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Cover Picture: Sohan Singh Bhakna was the President of the Ghadar Party. He continued to fight for a just society even after India gained independence in 1947.

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RADICAL
DESI

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

Premier Clark's stand on Bill C 51 commendable

BC Premier Christy Clark has shown leadership by raising serious concerns that Bill C 51 in its present form could threaten Canadians' personal liberties. The federal government under Stephen Harper's Conservative Party is determined to adopt the controversial anti-terror law that not only lacks oversight, but infringes upon civil liberties. The definition of terrorism under this bill is so vague and broad that any act of civil disobedience against pipelines and other issues concerning climate change could be seen as an act of terrorism. There is a feeling that the Conservatives are trying to create fear in the public mind to win another election by polarizing the Canadian majority against racialized minority communities, like Muslims who are fighting against Islamophobia, and Indigenous peoples against pipelines. The most common concern being raised against the bill remains lack of oversight on the security and intelligence agencies to ensure accountability and transparency. Already, four former Prime Ministers have also expressed their concerns over this. By raising similar questions, Christy Clark has joined the growing chorus against the bill in her own province. We may not necessarily agree with her right wing tendencies on a number of social justice issues, but her position against Bill C-51 is very refreshing. It is a reflection of the general feeling among the voters of BC. Close to 2,000 people showed up at a rally against Bill C-51 in Vancouver on March 14, part of a national day of action against the bill. Small children and seniors were seen at the event that was a total success. It brought together people from all walks of life, including a significant number of Indigenous activists. Throughout the event, car honks were repeatedly heard from all sides at the Vancouver Art Gallery indicating the amount of support this campaign is receiving. People were also seen signing petitions against the bill with great enthusiasm. Harper must see this opposition as the writing on the wall, and reconsider introducing such a draconian bill. Canada does need to deal with those spreading violence and terror, but not at the cost of the civil liberties of people fighting for social justice. Those who commit violent crimes, or break the laws against hate speech in our communities and places of worship must be criminally charged and prosecuted, but aren't the current laws sufficient to handle such situations? Why then give security and intelligence agencies extra powers? And why target those who are fighting for a just and humane society? Why club the good with the bad? And what is this government doing to stop white supremacists from indulging in hate crimes and propaganda? Why the selective approach? It has been learnt through social media that the white supremacists are pleased with this government's incitement of hatred against racialized communities. This only reflects whom this government is trying to appease. Instead of talking tough on crime and terrorism, the government should actually stop being a terrorist itself. The policies this government is adopting not only create potential enemies, but also drastically change the character of Canada, to a country permanently at war. The blind support this government lends to repressive states like Israel, and its harassment of Muslim women wearing niqab (veil) during citizenship oath ceremonies, will only create problems for Canada. It's a shame that Canada, which pretends to be a human rights leader in the world, is showing complete disregard to human dignity in its own backyard, by adopting flawed policies and then trying to muzzle voices of dissent against them.

-Editors

Ghadar

A continuous struggle

On the night of July 27-28, 1970, Comrade Bujha Singh, an 82-year-old anti-colonial freedom fighter who participated in the struggle to rid India of British occupation, got a different kind of reward from his nation. Although he deserved state honour for fighting against foreign rule, he did not get a medal or a certificate. Instead, he got a police bullet in post-independent India.

Bujha Singh's fault was that after spending best years of his life in the liberation struggle, he had joined the ultra-leftist Naxalite movement, an uprising of landless tillers who have been revolting against the rich and the elites in India since the 1960s.

This April marks the 102nd anniversary of the Ghadar Party, a militant group of Indian immigrants who settled on the Pacific Coast of North America. They believed in an armed rebellion against the British occupation of India. As the Indian establishment and the South Asian Diaspora continue to celebrate the Ghadar centenary, Bujha Singh's story stands as an ugly reminder of how Ghadar activists continued their struggle for social justice even after India gained independence in 1947. The movement's legacy remains relevant as the challenges that contributed to the Ghadar uprising refuse to die.

The Ghadar party was launched on April 21, 1913 by Indian immigrants who lived in B.C.,

Washington, Oregon, and California. Later, it spread its wings and those who lived in faraway places such as South America also established branches. Bujha Singh, who worked in Argentina, was instrumental in creating a chapter in that country. Formally known as Hindi Pacific Association, it came to be known as the Ghadar Party after the launching of its official newspaper called Ghadar, which means "mutiny" in Urdu. The name had its origin in the first organized rebellion against the British Empire in India in 1857. All the classes and people belonging to the Hindu and Muslim communities had united to overthrow foreign rule following a mutiny by Indian soldiers who worked for the British rulers. The upheaval was the result of discontent among the general population over

exploitative taxes, controls imposed on local industry and frustration among the Indian soldiers due to low pay scale. The British government was able to suppress the revolt which it named Ghadar, an expression that was later appropriated by the founders of the Hindi Pacific Association.

Before the Ghadar Party came into being, the year 1907 saw a farmers' agitation in Punjab that coincided with 50 years of the mutiny of 1857. Fearing revival of the rebellion, the British government started arresting leaders of the agitation. Some prominent leaders, like Ajit Singh, were sent to exile. Britain's fears were not unfounded. In London, the Indian immigrants organized an event to commemorate the heroism of the participants of the first uprising. This was in response to the Victory Day celebrations held by the British officials. The participants of the 1857 upheaval were portrayed as murderers in the official celebrations, so the South Asian activists wanted to hold a parallel event to shame the authorities. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who was instrumental in organizing the event, had authored a book titled; *The History of Indian War of Independence of 1857*. Men like him and Ajit Singh represented the freedom fighters who had moved outside India, either to escape from the police dragnet or who were exiled under order. It is a separate matter that Savarkar drifted away from the struggle years later and became a

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part of the fascist movement dedicated to the establishment of a Hindu nation, a cause contradictory to the philosophy of secularism which was central to the Ghadar ideology. These circumstances brought the Indian immigrants and British officials into conflict that culminated in the 1909 murder of a British officer, Sir Curzon Wylie, who was handling Indian affairs, by a rebel, Madan Lal Dhingra, who was executed the same year.

The Ghadar Party was formed in this politically charged environment within the Indian Diaspora, that comprised both die-hard nationalists abroad and ordinary immigrants who had mainly migrated for a better livelihood. The Indian immigrants who joined the Ghadar Party had moved to North America as British subjects, as India was under British occupation. Canada, too, was still constitutionally subject to British imperial rule. Systemic racism and discriminatory immigration policies disillusioned most of these immigrants, because British consuls rarely intervened to help victims of racial violence in the U.S. or Canada. It soon dawned upon these people that the root cause of their suffering was slavery back home. This whole experience encouraged them to organize and form a pressure group. They resolved to continue their fight against discrimination in the foreign land and against colonialism in India.

The Ghadar Party believed in social justice and equality. Its members desired to establish a democratic, secular, and socialistic republic that provided equal opportunities to everyone with no discrimination against the poor or marginalized.

Besides fighting against foreign

occupation of India, resistance against racism was an important hallmark of the Ghadar movement. In Canada, where the Indians were not allowed to bring in their families and were disfranchised due to institutional racism, the Ghadar activists continued to campaign against systemic discrimination. Aware of these activities, the government was spying on them through their moles in the South Asian community. One of them, Bela Singh, went inside the Vancouver

Sikh temple in September 1914 and fatally shot two community leaders, Bhaag Singh and Badan Singh. Bhaag Singh was a Ghadar leader in B.C. Bela Singh was being patronized by an Immigration Inspector, William Hopkinson. As a result of this shootout, Mewa Singh assassinated Hopkinson. He was executed in January 1915. In his court statement, Mewa Singh spoke about the racial treatment meted out to the Indians in Canada.

Around 1914, many Ghadar activists started returning to India, hoping to stage an armed uprising, only to face the gallows or life imprisonment. They did not get the desired support from the public, as the popular leadership of the independence movement was in the hands of moderates, who denounced political violence. Despite its failure for the time being, the Ghadar activists who survived remained determined in their mission, which had influenced the next generation of radicals. One of the towering revolutionaries of India, Bhagat Singh, was inspired by the Ghadar movement. He considered Kartar Singh Sarabha, one of the founders of the Ghadar Party, as his role model. Sarabha, who was among those hanged in 1915, had visited the home of the very young Bhagat Singh for a donation. Bhagat Singh's father Kishan Singh, who was a nationalist, gave financial assistance to the Ghadar Party. Ajit Singh, who spearheaded the farmers' agitation in 1907, was Kishan Singh's brother.

Years later, Bhagat Singh tried to carry forward the task of the Ghadar Party. He was hanged in 1931 for assassinating a British police officer. Much as Sarabha influenced Bhagat Singh, the latter influenced Udham Singh, a radical activist who was also inspired by the Ghadar Party, and

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had assassinated Michael O'Dwyer in London. O'Dwyer was the former Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab state of India, where he was instrumental in the hangings of Ghadar Party members. Udham Singh was hanged for his action in 1940. He was the second Indian rebel to be hanged in London after Dhingra. The executions of both men were important milestones in the history of the evolution of the Ghadar movement. One's death was the fallout of a conflict arising out of the golden jubilee celebrations of the first Ghadar; the other's execution was a direct result of the murder of someone who suppressed the second Ghadar with an iron fist. All these characters were connected through the spirit of the Ghadar movement.

Apart from inspiring others, those who escaped hangings and served time in jails carried on their struggle even in post-independent India after the British left in 1947. Among them was Bujha Singh, who became a die-hard Communist. The very first challenge that faced these activists was the partition of India on religious lines. Muslim Pakistan came into being upon independence. This was followed by sectarian violence on both sides of the border. Innocent Muslims were murdered on the Indian side, while Hindus and Sikhs were slaughtered on the other side. Being secularists, Bujha Singh and many other Ghadar activists saved Muslims from Hindu and Sikh fanatics during that period. He continued to participate in the labour movement and supported Dalits, or so-called untouchables who were discriminated against under the brutal caste system.

Following an uprising in the Naxalbari village of West Bengal in 1967 by poor farmers, who claimed a right to the land, a campaign of police repression galvanized a movement

across India. Its impact reached as far as Punjab, the birthplace of Bujha Singh. The extremists broke away from the ranks of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) which was the largest force in West Bengal's United Front government, and adopted violent means to liberate lands for the tillers. The uprising came to be known as Naxalite movement due to its roots in Naxalbari village.

People like Bujha Singh joined the radicals. All reports indicate he died in a staged shootout by Punjab police, which picked up many Naxalites and eliminated them during the early 1970s. From his perspective, India's independence was merely symbolic and was really just a transfer of power between the ruling classes of Britain and India.

Years after his death, the Naxalite movement goes on in over 200 districts across India. Known as a Maoist insurgency in its new avatar, it is involved in an armed conflict with Indian forces mainly in tribal areas. For centuries the tribal people have been subjected to exploitation, and their traditional lands hold natural resources which corporate companies have been eyeing for profits. Since Indigenous peoples do not want to lose their traditional ways of living, they are resisting attempts to push industry into their lands by the government. Many see the Maoist insurgents active in these areas as their allies against state violence.

Although the Naxalite movement ended long ago in Punjab, Bujha Singh's followers do not forget to gather at his native village Chakk Maidass every year on July 27 to pay tributes to the slain leader. A publication in his name was started in 2003. Since then, it has published many books and articles in solidarity with the tribal people of India.

According to Boota Singh of Baba Bujha Singh Parkashan, when they launched a petition against state repression of Indigenous peoples within the so-called Maoist zones, they were approached by the intelligence agencies for an inquiry.

Interestingly, Boota Singh has also published a Punjabi translation of prominent Canadian author Naomi Klein's book, *Shock Doctrine*, which gives an insight into "corporate greed" around the world. He has just finished the translation of *Haj to Utopia*, another highly publicized book on Ghadar history by US-based university professor Maia Ramnath. Her book situates the radical history of the Ghadar movement in a global context.

Ajmer Sidhu, who has authored a book on Bujha Singh, believes that his struggle remains relevant, as the social inequality which is the root cause of Maoist insurgency and led to the Naxalite movement or Ghadar rebellion in the past, still exists. He explains that Bujha Singh never accepted the official independence of India, and believed in a continued struggle for a just society. Both Sidhu and Boota Singh agree that with economic liberalization, the gulf between the rich and the poor is only expected to grow.

Vancouver-based independent

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history researcher Sohan Singh Pooni made an interesting connection between the Ghadar Party and the armed insurgency going on in the Maoist areas during his speech at an event organized in Surrey last month. "Songs of Revolution" was held under the aegis of the Vancouver International Bhangra Celebration and Hari Sharma Foundation. The program was dedicated to the Ghadar narrative, which was an important element of Ghadar Party literature. As one of the speakers on panel, Pooni pointed out that the Ghadar Party also recognized the potential of the tribal population of India, and in poems had mentioned their struggles against oppression, which had been going on for centuries both under British rule and during earlier times. He argued that the current tribal resistance against exploitation in those parts of India makes the Ghadar history relevant.

The Hari Sharma Foundation, one of the organizers of the event, had previously co-sponsored a talk by Arundhati Roy, a Booker Prize winner and famous author from India. Roy had travelled into the Maoist areas to interview the insurgents and the tribal people. She has written extensively on alternative politics and oppression in India. The Hari Sharma Foundation has been supporting other initiatives and events to promote Ghadar ideology, hosting activists who are opposed to racism, wars, and repression of minorities and marginalized sections. Its members have taken part in rallies in Vancouver against the arrests of activists who defend the rights of the tribal people in India.

Bujha Singh was directly associated with the Ghadar Party which clearly shaped his political

thoughts, but there are indications that those not even remotely connected with it were also influenced by the Ghadar program. Gummadi Vittal Rao, a prominent balladeer and social activist from Telangana state, is one good example. Popularly known as Ghadar, he borrowed that name for himself after coming in contact with Naxalites from Punjab. He has been associated with the cultural wing of the Maoist party in his home state. In 1997, he survived an attempt on

his life. Now in his mid-60s, he continues to sing for the masses and has been critical of oppression against Dalits and tribal people.

While Bujha Singh's story can easily be brushed aside by the Indian mainstream because of his extreme left-wing politics, others continued their struggle for social justice under different banners. Some joined the moderate Congress party; others became moderate Communists, or actively supported the militant struggle for the liberation of historic Sikh temples under the control of corrupt priests often patronized by the British Empire.

Sohan Singh Bhakna, the founding president of the Ghadar Party, continued to organize farmers and workers after independence. During the partition, he saved Muslims from the Hindu and Sikh fundamentalists, receiving death threats for doing so.

Thrown into prison for participating in people's struggles, he resorted to a hunger strike in response to the poor conditions in jail — this, even after India had become free. He used to complain that his back was bent due to the hardships he suffered while serving time in post-independent India. He did not even accept government accommodations and benefits, and died in 1968.

Bhakna also believed in women's empowerment. He opened a school for girls in his village, despite stiff opposition from orthodox community members. Bibi Veeran, an 87-year-old veteran female communist activist who was partly raised by him and currently lives in Greater Vancouver, recalls how passionate he was for the rights of the girls. Since Bhakna had no children, he adopted girls like Veeran as his daughters. She stayed

at his house when she was 17 or 18 years old. Bhakna bought her a bicycle when girls were largely confined to their homes. He had also authored a book on the situation of women in India.

In a very powerful public speech on the 50th anniversary of the Ghadar Party, another party activist, Gurmukh Singh Lalton, said that social injustice continues even in independent India.

The struggle for a fair and just society was also articulated by Vaisakha Singh Dadehar, a senior Ghadar leader, during an address he delivered in 1955.

And 23 years after independence, Harjap Singh, a prominent Ghadar activist, made an entry in his diary that revealed his pain over unfulfilled dreams in post-independent India. Yet another Ghadar hero, Niranjana Singh Pandori, actually passed away in Canada in 1971. Brought back to Vancouver by his relatives because he could not get proper medical attention

in "free" India, he continued his fight against the system until the end of his life.

Meanwhile, Hari Singh Soond continued to participate in the working-class struggles after 1947. Soond was involved in the murder of Bela Singh, who in 1914 had assassinated a famous Ghadar Party leader, Bhaag Singh, in Vancouver. Bela Singh went back to India after being acquitted by the Canadian courts, and was murdered by supporters of the Ghadar Party in Punjab.

Manguram Muggowal, a former Ghadar Party member, later joined the Dalit emancipation movement. Being a Dalit himself, he had endured caste-based discrimination. He raised his voice against untouchability and other discriminatory practices against Dalits in Punjab.

D. Chenchiah had joined the Communist Party in 1940 and was active in the labour movement. He had also helped prostitutes to be rehabilitated, and encouraged

widow remarriage. He died in 1964.

Pandurang Khankhoje, a Ghadar Party member who was an agricultural scientist, tried to educate farmers in free India and also opposed caste-based discrimination. He showed his solidarity to street sweepers, and also volunteered for military service when India and Pakistan first went to war in 1965, despite his old age.

These stories represent the continuity of the Ghadar movement that began in 1857 as a resistance against colonialism and social injustice, and went on even after India gained independence. The issues that bothered these men are still alive in one form or the other. Freedom of India from the British occupation is one thing, but liberation from socioeconomic inequality remains far from being achieved. The growing threat of religious intolerance, the yawning gap between the rich and the poor, and the ongoing exploitation of

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Indigenous peoples and Dalits in India, all still pose a challenge to a society that needs to focus on the unfinished task of the Ghadar heroes.

In Canada too, the racism that contributed to the emergence of the Ghadar movement continues to prevail. Charanpal Gill is a founder of the Progressive Intercultural Community Services in Greater Vancouver, whose maternal grandfather Dulla Singh was a Ghadar Party member. He has been active in anti-racism movements for many years, despite his reliance on the Canadian establishment for funding to support his community based initiatives, such as an old age home and immigrants' settlement programs. He came out with a very strong statement against Conservative Party MP John Williamson, who had recently remarked against people of colour being brought to Canada under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Williamson later apologized after telling delegates at a conference in Ottawa that it makes no sense to pay "whities" to sit at home when "brown people" are being brought as temporary foreign workers. Gill has also been supportive of the struggles of Indigenous communities against systemic racism in Canada. He is one of the rare activists within the local South Asian community who have shown compassion towards Indigenous peoples.

Bhagat Singh's nephew Prof. Jagmohan Singh, who has visited Canada a number of times, once called upon the members of the Musqueam Indian Band who were protesting against the desecration of their ancient burial site in Vancouver in 2012. As a social justice activist with the Association for Democratic Rights, which advocates for the rights of the

Indigenous peoples in India, he saw a linkage between the struggles of the First Nations in Canada and India.

Defying her age, Veeran, the adopted daughter of Bhakna continues to show up at public rallies and events to speak against violence against women and the oppressed groups. She has also been in the forefront of campaigns against racism, religious fanaticism and caste system.

In the light of ongoing racism and repression around the world, it should not surprise anyone to speculate that had Ghadar activists lived longer they would have met the same fate as Bujha Singh. After all, his custodial death was not an exception. Killings of political activists by the police in staged shootouts have been a practice in

India. Jaswant Singh Khalra, a former Naxalite, was eliminated under mysterious circumstances in 1995. He was investigating the disappearances of political activists by the police during the years when an armed conflict for a separate Sikh state was at its peak in Punjab. As a human rights activist, he was trying to identify people who were secretly cremated by the police after being murdered. He had documented over 2,000 cases in which the corpses of suspects were burned as "unclaimed". Khalra later joined mainstream Sikh politics (not separatist though). But he had a strong Ghadar connection. His grandfather Harnam Singh, a Ghadar activist, was aboard the Komagata Maru ship that was forced to return by the Canadian government under a discriminatory immigration law in 1914. Khalra had once visited Canada, where it was suggested that he stay rather than returning to India where his life was in danger. But he was determined to go back and continue his work, only to be murdered.

Consider what Bhagat Singh wrote in a letter addressed to young political workers shortly before his execution in March, 1931: "The political revolution does not mean the transfer of state (or more crudely, the power) from the hands of the British to the Indians, but to those Indians who are at one with us as to the final goal, or to be more precise, the power to be transferred to the revolutionary party through popular support." What can better illustrate this sentiment than the words of Sohan Singh Bhakna, who made it clear that he would not shy from opposing any kind of state repression or anti-people policies of the establishment, even if it takes another struggle?

-RDNB

Opinion**Legacy of the Ghadar movement still relevant**

The current year is very important for those interested in revolutionary history, as it marks the centenary of the executions of many Ghadarites, including one of its founders, Kartar Singh Sarabha, on November 16, 1915. The Ghadar party was a group of radical South Asian activists in North America, established in April 2013 to fight against racism abroad and British occupation of India. The party not only believed in an armed rebellion against the foreign rule, but also had a program to establish an egalitarian and secular society in free India. Although a majority of the Ghadar activists were Punjabi Sikhs, the party had members from other communities as well, and it was vehemently opposed to religious dogma, fundamentalism and the caste system.

A century after the Ghadar activists were executed upon returning to India, we need to ask ourselves what has really changed over these years, in terms of racism, casteism and religious divisions in India and North America. Certainly, there have been some positive changes, such as the end of the foreign rule in India, Indian immigrants enjoying equal rights in Canada, and stringent laws against racism, casteism and religious intolerance. All these changes are the result of the great sacrifices made by the Ghadar activists. In Canada, where Indians were once disfranchised, there are a significant

number of elected officials from the Indian community. We must acknowledge that this is the result of the sustained campaign against racism by the Ghadar activists in Vancouver. Likewise, secularism is enshrined in the Indian constitution because of the efforts of Ghadar activists to keep the spirit of humanity and egalitarianism alive. But we must not take this for granted. These rights and privileges are very much under attack by governments both in India and Canada.

In India, where the Hindu nationalist Bharitya Janata Party (BJP) is in power, pressure on the government is growing to remove the principle of secularism from the constitution. Emboldened by BJP rule, Hindu extremists have intensified their campaign against religious minorities. Likewise, casteism refuses to die, and so-called untouchables are still subjected to humiliation by the followers of orthodox Hinduism which created the brutal caste system.

In Canada, systemic racism against the Indigenous peoples remains an ugly reality. The right-wing Conservative government in Ottawa remains adamant against a national enquiry into the missing and murdered aboriginal women. South Asian immigrants are finding it hard to bring their parents and grandparents from India or elsewhere under this government,

which lacks compassion. Under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, workers brought from outside are often denied rights and treated like indentured labourers, whereas millionaire investors can easily get permanent residency. Only recently, Conservative MP John Williamson made racist comments against people of colour being brought under the TFWP.

These simple facts remind us that the legacy of the Ghadar movement is still relevant and will remain relevant while the religious intolerance and casteism are practiced in India, and while racism continues to exist in Canada. Rather than paying symbolic tributes to the Ghadar heroes, society needs to get organized against these challenges to keep their legacy alive. It's important to remember that the Ghadarites did not rest after India gained independence in 1947, and continued their struggle against repression and injustice. To assume that their task is over will be a great mistake. Under changed circumstances, there may not be a need to use violence as political tool, but it is still very important to get involved in social justice activism. Today, we have many other tools available, such as social media, to resist attempts to divide the world in the name of nationalism, race, religion or caste.

-RDNB

Echoes of Ghadar

The Ghadar movement not only produced revolutionaries who were willing to die in an armed struggle against the British Empire, but also a progressive literature that remains popular among secularist activists in the South Asian region even today. Many Ghadarites who were executed or had to serve life imprisonments wrote provocative poems. Through the Ghadar narrative one can see how determined its supporters were in their resolve to establish a just and an egalitarian society through people's unity and by rejecting sectarian divisions. Following are some translated passages borrowed from the Ghadar poetry compiled by Kesar Singh:

we do not need pundits or quazis
with whom we would end up as
losers
temples or mosques won't get us
anywhere
forget making gurdwaras
either.....

going after faith
you are more worried about
spirituality and meditation
you keep fighting against each
other
over Islam and Hinduism
they have ruined the glory of

India
by creating a wedge of Quran and
Vedas
beef or pork cause you pain
whites eat all of them without
shame...
oh brothers let's unite to defeat
oppressors
untouchability has resulted in
destruction
if you wish to rule
bury these conflicts for the sake of
nation.....
despite being born in the same
country
we have been divided in factions
by practicing untouchability

we have proved to be sectarians

we have not judged people by their
castes
nor do we care about untouchability
all Indians are brothers
we don't follow traditions that are
wily.....

oh Muslims and Hindus get united to
become Hindis
leave aside the feeling of ``us and
them''
let's be ready for combat with
enemies
why are you so down and depressed?

-RDNB

The “measly” 20-cent increase in BC's minimum wage

On March 12th, the BC government announced a 20 cent increase to minimum wage, up to \$10.45 per hour. At the same time, the government indexed the rate to inflation, declaring that politicians would now be freed from any further responsibility for this contentious issue. However, their decision was in fact highly political, since it guarantees that 120,000 minimum wage earners in British Columbia will remain thousands of dollars below the poverty line.

In contrast to what many have called a “measly” 20 cent increase for British Columbians, the North West Territories is raising its minimum wage by 25 per cent, and cities like Seattle and San Francisco are well on their way to \$15/hr. The increase leaves half a million employees in British Columbia earning paid less than \$15 per hour, which is the target for the new “Fight for 15” campaign led by trade unions and young workers and students.

As a society, we often have stereotypical views of the “average” minimum wage worker - usually a teenager employed in their first part-time job at a small business, hoping to earn some extra spending money or a few dollars for tuition. But the reality is rather different. Forty-seven per cent are 25 or older, and nearly 10,000 are over 55 years. Almost half of them work for companies with more than 500 employees. Almost two-thirds are women, and 55% have worked in their jobs for at least a year. One in seven - 14% - actually hold a

university degree.

Three years ago, after a huge campaign by the labour and student movements, the B.C. Liberal government was finally compelled to raise the minimum wage rate for the first time in over a decade. Today, B.C. is back near the bottom - eighth in Canada behind Ontario, Nunavut, Yukon, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Quebec and Prince Edward Island.

While BC has the highest cost of living in the country, 120,000 workers here are paid only the minimum wage, and 517,000 earn \$15 or less, according to recent Statistics Canada figures. Some, like liquor servers and farm workers, can even be paid lower than the minimum. Restaurant owners can use a legal loophole to pay employees just \$9/hour, by scheduling some staff to do a few hours of table service, putting them into the liquor server category. Farm workers are still paid at piece rates, often much lower than \$10 per hour.

No wonder that surveys indicate that about three-quarters of British Columbians support an increase to \$15 per hour. That was undoubtedly the main reason behind Christy Clark's decision to index the minimum wage, in an attempt to protect her image of caring for ordinary working people.

The “Fight for 15” campaign argues that “work should lift you out of poverty”. A \$15 wage would put BC's lowest paid workers 10 per cent above Statistics Canada's low income cut-off, and give them a better chance to cover the cost of basic

necessities.

And it would also help counter the increasing income inequality in Canada's most expensive province, where young people from low- and middle-income families find it hard to access the university or college education they need to get a good job. Tuition fees here have doubled since 2002, leaving many with crippling debt loads. Just to cover the cost of tuition, a student earning minimum wage must work 550 hours - fourteen weeks of full-time work - which does not include any other living costs.

The “Fight for 15” campaign went public on January 15, with petition drives and other actions across the province. Campaign events are being organized on the 15th of each month, to highlight unique aspects of the campaign.

“We know that many students are struggling to put themselves through school and make ends meet on minimum wage jobs,” says Irene Lanzinger, President of the B.C. Federation of Labour. “Post-secondary graduates are leaving school with an average of \$35,000 of debt. That is not good for our young people, and not good for the economy.”

For more details and to get involved in the campaign, visit www.fightfor15bc.ca.

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

Reflections on the death of Naverone Woods

Naverone Christian Landon Woods was a young 23 year old Gitksan man who was fatally shot by transit police on Dec 28, 2014 just after 8:00 am. According to media reports, transit police were called on the scene with reports of a man harming himself at the Surrey Central Skytrain Station. The man then went into a convenience store looking for a knife, and when he couldn't acquire one, he went into the Safeway at the corner of King George and 104th Ave. The transit police, listening to the RCMP radio channels, learned of his presence in Safeway and pursued him there. Nav had taken a knife off the shelf and was stabbing himself. When transit police arrived, they ordered him to drop the knife. When he refused and allegedly advanced toward them, one of the transit police officers fatally shot him.

Nav was from Hazelton in northern BC. He had come to Vancouver for his uncle's funeral in early December, and decided to stay for a while. He had friends in Surrey and had procured work in the construction industry stripping concrete forms. His death was a shock to family and friends; even those on the job site who knew him for only a few weeks were impacted by his sudden loss.

A public vigil was held on Feb

28, 2015, two months after Nav's tragic death. It was an occasion to honour his life and raise important questions about his death. Words from family and friends reinforced a moving image of Nav. People consistently described him as truly a gentle spirit who was respectful to all he came into contact with. He clearly had a special bond with family and brought happiness and laughter wherever he went. Friends talked of Nav as a gentle giant who was good-natured, hard working and fun to be with. The vigil confirmed that he was close to many and was known as a thoughtful and generous person.

The vigil also revealed many other aspects of this tragedy. The family was upset by the media construal of Nav as someone who was mentally ill. Although he was distraught at the time of his death, he had no history of mental health illness. Video footage from the convenience store and descriptions of his behavior that morning from witnesses portrayed a Naverone Woods who was not himself, according to a family statement. He had been admitted to Surrey Memorial Hospital twice the night before, and was released early in the morning on Dec 28th just hours before he was shot. The family is at a loss to know why he was in the hospital, why he was released, and what

happened between his brief stay in the hospital and his arrival at the skytrain station. They are perplexed about what it was that put him into such a profound state of distress and self-harm. From their experience, the man shot that morning was not the Nav they knew.

Another disturbing aspect for the family was that they learned of Nav's death through media reports. They had not received a call from police or the coroner's office or the Independent Investigations Office (IIO) about the incident that took his life. In most situations of this kind, the name of the deceased is withheld until the family can be notified; but not in this case. For Nav's family, the lack of communication was profoundly disrespectful, and showed how little his life mattered to those in positions of responsibility for what had happened. And the torturous silence continues. As with all cases of police involved deaths, it is being investigated by the IIO, and during this process no information is forthcoming. Despite demands from the family for details of what transpired that fateful morning, it remains shrouded in secrecy.

Nav's death raises other troubling issues as well. Anne Drennan, spokesperson for the Metro Vancouver Transit Police, claimed that all transit police have been

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trained in de-escalating situations where mental health illness may be an issue and they are certified in deploying firearms in a manner commensurate with other police agencies in the province. But questions are raised about their jurisdiction in spaces at some distance from skytrain property and the quick use of lethal force before attempting other tactics of de-escalation. Simply issuing commands before shooting someone is hardly an adequate attempt to secure the situation and diminish the possibilities of harm.

In the family statement read at Nav's vigil, these issues were clearly raised. It stated, "The average weight of a male grizzly bear is 800 lbs and this grizzly bear can be subdued with a tranquilizer gun. So why couldn't the transit police utilize options other than deadly force. Even if Nav was advancing, they could have deployed tasers, batons or good old-fashioned talking. Persuasion is always better than force."

Unfortunately, the police shooting of Naverone Woods is not a unique or rare event over the past few months. Since October 2014, seven people have been killed by law enforcement officers in BC. Peter de Groot (Slocan), Rhett Mutch (Victoria), Phuong Na (Tony) Du (Vancouver), Naverone Woods (Surrey), and Waylon Edey (Castlegar) have been the victims of police shooting; Kevin Mukuyama (Chilliwack) died as a result of police deploying a taser, and Jacobus Jonker (Smithers) died days after police used pepper spray. Each incident no doubt entailed unique circumstances, but each one resulted in the unnecessary

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loss of human life.

Attending the vigil for Nav was Lien Chan, the sister of Phuong Na (Tony) Du. On Nov 22, 2014 Tony Du was shot and killed by Vancouver Police officers at the corner of 41st Ave and Knight Street. Tony was 51 years old and lived with a mental health illness. At the time of his death he was holding a 2x4 piece of wood in his hands, although witnesses say he was not a threat to anyone. He had no history of violence or record of assaults, yet he was shot dead within one minute of police arriving on the scene. The family statement for Tony Du begins: "On November 22, a great tragedy befell our community, one

that has made us all question what is right and what is wrong. In the aftermath, a mother lost her son, brothers and sisters lost their sibling and the world was deprived of a gentle soul."

In a recent study of four Vancouver Police Department policy reports (2008 – 2013) on policing and mental health, the authors maintain that these reports repeatedly and problematically equate mental health illness with violence and dangerousness. These reports and the publicity they have garnered have shaped a discourse that stigmatizes people living with mental health illness by constructing them as significant threats to public safety. "Concerns for public safety," the study asserts, "amplified by the popular and overriding association of mental illness with dangerousness, have local consequences, validating increased policing of unwanted 'others' in public spaces." Not only are matters of criminal justice and mental health being increasingly fused together, it seems that the internalization of perceived dangerousness and violence triggers a justifiable use of lethal force, and fosters an attitude of unquestioning acceptance and indifference on the part of the general public.

The remarkable series of police-involved deaths over the course of a few months is deeply troubling, and calls into question the de-escalation training of those with state-sanctioned use of force. Even more, it challenges the logic that more police are required to reduce crime and make our communities safe, suggesting instead that police make our communities less safe, at

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least for certain groups of people within our communities.

At the vigil for Nav, Grand Chief Stewart Phillip of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs spoke of racism as an important factor in his death. "We know as Indigenous Peoples, this is not an isolated incident," he said. "This is part of the systemic racism and injustice that is perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples right across Turtle Island; and the list of names is long and many." The family statement for Nav expressed similar sentiments: "Native men are being shot and killed all across Canada. Racism is alive and well in police agencies in Canada. This is a fact. The only thing they regret is they didn't kill us all when they had the chance. It is what it is, sad but true."

The fatal shooting of Naverone Woods must be located within the framework of the ongoing violence of settler colonialism with its ideology of white supremacy and native disposability. The colonial state has consistently deployed its security forces in the relentless effort to dispossess Indigenous people from the land, destroy their cultural lifeways, and undermine their sovereignty. This violence, perpetrated with impunity, is evident in the growing list of murdered and missing Indigenous women, the overrepresentation of Indigenous women and men in prison, and the rampant conditions of poverty in Indigenous communities.

Nav was a young person whose life and future were terminated too soon and too quickly.

His death summons us to continue the fight against colonial violence, systemic racism and the criminalization of difference, and to dismantle the structures that obstruct our way to a more just and caring world.

Dave Diewert is currently an organizer and activist with the Social Housing Alliance and Streams of Justice. He has been involved in grassroots anti-poverty work for a number of years in East Vancouver. Dave is also on the editorial collective of The Volcano, an anti-displacement quarterly newspaper.

Prime Ministerial candidate Justin Trudeau assures amendments in Bill C-51

Federal Liberal leader Justin Trudeau has assured that if his party comes to power it will make amendments to the controversial Bill C-51. During an interaction with South Asian media in Surrey last month, he acknowledged that he has heard concerns from Canadians over the proposed bill that gives extra powers to security agencies to deal with terrorism.

Trudeau says the bill in its current form defines terrorism in a vague manner and lacks oversight and sunset clauses. "We need to narrow the scope of broad definitions. And we will make those

changes if are the government."

Trudeau has been widely criticised for supporting Bill C-51. Although he admits to supporting measures to ensure the safety of Canadians from terrorism, he expressed fears about environmental and Indigenous activists becoming targets of the new legislation.

Accusing the ruling Conservatives of playing the politics of divisions, Trudeau said that the current government is creating fears against people with head coverings. "Canada is open because of immigrants." Attacking Prime Minister Stephen Harper for his

government's efforts to bar Muslim women from wearing niqab during citizenship ceremony, Trudeau said, "He is a Prime Minister of Canada, not just a Prime Minister of Conservative Party."

Trudeau was accompanied by three South Asian Liberal candidates for the upcoming federal election: ex-MP Sukh Dhaliwal, Harjit Singh Sajjan and Jati Sidhu. He said that BC will witness a three way race between his party, the Conservatives and the NDP in the next election.

-RDNB

“Traditional left needs to do more to give voice to Dalits”

The traditional left has failed to recognize the sufferings of Dalits or so-called untouchables in Indian society, and needs to do more to give voice to the oppressed groups. This was stated by Samuel John, a visiting progressive playwright from India, in an interview with RDNB.

John is currently touring Canada to perform plays on serious issues, like the brutal caste system that excludes Dalits. He has been invited here by the Hari Sharma Foundation and the Harjit Kaur Sidhu Memorial Foundation. Born in a Dalit community in Punjab, John shot into prominence with his role in an award winning Punjabi film, *Anne Ghorey Daa Daan*. The film is based on a novel that reveals the viciousness of the caste system even in a modernist state like Punjab.

Answering questions on a range of issues, John noted that the caste system continues to prevail even in his home state, where the followers of Sikhism are in the majority. This is despite the fact that the Sikh faith denounces casteism. “Social boycott is often used as a weapon to suppress Dalits whenever they resist oppression.”

He pointed out that the traditional left which thinks that

casteism will end on its own with the classless society is mistaken. “Caste reality is much more horrific than the class difference. Being a poor and a Dalit I can see this through my own experiences.”

John, who mainly performs in poor Dalit colonies in Punjab, feels that he has often been left alone by the leftist organizations to raise these issues single handedly. “I don’t question their credibility. I believe that they see things through a traditionalist Marxist lens, because of which this problem has failed to enter their consciousness.”

John’s struggle to become a

theatre artiste began at an impressionable age, when he saw a play depicting the gap between the rich and poor in society. A character who could not afford to buy eggs, and tries to have their taste by licking a plate of eggs emptied by his employer, left an ever lasting impression on his sensitive mind. “That was the time I decided to do acting.” Since then he has been organizing street plays in impoverished communities. “Many times the artistes belonging to well-to-do families were reluctant to come along and perform in those localities.”

During his stay in Mumbai, the financial capital of India, he brought together the kids living in slums and posh areas to act together in street plays. At that time he was going through penury. He started getting free food for helping children learn theatre. This experience was an eye-opener for John, who decided to go back to Punjab and do more community-based performances with the help of donations. “Through this experience I learnt the importance of human bonding and have been carrying out my mission with people’s generosity.”

NEWS IN PICTURES

Close to 2,000 people showed up at the rally against Bill C 51 in Vancouver on March 14. The event was attended by people from all walks of life and belonging to different age groups. Not only people came out with placards, many signed petitions and letters to the MPs in opposition to the bill.

-RDNB

NEWS IN PICTURES

Hands Against Racism campaign by Spice Radio received massive response. People came out in big numbers at different locations to celebrate festival of colours on March 7. They coloured their hands and left behind hand prints along with statements against racism

-RDNB

Canadian silence over Hindutva terror is troubling

It was 2010. One of the organizers of the annual Vaisakhi parade in Surrey told a Punjabi radio station that former B.C. premier Ujjal Dosanjh and then-MLA Dave Hayer were not invited to the event. If they wished to attend, they were advised to bring their own security.

The Vaisakhi parade in Surrey is organized under the aegis of Dashmesh Darbar Sikh temple, which supports a movement for a separate theocratic Sikh state carved out of the Indian state of Punjab.

Most years, Sikh militants who supported violence and armed insurgency are glorified in the Surrey parade. Since Dosanjh and Hayer are known as staunch critics of Sikh extremism, the statement by Inderjit Singh Bains was taken as a threat.

Dosanjh was assaulted in 1985, while Hayer's father, Tara Singh Hayer, was murdered in 1998. Hayer senior died for being a critic of violence.

There was a very strong backlash from the mainstream media and the B.C. government to Bains's statement. Many commentators, including those in India, saw it as a sign of a growing threat of Sikh militancy in Canada.

The ugly memories of the Air India bombings were evoked. That's when 331 people died in two blasts on June 23, 1985. This mass murder was blamed on Sikh separatists who were seeking revenge for ugly political events of 1984, including an anti-Sikh pogrom after the assassination of Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards.

Now let's fast-forward to 2015. In February, a man in Edmonton threatened to kill Anna Hazare, a renowned anti-corruption activist in India.

Hazare is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi-leader of the pacifist liberation movement in British India. Hazare has recently launched an agitation against the right-wing Hindu nationalist

Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Narendra Modi.

Hazare opposes a controversial land acquisition bill that might hurt farmers. Gagan Vidhu posted on Facebook in February that he will be the next Nathuram Godse and will kill this modern Gandhi.

Godse was a Hindu extremist who assassinated Gandhi in 1948. Godse was associated with Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh (RSS)-a Hindu nationalist organization that has held over the BJP. The RSS was banned following Gandhi's murder.

Vidhu has told some South Asian media outlets that he had once contested a local election in Punjab as a BJP candidate and has been associated with the RSS, but claims to have made the post in anger and had

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read nothing about Godse. He also claims that he once supported Hazare, but was upset at his decision to challenge the Modi government.

As compared to the 2010 incident involving the Dashmesh Darbar Sikh temple, this Facebook threat from someone in Canada against Hazare did not capture the attention of the mainstream media.

This is despite the murder of Govind Pansare—a leftist activist from the Indian state of Maharashtra in February. Pansare was opposed to glorification of Godse by Hindu extremists. His killing remains unsolved.

Both Pansare and Hazare are from Maharashtra, the birthplace of Godse. Only recently, a BJP MP described Godse as patriot while another Hindu nationalist group has launched a campaign to install Godse's statues across India. Taking no chances, the Maharashtra government has beefed up security of Hazare.

Godse and his group wanted to establish a Hindu nation and saw Gandhi as a major roadblock in their designs. Following partition of India along religious lines in 1947 when Muslim Pakistan came into being, there were religious riots on either side of the border. Muslims were targeted by Hindu and Sikh fanatics on the Indian side, whereas Hindus and Sikhs were slaughtered by Islamic extremists across the border.

Gandhi tried to save as many Muslim lives he could during this violence. Even otherwise, Gandhi was against theocracy.

After five failed attempts on his life, Gandhi was shot to death by

Godse on January 30, 1948. In spite of such threats, India chose to be a secular country.

However since then, Hindutva (pro Hindu state) forces have remained active and today, the BJP enjoys a brute majority in the parliament. Not surprisingly, under the Modi government these forces have become emboldened and are seeking removal of secularism from the preamble of the Indian constitution.

Modi has been widely blamed for anti-Muslim carnage in the Indian state of Gujarat during 2002 when he was chief minister there. The massacre followed the burning of a train that left over 50 Hindu passengers dead.

The Gujarat government accused Islamic fundamentalists of torching the train, which triggered anti-Muslim violence. Over the past several years, Hindutva extremists have also been caught in bomb explosions and clandestine terror activities against Muslim targets.

Godse's niece has reportedly supported these activities. Yet, the Facebook threat did not create much sensation in Canada or India.

Credit goes to Ujjal Dosanjh that he sought action against Vidhu and is openly challenging Hindutva forces through his blog these days. But overall, a general silence prevails within the South Asian community and the mainstream against the increased threat of Hindutva extremism.

Moderates in the South Asian community (with exception of Dosanjh) who were critical of Sikh extremists in the past have maintained a studied silence, perhaps because the BJP rules India.

There has not been a single public event in Vancouver to denounce the murder of Pansare or violence by Hindu fanatics by secularist groups within the Indian community.

There is no question that Sikh separatists have been involved in violence and hate crimes, but one cannot be selective in criticizing extremist elements of one community and ignoring extremist activities of others. Religious extremists from both communities complement each other.

Sikh separatism is a demon being fed by the Indian state and its apologists in Canada and the mainstream by remaining silent over Hindutva extremists. If most Indo-Canadians were afraid to speak up against Sikh extremists due to fear of physical violence during 1980s, they are now fearful of a Hindu nationalist government that wields influence through consulates in Canada.

Apparently, Canadian leaders have not learned anything from the Air India tragedy. Rather, it took 9/11 for Canada to ban Sikh terror groups, like Babbar Khalsa and the International Sikh Youth Federation.

If the government is sincere, it must keep an eye on activities of Hindutva supporters in Canada. There are groups in India who have Canadian backers and if Canada really cares, it must expand its terror list to include Hindutva organizations alongside Islamist and Sikh terror groups.

Or is Canada waiting for more bloodshed or another Air India-like tragedy?

-RDNB

Missing Hari Bhai; who dared to challenge Hindutva

"Please come over someday. I want to hug you."

Those words still echo in my memory. Dr. Hari Sharma said that to me over the phone while he was struggling with cancer. But that day never came. He died on March 16, 2010. I still curse myself for not making time to go and see him in person. With the death of Hari Bhai, or Brother Hari as he was widely known in the local South Asian community, we lost a strong voice against Hindutva. With the supporters of Hindu fanaticism emboldened under the Modi government in India, his absence is felt even more, five years after his death.

Sharma taught at Simon Fraser University until his retirement in 1999. He was a prominent social justice activist and one of the founders of the Indian People's Association in North America, which

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promoted alternative politics. He had been in the forefront of campaigns against state repression in India, and vehemently opposed the emergency and censorship imposed by the Indian government back in 1975. He never shied from questioning the power in India, whether it was represented by the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) or the so-called secularist Indian National Congress. He openly condemned repressions committed under the Congress government, including the anti-Sikh massacre of 1984, engineered by the Congress party following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her

Sikh bodyguards. Likewise, he strongly condemned the anti-Muslim carnage of 2002 in Gujarat. The mass murders of Muslims followed the burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims. Over 50 people died in the tragedy, blamed on Islamic extremists by the BJP government in Gujarat. The current Indian PM Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat at that time. Human rights groups allege his complicity in the violence against Muslims.

I first met Hari Bhai around that period. I worked with Radio India and he would often come on air to denounce this madness. By then, his

group was known as the South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy. Later, he invited many speakers from India to keep the Gujarat issue alive. Among them were well known human rights activists, including Teesta Setelvad and Nishrin Jaffery, whose father and former Member of Parliament Ehsan Jaafray was also murdered during the mayhem. Teesta continues to be hounded by Gujarat's BJP government, which accuses her of embezzlement of funds for a proposed memorial for the victims of the Gujarat episode.

Sharma often used to say that he was ashamed to be a Hindu and an

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Indian for what is happening against minorities in his home county. On other occasions, he organized events to highlight caste-based atrocities against Dalits or "untouchables," and for the victims of tragedies such as the Bhopal gas leakage of 1984. But he was not just passionate about Indian issues. He was equally critical of racism in Canada, and of the US invasion of Iraq and other imperialist wars. He encouraged everyone to speak up against oppression of marginalized communities, both in Canada and India. Despite all this, he had many critics within the South Asian community. He had to go through many challenges, one being his inability to get an Indian visa. Some accused him of being soft towards extremists in the minority Sikh and Muslim communities. However, during one interview with me he did criticize the atrocities committed by Sikh separatists.

At one time, we had a very strong disagreement on alleged harassment of an activist in Gujarat. A famous dancer who was opposed to violence against Muslims, she had claimed that she was being framed in a false case of human trafficking. Being a stubborn reporter, I became a little skeptical. This led to an argument, to a point that I lost my cool and Hari Bhai actually branded me as a BJP agent. We stopped talking to each other for months. However, Hari Bhai let it go after a while, and provided me every

opportunity to interview his guests from India. I now feel very small and guilty for being nasty and rude to a person who deserved respect. It was his maturity that won. I cannot forgive myself for hurting him. I sometimes feel that I missed the bus by not going to see him personally one last time and apologize. Today, when we see how Hindu extremism continues to grow, and there is silence in our community against it here in Vancouver, I greatly miss Hari Bhai, who would have been much more vocal against the ongoing

fascist activities of the pro-Hindutva forces. As a torch bearer of secularism, he will always be missed by many others. It seems that with his death, activism against Hindutva has declined among the local secularists. I just hope that the generation of young activists inspired by him will stand up against this challenge with the same zeal and enthusiasm one day.

Gurpreet Singh is a founder of Radical Desi.

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Remembering Vinod Shuffled Off Somewhere, Have You?

When he published the Radia tapes, Vinod Mehta did what a good editor should. By making public the dirty diaries of the ongoing cluster-f..k between politicians, journalists, journalist/lobbyists and their corporate sponsors, he broke the club rules of the cosy oligarchy that runs our country. Not surprisingly, when the curtain went down on the show, for the people who were exposed in the Radia tapes, it turned out to be nothing more than a slightly embarrassing blip in the upward arc of their ambitions. For Vinod Mehta, however, the consequences were serious. I have no doubt they played a role in hastening his end.

Anyway, he's gone now, and with him perhaps the era of the intractable, unpredictable, idiosyncratic editor. Not because there aren't idiosyncratic folks around any more, but because we live in a climate where it's becoming increasingly difficult for them to function. The outpouring of grief at his passing by all kinds of people, including those who are professionally his polar opposite, seems to be as much for him as for the end of idea of the independent-minded editor. In some ways it must

be seen as a credit to *Outlook's* independent editors in future too. proprietors that they made room for a maverick like Vinod Mehta, despite being targeted and having their offices raided several times. As for the rest of us, while we grieve for Vinod, we cannot give up on the possibility that there can be

I will miss Vinod very much. He played such an important part in my life as a writer.

It's not that we agreed about everything, we certainly had our differences—about the Congress party, about Kashmir (of course),

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about the politics of caste, about his strange, recently rehashed biography of Meena Kumari. But this time around, the disagreement between us is permanent and irreversible. I maintain that he shouldn't have left. He could have stuck around with us a little longer. But he's just bloody well gone. It's ridiculous. I don't agree.

After *The God of Small Things* was published in 1997, I was aware that I ran the risk of turning into a sort of Interpreter of the East for the western media. This I did not wish upon myself. Whatever I wrote, whatever arguments I got into, whatever hooliganism I was involved in, I wanted it to be here. Not for reasons of any great nationalism on my part, nor because this is my country, but simply because this is where I live. Vinod Mehta became my partner in this enterprise. Almost everything I have written since 1998 was first published by him in *Outlook*.

Very early on in our alliance, regardless of any commentary to the contrary (and of that there was plenty) we both understood that neither was doing the other a favour. That, I believe, is a rare and wonderful thing in any relationship. Over the many years we worked together, we spoke several times on the phone, but we hardly ever met. I've never been to his house. He visited me only once, recently, but it was more like an inspection tour than a visit. It was as though he had come just to confirm an idea he had in his head about the way I live. He shuffled in, took a look around and

shuffled out. I don't think either of us knew how to play Guest and Host. At any rate we weren't very good at it. That's about it as far as our social life went.

And yet, out of this peculiar, laconic, minimalist relationship came a body of work that amounts to five volumes of collected essays and interviews that have been subsequently republished in several languages in several newspapers and magazines in India as well as the rest of the world. What does all this have to do with Vinod Mehta? Quite a lot actually. I wrote the essays, yes, but the freedom and the urgency with which I wrote had much to do with knowing that Vinod Mehta would publish them—without force-fitting them into some pre-determined magazine format. This was no joke. *Outlook* was, and is, a major, commercial, mass-circulation newsmagazine. That is its strength. And yet, Vinod had the self-confidence and the flexibility to publish, from time to time, these long, unorthodox, often unpopular essays that almost always created a storm.

The rules were set early on. When I sent him *The End of Imagination*, the essay I wrote after the 1998 nuclear tests, he called me and said, "Do you really want to say 'Who the hell is the Prime Minister to have his finger on the nuclear button?' Can I change it to 'Who is the Prime Minister?'" I said I'd rather he didn't. So 'who the hell' stayed. Then came my turn to ask him for something. Acutely aware of the

mined terrain I was wading into, I asked him whether he could avoid putting a picture of me on the cover. He said he'd see what he could do. It was his delicate way of telling me to take a hike. The issue came out, with a photograph of me on the cover, and the most controversial sentence in the essay splashed across it: I Secede. All hell broke loose.

These then, were our unspoken Rules of Engagement. Vinod would not make any alteration to my text without my consent. In turn, even if my essay was going to be the cover story, I would stay out of any discussions about the content and design of the cover. This went on for fifteen years.

At one point during his funeral, there was a strange, poignant moment that I don't really know what to make of. I found myself facing L.K. Advani, separated by the length of Vinod's flower bedecked body. Advani was laying a wreath at his feet. I was standing around trying to say goodbye (or not) to Vinod in my head. I was reminded of the only time he ever cautioned me. It was 2006. The papers had announced that Afzal Guru, convicted for his role in the December 13, 2001, Parliament attack, was going to be hanged in a few days. I was dismayed because I had followed the case closely for several years and had studied the legal papers. I knew that much of the evidence was either extremely flimsy or fabricated. (There was plenty to suggest that it could even have been a false flag attack.) Hanging Afzal would mean putting

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an end to the possibility of getting answers to some very disturbing questions. Outrageously, the Supreme Court judgement said that though there was no direct evidence against Afzal, it was sentencing him to death “in order to satisfy the collective conscience of society”. Meanwhile, the BJP, with Advani at the forefront (he was the home minister in 2001 when the attack took place), had begun a noisy campaign: “*Desh abhi sharminda hai, Afzal abhi bhi zinda hai*” (The country is ashamed, because Afzal is still alive).” I knew I would not be able to live with myself if I said nothing despite knowing what I knew. I called Vinod and said I wanted to write something. For the first (and only) time he said: “Arundhati, don’t. The mood is ugly. They will turn on us. They will harm you.” It didn’t take long to convince him that we could not keep quiet on this one. I wrote a long essay called *And his Life Should be made Extinct*—the title was a quote from the Supreme Court judgement. The *Outlook* cover said, in bold letters, Don’t Hang Afzal. (Of course, the Congress-led UPA government — and not the BJP—did eventually hang him a few years later, in 2013, in the most cowardly, illegal and shabby way.)

After the issue came out, the floodgates opened and once again *Outlook* was deluged with insults for weeks. But this was the other part of our Rules of Engagement. Vinod would publish what I wrote, but then would open up the letters pages for abusive responses for

weeks at a stretch. (After the 2008 Mumbai attacks, Sashi, Vinod’s secretary of 25 years showed me some angry letters-to-the editor that had begun to arrive even before I had written anything.) No other magazine I know publishes insults to itself, its contributors and its editor so gleefully. Vinod seemed to derive endless amusement from those letters. Occasionally, he would call and chuckle about the ones he particularly liked. His favourite letter after the Afzal Guru issue was one that said, “Spare Afzal Guru and hang Arundhati Roy.” Of course, he published it.

And now, suddenly, here we were, Advani and I, grieving at his funeral. I was unnerved. Perhaps it showed grace on Advani’s part and none on mine. I don’t know. I can’t imagine what Vinod would have thought.

The last essay of mine that Vinod published before he retired as the editor of *Outlook* was *Walking with the Comrades*, my account of the weeks I spent inside the forest in Bastar with Maoist guerrillas. B.G. Verghese, who recently passed away too, wrote a response to it. And then extraordinarily, Vinod published a reply to his response by Cherukuri Rajkumar, better known as Comrade Azad, a member of the politburo of the CPI (Maoist). It was a remarkable thing for him to have done. He called me, sounding pleasantly surprised at how calm and reasonable Azad sounded. By the time his reply (A Last Note to a Neo-colonialist) was published, Azad had been kidnapped in

Nagpur by plainclothes policemen and summarily executed in the Dandakaranya forest on the Andhra-Chhattisgarh border.

I had a last phone call from Vinod just before he fell ill. He said, “Listen Arundhati, I’ve never asked you for anything, but I’m asking now. Actually I’m not asking you, I’m telling you. You have to launch my new book, *Editor Unplugged*. I know you don’t do these things, but you just have to.” I laughed and said I would. A few days later he called again, naughtily. “Oh, I didn’t tell you, but the other person on stage with us will be Arnab Goswami.” I don’t think he told Arnab his plans. The crafty old fox was playing us!

The three of us on stage together. Hilarious. I’d have done it for Vinod Mehta, though. Gladly. But now he’s shuffled off somewhere. He shouldn’t have gone. I really need to talk to him.

Arundhati Roy is a Booker Prize winner. She has been writing columns for Outlook Magazine. This article has been borrowed from Outlook in commemoration of Vinod Mehta, a renowned journalist who passed away on March 8, 2015. As a founder editor of Outlook, Mehta gave space to alternative voices and was one of the few media persons who stood against the Hindu right-wing forces.

RADICAL NARRATIVE

Lose some sleep

losing sleep over my
black silk niqab, Harper

try to lose it over
missing murdered red
brown women
of this fast-fracking
land, Harper

losing sleep over my
black silk niqab, Harper

lose it over
homeless jobless
multicoloured people
of your C51-aspiring
brand, Harper

losing sleep over my
black silk niqab, Harper

lose it over
spilled oil poisoned
soil minimum wage toil
of your tarsands-producing
wasteland, Harper

by morning
perhaps we'll see the
bright BARE face
of a composite order for a
national inquiry just economy
sustainable development
UN-VEIL and RE-VEAL
itself on the
parliament hill
in your soft pink
hand, Harper.
a not-for-profit
stand, Harper.

Fauzia Rafique is a progressive author and poet of Pakistani origin. A resident of Canada, she has been writing fearlessly both against the Islamic fundamentalism in her community, and the establishment. Her famous novel Skeena has been published in three different languages.

RADICAL DESI

RADICAL NARRATIVE

"It is a tedious argument with insidious intent"-T.S.Elliot

in my journeys in buses and trains
questions like
what is your full name?
what is your father's name?
where exactly is your ancestral home?
are moves in a game of chess
where the die is caste.

Chandramohan.S(b.1986) is an English poet based in India. His poems reflect the socio-political struggles of the marginalized, the working class and the nomadic outcasts of the world who are victimized and then forgotten as nations clash and wage relentless war. This poem has been reproduced here in recognition of the birth anniversary of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar- a prominent social justice activist and towering Dalit leader of India, who was born on April 14, 1891.

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Fauji Banta Singh

I was disappointed not to see Banta Singh by the stairs in front of his house where he always was, his aged and slightly bent body supporting his weight on his cane. I never saw him without that cane. Banta Singh was known as Fauji, meaning soldier, even though he had retired from the army a long time ago.

I was off work for ten weeks due to a foot injury. I thought he might be sick or had gone to live with his younger son in Williams Lake, as he had done two years ago. When I saw his grandson, I asked him about Banta Singh. 'Oh, he died a month ago,' he said without stopping or showing any emotion. I was annoyed at his behaviour. Banta Singh had made my working life colourful by simply being there.

I also knew his son Kartar Singh, and I went to his house the same evening after work to give my condolences. Kartar Singh was busy watching TV. His wife was in the kitchen preparing dinner. Naseeb Kaur, the wife of Banta Singh, was sitting in a small sofa in one corner of the living room. With a string of beads in her hand, she was softly reciting *Gurbani*, the sacred Sikh

scripture.

Kartar Singh and I exchanged a few customary words about Banta Singh and then there was complete silence. I was hoping to learn more about the circumstances of his death, and to ask Kartar Singh about Banta Singh's favourite walking stick, which he sometimes used as a stool to sit on. I wanted to have it to remember my friend, but I didn't have the nerve to ask Kartar Singh, and he seemed bored with my presence. I was ready to leave, when he said, 'It was good to have him around the house and the hundred dollars that he paid for the little room.'

I was sad for my friend Banta Singh. As I drove home, my mind was filled with many fond memories of him.

Rain or shine he would be outside the house waiting for me, as I came around after delivering mail on the street. He would be there even when it was snowing, which he hated with a passion. From September to April he wore a heavy blue jacket, with the hood showing its red lining underneath. In warm weather he would wear the old black suit he had brought from India

years ago, or sometimes simply his khaki *kurta* and *pajama*. He had an elegant face made larger by his gray beard. It became a habit for me to spend a few minutes chatting with him each morning, no matter how late or rushed I was. I often found myself running to get to his house so I could talk to him.

Due to the dramatic increase in their numbers in Vancouver in the late sixties and early seventies, the Punjabis had become the target of racism from the local white community. In nineteen-seventy-one I was the only Punjabi postman in the area, and many white residents did not hide their prejudice. They would complain to my superiors if I was late a few minutes or let their dogs loose in their front yards. I would always look out for anything familiar. About twenty homes, out of the four hundred on my route, belonged to Punjabis. The smell of Punjabi cooking from these homes gave me a sense of intense belonging. I had special feelings about Banta Singh and his house because he was the only one who came out to talk to me. The other well-kept homes and tidy green lawns held no more charm for me

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than did the sawmill, where I had worked before the post office.

In his happier moods, Banta Singh would act like a child. Often he saluted me, using his right hand as he had done in the army, and he did this quite solemnly. One day he was holding his cane in his right hand and therefore used the left hand to salute. He presented an amusing picture and I couldn't control my laughter. To my pleasant surprise, he didn't mind and actually laughed with me. Later he would use this act to make me laugh.

One day he was holding a new stick in his hand, and his face was lit like that of a six-year-old excited by a new toy. The stick was actually an army field stool, its one end was

sharp so it could push easily into the ground, and the other end opened up to make a small seat. He met me a few houses away from his home, happier than I had ever seen him. Pushing the sharp end into the ground he opened up the seat, sat on it with his legs opened wide and his hands on his knees. His white-bearded face glowed with joy.

Jerking his head up and down, he said to me, 'What do you say now, Mister? Is this not the greatest thing in the world? This damn thing has been on my mind for the last fifty years. Our white officers used to have these, and they could sit anywhere with their asses supported comfortably, while we stood at full attention waiting for

their orders. I finally found one in a downtown second-hand store yesterday.'

One morning while I was still half a block away from his house, he came running towards me and said, 'Saab-ji, Saab-ji, you are so late today. I have been waiting for more than an hour!' He called me by the honorific even though I had asked him repeatedly to call me by my name.

I looked at my watch, a little surprised, and said, 'I am on time, not late at all; you sure seem to be in some kind of a rush today.' I walked past him to deliver the mail next door. He looked restless standing there.

'What is the matter?' I called

back.

'Since you are an educated person, I thought you would know whether what I've heard is true or not,' he said, walking hurriedly to catch up with me.

'What have you heard?'

'This letter came from the government yesterday.' He showed it to me and continued, 'My grandson read it to me and he says that they are coming to check how

much money I spend on food and shelter, and how much I have in the bank.' He paused for a few seconds, then motioned to me to come closer to him where he was now standing on the sidewalk in front of his house.

In a secretive voice he said, 'Son, I have some money in the bank. I thought that if there was any danger I could withdraw it and hide it somewhere else.' There was fear on his face as he stood stiffly leaning

over his cane, held firmly in both hands.

I didn't quite understand what he was trying to tell me, or the reason for his fear. To calm him down, I said, 'Oh they are probably doing some kind of survey to raise pensions for you old-timers. Nobody will touch your money. Don't worry about it.'

My response didn't satisfy him at all. Again in a secretive tone, which

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sounded quite comical, he said, 'Son, you don't know about these white people, they must be thinking of stopping the pension for us immigrants. They know that we don't spend much money and they do not want to give us more than we need.'

I started to laugh. He looked at me strangely as though I were deliberately being unreasonable. He said, with added seriousness and fear in his voice, 'It is not a laughing matter, Saab-ji; it has happened to me once before. I used to be in a cavalry regiment in Patiala. Oh, it must have been around 1932, three years before I retired. We Indian soldiers used to save all our pay each month, and the white soldiers used to spend all theirs. The English commander thought, 'These Indians

don't spend much, therefore they don't need any extra money.' Sure enough, they started to pay us less, and more to the white soldiers.'

I was taken aback for a moment. Then I tried my best to reason with him that here in Canada no one can look at your bank balance, and even if you were to tell them how much you had, they could not touch your money. He calmed down a little, but the fear of losing his money and having his pension reduced persisted.

Banta Singh had served in the British Indian Army for sixteen years. Though it had been over thirty-five years since he retired, the way he talked and moved reflected his army training. This led to problems with other older Punjabis, who gathered

in the local gurdwara, the Sikh temple, where Banta Singh went at least once a day. Most of them were village folks who had spent their lives working on family farms in Punjab. Banta Singh demanded special respect from them for being an ex-army man. On his part he became the butt of their collective ridicule for his snobbish attitude. Banta Singh would leave in frustration, muttering obscenities. He would continue to grumble until he arrived in his small basement room. I saw him on his way back from the gurdwara on one such occasion, and asked him, 'Baba, you seem to be in a bit of a bad mood today! What happened?'

'These bloody old people, they are rotten. They sit in the home of God and aren't afraid of anything,

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but He watches all and will make them pay one day soon. God will cut out their dirty tongues soon enough.' He kept muttering angrily, as he walked on home.

Later I asked Teja Singh, 'Baba-ji, what happened today? Old Fauji Banta Singh was really mad.'

Teja Singh, an old-time Canadian who always wore a small black turban, chuckled. 'What could be the matter, young man? Banta Singh doesn't let anybody else talk once he starts his tales of army days. He was up to the same thing today. And you know the type of person Bishna is—a real dirty-minded old man. He said to Banta Singh, 'You think you are such a big shot and treat us like we are a bunch of village idiots. Now tell me, has your son ever allowed your old wife to come down to the basement to see you?' Banta Singh is very sensitive about this issue—he started to hurl names at Bishna and ran out of the place.'

Teja Singh paused for a few seconds and added, 'You know, all of these fellows get together and give the Fauji a hard time.'

Banta Singh's marriage had not been going smoothly. He was extremely touchy about the subject and very bitter about his son's behaviour. He once told me, 'This son of mine is a real *maan choad* (mother fucker). He has ordered his mother, the old woman, to stay upstairs and never to come down to the basement where I live. He takes and cashes her cheque every month

and keeps the whole amount. The poor soul sits in a chair chanting *Gurbani* all day. I also used to hand him my entire cheque, which allowed me to sit at the table and eat my *roti* with the rest of the family. Now since I give him only a hundred dollars a month, he is always angry with me. He sends my *roti* downstairs. I used to be able to sit in the bathtub upstairs once in a while. Now I can only take a shower

if I get a chance at the right moment, since he has rented out the bigger part of the basement to white people. He owns two other homes in the city. I don't know what he is going to do with all this money.'

Banta Singh had lived with his younger son in Williams Lake for a few years. He couldn't get along with his daughter-in-law there and came to live with the older son in Vancouver. When he saw me

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delivering mail on his street the first time, he didn't speak to me right away. For a couple of days he just watched me from a distance. Then one day while I was climbing down the stairs of his house, having delivered the mail, he hesitantly acknowledged me with a slight movement of his head, and then said hello in English in a low, unsure voice.

Understanding his dilemma, I smiled and said in a loud voice, '*Baba-ji ki haal ai*, how are you?' He was overjoyed. He came towards me, energetically shook my hand, and kept on shaking it. He tapped my shoulder happily and said, 'I thought you were probably from Fiji or something. But you are really one of our own—this is great. Where is your village back home?'

'Baba-ji, my village is close to Jalandhar,' I told him, staring straight at him, wanting to know his reaction because I knew that he belonged to a different region of the Punjab. He seemed a bit disappointed, as I expected. Then suddenly he became cheerful again and exclaimed, 'It doesn't matter, and it is all the same in a foreign land anyway.'

We became instant friends, forgetting the big difference in our ages. Each day we met and talked about everything from the politics of India to the younger generations of Punjabis growing up here. He told me stories about the Punjabi people of his own age group who played cards in the local park. He knew all

the important people and the inside politics of the Ross Street gurdwara, which was close to his house. It was considered the most important religious place for the Sikhs in the entire country. Its management had ongoing internal conflicts, which often evolved into open fights. Banta Singh recounted these fights in detail and cursed the leaders for their conduct. He seemed genuinely concerned about the damage that was being done to the reputation of his Sikh religion.

He had become terribly upset when he found out that Vancouver's oldest gurdwara, on 2nd Avenue, had been sold to build a new one on Ross Street. 'Saab-ji, only God can save a community that cannot look after the important places where their forefathers have made history. I can't understand how these idiots think. Do they have no sense, no shame?' That was the first religious place built in North America by the Sikhs, in 1907.

Once, in a very secretive tone, he invited me to come to the gurdwara. 'Son, you must come to the *guru-ghar* this weekend.' I thought there must be a wedding in the family, or perhaps his family had initiated an *akhandpath*, the religious service. Just to make sure, I asked him, 'Is your family doing something special on the weekend, Baba-ji?'

'No, it is not a family matter, it's much more important. You must come.'

When I asked again, he looked around suspiciously and said, 'There

is a big election on Sunday. It is rumored that the communists are trying to take over the gurdwara. We must never let them take over the home of the Guru.'

'Aren't you always criticizing the leadership? Now let there be a change this time,' I said.

'Son, I know that these leaders aren't ideal people, and one day they will surely suffer for their ill deeds, but at least they have faith in the Guru Granth Sahib, while these communists don't even believe in God. They will turn the gurdwara into their political headquarters.'

I felt like arguing with him, but looking at his sincere face, I decided to keep quiet.

At times Banta Singh irritated me by his pretentious tone and high tales of his army days. Reacting to his boastfulness one day, I said, 'Baba, when the British massacred Punjabis in Amritsar in 1919, you were in the army; when they massacred the Sikhs during the Jaiton Morcha, you were in the army; when they hanged Bhagat Singh, you were in the army.'

He stood there, hurt and speechless at my sudden turnaround. Feeling guilty, I quickly changed the topic. After that, though, he never talked about his army days in the same tone with me.

He often complained about members of his family. He disliked the way his grandchildren behaved. One day his fourteen-year old grandson walked by us while we

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stood chatting. Looking at his long flowing hair, Banta Singh said with displeasure in his voice, 'Look at him. Look how he has grown his hair, and the style of his clothes, isn't he a disgrace? He could be straightened out in a minute with a strap, but it is a totally different game here, in this country.' In his voice, there was a sense of real loss and defeat.

His loneliness became much more pronounced when he talked about his wife. 'As long as I was in the army, she used to be happy with me; especially when I came home on my annual two-month leave. That is when we had our kids—two boys and a girl. Since then, she has never spoken to me properly or shown any affection towards me. Now we live here in the same house, but she never speaks to me. She recites *Gurbani* twenty-four hours a day. I sometimes wonder what sins she might have committed that she needs to do this.' He spoke about his wife as if he were talking about a total stranger.

One day I met him as he was returning from someone's home after a ritual reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. He looked very tired, which was a bit unusual because he was always upbeat after reading the *Gurbani*. He said to me, 'Son, I feel so homesick these days, here in this foreign land. I often wish that when I open my eyes in the morning I could get up in my village. Life was not so bad there in the fields, spending time with people that I had grown up with. I never felt like

this even in the army when I was away from home for so long.' I could see in his eyes his burning desire to go back to the village, and mused about the love a birthplace holds for people.

'Go then, for a while; the airfare is cheap these days.'

'I really would like to, but you have no idea of my situation, and the enmity I face from relatives. Everyone will cast an evil eye on my money. You never know, some idiot could simply finish me off in order to rob me. You can't trust people anymore. With God's will, I am going to spend the rest of my days in this land now.'

To cheer him up, I said, 'How about if we find a white woman for you to have a good time with, Baba-ji?' Spontaneously, that childlike smile spread on his face. Almost blushing he said, 'No sonny, why become sinners at this age? Just a few more years are left now and I will spend them singing the name of almighty God.'

After a short pause he said, 'Sometimes I do feel the desire to experience the touch of white skin at least once in my lifetime. You know, this country is really awful that way—it is so hard for a person to remain pious. Nobody hides anything. I just returned from reading the *Guru Granth* at Karnail Singh's house. His youngest son got married a couple of weeks ago—the bastard kept making noises with his wife in the next room. You know how thin the walls are in these

homes. It is hard not to have sinful thoughts, even while one is reciting the sacred text—forgive me, my dear God.' He looked up to the sky as he always did when addressing God.

We both understood that we were only kidding; still he seemed to have enjoyed my suggestion. He said, 'Come over to my basement after work sometime and we will have a drink or two, and I'll tell you some stories of my younger days. I have not only saluted the English; I have done some wild things too, you know.'

I accepted his invitation. I wanted to listen to his stories and see his small room in the basement, but I injured myself that week and our plan for a party never materialized.

Banta Singh did everything in his life that a normal Indian person is supposed to do. He worked hard all his life to raise his children. In old age, he fulfilled his religious duties by reciting the holy book countless times and praying for the well-being of his children and grandchildren. Now he was gone. I was filled with a strange sadness for my friend Fauji Banta Singh.

Sadhu Binning is a prominent progressive Punjabi author. His story Fauji Banta Singh has been reproduced here in recognition of its selection as part of Literary Landscape project that identifies landscapes featured in the works of literature by Canadian writers.

