

Margins of Peace

South Asians in America

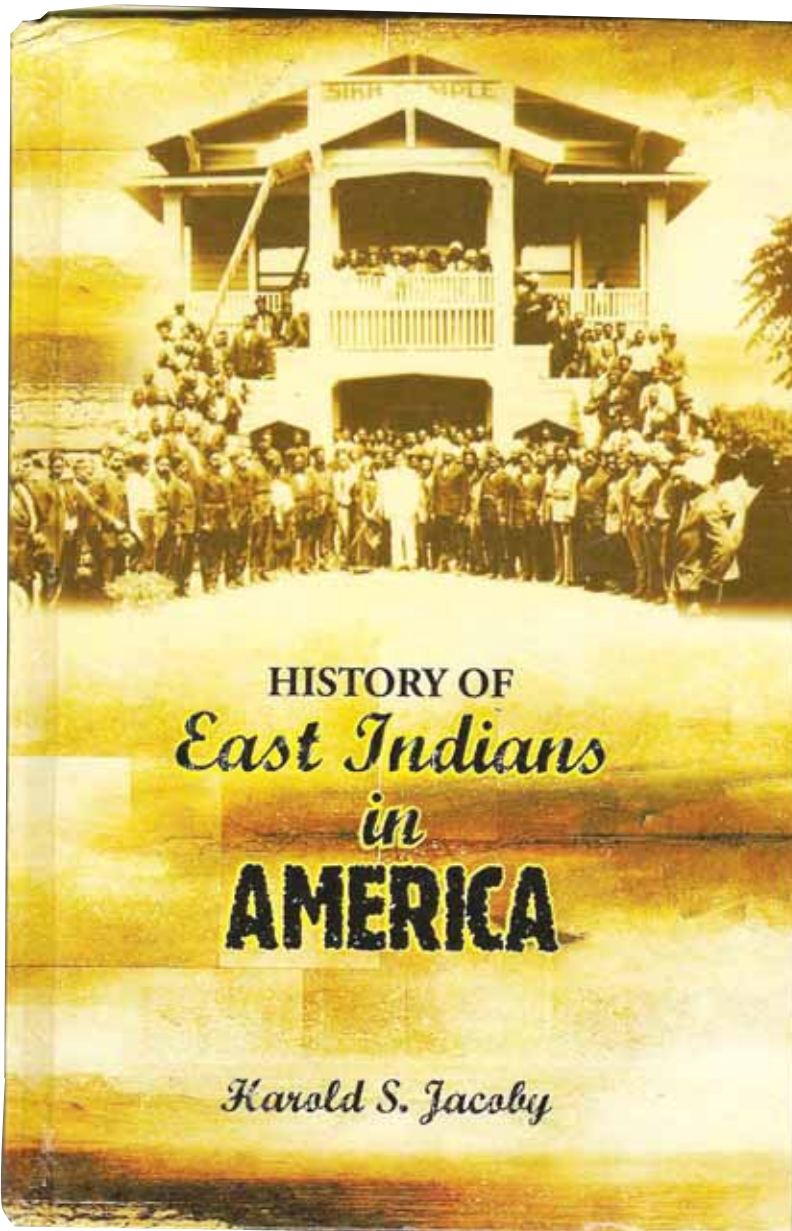


Dr. Amrik Singh

Today, South Asia is flashing all signs of turning into a battlefield for the most horrific war, the humanity has ever seen. The leadership of India and Pakistan has mostly been on the edge of escalation of a major armed conflict. It is feared that the third World War maybe fought in the Indus Valley. The nuclear rivals though share a common culture, language and lifestyle, but still are bent upon exterminating each other. The last strand of hope may be found in probing the history of the region, and analyzing the handling of social and political life in the last 100 years. Is it the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi or the British that made South Asia so vulnerable? The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 had deeply upset the Punjabi Pioneers in North America because their struggle was said to be for complete emancipation from the colonial kitsch. Dreams, hopes and aspirations of Ghadar movement influenced the freedom struggle of the region that has been well brought up in Harold S. Jacoby's book *History of East Indians in America*. It is a profound, thought-provoking and well researched study of Indian Diaspora in 1900-1950. Jacoby was a very popular professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Pacific Stockton, California.

The book under review has seen the light solely due to efforts of Dr. Amarjit Singh Bal, a Ph.D. in Education from University of California Berkeley. The chance meeting of Bal and Jacoby matured into an association of lifelong relationship of mutual empathy and trust. Jacoby couldn't get his research published during his lifetime as he fell seriously ill. While working for War Relocation Authority in World War II for repositioning of Japanese American internees, Jacoby was appalled by his total ignorance about social and political life of East Indians. The story of Ghadar fascinated him and he thought he would make an important contribution to document Punjabi Pioneers' arrival, pains they went through, life they built, struggles they made, martyrdom they achieved, and alienation they suffered at the hands of new rulers of free India.

Forwarding Harold Jacoby's book, Dr. Bal records circumstances and bouts of factional politics rampant in historical Sikh Gurdwara at Stockton during which Jacoby completed his book. Jacoby wonders how the Sikh community's tendency to



remain aloof, separate and uninformed actually made it susceptible to bias, misunderstanding and racial attacks. A systematic promotion of religious, cultural and historical understanding requires a different line of actions. Bal concurs that exhibitionistic tendencies as shown in organizing religious processions, fairs and other cultural shows can be more effective if a meaningful dialogue is continued with the American mainstream through participation in social and political life.

Jacoby questions appellation of "Hindoos" to a majority of Sikhs and Muslims as inappropriate because Hindus comprised not more than ten percent of the entire group.

Bellingham, Everett and Vancouver rioting against Sikh immigrants were testament of their faith. Driven from their temporary settlement, they tried a number of options but with dismal results. Among the early immigrant there was only one Christian, no member of Jain, Parsee and Buddhist faith. Hindus were just 5% of the whole population of immigrants who were mainly from urban areas with affluent background. Muslim and Sikhs shared almost a similar background. Sikhs comprised 78% of the entire immigrant population. Though they were not homogeneous group, they were united as a community for the achieve-

ment of freedom for their country. Punjabi was the common language, though Urdu and Hindi were also used very selectively.

The book can be divided in three sections. The first deals with the trials and tribulations of East Indians and their response and resilience to adapt to circumstances of both adversity and prosperity. The institu-



History of East Indians in America: The First Half-Century Experience of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims by Harold S. Jacoby
Bhai Chatter Singh Jiwan Singh
Amritsar (India). P. 280

tion of Khalsa Diwan Society in 1912 paves the way for the Hindu Association of the Pacific Coast in 1913. Extreme discrimination in Canada and America had already brought together revolutionaries like Kartar Singh, Kanshi Ram, Udham Singh, Sohan Singh and Harnam Singh Tundilat to carry out propaganda against the British. Patriotic sentiments impel them to devise ways to free their country from the foreign rule through an armed conflict. The unstinted financial and sentimental support of Sikhs and Muslims, and the intellectual and administrative support of urban-bred educated Hindus had succeeded in building up a revolutionary movement with sufficient resources. Radical literature was published to carry out a popular rebellion to oust British from India. The single factor that united three communities was the fervor for freedom. All other differences of religion, region,

caste and language were relegated to the background. Activists like Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia, though a low caste, were equal partners in revolutionary activities.

In the second part, the relationships of the three communities start deteriorating as the British succeeded in discrediting their freedom movement through covert operations. A wide surveillance network was spread and a huge amount of money pumped to diffuse the explosive situation. Fissiparous tendencies start appearing to the fore as the British bust their plan. Religion and caste that were insignificant in the first part started dividing people. The incident of Lala Hardyal's arrest by American authorities, his release and disappearance confounded the Ghadarites. Ram Chandra assumed the leadership and got popular support of all initially. Lala Hardyal's departure was coupled with the Komagata Maru tragedy. Later, shooting in Calcutta at Budge Budge had shaken the morale of leaders who were fantasizing total freedom from the British rule. The outbreak of First World War and the involvement of Berlin committee further complicated the problem. The prosecution of leaders of Ghadar movement in California had given the setback that broke the movement before its complete birth. Recipient of secret transactions with Germans, Ram Chandra stopped taking his party into confidence. His leadership touched the lowest point as he started misleading his own executive. He bought property in his own name. All this resulted into his murder in the court by Ram Singh.

Suspicion suggested that Ram Chander was in collusion with Germans on the one hand and the British on the other. The inclusion of his name immediately among heroes of Indian independence in 1930 by the National Congress created resentment.

The evidence was that he handled Annie Larsen incident in such a way that five Sikhs accompanying the ship were executed for smuggling arms to India. In the meanwhile, Lala Hardyal had become totally reconciled to the British which also meant that he later worked for Indian National Congress.

In the third part, Jacoby points out how a large number of organizations for the freedom of India had collapsed after independence was achieved. The only Khalsa Diwan Society and Ghadar party continued to function and monitor the new leadership. The desire to serve their country on getting freedom, Ghadrtes went to India. However, they became disillusioned with the new government and declared that India had not achieved any change. The same people who had colluded with the British were now manning position in the new administration. Frustrated and sidelined, many joined the communist ranks. Partition of India had the most devastating effect on them. The sense of unity that existed among East Indians in North America had evaporated.

Jacoby indeed makes an important contribution to Ghadar research that will go a long way to reconstruct authentic narratives of forgotten freedom fighters.