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HINDU CONSPIRACY CASES: ACTIVITIES OF THE INDIAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT IN THE U.S., 1908-1933



During World War I, Indian nationalists took advantage of Great Britain's preoccupation with the European war by attempting to foment revolution in India to overthrow British rule. Their activities were aided politically and financially by the German Government. Indian nationalists in the United States were active in the independence movement effort through fundraising, arms buying, and propagandizing through the Hindustan Ghadar newspaper published in San Francisco.

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Detailed Description:

From 1915 to 1917, the British government repeatedly requested that the United States government suppress the activities of Ghadar Party in the USA. However, these requests were turned down, as nothing in U.S. law prevented the Indians from seeking to overthrow the British government. Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, the Ghadar intellectual, Lala Hardayal, was arrested for anarchist activities and left the U.S. before he could be deported. With other Indian Nationalists in Europe, he enlisted the aid of Germany, who believed supporting a revolt in India would weaken the United Kingdom. In 1915, Germany offered the Indian Nationalists financial aid for transporting arms and Indians back to India via the United States.

The British government claimed that the United States was violating its neutrality with Britain by allowing Germany to conspire with the Indians on American soil. The first of several arrests of the Indian Nationalists were made in the Spring of 1917 with one hundred and five people of various nationalities being arrested. Eventually, thirty-five were tried for conspiracy, including nine Germans, nine Americans, and seventeen Indians.

During the war, nativists in the United States were expressing hostility toward certain minority groups, especially radicals and recent immigrants viewing anything un-American with suspicion. By 1917, Germans were the object of much of the American nativistic fervor. Fear

of German subversion and conspiracies ran rampant throughout the U.S. after the Black Tom explosion and the Kingsland Explosion, both suspected to have been caused by German agents. Thus by being linked to Germany in a conspiracy, the Indian Nationalists should have been the recipients of the same hostility. Although calls for their deportation were made by government officials after the Hindu-German conspiracy trial, none of the Indian Nationalists were deported.

The arrests started in March 1917, with Chandra Kanta Chakraverty "a thin-faced, falsetto-voiced Hindu, a native of Bengal, and a speaker of many languages," and the German, Ernest Sekunna, being arrested on charges of conspiracy. Most of the others were arrested on April 8, including Franz Bopp, the German Consul General for San Francisco, E. H. von Schack and Deus Dekker and William von Brincken. The Indian Nationalists were accused of taking "advantage of American neutrality to plot on American soil against the allies" at "the expense of the laws and hospitality of the United States." The two men had also taken out trade names to do business as The Oriental Society, The Oriental Kitchen, and the Oriental Review, and purchased 200 acres (0.81 km²) of land in an isolated part of New York State.

The Hindu conspiracy trial started in San Francisco on November 20, 1917. Despite attempts to focus on the machinations of the German agents, the Indians presented their position in terms of the ideals of the American Revolution. As the trial started, Jodh Singh, an Indian "whose testimony sent nine men, including his brothers to their death and condemned a score to life imprisonment in the Far East," pleaded with the court for an American square deal. The British had brought Singh to the United States to testify against his fellow Indian Nationalists. He pleaded guilty to the conspiracy charges and was to be a government witness in this trial. But when he took the witness stand, he suddenly refused to testify. He asked to change his plea to stand trial with his "brothers" in an American court. The judge refused his request.

The San Francisco Chronicle described the courtroom during the testimony of one of the Government witnesses:

The tense scene found its climax when four or five of the Hindoo defendants rose to their feet shouting, "That is not right-it is wrong," when Interpreter Gould translated one of the witness' answers. "Sit down-keep your seats," ordered Judge Van Fleet, "the Court will protect your rights-" "Have justice-this is a farce-give us justice," cried the Hindoos as deputy marshals started toward them. "Your counsel will protect your rights," said Judge Van Fleet... "But your honor," replied Bhagwan Singh, one of the alleged chief defendants, "our counsel cannot understand our language."

The Indians were placed into custody for the remainder of the trial following claims that they had been harassing witnesses by following them and attempting to bribe them. When Dr. Chakraverty's extensive confession was delivered, "the diminutive Hindoo was the target for dark glances from this fellow defendants, the subject of excited whisperings and the recipient of several notes from the Hindoos." One of the defendants even stuffed a wad of paper down Chakraverty's neck. To these notes and "to the dark scowls of his countrymen, Chakraverty

responded with a broad grin." Chakraverty was followed by several of the Hindu defendants when he left court.

A woman who gave evidence in the trial described how she had met two of the Ghadar activists, Taraknath Das and Lala Hardayal, when all three were at Stanford University. One wanted to "transform her into a modern Joan of Arc, leading the Indians in intrigue against the British." The other wished to "inspire her to be an idealist and a teacher in India." Evidence was also produced of money paid to two American women by Har Dayal in an attempt to "lure women to Europe to assist the revolutionists." The prosecution also suggested that Taraknath Das had used Camille de Berri, to store a bomb manual in her safety deposit box. When she was finally located she was revealed to be the Oakland divorcee of a wealthy mining expert and who had had recently remarried. Her new husband had been suspended from the University of California, upon graduating, for petty pilfering from gymnasium lockers. De Berri had come to his rescue by heading a special investigating committee to look into the affair and then by testifying as an alibi witness for him.

The defense attorney attempted to argue the accuseds' beliefs placed them squarely within American ideals. The opening address to the jury denounced the British Government's rule in India, declaring that the whole case was being tried at the initiation of Great Britain. Copies of Ram Chandra's Ghadar Party paper were produced quoting liberty appeals by Patrick Henry, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and President Woodrow Wilson.

The trial ended with a sensational climax when Ram Chandra was shot to death in the courtroom by fellow defendant, Ram Singh. The New York Times described the incident, which occurred just after the court announced a recess:

"Ram Chandra arose and started across the room. Ram Singh also arose. He raised his revolver and began firing. Ram Chandra staggered forward and fell dead before the witness chair, with a bullet in his heart and two others in his body."

"While Singh still pressed the trigger of his automatic pistol, he, too, was shot and killed by United States Marshal James H. Holohan, who fired across the room over the heads of attorneys."

Chandra had been murdered because it was believed he had been diverting Nationalists' funds to his own use. A week later, the judge found the defendants guilty of violating the neutrality of the United States. The Indians, "students and revolutionists, several of them highly educated, were sentenced to serve from twenty-two months to sixty days."

The Justice Department and U.S. Attorney records reproduced herein primarily concern the U.S. government's prosecution of these nationalists in the "Hindu Conspiracy Case" for violations of the Espionage Act (40 Stat. 217-231) arising from two major incidents.

In the first incident, the German Government provided funds with which the nationalists purchased arms for shipment to Indian rebels. The arms were shipped from San Francisco, California, on the Annie Larsen, which then sailed to Mexico where the arms were transferred

to the Maverick, which then sailed to the East Indies. The British Government arrested some of the Maverick's personnel in Singapore.

In the second incident, several Indians (some of whom were U.S. citizens) and others were arrested for attempted fraud involved in soliciting funds for, and calling themselves representatives of, the "Nationalists Government" of India.

In the spring of 1918, the "Hindu Conspiracy Case" trial (as it was called in the press and Department of Justice correspondence) was held in San Francisco, at which 29 people were convicted in indictments arising from the arms shipment. Indictments arising from the fraud case were dismissed.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service records reproduced herein relate to efforts to revoke the citizenship of certain Indians naturalized as U.S. citizens, as well as to general efforts to exclude Indians from admission to the United States and Canada.

Records include:

RG 60, General Records of the Department of Justice

Classified Subject Files, 1914-41

File No. 9-10-3, Sections 1-11, relating to violations of U.S. neutrality by Indian nationalists, 1915-23

RG 60, General Records of the Department of Justice

Straight numerical Files, 1904-37

1. File No. 193424, Sections 1 and 2, relating to regulation of the Indian Nationalist Party, 1918029.

2. File No. 203000.

3. File No. 218835.

4. File No. 225815.

5. File No. 232390.

6. File No. 232899.

Classified Subject Files, 1914-41

1. File No. 95-1483.

2. File No. 9-12-264.

3. File No. 9-19-0, Section 1.

4. File No. 38-524.

5. File No. 38-525.

6. File No. 38-927.

RG 85, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service:

Central Office Subject Correspondence, 1906-32

1. File Nos. 52903/110, 52901/110A, 52901/110B, 52901/110C, and 52903/110D, relating to Hindu immigration, 1910-14.

2. File Nos. 53854/133, 53854/133A, and 53854/133B, relating to the Hindu situation, 1913-26.

RG 118, Records of U.S. Attorneys and Marshals:

U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of California, Neutrality Case Files, 1913-20.

1. General Correspondence (selected records)

2. U.S. v. Bopp, Ram Chandra, et al.