Kartar Singh Sarabha: The student leader who changed the course of history

In the inaugural Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha Memorial Lecture at the Exeter University (Penryn Campus) on 27 Feb 2020, DR GURNAM SINGH presents the amazing contribution of KARTAR SINGH SARABHA that is being erased from mainstream accounts of history. In just a few years, the student leader managed to change the course of history.

By Gurnam Singh | OPINION |

INTRODUCTION

Can I begin by thanking the Asian, History and Politics Societies for both organising this evening’s historic Inaugural Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha Memorial Lecture with the aim being to celebrate the life of a student leader who, in just a few years, managed to change the course of history. I hope it becomes an annual event that continues to shine light on the amazing contributions of so many ‘non-western’ figures that have sadly been erased from mainstream accounts of history. A special thanks to Pavandeep Singh Joshan, who initially contacted me about this event and had the confidence in me to do justice to such an important historical figure.

One apology before I begin, I am not a historian but a sociologist. Though both would claim their aim is to understand society, in the crudest sense, the job of a historian is to document and interpret past events, figures and processes, whereas a sociologist is interested in the present, in relations between human beings, culture and social structure.

However, it seems to me that one cannot understand the present without having at least one eye on the past, and similarly, one cannot study the past without some appreciation of the contemporary ideological context and political context. In The Origins of Totalitarianism the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1973) cautions historians about making claims to explain whole trends of history. This, she argues, is “because the last century has produced an abundance of ideologies that pretend to be keys to history but are actually nothing but desperate efforts to escape responsibility.”
And so, it is not that history is reducible to ideology, but that history, or for that matter most intellectual pursuits, are never free from vested interests; which may be range from own personal biases, or wider political and economic dynamics. I am reminded of the African Proverb that is recalled by the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, which states that: "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

And so, over the next 40 minutes or so, as you may expect, I will try to tell the story of Kartar Singh Sarabha, who spent a mere 19 years on this Earth, younger than many in this room. Sarabha’s short life story is, in some sense, a condensed version of a historical moment that reveals the amazing potential of social movements, often emerging from a small collection of highly committed individuals, to change the course of history. As Margaret Mead famously asserted, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, organized citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

The story of Kartar Singh Sarabha is really the story of the Ghadar (meaning ‘mutiny’, ‘revolt’ or ‘rebellion’) Lehar, a movement, that had the audacity to take on the might of the British Imperial power in India. But sadly, the history of the Ghadar movement has been largely erased from the collective popular imaginary or reduced to a footnote in ‘official’ historical accounts. Today within societal institutions and higher education in particular, we are grappling with how to respond to the growing demand for decolonisation of the curriculum. Much of the debate is centred on philosophical questions about the legitimacy of the white western standpoint, which positions the achievements of Western powers, including the European Enlightenment, Empire and capitalism, as the pinnacle of human social and cultural development (See, for example, Edward Said, 1978 and 2012). This is important, but sometimes can become quite an abstract and dry debate. Therefore, by focussing on case examples such as Kartar Singh Sarabha and the Ghadar (also spelt: Ghadr) movement, we can draw upon ‘a rich repertoire of concepts, theories and vocabulary for reviving, re-theorising and re-politicising the relationship between diaspora and neo-colonial/imperialist politics’ (D’Souza and Tirmizey, 2018 p3).

In his most recent and arguably most ambitious book, The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company, William Dalrymple, (2019) attempts to explain ‘how a single business operation, based in one London office complex, managed to replace the mighty Mughal Empire as masters of the vast subcontinent.’ With so few men on the ground, clearly the traditional strategy of physical force alone would have definitely resulted in failure. The key to the success of the East India Company was, as Martyn Briton (1967) suggests, to engage in ‘trade’ of both goods, people and ideas, and to rapidly 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” (p70). One of the oft-repeated myths of Empire are that it was not only benevolent, but, as Rudyard Kipling famously asserts in his poem, “The White Man’s Burden” (1899) moral obligation to encourage their progress (economic, social, and cultural) through settler colonialism (Drabble, 2006 p. 808.)

However, the racial myths of inferiority of people of the Indian Subcontinent were shattered when the apparently invincible British Empire was shaken to its very foundations by what orientalist historians like to refer to as the Indian Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. In reality this was no local affair but the first major rebellion or Ghadar, which post-colonial scholars prefer to characterise as the First War of Independence (D’Souza and Tirmizey, 2018). As Karunan Mantena (2010), suggests, 1857 represented a dramatic shift from liberal imperialism to late imperialism and from this point the thirst for liberation never died down on the sub-continent and indeed across the global British empire. From this perspective, though growing out of the Panjaban or land of the five, it would be wrong to assume, as ‘official’ historical accounts have done, that the vision of Kartar Singh Sarabha and the Ghadarites was itself a local affair.

THE GHADARITES AND THE PANJABI SIKH TRADITION

One of the inescapable features of the Ghadarites was that they were predominantly Panjabi Sikhs and any analysis of this movement and what might have inspired them cannot ignore this fact. Given Panjaban’s unique location as the gateway to the subcontinent from both the West and North, we can assert that the rise of Punjabi language, religion, culture emerges from a syncretic tradition. As Khushwant Singh (1999) notes:
The Punjab, being the main gateway into India, was fated to be the perpetual field of battle and the first home of all the conquerors. Few invaders, if any, brought wives with them, and most of those who settled in their conquered domains acquired local women. Thus, the blood of many conquering races came to mingle, and many alien languages – Arabic, Persian, Pushto, and Turkish – came to be spoken in the land (p13)

He goes onto observe that the egalitarian and liberation philosophy of Sikhism was both a product of this encounter but also shaped the development of the rebellious Panjabi identity. From its inception its inception in the late 15th Century and Guru Nanak’s rebuke of the then Mogul emperor Babur for atrocities, to the early part of the 18th Century and the establishment of the Khalsa army by the 10th Guru of the Sikhs, Gobind Singh, which played a major role in the demise of the Moghul empire. So, for example, before the European enlightenment had not even been conceived, from as early 1500’s we see examples of revolutionary thinking, of a classless, casteless, inclusive just society.

If we fast forward to 1799 – 1839 with the collapse of the Modul empire we see the establishment of the Sikh empire in Panjab under Rule by Maharaja Ranjit Singh – highly respected, ‘secular’ rule with progressive policies on women’s rights, education etc. The empire itself was huge and covered something like a 3rd of the land mass of India ranging from Afghanistan in the West to Kashmir in the North to Delhi in the South. The British, principally through the clever strategies of the East India company, (use of mercenaries, acting as brokers, offering monetary rewards and prestige and patronage had their eyes firmly set on the vast Sikh empire, but, Ranjit Singh was more than a match for them.

After his death in 1839 there were 10 years turmoil over his succession. Having already sowed some seeds, in the power vacuum left by Ranjit and turmoil in the royal household, the East India Company made their decisive move through enticing the Dogra Rajputs, principally, Gulab Singh, was made a hereditary Raja of Jammu by Ranjit Singh, whilst his brother Dhian Singh was the empire’s prime minister, until October 1847. Following the Anglo Sikh Wars in 1845 and 46 and the defeat of the Sikh armies, principally through treachery, the East India Company annexed the Punjab on 2 April 1849 and incorporated it within British India and we saw the beginning of almost 100 years of rule in India with the Sikh Empire/Panjab being the last piece in the jigsaw and the British Ruled until the eventual partition in 1947.

The British established a unique hegemonic strategy to ‘manage’ the rebellious Panjabi’s. They definitely didn’t want them to regroup so, as well as exiling the last sovereign of the Sikh Empire, Maharaja Duleep Singh, to the Landed English Gentry in England, they recruited Panjabi’s and Sikhs in particular into the Armed and security forces in large numbers. They deployed them across the empire, especially in the Far East, Shanghai, Singapore, Malesia, Hong Kong and Europe and installed them as migrant and skilled Laborer’s, especially East Africa.

As well as seeking to co-opt key sections of population into the state, another aspect of the British Hegemonic strategy to weaken the Panjabis was to undermine the educational infrastructure that has been developed Under the Rule of
There is a colonial myth that pre-British Punjab was a land of uneducated natives, but in reality, as documented by the British Historian Dr Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner – who in 1864 became Principal of Government College Lahore and later founded the University of the Punjab in 1882 – in an incredibly detailed book published in 1881 ‘Indigenous Education in the Punjab’.

The Punjabi-Sikh Empire was a lot more advanced than education in Europe and that Punjab had more scholars and intellectuals than anywhere else in the world. Based both on sources of Fakir Khana Nuruddin’s family – Fakir Nuruddin was a minister who had served at the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in various capacities – Robina Shoeb (2017) in an article entitled Refocusing on the Education System under the Sikh Rule describes how Ranjit Singh had developed a novel way of educating people of Punjab:

Maharaja Ranjit Singh desired that every person of his kingdom should be able to read and write. Therefore, he advised Fakir Nuruddin to design a course for this purpose. Fakir Nuruddin prepared a Quaida (booklet) titled Noor” (light) for learning basics of all key languages including Gurmukhi, Shahmukhi, Urdu and Persian. The booklet also included a basic course for learning elementary and everyday mathematics. About 5000 copies of booklet were prepared and distributed among the Numberdars (head of a village) all across Punjab. Each Numberdar was directed to learn Quaida Noor in three months” time, and afterward distribute five additional copies of Quaida Noor among five people more in the village. He was further required to write with his own hand, a letter to Maharaja Ranjit Singh informing that he could write, and has further distributed five copies of Quaida Noor. The same process was repeated with each of the five people who received copy from the Numberdar: after learning the Quaida, he would further prepare five copies of Quaida Noor for distribution among five more people of the village. Thus, the process of learning continued and a chain reaction was started to educate the people in the Punjab. In the start, the Numberdars would not take it seriously, and would not send letters to the Maharaja. All those Numberdars were removed from their Numberdari (status of head of the village)"

Tragically, as Leitner notes, after the Indian Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857, the British decided to ban the Quida Noor and actually used enforced illiteracy as an instrument of oppression. In the carnage of revenge that followed 1857, Leitner notes how the British made a special effort to search every house of a village and to burn every book. Even in the secular schools of Lahore, which used Persian as the medium of instruction, books formed the major bonfire than the British troops ‘cleansed’ the area. With considerable precision, Leitner suggests that before 1857 the Punjab had an estimated 330,000 pupils learning “all the sciences in Arabic and Sanskrit schools and colleges, as well as Oriental literature, Oriental law, Logic, Philosophy and Medicine were taught to the highest standard”, but 30 years later the numbers of pupils had halved. He concludes an entire tradition, far superior to what Europe had to offer, has been destroyed.

**BIRTH OF THE GADDAAR MOVEMENT**

Before 1905-6 there was no open political movement in Punjab against the British regime, but there was a non-violent Sikh movement known as the Kukas or Naamdharis that had not been crushed. Again, imperial history seems to associate Gandhi with non-violent Satyagrah Movement for independence, but he appears much later when Gandhi left South Africa and brought Satyagraha to India in 1915. The Kuka’s, many of whom were being arrested and executed by the British well before the Independence movement, really began by keeping the fires of 1857 Ghadar rebellion smoldering. It was Baba Kesarji, a well-known Kuka and powerful orator who impressed and inculcated the ideas of patriotism and humanism into the mind of the founder of the Ghadar Party, Sohan Singh Bhakna.

Sohan Singh Bhakna born in 1870 in a devout Sikh family in the village of Khutrae Khurd in Amritsar District, Panjab. He wasn’t particularly educated, which was not through design but, as previously mentioned, Government policy to restrict educational opportunities following the annexation of the Panjab. He was the only son of the family like his father and grandfather. The ancestral land had therefore not been divided up, it continued in the form of a single unit. This was quite a rich peasant household in the village with 65 acres of land. Sohan Singh was hardly a year old when his father died. They were devout Sikhs and very charitable and therefore had a good reputation among the people.
He was a founding President of the All-India Kisan Sabha (farmers union) and he became politically active. Though he came from middle peasant stock, like many members of his class, fell into poverty and want due to debt. Like many of compatriots from the Punjab emigrated to America in search of work and to earn money. That was in the years preceding the first world war. Initially, Sohan Singh Bhakna had not gone to America with any political purpose; his aim was to earn some money to pay his debts, to get the land released and to improve his own personal life. He left the Panjab at the age of 40 on 3 February 1909 for America arriving at the port of Seattle. In those days there were no severe restrictions on entering America although such restrictions were there in Canada.

Sohan Singh like many other migrant workers got a job in a mill named Monarch. Nearly two hundred Punjabis were already working in it. About ten thousand Punjabis—mostly Sikhs—settled on the Pacific coast in California and Canada, were working mostly in the lumber industry. Most of them were nonpolitical in the beginning; but their own difficulties abroad, the refusal of the Canadian authorities to allow any further immigration, the refusal of permission to ships carrying Indian emigrants to land in Canadian ports, etc. soon brought them the realisation that these arose because India was a colony of the British imperialists and not an independent nation.

In 1912, a group of mostly Panjabi migrants met in Portland to set up a society “Indian Association of Pacific Coast”. One of the first actions was to publish a paper called Ghadar (Revolution) and a series of pamphlets like Ghadar-di-Gunj. Ailan-i-Jung, Naijan Zamana and Balance-Sheet of British Rule. All these publications emphasised the idea that independence could only be achieved through an armed uprising for which preparation has to be made by political mass agitation, forming of secret societies, collection of arms and work among the army for the purpose. Sohan Singh Bhakna became the first president of the Association which would become known as the Ghadar Party and it was he who recruited Kartar Singh Sarabha into the movement as his trusted right-hand man and active assistant in California.

A lot of these Ghadaris were from the Punjab area, mostly with Sikh backgrounds. Sikhs in the Punjab at that time were very pro-British and were in the British army in very large numbers. They were used all over the world by the British to fight wars, to conquer other countries and to suppress other peoples’ freedom movements. Most Sikhs who started coming to Canada from late nineteenth century onwards were ex-army men and were pro-British. But 1906 onwards more ordinary village people started coming to Canada. Early South Asians thought of themselves as British subjects as India was under the British Empire that time. They would try to impress white people on the streets of Vancouver by wearing their British army regalia. But they were treated here very badly, and white Canadians where very racist towards them.

After the Russian revolution of 1917, many Ghadarites, were inspired by communism, with some even going to Russia to study communism. For example, Bhai Santok Singh after studying there, went back to India and started a workers’ newspaper Kirti in 1926. Subsequently he also started a worker’s party called the Kirti Party, which was keen to bring communism and Marxism to the peoples of the Punjab.
The Ghadar Party was formally established in early 1913 in Oregon and formalized on 1 November 1913 in San Francisco. It was almost entirely made up of Punjabi Sikh who were farmworkers, mill-laborers, seamen, intellectuals and students, led a revolutionary anti-colonial movement for India. Though it was a coalition of different ideologies, the Party had a simple guiding objective: independence of India, at any cost. Through its revolutionary newspaper Ghadar – printed in San Francisco, circulated and read in South Asia, East Asia, North and South America, Mesopotamia, East Africa and Western Europe – the party was able to spread the movement and its message around the world. Within weeks of Britain declaring war against Germany in 1914, a call for a battle of liberation was published in the paper’s Ailan-e-Jang (Declaration of War).

**ENTER KARTAR SINGH SARABHA**

Kartar Singh Sarabha was born in 24 May 1896 in Ludhiana, Punjab India into a Sikh family in the village of Sarabha in the district of Ludhiana, Punjab. His father was Sardar Mangal Singh Grewal and his mother was Sahib Kaur. He was still very young when his father died. His grandfather brought him up with great care. After receiving initial education in his own village, Kartar Singh entered the Malwa Khalsa high school in Ludhiana for his matriculation. He was in tenth class when he went to live with his uncle in Orissa where, after finishing high school, when he was only 15 his family sent him to California in USA for studies at the University of California at Berkeley where on arrival he enrolled for a degree in chemistry. Not dissimilar to today’s international student, Sarabha, who had kept uncut hair and a turban, had to contend with much racism. Moreover, to help to pay for his costs, he joined many of his Indian compatriots in taking up work in the countryside of California as a farm labourer.

There he came face to face with the exploitation attitude of American farmers, and the scorn of the average American worker for Indians. He soon realized slavery to be the biggest curse heaved upon a nation. He exchanged views with his countrymen. The scornful attitude of Americans had opened the eyes of Indians, who could no longer tolerate the satirical atmosphere addressed towards them. Kartar Singh came across many other Indians who shared his views. He collected them together, and organized meetings in which Lala Har Dayal, Pandit Jagat Ram Rihana, Bhai Jawala Singh, and many Indian students, and workers, participated. They deliberated on the causes of the continued enslavement of India. It was felt that a very strong organization was necessary to lead, and carry on, the battle for liberation. This meeting of minds was a prelude to the creation of the organization but it could not carry out any agenda on its own.
During this period, Indian workers in the factories of Oregon and Washington, states had raised their consciousness to a level where they were able to lay the foundations of an organization. On hearing the news that the Ghadar Party had formed in March 1913 Kartar Singh was beside himself with joy upon and he joined immediately. The Ghadar newspaper, which made its appearance on the 1st of November, 1913 owed a lot to his efforts. The newspaper was printed on a hand-operated machine, and Kartar Singh not only wrote the Punjabi text, but also operated the machine, and composed patriotic poetry for it. He also went out among the Sikh farmers, and arranged meetings at which he, and other Ghadar leaders, made speeches urging them to united action against British.

As World War I broke out, members of Ghadar party were openly exhorted and returned to India to make an armed revolt against the British. Kartar Singh left the United States on September 15, 1914, nearly a month ahead of the main body of Sikhs, who were to follow. In keeping with his activist disposition, Kartar Singh returned to his village India via Colombo and immediately resolved to set up a branch of the Ghadar party's modeled on the one in San Francisco. When Bhai Parmanand arrived in India in December 1914 to lead the movement, Kartar Singh was charged with spreading the network in the Ludhiana district.

To strengthen the connection, he went to Bengal to secure weapons, and made contacts with revolutionaries such as Visnu Ganesh Pingley, with whom Kartar Singh visited military cantonments at Meerut, Agra, Benaras, Allahabad,
Ambala, Lahore, and Rawalpindi, with a view to incite soldiers to revolt. However just before the planned revolt was to erupt, there was a massive roundup of the Ghadar leaders, following disclosures made by a police informer, who had gained admittance into the party. Kartar Singh was told to leave the country, and escape to Kabul, but his conscience did not allow him to leave the battlefield. He was finally arrested on the 2nd of March, 1915 at Wilsonpur, in Shahpur district, where they had gone to incite the troops of the 22nd Cavalry.

KOMAGATA MARU INCIDENT

The Komagata Maru incident involved the Japanese steamship Komagata Maru which set sail from Hong Kong on April 4, 1914, carrying 376 Indian passengers – 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims and 12 Hindus. Over a month later, on May 22, the Komagata Maru arrived on the coast of British Columbia. The ship and its passengers did not receive a warm welcome. Following a standoff and legal challenges, other than a few passengers, the Canadian authorities refused entry and on July 23, two months after it arrived, the ship was escorted out of Canadian waters.

Given the intense publicity this incident had gained, the Ghadar Party decided that Sohan Singh Bhakna should follow the Komagata Maru on its return journey and he along with Kartar Singh Sarabha rendezvoused with the passengers of the ship at the port of Yokohama (Japan). There he explained to them the revolutionary policy of the party so that they propagate this policy in India. They also provided passengers of the ship with 200 revolvers and 2000 rounds of ammunition, which had been procured by Kartar Singh Sarabha.

The Komagata Maru eventually returned to Calcutta India on September 26, 1914. British authorities suspected that the passengers were revolutionaries arriving to make trouble. There was an altercation between authorities and passengers, and shooting started. When it ended, 22 people were dead, including 16 passengers. More than 200 of the surviving passengers were imprisoned, including Sohan Singh Bhakna. However, Kartar Singh Sarabha was released.
The *Komagata Maru* incident was widely cited at the time by Indian groups to highlight discrepancies in Canadian immigration laws. Further, the inflamed passions in the wake of the incident were widely cultivated by the Indian revolutionary organisation, the Ghadar Party, to rally support for its aims. In a number of meetings ranging from California in 1914 to the Indian diaspora, prominent Ghadarites used the incident as a rallying point to recruit members for the movement.

Though the Ghadar uprising was mainly in Bengal and Punjab, the main battle-front was the Punjab and north UP. The main fighting force was the returned Ghadar revolutionaries from California. The leadership and the organisation of bomb factories etc. was supplied by Bengal revolutionaries led by Rash Behari Bose. The main repressive blow struck against revolutionaries by the British was in the form of the first and second Lahore conspiracy cases and their offshoot in the Punjab in which 240 were tried, 46 were executed and some 160 were sentenced to transportations and lesser jail terms; and overwhelming majority of them were Ghadarites.

The threat that Indian organizing around the *Komagata Maru* posed to the British Indian Army was of serious concern to British officials. A later wrote to Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden by Sir Austin Chamberlin, highlights the panic on the British authorities about the *Komagata Maru*’s effect on the Sikhs and their loyalty, which he writers constituted ‘many of our best soldiers …and on whom, from the Mutiny onwards, we have been accustomed to rely with confidence for whole-hearted support of the British Raj’. Chamberlain went on to write that, as a consequence of the Canadian government’s treatment of the Sikh passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru*, ‘for the first time in their history, there has now been serious discontent among them and this has been largely due to, or at least made possible by, the exploitation of their grievances’ in immigration matters. (Sohi, 2014)

The trial of arrested leaders in the Lahore conspiracy cases of 1915-1916 highlighted the role of Kartar Singh Sarabha in the movement. Kartar Singh, and six of his comrades were hanged until death in Lahore Central Jail on the 16th of November, 1915. Kartar Singh put the noose around his neck himself, and laughed away death, immortalizing himself. In the short span of life he spent on this earth, and despite his youth, and lack of experience, Kartar Singh sacrificed his life in the cause of liberation of humanity at large, and his countrymen in particular.

He soon became the symbol of martyrdom and many were influenced from his bravery and sacrifice. Bhagat Singh, another great revolutionary of Indian freedom, regarded Kartar Singh as his inspiration, friend and brother. A statue of him was erected in Ludhiana, and Punjabi novelist Nanak Singh wrote a novel called *Ikk Mian Do Talwaran* based on his life. The judges during his trial were impressed by his intellectual skills, but nevertheless he was sentenced to death by hanging.

Kartar Singh was hanged in the Central Jail of Lahore on 16 November 1915, aged just 19 years. As well as a political activist, he was also keen on poetry which entered Panjabi folk lore, further contributing to building him up as a legend and inspiration, particularly for the youth. Indeed, there is one such poem that was widely recited, which really captures the dept of commitment and devotion that Kartar Singh had for the liberation struggle.

> "ਸੇਵਾ ਦੇਸ਼ ਦੀ ਜਾਂਦੀਆਂ ਵੱਖਰੀਆਂ ਚੀਤ ਮੁਰਿਆਂ ਹੰਤ, ਸੀਸ਼ੀ ਦੇਸ਼ ਦੀ ਮੇਰੁ ਚ ਕੈਥ ਪ੍ਰਧਾਨ, ਹਿੰਦੂ ਸਾਹ ਮੂਲਵੀ ਇੰਦਰੀਆਂ ਹੰਤ।"

> "Serving one’s country is very difficult. It is so easy to talk, but anyone who walked on that path, must endure millions of calamities" (Shaheed Bhai Kartar Singh Sarabha)

**CONCLUSION**

While India, and many other nations in the Global South have been officially decolonized, the struggles against imperialism, white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism and violence against minorities and women are still ongoing. Whilst the political contours of the world continue to shift, the legacies of colonialism continue to shape the lived experiences of many people. Human beings worrying ability to forget history – perhaps it’s some kind of evolutionary survival mechanism to help us escape trauma, responsibility or guilt! However, we should not need to be reminded that the history surrounding Kartar Singh Sabha is a recent history of events that took place less than 100 years ago, events
Tragically, following independence, as noted earlier, British and Indian scholars conspired to erase the Ghadar movement’s contributions to the freedom movements in the subcontinent. Official British accounts tended to categories the Ghadar movement as the “Punjab troubles” thereby localising the global scope of the movement and later as “anarchical activities” and the activists as unreasonable madmen, extremists, terrorists and fanatics (D’Souza and Tirmizey (2018 p3/4). Even leftist historians, who one might has expected to be more sympathetic to the Ghadar lehar has failed to recognize the contribution that the movement made in the development of revolutionary praxis.

In their article The Ghadar Movement: Why Socialists Should Learn About It, Rasha D’Sousza and Kasim Tirmizey are critical the Eurocentrism of the Left which they suggest, “has a tendency to assume that progressive politics originates exclusively as reactions to modernity and capitalism”. (D’Souza and Tirmizey (2018). There is no doubt that the Ghadarites were attracted to revolutionary politics associated with Socialism, Marxism, Leninism but this wasn’t merely because they had studied European revolutionary literature, which they did, but because of the deeply embedded progressive intellectual and revolutionary histories drawn from their own indigenous Panjabi tradition. For them, there was no contradiction between professing allegiance to egalitarian faith systems associated with Sikhism or Sufism and socialism. But, seen from a crude European Marxist standpoint that rendered religion as false consciousness, this fusion of religion and revolutionary politics may be seem as somewhat contradictory.

The Legacy of Kartar Singh and the Ghadar movement has valuable lessons to offer for us all, to connect struggles ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘past’ and ‘present’, and to resist violent structures of oppression in the postcolonial world. Through more, and ongoing, conversations, such as the one initiated here at Exeter, accounts of the Ghadar movement can
definitely augment contemporary struggles against racism and capitalism. At a time where universities are looking to decolonise, uncovering histories that have erased or misrepresented, can be a very important way to rupture the dominant perspective of empire which is both inaccurate and damaging.

As I speak, India is riddled with what seems on the surface like age old religious sectarian communalism. No doubt divisions exist in India; they exist throughout the world. From the western secular standpoint, we often view conflict in Asia or Africa as simply a manifestation of the tribal cultures and beliefs of half-educated black and brown people. And uncritical reading of colonial history will reinforce such racial myths, but as a sociologist I know such divisions are not natural, not programmed into certain individuals, but mostly a product of manipulation by governments. The fact the Stockton Gurdwara in California was established in 1912 served as an base and important backer of the Ghadar Party should tell us that for those revolutionaries there was no conflict between religion and revolutionary politics. Indeed, for them their faith was a calling for unity to fight oppression. As Kartar Singh Sarabha so forcefully articulated in his own words in a poem entitled, “asi ki ha’ or ‘who are we’, which I think are as important today as they were 100 years ago.

“What we are”, by: Kartar Singh Sarabha

If anyone asks who we are, Tell him our name is rebel, Our duty is to end the tyranny. Our profession is to launch revolution. That is our namaz, this is our Sandhya, Our puja, our worship. This is our religion, Our work. This is our only Khuda, our only Rama.

REFERENCE


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* This is the opinion of the writer and does not necessarily represent the views of Asia Samachar.

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Excellent writing on one of the most revered revolutionary.
Revolutionary Kartar Singh, the great devotee of Bellona, the goddess of war, was not even twenty years old when he sacrificed himself on the altar of goddess of freedom. Kartar Singh's name comes at the top among these few. Revolution lived in his veins. There was only one aim of his life, only one desire, only one hope - all that held meaning in his life was revolution. Kartar Singh was born in Sarabha, a village in district Ludhiana, in 1896. He was the only son of his parents. Kartar Singh Sarabha. September 07, 2018, Friday. Relevance of Kartar Singh Sarabha, a revolutionary of the Ghadar movement. The attack on Umar Khalid in Delhi put a martyr's village in Punjab on guard.

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