

Gadar Party: The Centenary Year

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It has been a hundred years since the Gadar party was launched in March 1913, in the United States by a band of fiery young Indian expatriates with the aim of waging an armed struggle against British rulers in India. To commemorate the party's centennial, the author recommends that the Indian government should take some concrete steps to create awareness about the party and the radical and revolutionary movement it unleashed.

The Gadar party was formed in the United States in the early twentieth century by migrant Indians, mostly Punjabis. However, the party also included Indians from all parts of India such as Darisi Chenchiah and Champak Raman Pillai from South, Vishnu Ganesh Pingle and Sadashiv Pandurang Khankhoje from West India, Jatinder Lahiri and Taraknath Das from East India, Maulvi Barkatullah and Pandit Permanand Jhansi from Central India and many more. In March 1913, in a meeting at St. Jones, the party was established as the "Hindi Association of Pacific Coast" under the leadership of Lala Har Dayal with Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna as its president. However, it became popularly known as the Gadar Party after it launched its journal "Gadar" on 1 November, 1913, in Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and other Indian languages from its headquarters the Yugantar Ashram in San Francisco. The building which housed the headquarters is now named as the "Gadar Memorial". The party took its name Gadar to consciously identify itself with the first war of Independence in 1857, which the British termed the "Gadar" (revolt). Though the party's planned "Gadar" in India failed to take off in February 1915, more than a hundred Gadar activists paid with their lives, 41 being shot in Singapore alone on 15 February, 1915. Hundreds were imprisoned for long terms with many being sent to the "Kalapani", as the jail in the Andamans was known. The Gadar Movement was the most advanced secular democratic movement of its time whose tradition was upheld and appropriated by Bhagat Singh later with further addition of the socialist ideology.

I visited the Gadar memorial in San Francisco where I had been invited to deliver a lecture on the Gadar party hero Kartar Singh Sarabha on 22 May, 2011, to commemorate his birth anniversary. In addition to visiting this historic site, I got an opportunity to visit the Stockton Gurdwara where many meetings of the Gadar party were held, the Sacramento Cemetery, where not only the Gadar party senior activist Maulvi Barkatullah, but many

other freedom fighters from Punjab have been buried as well, and the Holt farm of the Gadar party vice president Jawala Singh. These historic sites lie in a state of neglect, and I suggest that the Indian government should attempt to restore these sites and create awareness about the Gadar movement, particularly so since this is the centenary year of the party.

The Gadar Memorial

The Gadar Memorial is located at 5, Wood Street in San Francisco. Having been reconstructed, it has lost its heritage character, and even its original name –Yugantar Ashram– finds no reference anywhere. The name was adopted to identify with the early revolutionary movement in Bengal called “Yugantar”. The original name of the building was written in Urdu, Punjabi and English. Now only the changed name is painted on the front wall in English and Hindi with no Punjabi or Urdu version. The building was handed over to the government of India after the country attained independence, and the Gadar party was formally dissolved. Presently it is under the administrative control of the Consulate General of India, San Francisco. There is no proper care-taker of the building, and important documents and items related to the Gadar movement, including the artificial arm of Gadarite Harnam Singh Tundilat, (who lost his arm during the movement and became famous as “Tundilat” or “broken arm lord”) are displayed in glass cases without any lock and key. Most of the time this historic building remains closed, and when someone wants to visit it they need special permission from the Consulate.

This building should be rebuilt on lines of the original heritage building, and named again as the Yugantar Ashram. It should be converted into a library-cum-research centre on the model of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi, even if on a smaller scale. Further the Berkeley campus of the University of California should be involved in this project, and the memorial building should be leased to the University for establishing the Gadar archives and research centre. The Bancroft library of the University already has a Gadar archive with 20 boxes of documents and some digitised records. The Indian Government should also consider establishing the Kartar Singh Sarabha Chair at the University of California, Berkeley, where Sarabha was a student of science in 1912-13, and this Chair could well be linked with the Gadar memorial. Copies of all the documents relating to the Gadar movement, spread across countries where the Gadar party was either active, or had influence like US, Canada, India, Singapore, Philippines, China, Argentina, Brazil, Germany etc. should be brought to this research centre. This would be the best tribute to Sarabha and the Gadar party during its centenary celebrations.

The model of the ship Komagata Maru should also be displayed. A film ‘Continuous Journey’ made by Ali Kazmi on the Komagata Maru incident beautifully captures the moments from that period. This documentary should be shown and distributed throughout Indian schools and colleges during the centenary year.

The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library should acquire photo copies or the digitalised version of the Gadar Archives from the Bancroft library, University of California, Berkeley. Copies of documents housed in New York Public Library and other places in USA, Canada and other countries too should also be acquired. At the Nehru Memorial, a special section on the Gadar movement and the movement led by Bhagat Singh should be created as the two are inseparable from each other.

Stockton Gurudwara and Other Historic Sites

Sacramento Cemetery, where Maulvi Barkatullah's and other Punjabi Muslim freedom fighters' graves are found, a plaque with details should be put up by the Indian government. The caretaker of this cemetery, Patricia Hutchings is keen to know the details and willing to put them up. The Stockton Gurudwara where meetings of the Gadar party activists took place and where a hall still stands in the name of Gadari Babas, has been taken over by Khalistani sympathisers. A big banner "Khalistan Zindabad" with the photograph of Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale is displayed at the entrance of the Gurudwara. The pictures of the Gadar party heroes have been replaced by those of gun toting Khalistani "martyrs", including the killers of Indira Gandhi and general Vaidya. Despite the existence of a prayer room, the Gadar hall has been converted into an additional prayer room with a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib residing there. The local Sikhs who run the Gurudwara are strongly influenced by the Khalistani movement and are ignorant of the glorious past of the Gadar movement. The Indian government can initiate an awareness campaign about the significance of the Gadar movement among local Sikhs/Punjabis and restore the image of the Gurudwara as a historic Gadar building.

At the Holt farm near Stockton, which belonged to the Gadarite Jawala Singh, an identifying plaque with details should be put up by the Indian government.

Above all emphasis should be placed on creating awareness and deepening knowledge of these historic events amongst the younger generations. The history of such events should be taught at schools, and books should be published and distributed in major Indian languages. In particular, the autobiography of the founding president of the Gadar party, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna should be translated into all Indian languages and published, perhaps by the National Book Trust and documentaries and television serials could also be made on the Gadar movement. We should not let this opportunity to reclaim this great legacy of our anti-colonial past be lost to lethargy and bureaucratic delays. The Gadar movement was one of the most important events in the radicalisation of India's freedom struggle and forgetting its history is to lose a part of our own identity.