

The Ghadar Movement in Thailand, 1914–1917: Overseas Indian ‘Rebels’ and Their Multinational Asian Assistants

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Abstract

The Ghadar Movement was an effort by a group of overseas Indians from diverse diasporas around the Indo-Pacific region to set up an armed revolution to free India from the grip of British colonialism. This work mainly argues that Thailand was not merely functioning as a passage of the Ghadarites from abroad to return to India through its borders, but instead that different parts of the country were harboring their various clandestine and seditious missions. These activities were not only carried out by the overseas Indians travelling from abroad, but also by many “local Indians” in Thailand who turned themselves into active underground revolutionaries. By analyzing several cases of multinational Asian “allies” of the Ghadarites in Thailand, this study furthers the discussion initiated by previous scholars on the possible links between the Ghadar Movement and the tide of “Pan-Asianism” flourishing in different parts of Asia during the early twentieth century.

Keywords

Ghadar Movement – Indian Freedom Struggle – Indians in Thailand – Pan-Asianism

1 Introduction

The Ghadar Movement of 1913–18 was one of the early but ultimately unsuccessful attempts of a group of Indians to overthrow the British Raj. What makes this movement particularly outstanding among Indian freedom struggles was its extensive “transnational/transregional” terrain of operation. This movement was initiated by several intellectual expatriate Indians in the Pacific West Coast and joined by thousands of overseas Indians, living in multiple diasporas around the Indo-Pacific region.¹ San Francisco, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Manila, Singapore, and some parts of Thailand, British Malaya, Burma, and Sri Lanka were among the major sites where their networks and activities existed. During the First World War (WWI), these Indians turned themselves into armed revolutionaries, setting up armed revolts in India and neighboring regions. Like many other cases of Indian extremists who did not conform to Gandhi’s non-violent methods, the story of the Ghadar has received fairly little attention in the mainstream history of modern India (Keay 2010, 483).

This article contributes to the Ghadar historiography in three ways. First, it aims to construct the picture of this movement in Thailand. Thailand is often referred to or briefly discussed in previous literature as a vital location for this movement (Nijjar 2019, 184–86; Ramnath 2011, 81–88). However, there is still no comprehensive study on the key events, locations, and people involved, nor the role of Thailand in this movement. Further, in most of the preceding studies, the spotlight is usually given only to a few celebrated Ghadar leaders from America and in India, but the profound contributions of multiple players in other overseas diasporas are rarely seen. The cases of Ghadar members in Thailand will help fill this gap. This leads to the second main objective of the research, namely, to shed some new light on the history of Indian/Thai-Indian communities in Thailand. Hitherto, almost all the literature that represents the Indian ethnic groups in Thailand is focused on their economic, social, and cultural lives (e.g., Sashe 1991, 2003; Rooney 2017; Ayuttacorn et al. 2020). One component that has been constantly left out is their political ventures. This absence leads to a general impression that Indian communities in Thailand were politically inactive, which is in sharp contrast to many of the contemporaneous Indians around the world whose minds and actions were increasingly dominated by anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments, especially from the late nineteenth century onwards. I have found only two

1 The numbers of Ghadar participants estimated by scholars are varied. The suggested figures have been between 3,000–8,000 (Ramnath 2011, 37; Gill 2014, 26; McGetchin 2018, 282).

exceptions – Roger Beaumont 1999 and Sawitree Chareonpong 2014. Both allow one a rare glimpse of how the Indians in Thailand were also highly politically active and shared the same views with their fellow countrymen worldwide at least during the Second World War (wwII). As noted by the two scholars, as soon as the Indian freedom fighters Swami Satyananda Puri, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rash Behari Bose, and Subhas Chandra Bose – came to Thailand during the Inter-War period to wwII, they were welcomed by the “local” Indians with overwhelming support. Huge financial contributions were gathered, and several “local” Indians living in Thailand also risked their welfare to assist in dangerous underground missions (Chareonpong 2014, 117–22, 185–194; Beaumont 1999, 131–34, 223–29). The “sudden” active political engagements of these Indians during wwII inspired me to investigate their political lives prior to this moment. In fact, the two texts above also mention the Ghadar Movement as the dawn of Indian political movements in Thailand (Chareonpong 2014, 111–15; Beaumont 1999, 122–24).

Another fascinating aspect of the movement is its engagement with multiple ideological resources. As Mohammed A. Khan points out, this revolution was “a coalition of different ideologies, persuasions, worldviews, and interests coming together for the primary goal” (Khan 2014, 57). Maia Ramnath also stresses this character, stating that “this very richness of ingredients, of facets, of splice-able threads, is what provided so many different opportunities for collaboration” (Ramnath 2011, 5). In previous works, the Ghadar has usually been described using various conceptual terms. Most frequently, the Ghadar are defined as an anti-British or anti-colonial force (e.g., Sohi 2014; Gill 2014). This is undebatable, as the main goal of these revolutionaries manifesting at the forefront of their propaganda was to eradicate the oppressive British ruler and free India as soon as possible by any cost and by whatever means. Because of their non-peaceful approaches (e.g., terrorism and assassinations), the movement is often associated with anarchism and compared with Russian anarchists (Oberoi, 2009; D’Souza 2018, 19–21). The movement is sometimes engaged with socialism and even labelled as proto-communist, since a large portion of its members were leftist laborers and scholars, many of whom, after the Ghadar revolution eventually failed, continued their political moves in the 1920s–30s as explicit communist supporters (Ramnath 2011, 123–65; D’ Souza 2018, 22–24). Likewise, the movement is regularly recognized as a nationalist movement. However, which type of “nationalism” the movement represented – secular/religious/liberal/republican – is still debated (e.g., Naidis 1951; Ramnath 2011, 70–75). As its third goal, this study intends to explore the connection between the Ghadar and another tide of political ideology

flourishing contemporaneously along with those mentioned earlier, namely “Pan-Asianism”.

Pan-Asianism arguably began around the late nineteenth century and spread over diverse parts of the Indo-Pacific region after Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905.² Previous literature has rarely counted this ideal as a key element in the Ghadar Movement. This is probably because, among the Ghadar leaders, there was no one like Jawaharlal Nehru, Sun Yat-sen, Okawa Shumei, or other celebrated idealists who were well-known as the explicit promoters of the “Asia for Asiatics” discourse in their speeches and writings (Mishra 2012, 154–55). The close collaboration between the Indian revolutionaries and the “white” Germans in the Ghadar Movement may be another factor that has prevented scholars from associating the movement with Asianism. However, there are a few scholars, such as Ramnath (2011) and Khan (2014), who attempt to discuss connections between the Ghadar and the doctrine. As pointed out by Ramnath, several of the Ghadar activists such as Barakatullah, Taraknath Das, Rash Behari Bose, and Chenchiah, did develop some ties with prominent supporters of Pan-Asianism in the Tokyo milieu, including Okawa Shumei and Sun Yat-sen. As Ramnath further claims, Sun’s political principles – combining moderate socialism with democratic republicanism – were similar to those of the Ghadar; Sun also provided a model for Ghadar’s revolutionary activities and occasionally mentored Indian activists. Ramnath also suggests that Taraknath Das, a co-creator of the Ghadar Movement, was in fact a prominent advocate of Pan-Asianism as a tool for Indian freedom, chiefly to earn Chinese and Japanese support. A book that Das wrote explicitly promoted the Pan-Asianist approach and he traveled to Japan and China several times to advocate for collaboration. However, as Ramnath concludes, the Pan-Asianist alliance ultimately did not bear fruit for the Ghadar Movement; it was outstripped by “national” interests of each partner and nationalism remained the prominent mode of the political movements at the time (Ramnath 2011, 116–22). Ramnath’s work is so far the most elaborate attempt to examine the influence of the Pan-Asianistic ideal on the Indian revolutionary, and I wish to carry this discussion further by providing some case studies which can be observed through this movement in Thailand. I suggest that the Pan-Asianistic elements of the Ghadar Movement may not only be seen through the idealistic speeches or writings of its prominent leaders, or the connections between them and the other celebrated ideologues of the genre, but also through networks of their minor collaborators on the battleground.

2 For further details about the development of “Pan-Asianism” in the early twentieth century see Aydin (2007, 31–38) and Mishra (2012, 1–11, 154).

This paper mainly relies on a large volume of documents from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs (КТ) kept in the Thai National Archives (NA) in Bangkok. Its Thai title can be translated into English as “*The Indians are planning to cause mutiny against the British*,” and it is a fresh archival source that has never been used extensively, especially for this topic.

2 From San Francisco to Thailand

The Ghadar Party was founded in San Francisco in 1913 by a group of Indian scholarly activists on the Pacific West Coast who felt oppressed by the discriminatory treatment they and their countrymen had received under the British Empire.³ They were stimulated by diverse political groups affected by Western imperialism – nationalists, anti-imperialists, Pan-Asianists – around the world during the early twentieth century. To propagate their ideas, the Ghadar leaders began by organizing meetings at their headquarters. However, the crucial move which led the Ghadar to be very successful in expanding their networks was the distribution of their publications such as the weekly newspaper, *The Hindustan Ghadar*. Their publications were filled with “highly seditious” anti-British messages, and emotional requests to all Indians to support their movement by donating and spreading their message to as many Indians as possible. When the right time came, they would together return to their motherland to raise an armed revolution. Thousands of copies of their newspapers were smuggled across the Pacific Ocean to Indian diasporas in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and to India. Additionally, missionaries were sent out to “preach”, to collect funds and to recruit more supporters. The Ghadar leaders first thought they might need at least a decade to prepare for the revolution (Ramnath 2011, 38). However, the outbreak of WWI less than a year later presented them a great opportunity. The British Empire was going to be busy with wars in Europe. Moreover, the German government offered to secretly support their movement with money, arms and military training if they wished to fight against their colonial master.⁴ The Ghadar leaders decided to move forward with their goal. Several spots in neighboring regions were chosen as headquarters. Messages were sent out to all subscribers living in overseas communities requesting them to immediately return to India or

3 See esp. the case of the ship “*Komagata Maru*” (Naidis 1951, 252–53; Sohi 2014, 113–18).

4 Because of this, the Ghadar Movement has also often referred to as “the Indo-German Plot” or “the Indo-German Conspiracy.” For further details of the Indo-German cooperations see McGetchin (2018) and Nijjar (2019).

to give assistance to the Ghadar activists sent to their local area. (Naidis 1951, 251–53; Puri 1980, 54–57; Malhi 2021, 436–43)

Copies of Ghadar newspapers appeared in different parts of Thailand from early 1914. There is no clear evidence who decided to risk their welfare to distribute them in Thailand. An Indian living in the northern province of Phrae said that at the time he did not dare to keep the newspapers in his house “from fear” and did not [dare to] send them to anyone else (NA. KT. 97.1/17). However, some individuals who received the newspapers immediately decided to join the revolutionary path. An activist from Surat Thani said that after he and his brother read the newspapers, in order to help spread its ideas, they managed to forward their copies to other random people in India “whose names [and addresses] they found signed to testimonials in a book advertising medicines,” thinking they would be men of some importance (NA. KT. 97.1/21). They also wrote letters to Har Dayal, a celebrated Ghadar founder, saying that they were ready to travel to America to assist the party. A reply arrived in July 1914, requesting them not to go there, but instead, to preach the Ghadar message to other local Indians and to provide other assistance in their area (NA. KT. 97.1/21).

The real beginning of Ghadar activities in Thailand started in 1915 when Pundit Sohan Lal Pathak, a renowned Ghadar martyr, arrived to the country from America (Ramnath 2011, 86). He immediately travelled across the country to get in touch with local Indians. In a short time, he had convinced a number of influential Indians in several diasporas of Thailand to take up leading roles in their area. With help from local Indians, the Ghadar missions in Thailand seemingly made good progress. When other leading Ghadar members from abroad – America, China, the Philippines, Singapore, Burma, Laos – followed into the region shortly after, one of them said that “the soil [of Thailand] was [already] prepared” (NA. KT. 97.1/21). In her work, Chareonpong referred to the Ghadar as the Sikh nationalist movement and estimated there were around 10 activists in Thailand (Chareonpong 2014, 111–12). I argue that this number is too small. Counting only the active activists, there were certainly no less than eighty figures, and quite possibly beyond a hundred, including local Indians and those Indians from abroad. These activists originated from all parts of the subcontinent, from a variety of occupations, economic classes, and social standings. Although the majority of them were Indo-Sikhs, there were also many other Hindus and Muslims playing prominent roles. Based on my observation, the Ghadar network in Thailand was very “inclusive” in nature; it was one of the rare occasions, especially after the Partition of Bengal in 1905, when Indians from all major sects closely worked together for India without religious friction (NA. KT. 97.1/13; 97.1/14; 97.1/16; 97.1/17). This has led

many scholars to view the Ghadar as a secular rather than an ethno-religious movement (e.g., Ramnath 2011, 3–4, 70–75).⁵

3 Ghadar Activities in Thailand

The main goal of the Ghadar leaders in Thailand was to form at least two groups of armed forces which would be sent to set up mutinies in a part of British India. One would be sent directly into Burma and another into Yunnan, from where an expedition could be launched against Burma. The leaders were expecting that increasing numbers of overseas Indians would arrive and Indians in Thailand would subscribe to this plan. When enough people were collected, military training would be provided to these volunteers with the help of some German officers offered by the German government. Further, Thailand was also used as a base for collecting guns and ammunition, purchased and sent by ships from the Pacific Coast and elsewhere before smuggling them into British India. To achieve these two main goals, several tasks were to be done in Thailand. First, they needed to make Thailand a safe haven to accommodate and provide any necessary support to their members from abroad on special missions, or on their return trip to India. Some sites in Thailand were to be chosen and prepared as hiding places for both people and weapons. The plans for smuggling arms needed to be set. Thailand was also used as a center for producing bombs and printing more copies of Ghadar newspapers to be smuggled into British India. To achieve this, more financial support and manpower from local Indians in Thailand was necessary (NA. KT. 97.1/12; 97.1/14; 97.1/16; 97.1/17; 97.1/21; Ramnath 2011, 78–79).

Thailand, with its strategic location, turned out to play another crucial role. It became a major hub of communication that connected collaborators in India (mainly in Punjab and Bengal) with other key headquarters far away in the east. When people of those eastern headquarters wanted to send people or secret messages into India, they usually stopped in Thailand first and contacted the network. The members in Thailand would then manage to pass them through by varied means. The German consulate in Bangkok was also a major point of contact between the Ghadar leaders and their German allies (NA. KT. 97.1/14; 97.1/16; 97.1/17). The assassination of some important British colonial officers was among the “ways” of the Ghadar. However, it seems that this was not in their plans for Thailand. There were, in fact, some local Ghadar

5 The works which specially discuss the secular-religious binary of the Ghadar Movement include Gill 2014 and Khan 2014.

members who induced others to take the lives of the British consul or British officers in Thailand in order to avenge the arrests of their friends, but such extreme plans never materialized (NA. KT. 97.1/14). In my view, the Ghadar leaders might have felt that killing the British in Thailand would bring too much attention and lead to the dissatisfaction of the Thai government towards them, which might in turn cause them to lose the country as a strategic base.

4 Major Sites of Operation and Prominent Local Ghadar Activists

Previous studies which mention Ghadar activities in Thailand have usually focused on those in the capital – Bangkok. Beaumont and Chareonpong describe how Phahurat district – known as “Little India” – was turned into the site of the Ghadar operation where information was actively exchanged and arms were collected (Beaumont 1999, 122; Chareonpong 2014, 30–31). But, in fact, the sites of Ghadar networks impressively stretched to various parts of Thailand from north to south, including the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Nakhon Lampang, Phrae, Nan, Mae Hong Son, Tak, Nakorn Sawan, Surat Thani, and Nakhon Sri Thammarat. In each of these areas, there were at least one or two (and usually more) prominent local Indians who worked devotedly for the Ghadar cause in close collaboration with the movement’s leaders from abroad. These Indians developed highly active communication networks. They often travelled to one another to pass orders, news, and money. Also, when people from one area sensed any danger from authorities, they would run to other areas to hide. It was mainly the Thai railway lines that linked these Indian revolutionaries (NA. KT. 97.1/14; 97.1/17).

Evidently, the most important center of Ghadar activities in Bangkok was the Sikh temple in Phahurat named Singh Sabha Gurdwara. When the activists from abroad first arrived in Thailand via Bangkok, this was the place they needed to look for in order to make contact with other collaborators (NA. KT. 97.1/17). For a period during 1915 at the peak of the Ghadar Movement, the granthi of this gurdwara was Ganga Singh. According to informants, this man was not a real granthi; he was not even able to read the Sikh scripture which was a granthi’s most basic responsibility. Instead, he was a Ghadar activist who was elevated to this position. Ganga Singh was assigned with the task of welcoming newcomers. When a Ghadar activist came, after his identity was proven by several methods (to ensure he was not a spy), Ganga Singh would bring him to one of their houses. If the mission in Thailand of that Ghadar activist required a long period, a separate house might be rented for him. And that Ghadar activist would have to prepare an excuse of staying, such as searching

for a cousin or finding a job. This would make him look like a usual Indian visitor or migrant in the eyes of the Thai authorities (NA. KT. 97.1/14). The Singh Sabha Gurdwara was also the place where the Ghadar meetings were held. The most seditious speeches against the British Raj were announced there by all its prominent leaders to local Indians. Within this place, as witnesses reported, Indians in Bangkok cheerfully reacted to revolutionary messages, donated large sums of money, and took an oath following their religious customs to devote themselves to the movement (NA. KT. 97.1/21).⁶ It is interesting that although he was not the real temple leader, Ganga Singh was appointed as the granthi of the most prominent Sikh temple situated at the heart of Little India in Bangkok without being protested against or reported by any Indians to the British Legation or Thai authorities. This may be an indication that the Ghadar was widely supported within the Sikh Indian/Indian communities in Bangkok.

A restaurant of Gopal Dass was also known among the Ghadarites as a key site of their operation in Bangkok. After the movement kicked off, Gopal Dass was financially supported to set up this restaurant in which its upper room became “a recognized resort for wandering Indians” (NA. KT. 97.1/14). According to a report by an Indian spy of British authorities, on one night of his visit at a very late hour, he found almost thirty Pathans and Punjabis gathering at the restaurant and listening to a Punjabi singer. This singer had just come from America together with another Tamil Indian. This secret agent believed that he was witnessing a Ghadar gathering in disguise. The restaurant was also used as a hiding place when arrest warrants were issued by the Thai government, and as a spot for exchanging information and storing supplies, including pistols (NA. KT. 97.1/14; 97.1/15; 97.1/17).

Buddha Singh was the most prominent local Indian without whose wholehearted support the Ghadar activities in the area could never have materialized. Singh was a wholesale cloth merchant and one of the wealthiest and most influential Sikhs in Bangkok at the time. He was the one who managed to have Ganga Singh as the granthi in Singh Sabha Gurdwara. He also financially supported the opening of Gopal Dass’s restaurant. Certain witnesses said that Buddha Singh had many Indians in different parts of Thailand under his influence and, because of his invitation, many of them became active supporters of the Ghadar (NA. KT. 97.1/13; 97.1/14; 97.1/21). Apart from the Phahurat gurdwara and Gopal Dass’ restaurant, many other spots in Bangkok, such as another major Sikh temple “Kuka” and the shops of diverse

6 For a discussion on special roles of overseas gurdwaras in the Ghadar Movement, see Sohi 2014.

Indian traders in the middle of their communities, were also used for Ghadar's meetings and propaganda (NA. KT. 97.1/21).

Chiang Mai was another center of the movement, primarily due to its location close to the borders of Burma and China and the great size of its local Indian community. As with Bangkok, the Sikh gurdwara played a crucial role there. One informant recounted that he had once witnessed in this place a dramatic scene of swords being plunged in water and waved over the heads of new recruits who were giving their oaths of allegiance (NA. KT. 97.1/21). Large sums of money could be collected, evidencing the eagerness and devotion of many Indians in this city to the anti-British revolution. Chiang Mai also provided large numbers of active members from multiple sectors – businessmen, shop owners, cloth peddlers, and employees (overseers and workers) of the Royal State Railways of Siam (NA. KT. 97.1/14; 97.1/17; 97.1/21). One of the most prominent Ghadar figures in Chiang Mai was Wasawa Singh, who was also specially arranged to be in the post of the granthi to facilitate the movement. Formerly he used to be a soldier in the “92nd Punjabis” – an infantry of the British Indian Army – and was discharged on his own request at the end of 1913. In March 1914, he found employment in Burma. In June 1915 he decided to come to Thailand, likely with the specific aim to join the Ghadar. Apart from leading activities in Chiang Mai, Wasawa Singh also played a role as a major intermediary between Thailand and other overseas headquarters. When the gurdwara in Chiang Mai was going to be inspected by the Thai authorities at the request of the British, Wasawa Singh threw out a pound each of potash, red sulfide of arsenic and sulfur – all materials necessary for making explosives. Apparently, he was also responsible for bomb production (NA. KT. 97.1/13; 97.1/14).

Phrae was probably the most crucial site for the missions in Thailand. A small district in this province called Ban Pa Koh was chosen to be the main spot to prepare militant groups and collect arms for the mutinies in Burma. This location conferred several advantages. Phrae was situated close to both the Burmese and Chinese borders and was a rural area surrounded by forest. Deep in its jungle, plenty of suitable spots could be selected to build secret shelters out of the view of British and Thai authorities and their scouts. At the same time, this spot was convenient enough to be reached by all Ghadarites because Ban Pa Koh was a stop of the Thai northern trains. Moreover, the northern railway lines around this area were still under construction, and many Indians were hired as laborers and train's officers. It provided a perfect pool for new recruitment. Also, Ghadar members from other places could use job-seeking in the State Railways, just like many others of their countrymen, as their pretext to come to this district without raising too many suspicions (NA. KT. 97.1/17).

Another factor making this place ideal was that the construction of the Thai northern rail lines in this area was under the control of German engineers hired by the Thai government to facilitate the construction. Some of these officers appeared to be those who were secretly helping the Indian revolution. Ban Pa Koh was thus another suitable meeting place for the Ghadarites and their German allies, in addition to the German consulate in Bangkok (NA. KT. 97.1/16; 97.1/17; 97.1/18).

Many Ghadarites reported that they knew or heard from others about concealment places around the forest of Phrae. Arms and other provisions would be offloaded from the train and then moved by foot or by carts into those places. A report says that two local Ghadar members in Phrae, Acharya Singh and Surti, were “in habit of transporting certain necessities of life to the jungle plantation which seditious Indians were said to have established” (NA. KT. 97.1/14; 97.1/17). However, there is no clear evidence of how many such spots really existed, where exactly they were situated or how many Indian revolutionaries assembled there. Some people believed (with disappointment) that it was only a dozen. Others said they had as many as three hundred scattered across different points (NA. KT. 97.1/17). In my estimation, there were certainly more than a dozen Indians gathering in Thai forests at some point in 1915, but “hundreds” would be an overstatement. This latter number was probably hyperbole used to gain new recruits and amass support. After constant rumors, in October 1915, the Thai authority eventually found a place (the only one discovered after several searches) which was likely to be one such hiding spot. It was exposed by a Pathan spy working for Thai officers who reported that he met with two Lao men carrying loads of suspicious material into the jungle. After the quest, four unregistered browning pistols and 431 rounds of ammunition were discovered. The Lao carriers confessed that they were hired by three Indians to transport these objects. The search led to further discovery of a house on a plantation nearby. In the house, Thai police found another four unregistered pistols, 2550 rounds of ammunition and, most interestingly, two large empty subterranean chambers (NA. KT. 97.1/14; 97.1/24). From the testimony of a Ghadar confessor, this building was one of several places that they had planned to use for storing weapons. Another three spots were (1) in Denchai, where a “tunnel” was being dug by day while work stopped at night, (2) in “Chendrai” (both in Phrae), and (3) a boat to be purchased and put on the river at Paknampho in Nakorn Sawan Province (NA. KT. 97.1/16; 97.1/17).

One of the most important local Ghadarites in Phrae was Amar Singh. As recounted in his own testimony given to the British authorities, Amar Singh had started his anti-British fighting long before he joined the cause of the Ghadar. In 1907 when he was in Burma, he met with the celebrated Indian activist

Lala Lajpat Rai who had been confined in the Mandalay Fort by the British government.⁷ Wishing to pay respect to the man, although it was an unlawful act in the eyes of the British authority, Amar Singh decided to bow. Because of this, he was arrested and blacklisted by the colonial police, driving him to move to several other places in Burma and eventually Thailand. He married a Thai woman, started a family, and worked in several places. At the time he met the Ghadar leader Sohan Lal, he was working in Phrae as an overseer in the State Railways. After he decided to join, Ghadarites from abroad began to pass into the forest of Phrae and many went further across the Thai border with his assistance. He was also involved in the smuggling of arms and assigned to be a center of fund distribution to other activists who needed it for travelling to India or Burma. He was also a key mediator between the leaders from abroad and local Indians especially those workers for the railway, as well as between activists in Thailand and those of other overseas headquarters (NA. KT. 97.1/14; 97.1/16; 97.1/17).

Amar Singh was eventually arrested, deported to British India for prosecution, and sentenced to many years in prison. However, it is highly possible that this was not the end of his career as a freedom fighter. The name “Amar Singh” appears in the study of Sawitree Chareonpong mentioned earlier which discusses the Indian freedom movement in Thailand during WWII. According to Chareonpong, it was not the celebrated Subhas Chandra Bose who first chose Thailand as a base to support his freedom struggle. In fact, the ground had already been prepared by another celebrated Indian nationalist, Rash Behari Bose, who had come to Bangkok in the early 1940s. It was after Rash Behari Bose was able to get in touch with two local Indians, Amar Singh and Pritam Singh, and received great support from them that the underground Indian independence movement could truly be kicked off in Thailand. As Chareonpong further describes, the local Indian Amar Singh was an extremist who had moved against the British during WWI and, because of that, he was jailed in Burma for 22 years. After being released, he moved to Thailand and waited for a suitable time to continue his anti-colonial mission (Chareonpong 2014, 117–18). This description of Amar Singh of WWII, though very brief, corresponds with the story of the Ghadar activist Amar Singh of Phrae during WWI. Although I still have no concrete evidence to confirm that the two Amar Singhs were the same person, the circumstantial evidence leads me to that assumption. Another indication that may help support this hypothesis is the political background of Rash Behari Bose. This freedom fighter, playing an outstanding role in the Indian independence movement in East Asia during

7 For further information about Lala Latpat Rai, see Copland 2001, 42–45.

the early 1940s, is known to be a political refugee living in Japan since 1915. A reason that forced him to escape from the British's grasp in that year was because of his role as a leader of a failed Ghadar mutinous plot in Bengal. When in Japan he also continued to work with other leading Ghadarites there (Ramnath 2011, 53, 77, 116). It is highly plausible that the two revolutionaries – Rash Behari Bose and Amar Singh – had somehow acknowledged each other prior to the 1940s through the Ghadar network. If my assumption is correct, this is the first tangible evidence which confirms the connection between the two periods of Indian Independence movements in Thailand – during WWI and WWII.

5 Multinational Asian Collaborators and Sympathizers of the Ghadar

Besides the Indians and their German alliance, diverse individuals from Asian nations seem to be another group of people who gave some tangible contributions to the progress of this movement. The first prominent illustration is a Chinese named Sung. He appeared in Bangkok during mid-1915, meeting with some German officers and the Ghadar leaders. This man was assigned by the Ghadar network in Shanghai to send crucial news relating to the transport of weapons. He also needed the Ghadar leaders in Thailand to introduce him to their colleagues in Calcutta. His purpose of going to Bengal was because another Chinese named Kwong who was working with the revolutionaries there had written to Shanghai asking for another Chinese who knew English to be sent to assist him in communicating with Indians on the ground (NA. KT. 97.1/17; 97.1/18). Therefore, apparently at least two Chinese were working for the Ghadar. The next example was Mohamed Ismail who was said to be “a native of Penang”. He had long lived in Bangkok and was working as an officer in the Thai Postal Department. The British accused this “Malay” of being a supporter of the Ghadar. According to their claims, this man was induced by Indian cloth traders in Bangkok to write to the United States to subscribe for Ghadar seditious newspapers and had regularly received them. He was further described as “a creature” of “an Arab man” named Habib Idress who was also working as an intermediary between the Germans in Bangkok and the Ghadarites (NA. KT. 97.1/16). Several Burmese in Thailand were also suspected of being involved. One was Muang Tun Tin, a Burmese and a British subject working as head clerk in the Thai Forest Department in Phrae. He was said to be a subscriber of the Ghadar newspapers and helped to spread all sorts of anti-British messages. He was also “a great friend” of a local Ghadar leader in Tak named Bakshish Singh. As mentioned in a report, after Bakshish Singh was

arrested by the Thai authorities, Muang Tun Tin came out to warn people not to give any evidence against this Indian Ghadarite. (NA. KT. 97.1/16; 97.1/17). Sundar Singh, a leading Ghadar activist of Nakorn Lampang also referred to another rich Burmese merchant who was always asking him about the progress of the Ghadar missions (NA. KT. 97.1/20).

There were also a few ordinary Thais implicated as coworkers of the Ghadarites. One former activist recounted joining a group of the core leaders by train from Bangkok to Ban Pa Koh, bringing with them a box and a well-wrapped bundle consisting of some important materials. When they got off the train, “a Siamese woman who had in her hands a small basket containing BIRIS for sale” came towards them and quickly took the materials away (NA. KT. 97.1/17). Apparently, this woman was hired to help smuggle their illegal contraband which included weapons, letters and seditious papers, or provisions for those hiding in the jungles. Another Ghadar member also referred to a Thai man in Bangkok while he was assigned to carry a letter from Manila to Thailand. He had to hand it over only to a person that could present to him a sign similar to the one which appeared on the letter’s cover. When he was getting off the boat in Bangkok, a Thai man came aboard with the sign, took the letter from him, and left without saying a word (NA. KT. 97.1/16). It is possible that the two Thais above could simply be insignificant couriers hired with little idea that they were involved in an anti-British insurgence. However, there is an exceptional case of another Thai woman who certainly worked for the Ghadar with her eyes wide open. The name of this woman cannot be traced. All we know is that she was in Bangkok during mid-1915 and her house was located near Hua Lampong, the central railway station. She was described as speaking English very well, being very smart, and that her husband was a member of a group of Thais who wanted a parliament system in Thailand. Likely because of that he was imprisoned for life. This woman was introduced to the Ghadar leaders by a German ally named “Mr. Fitchz”. At the payment of 60 ticals per month, she became the main mediator to pass the Indo-German secret messages and other unlawful materials.⁸ Every day, a boy who lived with this woman would be sent to the houses of some leading activists to receive their messages. When the Germans procured some pistols, she would arrange to bring the weapons to her house before notifying the Indians to pick them up. She was also involved in smuggling unlawful materials from Bangkok to the hinterland provinces. According to a Ghadar informant, the shipping went well because this woman had some special connections with the guards and officials working in the Thai railway. Moreover, her house was known among a

8 “Tical” was the former standard monetary unit of Thailand before being replaced by “baht”.

core group of Ghadar leaders as a sanctuary in case any of them faced serious dangers from the authorities. She confirmed this to a new arriving member herself (NA. KT. 97.1/17; 97.1/18). Manifestly, this Thai woman, like other Asian colleagues mentioned earlier, knew exactly what illegal actions she was involved with, but she was nonetheless ready to take those risks.

Besides these ordinary Thais, I suggest that we may also be able to find more traces of Ghadar sympathizers, if not collaborators, among the Thai government officials. This statement may be highly questionable considering the correspondence between the Thai government, which was being represented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the British Legation at the time relating to this movement. In those diplomatic letters, the Thai government typically expressed their goodwill and conformity towards the British Empire whenever they were requested to investigate and/or arrest Indians the British had pointed out. At least sixty arrest warrants for Indians were issued by the Thai regime from 1915–17. After detention, these arrestees would be deported to Burma or Singapore in accordance with the desire of the British. Therefore, Chareonpong is right to mention that the Thai government chose their alliance with the powerful British Empire over the Indian revolutionaries (Chareonpong 2014, 30). However, I argue that the diplomatic correspondence actually contains multiple signs of tensions between the two authorities. Many times, the British representatives made complaints against Thai government officers for their foot-dragging, half-hearted approach, and for mistakes which led to chances for some Indian suspects to escape or to destroy proof of their treason. An example of the British's critiques is as follows:

I was afraid it would be difficult to find anything incriminating in them, for they were not seized at the time of his arrest [...] There was thus plenty of time afforded to destroy all the seditious papers. I understand the Governor was not instructed to seize papers, only to arrest Sunder[sic] Singh, and carried out his instructions literally.

(NA. KT. 97.1/22)

The British seemingly implied that those Thai officers were sympathetic towards the Indian rebels and went against the interest of the British. In one such case, the British Legation even explicitly accused a Thai provincial governor of befriending the seditious Indians in the area under his control (NA. KT. 97.1/24). The assumptions of the British envoys may not be groundless, especially when one goes beyond the diplomatic correspondence and investigates the reports from the Thai Ministry of Interior and provincial officers who had been directly assigned to look for traces of Indian sedition against the

British in different areas. Most reports from local Thai officers concluded that there was no such attempt and remarked that the British were paranoid or believed in rumors. In some of them, the unwillingness of the Thais to work for the British and their dissatisfaction towards some “white” officers was obvious (NA. KT. 97.1/13; 97.1/16; 97.1/22; 97.1/24). Moreover, several reports reflect the attempt of Thai officials to give protection to non-Indian Asians working under them who were accused by the British of being one of the Ghadar’s associates. For example, when the British identified the native of Penang Mahomed Ismail as a Ghadar propagandist, the Thai Postal Department insisted that from their investigation this man was not, or was no longer, involved in such activities, and nothing should be done (NA. KT. 97.1/17). Also, the British requested several times that the Thai authorities search for that Thai woman mentioned earlier who lived near Hua Lampong of Bangkok and was a key collaborator of the Ghadar, but the Thai authorities remained silent on this issue in their correspondences. Evidence remains insufficient to assume that the Thai government was a supporter of the Indian revolutionaries instead of the British Raj. Nonetheless, one can say these local Thai officials may have had more sympathy towards their Indian neighbors’ freedom struggle than has previously been imagined, especially when considering the issue at the individual level. It also clearly shows that the Thai government had hardly seen the Indian diasporas as a whole, or even these activists as an enemy who could be dangerous to the Thai state and people; they were only troublemakers for the British. This information may help to explain why Thailand was chosen as a major base for the Ghadar network in the first place, and how underground activities could exist in the country at least for a period.

With diverse examples from Thailand, I argue that the progress of the Ghadar Movement on the ground, at the most pragmatic level, was not merely dependent on the devotion of overseas Indians, but also relied on assistance and sympathies, explicitly and implicitly, of their “allies” from diverse Asian nations. As the evidence reveals, most of them were fully aware of what the Ghadarites were doing and were ready to take the risks along with the Indians in breaking the local laws and challenging the British Empire; it could cost whatever they had established in Thailand, or even their life in the worst case. I believe that, for these people, their decision to help the Indians were beyond financial, but engaged with their political beliefs. For some, such as the Burmese, the Malay, and the Laos, it was highly likely to be anti-British or anti-colonial sentiments that drew them towards the Indians’ cause. But these ideologies may not be well applicable to the cases of their Thai and Chinese partners who had only indirect experiences of colonial rule at the time. For the latter two nations, and in my opinion applicable for all Asian assistance of

the Ghadar, I suggest that it was the tide of Pan-Asianism that was flourishing in various parts of Asia that influenced their political sentiments and backed their choice to assist the Indian freedom fighters.

6 Conclusion

As this study reveals, during WWI various areas in Thailand were used by the Ghadarites to prepare for the uprisings against the British Empire. Multiple clandestine and seditious missions were in progress here, including preaching mutinous messages, collecting financial support, forming militant groups, smuggling weapons, producing explosives, and printing forbidden pamphlets. Thailand also functioned as a main hub of communication between different overseas diasporas and India, and between the Indians and their multinational partners. No less than a hundred Ghadarites, among several thousands in their networks worldwide, were actively materializing their assignments within Thai territory. The number of participants was not very small considering that it arose at the peak of British power in India, when the majority of their compatriots were yet unable to imagine the idea of full “*swaraj*” because of the belief that Indians were not ready, that it was impossible for them to overcome the invincible colonizers, or of simple fear for their lives. Also, the research reveals that diverse Indian migrants in Thailand had never cut themselves from the political sentiments shared by their fellow countrymen worldwide. Further study on this latter aspect should be pursued as I believe that it will help us to have a better understanding of the Indian independence movements in Thailand during the Inter-War period and WWII. Lastly, this study highlighted the roles of some local Thai officers, ordinary Thais and other diverse multi-national Asian supporters and sympathizers of the Ghadar in Thailand. Although these trivial Asian partners left no writing to record their political beliefs, I put forward a question whether we can see these cases as evidence of Pan-Asianism at work.

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