

4

Cover Story

Racism Within

Caste based discrimination continues to haunt Dalits in Canada

Editorial

Radicalizing samosa politics 2

Cover Story

Racism Within 4

Relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's legacy 10

Opinion 13

Radical History of the Month

Ghadar story 14

Remembering the bloody side of Vaisakhi 18

Radical Narrative

April 2 20

In Memoriam

Sant Ram Udasi 22

Current Affairs

The Loretta Saunders murder not an isolated tragedy 23

Law and order agenda is cheap politicking 24

Courageous lawyer Harvinder Singh Phoolka jumps into election fray in India 25

News 27

Voices from the Margins

India Mahila Association completes 40 years 31

Real story behind atheist billboard row 34

Many Canadians of South Asian descent support struggle for LGBT equal rights 37

Satire

Meet the so called angry young men of Bollywood 39

Radicalizing samosa politics

The launching of Radical Desi from Unceded Coast Salish Territories is a small attempt to give voice to the oppressed and the marginalized sections of our society. Ours is not the first magazine which has jumped into the media market to cover alternative politics, as there are many others which have been consistently and sincerely trying to change society for years. But it is our wish to focus more on social justice issues and activism within the growing South Asian community in Canada.

Often the stories of social justice activism and political actions within this section of society remain obscured. We mostly hear the success stories of a handful of South Asian immigrants, particularly those who have increased their electoral representation in politics, or the stereotypical reports about South Asians involved in criminal activities. Such stories make one believe as if the community needs to do self-criticism for all the bad things, like immigration fraud, drug trafficking, spousal violence and religious fanaticism, while a few successful gatekeepers of the community are picked to prove that the "right thinking" South Asian immigrants are increasingly becoming a part of the mainstream. In this popular discourse, what remains missing are the stories of political and social activism in the South Asian community. What remains untold is the ability of the community to question both itself and also rightly question the system. Radical Desi will therefore try to cover issues which most media outlets generally ignore by slighting progressive voices in our community.

As our name suggests, Radical Desi essentially represents those Desis, or people of South Asian origin, who want a fundamental change in our society. In fact this name comes from the movement of Radical Desi networks active in Canada and US, and has a big following among young people of South Asian heritage who have time and again rattled the cages of social injustice across the world. In the post 9/11 environment, this network of dedicated activists has collectively worked like a watchdog to check racial profiling and assaults upon the rights of the visible minorities.

It's our conviction that only progressive and secular forces can bring a real change. Radical Desi will give voice to such forces which can stand up against injustice both within and outside their community. It's our conscious decision to create a space for different marginalized groups even outside the Desi community, such as the indigenous peoples and the non-South Asian immigrants, besides other oppressed groups like atheists, Dalits or so called untouchables, women, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities and in poverty. We aim to bring all these sections together in the ongoing struggle for justice and fairness.

The decision to launch Radical Desi on the occasion of Vaisakhi has a purpose. It has nothing to do with the auspiciousness of Vaisakhi, which has a religious significance among Hindus and Sikhs. For pragmatic reasons, the timing is important, as it's easier to find advertisers and sponsors to start a venture like this during a popular festival of the Desi community. The occasion also provides us opportunity to outreach as much we can during Vaisakhi parades.

However, Radical Desi won't shy away from giving its own perspective on Vaisakhi, which is not just the harvest festival in India; it also has a strong association with struggles for social justice. It was on

Vaisakhi when the tenth master of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh, laid the foundation of the Khalsa, a revolutionary force in 1699 to challenge the age-old caste system and fight against injustice. It was on the occasion of Vaisakhi in 1919, when British troops opened fire on the supporters of the passive resistance movement who had assembled in Amritsar to oppose draconian laws in occupied India. The current issue tries to draw a connection between these pieces of glorious history and the contemporary world, as caste based oppression and occupation, and blockades of weaker nations continue to prevail, creating social and economic hardships for the marginalized, and fuelling unrest and uprisings. It was in the month of April in 1913 when the Ghadar Party was formed in United States. The party was established by Indian immigrants to fight against racism and British occupation of India. The month of April is also the birthday month of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a prominent social justice activist and the architect of the Indian constitution. Our readers will find articles about the Ghadar Party and Ambedkar and their relevance today in the following pages.

A variety of writers and activists representing different social justice movements has agreed to share their perspective and knowledge through their columns from time to time. Other regular columns are aimed at providing readers with the sense of our rich radical history and radical narratives, apart from the update on current affairs.

Radical Desi is thankful to its subscribers, sponsors and contributors; without their support it would have been impossible to bring out this magazine. We have just started our journey and there are miles to go. We want our readers to enjoy our first issue and feel free to share your input or criticism for better results in future.

Gurpreet Singh

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Racism Within

Caste based discrimination continues to haunt Dalits in Canada

When Mohan Lal Karimpuri (68) migrated to this part of the world from India in 2006, he believed Canada was a developed nation, where society was enlightened and progressive and where human rights and dignity were respected by all. Little did he know that the tag of being "untouchable" or "low caste" would follow him even thousands of miles away from his homeland.

Karimpuri was born in the Punjab state of India in a family of Dalits, or the so-called Untouchables, according to the brutal age old caste order still practiced by orthodox Hinduism in a country known as the world's largest secular democracy. For thousands of years, Indian society has remained divided in four distinct caste groups, with Karimpuri's family being on the lowest ladder. Those on top belong to the priest class, followed by the class of rulers and then the class of artisans and farmers. Those on the lowest level are forced to indulge in menial jobs, and are the ones most discriminated against.

Despite the hype created by so-called development in India, the caste-based oppression against the compatriots of Karimpuri at the

The birth of the Khalsa was not only a challenge to ruthless Islamist rulers but also to Hindu orthodoxy. Guru Gobind Singh fought battles with Islamic rulers and with Hindu kings. The latter group opposed his reliance on an army comprised of people belonging to "low-caste" groups.

hands of the upper caste people, particularly in rural India, goes on. In spite of stringent laws against Untouchability, the Dalits are often denied the right to take water from the common village wells and entry into temples. Defiance invites physical violence. However, the birth of Sikhism - one of the most modern and liberal religions of India - made a significant difference in Punjab. The Sikh scriptures, Guru Granth Sahib, include hymns of the Dalit saints, who were denounced by Hindu priests. The Sikh temples are open to all the caste groups, and the community kitchen was created to ensure that devotees of all the caste groups can

minge with each other. The Vaisakhi festival of 1699 saw the emergence of the Khalsa, a revolutionary armed force created by the tenth master of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh, to challenge the caste system and injustice. The birth of the Khalsa, an army of the pure, not only gave Sikhs a distinct identity, but also challenged the age-old caste discrimination practised in orthodox Hindu society. Guru Gobind Singh had asked for the heads of brave Sikh men to raise an army to fight against oppressive Islamist invaders, who were persecuting Hindus. Due to a lack of unity among castes, Hindus were virtually helpless in defending

Painting by Jarnail Singh

themselves against this repression. One by one, five brave men came forward to offer their heads to Guru Gobind Singh in response to his request. They succeeded in their test. At least three belonged to the so-called lowest castes. They were then baptized by Guru Gobind Singh and given a new surname of Singh (lion). The common surname of Singh symbolized elimination of casteism. The birth of the Khalsa was not only a challenge to ruthless Islamist rulers but also to Hindu orthodoxy. Guru Gobind Singh fought battles with Islamic rulers and with Hindu kings. The latter group opposed his reliance on an army comprised of people belonging to "low-caste" groups. Yet caste based discrimination has trickled into the Sikh community, and exists both subtly and explicitly within the Sikh faith. As a result, Karimpuri endured banishment in one form or the other by the dominant caste group of land owning peasants in Punjab. I still remember how the women belonging to the peasantry class did not let their kids play with us. I must be six-years-old when an upper caste lady told her son right in front of us that he needs to take a bath for playing with us," he says with a little agitated voice.

He had the rudest shock of his life when he overheard offensive remarks about his own community by those who proudly identified themselves as upper caste people during a visit to a Sikh temple in Greater Vancouver. Ironically this happened inside the community kitchen room: a space created by the Sikh Gurus to ensure the end of caste discrimination. "I could not believe my ears first. But I soon realized that the sense of caste superiority has travelled to Canada with them". The incident triggered ugly old memories of childhood. There were other occasions too, when he felt humiliated by pressing questions coming from Sikhs belonging to the dominant caste groups, asking to find out what caste group he belonged to? "From my perspective Sikhism today is no different from the Hinduism that created caste system. The Sikhs too have been influenced by the Hindu orthodoxy," he says. Karimpuri is not alone. There are many Dalits who feel the same. Sammy Singh Toora, who works with the City of Vancouver, faced this sort of racism in a more blatant form in 2005. Back then he worked at a private security company. A Sikh coworker from the dominant caste group, who had quit the job, wrote prejudiced remarks about Toora's caste

background in a company message note book. "He used to be very nice to me until he came to know about my caste. He had once told me that his mother had always warned him to stay away from Dalit kids when he was a child. Things changed after he came to know more about me and he became hostile," Toora says.

The case gained prominence and was quickly picked up by the Punjabi media, as Toora is a famous weightlifter in the community. However, no charges were laid and the controversy died down soon.

The prominent Dalit activist Surinder Ranga, who is the President of Chetna Association that represents the interests of the oppressed classes in Canada, says that almost every first generation Dalit immigrant has faced similar discrimination at the hands of other South Asians. He himself received an abusive phone call from a person belonging to the "upper caste" last year. "He made highly offensive remarks against my caste. It was so painful," he

remembers. Ranga reported this matter to the police but no charges were laid. The matter was resolved at the community level as the person involved apologized to him later. Ranga is a successful businessman and feels that this hatred is out of jealousy. "They can't bear seeing us competing with them in a much more free society like Canada, while in India they have ruled over our people for centuries."

The Dalits started immigrating to British Columbia in 1906, and have had many bad experiences both in terms of racism and caste-based discrimination. "They are victims of double discrimination, both at the hands of white society because of the colour of their skin, and their own people from the upper caste groups," explains Jai Birdi, one of the founders of Chetna Association, which was formed in the 1990s to bring awareness of this issue to the mainstream community.

In most instances they are hurled with casteist remarks and abuses. But not once have those indulging in this kind of hate crime ever been prosecuted, according to Birdi. "There is a growing demand to get caste-based oppression recognized as a hate crime in Canada."

Notably, these challenges are mainly coming from the upper caste Sikhs who dominate the Punjabi community within the South Asian Diaspora. As a result of

continued slighting of the Dalit presence in Sikh temple affairs, the Dalit community started establishing separate Sikh temples named after Guru Ravidas, a revolutionary Dalit saint of his times, whose hymns are included in the holy scriptures of the Sikhs. The one built in Burnaby is the only exclusive religious center of the community in British Columbia.

"We were forced to create a parallel spiritual space only because of this discrimination", according to Sri Guru Ravidas Sikh temple President Bill Basra. Established in 1982, the governing body of the temple has a membership of close to 2,500 people. Basra says that back in early 1980s, Sikh leaders from the dominant caste groups were reluctant to celebrate the birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas, prompting the community leaders to think about a separate temple.

It isn't surprising to see Dalits drifting apart from the mainstream Sikh religion, as many sects have increased their presence in the Dalit community in Punjab. Others have embraced Christianity, Buddhism and Sufism. The growing number of separate Sikh temples outside India is a clear reflection of the mood within the Dalit community back home.

Basra says that caste-based discrimination is the root of the problem. Even today the upper caste Sikhs generally avoid coming to our temple. While most Sikh temples in Vancouver

have a long wait for solemnizing weddings, our temple has hardly any wait time, in spite of the fact that the Guru Granth Sahib is also installed here, Basra says.

He points out that the annual parades organized by the temple management in Burnaby to mark the birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas receive a lukewarm response as compared to the Vaisakhi parades organized by other Sikh temples in Greater Vancouver. "This only explains that the dominant caste groups have no respect for our sentiments."

Although Birdi says that this can be partly attributed to the fact that the membership of Guru Ravidas Sikh temple is restricted to the Dalit community, the fact remains that Dalits are being discriminated against in North America. Birdi believes that caste-based discrimination within the South Asian community in Vancouver mainly comes from the dominant caste groups of the Sikh community. He acknowledges that the entire community of upper caste Sikhs or Hindus cannot be painted with one brush, as Dalits have many prominent allies within this group. "They have always stood with us and have shown compassion in an event of discrimination."

One of the prominent names is Tara Singh Hayer, the

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slain Editor of the Indo-Canadian Times newspaper. He was murdered in 1998 and died as a critic of religious extremism. The crime remains unsolved. Establishment of a separate temple by Dalit Sikhs stirred another controversy. For devout Sikhs, only the ten masters of the Sikh faith; starting from its founder Guru Nanak or their holy scriptures, can be described as Gurus; no other religious figure is entitled to this honour. The 10th master of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh, declared that after his death only the Guru Granth Sahib will be their guiding light. Many orthodox Sikhs took it as an offence when Dalits started establishing temples named after Guru Ravidas. As a result, a few Punjabi newspapers refused to run advertisements and press statements by the community describing Saint Ravidas as Guru Ravidas. But Hayer took a daring stand back then, and ran the press statements as the Dalit Sikh community wanted. In gratitude, the Dalit activists created an award in memory of Hayer last year, and presented it to the reporters of The Province newsgroup for highlighting caste based-oppression in Canada. Whereas Hayer was a supporter of the Sikh extremists at one time, and later fell apart with them, others like Sukhwant Hundal, the founder of a progressive Punjabi magazine Watan, were more consistently opposed to caste-based oppression. In a very impressive

research paper he wrote in 2013, Hundal questions the lack of representation of Dalits in public office in Canada. All the MPs and MLAs from the Indo Canadian community are from the dominant castes. "The very fact that Dalits started migrating to Canada since 1906 is not reflected in our electoral politics. There are pretty good chances that a Dalit candidate will find it far more difficult to get a party nomination from within the dominant society, leaving aside the chances of getting elected."

Likewise, former British Columbia Premier Ujjal Dosanjh, who also belongs to the dominant community, has always spoken boldly against the caste system during public meetings. In one such event, held in memory of highly renowned Punjabi progressive Dalit poet Sant Ram Udasi, under the aegis of Guru Ravidas Sikh temple, Dosanjh questioned why local Punjabi literary groups don't hold annual events for Udasi, and why only Dalits should be expected to hold such

an event.

The MLA for Burnaby-Edmonds, Raj Chouhan, is another case in point. Despite being a member of the dominant society, he made a statement in the BC legislature to recognize the birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas.

Things took ugly turn in 2009 within the South Asian Diaspora, and the caste situation became volatile when a Dalit saint, Ramanand, was shot to death in Vienna Sikh temple. Earlier reports suggested that this may be the handiwork of Sikh separatists, but the authenticity of such claims was never established. Ramanand, of the Sach Khand Ballan sect, had visited Vancouver a few times. He was a well respected man in the Dalit community and had a big following in Punjab. The news of his murder sparked rioting in India.

The tension was followed by a controversial speech by Kamlesh Ahir, a dedicated Dalit activist who embraced Buddhism after enduring the pains of caste system. During her visit to the

UK, she tried to make a point about caste dominance within the Sikh community, and challenged Sikh fanaticism. Her speech, according to Ahir, was misunderstood and misinterpreted only to fuel hatred against her. As a result, she began receiving threats through social media, and the matter was reported to the police. I was left completely alone and branded anti-Sikh. "I did not say anything wrong. I only spoke my mind but my freedom of expression was under assault." A section of the Punjabi media dominated by upper caste groups also created hysteria against her. An activist "for years, while in India she supported a campaign seeking justice for Phoolan Devi, a legendary Dalit female bandit who took to arms after being raped by influential upper caste landlords. She has been organizing events in Vancouver to highlight systemic violence against Dalit women, and public functions to celebrate the birth anniversaries of Dalit icons, like Ambedkar and political figures, such as Mayawati, the first Dalit female Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh province in India.

Rashpal Singh Bhardwaj, another activist, recently made a presentation before the Canadian Radio-Television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) hearing for new South Asian radio stations, complaining how existing Punjabi radio stations were promoting caste dominance and slighting the voice of the Dalit community. A

petition bearing close to 400 signatures was also submitted seeking CRTC intervention. "Most Punjabi radio stations continue to overlook the activities of Sri Guru Ravidas temple and issues relevant to our community, while at the same time airing songs that promote supremacy of the Sikh peasantry. If this is not caste prejudice then what?" he asks. All these challenges apart, Dalit assertion has also seen a rapid growth in this part of the world by different groups of activists. The international Dalit Conference held in Vancouver in 2003 was well attended and received wider media attention. Thanks to Dalit activism, the name of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a towering social justice activist and intellectual - who was the architect of the Indian constitution that guarantees social equality and secularism and outlaws Untouchability - is becoming increasingly popular in Canada. Born in April 1891 into a Dalit family, in spite of hardships he faced because of caste

prejudices he rose to become an icon of the Dalit community. Simon Fraser University in Burnaby hosts his bust, and his portraits greet people in many popular public spaces across Greater Vancouver. A room at the City Center Library in Surrey is now named after him. A meeting organized by Dalit activists on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2011 in Vancouver is one of the recent instances where all speakers unanimously declared caste-based oppression as the worst form of racism within the South Asian community. The event was attended by representatives of different groups, some moderates while others a bit angrier; but they all agreed that the Sikh clergy need to acknowledge and deal with caste-based oppression soon until it is too late.

-Radical Desi News Bureau

Modernizing India

Relevance of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's legacy

Who was Dr. Ambedkar? What did he say or do for modern India? How is his legacy relevant for our nation building process? Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born in a Mahar (Untouchable) family at Mhow Cantonment (M.P.) in 1891. In spite of hardships he educated himself and became M. A., M.Sc., Ph.D., D.Sc., LL.D., Bar at Law; all his theses were on the Indian economy, political and social situation, and religious-cultural system, and submitted to foreign universities as their student. Education in foreign universities awakened his mind and made him a great thinker. His writings and speeches have been published by the Maharashtra Government in 21 volumes, and he is the most read and remembered of all his contemporary politicians. He valued education so much that he started The People's Education Society, which established a number of student hostels, schools and colleges in Maharashtra state.

Being an untouchable by birth, he experienced hardships not only as a growing person, but also at the hands of his subordinate staff (even peons)

when he was appointed as Military Secretary to the Maharaja of Baroda and while looking for suitable accommodation in that capacity. In disgust he resigned from that post. Thereafter he set out to eradicate the scourge of untouchability and the caste system. He edited a number of newspapers and periodicals from time to time, to educate and organise his community. He also started vigorous agitation against untouchability being practiced at public places like temples and water-tanks.

He was active in the political field even while working in various capacities like professor and principal of colleges, High Court advocate, member of legislative bodies etc. He attended Round Table Conferences in U.K. (1930-32) as a representative of the Indian Untouchables, and secured separate rights for them in spite of opposition from Mahatma Gandhi. He never opposed independence for India, but persistently sought special protection for the Untouchables. Thus he got political identity for them as "Scheduled Castes" for the first time in Indian history. He also pleaded the case of the Untouchables before various commissions and delegations (like Simon Commission, and Cripps Mission) visiting India in connection with the British

proposal for freedom to India. As a Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, he secured many rights for factory workers, especially women and children. He got reservation in government service and scholarships for post-matric studies for the S.C. and S.T. He founded the Independent Labour Party and later the Scheduled Castes Federation and Republican Party of India, according to the prevailing circumstances.

Dr. Ambedkar's method for abolishing untouchability was quite different from the one adopted by saints/gurus who preached against the system, but never taught the downtrodden to fight for their cause. They never talked about equality in this world, but only in the court of God or next birth. Dr. Ambedkar fought for human rights right in this world. This led him even to criticize the scriptures teaching discrimination.

He was elected to the Constituent Assembly, and later in 1947 became Law Minister in Shri Nehru's Cabinet, and was largely responsible for drafting the Constitution of India and single-handedly piloting it in the Constituent Assembly. Later he prepared a draft of the new Hindu Code Bill to consolidate, systematize and modernize the Hindu social and legal system,

and resigned from the Cabinet when Nehru failed to support that bill in the Parliament. A big aim of Dr. Ambedkar was to get better status and rights for Hindu women.

Dr. Babasaheb (an endearment title given to him by his followers) Ambedkar had a unique and versatile personality. He was a deep political thinker and eloquent speaker, a patriot and a nation builder, dedicated humanist and a social revolutionary, a tireless fighter for justice and human rights, a visionary educationist, a legal and constitutional expert, a searching historian, an iconoclastic rebel and above all an explorer of religious phenomena.

In spite of wielding a lot of political and legal power for such a long time, and in spite of being fond of the good things of life, he had a blameless career. He was a widower for 13 years. There has not been even a rumour about any negative side to his personality and conduct. He did not leave behind much property for his family, and whatever he created is under one trust or the other.

After realising that Hindu society is incapable of reforming itself and removing untouchability, and that political revolution can follow only from religious-cultural awakening, he exhorted his followers to embrace Buddhism, which will give them an internationally known independent honourable identity. (He knew the fate of Jyoti Rao Phule's and

Naick's anti-caste movements, which provided no alternative religion to the Backward communities.) He chose Buddhism because of its closeness to logical thinking and this-worldly humanistic philosophy. He converted to that religion in October 1956 with lakhs of his followers, but could not do much for that religion due to his sickness and untimely death in December 1956. The life and teachings of Dr. Ambedkar and Lord Buddha have given birth to what is called Dalit literature, which is influencing every thinking Indian.

In spite of his unique and healthy contributions to the social and political issues of India, the Congress Party always opposed him before 1947 and after 1951. A decision was taken by the Nehru Government not to allow facility of reservation for Scheduled Caste to the Buddhist converts, although this facility had already been extended to Sikhs, who are more distinct from the Hindus than the Buddhists, and both of them having been declared, along with Jains, as a part and parcel of the Hindus under article 25 of the Constitution of India. This injustice was rectified by the V.P. Singh government in later years. Just wonder at this in the context of India's adoption of Buddhist symbols like Dharm-Chakra and Ashoka-Lions in appreciation of Buddhist ideology, and Nehru's tribute to Babasaheb on his death: "Dr. Ambedkar will be remembered mostly as the symbol of revolt

against all the oppressing features of Hindu Society. His virulent opposition to these oppressive features had kept people's minds awake. Although he was a highly controversial figure, he played a very constructive and very important role in making the Constitution of India and Hindu Law Reform. He revolted against something which everybody should revolt against." Dr. Ambedkar has been a victim of a process of reductionism. In the dominant media he has been viewed as a Dalit leader only. His contribution to the understanding of every individual as a unique person, his crusade against handicaps and privileges of various castes and religious obscurantism, his views about ethnic groups and communal situation of the time, have been blacked out and his other ideas about nation building have been marked down.

Dr. Ambedkar's ideas and philosophy of life are beneficial not only for the ex-untouchables but for the whole of India. It has been found by research of Indian society that Untouchability and the discriminatory caste system hinders economic progress and can lead to political distortions. Will the Hindus not get strengthened and India prosper if the blot of Untouchability is removed and caste barriers are

lowered? Was Babasaheb a lesser or a greater patriot if he preached and worked for achieving these aims? Are not all Indians benefitting by the various legal and constitutional provisions made possible by his efforts? In this connection extracts from two of his speeches (separated by 15 years) are worth quoting:

"In the fight for swaraj you fight with the whole nation on your side. In this fight (against caste system) you have to fight against the whole nation and that too your own. But it is more important than swaraj. There is no use having swaraj, if you cannot defend it. More important than the question of defending swaraj is the question of defending Hindus under the swaraj. In my opinion, only when the Hindu society becomes a casteless society that it can hope to have strength enough to defend itself. Without such internal strength, swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step towards slavery." (From his undelivered speech for the *Jat Pat Todak Mandal's proposed Conference* at Lahore, in 1935). "26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote, and one vote one value. In our social and economic life we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to

deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy... (Speech while proposing the adoption of the Constitution on November 25, 1949) Of all the politicians of modern India, Baba Saheb is the only one boldly facing forward. The Constitution of India is an embodiment of principles most dear to him, viz democratic system of government, secularism, fundamental human rights, freedom of conscience, equality of status and opportunity, decentralization of administration, uniform civil code along with protection of minorities, special safe guards for Backward communities and inculcation of scientific temper. He was very much opposed to hero worship. He was against obscurantism distorting the polity of India. He raised a strong voice for rational examination and reformation of the core values of Indian metaphysics like caste system and gender discrimination. Baba Saheb is not an individual now, but an institution and a living movement, perennial source of action and everlasting inspiration to the downtrodden and a beacon light for the whole

of India. The title of Bharat Ratna awarded to him was well deserved by him.

The tragedy of India has been that we have been pigeon-holing our leaders into caste grooves. All known reformers of India have ultimately become leaders of the castes in which they were born, or they created their own new castes and ritualistic systems instead of becoming all-India leaders and reformers. Any reformer criticizing harmful social and religious customs has become persona-non-grata with the masses. Any reformer protesting against economic exploitation is hated by the exploiters. Due to this historical context Babasaheb had to fight religious obscurantism, political hegemony and economic exploitation of the masses and hence was disliked by the vested interests.

As India is coming into contact with other advanced societies, it has to become more egalitarian. Dr. Ambedkar's ideas are proving more and more relevant and hence being accepted. More books are being written about Baba Saheb than any other leader, most of them appreciative of the life and mission of this great leader.

Opinion

Canada needs to stand up for Dalits

It is high time that Canada, which claims to be a leader in human rights, follow the European Parliament and recognize caste-based oppression as a form of racism.

In a major victory for Dalits—or so-called untouchables across the world—the European Parliament has acknowledged that caste-based discrimination is a global evil. The move follows a consistent campaign by the Dalit activists in the U.K. and elsewhere to get international recognition of this age-old crime against humanity. Dalits, who have been repeatedly humiliated and abused in caste-ridden Indian society, continue to face oppression, even in the South Asian diaspora. The caste system has prevailed in India for centuries and its roots can be traced to Hindu religion. There are four distinct caste groups: Brahmins (priests) on the top, followed by Kshatriyas (rulers), Vaishyas (agriculturists and artisans), and Shudras (those who do menial jobs).

Though the supporters of this inhuman system claim that it was the creation of the gods, it was clearly man-made and brought into practice by those who had the power and desire to bring the less privileged under subjugation. As a result, Dalits have been forced since time immemorial to indulge in menial

and lowly jobs, such as manual scavenging and serving the rich as bonded labourers.

Since the European Parliament has admitted that this problem is not just confined to South Asia, Canada should also look into this question seriously. Dalits have a significant presence in certain areas of Canada and have their own Sikh temples, while many others follow Christianity and Buddhism. There are numerous instances of caste-based discrimination against Dalits in the culturally diverse Greater Vancouver area. As a result some Dalit activists are contemplating pushing this issue through the Canadian parliament.

Legislative changes could provide protection for Dalits from hate crimes in the name of caste. However, the main challenge is likely to come from their own compatriots from the Indo Canadian community. No MPs who trace their roots back to India belong to the Dalit community. And most Indo Canadian elected representatives are from dominant caste groups.

In India, Dalits are often denied entry to the temples and other public places in accordance with an orthodox Hindu tradition that prohibits those on the lowest ladder of the caste system from mingling with

those on the top. Recently, when Indians were celebrating the 66th Independence Day across the world, an 80-year-old Dalit was stoned to death by the so-called upper-caste goons in Bihar.

His fault was that he and others like him dared to hoist the national flag of their country, defying illegitimate dictates of the "upper caste" people asking them not to do so.

It was not the first time that the Dalits faced such brutality for defying the dictates of the privileged group who had imposed this system on "Untouchables" for their own convenience. Even the elected members of the village councils from the Dalit community have faced such violence in the past for unfurling the national flag. All this goes on in a country known to be the world's largest secular democracy, decades after it had gained freedom from the British occupation. The political leadership of India has clearly failed to keep up its commitment for a true secular republic in spite of stringent laws against untouchability, which has its roots in the Hindu religion. If India is a secular state, then why does it lack a political will to eradicate this inhumane practice sanctioned by the oldest and the most dominant religious faith once and for all?

Ghadar story

The Ghadar movement was launched by a group of radical South Asian immigrants on the Pacific coast of North America in 1913 to mainly overthrow the colonial rule of the British government in India and challenge racism abroad.

Association of the Pacific Coast of America, but came to be known as Ghadar Party after the launching of the newspaper named "Ghadar" on November 1, 1913. The title was taken from the rebellion of 1857.

The origin of the Ghadar movement can be traced to the first rebellion of 1857 against the British occupation of India. This uprising brought the people of different faith groups, like Hinduism and Islam and caste backgrounds, together against the British Empire. Marx described it as the first war of independence. The British government termed it as "Ghadar", an Urdu expression which means an act of treason, but was later appropriated by the Ghadar Party members.

This rebellion was a result of anxiety among the Indian soldiers working for the British armies. They were unhappy with their pay. But what triggered the crisis were rumours that the grease inside the cartridges used by the soldiers was mixed with animal fat taken from cows and pigs. The soldiers had to tear off these cartridges with their teeth before loading them in the rifles. Since Hindus did not eat beef and Muslims were forbidden from eating pork, they felt deceived and revolted. The party was originally formed as Hindi

Though the rumours of animal fat inside the cartridges sparked the rebellion of 1857 for religious reasons, underneath this revolt was the discontent of the Indian people with the economic policies of the British rulers. These policies marginalized Indian industry and agriculture at the cost of the prosperity of England. The British government was not paying attention to the needs of the people of India. As a result many died due to starvation and plague. Local industry was discouraged and the cheaper raw material produced in India was being sent to England. Land revenue collection also wreaked havoc on the small and middle peasantry. Rigorous methods were used for collection of taxes and no respite was given in an event of crop failure. All this led to a rise in land mortgages and borrowings that further increased rural indebtedness.

The Ghadar newspaper published a regular column exposing this pillage. It gave startling figures to illustrate the

loot. It accused the British rulers of spending more on the military budget instead of providing basic services to the Indian population.

The migration of East Indians to US and Canada was an outcome of the economic hardships suffered under the British rulers. These conditions compelled many Sikh farmers from Punjab to migrate to other countries for better living by the end of the 19th century. Most of the middle level peasants had mortgaged their lands to the money lenders. The irrigation water rates had tripled and land holdings were reduced to small plots. As a result the farmers were compelled to move abroad for better livelihood. The first immigrants reached Malaya and China and were willing to take any task including lending services to the outposts of British imperialism. They later learnt from the travellers to Canada and US that in those countries, a worker could earn more. Eventually, these immigrants took

off to North America.

But the migration was not confined to economic hardships alone; many political refugees lived in exile. The political atmosphere of India had charged up on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the first mutiny. The Punjab in particular witnessed an uprising in the form of a farmers' agitation in 1907. Some of its prominent leaders were forced to leave India.

Others like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar lived in England, where he organized an event to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first Ghadar. He also wrote an important book on the history of the mutiny of 1857 in response to British propaganda against the participants of the first uprising. The book that gave an insight on the upheaval was banned by the British authorities. In a way these exiled leaders had already laid the ground for the Ghadar movement within the South Asian Diaspora.

Most of these men came to this part of the world as British subjects. Many had previously served in the British armies and trusted the fairness of the British Empire. They were soon disillusioned when they were exposed to racial hatred. The British diplomats did not come to their rescue in an event of hate crimes. The government of Canada, a former British colony, adopted racist immigration policies to "keep Canada white".

These immigrants were neither allowed to bring in their families, nor to vote. The Indians were disfranchised in 1907.

Across the border in the US, the social environment was very hostile towards South Asians. The white labour groups felt threatened because East Indian immigrants were willing to work for lower wages. This reduced their bargaining power and as a result they started intimidating the Asian immigrants. The Canadian government, buckling under pressure of white supremacy, adopted discriminatory policies, while the US authorities looked the other way during racial violence. The Indian immigrants soon realized that the root cause of their sufferings was foreign occupation back home. Racial taunts and violence hardened their feelings against the British establishment and they gradually turned their back towards an empire whose interests many of them had served before. Many moderate Sikhs had tried to draw the attention of the authorities to their loyalty towards the Empire during those times. Enough was enough for these men. Rampant racism taught them to fight back. They started getting organized and decided to buy weapons and resist. A strong urge emerged to form a group that brought all Indian migrants together irrespective of their religious beliefs and castes. Under these circumstances Hindi Association of the Pacific Coast of America was established on April 21, 1913 in

Astoria, with Sohan Singh Bhakna, a Sikh as its President and Har Dayal, a Hindu as a Secretary of the group. The association resolved to launch an armed rebellion against the British Empire. The term "Hindi" represented Hindustanis, a reference to all East Indians. On November 1, the Association launched its newspaper titled Ghadar. Hay Dayal, the editor of the paper, believed that it would revive the memories of the first uprising. The Ghadar newspaper was initially published in Urdu language. Shortly, the Punjabi edition of Ghadar was also launched. Kartar Singh Sarabha translated the Urdu edition in Punjabi. The Ghadar newspaper with its radical content soon became popular among the Indian community abroad. It gave an open call for armed resistance. As a result the Association came to be known as Ghadar Party. The Ghadar Party established its headquarters in San Francisco, considered a hotbed of revolutionaries from different countries, such as China, Ireland and Russia.

The Ghadar leaders anxiously waited for an opportunity to strike. As a crisis between Britain and Germany was brewing, they eyed an opportunity to start an armed revolt in case there was a full scale war between the two countries. Their calculations were that the two nations would take several years to go to war. With such possibilities in mind, many

revolutionaries abroad started collaborating with Germany for political and military support. Har Dayal looked upon such a war as a golden opportunity. However, he was served with an arrest warrant for spreading anarchy in US in March, 1914, allegedly under pressure from the British authorities. The party decided to send him to Switzerland. Har Dayal's departure was a big jolt to the party, but it continued to grow even after he was forced to leave America. The party had a big following in Canada. Ghadar activities in Vancouver also came to the notice of Canadian officials. A groundwork for the Ghadar party was laid in Vancouver much earlier. The Khalsa Diwan Society was established there in 1906. The body not only governed the Sikh temple, but also encouraged its congregation to indulge in political activism, and provided space to all the communities, including non-Sikhs, to hold political meetings.

The Ghadar activists condemned all peaceful means of struggle, such as boycotts and petitioning. They planned to go back to India and encourage Indian soldiers to quit the British armies and turn their guns against the authorities and toadies. Although the majority of the members and supporters of the Ghadar Party were Sikhs, the party was secular in composition and character. The party resolved to form an egalitarian and democratic society in

independent India and believed in economic and social equality.

Har Dayal was not the only non-Sikh face of the Ghadar Party. The central committee of the party had Kanshi Ram, another Hindu as treasurer and Karim Baksh, a Muslim, as Organizing Secretary. The Ghadar activists had learnt to work together to resist racism and oppression despite differences of opinion.

Casteism had no place in the party, and everyone was treated equally. The Ghadar party explicitly denounced caste-based discrimination. This policy inspired Manguram Muggowal, a Dalit or so-called "untouchable" to join the Ghadar movement. Muggowal later rose to become a towering leader of the Dalit emancipation movement in Punjab. People were encouraged to leave aside their spiritual beliefs and work in harmony as

Indians. Vegetarians or non-vegetarians, beef eaters or pork eaters, were treated alike in the party. The taboos that triggered the Ghadar of 1857 were broken by the Ghadar Party.

Though the party sometimes invoked religion where it was necessary to attract public support, it was never biased towards any particular religious group and denounced all kinds of prejudices. For instance the Ghadar activists instigated the Sikhs to react when an outer wall of a historical Sikh temple in Delhi was demolished during the extension of the Viceroy's palace in 1913. Similarly, the Ghadar party also condemned the demolitions of Hindu temples and mosques under British rule. It also recognized heroes of Sikh history and Hindu mythology to ensure mass appeal and encourage people to follow the ideals of these figures and fight against oppression.

The Ghadar party heavily emphasized people's unity and cautioned against the divide and rule policies of the British rulers. Against all calculations of the Ghadar Party, war broke out between Britain and Germany in August 1914. Seeing this as an opportunity to strike, the Ghadar newspaper gave a call for war against occupation.

Scores of Ghadar activists returned to India to face the

gallows or long imprisonments. Those who escaped arrest continued their activities secretly. While men like Bhakna were arrested upon reaching India, others like Sarabha gave slip to the police and continued to reorganize the Ghadar activists. He approached the Indian soldiers directly with intent to incite them for a coup. The party had made plans to engineer a coup in the armies in different parts of India on February 21, 1915. But the plot was foiled by the government with the help of their moles in the Ghadar Party. A number of Ghadar activists were arrested and the army cantonments were alerted. Sarabha was held in March 1915. He and six others were hanged in Lahore Jail on November 16, 1915. Among those executed alongside Sarabha was Vishnu Ganesh Pingle, a Hindu from Maharashtra.

Many of those who were awarded long sentences were sent to Andaman jail, situated on a faraway island. The political prisoners detained there were subjected to inhuman treatment. Bhakna was sent to the Andaman Jail.

The British government was able to crush the second Ghadar with an iron fist, but the spark of activism lit by the movement refused to subside. The Party activists who escaped the police dragnet continued their

work. Some joined other nationalist movements and carried on the struggle until India gained its independence in 1947.

Karam Singh Daulatpur was one of them. He had spent years in Canada. He gradually joined another militant movement that was aimed at liberating the historical Sikh temples from the clutches of corrupt priests who were patronized by the British government. Known as Babbar Akali movement, it inspired many former supporters of the Ghadar Party. The Babbar Akali movement also believed in an armed struggle. Daulatpur died in a police shootout in September, 1923. Bhagat Singh, a towering revolutionary who was hanged by the British in 1931 for killing a police officer, was influenced by the Ghadar Party. Bhagat Singh considered Sarabha as his role model.

The Ghadar activists continued their struggle for social justice even in post-independent India. People like Bhakna were thrown into jail for challenging the policies of the government. Likewise, Boojha Singh, a former Ghadar party activist was killed by the police in a staged shootout in 1970 for being a member of the ultra-leftist Naxalite movement that sought equality for the

oppressed classes.

The Ghadar ideology remained popular among the radical youth seeking complete freedom through an armed rebellion. The moderate leadership that sought nothing more than a dominion status for India was ultimately forced to seek complete independence from foreign occupation because of the continued efforts of the militants.

The moderate Congress party that dominated the political landscape of India for years claimed to have a monopoly over the history of freedom struggle. Its propaganda of having achieved freedom without spilling blood was recognized internationally, while the Ghadar history remained obscured.

But the legacy of the Ghadar movement remains alive and never gave up its rightful claim over the history of resistance.

Remembering the bloody side of Vaisakhi

The Vaisakhi festival is marked with prayers and celebrations in the Lower Mainland every year, but Indo-Canadians often overlook a bloody side of the carnival that changed the course of Indian history. Around this time of year, the harvest festival of Vaisakhi is the focus of parades, which are mainly organized by Sikh temples in Vancouver and Surrey. These events coincide with the anniversary of the birth of the Khalsa, a force of devout and armed Sikhs created by the tenth master of the Sikh faith, Guru Gobind Singh. But a gory historical aspect also needs to be remembered.

It was during Vaisakhi in 1919 when British troops opened fire on supporters of the passive-resistance movement. They had assembled at the Jallianwala Bagh (garden) in Amritsar to oppose the arrests of national leaders seeking the independence of India.

According to the official figures, close to 400 people died as a result of the shootings. The incident that came to be known as Bloody Vaisakhi influenced revolutionaries, who fought against the British occupation of India. Rabindranath Tagore, a prominent Bengali scholar and poet, renounced his British

knighthood. Many years later in London, Udham Singh, a Sikh rebel, assassinated Michael O'Dwyer, who was British lieutenant-governor of Punjab at the time of the massacre.

The assassin described himself as Mohammad Singh Azad, an unusual alias that symbolized secularism. The

Takht, the highest temporal seat of the Sikhs, actually honoured Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, who led the firing squad.

It is pertinent to mention that Singh was the grandfather of Simranjeet Singh Mann, a prominent Sikh separatist leader in India. When Queen Elizabeth visited Amritsar in 1997, leftists

massacre of innocent Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs united nearly all Indians, irrespective of their castes, cultures, and ideologies.

The incident jolted the Sikh peasantry in particular. Back then, Sikhs were considered to be the backbone of the British army, and Punjab remained a garrison state. So much so that the pro-British Sikh clergy was unmoved by the bloodshed. Arur Singh, a custodian of the Akal

campaigns for a formal apology, but the Sikh leadership did not insist on one. She went to the Jallianwala Bagh, laid a wreath at the memorial, signed the visitor book, and returned without making any apology.

Both moderate and fundamentalist groups within the Lower Mainland Sikh community continue to ignore the incident, which sent a message about the importance

of unity and secularism.

Supporters of Khalistan, a theocratic Sikh homeland, wish to separate from India. They organize the Vaisakhi parade in Surrey and cannot be expected to hold a memorial service for the victims of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

However, the so-called pro-India and secular moderates, who organize the Vaisakhi parade in Vancouver, have also repeatedly overlooked this part of history. Only a few progressive groups, like Mehak Punjab Di and the Fraser Valley Peace Council, have consistently come forward to hold annual candlelight vigil

in memory of the victims of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Surrey's Holland Park. The event has attracted people of both Indian and Pakistani origin. After all, the two nations were one before independence and the religious division of India in 1947. Many Muslim families who migrated to Pakistan lost relatives in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. It was a common tragedy before the partition of the country.

Ironically, the creation of Pakistan divided communities that were together when British troops fired indiscriminately at the Jallianwala Bagh gathering.

Kamaljit Singh Thind of Mehak Punjab Di has also launched an online petition seeking a formal apology for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in the British parliament. He has single-handedly started organizing a photo exhibition depicting this bloody episode during Vaisakhi parades, and has proved that an individual can sometimes do more than the institutions. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre carries a message not only for Indians, but for everyone who is opposed to imperialist wars and illegal occupations. Apart from unity and harmony, people can learn the lesson of social justice from the sacrifices made at the Vaisakhi of 1919.

April 2

Respected elders
forgive us
once again we let April 2nd
pass
while in slumber

we know
how beneficial it is
to remember our history
and believe you us
we do a lot of history
remembering
all year round
true, so far we've not bothered
to remember the victory you
won
after forty long years' struggle
and gave us the right to vote

dear elders
things are different now
we are doing quite well, thank
you
while you had only
a single organization called
Ghadar
we have dozens
only people from the left
supported you
we have support from political
leaders
of all different colours
only some eccentric poets
wrote for you
for us poets and singers line up
ready to sing anything and
everything

from spirituality to sexy spicy
melodies
they are teaching a different
way of life:

'eat drink and be merry
take the bhangra challenge if
you dare
do remember Bhagat Singh, if
you like
but don't be an atheist
and a revolutionary like him
...'

on our stages
anyone can sing anything
rile anyone for any cause
we stop no one
we do all this in your name
there are praises all around
it is good for you and it is good
for us

the expenses for our festivals
paid by the fashion industry
we award the winners of
the newest fashions
the owners pat our backs
and we pat theirs
we praise them and they praise
us
it's a win win situation for all

we Punjabis are at the zenith
there is happiness all around
no shortage of reasons
to do bhangra or giddha
the most useful thing to
remember
is the golden rule of the
ancient past:
'it is all a matter of destiny

everyone reaps
what they sowed in their past
life'

things are different now
our own brothers are the
owners
class struggles are things of the
past
no exploitation by anyone of
anyone
this is a unique era
classes have all disappeared
we are all part of the valor
the word weakling is no longer
part of our Punjabi dictionary
we are the owners of the land
we are the leaders of these
provinces

we celebrate every day of our
past
with unbounded enthusiasm
don't be disappointed
at our failure to celebrate April
2nd
one of these years we will
begin to hold colorful fairs
for this day as well
we will initiate a '*khandpath*'
in a few gurdwaras
we are in dire needs
of days to celebrate

we do have some constraints
mind you
this date is not all that
appropriate
for a powerful successful *mela*
this is the busy season of
vaisakhi

good for all kinds of businesses
and of course
spreading the word of the gurus
we will celebrate April 2nd for
sure
sometimes during the summer
or we can tag it with *teeaan da mela*
that goes on for three quarters
of a year
all kinds of entertainers come
from Punjab
along with flying pigeons
we can easily invite
a few local political leaders
elected by people's votes
you will know how wisely
we use the right to vote
for which you struggled
for forty long years
but for now

April 2, 1947 is a very significant date for the Punjabi/Indian community in Canada. On this day our community won back the right to vote after a continued struggle of 40 years. In early 20th century, both India and Canada were British colonies. As British subjects Indian immigrants to Canada had the right to vote. However, on March 26, 1907, the racist Conservative government of British Columbia changed BC's Election Act in Victoria and took this right away from them. By law, they could still vote in other parts of Canada but the reality was that very few of them lived outside BC at the time. This poem is dedicated to Husain Raheem, Darsaan Singh (Sangha) Canadian, Naginder Singh Gill, Dr. Pandia and those Canadians who struggled for the right to vote.

forgive us dear elders
we let April 2nd pass
while in deep slumber

Sadhu immigrated to Canada in 1967. A retired UBC language instructor, has published more than fifteen books of poetry, fiction, plays, translations and research. His works have been included in more than forty five anthologies both in Punjabi and

English. He edited a literary monthly Watno Dur and co-edits a quarterly, Watan. He is founding member of Vancouver Sath, a theatre collective and Ankur. For the last two and half decades he has been actively promoting Punjabi language and Punjabi language education in Canada. contact:

Sant Ram Udasi

Poor peoples' hero

During the month of April progressive people in India and abroad will be celebrating the 75th birthday of the late Sant Ram Udasi. Udasi was an activist and a passionate representative of the exploited and poor people of India. His poems and songs were all about equality and workers' rights. He desired a better life for all those who were deprived of an opportunity to live a life without sorrow and grief. He has depicted these feelings very beautifully in one of his very famous songs:

*mother earth! there are many
moons for your lap
hey sun! you keep on shining on the
court yard of the tailors*

Unfortunately, even 50 years after this was written, the feudal lords and the leaders of our society are working harder than ever to maximize workers' exploitation, hence becoming richer at the cost of poor people.

I first met Udasi in 1979 when he came to Vancouver as a guest of IPANA (Indian Peoples' Association in North America). I was grateful that he stayed with me for two weeks at my house. This provided me an opportunity to know him better.

Udasi struggled with extreme poverty all his life. He was a very simple man of simple means. When he came to Canada, he brought with him a night suit, two onions and a piece of brown sugar in his hand bag. He was also quite weak physically. Because of his

political views he was subjected to several police interrogations and physical torture.

Due to the police torture he had sustained a head injury. One morning during his stay, his nose started bleeding. I got worried but Udasi with a smile said, "It was a gift from the Punjab Police." When the bleeding did not stop after several minutes, I insisted on taking him to the hospital. Once there, the doctor needed to perform a small surgery on his nose to stop the bleeding. The doctor suggested freezing the area around his nose during the operation, but Udasi asked me to tell the doctor to proceed without it, because he had dealt with much more severe pain at the hands of the Punjab police in the past. A small surgery like that was trivial to him. After the surgery was done, the doctor was shaking his head and said that he had never witnessed a patient going through such a painful procedure without any complaint.

Udasi was not only a good writer, he was also a talented singer. He never needed any musical instrument to supplement his beautiful voice. When he stood up to sing his songs, the audience in the hall would sit in silence, holding their breath. While he was in Vancouver, IPANA produced an album of his songs entitled "Udasi De Geet." A book of his selected

songs called "Lahoo Ton Lohe Tuk" was also published.

During his stay in Canada Udasi was able to visit several communities. Everywhere his meetings were attended by large crowds. His songs and stories were very relevant to most people in the audience. He met with many people who themselves were subjected to police interrogations.

In 1979, the Farm Workers' Organizing Committee (FWOC) was actively mobilizing farm workers to get the legislative equality in British Columbia. FWOC organized several public meetings and marches in the Fraser Valley. Udasi attended some of these meetings and marched with us. His presence at these meetings helped the BC workers to link their struggle with the farm workers in India. His speeches and songs made the BC workers to understand the challenges faced by their counterparts in India. He inspired many farm workers to join the FWOC. Although Udasi is no longer with us, his voice and desire for a better life for workers and poor people all over the world will continue to inspire and guide us. ■

Raj Chouhan was first elected as the MLA for Burnaby-Edmonds in May 2005. He was re-elected in May 2009 and again in May 2013. He serves as Deputy Speaker. Previously he has served as Opposition Critic for Labour, Human Rights, Multiculturalism and Immigration.

Raj immigrated to Canada in 1973. As a student in India, he was actively involved in student union activities. Upon his arrival in Canada, he was greatly impacted by the plight of other immigrant workers and the wide disparity between the rich and poor in a prosperous country. This contributed to his ongoing advocacy for community and social justice for workers.

Raj is also the founding president of the Canadian Farmworkers' Union.

The Loretta Saunders murder not an isolated tragedy

On one level, the murder of Loretta Saunders is a senseless ending to the life of a young woman loved by her family, friends and fellow students. An Inuk woman from Labrador, Saunders was a university student in Halifax at the time of her death. In a heart-rending irony, she had been studying the murders of three Nova Scotia aboriginal women: Nora Bernard, Anna Mae PictouAquash, and Tanya Brooks. This killing is the latest of many terrible tragedies, stretching back to the colonisation of Turtle Island. Starting with that supreme act of theft, hundreds of millions of Loretta's have perished, the victims of a relentless pursuit of imperialist treasure at the expense of the indigenous people of the western hemisphere.

The killers of Loretta Saunders may be brought to justice. But the system which ignores the hundreds of murdered and missing aboriginal women in Canada in recent decades has yet to be put on trial. There is still no national inquiry, because even in death, these women and girls are regarded as second class people, unworthy of a serious examination of the inherently racist origins of modern Canadian society.

Here in British Columbia, sixteen months after Wally Oppal's Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, the province has yet to implement key recommendations. Unbelievably, there is still no budget or time line for a shuttle bus on the "Highway of Tears" between Prince George and Prince Rupert, where so many women have gone missing. There are still no new mental-health or addiction-service programs for aboriginal women, no mandatory police sensitivity training, no compensation fund for victims' families.

This travesty must end. Loretta Saunders and all the other Aboriginal women victims of violence across Canada must be mourned and remembered, and real action must be taken immediately to bring the justice which has been denied to them and their families for so long.

Law and order agenda is cheap politicking

Much has been made recently of Surrey as an area plagued by crime, with many of the usual suspects such as politicians, police and self appointed "community leaders" repeating the same worn out lines about crime supposedly being "out of control". Worse, not only does the dominant discourse surrounding the so-called determinants of crime lack real depth, but the so-called solutions are dead ends.

The public discussion of crime in Surrey largely mirrors the right wing "law and order" agenda, portraying crime as the result of purely individual choices and seeks to "solve" the problem of crime solely by building more prisons, enacting harsher laws and hiring more police.

On a broader level, to the extent officials such as Mayor Dianne Watts do speak of "root causes" of crimes, like "homelessness", "addiction", "mental health" problems, etc. they are only speaking of symptoms - not the true root

cause - of a much larger problem. The real root causes of crime lies in the fact that we live in a class divided society. It is capitalist society which breeds crime by structurally depriving some, while economically and socially benefitting others.

It is those who are structurally deprived of any meaningful existence who live in poverty, homelessness and who disproportionately suffer mental health problems all of which are concretely linked to crime. Capitalist society would collapse without structural deprivation of certain sectors of society. Furthermore, even those who might not be completely deprived of opportunity by the operation of capitalist society and who engage in criminal activities tend to come from the lower strata of the working class.

Crime is a means of getting ahead in a society in which the gap between the rich and poor increases daily and in which wages stagnate while hard fought for social reforms meant to mitigate the worst effects of capitalist society are clawed back. Thus, how can anyone claim to address the root causes of crime without discussing its class basis? It's impossible. There is no solution to crime without squarely addressing its class basis.

One further point should

be noted. During the 1980's and 1990's when the poor and lower strata of the working class largely lived in East Vancouver, murder rates regularly approached 30 to 40 homicides per year. Likewise, violent crime and other criminal indices were very high.

However, as the poor and working class have been pushed out of East Vancouver since the mid-90's and re-settled largely in Surrey, we have seen a precipitous decline in such crime in East Vancouver (the 6 homicides in Vancouver in 2013 was the lowest ever on record) accompanied by a corresponding increase of crime in Surrey (the 24 murders in Surrey was the highest on record).

The fact is this, the law and order agenda is cheap politicking which will never deal with crime. The only way to really start addressing the issues is to turn squarely to its class basis. When will the politicians, police and other usual suspects do so?

Jagdeep Mangat is a Vancouver area immigration and family law lawyer. He has been active over the years in numerous social justice campaigns and will be writing a regular social justice and the law column in this paper. He can be reached at his office in Surrey, British Columbia or by phone at 604-802-1034.

Courageous lawyer Harvinder Singh Phoolka jumps into election fray in India

A prominent human-rights advocate and author who's popular within the local South Asian community has put his name forward for public office. Lawyer Harvinder Singh Phoolka will be the candidate for the Ludhiana parliamentary seat in the upcoming general election in the Indian state of Punjab.

He has been nominated by the fledgling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which has emerged out of the grassroots movement of activists against corruption.

Phoolka has been singlehandedly fighting for justice to the victims of 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom engineered by Congress officials following the assassination of the then-Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. He coauthored the book, *When A Tree Shook Delhi*, which is based on the anti-Sikh violence.

The title takes a dig at the former prime minister and her son Rajiv Gandhi, who claimed that the violence was a natural reaction to the assassination of his mother. In a famous speech he once said, "When a big tree falls, the earth around it shakes." Significantly, there was no such reaction when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated

in 1991 by a Hindu Tamil suicide bomber associated with the Tamil separatists active in Sri Lanka.

Phoolka has visited Canada a few times and is admired within the local Sikh community, which has spearheaded a campaign for justice over the last 30 years. No

senior Congress leaders have been convicted for the mass murders of Sikhs.

The AAP, which claims to represent the interests of ordinary people in India, bagged 28 out of total 70 seats in the recently held assembly election in New Delhi, the political capital of India.

The party was able to form a minority government, but its rule ended only after 49 days in office.

The AAP leader, Arvind Kejriwal, resigned after his government had failed to pass an anti corruption bill, which was part of his party's election mandate. The bill was blocked both by Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the two major established political parties of India. The BJP received the rudest shock when it fell short of the majority in the house and could not form the government, despite being the largest party with 31 seats. During its brief tenure, the AAP government gave a green light to establishing a special investigation team to look into the 1984 carnage and reexamining all cases of mass murder—as well as the role of police, who allegedly sided with goons let loose to target the Sikh community.

Before the election AAP supporters also staged a fast in solidarity with victims of the 1984 violence. Influenced by these developments, Phoolka joined the AAP.

He was upset because a senior pro-BJP lawyer had been trying to help political conspirators behind the anti-Sikh violence.

The BJP is also accused of mimicking Congress and inciting

the anti-Muslim massacre in Gujarat in 2002 after more than 50 Hindu train passengers were burned to death. That incident was blamed on the Muslim fanatics. The AAP has also nominated Sikh journalist Jarnail Singh as a candidate from Delhi. Singh once hurled a shoe at the then-Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram during a news conference when the latter tried to give clean chit to the Congress leaders involved in the pogrom. Singh was later sacked by the newspaper he worked for. He has also authored a book, I Accuse....

Phoolka's decision has been widely welcomed by Sikhs in Canada, who are as upset as many Indian voters are with established parties for corruption, dynastic politics, and encouraging religious fanaticism. There is also a widespread anger against the Akali Dal, the powerful regional party of Punjab, which describes itself as "sole defender" of Sikh interests.

The Akali Dal is not only a staunch ally of the BJP, its president and the deputy chief minister of Punjab, Sukhbir Singh Badal, tried to discredit Phoolka by claiming that he was given money to fight cases on behalf of the 1984 victims. For years, the Akali Dal had been portraying Phoolka as a hero and used the anti-Sikh violence as a tool to defeat Congress.

Meanwhile, Phoolka has vehemently denounced the allegation and threatened to sue Badal. It is pertinent to mention that when Phoolka visited Surrey last time, he gave a jolt to Sikh separatists, who tried to appropriate his struggle with their fight for an independent Sikh state. He announced that he is a proud Indian and his fight is for human rights and dignity.

Phoolka also refused to accept their sponsorship for his visit to Canada. He has time and again opposed terrorism and instead, encouraged people not to resort to violent and disruptive protests, which inconvenience the public. He was also a part of the campaign to plant trees in memory of those killed in 1984. Phoolka can be best described as a defender of secularism, a principle highly cherished by the Indian constitution, but which has been conveniently violated by the ruling parties more than once.

-RDNB

Rally by AAP supporters draws tremendous response in Canada

Over 300 people showed up at the first ever rally organized by the supporters of the fledgling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on February 23 in Surrey.

Despite snowfall and inclement weather, the rally received a cross sectional support from the Indo-Canadian community. Cutting across ideological barriers, Hindus, a few Pakistani Muslims and Sikhs from both the moderate and extremist factions, besides the representatives of different progressive groups, came out with a significant number of women and seniors to attend the event held at a banquet hall. AAP volunteers with T-shirts bearing the party slogan and symbol greeted visitors were seen collecting signatures on party membership forms.

A big sign close to the entrance of the venue reminded visitors that the AAP is dedicated to deliver justice to victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh carnage. The former journalist and the AAP candidate from Delhi, Jarnail Singh, who hurled a shoe at the former Indian Home Minister P. Chindamram in protest against his attempt to shield those involved in the carnage, addressed the gathering via internet. He urged the supporters of AAP to strengthen the hands of the party to end corruption in the parliamentary system. Video clips of the AAP leader, Arvind Kejriwal were also played. The organizers encouraged people to go on the AAP website to donate money and get awareness about the party's objectives. Among

the speakers were the AAP British Columbia Support Group leaders, Lakhbir Singh Chahal, Balbir Singh Dhaliwal, Sukhdev Singh Mann and Karam Singh Dhanwant. In accordance with the principles of the AAP, a disabled participant who came on the wheelchair at the event was also given an opportunity to speak.

-RDNB

Bhagat Singh's house and school in Pakistan get Rs. 80 million for restoration

The ancestral house and village of the towering Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh, and the school he attended in Faisalabad, Pakistan, are getting Rs. 80 million for restoration. The government of the Punjab state of Pakistan has decided to fund the project in recognition of the role Bhagat Singh played in the freedom struggle. The announcement is significant as Pakistan's government is engaged in war against Islamic extremists. An earlier attempt by the Pakistani authorities to rename a road crossing in Lahore after Bhagat Singh was abandoned under

pressure from the religious fundamentalists. The Islamic extremists opposed any plan to honour a non-Muslim hero on Pakistani soil. Bhagat Singh was born in a Sikh family in an undivided India. He later chose to become an atheist and died as an agnostic. Bhagat Singh and his two comrades, Sukhdev and Rajguru, were hanged by the British government on March 23, 1931. India and Pakistan were one nation when Bhagat Singh and his associates waged a war against British occupation. They all believed in secularism and denounced religious sectarianism and casteism. Little did they

know that with freedom would come religious partition of the country in 1947, and the birth of a theocratic Islamic state of Pakistan. Partition was followed by the worst sectarian clashes in the history. The two neighbouring countries have fought two wars since then. Our correspondent in Pakistan, Mohammad Shoaib Adil, believes this gesture will go a long way in bridging cultural gaps between the two nations, as Bhagat Singh continues to be revered by progressive forces on both sides of the border. -RDNB

Mewa Singh should be recognized as Canadian hero

A prominent writer and history researcher from Toronto has demanded that Mewa Singh be recognized as Canadian hero for sacrificing his life for the sake of civil rights, equality and diversity. Waryam Singh Sandhu, who is crisscrossing Canada with this message, reiterated this demand during a series of events organized by different groups in Greater Vancouver early this year to commemorate the 99th death anniversary of Mewa Singh, who was hanged on January 11, 1915 for assassinating a controversial Immigration Inspector, William Hopkinson.

Mewa Singh was a political activist, close to the Ghadar Party, a group of South Asian radicals formed in North America to fight against British occupation in India and racism abroad. Hopkinson was instrumental in the September 1914 shooting inside the Vancouver Sikh temple that claimed the lives of two South Asian leaders, including Bhaag Singh who was in the forefront of the struggles against discriminatory immigration policies, such as disfranchisement of Indian immigrants and the bar on bringing their families to Canada. Bhaag Singh, a member of the Ghadar Party, supported the South Asian passengers aboard the Komagata Maru ship which was denied entry under the controversial continuous journey law that was aimed at keeping Canada white. The ship was forced to return following a two months standoff on July 23,

1914. The incident led to bloody clashes between Ghadar Party supporters and toadies, which culminated in the assassination of Hopkinson by Mewa Singh.

Since next year will be the centenary of Mewa Singh's

execution, Sandhu called upon the South Asian community to get organized and work together to get Mewa Singh recognized as a Canadian hero. He pointed out that that it was due to people like Mewa Singh that the South Asian community got the right to vote and bring their families to this country. "Today Canada celebrates its diversity, but do not forget that it wasn't like this always. The multiculturalism in this country is an outcome of sacrifices made by people like Mewa Singh. If Canada really cherishes such values then what stops it from recognizing him as a hero? He should not be treated as criminal anymore."

Sandhu, who is a diehard secularist, was also critical of the Sikh fundamentalists who are trying to appropriate the

Ghadar history. "Mewa Singh and other Ghadar activists shouldn't be merely portrayed as Sikh heroes. Although they were proud of their Sikh heritage, they represented the larger social justice struggle." The

Ghadar Party had members from the non-Sikh communities as well, and the party believed in secularism and social equality, wanting its members to keep religion and politics apart. As a majority of its supporters are from the Sikh community, the Canada-based Sikh separatists have been trying to appropriate the Ghadar movement. Mewa Singh was also a practicing Sikh.

Sandhu has authored a book in Punjabi, "Ghadari Babe Kaun San?" that directly challenges the propaganda of the Sikh separatists. He narrowly escaped an attempt on his life years ago from the Sikh militants. He wrote many short stories based on religious violence.

-RDNB

Declare Mewa Singh a Canadian Hero Now!

As we all know that next year is going to be the 100th anniversary of Bhai Mewa Singh's martyrdom, we strongly demand that the Canadian government recognize him as a national hero. Mewa Singh was hanged on January 11, 1915 for assassinating controversial Immigration Inspector William Hopkinson, who was instrumental behind the shooting inside the Vancouver Sikh temple in September 1914 that claimed the lives of our respected community leaders Bhai Bhaag Singh and Badan Singh, who were in the forefront of the struggles against racism and discriminatory immigration policies. Indians were disfranchisement as part of this policy, while our ancestors were not allowed to bring their families to Canada. The Komagata Maru ship was forced to return as part of the racist agenda to keep Canada white. Hopkinson was responsible for all this and was killed for political reasons. Mewa Singh attained martyrdom for all of us. Do not forget that it was for people like Mewa Singh that the South Asian community got equal rights in this country. We therefore urge the government to give him his due and rectify the errors made in the history.

Issued by:

Shaheed Bhai Mewa Singh Society

Gurbax Singh Sanghera 604-771-3100

Jagir Singh Nagra 604-726-7072

Balbir Singh Beesla 604-657-2559

Public inquest into the death of Mexican woman ordered

Following angry protests by social justice activists, the BC Coroner is going to hold a public inquest into the death of 42-year-old Lucia Vega Jimenez; a Mexican woman who died after remaining in the custody of Canadian Border Services Agency at Vancouver Airport. She was arrested by the transit police for a fare violation and faced deportation. She was found in a shower stall in a holding cell on December 20, and is believed to have attempted suicide by hanging herself. She died after a week in the hospital, causing a national outcry from advocacy groups representing undocumented workers. A rally organized by No One Is Illegal (NOII) outside the Immigration and Refugee Board offices in Vancouver in January received a massive response from different grassroots' groups

of activists. Speaker after speaker demanded a full inquiry into the episode. Ruby Walji, whose brother Mohammad Walji met the same fate, was also in attendance. Mohammed and two other members of his family died in what came to be known as murder — suicide in Ontario.

The family faced deportation and Ruby came to show her support to those who had gathered in memory of Lucia. "I felt myself strongly connected with Lucia's supporters," Karla Lottini, a Mexican journalist who came to Canada as a refugee fearing death for exposing corruption in that country, was one of the organizers.

NOII member and author Harsha Walia says that though she welcomes the BC coroner's decision, she wants it to look into the broader question of how the Canadian immigration system is treating refugees and

migrants, especially when such tragedies have happened in the past too.

-RDNB

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40 Years of India Mahila Association

I arrived in Vancouver in 1970 at a time when the women's movement was still in its infancy.

Along with immigrants from other parts of the world, a large number of families from India, mostly from the Punjab, also arrived on the west coast in the late 60's and early 70's. Within weeks of my arrival, I started volunteering in Vancouver schools to get acquainted with the education system. The work in the schools and community made me aware that women were missing from cultural and political institutions. There were almost no women in leadership roles in the various organizations. One rarely saw them at public meetings. I remember being at a public meeting on the issue of racism at a local high school auditorium that was full with men (standing room only) and only eight women including myself.

Many of the new immigrant women came to Canada through arranged marriages or as dependents of their fathers. They did not

speak, read or write English and had very limited understanding of the host culture and their own legal rights. In the event of conflicts in the family, they were ill-equipped because of the lack of knowledge and resources. All of this made them completely vulnerable to abuse at home and at work.

There were limited services for women in general, and for immigrant women in particular. There were no

talk about the need to establish a women's organization in the community - to give them a voice and a platform for discussion and resolution of the issues confronting them. Out of meetings and discussions arose the India Mahila Association (IMA) in 1973.

IMA was and continues to be a volunteer, grassroots organization of women of all ages that has worked in the Lower Mainland for the last four

transition houses/shelters where women could go and stay in safety in times of need. The mainstream services were not well-equipped to deal with the needs of the immigrant women and hardly had any staff members from these communities. We would often

decades without any operational funding from any government. It pioneered the dialogue on women's rights. It made men and women aware of the issues. It provided support and referral for women. It worked with the transition Houses to make them more culturally sensitive and

accessible to the South Asian women. We rallied. We wrote. We spoke out. We successfully prevented an American doctor from opening a fetal sex determination clinic in Vancouver in the 1990s.

IMA has empowered women with a powerful and fearless voice.

Violence against women has been our major concern. Since the mid-70s, we have actively lobbied and encouraged the community to have zero tolerance for it.

We commissioned two reports to assist us with this work. The first, Assessment Of Needs And Services To South Asian Women In The Lower Mainland Area and the second, Spousal Abuse - Experiences of 15 South Asian Women. Other issues we addressed included growing up in two cultures, the recognition of foreign credentials, the need for language training and to discourage sex role stereotyping.

Our membership reflects a wide diversity of faiths and traditions, but the organization operates on secular principles. We strengthen families through education, support and solutions that recognize women as equal partners in relationships, and continue to empower women by providing encouragement, support and referral to those in need.

In setting up the organization, we faced much resistance and ridicule from some in the community, but we

persevered. Today, there are numerous women's organizations doing good work. This year we are proudly celebrating over four decades of IMA's volunteer efforts to bring about change in women's lives. In so doing we rededicate ourselves to the work that remains. While sitting down to write this piece in the midst of preparations to celebrate 40 years of our struggles and achievements as part of India Mahila Association, commonly known as IMA, I reflect on the ups and downs, the victories, defeats, the joys and sorrows - and ask myself, has anything changed? Was it all worth it? Would I do it again? And the answers are as follows: yes, yes, and capital yes! I am sharing part of our four decade long journey with you in the hope that the next generation will get involved, get active, in their own way, in their own space and at their own time to change the world to make it a better place. This is for you, your children and grandchildren.

Real story behind atheist billboard row

generous of charitable giving comes from atheists (Bill Gates, Warren Buffet etc.). We are a misunderstood lot so my job will be to pull the theist's wool from your eyes and dispel some of the myths about atheism.

Atheism does not follow any dogma, does not have any beliefs per se and has no authority to guide it. The atheist position in my writing is my own; it may or may not reflect the views of all atheists but the positions I will articulate have yet to be disputed by any atheist I have presented them to. After a recent appearance on television, an acquaintance said "I saw you on TV, so you represent the atheists". Nothing could be further from the truth. Definitions can be tricky but I have distilled the writings of many atheists, most notably Matt Dillahunty of Austin, Texas to come up with a satisfactory definition. Here we go:

Atheism is simple a position on one question, whether a god (or gods) exist. Our position is not that a god does not exist but rather, the evidence in favor of a god has not met its burden of proof. We make no claim; we reject god claims as unsubstantiated. With that in mind, let's look at a recent situation Center For Inquiry Canada (CFI) found itself in. Early in 2013 CFI received a donation of \$20,000.00, the donor specifically asked that the money be spent on a billboard advertising campaign. As a registered charity we are legally bound to spend donations the

way the donor requests, so that is what we did.

The first order of business was to come up with a design. There have been several Atheist themed billboards over the last few years and we did not want to plagiarize. We wanted something that would catch the eye, tell our story and not be so offensive that no one would put it up. We will let the readers decide if we accomplished that goal.

We engaged an advertising firm to come up with some ideas and over a couple of months came up with the ones seen in and around Vancouver. \$20,000.00 may sound like a lot of money but billboards in high traffic areas in Vancouver are very costly, as much as \$16,000.00 per month. Through careful budgeting we were in a position to purchase one of the more sought after billboard locations. The owner of virtually all of these coveted spots was Pattison Outdoor so we approached them with our ads. And we were rejected.

This is where things get a bit muddy. All conversations with Pattison Outdoor were by phone so there is no written record but nothing in this article, has, to my knowledge, been disputed by Pattison. Their first response was that they did not want to be associated with the ads (more on this later). They said it did not fit with their policy on political/activist advertising but would not tell us what the policy was; they asked that we do a re-design. But re-

This will be the first in what I hope will be a series of articles from an atheist's perspective. I hope to explore many areas of thought around religion and belief. But first I must thank Gurpreet for giving me this opportunity; it is an honor to be included in this discussion.

There is a saying among atheists, that: "Atheism, is the new gay". In other words, we are the last group in society who it is all right to discriminate against. We have broad shoulders, we can fight the good fight, but what is frustrating, and what theists have to understand, is that when we ask for the same rights as everyone else, everyone else can't act like their rights are being taken away. As Rickey Gervais said recently (I paraphrase): "Giving atheists the same rights as everyone else is not giving special treatment, special treatment would be like asking to not pay taxes, like religion".

In the United States recently, atheists were listed as the most unlikely group people would vote for. And yet, atheists are far underrepresented in prison populations and the most

design in what way? We had no idea and they would not tell us. We had spent the design part of our budget so to go back and re-submit design after design would have been what we came to call "censorship by bankruptcy". So we went to the media.

There was a lot of interest in our story and I did several TV, radio and print interviews but it was not till a Global reporter was interviewing me that we found the real reason for the rejection. Pattison revealed to the reporter that all we had to do was make our name and contact information bigger. This is what Pattison meant when they said they did not want to be associated with the message. Apparently their policy was to ask any activist advertisers to make their logos so big that no one would think the ad was being endorsed as a Pattison initiative. Fair enough, but why not tell us that at the outset? Why ask for re-designs with no guidance (is my bankruptcy metaphor now making more sense?).

The information from the Global reporter came just after we contacted another billboard company, Astral, who said they would run our ads as they were. We also received an email from a third company saying they would be happy to see our ads on their spaces. So what was Pattison's problem? One can only speculate.

Our ads showed up on a bus shelter at Bute and Robson, a billboard at Loughheed and Boundary, one in New Westminster and one in Pitt Meadows. Not the high traffic

Vancouver locations we hoped for but good ones none-the-less. Of course this was not the end of the story. There were those who felt the ads were offensive, or that atheists should just keep quiet. There were accusations that we chose the Christmas season to rub people's nose in the message. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Are bungee jumping ads offensive to those with vertigo? Were the Catholic Come Home ads offensive to us? No. Our ads

sitting on our hands and keeping quiet.

Many religious people have no problem with our ads or atheism in general but there are a significant number who wish we would go away and stop pushing our views in public. This is not going to happen, not as long as the religious continue to insist on special privilege (not paying taxes, legally able to discriminate). We are here, we are proud and we have science and reason on our side. We

were not aimed at the religious. Our ads were focused on those atheists in the community who may not realize there is an organization that speaks to and defends secular values. Car ads are not aimed at cyclists and beer ads are not aimed at teetotalers. Our ads were aimed at those who already share our position, that the religious had to see them in public is the price they pay for living in a free country. There are many in our community who feel isolated or afraid to come out as atheists, our mandate is to give them a voice, to let them know they are far from alone. We want them to know that there is an advocate for them, but we can't do it by

welcome you to join us, but if your position clashes with ours then let's talk about it, not shut each other up. To quote Aristotle: "The mark of an educated man is one who can entertain an idea without accepting it". Try entertaining atheism, you may be surprised.

Pat O'Brien has been a skeptic since he was 10 and an Atheist since he was 13 but it was not till he was in his 40's that he became active in the movement. Pat was the president of The Humanist Association of B.C., the president of Humanist Canada, an ambassador for Atheist Alliance International and is now on the board of Center For Inquiry Canada. Pat's day job is being Project Master in the film and television industry, he is married and lives in Vancouver.

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Many Canadians of South Asian descent support struggle for LGBT equal rights

The Indian Supreme Court decision upholding a regressive law that bars homosexuality as a punishable offence reflects very badly on the world's largest secular democracy.

The apex court of India recently overturned the Delhi High Court verdict of 2009 that decriminalized homosexuality. The lower court had rejected the validity of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which is a tool of the British colonial era and describes homosexual union as crime.

Ironically, the British government has allowed same-sex unions, whereas India—despite independence from the British occupation in 1947 and tall claims of progress and modernity—continues to cling to an outdated law.

The verdict has obviously outraged LGBT people both in India and Canada. In Vancouver, South Asian gay and lesbian activists rallied outside the Indian consulate December 13, defying rain and cold weather.

The controversial decision has particularly saddened LGBT people of Indian origin, who feel that the queer community continues to be oppressed and discriminated against in their home country.

At the same time, they face double discrimination, and in case of lesbians—triple—in a foreign land because of their

race, gender, and sexual orientation.

The verdict sends a wrong signal and reinforces stereotypes and myths about the homosexuals within the South Asian community. In several instances of hate crimes against homosexuals in Vancouver, South Asians were reported to be potential suspects.

Several years ago, the social environment within the Indo-Canadian community was quite hostile against homosexuals. The clerics and the self-styled gate keepers tried to make everyone believe that homosexuality is a moral crime.

Openly gay former NDP MP Svend Robinson was sometimes ridiculed by a section in the community in spite of his passion for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, including Sikhs and Muslims.

Robinson vehemently opposed human-rights violations and persecution of minorities in India. His support for LGTB rights was hardly endorsed by the South Asians at the time.

Itrath Syed, a former NDP candidate, also faced undue criticism by the Muslim clerics for being in a party that supports same-sex couples' rights.

However, a wind of change has been noticed recently. All the hype about social conservatism in the South Asian community is not entirely

true.

If open-line radio shows on recent developments in India is any indication, the majority of South Asians are pained by the verdict. They feel that it is an attack on the rights of a gendered minority.

Many feel that the law should not interfere into the sexual preferences of people and that the Indian parliament should eliminate this draconian law or make amendments to ensure safety and protection of the queer community.

It is worth noting that Dr. Barjinder Singh, a prominent human rights activist, has expressed his solidarity with homosexuals. He's the leader of the Sikh Nation, a campaign that organizes annual blood donation camps across Canada in memory of the victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom.

Thousands of Sikhs were murdered by goons influenced by leaders of India's Congress Party following the assassination of then-Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984.

Singh said during live talk show that the Indian judiciary, which has already failed the Sikh minority, has once again failed to protect the rights of a minority. Singh, who is influenced by the values of Sikhism, draws inspiration from the ninth master of the Sikhs, Guru Tegh Bahadur, who laid

down his life for the sake of Hindus who were being persecuted by the Islamic rulers.

Singh feels that though Guru Teg Bahadur did not believe in Hinduism, he sacrificed his life for human liberty. Therefore, Singh believes that whatever may be the sexual orientation of the majority, we must stand by the gendered minority.

Years ago, the World Sikh Organization (WSO) also supported the rights of gays and lesbians when books about same-sex parents in Surrey schools stirred an unwanted debate.

In 2005, when the orthodox Sikh clergy in India ordered the Sikh MPs in Canada to vote against the same-sex marriage bill, then-Liberal MP Navdeep Singh Bains, a devout Sikh himself, defied the edict. The WSO supported his stand.

One may disagree with the WSO's politics and its inclination toward theocracy, but it definitely scored a point over the so-called moderates in the Sikh community. As against WSO's progressive position, a prominent moderate leader, Balwant Singh Gill, once trashed homosexuals, only to later apologize.

Former B.C. premier Ujjal Dosanjh, who's of Sikh heritage, has consistently and vocally supported the cause of the homosexuals in the South Asian community. He also tries to educate his compatriots on this subject, even at personal level.

Dosanjh, who is socially progressive in many aspects,

also defied the Sikh clergy by voting in support of same-sex marriage as a Liberal MP in 2005.

Baljinder Narang, chair of the Burnaby board of education, is another example. A practising Sikh herself, she spoke passionately about the rights of the the LGBT community when they came under attack in her city.

All this indicate that the homosexuals should not feel alone, as many respectable and prominent South Asian immigrants stand by them.

The Indian establishment should wake up and acknowledge the changing landscape of the world, instead of talking about symbolic development and progression by way of sending mission to Mars and also courting religious conservatives at the same time.

India, after all, belongs to its diverse population, including people with different sexual orientations—and not only to those who while away their time in religious places and spit venom against humanity.

Meet the so called angry young men of Bollywood

Indian cinema star Salman Khan's recent praise for the prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi is shocking, but shouldn't surprise anyone.

Khan had described Modi as a "great man" during an event aimed to promote his latest film *Jai Ho*.

Though there is nothing unusual for stars of commercial cinema using such compliments to seek favours for promotion of films, Khan stirred a controversy by virtually exonerating Modi of any wrongdoing during an anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002. It followed the burning of a train that left over 50 Hindus died.

Hindu leaders blamed that incident on Muslim fundamentalists, whereas one commission of inquiry found that it was a plain accident caused by the passengers cooking their meals on the train. Modi, chief minister of the Indian state of Gujarat, has been blamed for engineering anti-Muslim violence and continues to be barred from entering the United States. He's the prime ministerial candidate of the Hindu nationalist *Bhartiya Janata Party* (BJP). Although he has not been convicted, the BJP government in Gujarat was clearly involved in the mass murders, according to survivors and human-rights groups.

While praising Modi, Khan said that he should not be apologetic for what happened in 2002. This has raised eyebrows of many in the Muslim community, with a section of clerics asking the people to

boycott his films. Being a Muslim himself, Khan's statement has added insult to the injury.

However, Khan is not the only one in the Indian film industry to leave his fans disappointed.

In the past, Amitabh Bachchan, a veteran Bollywood star, remained a mute spectator to the violence against Sikhs in 1984, despite being born to a Sikh mother. Not only that, he joined the then ruling Congress

Bachchan cannot escape from his responsibility as he has seen the best of both the film industry and the political world.

Shamefully, Bachchan got elected riding on the anti-Sikh wave that gave the Congress Party a brute majority in the Parliament in the aftermath of Gandhi's murder.

One thing that binds these two stars together is their reputation as angry young men and mighty heroes who could

Party—which was involved in the anti-Sikh carnage—and got elected as a member of Parliament. The massacre followed the assassination of then-Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. Bachchan was seen standing next to the body of Gandhi as she lay in state.

He was close to the Gandhi family. Others saw him remaining quiet when angry Congress supporters were announcing provocative slogans.

Whereas Khan can rightly claim to be politically naïve,

singlehandedly fight with many ruffians. In movie houses, they stand up like a rock in front of social evils.

Their actions in terms of what happened in 1984 and 2002 clearly contradict their images on the silver screen.

Even from a secularist standpoint, their silence serves the interests of those who have time and again tried to rip off the diverse and pluralist fabric of the Indian society in the name of faith. This has also brought the Bollywood's secularist credentials into question.

Radical Desi wants to thank all the individuals and groups who not only opened their purses, but also their hearts to support us. As the list below indicates we are proud to say that a majority of them are dedicated social justice activists, while a few are progressive political figures. Whereas, a few small business groups have helped us financially, most of our supporters are from the working class, who donated generously despite their own financial hardships.

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Jagdish Binning	Surinder Singh Binning	Shamsher Randhawa
Jinny Sims	Harinder Mahil	Pal Dhindsa
Kuldip Singh Basran	Avtar Gill	Sukhdev Singh Brar
Bruce Ralston	Gurmel Singh Gill	Chinmoy Banerjee
Harpreet Singh Sekha	Raj Chouhan	Kamaljit Jassi
Shahzad Nazir Khan	Surinder Sangha	Baljinder Sihota
A.S.Bubber	Saif Khalid	Sucha Deepak
Maninder Singh Gill	Kuldip Jhand	Shinder Brar
Vinay Sharma	Jas Toor	Bhupinder Malhi
Beant Singh	Parshottam Dosanjh	Satpal Singh Dhaliwal
Amar Sangha	Harkewal Dhaliwal	Harjit Daudhria
Jugraj Dhaliwal	Harmel Sunner	Surrey Wireless Solutions
Devinder Singh	Jasbir Dosanjh	Charnjit Singh Brar
Kulwant Singh	Harkirat Singh	Ranjit Singh Gill
Amolak Singh	Sukhdev Singh Chandi	