in locations across the globe, "including Vancouver (B.C.), Portland, Astoria, St. John, Sacramento, Stockton, Panama, Manila, Hong Kong, and Shanghai" [7].

Accomplishments and Achievements

The Ghadar Party's goal was to advance the cause of Indian independence [5]. It did so in two main ways: by battling the concept of *izzat*, or military honor, in the colonial army, as well as by promoting the idea of a casteless post-revolutionary society [5]. The Ghadar Movement proclaimed that Indian soldiers, especially Sikhs, who came from a lower caste, should question how *izzat* was derived and challenge the idea of unconditional loyalty to the British [5].

Additionally, at a time at which the leaders of the Indian independence movement, notably, the members of the Indian National Congress, still advocated for reconciliation with the British and a hierarchical Indian society, the Ghadar Party was significantly more radical in its nationalist sentiment and promotion of an equal society [5].

Central to the activities of the Ghadar Party was propaganda. The Ghadar Party published the inaugural issue of *The Hindustan Ghadar* on November 1st, 1913. This newspaper defined its official mission as "conveying the message of a rebellion to the nation once a week" [5]. This newspaper was particularly popular among the lower castes in India, as it put the cause of independence in easily understandable terms [5]. For example, one of the newspaper articles, the "Balance Sheet of British Rule," provided a quantitative description of "how much money was removed by British taxation, how much the daily average income had dropped under British rule, and how much was spent on the army compared to public education" [5]. The newspaper made frequent appeals to the moral values of Indians, criticizing soldiers for their loyalty to the British and encouraging a nationalist identification toward India as a unified country. Another piece of literary propaganda produced by the Ghadar Party was the poetry collection called *Gadar di Goonj*, which translates to "Echoes of Revolt," a collection of nationalist and socialist poetry that aimed to inspire nationalist feelings among Indians, especially those in the army [5].

To some degree, the Ghadar Party was successful in inciting insubordination and resistance among Indian colonial troops – this can be seen in the significant fall in Sikh recruitment in the British army by January of 1915 [5]. In addition to this destabilization of the colonial army, the Ghadar Party was able to gather arms and munitions to destroy British infrastructure in India, including railways and telegraphs [5]. However, due to the radical nature of the Ghadar Party's mission and the swift response by the British, its mobilization efforts were not very successful in contributing to the success of the independence movement.

A key accomplishment of the Ghadar Party was that it was able to unite Indian communities globally in the cause for independence, highlighting the international nature of the Indian independence movement in the context of increased globalization. The Ghadar Party had branches in countries including Singapore, Thailand, Germany, Egypt, South Africa, Canada and

Mexico, and many branches across the United States [7]. The Ghadar Party was successful in mobilizing “nearly eight thousand Indians from North and South America and East Asia to overthrow British rule” [7]. Furthermore, the Ghadar Party gained the support of foreign nations, most notably Germany. This is exemplified by the Hindu-German Conspiracy, an effort by the Ghadar Party to collaborate with German officials to facilitate a concerted resistance against British rule in India [6]. In the context of World War I, Germany hoped that promoting Indian unrest would destabilize the British Empire and help Germany attain victory in the war [6]. As part of this collaboration, Germany purchased large quantities of rifles and ammunition from American corporations to arm Sikh Ghadar Party members in India [6]. In the end, this effort was unsuccessful as it was halted by British intelligence. Nevertheless, it had a lasting impact on British colonial policy as British officials began to implement stricter policies to try to prevent resistance from developing in the future [5]. It also strained Anglo-American relationships as the Ghadar Party, based in the United States, threatened Britain’s colonial holdings [5].

Impact and Historical Significance

The failure of the Ghadar Party in achieving its goal of Indian independence from British colonial rule can largely be attributed to its lack of internal structure [5]. The Ghadar Movement lacked organization across its branches, with each branch acting autonomously towards the movement’s common goal [5]. Also, German aid to the party was unable to contribute to the party’s goals due to the lack of coordination in the shipping of arms, causing them to be intercepted by British intelligence [5]. Thus, the Ghadar Party was unable to use its numbers and global extent to its advantage, resulting in the movement ultimately failing in swiftly achieving Indian independence. Independence would only be achieved after World War II.

Although the Ghadar Party was unable to definitively achieve independence in India before its dissolution, its attempts to incite resistance among Indian soldiers were followed by signs of weakening British rule over India [6]. The Jallianwala Bagh incident, a firing by British police officers on an unarmed crowd of peaceful protesters in Amritsar in 1919, demonstrates the increasing resistance over British rule [6]. The incident increased discontent with the government and caused many, both in India and overseas, to begin to support the nationalist independence movement [6]. Following the Ghadar Party’s attempts to incite nationalist sentiment in India and

police firings such as the Jallianwala Bagh incident, revolutionary activities among young Indians increased greatly [6]. Later heroes of the revolutionary movement, such as Bhagat Singh, who was convicted of terrorist activities against the British government and hanged in 1929, were inspired by the actions and sacrifices of Ghadar Party members [6].

The Ghadar Movement, nevertheless, reinforced the larger development of Indian independence through its international projects that spread propaganda and attempted to arm Indian soldiers. Despite the fact that its efforts were often denounced by many members of the Indian National Congress, its propaganda and literature helped promote nationalist sentiments among soldiers and connect Indian communities globally in the fight for independence. It also was part of the larger development of re-envisioning Indian society post-independence. At the time, the Ghadar Party was unconventional and radical in its promotion of a casteless and egalitarian post-revolutionary society [5]. However, as time went on, such ideas of a unified, casteless India became endorsed by key members of the Indian independence movement, such as Mohandas Gandhi, showing how the radical ideas of the Ghadar Party served as ideological inspiration for the transformation of Indian society.

The legacy of the Ghadar Party lives on today. For example, the spirit of the movement inspired the creation of the Indian Workers' Association (IWA) in the United Kingdom in 1939 [5]. This organization was created by Sikh immigrants to the UK who had contact with the Ghadar Movement [5]. The IWA continues to fight for the rights of Indians in Great Britain, illustrating how the ideological spirit of the Ghadar Party lives on in the form of movements and organizations dedicated to protecting the rights of Indians and members of the Indian diaspora [5].

The Ghadar Party has been commemorated by the creation of the Ghadar Party Memorial in San Francisco in 1992 as a collaboration between the Gadar Memorial Steering Committee and the Consulate of India [4]. This memorial serves as a key center of Indian culture, featuring celebration of key cultural events, Indian language classes, and Indian music [4]. Furthermore, the literary works of the Ghadar Party remain preserved at the library in this memorial [4]. This

memorial still stands today and serves as a reminder of the efforts of Indian Americans in building a sense of community and fighting for the cause of Indian independence [4].

Conclusion

The Ghadar Party was a movement started by Indian immigrants in San Francisco to encourage support for Indian independence and promote nationalist sentiment in India from abroad [5]. The party's views were more radical than existing independence movements in India in its promotion of a classless post-revolution society and extreme nationalist views. Much of the party's activities occurred during the First World War, which it took advantage of by mobilizing soldiers towards its nationalist cause and allying with Britain's enemies, specifically Germany in what became known as the Hindu-German Conspiracy [5]. Despite the failure of the Ghadar Party in directly achieving Indian independence, the party had lasting political effects in both India and the United States, where the party was situated. The Ghadar Party's activities successfully mobilized many members of the Indian diaspora in North and South American as well as Indian troops in World War I against British colonial rule [7]. The party's activities in India were followed by signs of weakening British control over India, characterized by a rise in police firings against protesters and rising nationalist sentiment and discontent with British rule [6]. Learning about the Ghadar Party and its legacy in post-colonial India is important to challenge the leading narrative that attributes the decolonization of India to a few well-known figures, including Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, in a short time period in the aftermath of World War II. The Ghadar Party's activities show the widespread nature of the movement for Indian independence that included Indians from across the globe and of varying backgrounds and religions. In addition to being an important part of the history of Indian independence, the legacy of the movement is also an important chapter in the history and experiences of Indian Americans in the Bay Area.

Works Cited

[1] Ghadar Di Gunj. Collection of Nationalist and Socialist Poetry. 1914. South Asian American Digital Archive, https://www.saada.org/item/20110525-195. Accessed 19 May 2024.

[2] "The Ghadar Party: Freedom for India." *The Pluralism Project*, President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, https://pluralism.org/the-ghadar-party-freedom-for-india. Accessed 18 May 2024.

[3] "There is a Difference Between Independence and Independence." The United States of India, July 1923, https://www.saada.org/item/20110908-346. Accessed 28 May 2024.

[4] Dayal, Lala Har. Gadar [San Francisco], 1992, p. 1, https://www.saada.org/item/20131031-3253#:~:text=The%20November%2FDecember%201992%20newsletter,a%201920%20issue%20of%20Gadar. Accessed 18 May 2024.

[5] Jain, Mehek, and Michael Kelley. "A Forgotten Revolution: Understanding the Ghadar Movement's Impact on Indian Nationalism, Castes, and Martial Troops During World War I." *Rice Historical Review*, vol. 7, 2022, pp. 44-69. *Rice Research Repository*, https://doi.org/10.25611/1SS8-9881. Accessed 19 May 2024.

[6] Singh, Jane. "The Gadar Party." Asian American Studies: A Reader, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Min Song, Rutgers University Press, 2000, pp. 35-45. The University of Utah. Accessed 18 May 2024.

[7] Sohi, Seema. "The Ghadar Party." *South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA)*, 8 May 2018, https://www.saada.org/tides/article/the-ghadar-party. Accessed 17 May 2024.