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Cover Picture: Bhagat Singh, a great Indian revolutionary who was hanged alongside two comrades Rajguru and Sukhdev on March 23, 1931, died as an atheist.

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RADICAL_{DESI}

"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

~ Desmond Tutu

This year marks the 84th anniversary of the execution of Bhagat Singh and his comrades Sukhdev and Rajguru. The three political activists who fought against British occupation of India were hanged on March 23, 1931 for assassinating a police officer.

They were all associated with a revolutionary cell that believed in an armed resistance against colonialism and foreign occupation of their motherland. Their group believed in social justice and wished to carry on their struggle for a fair and just society even after the British left the country. They believed that after independence, power might fall into the hands of the rich and powerful, and the poor would continue to suffer. Throughout their struggle they emphasized people's unity and opposed religious nationalism of every shade. As believers of secularism, they denounced the leadership which was using religion to both divide communities and outreach to the masses.

Bhagat Singh in particular believed in atheism and considered Kartar Singh Sarabha, one of the founders of the Ghadar Party, as his role model. The Ghadar Party was formed in North America in 1913 by radical Indian immigrants who resisted racism abroad and colonialism back home. The Ghadar Party believed in secularism and kept religion and politics apart. It also wanted to establish an egalitarian society in post-British India. Obviously, this legacy of the Ghadar activists had shaped the ideology of Bhagat Singh and his associates.

When India gained official independence in 1947, the predictions of Bhagat Singh were proven right. Not only was power transferred into the hands of the bourgeois, but the country was divided on religious lines. The narrow religious nationalism promoted by the mainstream leadership culminated in the birth of Muslim Pakistan out of India. The partition followed bloodshed and rioting. Thousands of Muslims were murdered on the Indian side of the border, while Hindus and Sikhs were slaughtered on the other side. This was not the India of Bhagat Singh's dreams.

Today, decades after independence, the opportunistic political leadership of India and Pakistan continue to glorify Bhagat Singh, but hardly any challenge is being given to religious extremism that continues to grow. Rather, the religious extremists on both sides of the border, including Islamic fundamentalists and Hindu and Sikh extremists, have time and again tried to appropriate Bhagat Singh's image to promote their narrow

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interests and justify their violent actions.

Bhagat Singh's statue greets visitors at the Indian parliament in New Delhi, and the Pakistani government also recognizes his ancestral land and his school on their side. But a strong political will to check growing fanaticism is clearly lacking. The Taliban have been killing people freely in Pakistan, which had been promoting them in the past. One can still give Pakistan a benefit of doubt, as the country is an Islamic republic, in other words a theocracy. But what about India – a secular democracy? Hindu extremism has grown over the years, and has become emboldened under the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party government. The BJP supporters are now pressuring the government to amend the constitution of the country to turn it into a Hindu state.

Apart from religious extremism, the two countries have also witnessed growing influence in the region of imperialist forces, such as the US. This influence has widened the gap between the rich and poor on both sides. Thanks to neo-colonialism that comes under the garb of the free market, this gulf is only expected to grow.

To keep Bhagat Singh's legacy alive, all those committed to his ideology must come together to challenge these threats, in the South Asian region and even in countries like Canada, where colonialism continue to exist in the lives of the Indigenous peoples. At a time when Indigenous communities in this country are fighting against systemic racism and the expansion of pipelines and mining operations on their sacred lands, South Asian activists who claim to be adherents of Bhagat Singh's ideology must stand behind the first people of North America.

-Editors

Defenders of Secularism

South Asian activists continue to fly the flag of atheism and free thinking, despite stereotyping by the mainstream and challenges from their religious compatriots

When Burnaby-based Punjabi scholar Sadhu Binning received a call from the mainstream media asking to know more about atheism within the Punjabi community in Vancouver, he was delighted that finally the big press has started recognizing the existence of secularists and free thinkers in the local South Asian community.

The author of a highly publicized Punjabi book, *Naastik Baani* (Atheistic Verses), Binning was asked how strong is the atheist movement within a community largely known for being highly conservative and religious. Binning thinks that until now, the mainstream media has amplified only the voices of religious leaders, while ignoring those who believe in secularism. As a result, the wider community has always seen Punjabis as mostly conservatives who are involved in temple politics. Most of the stories which appear in the mainstream media are related to the activities of religious fundamentalists or moderates and their infighting, further reinforcing the myth that rationalist and secularist voices are almost negligible in the Punjabi community.

Obviously, for Binning - an atheist himself - it was a very refreshing experience. The story that followed his interview in 2013 finally broke the myth about the dominance of

religious conservatives over people of South Asian heritage in Canada.

Contrary to the widely held beliefs of the mainstream, the idea of atheism or free thinking isn't new to South Asians. The community is very much familiar with secularism, having shared the legacy of rationalism and religion for centuries. Many revolutionary saints had challenged blind faith and ritualism. The radical political activists who fought against the British occupation of India kept both legacies alive. Notable among them were the Ghadar Party members. The party was formed by South Asian immigrants in North America in 1913, to resist racism

abroad and fight against foreign rule back home. It always wanted to establish an egalitarian and secular society in free India, and kept religion and politics apart. It's a separate matter that they also preached progressive and socialist aspects of religion, especially Sikhism, whose followers were in great numbers in the party through their narrative. The Ghadar Party emphasized people's unity and wanted Indians to break religious and caste barriers for a common cause. Among its leaders were people from other faith groups, like Hinduism and Islam. The party had a big following in Vancouver where the cadre was very diverse.

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Later, the towering revolutionary Bhagat Singh, who was hanged alongside Rajguru and Sukhdev on March 23, 1931 for assassinating a British police officer, tried to keep the struggle of the Ghadar Party alive by propagating values such as secularism and rationalism. The very fact that he was hanged alongside two Hindus symbolizes the secular spirit of the struggle against colonialism. He was staunchly opposed to religious nationalism and faith-based politics, and was highly critical of leaders who used religion to both divide communities and outreach the masses.

Bhagat Singh had died as an atheist. He was born in a Sikh family that followed the Arya Samaj sect of Hinduism - a reformist sect that opposed blind faith. As he grew and studied progressive writers, he started questioning old beliefs and the existence of god. His famous essay; *Why I am an atheist*, written hardly a year before his execution, goes on to explain the virtues of rational and scientific thinking, forcing readers to question why the so-called omnipresent god has failed to break the shackles of slavery.

It should not be surprising that progressive individuals such as Binning, and leftist groups, continue to preach free thinking in the South Asian pockets of Canada. These areas include Surrey, which has a sizable Sikh population and is known for holding the largest Vaisakhi parade every year. Vaisakhi has a special religious significance for the Sikhs. Binning is a frequent visitor to Surrey, where he often speaks in support of atheism. His book was released in Delta, a municipality neighbouring Surrey, where people came out to speak

their mind on this ticklish issue. *Naastik Baani* is a collection of quotations by renowned thinkers in support of atheism. Binning has also written a poem in defence of his agnostic ideas and considers

Bhagat Singh as his source of inspiration. He has been consistently trying to start a dialogue on atheism in the face of challenges from the religious conservatives, for whom any attempt to deny the existence of a supernatural being is a taboo.

"It's frustrating to see the way religious interference continues to grow in our society," says Binning. "It's not only true about our own community; it also goes for the mainstream society, where politics and popular culture are increasingly coming under the influence of

religion." As a former lecturer, he strongly condemns public funding to religious schools in Canada.

Binning is certainly not alone in such efforts. The Taraksheel Sabha, a society of Indian rationalists, has been continuously organizing community gatherings in Surrey to mobilize people against superstition and blind faith. For them, Bhagat Singh remains a role model. During the annual Taraksheel events, the essay of Bhagat Singh is distributed in book form to encourage youngsters to adopt the scientific approach. Many Taraksheel activists have pledged to donate their organs for scientific research after death. They also hold independent investigations against astrologers and sorcerers, to expose the exploitation of the believers. To make a point that these people are taking advantage of lack of awareness in the community, Taraksheels also teach magic tricks often used by the "holy men" to "mislead general public".

The members of Taraksheel Society have not only faced resistance from religious conservatives, but from their relatives as well. A few years ago, one of their members tried to have his daughter married in Surrey in an unconventional manner, without performing any rituals. This was opposed by none other than his own wife. Back in India, Taraksheels have repeatedly come under attack from the Hindu right and other controversial sects involved in scandals.

South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy is another group that promotes secularism in Greater Vancouver politics. Its members have invited speakers from India on different

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occasions, to enlighten people against religious fanaticism and politicians involved in religious violence. In the past several years, they have organized forums against the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party and the Congress Party, to expose their involvements in sectarian riots that were engineered to terrorize religious minorities in India. The organization principally opposes faith-based politics. For doing so they have had to face challenges from right-wing forces within the community and at times from Indian authorities.

Chetna Association is another organization which has time and again focused on the legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution that is based on the principle of equality and secularism. It has consistently supported any initiative against racism, caste-based discrimination and communalism. Casteism is a byproduct of orthodox Hindu religion, and any statement against it by Chetna has been resisted by right-wing groups in the community.

Likewise, the Committee of Progressive Pakistani Canadians has been vocal against violence by Taliban and Muslim extremists in Pakistan. Its members have often supported campaigns in support of secularism, despite pressures and intimidation from religious conservatives in their community.

Then there are individuals like Kamaljit Singh Thind, who on his own has been holding an annual exhibition to highlight the history of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The bloody event happened in 1919, when British soldiers fired indiscriminately on a gathering of supporters of the passive resistance

movement in Amritsar. The victims, who belonged to different communities, had gathered at a public park called Jallianwala Bagh to protest against the arrests of leaders of the liberation movement. Bhagat Singh was deeply impacted by the massacre that became a major turning point in the history of the freedom struggle. A section of Sikh separatists seeking a theocratic state did not appreciate Thind's exhibition being held during the Vaisakhi parade in Surrey.

What binds all these groups and individuals together is their unanimous agreement with the philosophy of Bhagat Singh, whom they continue to glorify one way or another. Many remember how a series of events held to commemorate Bhagat Singh's birth centenary in 2007 brought all of them together in Vancouver. Nevertheless, religious groups are also out there to appropriate Bhagat Singh, within both the Hindu and Sikh communities. Some Sikh temples have been holding prayers in his memory, while others have been openly presenting a distorted version of his image.

However, all secularists are not on the same page on the question of atheism. For instance, Parshottam Dosanjh, who is an independent activist and an atheist, feels that there is no need to over-emphasize agnosticism. "What is more important is to take everyone along to fight against oppression and injustice. And if some religious people who believe in social justice want to come along why should we attack their belief system?"

He points out that all Ghadar Party members were not atheists, as some of them practiced their faith and found compatibility between "a

true religion" and activism. In fact, Bhagat Singh was also respectful in his writings toward his comrades, who were influenced by religion.

"Atheism was not his only agenda. He mainly fought against repression. What we need is a secular and just society for which we also need allies from among religious people who believe in change." He gives an example of Indigenous communities who continue to hold spiritual beliefs and yet fight for an egalitarian society based on the principle of equality.

The diversity of views within a group of people subscribing to a common ideology is not something strange. But the strong agreement for a secular society in progressive circles of South Asians in Canada is something which has certainly been eclipsed by the mainstream's amplification of conservative voices in racialized communities. Whether or not the projection of Bhagat Singh on Canadian soil will change these attitudes, only time will tell, but the conflict between the supporters of theocracy and secularism is not going to end soon, and is only likely to grow as time passes.

-RDNB

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Excerpts from Bhagat Singh's famous essay; Why I am an Atheist

I was not completely atheistic in my beliefs. I was brought up under the care and protection of my father. He was a staunch Arya Samaji. An Arya Samaji can be anything but never an atheist. After my elementary education, I was sent to D. A. V College, Lahore. I lived in the boarding house for one year. Besides prayers early in the morning and at dusk time, I sat for hours and chanted religious Mantras. At that time, I was a staunch believer. Then I lived with my father. He was a tolerant man in his religious views. It is due to his teachings that I devoted my life for the cause of liberating my country. But he was not an atheist. His god was an all-pervading entity. He advised me to offer my prayers every day. In this way I was brought up. In the Non-cooperation days, I got admission to the National College. During my stay in this college, I began thinking over all the religious polemics such that I grew sceptical about the existence of god. In spite of this fact I can say that my belief in god was firm and strong. I grew a beard and *Kais* (long head of hair as a Sikh religious custom). In spite of this I could not convince myself of the efficacy of

Sikh religion or any religion at all, for that matter. But I had an unswerving, unwavering belief in god...

Then I joined the Revolutionary Party. The first leader I met had not the courage to openly declare himself an atheist. He was unable to reach any conclusion on this point. Whenever I asked him about the existence of god, he gave me this reply: "You may believe in him when you feel like it." The second leader with whom I came in contact was a

firm believer. I should mention his name. It was our respected Comrade Sachindara Nath Sanyal...

An incessant desire to study filled my heart. 'Study more and more', said I to myself so that I might be able to face the arguments of my opponents. 'Study' to support your point of view with convincing arguments. And I began to study in a serious manner. My previous beliefs and convictions underwent a radical change. The romance of

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militancy dominated our predecessors; now serious ideas ousted this way of thinking. No more mysticism! No more blind faith! Now realism was our mode of thinking...

I studied Bakunin, the anarchist leader. I read a few books of Marx, the father of Communism. I also read Lenin and Trotsky and many other writers who successfully carried out revolutions in their countries. All of them were atheists. The ideas contained in Bakunin's *God and State* seem inconclusive, but it is an interesting book. After that I came across a book *Common Sense* by Nirlamba Swami. His point of view was a sort of mystical atheism. I developed more interest in this subject. By the end of 1926, I was convinced that the belief in an almighty, supreme being who created, guided and controlled the universe had no sound foundations. I began discussions on this subject with my friends. I had openly declared myself an atheist...

It is necessary for every person who stands for progress to criticise every tenet of old beliefs. Item by item he has to challenge the efficacy of old faith. He has to analyse and understand all the details. If after rigorous reasoning, one is led to believe in any theory of philosophy,

his faith is appreciated. His reasoning may be mistaken and even fallacious. But there is chance that he will be corrected because reason is the guiding principle of his life. But belief, I should say blind belief is disastrous. It deprives a man of his understanding power and makes him reactionary...

Being atheist, I ask a few questions from theists:

1. If, as you believe there is an almighty, omnipresent, omniscient god, who created the earth or universe, please let me know, first of all, as to why he created this world. This world which is full of woe and grief, and countless miseries, where not even one person lives in peace.

2. Pray, don't say it is his law. If he is bound by any law, he is not omnipotent. Don't say it is his pleasure. Nero burnt one Rome. He killed a very limited number of people. He caused only a few tragedies, all for his morbid enjoyment. But what is his place in history? By what names do we remember him? All the disparaging epithets are hurled at him. Pages are blackened with invective diatribes condemning Nero: the tyrant, the heartless, the wicked...

One Genghis Khan killed a few thousand people to seek pleasure in

it and we hate the very name. Now, how will you justify your all powerful, eternal Nero, who every day, every moment continues his pastime of killing people? How can you support his doings which surpass those of Genghis Khan in cruelty and in misery inflicted upon people? I ask why the almighty created this world which is nothing but a living hell, a place of constant and bitter unrest. Why did he create man when he had the power not to do so? Have you any answer to these questions?

I ask why your omnipotent god does not hold a man back when he is about to commit a sin or offence. It is child's play for god. Why did he not kill war lords? Why did he not obliterate the fury of war from their minds? In this way he could have saved humanity of many a great calamity and horror. Why does he not infuse humanistic sentiments into the minds of the Britishers so that they may willingly leave India? I ask why he does not fill the hearts of all capitalist classes with altruistic humanism that prompts them to give up personal possession of the means of production and this will free the whole labouring humanity from the shackles of money...

I tell you that the British rule is not there because god willed it but for

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the reason that we lack the will and courage to oppose it. Not that they are keeping us under subjugation with the consent of god, but it is with the force of guns and rifles, bombs and bullets, police and militia, and above all because of our apathy that they are successfully committing the most deplorable sin, that is, the exploitation of one nation by another. Where is god? What is he doing? Is he getting a diseased pleasure out of it? A Nero! A Genghis Khan! Down with Him!

Now another piece of manufactured logic! You ask me how I will explain the origin of this world and origin of man. Charles Darwin has tried to throw some light on this subject. Study his book. Also, have a look at Sohan Swami's *Common Sense*. You will get a satisfactory answer. This topic is concerned with biology and natural

history. This is a phenomenon of nature. The accidental mixture of different substances in the form of Nebulae gave birth to this earth. When? Study history to know this. The same process caused the evolution of animals and in the long run that of man. Read Darwin's *Origin of Species*. All the later progress is due to man's constant conflict with nature and his efforts to utilise nature for his own benefit. This is the briefest sketch of this phenomenon...

As regard the origin of god, my thought is that man created god in his imagination when he realized his weaknesses, limitations and shortcomings. In this way he got the courage to face all the trying circumstances and to meet all dangers that might occur in his life and also to restrain his outbursts in prosperity and affluence...

Society must fight against this belief in god as it fought against idol worship and other narrow conceptions of religion. In this way man will try to stand on his feet. Being realistic, he will have to throw his faith aside and face all adversaries with courage and valour. That is exactly my state of mind...

I don't think that by strengthening my belief in god and by offering prayers to him every day, (this I consider to be the most degraded act on the part of man) I can bring improvement in my situation, nor can I further deteriorate it. I have read of many atheists facing all troubles boldly, so I am trying to stand like a man with the head high and erect to the last; even on the gallows.

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Opinion

Looking beyond atheism

It was the year 2007. We were at Burnaby City Hall waiting for the Bhagat Singh Birth Centenary proclamation to be made that day. The City of Burnaby was going to recognize the legacy of Bhagat Singh – a towering Indian revolutionary who was born in 1907 and hanged in 1931 for killing a British police officer. The progressive city council had agreed to recognize a hero who believed in social justice, equality and secularism. A young Caucasian female asked me, what was going on and what are people waiting for. She was a student from the British Columbia Institute of Technology and had come on a school assignment to deal with something else. I told her that we were here to celebrate Bhagat Singh's birth centenary. Since she did not know anything about him, I told her briefly that he was a famous revolutionary. "Was he a Sikh?" she wanted to know. I told her that he was born in a Sikh family, but died as an atheist and suggested her to read more about him on the internet. She then asked me a very straightforward question; "Isn't it true that the South Asians are very religious? How come a man who was an atheist can be so popular in your community then?" That

question still echoes in my memory. It was a representation of the collective consciousness of the mainstream that thinks we South Asians are religious only because the religious leaders are the ones whose voices are mostly amplified in the big press.

That is a reason why a public debate on secularism and atheism within our community is needed. That is why it was decided to give voice to secularists and atheists in our community through a cover story on the occasion of the anniversary of Bhagat Singh's martyrdom.

That the mainstream should know that we are all not the same and we have diverse opinions is important. Because of these stereotypes, the entire community is frequently painted with one brush, especially when a handful of religious fundamentalists taking advantage of the silent majority make hateful speeches and commit acts of violence. Most of the time, the activities of secularist and progressive groups are overlooked.

For years, the secularists of Indian origin not only have been celebrating Bhagat Singh, but also the Ghadar Party which was established in North America in

1913. The party that believed in secularism had a great following in Vancouver. The group was formed by South Asian immigrants in response to racism. It simultaneously fought against discrimination abroad and British occupation back home. Bhagat Singh was a follower of the Ghadar Party ideology, so one can conclude that secularism has always prevailed within the local South Asian community for the last 100 years. The progressive voices got lost only with the emergence of Sikh militancy in 1980s, following some ugly political events in India that led to the birth of a movement for a theocratic Sikh homeland. Although Sikh militancy has ended both in Punjab and Canada, its ideology refuses to die. Instead, the Sikh extremists are now trying to appropriate the Ghadar history. Just because majority of the Ghadar Party members were practising Sikhs, the Sikh militants continue to project them as Sikh heroes. Their attempt to confuse history has gone to the extent of appropriating Bhagat Singh, who died as an atheist. Some Sikh temples in the Lower Mainland, including those who do not subscribe to the political views of militants, claim that he had become a devout Sikh

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before his hanging, after coming under the influence of a well-respected Sikh preacher. It is not surprising that these temples hold prayers for Bhagat Singh. At the same time, the Hindu fundamentalists in India and the Islamic extremists in Pakistan have also tried to distort the image of Bhagat Singh to their advantages.

This has doubled the responsibility of the secularists, who have to make sure that their voices are heard outside the community, while at the same time continuing their efforts to challenge the lies being told to the younger generation by a section of the religious leaders. A dialogue on atheism and free thinking is therefore important to present the authentic version of this history. By not doing so, the secularists will be morally responsible for the ongoing distortion of our progressive history.

That said; we need to look beyond this debate in the light of some real pressing issues, such as repression both in India and Canada. To be an atheist is not a qualification. Had Bhagat Singh not been an atheist, he would still deserve respect for standing up against colonialism and injustice. All of his comrades were not atheists, nor were all the Ghadar Party members agnostic. What bound them together was secularism that encompasses all the beliefs (including atheism), castes and races. The word secularism must not be confused with atheism. A religious person can also be secular.

The Ghadar Party is a prime example. Many Ghadar Party members practiced their religion beliefs, but they never indulged in faith-based politics. Bhai Mewa Singh, who was hanged for killing controversial Canadian immigration inspector William Hopkinson, was a devout Sikh. Prayers were on his lips when he was being taken to the scaffold on January 11, 1915. He was one of the followers of the Ghadar Party. He had killed Hopkinson for precipitating a crisis in the community that led to a shooting inside the Vancouver Sikh temple that claimed the life of a senior Ghadar Party member, temple leader Bhai Bhaag Singh. In spite of their beliefs, they wanted to establish a secular Indian republic. When India and Pakistan were divided on religious lines in 1947 and sectarian violence broke out, Ghadar members of the Sikh heritage tried to save Muslims from Hindu and Sikh fanatics. One of the

prominent leaders of the Ghadar Party, Sohan Singh Bhakna, received threatening letters for doing so. Thus, any attempt to appropriate the Ghadar history by religious extremists is ridiculous.

These stories suggest that not only it is important to recognize the value of secularism in our community, but also to go beyond the debate of atheism versus faith, to see how an egalitarian society can be established, where religious or racial dominance has no place. If atheists and non-atheists can come together in such a struggle, what is wrong with that? Even Bhagat Singh had no issues with his non-atheist associates. He had written very passionately about those who were highly religious, but fought against repression. Atheism was important to him, but that was not his only agenda. In today's world of many complexities, all the communities need to make bridges to fight against power which has on its side the state and established religion. To fight bigotry, secularists also need allies who practice religion, but are opposed to fanaticism. Last year, when India was headed to an election, some Hindu priests opposed the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as he represents the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party – which has a mandate to turn India into a Hindu theocracy. It's a separate matter that those priests did not succeed in their mission, but their voices matter. Likewise, many

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pastors have been opposing the US blockade on Cuba, despite the widely held belief that the Communist government of the island nation has been intolerant to religion.

From Bhagat Singh's perspective, it is certainly necessary to educate people about atheism and rationalism, but what is more important is to see his legacy in a broader context of the history of struggles against occupation and colonialism. Rather than offending people by questioning their belief system, we need to challenge the faith-based politics and theocracies which have created more problems. In India, the caste system was a byproduct of the cocktail of religion and politics that ensured the supremacy of the priest class over the state. At present India has a right-wing Hindu nationalist government that poses a danger to its secular constitution. Some of the leading members of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government suggest that the country should adopt *Bhagwad Geeta*, a Hindu scripture as national book, while others want secularism to be removed from the constitution. The BJP has been responsible for the demolition of an ancient mosque in 1992, and for the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002. In Canada, the Indigenous peoples were forced to give up their heritage and languages through the Indian Residential School system imposed by the state and the church. We need to recognize that the true danger is the mixing of

religion and politics, which badly impacts diversity and promotes the hegemony of dominant society by marginalizing other cultures to the fringes. More than the religion, it is religion-based politics which is problematic. Let people take their own time to adopt atheism in their individual lives and recognize its beauty. For now, we need to stand up against repression on religious minorities and oppressed classes across the world, either in the name of war on terror or free market. Religion or

atheism should remain one's individual business. The state should not be allowed to adopt one faith or the other. It should have no religion at all. By merely promoting atheism as one point agenda of Bhagat Singh and ignoring other obligations we will be fooling ourselves.

Gurpreet Singh is an independent journalist and one of the founders of Radical Desi.

Tribute to a brave atheist who went in harm's way

In a scene from the long running television series the *West Wing*, fictional US president Josiah Bartlet asks one of his advisors: "Why do we value the life of an American over another?" The response: "I don't know why, but we do". That is a bit how I felt after hearing of the brutal assassination of an atheist blogger Avijit Roy. Roy was Bangladeshi by

birth but a US citizen by choice living in Atlanta, Georgia who despite threats to his life, visited his home country only to be met by the type of religious violence he spoke so strongly in opposition to.

Why does the death of this particular atheist resonate with me personally? Roy was a regular contributor to Center For Inquiry's *Free Inquiry* magazine. As a board

member of CFI Canada many of my colleagues in the US office knew and worked with Roy and that degree of separation brings the reality of religious extremism into stark focus.

Ironically, or, if you will forgive the term, prophetically, his last article for the magazine is to be published in the April edition of *Free Inquiry*. In the article, he discussed

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at length the problems of Islam. He especially cites the *Koran* as a manual for violence. He also reiterates his position on religion which is summed up in his most recent book, *Biswisher Virus* (The Virus of Faith). Roy uses Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett's meme of religion as a virus to make his point. Roy quotes extensively from the *Koran* to make his point. Apparently quoting from the *Koran* is only available to those who believe it is the word of god, not those who seek to unmask its darker passages.

Roy was the son of a retired professor of physics. Avijit himself had a PhD in Mechanical Engineering. His science pedigree was as well established as his credentials as a fighter for secularism and freedom of speech. He was a tireless defender of atheists, rationalists, skeptics and humanists mostly focused on people of South Asian and Bengali descent. It was his writings on his web site *Mukto-Mona* that garnered death threats from Islamists. Those same self-styled defenders of Islam were quoted widely saying they could not carry out their threats against Roy as he lived in America but that if he were to return to Bangladesh he would meet his demise.

Winston Churchill famously said that Russia is "... a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma", much the same could be said of Bangladesh. Officially secular in its constitution, it is 86.6% Muslim and 12.1% Hindu. Its history since the country was

created in 1947 (it was part of East Pakistan at that time and came into being as a separate nation in 1971) has been marked by periods of secularism, military rule and religious turmoil. Its leader Sheikh Hasina is a woman and it enjoys a position as a member of The Next Eleven Emerging economies. It has enjoyed a period of relative calm since 1991 but with a population dominated by one religion, it seems to have fallen prey to the extremist elements that seek to impose their worldview as the rule of law. As with Islamists in other countries will not countenance any questioning or criticism of their faith and will murder anyone who challenges them.

And so, on February 26th 2015, Roy, while returning from a book fair in the capital Dhaka was attacked by two assailants armed with machetes, they literally hacked Roy to death in front of his wife, Rafida Ahmed Bonna, who suffered cuts to her head and a severed finger. The little known group Ansar Bangala 7 has claimed responsibility for what it calls retaliation against America for its attacks on ISIS.

And here we have the crux of the matter. ISIS, ISIL, IS, whatever you call them, the first letter is the clue. It stands for Islam, and while it certainly does not speak nor act for all Muslims, there is without a doubt a percentage of Muslims who believe that the penalty for those who insult Islam should be death. What that percentage is has been widely debated but it is not small. Fortunately, the percentage of those willing to carry out the

prescribed death penalty is in fact small, but not inconsequential.

And so I mourn for the loss of a man I never met but to whom I am removed by one degree of separation. I mourn for the loss of a brave man who fought for the values I hold, and I mourn for the loss of security for writers who are at risk merely for having an opinion or for telling uncomfortable truths. I am not famous like Roy, I am not as good a writer as him but as I read the words in this article I wonder if I too could be a target. I wonder if you, who may hold similar opinions are safe and I wonder what we, as a society, as a civilization are willing to do to create a safer environment in which ideas and opinions do not result in our deaths.

Am I being overly dramatic, or is my concern real? In the life of Avijit Roy we have one answer, his concerns were real. In Paris and in London, in Madrid and in Peshawar we have similar answers. Answers are fine, but when we will wake up and start asking the questions?

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 Props Master in the film and television industry, he is married and lives in Vancouver.

Thousands take part in Women's Memorial Marches

Thousands participate in the annual march for missing and murdered aboriginal women in Vancouver every year.

Memorial marches and other events were held across Canada on February 14, to honour more than 1,200 missing and murdered Aboriginal women, and to emphasize the growing demand for an independent federal public inquiry.

The largest event took place in Vancouver, where an estimated 5,000 marchers filled the streets for several blocks. They followed a route through the Downtown Eastside, stopping for moments of silence near locations where women have been murdered or

where they were last seen. The event concluded with a healing circle at Oppenheimer Park and a community feast at the Japanese Language Hall.

In Toronto, 1200 community members paid homage to Aboriginal women who have been murdered or gone missing. Amidst strawberries and water handed out to the many individuals who came to this event, were heartfelt speeches given by individuals who have lost family members due to violence. Toronto's February 14th

Organizing Committee includes No More Silence, the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, Jaggies "and other Indigenous and feminist organizations working together to raise awareness about the disappearance of Indigenous Women, Girls, Trans and Two-Spirit people on Turtle Island."

Activists also stood shoulder to shoulder in gatherings in Ottawa, Montreal, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, St John's, Victoria, Hagersville, Kenora, Courtenay, Nelson, Grand Forks,

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Kelowna, Prince George, Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Nanaimo, and London, as well as in three U.S. cities - Denver, Fargo, and Minneapolis.

The organizers of the Vancouver march (<https://womensmemorialmarch.wordpress.com>) say that "the first women's memorial march was held in 1991 in response to the murder of a Coast Salish woman on Powell Street in Vancouver. Her name is not spoken today out of respect for the wishes of her family. Out of this sense of hopelessness and anger came an annual march on Valentine's Day to express compassion, community, and caring for all women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Unceded Coast Salish Territories.... I n d i g e n o u s w o m e n disproportionately continue to go missing or be murdered with minimal to no action to address these tragedies or the systemic nature of gendered violence, poverty, racism, or colonialism.

"This event is organized and led by women in the DTES because women – especially Indigenous women – face physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual violence on a daily basis. The February 14th Women's Memorial March is an opportunity to come together to grieve the loss of our beloved sisters, remember the women who are still missing, and to dedicate ourselves to justice. Over the years, the February 14th Women's Memorial March has expanded to cities across these lands, as well as internationally. The March is an opportunity for all cities and

communities to come together to grieve the loss of our beloved sisters and remember the women who are still missing. We encourage all women to journey and heal together by organizing memorials on this day because women, especially Indigenous women, face physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual violence on a daily basis. Violence against women is always unacceptable; every life is precious and we must continue to honour and work for justice for murdered and missing women."

In the latest news around this issue, Saskatchewan's justice minister has now added his voice to calls for a national inquiry. Between 1980 and 2012, 153 aboriginal women were murdered in Saskatchewan, compared with 116 non-aboriginal women, according to RCMP. Yet aboriginal women only represent about 15 per cent of the province's population.

A Feb. 27 national roundtable meeting organized by the Assembly of First Nations will bring together aboriginal groups and members of federal, provincial and territorial governments to discuss the murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls. While most of the participants have supported the call for a national inquiry, Prime Minister Stephen Harper continues to reject the demand. Federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt and Status of Women Minister Kellie Leitch are reportedly attending the roundtable, giving rise to speculation that the Conservative government may be looking for a face-saving way to back down from its current negative position.

Kimball Cariou is the Editor of People's Voice, a social justice activist, and a member of the Radical Desi Editorial Team.

Sweeping victory of AAP in Delhi assembly election is a ray of hope for secularists

The sweeping victory of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the recent Delhi assembly election has generated a fresh ray of hope among the secularists both within India and the Indian Diaspora.

The fledgling AAP (Common Man's Party) bagged 67 out of total 70 seats in the Delhi legislature, leaving only three for the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) which otherwise enjoys a brute majority in the Indian parliament.

The results of the assembly election in the country's national

capital have come as a rude shock for the BJP, which came to power under the leadership of Narendra Modi with a thumping majority in the last general election. Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, which witnessed an anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002. Human Rights groups and secularist political parties hold him responsible for the bloodshed. Despite that baggage, the "Modi wave" helped the BJP and its allies win the general election and a series of provincial elections later on. His supporters credit Modi and his "oratory skills" and "humble

background" for the "development" of Gujarat. The Delhi election results therefore came as the first major blow for the BJP and its supporters. After all, Modi himself campaigned to ensure a BJP victory, hoping that his magic would work. The BJP, which had continued to attribute their electoral victories to the "Modi wave," is now trying to say the Delhi election results were not a referendum on their leader.

Since the national capital has gone to the AAP, which has emerged as a secular alternative to

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the BJP, it may have both immediate and long term psychological impacts on the psyche of Indian voters.

AAP was a byproduct of an anti-corruption campaign launched by a former Indian official Arvind Kejriwal, who staged demonstrations and rallies seeking to establish an ombudsman office which could check bribery at high places. AAP first came to power in Delhi after the 2013 assembly election, and formed a minority government. AAP at that time had bagged only 28 seats, while the BJP was the single largest party, although it was short of a majority. Riding an anti-corruption wave, the AAP tried during its brief rule to eradicate corruption by launching some initiatives, such as a helpline

against tainted officials. Kejriwal, who headed the government as Chief Minister, refused to take VIP security cover. However, he resigned after he failed to win enough votes in the assembly to pass a bill in support of the Ombudsman office. Later, he fought in the parliamentary election in Varanasi against Modi, only to be defeated.

Ever since Modi became Prime Minister, the Hindu nationalist groups became emboldened. Many extremists started making statements in support of Hindu theocracy, while Modi maintained his silence. In Delhi, Hindu extremists went to the extent of openly glorifying the assassin of Mahatma Gandhi, who was murdered in 1948 for

opposing Hindu theocracy. Apart from such controversial statements, churches and mosques also came under attacks in Delhi, while the BJP supporters pressured the government to remove "secularism" from the preamble of the Indian constitution.

When Delhi went to the polls, secularists feared a BJP victory. But as the results came in on February 10, they heaved a sigh of relief. For many, the magic of the broom, the AAP election symbol, has worked effectively to sweep the mess created in Indian politics by big parties. The symbol might have also enhanced the party's image in the eyes of common people who identify the broom as an essential part of daily life to ensure hygiene. Interestingly, Modi had started the

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hygiene campaign by making prominent figures hold a broom, but when US President Barack Obama visited him recently, he was caught wearing an expensive suit that contradicted his image of someone who comes from a modest background. The BJP supporters who tried to project Modi and Obama as natural allies for being born in down to earth families had egg on their faces. A section of political observers believe Modi's choice of expensive clothing backfired during the Delhi election.

But the AAP had to face many challenges during the election campaign. Its leader Kejriwal was accused of running away and abandoning the Delhi assembly last time. Some prominent AAP supporters had joined the BJP. There was lot of mud slinging against him.

The AAP has come to power on the plank of providing clean and transparent government and a secular alternative. When it briefly came to power last time, it formed a Special Investigation Team to reexamine the cases of the 1984 massacre, when thousands of Sikhs were murdered in Delhi and other parts of India following the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. The so-called secular Congress party of the slain leader was involved in the carnage. This is one reason why Congress has also lost its credibility among secularists who now see AAP as a fresh alternative to the parties involved in religious violence. Congress has also lost face because of nepotism

in the party and corruption in the past. Among the four Sikh MLAs elected on the AAP ticket is Jarnail Singh, the former journalist who threw a shoe at the ex-Indian Home Minister in protest against his statement defending Congress leaders involved in the anti-Sikh violence.

Whether the AAP will be able to deliver its poll promises, only time will tell. For those who wish to see India's diversity and pluralism

survive, now it's time to celebrate the victory of secularist forces. The first sign of this victory was the breaking of Modi's silence on the attacks on churches in Delhi. Only after the humiliating defeat of his party, he finally spoke against religious violence and sought a report from the Delhi police on the attacks on churches.

-RDNB

Lessons of Delhi Elections: The Congress Must Lose Sycophancy & Gandhis , Modi His Million Rupee Suit!

The decimation of the grand old Congress and deathly humiliation of the ruling BJP in the Delhi election at the hands of AAP still in its infancy is good for India and Indian politics. Political pundits will read different things into the disaster that just knocked the living daylights out of both the big parties. That it happened in Delhi will shine a light on the old politics of the decrepit and decadent in Congress as well as the arrogant dealers of Hindutva in BJP.

The BJP suffered a near death jolt because until now the voters saw in Modi only a penchant for vacuous oratory and a little appetite for performance in delivering on the promises he has been making. No matter how great the oratory and acronymic gimmickry it doesn't put food on the tables or in the *thalis* of ordinary people. There has been a singular lack of delivery on the promises of good governance and material progress. Modi and his flock are focused more on easing the pain of the corporate elites than alleviating the poverty and corruption suffocating people's

Modi's Republic day outing with Obama in his Rs. 10 lakh pinstriped suit distastefully embossed with his name all over it perfectly synthesised his disconnect and arrogance.

lives. In the less than a year of his prime ministership Modi already shows signs of a huge and deadly disconnect from the lives of ordinary Indians. Prior to the destruction of its bloated sense of

self importance in the Delhi polls BJP had become arrogant. Modi's Republic day outing with Obama in his Rs. 10 lakh pinstriped suit distastefully embossed with his name all over it perfectly synthesised his disconnect and arrogance. Modi's suit moment totally surprised me. He is a smart politician. His suit moment made him look politically somewhat deranged and deaf. The despicable display of arrogance and disconnect epitomised in that Modi Moment shall for ever live in infamy, to borrow an expression from Franklin Roosevelt.

The Congress' wipe out from Delhi is no surprise at all. What else do you expect from a political party run by the 'royalty'? The party is full of sycophants who can't fathom the truth that the fate of a national party let alone a nation can't for too long be tied to one family no matter how noble or historically important. The Congress is deader than dead. Even life support is meaningless in utter deadness. Past glory can't be sufficient reason for the Indian people to repose their faith and trust in it to tackle the mammoth

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task of building a caring, inclusive, just and prosperous India. The remnants of our feudalist society and values that have allowed the Nehru-Gandhis to lead the Congress in the past are being rapidly smashed and transformed. The massive AAP victory in Delhi is a testament to that fast occurring transformation. No matter how glorious its role in the freedom movement, the Congress can't afford to remain a prisoner of its history either in terms of the individuals that lead it or the ideas it leads India with. It needs to engage the billion plus Indians to throw up new leadership for itself in the still relatively young and new century. The Gandhis can make the job of reviving and rejuvenating the Congress easier by moving over and making room for new leadership.

No I am not suggesting Priyanka. There are at least half a billion Indian women to choose from. If there is a ceiling, be it glass or feudal glass, beyond which only the Gandhis can go in Congress in being the kings/queens or King/queen makers why would any bright self respecting Indian join the fight to keep alive and kicking what was once a grand party but is no more because of corruption, sycophancy/family rule.

The AAP has an impressive mandate. It must now govern for all Delhiites in an inclusive, fair and just fashion. No more agitational antics. It is the government. Its job is to govern.

Modi must lose his infamous suit and along with it the fatal disconnect as well as the so quickly developed BJP arrogance.

The Congress must

challenge and shed its history of recent and not so recent corruption and sycophancy. For it to shed the culture of sycophancy it will have to bid good bye to the Gandhis. Letting go of the Gandhis may cause epileptic fits of sycophancy among some of the 'courtiers'. That will simply prove the correctness of my otherwise gratuitous political prescription.

Let the new politics begin; out with the old, in with the new!

Ujjal Dosanjh is the former Premier of British Columbia. He also served in the federal government as Health Minister in the past. Dosanjh is a known secularist and critic of religious fundamentalism within the Sikh community in Vancouver. He was assaulted for speaking out against violence and terrorism.

Godse's ideology denounced at a public meeting

The ideology of the assassins of Mahatma Gandhi was denounced by secularist activists at a public meeting held under the aegis of Radical Desi Publications Ltd. in Surrey on January 31.

The event was held on the occasion of 67th death anniversary of Gandhi, who was murdered by Nathuram Godse, a pro-Hindu nation extremist, on January 30, 1948. Godse was aligned with Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) – an ultra Hindu nationalist organization that was banned following the murder. However, the followers of Godse continue to glorify him. Among them are lawmakers belonging to the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party of India.

The speakers at the event were unanimous in their criticism of the Hindu right which is involved in violence against minorities, and is now exerting pressure to get the principle of secularism removed from the Constitution of India.

Keynote speaker Ujjal Dosanjh warned that the ideology behind Gandhi's murder has become emboldened under the BJP government led by Narendra Modi. He challenged Modi to break his silence over the growing sectarian activities of the Hindu nationalists. Dosanjh condemned the double standards of the BJP government, which celebrates Gandhi on one hand, while allowing its supporters to glorify Godse on the other. He emphasized that Gandhi is more

relevant today, as his policy was not exclusionist and he laid down his life for opposing theocracy. Dosanjh is the former Premier of BC, and has been known for his secularist stance against Sikh separatists in Canada.

MLA Harry Bains, who recently returned from a trip to India, said that the influence of the RSS continues to grow there as its supporters have started interfering at every level of electoral politics.

Former neo-Nazi Tony McAleer cautioned that any attempt to adopt a fascist policy can be harmful for society. The supporters of the Hindu right often see Hitler and the Nazis as role models.

Kanwar, who is associated with the Aam Aadmi Party, demanded that the hands of his party should be strengthened to challenge the nefarious designs of the RSS in India. His party has been critical of attempts to install statues of Godse in Delhi.

Nazir Rizvi from the Fraser Valley Peace Council announced that he and his associates will soon form an anti-fascist league to keep a check on the activities of the RSS

both in India and Canada. Minakshi Sidhu from the same organization warned that women will be subjugated completely if the RSS succeeds in its mission to form a Hindu nation.

Ram Partap Kler, a Dalit activist, warned that a Hindu theocracy will not only be a threat to minorities in India, but also to women and oppressed groups, who were pushed to the margins in the ancient Hindu society.

Dr. Sadhu Singh, a prominent secularist scholar, said that the politics of the Hindu nationalists directly assault the spirit and mandate of the Indian constitution. He particularly cautioned against attempts to adopt the Hindu scriptures as a national text.

Former Student Federation of India activist Hardev Singh said that they will continue to oppose any effort to declare Godse a national hero or turn India into a Hindu state.

Among those in attendance were the Ross Street Sikh temple Vice President Major Singh Sidhu (who lost his sister, a nephew and a niece in the Air India bombings of 1985), India Mahila Association leader Raminder Dosanjh, Ghadar Party Centenary Committee member Parminder Swaich, Chetna Association founder Jai Birdi, and Saif Khalid from the Committee of Progressive Pakistani Canadians.

-RDNB

Activist who challenged the followers of Godse assassinated

A veteran Communist leader who has been challenging the followers of Nathuram Godse, the Hindu extremist who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, was fatally shot in Maharashtra on February 16.

82-year-old Govind Pansare and his wife Uma were shot by unidentified gunmen while they were returning from a morning walk. Both received serious injuries. Pansare later died in the hospital.

According to the Communist Party of India state Secretary Dr. Bhalchandra Kango, Pansare was in

the forefront of the campaign against the glorification of Godse by Hindu nationalists in Maharashtra. "He has been organizing public events to counter the attempts to glorify the action of Godse. And this had enraged the sectarian forces." A section of the Hindu nationalists have intensified their demand to install Godse's statues in recent months. Kango believes that the ascendancy of the right-wing Bhartiya Janata Party to power with a brute majority in the last parliamentary elections has emboldened the supporters of Hindu theocracy. He told RDNB over

the phone that there were massive protests against the killing of Pansare in Maharashtra and people are seeking an impartial investigation into the incident. "The public has lost trust in the fairness of the state police department." Maharashtra is currently ruled by the BJP alliance. Kango complained that in the past too, the state police and intelligence have taken the investigation into the crimes committed by Hindu extremists on the wrong track.

Teesta's book on Gandhi assassination released

A prominent secularist activist and the Editor of *Communalism Combat* magazine, Teesta Setalvad, has compiled a book based on documents related to the investigation of Mahatma Gandhi's murder.

Beyond Doubt: A Dossier on Gandhi's assassination was released on the occasion of the death anniversary of Gandhi.

Talking to RDNB by phone from India, Setalvad said the book was necessary as the current Hindu nationalist government is out to destroy the historical evidence by tampering with official documents related to the case. "This government wants to hide the simple fact of the Hindu nationalists being involved in Gandhiji's murder."

Setalvad says that Gandhi was a major roadblock for the religious extremists who wanted to see India transformed into a Hindu nation following India's independence in 1947. "There were five attempts on his life before he was fatally shot sixth time."

Setalvad was in the forefront of the campaign to seek justice for victims of the anti-Muslim pogrom that rocked Gujarat state in 2002. She holds the right-wing Bhartiya Janata Party government and current Prime Minister Narendra Modi responsible for that carnage. She now faces charges of embezzlement for raising funds to establish a memorial for the

victims of the massacre. Her supporters feel that she is being victimized through a motivated criminal case. A series of protest rallies have been held in her support across India.

New from Tulika Books!

Beyond Doubt

A Dossier on Gandhi's Assassination

compiled and introduced by
Teesta Setalvad

January 2015
9.5 x 6.25 inches
x + 278 pages
Paperback
ISBN: 978-93-82381-50-1
Rs 450

The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on 30 January 1948 was a declaration of war and a statement of intent. For the forces who conspired in the killing, the act was a declaration of war against the secular, democratic Indian state and all those who stood to affirm these principles, as well as an announcement of a lasting commitment to India as a 'Hindu Rashtra'. It was also an act to signal the elimination of all that India's national movement against imperialism stood for.

Beyond Doubt is a dossier of historical and critical documents that aims to contextualize the politics, motivations and circumstances behind the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Attempts to legitimize the act of killing and to celebrate the killers have re-doubled since May 2014, following the coming to power of the new regime in New Delhi. The time is right, therefore, to set the record straight.

The visceral hatred directed against Gandhi and the denigration of everything he stood for need to be recounted if we are to understand the *political* nature of that dastardly act. This book attempts to weave together archival documents from Government of India records relating to developments after the assassination, with translation of works in Marathi, Gujarati and Hindi de-constructing the ideology responsible for the political killing. While several of the documents have appeared before in issues of *Communalism Combat*, this compilation presents new material on the subject. The first English translation of Jagan Phadnis's book, *Mahatmyache Akher*, forms part of the dossier, as do Y.D. Phadke's analysis of attempts to legitimize Gandhi's killing and Chunibhai Vaidya's analysis of Pradeep Dalvi's play on Godse. It also covers the recent controversy over the destruction of files relating to Gandhi's assassination by Government of India.

Teesta Setalvad is a senior journalist, educationist and activist. She is co-editor of the monthly *Communalism Combat*, along with Javed Anand. Setalvad is involved with broadening the boundaries of history and social studies teaching through KHOJ, a programme for secular education, and has worked extensively on exclusion and communalization in school curricula and textbooks. She has analysed and documented the communalization of India's law and order machinery, and the building up of communal conflict in Gujarat, since the early 1990s. Trained also in law, Setalvad was convenor of the Concerned Citizens Tribunal – Crimes Against Humanity, Gujarat 2002, headed by Justices V.R. Krishna Iyer, P.B. Sawant and Hosbet Suresh. She is secretary of Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP), a civil rights group set up by her and other concerned citizens of Mumbai in April 2002.

Vigils held in memory of three Muslims murdered in US

Vigils and demonstrations were held across Greater Vancouver in memory of three Muslim students murdered in North Carolina.

A Muslim man, his wife and her sister were shot to death near the North Carolina University on February 10. Craig Stephen Hicks now stands indicted for the killings. His family claims that he is an atheist who believes in equality. While the police say that the shooting was a result of a fight over parking, Muslim leaders call it a hate crime. Saudi Arabia, a US ally, has even described it

as a "heinous terrorist" act.

The incident has shocked the Muslim minority across North America, reviving fears of the Islamophobia that followed 9/11. To show their solidarity with the aggrieved families, local Muslim activists came together to hold vigils and demonstrations in Surrey and Vancouver.

A vigil was held on February 13 at Surrey's Holland Park, where people from different communities showed up, according to Imtiaz Popat, one of the organizers. "It's a shame that how conveniently the police have

attributed it to a fight over a parking spot, whereas it is a hate crime." Popat thinks that the people of colour, including Muslims, remain the target of violence in the US, and this has been going on since the time of Malcolm X.

Former BC Human Rights Commissioner Harinder Mahil separately told RDNB that had any Muslim done something like this, it would have been easily branded as an act of terrorism. "It only shows the double standards of the western media."

Hindu temple vandalized in Seattle

A Hindu temple in Seattle was vandalized by suspected white supremacists on February 16. The attackers left swastika graffiti and spray painted slogans, like "Get Out" on temple walls and a nearby school, leaving the local Hindu community distraught as they were preparing to hold annual celebrations on the auspicious occasion of Shivaratri.

The Bothell temple Chair Nit Niranjan told RDNB that three years ago there was another small incident of vandalism, "but this one was much more explicit." He believes that some racist elements may have done this out of ignorance, as the community at large in Bothell is friendly. "We have received support from everyone. Even the state governor called us to show solidarity."

In the meantime, Alabama Governor Robert Bentley has apologized to the Indian government after police were

accused of assaulting 57-year-old Suresh Bhai Patel of Indian origin. The incident has left Patel partially paralyzed. He believes that the

incident was an outcome of racism. A police officer allegedly involved faces charges.

My first racial experience of Canada in 1980

Im migrating to Canada in April 1980, the very first thing I was told was that hardly any Sikh wears his turban in Canada, because Caucasians make fun of him, using disrespectful and derogatory language and by calling him names. I also learnt that though Canada's Human Rights Act 1971 forbids discrimination based on race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief and religion, the Sikhs generally continued to be discriminated against. Racially motivated incidents including scribbling insulting and derogatory phrases on walls of their houses and cars, rocks throwing, burning their houses and other properties, was a daily affair. Not only that, even death threats were made against them more often than not.

Having worn a turban all my life including during fighting in World War II alongside the Canadians, I was shocked and taken aback to learn that incidents of racism continue to occur in a well-known multicultural, multiracial and multi-religious country such as Canada, where anti racism Day is celebrated during the last week of March every year.

I had half a mind to go back to India. But after a serious and thorough consideration, especially because my children had also

migrated to Canada, I decided to stay here, come what may and face untoward situations tactfully and boldly, in the future.

As luck would have it, few days later, during my evening walk on a sidewalk East of Intersection formed by King George Highway and 100 Avenue in Surrey, I noticed

an old blue car coming from the opposite direction. Seeing me wearing a turban, the car occupants, yelled at me from a distance and said "Hey Paki! Go back to your Country." They repeated it a number of times. As the light at the Intersection ahead of their car, turned red, it slowed

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down and came to a halt. I also stopped nearly 10 metres away from their car. I noticed that two teen-aged boys and a girl between them, were seated on front seat of the car.

One of the guys and a girl came out of the car. I asked them as to why they had been yelling at me? The boy replied "We want you to go back to your country". He spoke in a normal voice for a change this time. There was no shouting whatsoever. I responded that Canada, like him, was also my country. That was why I was here. They retorted that they were Canadian-born, whereas I had come from some other country. I replied, that being the case, their elders too, like me have come from other countries. The arguments from both sides continued for a while

Suddenly, the girl, maybe realizing that they had not been able to convince me or my arguments were not to their liking, got a fully grown German Shepherd dog out of their car. Both, the girl and boy ordered their dog repeatedly to attack me. Despite their repeated orders, the dog did not move even an inch towards me. If that was not a miracle what else could it be? Since I had done no harm to the teenagers or their car, the dog did not obey his masters. It appeared that the Almighty God has bestowed the dog more wisdom than the two teenagers. Seeing this, I told them firmly and unhesitatingly that I had seen enough of blood during World War II and other Wars. I am therefore, not scared of their dog or them.

As the boy and girl along

with their dog were getting into car, I approached them and asked them to take a personal message from me for their forefathers. I said you tell them that you came across a retired Indian Army Colonel and narrate exactly what transpired between you and me. I further said, you tell them that the Colonel has challenged them that if they, accompanied by all members of their families leave Canada for good tomorrow, I will take my children away from Canada, the day following. That day has yet not come, nor it ever will.

To be on the safe side, I reported the matter to the Surrey R.C.M.P telephonically.

Lt. Col. Preetam Singh Jauhal is a World War Two veteran who shot into prominence for fighting against racism after being denied entry into the Newton branch of the Canadian Legion in Surrey because of his turban. This article has been reproduced here in recognition of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination which falls on March 21.

Flock of sparrows

flock of sparrows will not take flight
here and there will cut grass on the sides
will carry stale chapattis to far-off fields,
dipping dirty head-gears in water
will rub them on their sun-burnt faces.

flock of sparrows will not take flight
here and there, hiding from public gaze
will all by itself lament
their damned youth with full-throated ease.

flock of sparrows will not an inkling have
of a net of iron-made beaks;
from somewhere the sky will expand in front,
and the dream of a long flight
will mortally fear her fawning eyes.

for nothing, flock of sparrows despairs
after the bride's departure;
loving father will mend the dismantled door
with cloth from toys torn with be sewn
his shirt smelling foul with sweat;
by itself spun into balls it will not pine-
flock of sparrows for the spinning-wheel.

flock of sparrows will not take flight
for some far-off country,
it will always feel the itch of fodder,
the spot of menses on the white sheet
will mock it at its life.

Paash was a famous revolutionary Punjabi poet, who was assassinated by the Sikh extremists on March 23, 1988. Translated by Tejwant Singh Gill, this poem is reproduced here in recognition of International Women's Day.

Remembering a hero who got South Asians right to bring families in Canada

Almost a century ago, a radical political activist who got South Asians the right to bring families to Canada, was hanged in India on March 29, 1917.

Balwant Singh Khurdpur was a priest at the first Sikh temple in Vancouver, established in 1908 by the community as a response to rampant racism and discriminatory immigration policies. Khurdpur had served in the British army before immigrating to Canada in 1906 as a British subject. Since India and Canada were British colonies, many came to this part of the world trusting in the fairness of the British Empire. Like other South Asian immigrants, Khurdpur came to Vancouver to earn a better livelihood and worked in a saw mill. Racism transformed many immigrants into activists, as they realized that the root cause of their sufferings abroad was the British occupation of India. In any event of racial violence, the British officials never came to their rescue. They could see that the Empire was not being fair to its subjects from India. As a result they started getting organized to resist racism and fight against the foreign occupation of their motherland. The Sikh temple

was established with a political purpose and became a center of ideas. He found the progressive social justice activism. who were influenced by socialist aspect of Sikhism and socialism

Khurdpur was one of the prominent and outspoken activists compatible. He was in the forefront of the struggle for the right to bring

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families to Canada. The discriminatory immigration policies back then did not allow Indians to bring their wives and children. In 1908, the Canadian government passed a controversial "continuous journey law" that forced Indians to come to Canada through direct passage from the country of their birth. This law was aimed to "keep Canada white" by discouraging immigration from India, culminating in the Komagata Maru episode. The Japanese vessel carrying over 300 South Asian passengers was forced to return in 1914, which the Canadian government now acknowledges as an act of racism.

Khurdpur went to India in 1909, and defying the discriminatory laws, brought his wife and two daughters to Vancouver in 1912. Initially, his family was detained, but later released on bail. Khurdpur had challenged the deportation orders against his family. Fearing the political repercussions of the growing anger in the community, the family was allowed to stay on compassionate grounds. This symbolic victory of the community was an act of resistance that laid the ground for future struggles. In 1913, the Ghadar Party that believed in armed rebellion against the British government was formed in the US. The party had a big following in Vancouver, and Khurdpur was one of its many supporters.

Khurdpur died for fighting against racism and colonialism. As we gear up to commemorate 100 years of his execution, we need to acknowledge the relevance of his legacy in the contemporary world. Even though the current government of Canada has acknowledged that it was wrong to exclude the Komagata Maru, it continues to tighten immigration rules, making it harder for refugees and even families of immigrants to get in. The ruling Conservatives are enamored with the policy of giving permanent resident (PR) status to millionaire investors, but have no compassion for the families of working class immigrants.

The same year, a delegation of Indian activists left for England and India to lobby the British establishment to let the immigrants bring their families. Khurdpur was part of this delegation. But he did not just use this opportunity to raise the issue of family reunification. He held public meetings in India to educate Indians about the sufferings of their compatriots in the foreign land at the hands of the British Empire. The whole idea was to make people ready for a potential rebellion. Khurdpur was very much under watch for his radical views.

Upon coming back, he became a

part of the campaign in support of the Komagata Maru passengers. He tried to bring arms and ammunition from the US for the passengers to transport for future use in India.

In October 1914, when the controversial immigration inspector William Hopkinson was murdered, Balwant Singh was arrested among others as suspects. Mewa Singh, another activist, murdered Hopkinson in retaliation for the shootout in the Sikh temple that led to the deaths of two community leaders, Bhai Bhaag Singh and Badan Singh. The incident followed a bloody conflict between the radical and pro-establishment factions of the Sikh community after the Komagata Maru was forced to return. Hopkinson was keeping an eye on the Ghadar Party activists. One of his moles in the community, Bela Singh, went inside the temple and fatally shot Bhaag Singh and Badan Singh. The authorities believed that Hopkinson's murder was the result of a larger conspiracy. However, Mewa Singh took sole responsibility for the action, and Balwant Singh and others were subsequently acquitted.

Shortly after being released, Khurdpur decided to go to Shanghai to work on the eastern front of the Ghadar Party. He worked for several months among the Indians in China, and later reached Bangkok in July 1915. While trying to re-establish links

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with Ghadar activists who wanted to use Burmese and Thai territories to launch a rebellion against the British government in India, Khurdpur fell ill. He was arrested outside the Bangkok hospital and handed over to the British authorities. He was tortured at the Singapore Interrogation Center and later extradited to India, where he was tried by a special tribunal in Lahore Jail. The interrogators failed to break Khurdpur, who did not reveal any information.

In its verdict on January 5, 1917, the tribunal found Khurdpur guilty of conspiracy against the empire and gave him the death sentence. The decision described him as "one of the ring leaders of the Canadian

chapter of the Ghadar Party".

Khurdpur died for fighting against racism and colonialism. As we gear up to commemorate 100 years of his execution, we need to acknowledge the relevance of his legacy in the contemporary world. Even though the current government of Canada has acknowledged that it was wrong to exclude the Komagata Maru, it continues to tighten immigration rules, making it harder for refugees and even families of immigrants to get in. The ruling Conservatives are enamored with the policy of giving permanent resident (PR) status to millionaire investors, but have no compassion for the families of working class immigrants. As a

result, family reunification has become difficult. The temporary foreign workers, who are denied PR status, are forced to work like indentured labourers in the absence of rights. So the immigration rights won for his community by people like Khurdpur are under attack once again. Likewise, systemic racism against people of colour, particularly the first peoples of this country, refuses to die. The situation in India, the country Khurdpur wanted to see liberated, is not good either. Repression against oppressed groups, like tribals and so-called untouchables, goes on. The best tribute to a man like him will be to keep his struggle alive.

-RDNB

Modi lovers should think of building toilets in the name of Indian PM

An unwanted controversy arose recently when fans of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to open a temple dedicated to him in Gujarat.

An idol of Modi was already installed, but the plan was scrapped after he expressed his displeasure at the move following widespread criticism. The embarrassed PM of the world's largest secular democracy had said that he was appalled by the idea.

It is not unusual to notice this level of sycophancy in Indian politics. On earlier occasions, the followers of other prominent political figures have also built temples dedicated to their masters. However, Modi's story is slightly different. He had announced before his election as PM that the country needs toilets first, and temples later. The statement came as a surprise to many as his Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) believes in faith-based politics. The party is determined to build a temple in memory of Lord Rama at a disputed site in Ayodhya, where an ancient mosque once stood. The Babri Masjid, as it was known, was demolished by supporters of the BJP in 1992. The party claims that the mosque was built by Babar, an

Islamist ruler, after demolishing the original Rama temple.

When Modi made the statement, some did not believe their ears. It sounded like a real progressive declaration coming from a man under whose government in Gujarat an anti-Muslim pogrom broke out in 2002. The carnage followed the burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims from Ayodhya. The incident left more than 50 people dead, and the Gujarat police blamed Muslim fundamentalists for torching the train. Human Rights groups openly accuse Modi of being directly involved in the massacre of innocent Muslims.

After becoming the PM, Modi had launched a hygiene campaign across India. He inspired many known personalities to pick up brooms and clean up the streets to make India clean. So, if his followers really want to give him respect, they have other ways of doing it instead of building temples with his idols. If their master is really passionate about hygiene and toilets, why not think of making toilets named after him? Or to make it easier, why not put his pictures outside men's toilets in India? Just some free light-hearted advice. We hope his supporters won't mind or see it as another sign of sedition.

-RDNB

