Some Aspects of the Communist Movement in Colonial Punjab: Testimony of the Participants

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This paper seeks to understand the anti-imperial struggle through the writings of five prominent Punjabi Communist stalwarts, Gurcharan Singh Sahnsara, Bhagat Singh Bilgha, Chain Singh Chain, Sohan Singh Josh and Naina Singh Dhoot. As all of them hailed from families with meager means they could not get substantive formal education. Despite that shortcoming they started their political careers at the early age and came under the influence of the Communist ideology. They took on British imperialism and participated in struggles of the peasantry. They strived hard in building cadres of communist organization and had to endure imprisonment. Despite all the hardships, they persevered and as a consequence had a tremendous success in winning over a large following. The paper makes use of Punjabi vernacular personal accounts to study these personalities. The paper brings to the foreground all those epistemic forms and narratives that had hitherto been surviving on the margins.

This paper revolves around the writings of five prominent Communist activists of colonial Punjab viz. Gurcharan Singh Sahnsara, Bhagat Singh Bilgha, Chain Singh Chain, Sohan Singh Josh and Naina Singh Dhoot. We find a remarkable similarity in their social backgrounds and political careers. All of them belonged to the class of small peasantry, which was based in the central districts of the province. They could not acquire substantive formal education owing to lack of means in their rural households. They acquired knowledge regarding aspects of contemporary life from the school of experience. They plunged into the political arena at a young age and played unusually long innings, extending beyond half a century in almost all instances. They fought against British imperialism, participated in the struggles of peasants and workers, built the cadre of communist organizations and, in the process, suffered several terms in colonial jails. Displaying a firm commitment to Marxism and making tremendous sacrifices, they played a pioneer role in the emergence and growth of the communist movement in South Asia in general and Colonial Punjab in particular. They appear to have nurtured strong reservations regarding the growing body of literature on the anti-imperialist struggle and the communist movement.[1] Whilst they may have lacked the methodological equipment of professional historians, they brought themselves to narrate their personal experiences of political involvement in a simple idiom, so that the substance of their role was not overshadowed by the weight of academic jargon. Since these writings (except the memoirs of Sohan Singh Josh and Naina Singh Dhoot)

were produced in Punjabi, they remained inaccessible to a substantial readership.[2] This paper seeks to familiarize the English-reading world with a distinct category of historical documentation.

The writings under study perceive a direct relation between the economic crisis of the early twentieth century and the subsequent social and political fallout. The small peasantry struggled hard to survive because the landholdings had become economically unviable, the burden of land revenue became oppressive, moneylenders charged exorbitant rates of interest and the epidemics caused much mortality and dislocation. The small peasantry responded to the situation in a variety of ways. A sizeable number migrated to East Africa, South East Asia, Australia, England, Canada, the USA and Latin America.[3] Hundreds secured recruitment in the British Indian army in return for low regular salaries, even if it meant fighting the enemies of the Raj in distant lands.[4] A large number of small peasant proprietors, owning uneconomic holdings in the *Doaba*, migrated to the canal colonies as sharecroppers. Since the newly opened lands were offered only to some dominant sections of the rural and urban society, the marginal farmers and landless poor were excluded from the benefit.[5] In the Pathankot-Kangra enclave, the Kathluria jagirdars possessed the entire lands of 30 or 40 villages. The unequal distribution of land led to the emergence of a new pattern of agrarian relations, where the *sardars* (Masters) began to subject the *muzaras* (tenants) to the worst form of exploitation. These socio-economic changes prepared the ground for a wide range of political responses, including the formation of several radical political organizations.

Most Communist activists of the Colonial Punjab trace their political pedigree to the second incarnation of the Ghadar Party and, while doing so, they focus on the revival of the organization owing to the strenuous efforts of Rattan Singh and Santokh Singh. The last named began to publish and distribute copies of *Ghadar Di Goonj* to the Punjabi migrants, who were scattered in the different parts of the world. They were deputed by the California branch of the party to attend the fourth congress of the *Comintern*, which was held in Moscow in November 1922. They played a crucial role in forging an alliance between the Ghadar Party and Comintern, besides persuading the former to adopt Marxism as its ideology. Rattan Singh travelled extensively in the USA and Latin America and motivated the *Ghadarites* to study Marxism at the University for the Toilers of the East.[6] Till recently, the scholarly understanding of these significant historical aspects remained wanting. The writings of two communist activists - Bilgha and Dhoot - constitute an authentic source as both of them studied at the above mentioned institution. Their narrative revolved around the nature of courses, methods of teaching and arrangements for boarding and lodging. Students were drawn from the different countries of Asia. They were brought to Moscow in utmost secrecy, owing to the Nazi onslaught on the communists. They were organized in separate batches, because the instructions were given in the respective mother tongue. All the teachers were Russian, but they were quite proficient in the native language of the taught. The main subjects were geography, political economy, history and philosophy. The curriculum also included themes on revolutionary movements and working of

the communist organizations, besides underground political activism. Theory was complimented with practical training, for which the students were taken to farms and factories. They were also given a short course in military training, which took place in the area reserved for the army. Students, who distinguished themselves during the one-year course, were encouraged to join an additional advanced course, as evident in the case of Naina Singh Dhoot.[7] Members of the Ghadar Party, who had received education in Marxism at Moscow, sneaked into Colonial India facing immense hardship and risk. They were not only armed with knowledge regarding the theory and practice of Marxism, they were also full of enthusiasm and commitment regarding their mission of securing freedom from colonial rule and bringing a socialist revolution in the Indian Subcontinent.

Prior to 1935, the CPI sought to bring the anti-imperialist struggle under its exclusive control and denounced the Congress as a bourgeois outfit. In 1935, the CPI adopted the United Front line (mooted at the seventh congress of the Comintern and elaborated in the Dutt-Bradley thesis) and joined hands with the Congress and Congress Socialist Party in the ongoing anti-imperialist upsurge.[8] The new strategy had important implications for the Punjab, where an initial phase of enthusiastic collaboration was followed by sharp differences in political objectives and practical means. Bilgha, a prominent Gahadar-Kirti activist, provides important insights into the manner in which the United Front line was worked out at the grassroots level in the province and identifies factors contributing to its subsequent collapse.

The build-up towards elections to the Provincial Legislative Assemblies prepared the ground for collaboration between the Congress and the Communists. A series of four conferences were held in the rural areas - Mahilpur, Garhdiwala, Sarhali and Cheema Kalan - where the *Kirtis* played a decisive role. In the first three conferences, the desire to iconize Gandhi and Nehru overshadowed such concrete issues as complete independence, release of political prisoners and local economic problems. In the fourth conference which was held at Cheema Kalan (20 June 1936), the focus shifted to relief for the debt-ridden peasantry, reduction of land revenue in the princely state of Kapurthala and demands of the agitating farmers of Cheema Kalan itself. Quick to perceive the radical character of the meeting, the Unionist Government swung into action, arrested Communist and Socialist leaders and sentenced them to the imprisonment of one or two years for making rebellious (*baghiana*) speeches. During this phase of collaboration, the Kirtis became formal members of the Congress and took to wearing *khadi*, spinning cotton yarn, cleaning *Harijan* quarters (*bastis*) and participating in the morning Gandhian marches (*prabhat pheris*). However, the strong presence of the Kirtis in the Congress led to the inclusion of economic demands and tributes to martyrs like Bhagat Singh. The growing Kirti influence was manifested in the Congress elections which took place in early 1938. In the Jalandhar district, 18 out of 21 delegates turned out to be Kirtis. Owing to this, the Satyapal-led left wing of the Congress captured all major offices, despite the fact that the Josh group in the provincial CPI sided with the right wing of the Congress. The Kirtis and Socialists

acquired a dominant position in the Provincial Congress Committee, while the Kirtis did so at the district level.

While Bilgha served as the secretary of the district committee of Jalandhar, a unique campaign of political mobilization was launched in the rural areas. A special fortnight was observed during which political conferences were held in every village and an enrolment drive for Congress membership was initiated. The new members were required to sign on the resolutions on economic demands that were listed on the reverse side of the membership form. Copies of these resolutions were sent to the Punjab government, the office of the AICC at Allahabad and the Provincial Congress Committee at Lahore. The programme succeeded in enhancing the political consciousness and spreading political propaganda, which spilled over into the neighbouring districts where the Kirtis exercised influence. However the arrival of 76 letters every day from the villages of Punjab to Allahabad created a virtual panic in the Congress headquarters. It issued a warning to the Provincial Congress Committee and the District Congress Committee of Jalandhar, asking them to abandon the campaign as the time was not ripe for making such demands. They were exhorted to concentrate on wearing khadi, spinning cotton yarn and cleaning *Harijan* localities. Since the AICC feared that the Kirtis had hijacked the Provincial Congress Committee, it was therefore disbanded and replaced by an ad-hoc committee under the presidentship of the right wing Congress leader Gopi Chand Bhargava.[9]

The Communists remained in the thick of widespread peasant unrest in the different pockets of the Colonial Punjab during 1938-39. They launched the *muzara* movement from two fronts viz. Nili Bar and Kangra-Pathankot. In the former, the movement engulfed villages in the tehsils of Sumundari, Burewala, Arifwala, Kabirwala, Pakpattan, Khanewal and Tulumba. Such was the intensity of demand for half of the produce at the threshing pit (*banney utte adh o adh*) that the Unionist Government was forced to send to the affected area its financial commissioner, who was left with no recourse than to accept the outstanding demands of the tenants.[10] In consequence of this success, ground was levelled for the next logical demand i.e. ownership rights for the tenants. A movement on similar lines gathered momentum in the Kangra-Pathankot belt, where Lahori Ram Pardesi (a *Ghadarite* who had returned from New Zealand) spearheaded the struggle from the centre of *Paniarh Ashram*. In the summer of 1938, the Kirti leader Baba Arurh Singh launched a struggle against the princely state of Kalsiya and organized a successful boycott of the famous cattle fair at Chirik. In the winter of 1938, the Kirtis mobilized farmers from the villages of Doaba, marched to Jalandhar and organized a huge rally (20 December 1938) demanding the construction of a canal in the tract.[11] The agrarian discontent culminated in the long drawn out morchas of Lahore and Amritsar during 1938-39. In both districts, the agitations were launched to protest against the new revenue settlements. The contingents of peasant volunteers (*jathas*) marched from several districts and poured into the cities to court arrest. The marching of jathas through the villages, accompanied by slogans and speeches, contributed much to the radicalization of the peasantry. The Unionist Government clamped

Section 144 in the entire province, arrested thousands of participants and subjected the demonstrators of Amritsar (20 July 1938) to a brutal *lathi* charge. These morchas threw up fresh leadership, suggested new methods of political mobilization and brought the peasantry to the centre stage of politics as never before.

The different political parties could not remain immune from the growing peasant unrest. Deciding to swim with the tide, they were galvanized into organizing their respective *kisan* conferences (1938) at Lyallpur, which had emerged as a nerve centre of peasant politics. The first one was staged by the pro-Unionist *Zamindara League*, which flaunted the 'Golden Acts' as a major relief package for the debt-ridden peasantry, but remained silent on such crucial issues as the rights of tenants and British imperialism.[12] The second kisan conference was organized by the pro-right Congress, with the support of the Akalis and the Josh group of the CPI. In the course of that conference the leadership not only confused the entire peasant question, but also made a laughing stock of themselves owing to muddled thinking and opportunism. The third kisan conference was organized by the Kirti-dominated Punjab Kisan Committee and presided over by Sajjad Zaheer. The three-day programme was attended by nearly 500 delegates from the different districts of the Colonial Punjab. During the course of the proceedings, a clear distinction was drawn between such feudal elements as *jagirdars* and moneylenders on the one side and the exploited peasants and tenants on the other. A comprehensive charter of demands concerning all outstanding agrarian issues was approved, while the rival political outfits - the Unionists, Congressites and Akalis - were exposed in the public eye.[13]

At this juncture, we would take a closer look at the tenant front of *Nili Bar*, through the personal memoirs of Naina Singh Dhoot who witnessed the emerging *sardar-muzara* conflict from close quarters and revived the muzara movement in the middle of 1938 after the death of Baba Jwala Singh. At first the sardars lured the muzaras to take up cultivation of their squares (*murabbas*). When the muzaras raised the crop through their hard labour of several months of the agricultural calendar, the sardars forcibly evicted the muzaras who were not only beaten, but were also denied their stipulated share in the produce and made to pay many arbitrary imposts including unpaid forced labour (*begar*). In violent situations, the sardars enlisted the support of neighbouring landlords, local police and hired *goondas*. The muzaras were weak, illiterate, disunited and politically ignorant. In these circumstances, the PKC took up the fight on behalf of the muzaras. In most cases, a group of three kisan activists was deputed to the area affected by sardar-muzara conflicts. They began their mission by establishing an office of the PKC in the grain market of the nearest town, which also served as their lodging apartment.

Operating from this base, they penetrated into the colony villages (*chaks*), studied the specific nature of the conflict, chalked out strategies, provided guidance on immediate and long-term issues and ultimately formed a kisan committee manned by the muzaras. In cases where incidents of highhandedness and eviction were reported, the kisan activists responded by planning

demonstrations. A day was fixed, the venue was selected and the muzaras of neighbouring villages were invited through public announcements. On the day of the demonstration, contingents of muzaras converged on the chosen venue from different directions, raising anti-landlord slogans. In their speeches, the kisan activists explained the nature of the prevailing conflict, exhorted the muzaras to unite along class lines, warned the sardars to desist from oppression and condemned the local authorities for their inaction. The evicted muzaras entered the field with his plough and pair of bullocks, amidst triumphant slogans and beating of drums. At the conclusion of the rally, small contributions were collected in order to expand the movement.[14] The sardars found themselves unable to act in the face of this militant display of unity and the resolve to fight all forms of exploitation. The intelligence agents reported these developments to the police and government functionaries. The Unionist Government, which was committed to protecting the interests of the big landlords, was understandably unnerved by the impact the Marxist propaganda engendered in their rural strongholds. It undertook several measures to crush the muzara movement. The kisan activists were put behind bars, tortured in the Lahore Fort, sentenced to varying terms in jail and finally subjected to internment (*nazrbandi*) in their native villages. The PKC sent a new batch to take the place of their predecessors, to preclude any disruption in the movement. On their part, the muzaras remained in contact with the local PKC office through the office bearers of the newly established kisan committees.[15]

The writings under study afforded considerable attention to the plight of political prisoners and conditions prevailing in the Colonial jails viz. Amritsar, Lahore, Multan, Montgomery and Attock. These places were generally overcrowded, as they were often forced to accommodate more than double the prescribed numbers. Since the structures were poorly built, they did not provide adequate ventilation and sunlight. They were hot and humid from inside, offering no protection against wind and rain. Even snakes and scorpions could be found inside the premises. In all places, food was unhygienic and unpalatable. Owing to inadequate medical facilities, the inmates acquired a variety of ailments. Sometimes the detenus were transported from one place to the other in cage like structures that were placed on lorries or in rail coaches. At other times, they were driven like flocks of cattle from the railway stations to the prison. On such occasions, a single chain was made to pass through their handcuffs. Since their feet were clamped in fetters, the metal ate into their flesh and caused profuse bleeding. The prisoners were subjected to several restrictions, which had been devised by jail superintendents (*daroghas*) - like Gokul Chand, Chander Bhan and Bakhshi Sampuran Singh - who derived sadistic pleasure from torturing their hapless victims.[16] Simple demands of the detenus were met with beating and abuse. They were required to put in hard labour, like grinding 18 seers of grain with a hand mill. Special equipment was improvised for torture. In case of severe punishment, the limbs of the prisoner were tied to wooden beams with leather straps, so that he could not move while facing the blows of sticks and whips. Sometimes a single chain was passed through the iron rings shackled to the ankles of a large number of prisoners, so

that they suffered untold misery while urinating in a single tin can. All limits of decency were crossed in the Multan jail, where Gokul Chand lowered the prisoners upside down in a receptacle of urine and faeces. This matter was serious enough to be raised in the legislative assembly as well as the legislative council.[17]

The above inhuman conditions notwithstanding there had been some redeeming features obtaining in the colonial jails. The detanus availed the opportunity of meeting the famous *Ghadarite* stalwarts (*babas*) and revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and his comrades. They benefited immensely from the lectures delivered by learned activists like Feroz Din Mansur, who spoke to jail inmates on various aspects of Marxism. It became possible for them to meet their relatives on account of the efforts by the *Desh Bhagat Qaidi Parivar Sahayak Committee*.[18] They managed to lay their hands on letters and newspapers by bribing the jail staff. In fact, the prisoners had devised a system by which their minor requirements were fulfilled by smuggling some items inside by paying bribes. This amount, which was shared by the jail staff, was known as *badmashi*. Using this very method, they sent out messages to their comrades and managed to carry on political activity on a restricted scale. They also sent reports regarding inhuman conditions and cruel treatment to their friends, who got them published in the newspapers and, thus, the matter was exposed to the world at large. On account of these factors, the political prisoners were not demoralized.

Political activists in the Colonial Punjab believed that the annals of the Communist Movement would be incomplete without a detailed reference to the Lahore Fort. Originally built by Akbar to consolidate the Mughal rule in the North West, it was situated on the old bed of the river Ravi. After making his entry through the gateway facing the city, a prisoner encountered on the left a strong iron fence which protected the *Hathi Khana*. When he entered it and climbed the stairs, he reached the interrogation centre of the intelligence wing of the police. Several cells were founded along the courtyard (*ihata*) of the Hathi Khana. The cells did not stand in a row. Their doors were fixed in such a manner that the prisoners were not able to see or speak to each other. The cells did not have any windows or ventilators. Calls of nature had to be answered inside the cell, which was guarded by policemen armed with rifles and bayonets. The prisoner was entitled to food worth 6 paisa, brought by Bua Ditta who swallowed half of the cooked lentils (*dal*) on the way. The prisoner was subjected to cruel treatment that included filthy abuse, beating with cane with his hands cuffed at the back. Sometimes he was made to stand the whole night and, at other times, he was not allowed to sleep for many days at a stretch. During his imprisonment, he became aware of the tortures suffered by several distinguished freedom fighters viz. Ghadarites, Babbar Akalis, militant revolutionaries, Moscow-trained communists and the indigenous Kirtis. It was interesting to note that legislative members belonging to the Majlis-i-Ahrar often underscored the cruel treatment meted out to the political prisoners in the Lahore Fort.[19]

The Unionist government relied on the Lahore Fort to deal with its most dangerous political opponents, particularly the kisan activists of the *Nili Bar*. The latter, after being arrested from the colony villages, were jailed in this awesome building where they passed through a two-month course of interrogation and torture. The aim of the interrogating officers was to extract a confessional statement from the prisoner, particularly regarding his ideological leanings and the network of communist organizations, [20] so that the latter could be destroyed in subsequent raids. Every week a new inspector assumed the charge of interrogating a prisoner. Every inspector endeavoured to succeed in his aim and, in the process, made desperate attempts to steal a march over his colleagues. Such was the intensity of mutual rivalry that he did not hesitate to compromise his professional integrity. On his part, the prisoner was subjected to several rounds of questioning. There were alternative rounds of excessive kindness and heartless cruelty. In the former situation, sweets and fruit were offered to the prisoner, with a view to first trap him in the web of sweet words and then extract crucial information regarding various dimensions of the ongoing muzara movement. When this method failed to yield the desired results, the inspector resorted to a variety of physical torture, including electric shocks. When even this tactic did not succeed, the prisoner was directly threatened with death. He was taken to a ghostly corner, a virtual slaughter house, where huge rocks lay splattered with blood and the whole place was strewn with human skulls and bones. Fearsome armed guards stood with unsheathed weapons, waiting for orders to cut any person into pieces. In this manner, the fear of death was instilled to cow the prisoner. With a view to break his resistance, the police subjected his close relatives to harassment. The police also tried to blackmail the innocent victims by utilizing the services of sex workers who were brought from *Hira Mandi*, the famous red light enclave of Lahore.[21]

Kirti sources throw valuable light on the participation of women in politics and underline the factors that sought to discourage such trend viz. restrictions imposed by the family members and social norms operating outside the household. It appears that the Congress had taken the lead in this regard. Bibi Raghubir Kaur, a member of the Congress as well as the Provincial Assembly, was known for her effective speeches at kisan conferences. Bibi Ghulam Fatima, also a member of the Congress, sang patriotic songs that exposed the plight of the poor masses at political rallies. In so far as radical politics was concerned, the ground was prepared in the colleges of Lahore. Some distinguished teachers - Dev Dutt Atal and Saral Dev of the Dev Samaj College and Yajyavalik of the Sanskrit College - cleverly inculcated socialist ideas among their students, while delivering lectures on their respective subjects. As a result, several young girls - Sushila Kumari, Shakuntla Trehan, Sanyogita, Urmila, Suhail, Vatsala and Uma - were attracted towards Marxism. Their creative energies were channelised into a literary society, *Adhiyansheel Mahila Samiti*, which was organized by Shakuntla Sharda. The last named appears to have been the first woman to have acquired the formal membership of the Communist organization. Initially she was inspired by the example of her

brother Shiv Kumar Sharda. She was married to a Kirti activist, Kunj Bihari Lal, with a view to enable her to engage in politics without any restrictions. Since she was not accepted by her parents-in-law, she took refuge at the Paniar Ashram in Kangra. When warrants for her arrest were issued, concerning her speech on Dyer's death at the hands of Udham Singh, she sneaked into Lahore. In spite of the birth of their son Kranti, the wife and husband continued their political activities on separate fronts - Shakuntla Sharda worked in the secret cell of the KKP at Nawankot and Kunj Bihari Lal worked among the industrial workers of Okara.

The political career of Sushila Kumari makes an interesting case study. While still a teenager, she lost her father who traded in building material at Pathankot. As her mind turned against an unjust system, she came across Marxism owing to irregular contact with active communists like Dev Dutt Atal, Vishnu Dutt and Shakuntla Sharda. Her brother Amolak Ram restricted her to the house, but she continued to receive Marxist literature through her mentors. On attaining the age of eighteen in 1941, she left Pathankot without informing anyone and came to Lahore, with the intention of joining the KKP. The party expressed its reluctance in view of her age, sex and unmarried status. Chain Singh Chain, the then secretary of the KKP, tried to dissuade her from taking the path of radical politics by painting a frightening picture of hazards one had to encounter. She was sent to live with the family of Comrade Muhabbat Singh at Kot Saundha (Shaikhupura district). She wrote to the party and protested against a decision barring women under-21 from political work. In view of her unflinching determination and recommendation of Shakuntla Sharda, she was given two-hour lectures in Marxism for ten days by Chain Singh Chain. As her first duty to the party, she was assigned the task of preparing a women's contingent for the forthcoming Kisan Conference at Fatehgarh Kortana. Joining hands with Bibi Dhan Kaur, the sister of Chanan Singh Buttar, she toured villages in and around Moga, addressed meetings of women in Gurdwaras, motivated women for participation and collected funds for the conference. Eyebrows were raised when a young unmarried woman was seen on public platforms. In accordance with a decision of the party, Sushila and Urmila were tied in 'notional marriages' with Chain Singh Chain and Dalip Singh Jauhal. Sushila faced no problem from her marriage, but Urmila underwent a long ordeal owing to parental opposition which was overcome only by legal intervention. A three-member squad consisting of Sushila, Dhan Kaur and Usha organized study circles and brought several women into the political arena.[22]

Circulars of the KKP, which were issued during the late 1941 and early 1942, indicate the efforts made by the party to encourage the entry of women into the political arena. Instructions were issued to district leadership to facilitate the participation of women in the kisan committees and *mazdoor sabhas*, besides proposing the establishment of a women's separate organization. On 20 February 1942 a provincial level conference was held at Lahore. In this meeting 100 women delegates - from various districts and political parties - announced the formation of Progressive Women's Conference and adopted a draft constitution. The membership forms were drafted by the

KKP leadership then imprisoned in the Campbelpur jail. The conference elected Bibi Raghubir Kaur as the president, Sitadevi (Congress) and Baji Rashida Begum (Muslim League) as the vice presidents and Sushila Kumari as the general secretary. By March 1942, the membership of this organization had risen to 2000.

Despite its strong presence on several political fronts and geographical pockets in the Colonial Punjab, the Communist Movement did not develop into a monolithic organization. It was divided into two unequal segments - the larger KKP and the smaller Josh (official) group of the CPI - which appeared immediately after the release of the Meerut prisoners in November 1933 and continued till 1952, despite numerous attempts to enforce unity from above.[23] The communist leaders, acting in line with their affiliation to either of the two organizations, have taken categorical positions on the causes of the nagging schism. Sohan Singh Josh, the undisputed leader of the official CPI group, has drawn up a long charge sheet against the KKP. In his opinion, the KKP displayed political bankruptcy in failing to understand the significance of the Meerut Conspiracy Case, failing to recognize the achievement of the accused in placing Marxism in the contemporary political discourse and failing to inquire about the well being of the Meerut prisoners and their families. The Kirtis ousted Bhag Singh Canadian from the Kirti management and replaced him by Santa Singh Gandiwind, who was not only illiterate but also politically ignorant. They permitted a division in the ranks of both the KKP and the *Naujawan Bharat Sabha*. They allowed a government intelligence agent to assume the editorship of the *Kirti* (Urdu) in the place of tested and tried Feroze Din Mansur. They misguided the Moscow trainees into believing that the KKP was the Punjab unit of the CPI. Encouraged by their support and swelling coffers of Ghadar Party, they sought to wipe out the official group. Their accusations against Karam Singh Maan as a CID agent induced the official group to align with the Gopi Chand Bhargava faction of the Provincial Congress Committee. They failed to comprehend that they could not get affiliated to the Comintern over the head of the Communist Party of Great Britain. They squandered funds of the Ghadar Party and the precious life of Ram Krishan B.A. National in this wild goose chase. They agreed to merge with the CPI only when they realized the strength of the CPI at Deoli and interacted with leaders like S.V. Ghate, S.A. Dange, B.T. Ranadive and Z.A. Ahmad. Three Kirti leaders - Gurcharan Singh Sahnsara, Dalip Singh Jauhal and Bachan Singh Mehatpur - played a major role in keeping the two groups separate and creating the illusion that they could liquidate the official unit of the CPI in Punjab.[24]

While vehemently refuting the above charge sheet, the Kirti leaders came out strongly in defense of their ideological positions and tactical moves. Sahnsara holds Josh responsible for scuttling the efforts for forging the unity between the two warring groups. He also apportions blame on the national leadership of the CPI for adopting a partisan attitude towards Josh, who had his eyes on the Ghadar Party funds. The Kirtis were themselves keen on a merger of the two groups. It was in pursuit of this aim that they had sent Ram Krishan to Moscow with the necessary documents. It was for the same purpose that they

had sought the assistance of the Moscow-based Rattan Singh. The ground for unity, which was forged at Deoli, had been prepared by Teja Singh Swatantra who wrote persuasive letters to the Kirtis on the issue from Campbelpur jail. Supporting this line of argument, Chain accuses the Josh group of misinforming the national leadership of the CPI about the activities of the KKP, frustrating the emergence of a unified party. Bilgha, while explaining the persistence of differences between the two, despite the merger achieved at Deoli, draws attention to some other factors.[25] He argues that after being released from their imprisonment, prominent Kirti leaders began to work among the people, explaining the CPI's stand on the People's War and self-determination for minorities. However, leaders of the official group remained confined to their provincial secretariat. They failed to appreciate the revolutionary work done over-ground. Nor did they contact the comrades who were active underground. The official group had little presence in colonial Punjab. It did not have the capacity to absorb the powerful organization of the KKP. It found faults with the functioning of the Kirtis and sent distorted reports of their activities to the central leadership of the CPI. It adopted an overbearing attitude towards the Kirtis and imposed humiliating conditions for their entry into the CPI.

Notes

[1] To comprehend the diverse political currents in the colonial Punjab during the early decades of the twentieth century, one may refer to Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947*, New Delhi, 1988; Satya M. Rai, *Legislative Politics and the Freedom Struggle in the Punjab*, New Delhi, 1984; Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, Vol. II*, New Delhi, 1984; Kamlesh Mohan, *Militant Nationalism in the Punjab 1919-1935*, New Delhi, 1985; Bhagwan Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab*, New Delhi, 1979.

[2] Another two works, which command a somewhat lesser importance, may also be included in this very genre viz. Jagjit Singh Anand, *Chete Di Changer Chon*, New Delhi, 1991; Karamjit Singh K.P., *Jeevan Kahani*: *Desh Bhagat Ram Singh Ghala Mala*, Amritsar, n.d.

[3] Bhagat Singh Bilgha, *Ghadar Lehar Dey Anfoley Varkey*, (Unturned Pages of the Ghadar Movement), Jalandhar, 1989, pp.11-13; Surinder Singh, Ed. (Introduction, Translation and Annotation), *The Political Memoirs of An Indian Revolutionary: Naina Singh Dhoot 1904-1989*, New Delhi, 2005, pp.64-67.

[4] Recruitment of the Sikhs was limited to the Majha area of central Punjab and 90 per cent of them were Jat Sikhs. According to the settlement officer of Amritsar, in 1915 a gross amount of Rs.25 million was disbursed as military pay and pension, out of which a quarter was remitted home. This military income enabled them to avert debt, retain their small holdings and purchase more land. During their absence, they could mortgage their land for raising money that was required for constructing houses, marriages and litigation. Military pensioners often advanced money to families of soldiers, with family plots as collateral. Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849-1947*, New Delhi, 2005, p.88.

[5] In the Chenab Colony, land grants were of three types, distinct in both size and tenurial status - peasants were granted 73.3 percent of area, yeomen 8.2 percent and capitalists 7.0 percent. The last two proved unsatisfactory colonists, as they were found lazy in developing their grants and quarreled incessantly with their sub-tenants and among themselves. Imran Ali, *The Punjab Under Imperialism, 1885-1947*, New Delhi, 1989, p. 21; for factors contributing to a massive increase in the incidence of sharecropping tenancy, see M. Mufakharul Islam, *Irrigation, Agriculture and the Raj: Punjab 1887-1947*, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 83-86, 93.

[6] Bhagat Singh Bilgha, op. cit., pp.168-169.

[7] Surinder Singh, op. cit., pp.108-118.

[8] Owing to application of the United Front tactics, peasant movements expanded and the All India Kisan Sabha was formed. The Congress adopted the Faizpur agrarian programme and trade unions displayed considerable activity in key industrial sectors. But the United Front collapsed owing to the communists' dissatisfaction with inadequate agrarian reforms and anti-labour policies in the Congress-ruled states, panic in the CSP over the growing communist influence in its ranks, revival of the Congress right wing and the corresponding marginalisation of the left wing. For details, see Sanjay Seth, *Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India*, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 157-187.

[9] Bhagat Singh Bilgha, op. cit., pp. 218-222.

[10] Recently it has been argued that apart from highlighting merely the moments of high drama - demonstrations, rallies, morchas and arrests - it is imperative to underline the significance of the undramatic bread and butter aspects of the peasant movements involving painstaking and often repetitive preparation, besides the undefined but intense organizational, ideological and political activity among the peasants. Mridula Mukherjee, *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*, New Delhi, 2004, p.172.

[11] Bhagat Singh Bilgha, op. cit., pp.247-248, 258-260; compare with Master Hari Singh, op. cit., pp. 231-232.

[12] On assuming power after the assembly elections of 1937, the Unionist government under Sikandar Hayat Khan enacted the Punjab Alienation of Land Second Amendment Act, the Registration of Moneylenders Act and the Restitution of Mortgaged Land Act. The so-called Golden Acts aimed at canceling *benami* transactions of moneylenders and restoring land to the original owners. Ian Talbot, op. cit., pp.118-119.

[13] Bhagat Singh Bilgha, op. cit., pp.251-258; compare with Master Hari Singh, op. cit., pp. 205-207.

[14] Surinder Singh, op. cit., 160-168.

[15] Alarmed at the intensification of the peasant movements, the colonial bureaucracy believed that the agitation was fomented by the Amritsar-based PKC, which was formed (March 1937) in pursuance of a decision of the AIKS and which had branches in several districts and a membership of 75,000. The agitation was spearheaded by kisan committees that drew support from over forty communists of the Sikh American Ghadar Party who had been trained in

Moscow, ex-convicts of 1914-15 conspiracy cases and disaffected MLAs with little property or stake in the country. The agitators had some genuine agrarian grievances, but these had been placed along some fraudulent demands to be exploited indiscriminately for economic, electioneering, sectarian, communal, socialist and communist reasons. The activists aimed at fuelling general discontent, distorting local grievances, exaggerating differences between landlords and tenants and vilifying the police as the instrument of a reactionary government. Even the benefits to the peasantry of the agrarian policy of the Unionist Party was not likely to curtail the growing influence of the PKC. Home Department (Political), File No.18.9.38, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

[16] Gurcharan Singh Sahnsara, *Oah Vi Din San* (Those Too Were the Days), Jalandhar, 1973, pp.8-19, 19-29, 29-52; Bhagat Singh Bilgha, op. cit., 269-274.

[17] Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism: An Autobiography*, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 56-57.

[18] Jaswant Singh Jas, *Baba Wasakha Singh: Jeewani*, Jalandhar, 1979, pp.115-131; Bikram Singh Ghuman, *Ghadari Baba Wasakha Singh: Jeewani*, Amritasr, 1982, pp.115-134; Bhagat Singh Bilgha, op. cit., 197-201.

[19] Bhagat Singh Bilgha, op. cit., pp. 210-212.

[20] The political prisoners, who were charged under the Defense of India Act, were detained in the historical forts, where the CID carried out interrogation with the purpose of extracting information regarding political movements. The detenus were subjected to both physical and mental torture such as beatings, being kept fettered and handcuffed in cells unprotected from the hazards of the elements and give unpalatable and dirty food. Ujjwal Kumar Singh, *Political Prisoners in India*, New Delhi, 1998, pp.189-190.

[21] Surinder Singh, op. cit., pp.169-175; compare with Gurcharan Singh Sahnsara, op. cit., p.158.

[22] Chain Singh Chain, *Kirti Party: Dooji Sansar Jang Samey*, Jalandhar, 1990, pp. 205-214.

[23] According to an incisive analysis, the protracted conflict was located in the particularism of Ghadar-Kirti-Communism which was sustained by a cultural association with the egalitarian tradition of Sikhism, a militaristic orientation, a unique relationship with the *Comintern*, anti-intellectualism and an independent source of funds from the Ghadar Party. Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab: A Study of the Movement upto 1961*, New Delhi, Ajanta, 1994, pp. 47-56.

[24] Sohan Singh Josh, op. cit., pp.201-205.

[25] Bhagat Singh Bilgha, op. cit., pp.192-197.