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**How cocktail of religion and politics
culminated into the Air India tragedy**

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Cover Picture: Major Singh Sidhu, who lost his sister Sukhwinder Kaur Uppal, an 11-year-old niece and a 10-year-old nephew in the Air India tragedy, pointing out at their names etched on the Air India memorial in Vancouver's Stanley Park.

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RADICAL
DESI

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

Lessons from the Air India bombings

This month marks 30 years of the Air India bombings that left 331 people dead on June 23, 1985. This was the worst incident in the history of aviation terrorism before 9/11. Two blasts, including one that happened mid-air above the Irish Sea, were triggered by suitcase bombs checked into two different flights heading to India. One blast ripped apart Air India Flight 182, killing all 329 people aboard. Among the dead were 83 children, including six babies heading for vacation. The second blast at Japan's Narita Airport claimed the lives of two baggage handlers. Both bombs had originated from Vancouver Airport.

The attack was blamed on Sikh separatists who were seeking revenge for ugly political events in India. In June 1984, the Golden Temple Complex - the holiest Sikh shrine - was invaded by the Indian army to flush out religious extremists who had stockpiled weapons inside the place of worship. The army operation left many people dead and the buildings inside the shrine heavily destroyed. Following the attack, there were angry protests across the world, and the Indian consulate in Vancouver was vandalized by angry Sikh activists.

On October 31, 1984, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, after which anti-Sikh pogroms were engineered in different parts of India. Thousands of innocent Sikhs were brutally murdered and women were raped while the police remained mute spectators. The violence was well organized by none other than Indira Gandhi's Congress party, which claims to be secular. These incidents had enraged Sikh separatists abroad, and a year later, close to the first anniversary of the military attack on the Golden Temple Complex, the Air India tragedy shook the world. Although 30 years have passed, only one person has been convicted for the crime. Inderjit Singh Reyat has already served time for his involvement in making the explosive devices, and now is serving sentence for perjury and trying to conceal the identity of at least one potential suspect.

Unfortunately, the circumstances that led to the bombings continue to prevail. There seems to be no political will to address the reasons that contributed to the barbaric crime. Not only have the high profile killers of innocent Sikhs not been punished, they have been enjoying the power and privilege for all these years. The situation that led to the fortification of the Golden Temple Complex and the political reasons behind Sikh militancy have not been handled properly either. The Indian establishment continues to indulge in mixing religion and politics at the cost of peace and harmony, which only gives undue legitimacy to bigotry.

The crisis that culminated in the Air India tragedy started with some simple political demands of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), the mainstream Sikh political party of Punjab. Instead of negotiating peace with the SAD, the Congress that ruled India back then tried to create a wedge within the SAD supporters by encouraging Sikh radicals to take the centre-stage. Later, the SAD due to its own weaknesses allowed the Sikh extremists to turn the Golden Temple Complex into a fortress. The Sikh clergy also encouraged militancy for its narrow interests. The Congress government wanted to whip up anti-Sikh emotions for political gains. In order to please the Hindu majority, it ordered the army invasion on the Golden Temple Complex without honestly trying other alternatives to avoid catastrophe. Its direct involvement in the anti-Sikh pogrom afterwards is a simple attestation to this fact. After all, the pogrom paid dividends to the Congress, and Indira's son Rajeev Gandhi was elected to power with a brute majority.

This whole bloody experiment alienated the Sikhs from the national mainstream of India, as a result of which the Air India incident happened. Three decades later, what lessons have really been learnt from this

tragedy? Has India's political leadership really tried to do some soul searching? It appears that the truth is far more horrific and inconvenient. In 2002, a similar pogrom-like event was repeated in Gujarat, where current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was then Chief Minister. Thousands of Muslims were murdered after a train carrying Hindu pilgrims was burned, killing over 50 people. The Modi government had accused Islamic extremists of torching the train, and was responsible for inciting Hindu mobs against Muslims. In 2014, Modi was elected as Prime Minister despite his political baggage, and the fact that he represents the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party, known for its anti-minority stance. Interestingly, the SAD which has been using the 1984 anti-Sikh carnage as a political tool to beat the Congress with, is one of the allies of the BJP.

Not surprisingly, the Hindu extremists have become emboldened under Modi's government. They have been openly glorifying the Hindu nationalist assassin who gunned down Mahatma Gandhi, and terrorising Christians and Muslims. Some have been involved in bomb blasts targeting Muslim communities. Ever since the Air India days, political parties in India have continued to whip up religious emotions and polarize religious communities against each other. Shamefully, this goes on in a country whose constitution guarantees secularism and religious equality. With a right-wing Hindu nationalist government, the situation is only likely to get worse. If we really want to prevent violence in future, we need to keep an eye on India's mainstream politicians, whose policies have bred more problems while talking tough on terrorism. We need to identify real terrorists who are running the system and indulging in systemic violence and repression. The minimum we can ask our leaders to do is stop indulging in the dangerous cocktail of religion and politics which creates tension and hatred. Instead of paying symbolic tributes to the victims of terrorism or playing politics over their deaths, the politicians should be made accountable for their nefarious designs.

-Editors

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The Dangerous Mix

How cocktail of religion and politics culminated into the Air India tragedy

Oh Muslims and Hindus get united to become Hindus

leave aside the feelings of "us and them"

let's be ready for combat with enemies

why are you so down and depressed?

When Indian freedom fighter Hari Singh Soond passed away on June 23, 1958, he never imagined what would happen to the legacy he and his comrades left behind. Soond was a member of the Ghadar Party, formed in 1913 to launch an armed rebellion to liberate India from British occupation. The party wanted to establish a secular and egalitarian society in post-British India, and asked its members to keep religion and politics apart. The above verses from the Ghadar narrative, written to encourage all Indians to bury narrow religious divisions and unite against foreign rule, remain immortal. But even though the British have quit India long ago, the divisions refuse to die, and have rather become sharper due to political patronage.

Almost 30 years after Soond

breathed his last, an assault on the Ghadar ideology came on his death anniversary, when Air India Flight 182 was bombed above the Irish Sea on June 23, 1985, killing 329 people aboard. The tragedy that is widely blamed on Sikh separatists was a culmination of the bloody mix of religion and politics over the years since India's independence in 1947,

both by the Indian state and the reaction. It was an outcome of ugly political experiments that were openly denounced by the Ghadarites throughout their activism. Thanks to political opportunism, the causes that contributed to the bombing continue to prevail today. Had the ideas preached and practiced by Soond and his associates been followed, the Air India episode would not have happened. But there seems to be no acknowledgement at the level of the Indian establishment to admit its complicity in the faith-based politics that led to the crime. Rather, these experiments go on unashamedly in a country whose constitution guarantees secularism and religious equality, the values enshrined in the mandate of the Ghadar Party.

The birth of revolution

In April 1913, the Ghadar Party was formed in Astoria, US, by South Asian immigrants in the face of systemic racism. These immigrants had started moving to North America to earn a better livelihood, coming here as British subjects, since India was a British colony. They mostly worked in sawmills, farms and the construction industry on the Pacific coast. However, rampant racism changed their lives. In any event of racial violence, British officials hardly came to their rescue. They soon realized that the root cause of their sufferings was the foreign

occupation of their homeland. It did not take them long to get organized against racism and colonialism. The Ghadar Party believed in an armed revolt against the British Empire and also fought against racial discrimination in US and Canada. The party had announced that it welcomed members of all the faith groups, and would not allow any kind of debate on religion on its platform. It openly denounced religious and caste-based discrimination. Although a majority of its supporters were Punjabi Sikhs, among the party leaders were people from the Hindu and Muslim communities. The party wanted to eradicate religious differences to bring people's unity, so that a true secular and democratic republic could be formed once British rule was overthrown.

The Ghadar Party's understanding of secularism can be partly attributed to the "divide and rule" policy of the British government. The Ghadar activists and other progressive freedom fighters commonly believed that it was in the interest of the Empire to keep its subjects divided on religious lines, hence they consciously asked people to bury all differences and unite against their common enemy. There are testimonies of those associated with Ghadar movement and other radical camps available to suggest that they clearly recognized how the Empire was worried about efforts to keep Indians united, and had religious reactionaries on their side to ensure the longevity of their

rule in the occupied territory. It is not surprising that the ruling classes both in India and Canada continue to use the "divide and rule" policy by giving legitimacy to religious bigotry for long term political survival.

Soond was among those who lived in Vancouver, where the party had a big following. Here, the party was also fighting for the rights of the immigrants, who were not allowed to bring in their families and were denied the right to vote. Under these circumstances, the Vancouver-based Ghadar Party leader Bhai Bhaag Singh encouraged former Sikh soldiers who had served in the British army to burn their discharge certificates and uniforms, to sever all ties with the Empire. He was in the forefront of many social justice struggles, including the one for family reunions. Even though he was a leader of the Sikh temple, he was popular among the non-Sikhs too. The temple was built under the aegis of the Khalsa Deewan Society, a Sikh religious body formed to resist racism. Bhai Bhaag Singh not only worked in partnership with socialists, but with activists from other communities as well. He provided space in the Sikh temple for the activities of groups like the United India League that fought against imperialism.

The formation of the Khalsa Deewan Society as a body against colonialism was a radical act, as the Sikh clergy and priest class in general of that time were largely

pro-British. They openly prayed for the longevity of the British Empire and ostracized Ghadar activists at the behest of their political masters.

In 1914, the Canadian government forcibly returned the Komagata Maru ship, carrying over 300 South Asians, back to India under the discriminatory immigration law. The incident resulted in a violent fight between the pro-establishment faction and the radicals, leading to the assassination of Bhaag Singh by a British spy, Bela Singh, in September 1914. The same year, many Ghadar activists started returning to India to initiate a movement against British rule, and Soond was one of them. Britain was locked in a war with Germany, and the Ghadarites saw an opportune time to strike. However, their calculations failed as they could not muster public support, and many of them were arrested. Diehard Ghadar activists were executed, and others were detained. Soond remained under detention until 1918. But he never looked back after that, and remained active in the freedom movement. In 1933, he was involved in the high profile murder of Bela Singh, who had also returned to India and enjoyed the patronage of the British authorities. Soond was acquitted due to want of evidence, and he continued his struggle for social justice and equality even after India gained independence.

Their first test came when India's freedom was announced and

the country was divided on religious lines, carving Muslim Pakistan out of India. Muslims were forced to migrate to Pakistan, while Hindus and Sikhs were forced to abandon their homes in the newly formed country and seek refuge in India. There were violent religious riots everywhere. This was a major blow for the Ghadarites, according to the party president Sohan Singh Bhakna. True to their ideology, the Ghadar activists, including Bhakna, tried to save many Muslim lives despite threats from Hindu and Sikh fanatics. For all these years they worked hard to strengthen kinship between all the religious communities. Bhakna was once provoked to become an approver and the authorities tried to instigate him against his Hindu party colleagues. But he did not fall into the police trap. On another occasion, when Bhakna and other Sikh prisoners resorted to a hunger strike in jail after being forced to remove turbans and breeches, which are important articles of faith in Sikhism, their Hindu associates also participated in the hunger strike. Achieving the independence of their country at the cost of the religious split was too much to bear for Ghadarites. But they could not have visualised that the worst was yet to come as India grew out of the pains of partition.

Post-British India

The division brought its own problems. Even as India chose to remain a secular republic, disgruntled sections of the Hindu

and Sikh communities saw independence as deception. The Hindu nationalists could not digest how a Muslim Pakistan was allowed to be liberated, without India becoming a theocratic Hindu state. For them, India with its Hindu majority should instantly have been declared a Hindu nation. They continued their activities to transform India into a Hindu theocracy. In 1948, the Hindu nationalists assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, and they continue to glorify his murderer, Nathuram Godse. Today, inspired by the ideology of Hindu nationalism, the right wing Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is running the government. Some BJP supporters seek a new debate on secularism, while others want Godse to be recognized as a patriot.

Likewise, a section of separatists within the Sikh community felt that they achieved little from partition. As a small minority, Sikhs were not in a position to bargain for an independent homeland, and had limited options of either going with Pakistan or with India. The popular Sikh leadership decided to go with India, considering Hindus culturally closer to their community than Muslims. They suffered heavily because of partition, as a big part of their state of Punjab went to Pakistan, along with key religious places, such as the birthplace of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith.

Relations between the two communities became strained as

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the demand for a Punjabi-speaking state began to pick up in independent India. The mainstream Sikh political party of Punjab, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), wanted the state to be reorganized on linguistic lines. They wanted a Sikh majority state, where their rule was ensured. The demand was opposed by Hindu chauvinists, who encouraged ordinary Hindus to declare Hindi and not Punjabi as their mother tongue. The ruling Indian National Congress, which had been in the forefront of the passive resistance movement against the British, also opposed the demand for a Punjabi-speaking state. Following years of struggle, the present day Punjab came into being in 1966, and many Punjabi-speaking areas went to the newly born states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The SAD accused Hindu chauvinists and the Congress of inciting Punjabi Hindus to declare Hindi as their mother tongue during the census leading to the formation of the new Punjab.

Thus, a new agitation began, seeking boundary readjustments and settlement of river water distribution under new boundary arrangements. They also sought autonomy for Punjab. Parallel to this struggle by the SAD, a violent campaign was started under the leadership of a fiery preacher, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who was seeking extra religious rights for

the Sikh community. Political observers believe that the Congress, which claimed to be secular as compared to the Hindu nationalist parties, was behind the emergence of Bhindranwale, wanting to weaken the SAD politically. Bhindranwale had turned the Golden Temple Complex, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar, into the nerve center of his political activities. He wanted the Sikhs to carry weapons. He and his followers were commonly seen brandishing weapons inside the temple. There are indications that the stockpiling of weapons inside the temple was allowed to happen as part of some calculations, and the intelligence agencies knew what was going on.

During this period, violence against the Hindu minority in Punjab escalated to alarming proportions, and the Sikh minority became a target of vicious violence outside Punjab. Much like Bhindranwale was calling the shots in Punjab, the Hindu right openly threatened and intimidated Sikhs in other parts of India.

While Bhindranwale never sought a Sikh homeland, some other groups were seeking Khalistan, a sovereign Sikh state, remained active both in India and abroad around this time. It was the Cold War era, with Russia and India in one camp, and the USA and Pakistan in another. The USA and its allies were busy propping up Islamic extremism against so-called "Communist Expansionism," and aiding and abetting Sikh separatists outside India. Strongly hostile toward India, Pakistan was certainly giving sanctuary to the Sikh militants. Its soil was being used for armed training of the Sikh militants, while its establishment was training the future Taliban to oust the Soviet-backed secular government from Afghanistan. Pakistan had an axe to grind against India, which had helped in the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. Also, Pakistan wanted to disintegrate Punjab from the rest of the India, to ensure its annexation of India's Muslim-dominated Kashmir state. Punjab provides a corridor that connects Kashmir with the rest of India. In USA and Canada, the Sikh separatists were slowly gaining ground due to Cold War era

considerations.

In June 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered a military invasion of the Golden Temple complex. The army attack left many dead and many buildings inside the shrine damaged. Bhindranwale also died during this operation. This enraged the Sikh community across the world, and there were protests in Vancouver, where the Indian Consulate office was vandalized. There was a feeling that the army attack was aimed at "teaching Sikhs a lesson" and garnering Hindu votes in the upcoming general election, as no other alternatives were used to end the crisis. In a fit of rage, Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards shot her to death on October 31, 1984. Her assassination was followed by anti-Sikh pogroms in the Congress-ruled states of India. Everywhere Sikhs were targeted by mobs led by Congress leaders. Thousands of Sikhs were systematically killed with the police protection. These ugly political events further galvanized the Sikh separatist movement that gained currency after the assault on their faith. Adding insult to their injury, the Indian electorate gave Congress a brute majority in the December 1984 general election. Indira Gandhi's son Rajeev was elected as Prime Minister on the populist slogan of national unity, giving legitimacy to the sectarian politics played in the garb of secularism and democracy. Clearly, the Congress was successful in its experiment of mixing politics and religion to strengthen its grip over the Indian political system. It was

able to get the Hindu majority on its side by attacking a small minority, and at the same time, to create a political vacuum in Punjab by supporting Bhindranwale and company. In a way, the Congress was mimicking its cold war era rivals by encouraging religious sectarianism for narrow political ends.

Air India tragedy

Obviously, this did not sit well with the Sikh separatists in Canada. They asked for a boycott of anything that represented Indian nationalism, ranging from the State Bank of India to Air India flights. A call was given to stop boarding Air India planes. Talwinder Singh Parmar of Babbar Khalsa, a separatist group now banned in Canada, even threatened that planes would be falling from the skies. Close to the first anniversary of the army assault on the Golden Temple Complex, came the news of the bombing of Air India Flight 182. The suitcase bomb used in the crime ripped apart the ill-fated flight above the Irish Sea on June 23, 1985, killing all 329 people aboard. Among those killed were Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and followers of other faith groups. The diversity of India came under attack. The majority of those who died were Canadian citizens who shared joint Indian heritage, and were heading to India for summer holidays. At least 83 children, including six babies, perished in the bombing. These children were heading to India to spend vacation with their grandparents and extended

families.

It became obvious that it was a mass murder as another blast at Narita Airport claimed the lives of two baggage handlers. Investigators were able to establish that both bombs were checked into different flights from Vancouver. The discovery made on the ground at Narita Airport helped in unfolding the mystery, otherwise who knows what would have been the fate of the investigation.

In all 331 lives were lost, but only one man is serving time for involvement in the crime. Inderjit Singh Reyat has already served time for his hand in making the explosive devices used in the blasts. He is

currently serving another sentence for lying under oath and trying to conceal the identity of a potential suspect in the Air India conspiracy.

Two other former suspects, Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri, were acquitted by the courts. Other potential suspects were never charged. Among them was Talwinder Singh Parmar. Widely acknowledged as the mastermind behind the conspiracy, Parmar was the leader of the Babbar Khalsa, the group which is mostly blamed for the crime. He died at the hands of the Indian police under mysterious circumstances in 1992.

Just one conviction for 331 murders has left the Air India victims'

families wondering what went wrong with the investigation. A public enquiry has already established that the tragedy was preventable, as some vital clues about the conspiracy to target Air India flights were missed. Some victims' families allege racism, while more cynical observers believe in conspiracy theories behind the incident. According to them, this was the handiwork of the Indian intelligence to discredit Sikh separatists abroad and weaken their position in countries like Canada. They often ask why Parmar, a prize catch, was allowed to be killed in police custody. For them, the lack of will to investigate had more to do with interference by the Indian

intelligence which had penetrated into the separatist movement. These claims remain debatable, but there is no denying that the Indian intelligence had its moles in the movement for Khalistan, and the Sikh militancy was partly supported by the Indian establishment. Conspiracy or not, this speaks about the dangerous mix of faith and politics which has far reaching consequences.

The Indian state was not the only party to this, as Canadian authorities also turned a blind eye to the growing threat of Sikh militancy, either because of Cold War era political equations, or the influence of separatists on the Sikh vote bank in swing ridings. Some Canadian politicians did not even shy away from rubbing shoulders with potential suspects in the Air India case. Notably, a few Air India suspects were prominent figures in the Sikh community and commanded influence in swing ridings. There was a huge controversy when Conservative MP Wai Young was endorsed by Ripudaman Singh Malik, who was charged in the Air India case, but acquitted by the BC Supreme Court much before the last federal election in 2011. Wai Young ran against Liberal candidate Ujjal Dosanjh, a known critic of religious extremism who remains unpopular among the Sikh fundamentalists. Dosanjh had launched an election complaint alleging that the Khalsa School was being used to launch a campaign against him. Malik, who is a millionaire, was one of the founders of the Khalsa School. He

endorsed Young because he found Dosanjh to be working against "Sikh interests".

After all, the Babbar Khalsa was banned only after 9/11 and not after the Air India disaster. Canadian police and army officers and elected officials have openly attended Sikh parades where Khalistani militants are glorified. Notably, the Khalsa Deewan Society, formed by the secularist Ghadar activists, also came under the influence of the separatist ideology when militancy was at its peak. This gave reasons to men like Major Singh Sidhu, the former Vice President of the Society, to jump into temple politics. Sidhu had lost his sister, a nephew and a niece in the Air India bombing. The tragedy transformed him into a political activist, and it became his mission to oust separatists from the Sikh temples. He has been associated with the moderate Sikh camps since then.

Lessons from the bombing

Faith-based politics was clearly responsible for the situation that led to the worst incident in the history of aviation terrorism before 9/11. Right from the days of partition, Indian politicians have learned how to polarize one community against the other, using religion as a tool. This practice remains common and has paid dividends to the Hindu nationalist BJP which now rules India with a brute majority.

In 2002, the ugly memories of the 1984 were revived as anti-Muslim violence broke out in the Gujarat state of India. A train

carrying Hindu pilgrims was burnt killing over 50 people. The Gujarat government, headed by the BJP, blamed Islamic extremists for torching the train, following which anti-Muslim massacres rocked the state. Back then, current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat. Tactics similar to those applied against Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's murder were used against the Muslim minority, and Modi received the political advantage of this violence in the next assembly election. Modi was previously denied a visa by the USA for his government's complicity in the crime, but after he was elected Prime Minister in 2014, he has visited USA and Canada successfully over the past two years. Interestingly, those accused of torching the train carrying Hindu pilgrims were tried for terrorism, but those who indulged in subsequent anti-Muslim violence were never treated as terrorists.

The Gujarat violence has one notable Canadian connection. One victim of the anti-Muslim violence, Irfan Jethwa, was 10 years old in 1985 when his father Umar and mother Zebunisa, who ran a hospital in Gujarat, went to visit relatives in Vancouver. They were among the passengers of Air India Flight 182, returning to India when the tragedy struck. Their deaths turned Irfan's life upside down. His parents always wanted to see him become a doctor, but instead he ended up opening a computer business that was attacked and

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ruined by Hindu mobs in 2002. Ironically, Modi visited the Air India memorial in Toronto during his Canada visit in April. But that was not the only ironic moment. Among those who welcomed him during his Vancouver visit at the Khalsa Deewan Society-run Sikh temple was Major Singh Sidhu, who is known to have chosen a path against religious fanaticism. On top of that, Modi recognized the contributions of the Khalsa Deewan Society in the Indian freedom movement during his speech at the temple. It is needless to speculate whether he understood the society's affiliations with the Ghadar Party, whose ideology was in sharp conflict with his own Hindu nation philosophy. It is pertinent to mention that the Hindu nationalists consider Sikhs as part of the Hindu mainstream, and treat Christianity and Islam as foreign religions. The SAD, which has always seen Congress as "the enemies of the Sikhs", has a political alliance with the BJP, despite its involvement in a 1984-like massacre.

Whether the Air India tragedy is situated in the broader context of ugly politics to understand the goriness of the crimes committed against humanity, or instead used as a tool to vaguely define "terror" by right wing politicians for their own agendas, the underlying fact of the episode as a by-product of state-sponsored sectarianism cannot be denied. Much as the army invasion on the Golden Temple Complex and the anti-Sikh pogrom contributed to crimes like Air India tragedy, the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat was

followed by a spate of militant attacks blamed on Islamic extremists. It is a separate matter that human rights groups have raised questions over the authenticity of such attacks. If this was not enough, many instances of bombings by Hindu nationalist groups have also come into the limelight since 2002. Most of these bombings targeted the Muslim community, and with the BJP in power, these forces are likely to become emboldened. In the post 9/11 scenario, when the rhetoric against Islamic terror continues to grow and the list of terror groups continues to

expand, the reality of pro-Hindu state terror has not entered the collective consciousness of society. Going by the track record of Indian and Canadian politicians, it seems plausible that the ruling classes will continue to overlook this inconvenient truth, which gives them too little to survive, especially when the masses continue to elect them to power without questioning their baggage of bloodbaths and barbarity. As of now, the trend of mixing faith with politics seems to be an acceptable practice in both democracies.

-RDNB

Open letter to Indian authorities by the Air India victims' families

It's a shame that 30 years after the bombings, the Indian government has failed to build a fitting memorial for the victims of the Air India tragedy. The victims' families have been forced to write the following letter to the Indian government. *Radical Desi* would like to take the opportunity to publish it here to expose how governments often use terrorism as a tool to further their political agendas, but lack the real political will to stand up for the victims at a human level. The government of India, which has never even acknowledged the repression of Sikhs during 1984, cannot be expected to have a human heart. The Air India tragedy was the culmination of the anti-Sikh violence committed by the Indian government in 1984. The following letter was written by the wife of Satwinder Singh Bhinder and the son of Narinder Singh Hanse, the two pilots who lost their lives in the bombing of Air India flight 182.

*Friday 21st of
November 2014*

*Rajiv Gandhi Bhawan
Safdarjung Airport New
Dehli 110003*

*Dear Minister of
Aviation, Shri Ashok
Gajapathi Raju Pusapati,*

*I am writing with a
request to have a memorial
plaque to be placed at
Rashtrapti Bhavan Museum
in memory of Air India's
Flight 182, which was
bombed in 1985 over
Ireland. This request is from
the the families of the pilots
on board (Captain Narendra
Singh Hanse & Captain SS
Bhinder) The Aircraft;
Emperor Kanishka, Air India
Flight 182.*

*As such, I am making
this request as it has been
30 years and there has been
no memorial or a similar
acknowledgment in India.
On behalf of the families we
are humbly requesting your
cooperation and approval
to have a memorial plaque
placed at the museum.*

Sincerely,

*Anil Singh Hanse &
Mrs. Amarjit Bhinder*

Opinion

Terrorism has no boundaries

It was July, 2011. I was sitting with an Indian official when the story of a terrorist attack in Oslo was being reported. A bombing and gunfire had claimed more than 70 lives. This official was too confident about who could be behind the attack, and immediately blamed Al Qaeda, the Islamic extremist group locked in a bloody war with the west. His speculations were proven wrong, as it emerged that the attacker was actually white supremacist Anders Behring Breivik, who had targeted

the Norwegian Labour Party youth camp to “save Europe from Islam and multiculturalism.”

I was certainly taken aback at the approach of this particular Indian official for jumping the gun and prematurely making a judgement about Al Qaeda. But after years of reporting terrorism and political violence, I can conclude that rather than being upset at one individual, we need to understand how the popular discourse works and how investigators can be prejudiced by it.

Today when we are observing 30 years of the Air India bombings, we must also look into our own approach towards terrorism, to ensure that it is not selective, biased or one that suits the power.

The Air India bombings left 331 people dead on June 23, 1985. The crime was blamed on Sikh separatists seeking revenge for the ugly political events of 1984, a year that witnessed large scale systemic violence against the Sikh minority in India. The Sikh community had come under the microscope during that

time period, and the Air India tragedy was blamed on the Sikh separatists both by the Indian and the Canadian governments. This is not to suggest that the Sikh extremists were not involved in violence and bloodshed, but the one sided approach of the Indian establishment had almost blinded everyone in India, including the media. The Sikh extremists were being blamed for virtually every untoward incident during that period. Their situation was no different from that of the Muslims in the post 9/11 period. A year before the tragedy, India's ruling Congress party had organized anti-Sikh pogroms in different parts of the country, following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. What was done to innocent Sikhs at the time was no less than an act of terrorism, yet nobody was charged for indulging in terror. Instead, those who incited the violence were elevated to ministerial positions in the general election held after the carnage. Indira's son Rajeev Gandhi was elected as next Prime Minister with a brute majority. In contrast, Air India suspect Talwinder Singh Parmar was eliminated by the Indian police in a staged shootout in 1992. Many Sikh political activists were killed extra-judicially or went missing after being branded as separatists.

While the Air India bombings can never be justified, the dominant society needs to recognize how convenient it is to overlook state terrorism and violence, and to blame minority extremist groups and set a popular discourse against them. An

act of terrorism by a small band of misguided people or rogue elements has no comparison to a state-sponsored act of violence and terror which has a capability of breeding more hatred.

One lesson we need to learn from the Air India tragedy is that apart from being open minded about the investigation to trace out real culprits and find real motives, we must look into the root causes of political violence. Undoubtedly, the religious extremists involved in the crime must be made accountable and punished accordingly. But isn't it time for the Indian establishment to also take some blame for creating a situation that led to this catastrophe? Also, there are indications that within the religious extremists involved in the Air India conspiracy there were some moles of the Indian intelligence agencies. Why not charge them instead of letting them move around freely in the name of the so-called national interest? The Indian government

expressed outrage when two former Air India suspects were acquitted, but it has never been outraged over the brutal murders of its own citizens at the hands of the Congress-led goons. Another recent example of the Indian state's double standard is its reaction to the release of a suspect in the Mumbai attack by a Pakistani court. The Indian city of Mumbai came under terror attack in November 2008. The Indian government maintains that Pakistan-based extremists were behind the invasion. When Pakistani court recently released one suspect, the Indian government reacted very strongly, but if reminded of the delay in justice for the victims of 1984, it will get away by saying that the law will take its own course.

30 years after the tragedy, we are witnessing the growing threat of Hindu extremism under the current Indian government, led by the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party. These forces are involved in violence against

minorities. Some of these groups are responsible for bombings that targeted Muslim communities. In 2007, 68 human lives were claimed when the Samjhauta Express train carrying Pakistanis was targeted by Hindu nationalists. That incident too was promptly blamed on Islamic extremists by the Indian agencies, despite the fact that the Hindu nationalists were continuously opposing rail and bus services to strengthen cultural and trade relations between India and Pakistan. The Samjhauta Express service was started to resume friendly relations between the two neighbouring countries. When I made a commentary about this on air at *Radio India* where I previously worked as a broadcaster, a couple of Hindu nationalist callers were mad. They completely forgot how critical I have been of the Sikh extremists too. However, much to the embarrassment of the Indian agencies, it was later revealed that Hindu nationalists were responsible for the bombing, not Muslims. That incident never entered the collective consciousness of a society which is addicted to accept any kind of gossip about Islamic terrorism, and the victims of that bombing remain unworthy for many media outlets.

This goes on happening even after Indian officials have acknowledged that Hindu extremism is a bigger threat to the internal security of India, or the Canadian spy agency CSIS document has found that "lone wolf" attacks mostly come from white supremacists than Islamic radicals. The perceptions and myths about minority extremists continue to

prevail, while it is easier for extremists from the dominant groups to melt into the crowd. As compared to Islamic or Sikh extremists, how many Hindu or white extremists have been persecuted? How often are Hindu extremist or white supremacist groups banned or included in terror lists?

Often people think that the victims of terrorism want the state to react violently to acts of political violence. But that is a complete myth. A group known as 9/11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows is a good example. This group was formed by people who lost their loved ones in the September 11, 2001, terror attack and has always emphasised peaceful resolution of conflicts and opposed wars and state terrorism. Yet the governments fight against terror in their names. Similarly, I have met people who despite personal loss in the Air India tragedy have never shown any anger or signs of vendetta. Instead they have started works of charity and philanthropy. Among them are Dr. Chandrasekhar Sankurathri and Dr. A.V. Anantaraman. Both these men lost their children and wives in the attack, yet they have forgiven the perpetrators and are running a hospital and school respectively in India for the poor and needy. The Air India pilot Narendra Singh Hanse's son, Anil Singh Hanse, who is a Facebook friend, is also critical of the Indian establishment for its involvement in the anti-Sikh violence. Banu Saklikar, who lost her sister and brother-in-law, asked during an interview with me, why did then-Indian Prime Minister

Indira Gandhi order the army attack on the Golden Temple complex in 1984? Rather, the apologists of the state try to take advantage of their tragedy to justify state violence. I still remember how a Toronto-based pro-India broadcaster and author once phoned me and expressed his surprise after reading my book, *Fighting Hatred With Love: Voices of the Air India Victims' Families*. He said that he doesn't understand why none of the victims' families have expressed a desire to kill those involved in the bombing.

There is a need to accept the fact that terrorism has no boundaries, and no nationality or ethnicity is immune to this problem. It's only the politicians who set those boundaries for their own narrow interests. Instead, state sponsored violence must always be seen as real terrorism. Also, no set of victims of terrorism are worthy or unworthy. The rules to deal with terrorism both by state and non-state actors should be the same. Demonizing a particular kind of political activists as terrorists while giving others political legitimacy is problematic.

On the occasion of the Air India tragedy, let us also take a moment to remember the victims of state-sponsored terrorism who continue to await justice and closure, instead of falling into the trap of the establishment, whose only agenda is to use the Air India story or similar tragedies to pursue its political agenda in the name of the "war on terror."

Gurpreet Singh is a founder of Radical Desi.

The political earthquake in Alberta - not completely unforeseen

Few things are permanent, in life or in politics. After being in office for more than 43 years, Alberta's Conservatives were soundly defeated on May 5, reduced to third place in the Legislature while the NDP surprised most observers by electing 53 out of 87 MLAs to form a big majority. The shift in seats is bigger than the vote swing, since the NDP landslide was achieved with just 40% of the ballots cast, but the politics of Alberta have been dramatically altered. Whether this change will have some reflection in the October 2015 federal election remains to be seen, but the latest polls indicate a near-tie among Stephen Harper's Tories, Tom Mulcair's NDP and Justin Trudeau's Liberals. An interesting few months lie ahead.

One of my colleagues in Edmonton made an important point after this campaign. The election of NDP Premier Rachel Notley, she noted, is after all a political rather than a magical event. Those who viewed Alberta as a land frozen in time missed the significance of many changes in that province since 1971.

Even before Peter Lougheed swept to power in that year, Alberta

actually had a fascinating and diverse political history. Nearly every political party which has governed the province since it joined Confederation in 1905 was elected on some type of reformist or populist platform. The United Farmers who ruled from 1921 to 1935 were the political vehicle of farmers who wanted to challenge the power of the big railway and grain monopolies. Then the Social Credit party took office, attacking the big banks and "The Fifty Big Shots of Canada," promising debt protection and a guarantee of the necessities of life for all - a heady platform during the misery of the Great Depression.

Those times also saw other more radical political developments. The CCF, the forerunner of today's NDP, was founded in Calgary in 1932, and had strong support in Alberta during those years. Trade unions were often very militant, including coal miners in the Drumheller and Crow's Nest Pass districts, where many supported the Communist Party. Among aboriginal peoples, the 1920s and '30s were a period of intense political organizing, especially for the Metis in northern Alberta led by the revolutionaries Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady.

The emergence of Big Oil as a dominant factor in the Alberta economy (unlike in neighbouring Saskatchewan), changed this picture. U.S. and domestic energy corporations played an increasing role in dictating provincial policies. Social Credit became closely linked with the petroleum industry and dependent on its rural base of religious fundamentalists, but failed to diversify the economy. By 1971, the Socreds were seen as political dinosaurs, losing to the Conservatives, who were widely considered (believe it or not) to be dynamic young reformers. That shine quickly dulled as the Conservatives continued to make support for energy industry profits the basis of all key decision-making. But the booming economy (other than period downturns such as in the early 1980s) allowed the Conservatives to portray themselves as the source of jobs, growth and stability. With each decade, their government became more arrogant and elitist, but most working people saw little realistic alternative at the polls. An upsurge of labour militancy during the 1980s (particularly the bitter strike at the Gainers meatpacking plant in Edmonton) was paralleled by a temporary rise in NDP support, but

only in that city.

All this began to unravel with the 2008 economic crisis, and then last year's stunning collapse of crude oil prices. Suddenly it became crystal clear that the Conservatives had badly mismanaged the economy, scrapping the Lougheed-era "Heritage Trust Fund" and failing (like the Socreds) to build any real diversified value-added economy.

The other major factor behind the sudden implosion of the Conservatives has been the changing demographics of the province. The percentage of rural residents has fallen sharply since 1971, although the electoral map is still skewed to give a disproportionate number of seats to the more conservative rural areas.

Just as significant, while Alberta is still a much more "white European" province than British Columbia, the major cities today have a much more diverse population than in the past. For example, the 2011 census found that by religion, nearly 200,000 Albertans were Muslims, Sikhs or Hindus. In 2010, Naheed Kurban Nenshi was elected in Calgary as the first Muslim mayor of a major North American city, and he was re-elected in 2013 with 74% of the votes. While Nenshi is no radical in the economic sense, his victories illustrate that voting patterns were shifting.

The underlying economic realities of the province badly undermined confidence in the Conservatives. Since 2008, Alberta has seen seven years of increased hidden taxes, cuts in spending,

deficits, and increasing government debt. Falling oil prices led to a \$5-billion deficit in 2009, while the government helped out the oil industry with lower royalty rates. New drilling technology and "fracking" in shale deposits brought new supplies of oil and natural gas onto the North American market, with the consequence of lower prices. Alberta's natural gas exports collapsed, reducing government revenues from \$6-billion in 2007 to less than a billion in 2013. Then oil prices sank to \$50/barrel.

In this context, the moderate platform of NDP leader Rachel Notley was widely seen as fair and reasonable: an increase in the corporate tax from 10 to 12 per cent; mildly progressive rather than flat taxes on high income earners and the wealthy; a review of oil royalties; increasing the minimum wage to \$15; opposition to the Keystone and Northern Gateway pipelines; a promise to get serious about the degradation of Alberta's environment and controlling greenhouse gas emissions; more spending on health, education and social programs.

As most serious observers note, this is not a "far left" program, just a set of "sensible and long overdue" policies.

What will happen next? Only the most rash pundit would go out on any limb. The new NDP government includes many strongly progressive voices, many of them women, members of racialized communities, or trade union

members. After decades in the political wilderness, these MLAs are eager to accomplish reforms, despite the inevitable opposition from far right forces and the oil and gas industry. Notley herself springs from Alberta's old populist traditions; her late father was the province's highly popular NDP leader until his tragic death in a 1984 plane crash, and she appears to feel confident in her ability to stand up to entrenched local and international energy elites.

On the other hand, the NDP has taken office during a period of serious economic decline in Alberta, which may limit the party's options. And Notley has signalled all along that she intends to build on the present economic base - the privately owned energy sector - rather than introducing any socialist policies.

The real question may be: will big capital allow the new government to impose even the mildest of reforms? Or will it attempt to cripple Premier Notley by slashing investment and pulling out corporate head offices?

The answers to such questions will be highly revealing for Canadians seeking alternatives to the neoliberal austerity programs of most federal and provincial governments.

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Professor, P.O.W.

So afraid is the government of this paralysed wheelchair-bound academic that the Maharashtra police had to abduct him for arrest

May 9, 2015, marks one year since Dr G.N. Saibaba, lecturer of English at Ramlal Anand College, Delhi University, was abducted by unknown men on his way home from work. When her husband went missing and his cellphone did not respond, Vasantha, Dr Saibaba's wife, filed a missing person's complaint in the local police station. Subsequently the unknown men identified themselves as the Maharashtra Police and described the abduction as an arrest.

Why did they abduct him in this way when they could easily have arrested him formally, this professor who happens to be wheelchair-bound and paralysed from his waist downwards since he was five years old? There were two reasons: First, because they knew from their previous visits to his house that if they picked him up from his home on the Delhi University campus they would have to deal with a crowd of angry people—professors, activists and students who loved and admired Professor Saibaba not just because he was a dedicated teacher but also because of his fearless political worldview. Second, because abducting him made it look as

though they, armed only with their wit and daring, had tracked down and captured a dangerous terrorist. The truth is more prosaic. Many of us had known for a long time that Professor Saibaba was likely to be arrested. It had been the subject of open discussion for months. Never in all those months, right up to the day of his abduction, did it ever occur to him or to anybody else that he should do anything else but face up to it fair and square. In fact, during that period, he put in extra hours and finished his PhD on the Politics of the Discipline of Indian English Writing.

Why did we think he would be arrested? What was his crime?

In September 2009, the then home minister P. Chidambaram announced a war called Operation Green Hunt in what is known as India's Red Corridor. It was advertised as a clean-up operation by paramilitary forces against Maoist 'terrorists' in the jungles of Central India. In reality it was the official name for what had so far been a scorched-earth battle being waged by state-sponsored vigilante militias (the Salwa Judum in Bastar and unnamed militias in other states). The

mandate was to clear the forests of its troublesome residents so that mining and infrastructure-building corporations could move ahead with their stalled projects. The fact that signing over Adivasi homelands to private corporations is illegal and unconstitutional did not bother the UPA government of the time. (The present government's new Land Acquisition Act proposes to exalt that lawlessness into law.) Thousands of paramilitary troops accompanied by vigilante militias invaded the forests, burning villages, murdering villagers and raping women. Tens of thousands of Adivasis were forced to flee from their homes and hide in the jungle for months under the open sky. The backlash against this brutality was that hundreds of local people signed up to join the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) raised by the CPI (Maoist) who former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh famously described as India's "single-largest internal security threat". Even now, the whole region remains convulsed by what can only be called a civil war.

As is the case with any protracted war, the situation has become far from simple. While some in the resistance continue to fight the good fight, others have become opportunists, extortionists and ordinary criminals. It is not always easy to tell one group from another, and that makes it easy to tar them all with the same brush. Horrible atrocities have taken place. One set of atrocities is called Terrorism and the other, Progress.

In 2010 and 2011, when Operation Green Hunt was at its most brutal, a campaign against it began to gather speed. Public meetings and rallies took place in several cities. As word of what was happening in the forest spread, the international media began to pay attention. One of the main mobilisers of this public and entirely un-secret campaign against Operation Green Hunt was Dr Saibaba. The campaign was, at least temporarily, successful. The government was shamed into pretending that there was no such thing as Operation Green Hunt, that it was merely a media creation. (Of course, the assault on the Adivasi homelands continues, largely unreported, because now it is an Operation Without a Name. On May 5, 2015, Chhavindra Karma, son of Salwa Judum founder Mahendra Karma, who was killed in a Maoist ambush, announced the inauguration of Salwa Judum-II. This despite the Supreme Court judgement declaring Salwa Judum-I illegal and unconstitutional and ordering that it be disbanded.)

In Operation No-Name, anybody who criticises or impedes the implementation of state policy is called a Maoist. Thousands of Dalits and Adivasis, thus labelled, are in jail absurdly charged with crimes like sedition and waging war against the state under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA)—a law which would make any intelligent human being bust a gut laughing if only the uses to which it is being put were not so tragic. While villagers languish for

years in prison, with no legal help and no hope of justice, often not even sure what crime they have been accused of, the state has turned its attention to what it calls 'OGWs'—Overground Workers—in the cities.

Determined not to allow a repeat of the situation it found itself in earlier, the Union ministry of home affairs spelled out its intentions clearly in its 2013 affidavit filed in the Supreme Court. It said: "The ideologues and supporters of the CPI (Maoist) in cities and towns have undertaken a concerted and systematic propaganda against the state to project it in a poor light...it is these ideologues who have kept the Maoist movement alive and are in many ways more dangerous than the cadres of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army."

Enter Dr Saibaba.

We knew he was a marked man when several clearly planted, hyperbolic stories about him began to appear in the papers. (When they don't have real evidence, their next best option—tried and tested—is to create a climate of suspicion around their quarry.)

On September 12, 2013, his home was raided by 50 policemen armed with a search warrant for stolen property from a magistrate in Aheri, a small town in Maharashtra. They did not find any stolen property. Instead they took away (stole?) his property. His personal laptop, hard disks and pen drives. Two weeks later, Suhas Bawache, the investigating

officer for the case, rang Dr Saibaba and asked him for the passwords to access the hard disks. He gave it to them. On January 9, 2014, a team of policemen interrogated him at his home for several hours. And on May 9, they abducted him. That same night they flew him to Nagpur and from there drove him to Aheri and then back to Nagpur with hundreds of policemen escorting the convoy of jeeps and mine-proof vehicles. He was incarcerated in the Nagpur central jail in its notorious 'Anda Cell', adding his name to the three hundred thousand undertrials who crowd our country's prisons. In the midst of all the high theatre, his wheelchair was damaged. Dr Saibaba is what is known as "90 per cent disabled". In order to prevent his physical condition from further deteriorating, he needs constant care, physiotherapy and medication. Despite this, he was thrown into a bare cell (where he still remains) with nobody to assist him even to use the bathroom. He had to crawl around on all fours. None of this would fall under the definition of torture. Of course not. The great advantage the state has over this particular prisoner is that he is not equal among prisoners. He can be cruelly tortured, perhaps even killed, without anybody having to so much as lay a finger on him.

The next morning's papers in Nagpur had front-page pictures of the heavily armed team of Maharashtra Police proudly posing with their trophy—the dreaded terrorist, Professor pow, in his

damaged wheelchair.

He has been charged under the UAPA, Sections 13 (taking part in/advocating/abetting/inciting the commission of unlawful activity), Section 18 (conspiring/attempting to commit a terrorist act), Section 20 (being a member of a terrorist gang or organisation), Section 38 (associating with a terrorist organisation with intention to further its activities) and Section 39 (inviting support and addressing meetings for the purpose of encouraging support for a terrorist organisation.) He has been accused of giving a computer chip to Hem Mishra, a JNU student, to deliver to Comrade Narmada of the CPI (Maoist). Hem Mishra was arrested at the Ballarshah railway station in August 2013 and is in Nagpur jail along with Dr Saibaba. The three others accused with them in this 'conspiracy' are out on bail.

Another of the serious offences listed in the chargesheet is that Dr Saibaba is the joint secretary of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (RDF), an organisation that is banned in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh where it is suspected to be a Maoist 'front' organisation. It is not banned in Delhi. Or Maharashtra. The president of RDF is the well-known poet Varavara Rao who lives in Hyderabad.

Dr Saibaba's trial has not begun. When it does, it is likely to take months, if not years. The question is, can a person with a 90 per cent disability survive in those abysmal prison conditions for so long?

In the year he's been in prison, his physical condition has deteriorated alarmingly. He is in constant, excruciating pain. (The jail authorities have helpfully described this as "quite normal" for polio victims.) His spinal cord has degenerated. It has buckled and is pushing up against his lungs. His left arm has stopped functioning. The cardiologist at the local hospital where the jail authorities took him for a test has asked that he be given an angioplasty urgently. If he does undergo an angioplasty, given his condition and the conditions in prison, the prognosis is dire. If he does not, and remains incarcerated, it is dire too. Time and again the jail authorities have disallowed him medication that is vital not just to his well-being, but to his survival. When they do allow the medicines, they disallow the special diet that is meant to go with it.

Despite the fact that India is party to international covenants on disability rights, and Indian law expressly forbids the incarceration of a person who is disabled as an undertrial for a prolonged period, Dr Saibaba has been denied bail twice by the sessions court. On the second occasion, bail was denied based on the jail authorities demonstrating to the court that they were giving him the specific, special care a person in his condition required. (They did allow his family to replace his wheelchair.) Dr Saibaba, in a letter from prison, said that the day the order denying him bail came, the special care was withdrawn. Driven

to despair, he went on a hunger strike. Within a few days, he was taken to hospital unconscious.

For the sake of argument, let's leave the decision about whether Dr Saibaba is guilty or innocent of the charges levelled against him to the courts. And let's, for just a moment, turn our attention solely to the question of bail, because for him that is quite literally a question of life and death.

No matter what the charges against him are, should Professor Saibaba get bail? Here's a list of a few well-known public figures and government servants who have been given bail.

On April 23, 2015, Babu Bajrangi, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in the 2002 Naroda Patiya massacre in which 97 people were murdered in broad daylight, was released on bail by the Gujarat High Court for an "urgent eye operation". This is Babu Bajrangi in his own words speaking about the crime he committed: "We didn't spare a single Muslim shop, we set everything on fire, we set them on fire and killed them—hacked, burnt, set on fire.... We believe in setting them on fire because these bastards don't want to be cremated. They're afraid of it."—'After killing them, I felt like Maharana Pratap' in *Tehelka*, September 1, 2007

Eye operation, huh? Well maybe on second thoughts it really is urgent that he replace the murderous lenses he seems to view the world through with something less stupid and less

dangerous.

On July 30, 2014, Maya Kodnani, a former minister of the Modi government in Gujarat, convicted and serving a 28-year sentence for being the 'kingpin' of that same Naroda Patiya massacre, was granted bail by the Gujarat High Court. Kodnani is a medical doctor and says she suffers from intestinal tuberculosis, a heart condition, clinical depression and a spinal problem. Her sentence has been suspended.

Amit Shah, also a former minister in the Modi government in Gujarat, was arrested in July 2010, accused of ordering the extrajudicial killing of three people—Sohrabuddin Sheikh, his wife Kausar Bi and Tulsiram Prajapati. The CBI produced phone records showing that Shah was in constant touch with the police officials who held the victims in illegal custody before they were murdered, and that the number of phone calls between him and those police officials spiked sharply during those days. Amit Shah was released on bail three months after his arrest. (Subsequently, after a series of disturbing and mysterious events, he has been let off altogether.) He is currently the president of the BJP, and the right hand man of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

On May 22, 1987, 42 Muslim men rounded up in a truck by the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) were shot dead in cold blood on the outskirts of Hashimpura and their bodies were dumped in a canal. Nineteen members of the PAC were

accused in the case. All of them were allowed to continue in service, receiving their promotions and bonuses like everybody else. Thirteen years later, in the year 2000, 16 of them surrendered (three had died). They were released on bail immediately. A few weeks ago, in March 2015, all 16 were acquitted for lack of evidence.

Hany Babu, a teacher in Delhi University and a member of the Committee for the Defence and Release of Saibaba, was recently able to meet Dr Saibaba for a few minutes in hospital. At a press conference on April 23, 2015, that went more or less unreported, Hany Babu described the circumstances of the meeting: Dr Saibaba, on a saline drip, sat up in bed and spoke to him. A security guard stood over him with an AK-47 pointed at his head. It was his duty to make sure the prisoner did not run away on his paralysed legs.

Will Dr Saibaba come out of the Nagpur central jail alive? Do they want him to? There is much to suggest they do not.

This is what we put up with, what we vote for, what we agree to.

This is us.

Arundhati Roy is a Booker Prize winner. She has been writing columns for Outlook Magazine. This article has been borrowed from www.outlookindia.com to mark the first anniversary of Saibaba's arrest.

Wife of G.N. Saibaba fears for his life

The wife of G.N. Saibaba, a Delhi University Professor and a social justice activist who has been under arrest for one year, fears for his life.

In an exclusive interview with RDNB over the phone from India on the first anniversary of Saibaba's arrest, Vasantha said that the Indian state is bent upon killing her disabled husband. "He is 90 percent disabled below the waist and has serious health issues. He is not getting enough attention and treatment so I believe that the authorities want to eliminate him legally."

Wheelchair-bound Saibaba was held by the Maharashtra police on May 9, 2014 for alleged links with Maoist insurgents who are engaged in an armed conflict with the Indian forces in more than 200 districts. Most of these areas are in the "tribal belt", which has rich minerals and natural resources. The corporate world wants to extract these resources with the help of the Indian government, while indigenous communities and Maoist insurgents are opposed to heavy industry which is likely to displace tribal people and affect their livelihood. Associated with Revolutionary Democratic Front, Saibaba has been a vocal critic of state violence against the Indigenous communities and other oppressed groups in the name of

"The only fault of my husband is that he has been fighting for the rights of women, tribal people and Dalits (so called untouchables)," said Vasantha. "He is being persecuted for this very reason."

She pointed out that her husband's wheelchair had broken, and he has been forced to crawl to the toilet in the jail where he is being forced to live under inhuman conditions.

According to Vasantha, even the Delhi University administration did not come to their help. She appealed to the Indian Diaspora to raise their voice in support of her husband. Last year, a series of demonstrations were held against his arrest in Canada.

In the meantime, Boota Singh, a visiting activist from India, said that the arrest of Saibaba reflects the "real mindset" of the Indian state which has always tried to muzzle the voice of dissent, and has a past record of targeting elderly critics. A press secretary of the

Association for Democratic Rights, Boota Singh runs a publication named after Bujha Singh, an ultra-leftist activist who was brutally murdered by the Indian police in 1970. He was 82 years old when the police killed him in a staged shootout. Bujha Singh Parkashan covers alternative politics.

Boota Singh believes that Saibaba's case also reflects very badly on the Indian judicial system which is "biased and partisan". He argued that the Indian film star Salman Khan was recently given bail promptly after being sentenced to five years imprisonment for negligent driving leading to the death of a homeless man sleeping on the street, while Saibaba is being denied bail despite poor health. He also points out that in contrast to Saibaba, those involved in the anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002 have been given bail on humanitarian grounds. The 2002 violence against Muslims rocked India's Gujarat state after a train carrying Hindu pilgrims was burnt killing over 50 passengers. After the Hindu nationalist government of the state accused Islamic extremists of torching the train, anti-Muslim violence broke out. The current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat back then, and is widely blamed for giving a free hand to the Hindu mobs.

Sikh pediatrician who has returned from Nepal after helping earthquake victims warns against extraction

A prominent Sikh pediatrician from Surrey, who has just returned from Nepal after helping earthquake victims, has warned against the growing threat of climate change due to ongoing resource extraction.

Dr. Pargat Singh Bhurji was in Nepal where a devastating earthquake claimed more than 8,000 human lives. Bhurji, who practices at his Surrey clinic, is known for philanthropy, and has been to disaster zones in the past to give free medical aid to the victims of natural calamities. He went to Sri Lanka after the tsunami struck in 2004, and to Haiti in 2010 when a massive earthquake shook the Caribbean nation.

Having been in the forefront of an environmental campaign against coal exports to the US, he sees a linkage between the earthquakes and extraction. In 2013, Dr. Bhurji was part of the protests in different parts of Greater Vancouver against increasing coal exports through a Surrey dock terminal, and he warned the public against the long term health impacts of coal dust on communities along the export route.

After returning from Nepal and seeing massive destruction first hand following earthquakes over the years, he is convinced that resource extraction is contributing

to climate change and calamities. "What is in the ground should remain there. Human beings should not fiddle with the laws of nature and mother earth. The greed for fossil fuel and coal will only make our lives difficult."

Dr. Bhurji, who is spiritual in personal life and a practising Sikh, frequently quotes from the Sikh scriptures that describe earth as mother and water as father. He also draws inspiration from Bhai

Kanhaya, who served as water bearer in the army of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth master of the Sikh faith. The legend goes that Bhai Kanhaya served water even to the wounded soldiers of the enemy camp and never discriminated against anyone at the time of need. Dr. Bhurji appealed to the South Asian community to help the victims of the Nepal tragedy with open hearts.

-RDNB

Nepal earthquake failed to shake caste barriers

The recent earthquake that claimed more than 8,000 human lives and devastated Nepal failed to break caste barriers in the orthodox Hindu society.

Media reports suggest that the earthquake victims belonging to the Dalit or the so-called untouchable community are being discriminated in relief efforts and not getting enough help. Orthodox Hindu society is divided in four caste groups, and those on the lowest ladder are often

mistreated and denied equal rights. Nepal was previously a Hindu nation.

Despite the general belief that tragedies unite human beings, Dalits also faced similar discrimination when a tsunami struck the Indian Ocean in 2004. Dalits in the worst-hit south Indian region were discriminated against during the relief efforts. The caste system continues to prevail in the South Asian region.

Abi Sharma, a Vancouver-based progressive Nepali activist who was in

the forefront of raising funds for his compatriots back home expressed outrage over discrimination against Dalits at this time of tragedy. He raised more than \$10,000 with the help of 2,000 people of Nepali origin living in Greater Vancouver. He urged that all the international bodies engaged in relief efforts must address this issue and ensure that money goes to the Dalit victims, who are more vulnerable to such tragedies due to their poor economic conditions.

-RDNB

Manila factory disaster claims 72 lives

Barely two weeks after International Workers' Day on May 1, a devastating fire at a shoe factory in Manila left 72 workers dead. The fire was caused by sparks from a welding machine. The incident once again brought forth the question of

safety at workplaces across the world, prompting the International Labour Organization (ILO) to issue a strong statement. The ILO noted that often such incidents are preventable and called for a global action to make workplaces safe. The incident has also prompted demands for an inquiry to

find whether it has anything to do with cost cutting practices that often put workers' safety at risk, and how the big companies in rich countries are involved in getting their products manufactured through cheap labour in poor countries to maximize profits.

-RDNB

Radical Desi would like to thank its subscribers and sponsors for their support on the occasion of our magazine's first anniversary. Launched on March 23, 2014, Radical Desi has completed a year-long journey and looks forward to go many more miles further with your help. We request those who bought one-year subscriptions to renew their subscriptions now so that we can serve you better.

Film based on story by Canadian Punjabi author competes in the Cannes festival

Chauthi Koot, a Punjabi film based on a story by Canadian author Waryam Singh Sandhu, is competing at the Cannes Film Festival.

For the first time, two Indian films – *Chauthi Koot* and *Masaan* - will be competing in the festival's "Un Certain Regard" category.

Sandhu, a Toronto-based prominent progressive author, wrote *Chauthi Koot* years ago. The story is based on the political crisis in Punjab during 1980s, when Sikh separatists were engaged in an armed conflict with the Indian state. It is an interesting tale that represents the social bonding of Hindus and Sikhs, and depicts how the Hindu minority in Punjab lived under fear from Sikh extremists, while the Sikh community lived under fear from the Indian police. The central theme of the story is how the two communities survived the bloody conflict by supporting each other.

Sandhu hails from the Amritsar region of Punjab that was worst hit during the violence. He

told RDNB that he wanted to emphasize the unity of the two communities. "Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs share a common heritage, and their bonding remained intact even during the worst political times. They both were caught into turmoil because of ugly political events which were beyond their control."

Sandhu has written a few more stories on that period, and has always been critical of both state violence and religious extremism. There was a failed attempt on his life

by the Sikh militants for his outspokenness against religious sectarianism. "I will never condone state violence against Sikhs, but those who claimed to be the defenders of the Sikh faith also went against the principles of universal brotherhood preached by Sikh gurus."

As a staunch secularist, he has been in the forefront of the campaign to challenge the Sikh separatists, who according to him are trying to appropriate the Ghadar Party history. The Ghadar Party was formed by South Asian activists in North America in 1913 to launch an armed rebellion against the British occupation of India.

Although the members of the Ghadar Party were predominantly Punjabi Sikhs, it had a clear mandate to form a democratic secular republic in post-British India. Sandhu has written several books to counter the attempts to distort this fact by the religious chauvinists.

Although he has not been able to see the film, he feels that its entry to Cannes Film Festival is a big honour for not just himself, but also for the entire Punjabi community.

After Emergency Was Imposed

except that someone is dead
nothing is true of this intractable death,
all else are rumours only
for entertaining the ears
or else the coldness of the impending winter.
mourning without, celebration within,
a sadness, as of a cotton-crop picked
that was there before he died,
will with insidious intent scream
to the opening and closing of our doors.
except that graves will not change their nature
nothing is true of this intractable death,
like the second half of the rising swing
one is muffled in expectation
holding his fear and joy betwixt his thighs.
the prayer for its uninterrupted ending
pours molten lead in our ears.
this fear that Thursday will lose

to the clarion-call of Friday,
encourages some to take to killing.
the blame lies not on the rifleman only;
as much blame do we also carry
for whom collacium in the eyes
causes curfew for the tears.
except that someone is dead
all are rumours only
for entertaining the ears.

Paash was a progressive Punjabi poet. This poem has been reproduced here to mark 40 years of the Emergency imposed by the Indian government under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975. Press freedom was completely curtailed during the period, and brutal censorship was imposed. People like Paash resisted the state repression during that period.

Remembering five brave activists who kissed the gallows for the liberation of their motherland

Almost a century ago; five brave political activists, including three who lived in Vancouver, kissed the gallows for the liberation of India from the British occupation.

These five men, who belonged to the Ghadar Party, were hanged on June 18, 1916 in Central Lahore Jail.

The Ghadar Party was a group of South Asian radicals in North America that was established to launch an armed rebellion against the British occupation of India. Most of these immigrants had moved to this part of the world for a better livelihood as British subjects. But in any event of racial violence against South Asian immigrants by the white supremacists, the British officials never came to their rescue. They soon realised that the root cause of their sufferings abroad was foreign occupation of their motherland. This experience transformed them into political activists, and the Ghadar Party was formed in 1913.

Ishar Singh Dhudike, Uttam Singh Hans, Beer Singh Bahawal, Ranga Singh Khurdpur and Roor Singh Talwandi Dosanjh were all associated with this group. The first three men lived in Vancouver before

returning to India to initiate a revolt in 1914, when Britain was locked in war with Germany. While staying in Vancouver, they worked hard to enrol recruits for the Ghadar movement and became active members of the party. Uttam Singh Hans also played an important role in the Komagata Maru ship struggle. The Japanese vessel carrying over 300 South Asian passengers was forced to return in July 1914 by the Canadian government under the discriminatory immigration law. This episode had further galvanized the Ghadar movement.

The Ghadar activists thought that it was an opportune time to strike when their enemy was involved in a conflict. However, their calculations failed, as they did not get massive public support upon returning to India. Still, they tried to convince the Indian soldiers to revolt against the British Empire, and worked underground to reach out to the masses. They raised funds for weapons through political robberies. These men were also instrumental behind killings of stooges of the British government.

Following their arrests these men were tried by the courts and awarded death sentences. Their bodies were never given to their

relatives.

These men had a choice to stay in Vancouver instead of dedicating their lives for activism, but they chose to die for a cause rather than make money and enjoy the comforts of a Canadian lifestyle. Although India is liberated from the British, their struggle for social justice remains unfinished. The Ghadar Party was formed in response to the systemic racism that continues to prevail in US and Canada. Also, the party believed in secularism and social equality and wished to establish an egalitarian society in post-British India. Their fight was not just confined to independence from British rule. As a matter of fact, many Ghadar activists continued their struggle even in post-British India and tried to save the lives of the Muslims during the religious violence that broke out following the partition of Muslim Pakistan from India in 1947.

Today when the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow in India, and there seems to be no end to caste and religion based discrimination and state repression, the legacy of the Ghadar Party remains relevant.

-RDNB

