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Resisting Biographical Illusions: Pandurang Khankhoje, Indian Revolutionaries and the Anxiety to be Remembered

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a growing discussion concerning the way historians should approach the study of Indian revolutionaries both within and outside the subcontinent. Described as ‘the revolutionary turn’, this area of research has not only explored the porosity and ambiguity in defining individuals as revolutionaries but has also questioned the way such revolutionaries sought to write themselves into history as a political act. Continuing this line of interrogation, this article examines the retrospective political claims of heroic revolutionary belonging by analysing the autobiographical notes left by Pandurang Khankhoje, a peripatetic Indian who left his country pursuing dreams of revolution. While in the last decade Khankhoje has become an iconic character in writing histories about global solidarities and anti-colonial resistance, this article asks to what extent can historians believe self-described revolutionary narratives. As this article shows, these narratives privilege what Pierre Bourdieu has called ‘biographical illusion’, the organisation of life as a history that unfolds coherently and chronologically from beginning to end. Political or ideological differences and inconsistencies are flattened in the name of global ideologies or solidarities. As an attempt to disrupt these narratives, this article will focus on the silences, absences and ‘unreliability’ of the experiences and sources used to understand the work and lives of Indian revolutionaries abroad, such as Khankhoje, Lala Har Dayal and M. N. Roy. This article argues that the story of revolutionaries reveals important details about how they understood the racial, political and gender structures of different societies in the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Ghadar; Khankhoje; Biographical Illusion; Indian revolutionaries; Har Dayal; Racial Hierarchies

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The relationship historians have with the study of Indian revolutionaries is highly complex. On the one hand, since the Indian independence movement is commonly associated with Gandhian values and non-violence, revolutionaries have often been seen as figures awkwardly inhabiting the margins of history, legality and the nation. On the other hand, much of the evidence available to historians about the lives of revolutionaries is embedded in a political bipolarity in which individuals are presented either as dangerous terrorists in colonial sources or as immaculate freedom fighters in nationalist and autobiographical writings. Under such circumstances, historians are presented with the difficult task of deciding how to deal with sporadic archival ‘sightings’ of revolutionaries often tainted by a colonial, nationalist or even a self-reflective gaze. In recent years, scholars associated with what is often referred to as the ‘revolutionary turn’ have embraced the challenges of this topic to present revolutionaries as complex figures that are central to understanding the transition of India from a colony to an independent country.¹

In conversation with the works of this revolutionary turn, this article explores the difficulties and possibilities of writing the history of Indian revolutionaries travelling around the world before the independence of India in 1947. It does so by analysing the autobiographical notes and archives left by Pandurang Sadashiv Khankhoje (1884–1967), a wandering nationalist who left his country of birth pursuing dreams of revolution.² As a young man, in 1906, Khankhoje travelled to Japan searching for military education. From 1907 to 1914, he lived on the Pacific Coast of the United States, where he studied agriculture and became involved with the Ghadar Party,³ a movement attempting to bring down British colonialism in India from abroad. This led Khankhoje to the Middle East, where he would be linked to German forces fighting against Britain (1914–19). Later, he left a trace in Germany and Russia (1921) and arrived in Mexico in 1924, where he would stay for almost thirty years. It is hard to know whether Khankhoje’s dream became a reality. Still, his life is a fine example of the complicated situations Indian revolutionaries experienced at this time and their anxieties about being remembered as freedom fighters in their own country.

Khankhoje’s political and geographical trajectory mirrors the trail of better-known Indians associated with transnational colonial resistance, such as M. N. Roy, Har Dayal or Heramba Lal Gupta. At different stages of their

¹ For instance, K. Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text* (London, 2015); K. Maclean and J. D. Elam, ‘Reading Revolutionaries: Texts, Acts, and Afterlives of Political Action in Late Colonial South Asia’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 16 (2013), 113–23; D. Ghosh, *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919–1947* (Cambridge, 2019); O. B. Laursen, *Anarchy or Chaos: M. P. T. Acharya and the Indian Struggle for Freedom* (2023); C. Moffat, *India’s Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh* (Cambridge, 2019).

² S. Sawhney, *I Shall Never Ask for Pardon: A Memoir of Pandurang Khankhoje* (New Delhi, 2008); G. Soto Laveaga, ‘Largo dislocare: Connecting Microhistories to Remap and Recenter Histories of Science’, *History and Technology*, 34 (2018), 21–30.

³ For Ghadar see M. Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley, 2011); E. Brown, *Har Dayal: Hindu Revolutionary and Rationalist* (Tucson, 1975).

lives, these men were linked to prominent political movements and ideologies brewing in India or elsewhere, such as nationalism, the Ghadar Party and cosmopolitan versions of anarchism or communism.⁴ In the same way, most of them spent time in Japan, the United States, Europe and, a few of them, Mexico. While many writings about these revolutionaries have focused on the potential of global south connections or anti-colonial solidarities, these works typically do not analyse how the experience of these young revolutionaries was constituted or constructed.⁵ As Joan Scott has warned in a different context, historians often use the memoirs left by these revolutionaries as ‘evidence of experience’ validating the existence of a global anti-colonial movement without questioning how larger discursive notions of nationalism, race, caste and masculinity, among other things, transformed these men.⁶ Political or ideological differences and inconsistencies are flattened in the name of global ideologies or solidarities.⁷ As an attempt to disrupt these narratives, this article will focus on the silences, absences and ‘unreliability’ of the experiences and sources used to understand the work and lives of Indian revolutionaries abroad.

This article argues that the story of revolutionaries in exile, such as Khankhoje, reveals how they understood the racial, political and gender structures in which they moved and not necessarily the history of global anti-colonial struggles. As Benjamin Zachariah and Gajendra Singh have shown, if not taken at face value, the documents recollecting the experiences of Khankhoje and others (Ghadarites, Indian nationalists, socialists) uncover some of the precarious conditions of Indians living abroad, their desire to insert themselves in the history of Indian independence, their encounter with racial hierarchies, and the divisions and instability of fragile political movements.⁸ The main primary sources informing this research are a series of autobiographical articles by Khankhoje for the Marathi newspaper *Kesari*. These are kept in Dr Horst Krüger’s estate at ZMO Library, Berlin.⁹ Virtually unexplored, these memoirs display the anxiety of former ‘freedom fighters’ to construct triumphal narratives tying their lives to the history of the nation.

⁴ M. Ramnath, ‘Two Revolutions: The Ghadar Movement and India’s Radical Diaspora, 1913–1918’, *Radical History Review*, 92 (2005), 18–27; A. Raza, *Revolutionary Past: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 2020), 1–25.

⁵ A. Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford, 2015), 190–7; H. K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: A Short History* (Delhi, 2011).

⁶ J.W. Scott, ‘The Evidence of Experience’, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 773–97.

⁷ M. Ramnath, *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India’s Liberation Struggle* (Oakland, 2011).

⁸ G. Singh, ‘Jodh Singh, the Ghadar Movement and the Anti-colonial Deviant in the Anglo-American Imagination’, *Past and Present*, 245 (2019), 187–219; B. Zachariah, ‘A Long, Strange Trip: The Lives in Exile of Har Dayal’, *South Asian History and Culture*, 4 (2013), 574–92.

⁹ I thank Ole Birk Laursen for directing me to these files. P. S. Khankhoje, ‘The Story of my Revolutionary Work’, Berlin, Zentrum Moderner Orient [ZMO], Krüger Papers [KP], Box 14, File 78, No. 2. I used a digitised version of these files, the columns were translated to English by Khankhoje and J. G. Karandikar. For clarity, I provide the page number of the PDF document and not of the hard copy.

This article has four main sections. It starts by underscoring the importance of breaking what Pierre Bourdieu called ‘biographical illusions’ in the life stories of Indian revolutionaries.¹⁰ These are coherent ‘hero’ life journeys culminating in the accomplishment of a predetermined goal. The second section analyses Khankhoje’s days as a young nationalist in India and how he imagined his ancestry to cast himself as destined to save the nation. Although he has been branded as a socialist, in his early days Khankhoje was attracted to a type of nationalism, close to the extreme right, that was hostile to non-Hindu minorities. Third, Khankhoje’s time as part of a small network of Indian students in the United States is examined. This period in his life has often been used to link Khankhoje to anarcho-syndicalism and to place him as a political leader of Indian anti-colonial resistance abroad. Nonetheless, if read against the grain, the sources relevant to these years reveal long periods of idleness and multiple divisions along caste, religious and racial lines within Indian circles in the United States. The fourth section deals with Khankhoje’s recollection of his time in the Middle East. While there is no concrete evidence of the extent of his military involvement during these years apart from a few documents housed in the German Foreign Office,¹¹ Khankhoje wrote extensively about this episode to record the sacrifice he had made in the name of the nation. While the incursion of Indian revolutionaries in the Middle East has been labelled insignificant,¹² Khankhoje used these events to present himself as a fearless adventurer and servant of his nation. He was anxious to be remembered as a freedom fighter above anything else. To conclude, rather than retelling the usual narrative of Khankhoje’s time in Mexico, I offer some general remarks about the challenges of writing history posed by characters like him who inhabit liminal spaces where rumours, legends and historical events meet. The writings of Indian revolutionaries, such as Khankhoje, hold vital historical information to understand the society they inhabited. To access it, historians must resist the temptation of romanticising the life of revolutionaries and look to the larger socio-political context navigated by these individuals. To highlight the need to revise such testimonies and to break the linearity of biographical illusions, this article begins by examining a peculiar episode in the life of Khankhoje during his time in Mexico where his character as a historical narrator is questioned.

Khankhoje, Tláloc and biographical illusions

In the autumn of 1930, several small newspapers in Canada and the United States reported that a ‘Hindu savant’ had discovered an ‘archaeological gem’ in Coatlinchán, Texcoco, a town near Mexico City. The artefact was a giant

¹⁰ P. Bourdieu, ‘The Biographical Illusion’, in *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries*, ed. W. Hemecker and E. Saunders (Berlin, 2017), 210–16.

¹¹ The Indian National Society to the German Foreign Office, 3 Oct. 1916, RZ 201/021104–067, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin Germany (PAAA).

¹² Singh, ‘Jodh Singh’; S. Kuwajima, *The Mutiny in Singapore: War, Anti-War and the War for India’s Independence* (New Delhi, 2006); S. Singh, ‘Ghadar Conspiracy’ (2015), in *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by U. Daniel et al.

monolith, 32.5 feet high and 17 feet 10 inches feet thick, representing either an ancient Aztec water goddess, Chalchiuhtlicue, or the god of rain, Tláloc. The notes claimed the discovery was made by Professor Pandurang Khankhoje, a horticulturist who attracted national attention by revealing a perennial bean that was able to bear 'as many as 100 pods', and who had adopted archaeology as a 'side line' activity.¹³ *The Brainerd Daily Dispatch* included a picture of Khankhoje before the giant stone, which appears fully unearthed at the bottom of a hill. The reports underscored the importance of the finding as 'no mention of this idol is to be found in any existing books on Mexican archaeology', and even the National Museum of Mexico considered retrieving the enormous idol to house it as part of its collections.¹⁴

With an archaeological breakthrough of this magnitude, one would expect to find Khankhoje's name in plenty of archaeological volumes in Mexico or elsewhere, but this is not the case. This absence is not related to the historical value of 'La Piedra de los Tecomates', another name for the piece in question. The existence of this object was well documented from the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ Indeed, the provenance of this monolith was the cause of a bitter debate between Alfredo Chavero and Leopoldo Batres, two of the founders of Mexican archaeology, who could not agree about the identity of the idol, whether it was a representation of Tláloc or Chalchiuhtlicue.¹⁶ In 1903, the journal of the Sociedad Científica Antonio Alzate (an association to which Khankhoje would join as a member in the 1920s), also discussed where and how the stone could be visited and acknowledged that locals functioned as guides to arrive at the location of this Aztec monument. Similarly, a few years later, 'La Piedra' found its way to the pages of the *Annales du Musée Guimet* in Paris.¹⁷ In other words, this archaeological item was well known worldwide by the 1930s when Khankhoje claimed to have discovered it. In 1964, the monolith was extracted from Coatlinchán, despite the protests of the local community, and moved to the front of the Museo Nacional de Antropología where it is today. The name of Khankhoje was not to be associated with 'La Piedra' for decades until a recent biography written by his daughter revived the old tale. It is hard to say if Khankhoje was fooled into believing he made an archaeological discovery or whether he attempted to gain fame by claiming to have made such an important discovery. Yet, including this story in Khankhoje's biography indicates that he continued to retell this anecdote to other people, at least those close to him.

¹³ 'Ancient Idol in Mexico is Found on Hill', *Victoria Daily Times*, 11 Sept. 1930, 20; 'Finds Mexican Idol', *The Pathfinder*, 15 Nov. 1930, 18; 'Hindu Discovers Mexican Idol', *The Brainerd Daily Dispatch*, 7 Oct. 1930, 3.

¹⁴ 'Ancient Idol in Mexico is Found on Hill', *Victoria Daily Times*, 11 Sept. 1930, 20.

¹⁵ E. Noguera, 'El monolito de Coatlichan', *Anales de Antropología*, 1 (1964), 131–41.

¹⁶ L. Lejeal, 'Review Alfredo Chavero: El Monolito de Coatlinchan', *Journal de la Société de Americanistes de Paris*, 2 (1905), 295–6.

¹⁷ E. T. Hamy, 'Croyances et pratiques religieuses des premiers mexicains, le culte des dieux Tlaloques', *Annales du Musée Guimet: Bibliothèque de Vulgarisation, Conférences faites au Musée Guimet*, 25 (1907), 43–80, at 66.

An episode like this would usually amount to an irrelevant funny story in the life of a historical character. However, the case of Khankhoje raises crucial questions about his reliability as a narrator as his memoirs, like those of other Indian revolutionaries, are full of such extraordinary accounts. According to Khankhoje's autobiographical notes, at the time this news was published he had already been involved in what the British colonial government classified as 'terrorist organisations' and revolutionary activities all over the world for over thirty years.¹⁸ He remembered leaving India as a young man and organising revolutionary cells throughout the West Coast of the United States. He also recalled travelling incognito across Europe and Asia to fight in Persia shoulder to shoulder with Wilhem Wassmuss, the 'German Lawrence'.¹⁹ Khankhoje claimed to be imprisoned by British forces but escaped by hiding with nomadic tribes in the Middle East while pretending to be a dervish. Khankhoje then travelled incognito through Europe. He lived in Berlin and Moscow and even met Lenin.²⁰ Khankhoje asserted that all these endeavours were done with extreme secrecy as he was constantly under surveillance by British spies worldwide. But if Khankhoje's memoirs are credible, and British imperial forces wanted him throughout the globe, why would he publicly announce his whereabouts to newspapers?

Khankhoje's archaeological anecdote illustrates the unreliability of certain historical characters who may distort life events to shape how they want to be remembered or perceived by others. This is particularly important as today the figure of Pandurang Khankhoje has become an exemplary character to write histories about global solidarities including anti-colonial resistance, global networks of revolution, international communism, anarchism, and even the birth of the green revolution.²¹ As this article shows, these narratives privilege what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'the biographical illusion', the organisation of life as a history that unfolds coherently and chronologically from beginning to end. In these biographical illusions, the subject and the object of the narrative have a well-defined origin and motivation (a *raison d'être*) that is followed to the end/culmination of the 'life history'.²² The subject is given an identity (a revolutionary, nationalist, businessman, etc.), and all events are organised and connected to fulfil such identity. Anecdotes such as Khankhoje's archaeological findings represent a problem for historians, and they are often excluded from historical narratives to preserve the cogency of the story.

¹⁸ S. Kapila, *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age* (Princeton, 2021), 53–87.

¹⁹ C. Sykes, *Wassmuss: The German Lawrence* (New York, 1936).

²⁰ Kapila, *Violent Fraternity*, 53.

²¹ Soto Laveaga, 'Largo dislocare'; D. Kent-Carrasco, 'De Chapingo a Sonora: Pandurang Khankhoje en México y el tránsito del agrarismo a la agroindustria', *Historia Mexicana*, 70 (2020), 375–421; A. Ortiz Wallner, 'South-South Exchange Networks and the Circulation of Knowledge in 1920s Mexico', in *Handbook of the Historiography of Latin American Studies on the Life Sciences and Medicine*, ed. A. Barahona (2022), 339–53; T. K. Lindner, *A City against Empire: Transnational Anti-Imperialism in Mexico City, 1920–30* (Liverpool, 2023), 139–46.

²² Bourdieu, 'The Biographical Illusion', 210–16.

In the case of Khankhoje, his life has been imagined as that of an infallible revolutionary and agricultural scientist fighting for the oppressed throughout the globe. The works of Ortiz Wallner, Lindner and Kent-Carrasco illustrate these points well. For instance, Ortíz Wallner, in her work on Khankhoje's time in Mexico, describes the latter as 'agronomist and revolutionary [...] an anti-colonial activist, trade unionist, avant-garde geneticist, as well as an agrarian pedagogue'.²³ She attributes to Khankhoje the authorship of eighteen books (although the bibliographical information is omitted) and places him as a 'key figure' in developing Mexico's project of modernisation of agriculture through his involvement in the National School of Agriculture at Chapingo.²⁴ Similarly, Lindner conceives Khankhoje's work in Mexico as 'exemplary of an agrarian version of anti-imperialism and of Indian-Mexican cooperation'.²⁵ In Lindner's account, Khankhoje emerges as a left-wing activist and agricultural geneticist, inspired by the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, who was so committed to the cause of agriculture that he even 'taught peasants free of charge'.²⁶ The problem with the work of Lindner and Ortiz Wallner is that they present a romanticised vision of Khankhoje's activities in Mexico. This is partly due to their wish to write the histories of Global South exchanges, and because their main source of information is the research made by Savitri Sawhney, Khankhoje's daughter, who broadly views Khankhoje as a revolutionary. Thus, apparent tensions in the narratives about Khankhoje's life are avoided, such as his interest in what might be described today as the Hindu right; his conflicting political allegiances to disparate causes in Japan, the United States, Germany and Russia; or exaggerated accounts of historical events or his interventions in agricultural science and archaeological findings. Even practical questions are evaded such as which language Khankhoje taught the peasants. As noted by Gilberto Aboites Manrique, while Khankhoje was recognised as someone navigating the Mexican agricultural field between 1925 and 1940, he did not 'hizo escuela' [create a school/legacy] due to language and scientific limitations.²⁷ Emilio Alanís Patiño, one of Khankhoje's students at Chapingo, who would become a leading figure in statistical studies in Mexico, remembered the itinerant Indian as a 'good man' who 'did not know Spanish ... or genetics'.²⁸ Instead of presenting a romantic image of Khankhoje, this article engages with his limitations to shed light on unexplored areas of his trajectory.

For his part, Kent-Carrasco offers a more nuanced picture of Khankhoje in which the latter is linked to socialist agricultural endeavours and, importantly, to the development of capitalist agricultural companies in Mexico. Filled with rich historical details, Kent-Carrasco's work neatly traces Khankhoje's movements in Mexico for over two decades. Yet, a few tensions in his analysis of

²³ Ortiz Wallner, 'South-South Exchange', 345.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 339–48.

²⁵ Lindner, *A City against Empire*, 143.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ G. Aboites Manrique, *Una mirada diferente de la Revolución Verde: ciencia nación y compromiso social* (México, 2002), 86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Khankhoje seem to return to the appeal of reproducing 'biographical illusions'. For instance, Khankhoje's constant change of jobs, in India and Mexico, is read by Kent-Carrasco as part of Khankhoje's activism rather than inadequacy to fulfil specific posts, a change in the circumstances of the political circle supporting the Indian, or the short-lived nature of state-sponsored agricultural projects that fail to produce tangible results. Similarly, Kent-Carrasco, following Soto-Lavega, tends to overplay Khankhoje's involvement in the origins of the green revolution, claiming that an exchange of seeds between Mexico and India, brokered by the Rockefeller Foundation, was the result of Khankhoje's 'visionary scientific work in Mexico that was now returning to India in the shape of hybrid wheat seeds'.²⁹ The problem with this narrative is that Khankhoje was not involved in developing these seeds or in the scientific trade between India and Mexico.³⁰ His research at the time did not relate to wheat but to maize. Even when Khankhoje returned to India, he was excluded from national and international agricultural projects in the subcontinent, leaving him frustrated.³¹ It is hard to know whether this exclusion had political reasons or was related to Khankhoje's ability as a scientist. However, the distortions in Khankhoje's life events may be explained due to the desire of most historians, myself included, to tell fully coherent stories with a larger historical meaning.

Attempting not to fall into the temptation of reproducing these biographical illusions, this article looks at often omitted episodes in Khankhoje's life that reveal a great deal of the social and political context he inhabited as a peripatetic Indian travelling around the world at the beginning of the twentieth century. Khankhoje will not be examined as an isolated figure but as one of several Indians who left the subcontinent and followed a similar political path. The point is not to expose Khankhoje as an unreliable narrator (after all, everyone is the hero of their own story), but to understand what else the sources he left behind are saying and how his exaggerated version of events reflects a desire to be remembered as an Indian freedom fighter. To show this, this piece reads Khankhoje's memoirs against the grain. Rather than focusing on his achievements, the following sections focus on Khankhoje's brushes with revolutionary activities and emergent concepts such as nationalism, race and masculinity.

From India to California

This section explores the way Khankhoje experienced nationalism and the reasons that awoke in him a spirit of revolution. As Elam and Maclean have noted, many of the so-called revolutionaries often embraced a dissimilar and sometimes contradictory mixture of nationalism, religion, anarchism,

²⁹ Kent-Carrasco, 'De Chapingo a Sonora', 410.

³⁰ N. Cullaher, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

³¹ Interview with G. V. Ketkar in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 2, ed. S. P. Sen (Calcutta, 1973), 333.

communism and socialism. As it will be shown, Khankhoje was no different. His understanding of nationalism at this stage, and even when he wrote his memoirs, was centred on the religious oppression of Hindus. He did not have a clear political vision of what independent India should look like, nor was he committed to a socialist or communist cause. Khankhoje's nationalism was inspired by Hindu historical figures and deities, it had an upper-caste outlook, and it frequently excluded other Indian minorities from its vision. Khankhoje's recollections about his background clarify things in this respect.

Pandurang Sadashiv Khankhoje was born sometime in the winter of 1884 in Wardha, India.³² He came from a relatively well-off Brahmin family that valued education. Khankhoje's father was a petition writer for the colonial government, which may explain his son's fluency in English and social and economic mobility. After completing his primary education, Khankhoje moved to Nagpur to study at Neil City High School. It was during this period that he began to think critically about colonialism. Like many other revolutionaries and nationalists, including Surendranath Banerjea, Tilak and Gandhi, Khankhoje claimed to have been influenced by the figures of Mazzini and Garibaldi and their fight to establish a republic.³³ While none of the written works of the Italian nationalists is mentioned in his memoirs, Khankhoje argued that it was from them that he learned to look 'upon the role of Kings and Emperors as inferior to a republic'.³⁴ Yet, more than a commitment to republicanism, Khankhoje's gesture to Mazzini and Garibaldi reflected the growth of nationalism or anti-colonialism in the subcontinent, mainly Hindu nationalism.

The importance of religious nationalism over establishing a republic can be appreciated by looking at Khankhoje's reverence for Indian (and Hindu) historical figures such as Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi, Maharana Pratap and Shivaji Maharaj.³⁵ These leaders came from a royal and upper-caste family and are usually remembered for defending their religion and fighting 'foreign invaders', usually the British or the Mughals, and not for attempting to establish a republic of equals. Perhaps evidencing how biographical illusions are constructed, Khankhoje linked his lineage to these royals and their defence of Hinduism by claiming his surname was given to one of his ancestors 'who successfully searched and found out one Muslim "Khan" who was secretly converting Gond aboriginals near Nagpur. The Bhonsla rulers of Nagpur had ordered the search (Khoj) of the Muslim (Khan)'.³⁶ In other words, in his recollections, Khankhoje's mission to defend India was set even before his birth. Notably, the nationalism that Khankhoje was attracted to as a young

³² A. Joshi, 'Ban on Prof. Khankhoje', *The Mahratta*, 17 July 1927.

³³ C.A. Bayly, 'Liberalism at Large: Mazzini and Nineteenth-Century Indian Thought', in *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalization of Democratic Nationalism*, ed. C. A. Bayly and E. F. Biagini (Oxford, 2008), 355–74.

³⁴ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 13 (pdf).

³⁵ H. Singh, *The Rani of Jhansi: Gender, History and Fable in India* (Cambridge, 2014); R. Sharma, *Maharana Pratap* (Lahore, 1932[?]); J. W. Laine, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* (Oxford, 2003).

³⁶ Interview with G. V. Ketkar, *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 2, 333.

man was not particularly inclusive, as the sources of inspiration were strongly associated with Hinduism.

Khankhoje's understanding of nationalism was strongly influenced by the nationalist intellectual Bal Gangadhar Tilak.³⁷ It was focused on the defence of Hindu religious celebrations, and it was quite popular in Western and Central India when Khankhoje was growing up. Indeed, Khankhoje remembered that one of his first revolutionary activities was associated with the Ganapati festival, the celebration of Lord Ganesh, which became a point of political contention around the intervention of the colonial government in religious matters.³⁸ His involvement in the Ganapati campaign came through the Bandhav Samaj, a secret society that Khankhoje compared to other associations carrying out revolutionary activities in India, such as Yugantar or Anushilan Samiti.³⁹ Even though there is no reliable information about the Bandhav Samaj apart from his testimony, Khankhoje placed himself as one of its founders and claimed that the group drew inspiration from Sanskrit epics. The group's main objective was to 'drive the British out of India by war' even if they had to sacrifice their lives. The members of the Samaj lived by the principle of the Bhagavad Gita: 'if you are killed in war you will go to heaven. If you survive, you will rule the earth.'⁴⁰ According to Khankhoje, the group consisted mostly of students preaching nationalism and revolution to lower-caste people. When the Ganapati movement emerged, Khankhoje recollected, the Bandhav Samaj attended town gatherings to 'preach that Ganapati meant God of Independence and his worship meant the love of the country'.⁴¹ In other words, to a great extent, Khankhoje associated Hinduism with nationalism and anti-colonialism.

Despite the explicit Hindu character of the Ganapati campaign, Khankhoje claimed that the Bandhav Samaj continuously attempted to recruit Muslims to their ranks. However, he confessed in his biographical notes that regardless of the best efforts of the Samaj, they 'could not induce their [Muslims] minds to love their country'.⁴² Even if Muslims were convinced to join the Bandhav Samaj, Khankhoje added, they received different treatment in the organisation. For instance, in one of his anecdotes about this period, Khankhoje explained how after convincing two young Muslim men to join the Samaj, these had to be 'thoroughly tested for their patriotism'.⁴³ Similarly, the Samaj had to change the admission ceremony welcoming these new members as Muslims were not admitted 'in the sacrificial Vedic rites'.⁴⁴ Surprisingly, Khankhoje

³⁷ P. V. Rao, *Foundation of Tilak's Nationalism: Discrimination, Education and Hindutva* (New Delhi, 2010); S. Seth, 'The Critique of Renunciation: Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Hindu Nationalism', *Postcolonial Studies*, 9 (2006), 137–50; S. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale, Reform and Revolution in the Making of Modern India* (Los Angeles, 1962).

³⁸ S. Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History 1890–1950* (Bloomington, 2008), 27–74.

³⁹ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 41 (pdf).

⁴⁰ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 40 (pdf); *Bhagavad-Gita*, chapter 2, verse 37.

⁴¹ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 49 (pdf).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 55–56 (pdf).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 50 (pdf).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

did not see the association's devotion to Hindu icons or how Muslims were treated as the reason behind the Samaj's failure to recruit members from such a community. Instead, he attributed this to the success of the 'English authorities', who 'sow the seeds of dissension between the Hindus and the Muslims'.⁴⁵ In short, even though he wrote his memoirs as an older man, Khankhoje did not seem to be aware that the brand of nationalism he endorsed was sectarian. It excluded Muslims and other minorities by default. More importantly, his narrative of events reproduced the division between Hindus and Muslims that the colonial government used to justify communal policies between these groups.

At the turn of the twentieth century, India went through critical political events that inspired many young nationalists, including Khankhoje, to rebel against the British Empire. In particular, the emergence of the *swadeshi* movement against economic exploitation, the British partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese became landmarks in the stories of Indian revolutionaries abroad embracing the colonial narrative about insurrection brewing across the subcontinent instead of denying it.⁴⁶ Khankhoje's version of this period follows the pattern described above, even though his revolutionary activities were limited to lecturing about nationalism and giving political speeches in public. Eventually, these actions created problems for Khankhoje as the local police began to take notice of his activism. After several interventions from his father to keep Khankhoje out of jail, the latter was presented with a marriage proposal.⁴⁷ Khankhoje's family was convinced that marriage would encourage the young revolutionary to settle down, but he refused the proposal, arguing that his only interest was to achieve India's independence.⁴⁸

The point about marriage requires an explanation as it became a common trope in the biographies of Indian freedom fighters and opens up exciting points of analysis that have often been neglected. As Kama Maclean has shown in the case of Bhagat Singh, refusing marriage could be interpreted not only as a commitment of young revolutionaries to the cause of independence but also as an acknowledgement that by fighting imperialism, death could arrive unexpectedly.⁴⁹ This justification aligns itself with other popular kinds of renunciation in Indian tradition associated with masculine religious figures, such as sanyasis, who gave up family life in the quest for enlightenment, but also with modern examples of Indian revolutionaries who refused to marry or hid their relationship with women from the public such as Har Dayal and M. N. Roy.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 55 (pdf).

⁴⁶ R. P. Dua, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War on Indian Politics* (Delhi, 1966); Philip Towle, 'The Russo-Japanese War and the Defence of India', *Military Affairs*, 44 (1980), 111–17; Alexander Nordlund, 'A War of Others: British War Correspondents, Orientalist Discourse, and the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905', *War in History*, 22 (2015), 28–46.

⁴⁷ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 120 (pdf).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ K. Maclean, 'The Portrait's Journey: The Image, Social Communication and Martyr-Making in Colonial India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 70 (2011), 1051–1082, at 1064.

⁵⁰ In the case of Roy, his first wife, Evelyn Trent, is not even mentioned in his autobiography.

To return to Khankhoje, while his refusal to get married may be read as a sign of his commitment to the nationalist cause, his behaviour after this episode shows that he still did not have a clear action plan to engage in revolutionary activities. In a brief period, Khankhoje toyed with different ideas about his future that his family found so erratic that he was sent to a doctor to assess his mental state. Some of Khankhoje's self-confessed schemes and plans at this stage included living with indigenous communities to raise 'an army of aboriginal Bhils and Gonds' to rebel against the British;⁵¹ joining a national circus to learn how to ride horses and shoot firearms;⁵² and travelling to Africa to work as a 'coolie' on the Mombasa railway.⁵³ None of these activities amounted to anything until an opportunity to travel to Japan emerged. According to Savitri Sawhney, Khankhoje's decision to travel to Japan came after meeting Tilak and G. S. Khaparde,⁵⁴ who encouraged the young revolutionary to seek military training abroad.⁵⁵

Khankhoje left Bombay for Japan in February 1906 without papers. His hopes of establishing the foundations of pan-Asian solidarity against European powers died soon after his arrival. Khankhoje found this country harder to navigate than he initially thought. He could not find military training and realised that the Indian community in Japan was divided along class and caste lines. Khankhoje, who had no money and was struggling to earn a living, recalled how after the catastrophic San Francisco earthquake of 1906, news arrived in Japan announcing employment was available even to unskilled and inexperienced workers like himself. This encouraged him to follow his 'long-cherished dream of going to America'.⁵⁶ California needed a cheap workforce after the earthquake destroyed over 80 per cent of the city. Labour was also needed for agriculture, lumbering and the construction of railways. Japanese, Chinese and Punjabi workers were allowed to enter the United States, although a rise in anti-Asian discrimination would follow.⁵⁷ In other words, economic hardship and financial opportunity were also factors in Khankhoje's decision to leave Japan, not only revolutionary plans. Khankhoje's time in the United States would formally begin two of the most important elements in his life: his connection to the Ghadar Party and his

⁵¹ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 45 (pdf).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 122 (pdf).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 124 (pdf).

⁵⁴ S. Sawhney, *I Shall Never*, 38–9. Tilak is often seen as the sponsor of other young nationalists including Vinayak Savarkar. See S. Kamra, 'Law and Radical Rhetoric in British India: The 1897 Trial of Bal Gangadhar Tilak', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39 (2016), 546–59.

⁵⁵ Khankhoje box, 38(doc) (pdf) 74. For the importance of Japan as a revolutionary place see R. P. Dua, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War on Indian Politics* (Delhi, 1966); P. Towle, 'The Russo-Japanese War and the Defence of India', *Military Affairs*, 44 (1980), 111–17; A. Nordlund, 'A War of Others: British War Correspondents, Orientalist Discourse, and the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905', *War in History*, 22 (2015), 28–46; C. Stolte and H. Fischer-Tiné, 'Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism, ca. 1905–1940', *Comparative Studies of Society and History*, 54 (2012), 65–92.

⁵⁶ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 18 (pdf).

⁵⁷ J. M. Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven, 1988).

education in agriculture. It would also open Khankhoje to new experiences in an unknown racial hierarchy.

California dreaming: Khankhoje in the United States

The story of Khankhoje's time in the United States is ambiguous. On the one hand, he left a clear record of his educational activities during his time there.⁵⁸ On the other, as Kama Maclean has suggested, the stories of Indian revolutionaries abroad, such as Khankhoje, are full of gaps that are to remain part of a collective history without guarantees.⁵⁹ If focused on the growth of revolution, the gaps in his story are difficult to assess. Historians have used Khankhoje's time in the United States to establish links between him and different political groups including revolutionaries from the Partido Liberal Mexicano, the Ghadar Party, and the Industrial Workers of the World (known as Wobblies). However, Khankhoje's name is surprisingly absent from many of the official documents reporting the activities of Indians in the United States. Even the records of the infamous 'Hindu Conspiracy Trial' listing almost sixty Indians involved with the Ghadar Party do not mention Khankhoje.⁶⁰ This is rather strange for someone who claimed to be the leader of the 'action (armed) group' of the Ghadar Party.⁶¹ The few documents we have registering Khankhoje's revolutionary activities are biased either by the view of colonial authorities aiming to convict Indians abroad or by a romantic, and often exaggerated, vision of the fight against imperialism. To some extent, the story of Indian revolutionaries abroad is full of speculation about their activities that cannot be denied or confirmed. For instance, the willingness of young Indians to attend foreign universities has often been explained as preparation for a future revolutionary battle. Degrees in engineering or agriculture have usually been associated with an interest in learning how to build weapons or manufacture explosives. The implicit message is that revolutionary activities never ceased and that the Ghadar Party was born from such events. However, this perspective reflects the anxieties of imminent danger put forward by the colonial government. By ignoring important periods of calm and idleness and linking unrelated events, colonial intelligence agents justified their hypervigilance against Indians abroad. In contrast, the autobiographical notes left by Indian revolutionaries suggest that a significant portion of their time in the United States was spent working and attending classes and not planning an insurrection. So rather than repeating the history of Ghadar as a political movement, the sources and documents left by these freedom

⁵⁸ Diplomas and Certificates of P. S. Khankhoje, New Delhi, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), P. S. Khankhoje Papers.

⁵⁹ K. Maclean, 'The History of a Legend: Accounting for Popular Histories of Revolutionary Nationalism in India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 46 (2012), 1540–71.

⁶⁰ List of defendants in the 1917 Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial, South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), <https://www.saada.org/item/20120722-795>.

⁶¹ I. Singh, *The Gadar Heroics: The Forgotten Saga of Overseas Indians Who Staked Their Lives to Free India from the British* (New Delhi, 2013), 166.

fighters will be used to understand essential elements of the racial and caste structures in which they were immersed.

Looking at this period from a caste and racial perspective shows that the small community of Indians on the West Coast of the United States was divided in terms of caste, religion, region, and class. Upper-caste Indian students, many of them Bengalis, saw themselves as the ethical and intellectual leaders of the revolution and did not think of Indian agricultural workers, usually Punjabis, on equal terms. Regarding the question of race, young Indian nationalists found themselves towards the bottom of a complex hierarchical structure dominated by an emerging category of whiteness.⁶² Contrary to accounts highlighting global solidarities, in several instances Indian revolutionaries abroad did not attempt to establish camaraderie campaigns with other oppressed groups and were determined to demonstrate their ancestral Aryan status.⁶³ Rather than rejecting hierarchical structures of race and caste, often produced by colonial understandings of the world, Indian revolutionaries embraced them and adjusted them for their purposes. Once again, Khankhoje's version of events provides a window to observe this.

Khankhoje arrived in San Francisco in 1907. This journey was not uncommon. Khankhoje recalled finding a pre-established network of students waiting for him in the United States.⁶⁴ In 1911, Indian students in America published articles advising interested people about what steps should be followed for those interested in studying on the Pacific Coast. The advice was vast and included tips such as how many bars of soap travellers should pack and how much money one should carry to pass through border control.⁶⁵ Prospective students were also instructed to declare to immigration officers that they would receive financial backing from home and that they did not believe in polygamy.⁶⁶ Upon his arrival, Khankhoje contacted students and nationalists who had arrived before him, such as Surendra Mohan Bose, Adharchandra Laskar, Khagen Das, and Girindra ('Girin') Mukerjee. This group was responsible for easing Khankhoje into life in San Francisco and 'Birkley'.⁶⁷ Through such networks, Khankhoje engaged in a series of odd jobs, including cleaning at a hospital and working in agricultural fields, and would later enrol in full-time education.⁶⁸ Interestingly, for Khankhoje and others like him, revolutionary activities took a secondary status at this stage. The priority was to study and survive.

Getting a job for a person of colour in California was more complex than Khankhoje thought. Employment as office clerks was closed to young Indians, and most were pushed to perform manual labour, pushing the limits

⁶² S. Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (Oxford, 2014), 5.

⁶³ See, for instance, P. Singh, *Ethnological Epitome of the Hindustanees of the Pacific Coast* (Stockton, 1936), 2.

⁶⁴ S. Das, 'Information for Indian Students Intending to Come to the Pacific Coast of the United States', *Modern Review*, 10 (1911), 602–12.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 604.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 23 (pdf).

⁶⁸ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 25 (pdf). See also Sawhney, *I Shall Never*, ch. 3.

of their understandings of caste and racial hierarchies. Physical labour was entirely new for those from an upper caste. Khankhoje remembered being fired from construction and cleaning jobs for being too small, too slow or not cleaning properly.⁶⁹ Eventually, he could keep a 'very low-paid job' at Saint Mary's Hospital in Oakland.⁷⁰ Job security changed things for Khankhoje. After three years, he finished high school in the United States, completed a one-year 'Scientific' course at Mount Tamalpais Military Academy,⁷¹ and enrolled in an agriculture programme at the Oregon State Agricultural College.⁷² Throughout his years in college, his busy schedule did not change, as Khankhoje's memoirs confirm:

Provision for my food was made as I was employed in a private boarding house to do the work of a server and to wash utensils. I got two hours' employment of sweeping clean the mechanical workshop of the college. My daily time table was as follows:- 4 a.m. to 6 a.m. cleaning of the workshop; 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. working in the dining hall; 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. attending classes and studies; 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. – washing utensils etc. and doing next day's studies up to midnight. I could do all these activities – though in a hurried manner for my quarters, the college site and the boarding house where I worked were not at great distance from one another.⁷³

In other words, revolutionary work was not a constant in Khankhoje's life for roughly seven years. He admits that most of this work 'was being done in vacation days'.⁷⁴ But even at this time, communication with India was not accessible and it was hard to keep up to date with political changes occurring elsewhere.

Pausing revolutionary work to undertake low-paid jobs was not an experience exclusive to Khankhoje. Other Indian students and nationalist leaders wrote about having hard times supporting themselves while in the United States and even denied their involvement in revolutionary activities altogether. Writing for *The Modern Review*, Sarangadhar Das noted that the conditions for 'self-supported' Indian students were not 'rosy' and were fraught with complications, particularly for the upper-caste 'Hindu youth who has never known the struggles of life'.⁷⁵ These obstacles, however, were not to stop him from achieving his goals as a 'real man always faces the dangers, the hardships, the loneliness of being away from home and all that'.⁷⁶ Sarangadhar Das also commented that the time taken by school and work

⁶⁹ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 25 (pdf).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Diploma Mount Tamalpais Military Academy. NMML, P. S. Khankhoje Papers, Subject File 1, 31. Khankhoje claims he studied at the military academy while working in the canteen for a year. Yet, a standard programme at the academy lasted four years.

⁷² S. Das, 'Why Must We Emigrate to the United States of America', *Modern Review*, 10 (1911), 69–80, at 73.

⁷³ Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 127 (pdf).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 130 (pdf).

⁷⁵ Das, 'Information for Indian Students', 610.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

occluded any possibility of being involved in politics. Sarangadhar Das stated that Indians in the United States were 'too busy with our studies and hard struggle for a living, to be able to handle politics. As I have said before, we don't know anything of the "revolutionary".'⁷⁷ Even Har Dayal, who became a catalyst for the Ghadar movement, noted in 1911 that it was typical for Indians attending school on the Pacific Coast to withdraw from any nationalist activism as 'students who work four or five hours every day as house-assistants or labourers and attend the university lectures for 8 hours or more have no surplus energy for other activities'.⁷⁸ The rest of the Indians in the United States were 'too much engrossed in the struggle for life to have much time for real patriotic work'.⁷⁹ In sum, Indian revolutionaries abroad had to juggle their patriotic aspirations with survival. Their periods of activity and inactivity oscillated between the resources and the time they had available.

Oddly, these student-revolutionaries also used their writings to separate themselves from other minorities in the United States, African Americans in particular, and from the Sikh labourers who composed the majority of Indians on the Pacific Coast at this time. Indian students dissociated themselves from African Americans to avoid discrimination. As noted by Sarangadhar Das, even though prejudice against students was rare within college campuses, 'a section of the general public who are totally ignorant of our social life and our modes of living [...] take us for Negroes at the first sight'.⁸⁰ This was a problem not only due to racist segregation laws and practices but also because 'Negro men and women are passing for Hindu Yogis, Yoginis and Mahatmas and making money by fooling the Americans.'⁸¹ That is, Indian students were aware of the racial hierarchies in the United States and how their lives could be affected if they, or their religion, were associated with African Americans. Something similar can be observed in the relationship between these students and Punjabi labourers on the West Coast.

The division between Indian students and labourers might be explained by differences in caste or social status between the two groups and the racial discrimination against Asians prevalent in the United States at this time. First, even though they recognised that they had to engage in manual labour to survive, young revolutionaries like Khankhoje still considered themselves above Sikh agriculturalists in the Indian social hierarchy. These student-nationalists believed it was their duty to teach Sikh labourers about nationalism. But this was to be done carefully as not all Sikhs were open to revolutionary politics or upper-caste students. Khankhoje learned about this problem by observing the work of Girindra Mukerjee as an interpreter among the Indian agricultural workers in California. According to Khankhoje, despite Mukerjee published several newspaper articles in the United States to create a positive attitude towards the Indian workers, 'the Punjabi labourers were uneducated and

⁷⁷ Das, 'Why Must We Emigrate', 74.

⁷⁸ H. Dayal, 'India in America', *Modern Review*, 10 (1911), 1–11, at 3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Das, 'Why Must We Emigrate', 78.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

suspicious. They even harboured some misunderstanding against [Mukerjee]. It was then that I realised how all possible care must be taken while working among ignorant people'.⁸² Indeed, it was not uncommon for revolutionaries and Indian students to refer to the lack of education of Punjabi workers as a way to highlight their leadership and reaffirm their caste superiority.

Har Dayal, who would become the leader of Ghadar, wrote about Sikh labourers in similar terms. After highlighting that Sikhs were sought after by farmers and fruit growers due to their responsibility, ability and 'low-cost', Dayal claimed that the presence of this group in the United States was not welcomed by everyone. According to Dayal, the labourers were 'simple oriental peasants and cannot adapt themselves to the ways and manners of a highly developed and complex social system which makes enormous demands on the self-restraint, and the good sense of every individual'.⁸³ Har Dayal claimed that the lack of education among the Sikhs made them vulnerable to the influence of 'unscrupulous persons who trade on their credulity and simplicity'.⁸⁴ Yet, since their arrival in America, Har Dayal perceived a political awakening among the Sikhs. The group began to develop a 'keen sense of patriotism which manifests itself in deeds of kindly service to their fellow-countrymen here'.⁸⁵ In short, the lack of education among the Sikhs was used as an excuse by self-proclaimed revolutionaries to place themselves as the leaders of the Indian political organisations in the United States.

The second reason young revolutionaries wanted to distance themselves from the Sikh labourers concerned the racial tensions and anti-Asiatic sentiment growing in California in the early twentieth century. The Pacific Coast saw a rise of racially discriminatory practices against 'Asiatic' labourers, particularly against Chinese and Japanese immigrants. Acts of violence were committed by white workers against Asian immigrants to 'protect' the United States against the so-called 'yellow peril'. Sikhs immigrants were also the victims of organised violence by white supremacy organisations such as the Asiatic Exclusion League. Within Khankhoje's circle, students and nationalists were aware of this problem and highlighted their caste and education through their writings to dissociate themselves from the Sikhs. In particular, 'self-supporting students' wanted to clarify that they did not represent an economic threat to white workers. Girindra Mukerjee explained that white workers feared that the Sikhs would displace them because the latter accepted lower wages. This situation had threatened to 'bring on another racial and international complication' as the image of Sikhs was being damaged publicly and legally. Mukerjee noted that 'the public mind seemed to be in such a disordered state that the better class of the Hindus here blushed for shame for their fellow man. The law courts declared the Hindus as "undesirable", not fit to become citizens of the State'.⁸⁶ While they might have felt some sympathy for their co-nationals, Indian students on the West Coast certainly did not see themselves as part of the Sikh labourers.

⁸² Khankhoje, ZMO, KP, Box 14, File 78, No. 2, 23 (pdf).

⁸³ Dayal, 'India in America', 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ G. Mukerji, 'The Hindu in America', *Overland Monthly*, 6 (1908), 305–6.

The relationship between Sikh labourers and Indian students changed somewhat when Har Dayal assumed the leadership of the Ghadar Party. After stints in Lahore, Oxford, London and Martinique, Har Dayal arrived in San Francisco in 1911. Once in California, he became a Professor of Indian Philosophy at Stanford and became an organiser of Indian revolutionaries and workers due to his charisma and his fluency in Punjabi and Urdu. While Har Dayal espoused many different ideologies throughout his life, he was mainly interested in anarchism during his time in the United States. Har Dayal toured the West Coast looking to bring together different Indian associations of workers and students into a single political organisation. According to Khankhoje, he joined Har Dayal on some tours and became one of the main leaders of Indian students abroad. Shortly after this, Khankhoje published journals and propaganda to stir up anti-British sentiment in the United States.⁸⁷ Through such efforts, shortly thereafter, the Ghadar Party was created (1913).

In 1914, Ghadar and Khankhoje's political situation leaped forward due to the arrest of Har Dayal and the start of the First World War. In March 1914, Har Dayal was arrested on charges of illegal immigration and accusations of anarchism. His arrest by US authorities became a palpable warning of imperial power across borders and an indication that America was not a safe haven for Indian revolutionaries. On its part, the beginning of the First World War presented itself as an opportunity to find international support for Ghadar. Despite the alleged influence of anarchism and socialism over Ghadarites, Indian revolutionaries found support from imperial Germany. After the release of Har Dayal on bail, members of the party met several times with German agents who, keen to fuel conflict in the colonial territories of their British enemy, agreed to support Ghadar with money and guns. At this time, Khankhoje decided to abandon his PhD in agricultural studies in Minnesota and soon found himself on the way to Europe to plan an offensive against the British army in the Middle East.⁸⁸

Khankhoje's time in the United States was not marked by an ongoing search for global solidarity against imperialism or revolution as his memoirs would make readers believe. Instead, there were periods full of idleness, poverty and racial discrimination where there was little else to do than try to survive. Khankhoje's reminiscences, however, provide important information about the experience of young Indian men in a new social hierarchical structure where they had to adapt fast to changing circumstances.

League of legends

After his time in the United States, Khankhoje's trace becomes hard to follow. We know that his time in the Middle East lasted roughly from 1914 to 1919.

⁸⁷ One of these journals was the *Bulletin of the Hindusthan Association of U.S.A.* published in August 1913. Khankhoje is listed as a founding member of the journal. See Bulletin of the Hindusthan Association of U.S.A., South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA): <https://www.saada.org/item/20110930-387>.

⁸⁸ Laursen, *Anarchy or Chaos*, 51–86.

According to his memoirs, Khankhoje wanted to raise an army and enter India through Baluchistan, along with Wilhelm Wassmuss, the 'German Lawrence'.⁸⁹ This offensive was intended to weaken the British efforts in the region and loosen the colonial grip on South Asia. The campaign was unsuccessful. As noted by Sunit Singh and Gajendra Singh, the activities associated with Ghadar were ineffective and were often limited to distributing pamphlets among Indian troops in the British army.⁹⁰ Khankhoje and his group could not coordinate their efforts simultaneously with other Ghadarites in different parts of the world.⁹¹ They also realised that changing the allegiances of Indian soldiers loyal to the British army was more complicated than they thought it would be. Similarly, when Germany's luck in the war began to run dry, support towards Indian revolutionaries fell quickly off the list of German priorities.

Before moving on, I want to address the difficulty of assessing this period both in Khankhoje's life and that of other Ghadarites. Different works covering the history of Ghadar often focus on the revolutionary activities of the party. Much attention is given to the activism and political mobilisation of this group around the world.⁹² This type of narrative, consciously or unconsciously, has created an image of Ghadarites as heroes and even martyrs in the popular domain. The Ghadarite is then portrayed as a fearless soldier willing to pay the ultimate price for India's independence. The problem with such a vision is that it romanticises the harshness, cruelty and precariousness of life in exile to favour a narrative of sacrifice and selflessness owed to the nation. The life of the revolutionary was full of uncertainties and precarity that took its toll. At different points in their life, people like Har Dayal, Chattopadhyaya, M. N. Roy and Khankhoje were doing everything in their power to go back to India regardless of the British presence in the country.⁹³ They even denied the importance of their incursions in the Middle East. M. N. Roy, whose biographical illusions should also be questioned, for instance, referred to the Ghadar incursion of the Middle East as the 'The tragic story of the Indian Dupes of German intrigue'.⁹⁴ Har Dayal dismissed the affair by belittling its relevance and noting how some revolutionaries were more

⁸⁹ Sykes, Wassmuss.

⁹⁰ Singh, 'Jodh Singh', 191.

⁹¹ Giles T. Brown, 'The Hindu Conspiracy, 1914–1917', *Pacific Historical Review*, 17 (1948), 299–310; Karl Hoover, 'The Hindu Conspiracy in California, 1913–1918', *German Studies Review*, 8 (1985), 245–61.

⁹² A. C. Bose, *Indian Revolutionaries Abroad, 1905–1922: In the Background of International Developments* (Patna, 1971); S. Bose and K. Manjappa (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (Basingstoke, 2010); H. Fischer-Tiné, "'Indian Nationalism and the World Forces': Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War', *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007), 325–44; H. C. Aspengren, 'Indian Revolutionaries Abroad: Revisiting their Silent Moments', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 15 (2014).

⁹³ See for instance Zachariah, 'A Long, Strange Trip', 574–92; I. Huacuja Alonso, 'M. N. Roy and the Mexican Revolution: How a Militant Indian Nationalist Became an International Communist', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 40 (2017), 517–30; N. K. Barooah, *Chitto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* (New Delhi, 2004); Laursen, *Anarchy or Chaos*.

⁹⁴ M. N. Roy, *M. N. Roy's Memoirs* (Bombay, 1964), 90.

interested in gaining fame than in independence: 'There were all kinds of people in the association, sincere but misguided patriots, unprincipled adventurers, self-indulgent parasites, scheming notoriety hunters [...] The number was never very large. Some pamphlets were written, and some foolish intrigues were set on foot.'⁹⁵ There are different reasons for the absence of this side of the story but here I only discuss two. First, as noted by Shruti Kapila, while the history of Khankhoje and Ghadar has been presented as a global affair, it remains a profoundly nationalist story which culminates with the goal of independence.⁹⁶ The doubts and fears of the revolutionaries are erased from such a perspective. Hagiographical renderings often portray the revolutionary as a coherent whole, as an adventurer and as an individual determined to fight for India whatever the cost with a definite set of ideals. But as noted above, this was hardly true as these revolutionaries did not have a specific action plan or a guiding ideology for Indian liberation. They were ready to associate with German imperialists, Russian spies and anarcho-syndicalists as long as it would help them to survive.

The second reason for the absence of vulnerable episodes in the journey of revolutionaries has to do with the recollections of their own lives. These remembrances, or autobiographical illusions, are shaped by nationalist and male-dominated visions of history in which any type of weakness is minimised. In contrast, many inconsequential events are glorified as great acts of sacrifice. Some of these problems can be seen in Khankhoje's life story. Here, I do not attempt to take away value from Khankhoje's efforts to achieve India's independence. Rather, I want to show the anxieties of Indian revolutionaries to be remembered as larger-than-life heroes in order to leave a mark on the construction of the nation.

One of the only writings left by Khankhoje regarding his crusade against the British appeared on 26 January 1961 in the Punjabi periodical *The Frontier Mail*. The events described are beyond reality, but the article's tone falls in line with the hero's image in an inevitable fight for independence. Even the piece's title, 'An Episode During My Freedom Struggle', is evidence of this. The blurb offered in the article is also romanticised and describes Khankhoje as 'one of those revolutionaries who sacrificed their all in the cause of country's independence'.⁹⁷ According to Khankhoje, these events occurred sometime in 1916. While some sources in the German archives do place Khankhoje in the Middle East at this time, the story of his arrest is not described and is placed under the label of 'Rumours'.⁹⁸ Along with Wilhelm Wassmuss and others, Khankhoje travelled across Persia fighting the British, then under the leadership of General Sir Percy Sykes. Near Baft, the group was attacked by British troops. Khankhoje was wounded and captured after his horse was

⁹⁵ H. Dayal, *Forty-Four Months in Germany and Turkey* (London, 1920), 68–69.

⁹⁶ Kapila, *Violent Fraternity*, 59.

⁹⁷ See P. S. Khankhoje, 'An Episode During my Freedom Struggle', 26 Jan. 1961, *The Frontier Mail*, New Delhi, NMMML, P. S. Khankhoje Papers, Subject File 14, 52, Miscellaneous Notes, Published Articles of P. S. Khankhoje.

⁹⁸ The Indian National Society to The German Foreign Office, 3 Oct. 1916, RZ 201/021104-077, PAAA.

shot. The British took more prisoners and began to march towards their headquarters in Bandar Abbas. Khankhoje considered escaping but was deterred by 'heavy chains' and 'strict vigilance of guards'. Once his leg was better, Khankhoje came up with a plan.

I pretended to be suffering from acute dysentery and during three days, I was allowed to take constant trips to the bushes without chains, but I always returned faithfully to my chains. On one of such trips to the bushes I found an opportune time to run away, I did escape. Soon enough, there was gunfire and bullets were fired at me. I was however already climbing a high mountain and was protected by the absolute darkness of the night. I made good my escape. After a while, the soldiers got tired of shooting in the dark.⁹⁹

Khankhoje hid in a cave. Soon, he was alone in a territory 'inhabited by nomadic wild tribes' where 'life was not worth much'.¹⁰⁰

Here, Khankhoje offers us one of the only instances in which he touches on the theme of vulnerability in the life of revolutionaries. After his escape, he became 'ill with a real dysentery'. Alone, in pain and without food or water, Khankhoje felt 'so sick, so abandoned, so weak and so unhappy' that he thought about ending his life. In desperation, he found a precipice and jumped. However, the fall did not kill Khankhoje, but only worsened his suffering. Subsequently, Khankhoje was found by two riflemen of a local tribe. They took him to their camp after realising that Khankhoje had been fighting the British. The tribe treated Khankhoje as one of their own and even asked him to marry one of the women there. He kindly declined as he had to follow his calling: 'I begged them to let me go and follow my destiny which, incidentally, was going to provide me with many more adventures and dangers during my quest for the freedom of my country'.¹⁰¹

Khankhoje left the tribe and headed to Nehriz. Whenever he encountered people on the road or in villages, Khankhoje pretended to be a dervish, a Sufi Muslim ascetic. On one such occasion, another tribe approached Khankhoje. They asked about his destination while the latter bowed and prayed profusely. While talking to the tribe, a map of Persia in Roman characters fell from Khankhoje's trousers. The tribe enquired in an aggressive manner looking for an explanation. Khankhoje said he was going to the holy city of Kerbala, near Bagdad. His reply was enough. The tribe fed and welcomed Khankhoje. He talked to them and even predicted that the 'chief's wife, who was pregnant, would give birth to a son'. Rapidly, Khankhoje realised that making such a claim was a mistake as '[w]ith these ignorant and nomadic people, a daughter is seldom welcomed and is considered a disgrace'. If he were wrong, the chief would not be happy. When the child's birth was closer, Khankhoje escaped to the mountains but quickly lost his way. He returned to the main road and

⁹⁹ Khankhoje, NMML, P. S. Khankhoje Papers, Subject File 14, 52, Miscellaneous Notes.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

realised that the men of the tribe were waiting for him. Khankhoje remembered this event as ‘a lucky strike’:

These men had been sent by their chief who wanted to see me and wanted me to participate in the festivities organised in honour of the birth of his son. This time, without reluctance, I accompanied them and enjoyed a few days without fear and with all the respect due to a good fortune teller.¹⁰²

This is where Khankhoje’s anecdote, ‘one of the adventurous episodes in which [his] life abounds’, ends.

If these stories seem too good to be true it is because they are probably exaggerated versions of events or anecdotes that Khankhoje, or someone close to him, may have heard or experienced. As noted by John-Paul A. Ghobrial, the accounts of travellers about their personal experiences in places that hold a particular image in the mind of the public (whether this is the Middle East, China or India) often reflect the popular imagination of such places.¹⁰³ Thus, in such narratives, a place like India may appear as a spiritual or ‘exotic’ land where sadhus and fakirs are everywhere. While the Middle East might be portrayed as a place full of Sheiks, nomadic tribes and looming danger. This is true in Khankhoje’s story. For instance, Wilhelm Wassmuss, Khankhoje’s German companion, was famous for his improbable escape stories. In fact, one of Wassmuss’s anecdotes closely resembles Khankhoje’s escape from British custody. In Wassmuss’s version, however, it wasn’t he who was sick but his horse. After he was captured, the guards allowed Wassmuss to check on his horse quite often as he was a high-ranking officer. One early morning, when the guards were sleeping, Wassmuss asked again to see his horse. The guards accepted but did not bother to escort Wassmuss. The latter made good his opportunity and galloped away.¹⁰⁴ The similarities in the anecdotes are too great to be a coincidence. However, this does not mean that Wassmuss’s version trumps Khankhoje’s. Rather, the similarities in the anecdotes say more about society’s expectations of the heroic experiences that people involved in war or revolution should have.

The last element to address in Khankhoje’s life as a Ghadarite is the vulnerability of being a revolutionary. While part of this article’s argument is that the lives of revolutionaries are often romanticised and doubt and crises of confidence are underplayed, Khankhoje’s words about suicide seem more like a literary tool than an actual narrative of events. Khankhoje used his suicide attempt as a point of inflexion in the story. In line with biographical illusions, failing to kill himself was not just luck but destiny. He emerged from this experience as a committed revolutionary who even rejected marriage to continue facing ‘adventures and dangers’ for his country’s freedom.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ J. A. Ghobrial, ‘The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon and the Uses of Global Microhistory’, *Past and Present*, 222 (2014), 51–93.

¹⁰⁴ H. RamHormozi, *Averting an Iranian Geopolitical Crisis: A Tale of Power Play for Dominance between Colonial Powers, Tribal and Government Actors in the Pre and Post World War I Era* (Victoria, BC, 2016), 240.

Khankhoje's time in Persia came to an end around 1919. From then on until 1924, Khankhoje's whereabouts and activities are again hard to pin down. He travelled with a letter of introduction from the Amber of Ghashgai from Fars, Persia. The letter appointed 'Professor P. Hadjiaga Khankhoje' as a representative of the Amber in America. It allowed him to negotiate with 'capitalists, corporations or companies interested in Asphalt and Oil-springs'. In the same way, the letter requested 'all the Persian Ambassadors, Representatives or Consuls to give Professor P. Hadjiaga Khankhoje every kind of official assistance in order to facilitate this journey through different countries'.¹⁰⁵ While Khankhoje did not return to the United States, sources show that he lived in Russia, France and Germany. During his time in Europe, Khankhoje met other influential Indian revolutionaries such as Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (Chatto), Bhikaiji Cama, Heramba Lal Gupta and M. N. Roy. Khankhoje settled in Berlin due to his involvement with the German efforts in the Middle East. However, he abandoned this place after a friend warned him that the British colonial authorities were closing in on him. Khankhoje travelled to hide in Mexico in 1924.

Conclusion

Khankhoje's time in Mexico has been retold many times. Suffice to say that when he arrived in Mexico, he hit the ground running. He became part of a strong political and cultural network that eased him into finding a job as a faculty member of the National Agricultural School at Chapingo. He moved among the most famous artists in the country, including Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Tina Modotti and Edward Weston among others. Many job opportunities were offered to Khankhoje throughout his time in Mexico. He bounced from one job to the next, particularly during his first ten years in the country, until he settled in the private sector. The government sponsored him to study genetics in Europe and at some point he began introducing himself as Dr Khankhoje, although there is no record of him completing his PhD. When Khankhoje finally returned to India after the end of colonial rule, he expected to be welcomed as a hero, but this did not happen. After he died in 1967, Khankhoje's name was almost forgotten until Savitri Sawhney brought it back to life through a biography published in 2008. The fame that Khankhoje seemed to have been chasing at different stages of his life finally arrived.

Indeed, Khankhoje's time in Mexico has become one of the main elements of his biographical illusion that continues to grow to this day. In September 2022, a bust of Khankhoje was unveiled at the Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo.¹⁰⁶ Numerous newspapers and magazines in India have used his time there to label him as a 'revered hero of Mexico' who led an 'agricultural

¹⁰⁵ Papers Concerning Refusal by the Consul at Mexico to Grant Passport to Dr. Khankhoje to Return to India, Letter of Introduction from The Amber of Ghashghai, Fars Persia, 3 Nov. 1921, New Delhi, NMML, P. S. Khankhoje Papers, Subject File 3, 17.

¹⁰⁶ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/birla-unveils-bust-of-indian-agricultural-scientist-at-mexico-university/articleshow/93959255.cms>.

revolution' in Latin America.¹⁰⁷ However, as this article has shown, Khankhoje's version of events is not entirely reliable and depicts an anxiety about being remembered as a man of great deeds. Even Khankhoje's intervention in Mexican agriculture is hard to assess as he only left a few articles describing his experiments with different plants such as soy, maize and lemon. In the same way, his role in directing free schools of agriculture is equally obscure as there are only a couple of documents recording his work there. While Khankhoje has usually been presented as a man of the people, his time in Mexico was also marked by his interaction with an influential network of intellectuals and politicians that only emerges if the biographical illusions in his memoirs are disrupted. Resisting these illusions, however, does mean disqualifying Khankhoje as a historical narrator. Rather, it suggests that perhaps historical subjects do not choose how they are remembered. Despite the exaggerations found in his recollection of events, Khankhoje's memoirs also hold important information about different political episodes that transformed our understanding of the twentieth century, including the emergence of right-wing nationalism in India; the way Asian migration changed race relations in the United States; the anxiety of Indian exiles to insert themselves in the history of Indian independence; and the way cosmopolitan elites influenced national politics across the world.

For historians, a character like Khankhoje and the archival trail he left behind represents a complex challenge. If taken at face value, Khankhoje's narrative invites itself to fill gaps within exciting new fields relating to global, revolutionary and decolonial turns. But as this article has shown, many of those gaps can only be filled if certain stories in Khankhoje's memoirs are excluded. Rather than 'getting the story right' or demystifying Khankhoje's life, this article has explored what else these autobiographical sources can tell us about the way revolutionaries wanted to be remembered.

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.peepultree.world/livehistoryindia/story/people/dr-pandurang-khankhoje-the-ironic-revolutionary>.