

Eleventh Grade Lesson on the Ghadar Party By Noreen Naseem Rodriguez

GA Social Studies Standards:

SSUSH16 Investigate how political, economic, and cultural developments after WW I led to a shared national identity.

Background Information:

From 1858 until 1947, Great Britain ruled the Indian subcontinent under what was known as the British Raj. But throughout Britain’s rule, Indians resisted, although this history of anti-colonial resistance and activism abroad—including in the United States—is rarely taught. In general, South Asian Americans are often missing from U.S. history, so it is especially important for educators to teach about South Asian American history as well as South Asian religions and multiple South Asian immigration waves to North America.

Historically, South Asian immigrants to the U.S. have been categorized and labeled inaccurately. In the [U.S. Census Bureau’s “Measuring Race and Ethnicity Across the Decades: 1790-2010” graphic](#), “Hindu” (also spelled “Hindoo”) was a category in the 1920, 1930, and 1940 censuses. Hinduism, a religious identity, was incorrectly designated as the racial identity of all immigrants from the Indian subcontinent regardless of their religion, and this use of religion as an option for racial categorization is the only such instance in census history. From 1870 until 1940, “Indian” referred to Native Peoples of North America and was later adjusted to “American Indian” in 1950 while “Asian Indian” was introduced in 1980.



Most of the first Indian immigrants to the West Coast of North America were Sikhs, not Hindus, from the Punjab region. Although at the time East Asian men were perceived as asexual, sexually deviant, or impotent, the British viewed Sikhs as uniquely masculine and warrior-like. Sikhs comprised less than one-hundredth of the Indian subcontinent’s population, yet they made up one-sixth of British India’s army and were generally loyal to the British Empire. However, as Sikhs began to immigrate to the U.S. and Canada, they faced racial discrimination similar to their experiences with colonial subjugation in their homeland. Frustrated by their unjust treatment in their new homes, Sikh immigrants along the Pacific Coast of North America began to organize and resist the ongoing dehumanization that they attributed to colonialism.

One of the first North American anti-colonial newspapers created by Sikh immigrants was *Circular-i-Azadi* (Circle of Freedom), printed in Urdu in the summer of 1907 by Ram Nath Puri. *Circular-i-Azadi* was distributed weekly in the San Francisco Bay Area. In Vancouver, Canada, Taraknath Das published the bi-monthly journal *Free Hindustan* in 1908, while in nearby Victoria, Guru Dutt Kumar’s monthly periodical *Swadesh Sewak* (Servant of the Country). These publications detailed the

restrictive immigration laws and discrimination faced by Indian immigrants in the U.S. and Canada, as well as the need for revolution in the motherland. These messages of revolution were viewed as seditious threats to British officials, who soon worked with U.S. and Canadian officials to surveil Sikh immigrants.

In 1913, Punjabi migrant workers and Bengali and Punjabi intellectuals and students who felt pushed out of India due to colonialism and now faced racist humiliation in North America came together to form the Ghadar Party. Ghadar, Urdu for “revolt” or “rebellion,” represented the coalition’s name and their goal to attain racial equality in the U.S. and Canada (and beyond) alongside an independent India. The Ghadar Party focused on unity and secularism among those of Indian descent, favoring a collective national identity instead of focusing on religion, caste, or region of origin. Months after the Ghadar Party’s creation, it had over 5,000 members and branches across the world, from Stockton, California to Panama and Shanghai. North America alone had 72 branches. Ninety percent of Ghadar Party members were Punjabi Sikh men, nearly half of whom had served in the British Indian Army.



The party published a newspaper of the same name, which encouraged readers that circulating as many copies of the newspaper to fellow Indians was their patriotic duty. Given its anti-colonial focus, the paper was banned immediately in India when the first issue arrived on December 7, 1913. Indian officials searched luggage from the U.S., seizing Ghadar publications as contraband. By 1914, nearly 5,000 copies of *Ghadar*, published in Gurmukhi and Urdu, were circulated weekly for free, funded by local Indians. Readership spanned east Asia as well as parts of Africa and South America, and readers there would send copies of *Ghadar* to India. That same year, the Ghadar Press published 12,000 copies of *Ghadar-di-Gunj* (Echoes of Mutiny), a collection of poetry and protest songs in Urdu and Punjabi that were often performed at Ghadar gatherings. These two publications connected and mobilized Indians worldwide as they exposed the exploitation and brutality of British imperialism in the Raj and beyond, leading some members to return to Punjab and attempt an armed revolt known as the Ghadar Mutiny. These efforts were unsuccessful, and Ghadarites were tried for several anti-colonial actions.



Concerned by the Ghadar Party’s anti-colonial efforts, British officials worked closely with immigration offices in San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland to exclude and expel individuals they considered political radicals. The British government pressured the U.S. to refuse asylum to Indian revolutionaries and sent lists of publications and Indian immigrants they considered seditious to the State Department and the commissioner-general of immigration. Soon, both British and U.S. officials viewed Indian immigrants as having subversive political agendas. Across the globe, U.S. diplomats tried to forbid any Indian with anticolonial leanings from leaving India and, if successful, from landing at U.S. immigration stations.

Ghadarites became disillusioned with the U.S. alliance with Britain during World War I, recognizing the hypocrisy of a nation claiming to fight a war in the name of democracy while continuing to dehumanize Black Americans and Asian immigrants at home. In an important show of cross-racial solidarity, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) published reports in its magazine *The Crisis* about the Indian independence movement and efforts by the Justice Department to deport six

Indians. This alarmed U.S. intelligence officials, who then increased their surveillance on both Black and Indian communities for decades. After World War I, the Ghadar Party began to split into different factions. Some Ghadarites in New York created the Friends of Freedom for India organization, which included Indians and white activists, while others who viewed Soviet Russia as a model society joined the international communist movement. By 1926, the Ghadar Party in California was at its most active and continued to organize meetings and collect money for political outreach in India across the state. Two decades later, the party formally dissolved after Indian independence was finally achieved in August 1947.

The Ghadar Party exemplifies the longstanding efforts of U.S. empire in suppressing activists perceived as radical, even when their activism is not directed at the U.S. Educators can highlight transnational resistance to colonialism and white supremacy by sharing the story of the Ghadar Party and the agency and determination of the Ghadarites. Moreover, the surveillance of Indian immigrant activists by U.S. immigration, justice, and state department officials parallels programs like COINTELPRO, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's counterintelligence program from 1956 to 1971 that targeted groups like the Black Panthers, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, and the American Indian Movement, in addition to famed individuals like Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks. Surveillance and suppression are tactics of empire that have been deployed for centuries and continue today, although they are more likely to be exposed via social media rather than in mainstream news.

For more about the Ghadar Party, read Seema Sohi's *Echoes of Mutiny* or [her shorter description of it at the South Asian American Digital Archive](#). Learn more about Asian American demographics from the U.S. Census Bureau [here](#).

Instructional Resources and Suggestions:

Few resources exist for secondary teachers to teach about the Ghadar Party. The most robust collections of primary sources can be found at the [Punjabi and Sikh Diaspora Digital Archive housed at UC Davis](#) and at the [South Asian American Digital Archive](#) (SAADA). A curated collection of primary sources ready for classroom use can be found [here](#) and includes teaching extensions about the Bellingham Riots of 1907 and Mexican-Punjabi families in California. Harvard's The Pluralist Project has a [short PDF](#) that can be used for in-class or independent reading and a college-level lesson plan about the Ghadar Party created by Ritu Radhakrishnan is available free in digital version for educators [here](#).

- If students have learned about depictions of Chinese immigrants as the “yellow peril” in the 1800s, compare those images with early 1900s articles that present Indian immigrants as a “dusky peril” of “Hindu hordes” (several are included in [this slideshow](#)). How is the discourse similar? Different? What do these depictions say about what kinds of immigrants were viewed as desirable/undesirable? How does the categorization of Indian immigrants as Hindus explain stereotypes related to religion and religious dress and how are some of these stereotypes continued today?
- Give students time to look through the Ghadar Party archive at SAADA. What were some of the issues Indians had with British rule? How were the grievances of Black Americans in the early 1900s similar/different? What were some benefits of Black/Indian alliance-building?
- If students have time to read excerpts from the Ghadar Party pamphlet [“Exclusion of Hindus from America due to British Influence”](#) as a class or in small groups, they can participate in a Socratic discussion or structured academic controversy (being mindful not to use dehumanization as an argument) about exclusion. This can draw from prior learning about Chinese Exclusion or taught standalone.
- Sections of the [pamphlet](#) also address beliefs that high caste Hindus were classified as Aryan. This was an argument used by Bhagat Singh Thind (see BSLP about him) in his Supreme Court

case to reinstate his status as a naturalized U.S. citizen. Thind argued that because he was of Aryan descent, he should be considered white, not Asian, and therefore should have access to U.S. citizenship.

Images Used:

1. Five Indian immigrants at Angel Island in 1910. Courtesy of California State Parks.
2. Article from the 16 September 1906 Puget Sound American newspaper incorrectly describing turbaned Sikhs as "Hindu" and their unfavorable immigration to Bellingham. Image from Wikipedia
3. Ghadar Party Headquarters, via Consulate General of India, San Francisco, USA
4. Ghadar Publication, via FoundSF