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Cover Picture : Harbans Kaur, the wife of Darshan Singh Canadian, a towering Communist leader who was assassinated in September 1986 at her home in Langeri, Punjab. Canadian's portrait in the background greets visitors in the front-yard of their home.

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RADICAL
DESI

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

Bhagat Singh and Dalits

This month marks the 109th birth anniversary of Bhagat Singh, a towering Indian revolutionary who was hanged in 1931 for killing a British police officer and waging war against the British Empire. Born on September 28, 1907 Bhagat Singh had participated in an armed struggle against the British occupation of India. But his fight wasn't confined to resistance against foreign rule. He and his comrades wanted to establish a socialist republic and egalitarian society in post-British India. Bhagat Singh and his associates believed that once the British left, power might come into the hands of the native ruling class, and vowed to continue their struggle until human exploitation ends completely. Bhagat Singh's prophecies were proven right after India gained official independence in 1947. One of the worst forms of human exploitation continues to exist in India, in spite of tall claims of development and scientific progress in the world's so-called largest democracy. Untouchability has prevailed in the caste ridden Indian society for centuries. Despite the fact that it has been outlawed by the Indian constitution, it refuses to die. Those considered as untouchables by the self-styled upper caste chauvinists are frequently refused entry into temples and other public spaces. As a writer and thinker, Bhagat Singh penned many thought provoking essays, including one on the question of untouchability. He passionately wrote that the Dalits or so-called low caste people are being shamelessly discriminated against in a hypocritical society where animals are treated more respectfully. While in jail he affectionately called a Dalit sweeper who cleaned his cell as Bebe (mother) and wished to have food from his hands. His argument was that since mothers clean up their children, those who cleaned streets and homes deserve similar reverence by society. It was a very powerful statement for that time when nobody accepted food from Dalits, an ugly reality that prevails even today. Some recent ugly developments in India show that Bhagat Singh's thoughts on Dalits are still relevant. In particular, the recent incident of flogging of Dalit men in Gujarat state by the Hindu extremists reminds us how Indian society and the country's ruling classes have failed to stand up against atrocities on Dalits. These men were beaten for skinning dead cows in July. Notably, Hindus consider the cow as a sacred animal. Ever since the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in India in 2014, cow vigilantism has grown. Often people suspected of eating or selling beef are beaten with the connivance of the police. Not very long ago, a Muslim man was lynched to death in Uttar Pradesh by goons associated with the BJP after being accused of consuming beef. These incidents only prove the point made by Bhagat Singh years ago. That the cow is valued more than a human life was proved by a statement made by BJP MLA Raja Singh, who openly justified the flogging of Dalits. Notably, Gujarat is the home state of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He used to be the Chief Minister of the state before coming to power at the national level. His supporters continue to claim that he has brought massive development to Gujarat, but his development model hardly means anything for Dalits, who are forced to indulge in manual scavenging, and are repeatedly denied entry into temples or food in many public places. Considering these facts, the fight against untouchability and caste-based oppression has to go on if we really care for Bhagat Singh, whose birth centenary was celebrated by the Indian government on a grand scale. Rather than paying tokenistic tributes to our radical heroes, the politicians should be made accountable for not doing enough to eradicate caste-system and stop oppression on the Dalit community.

-Editors

Shadows of Socrates

Religious chauvinism continues to stifle voice of reason using both state power and violence even in the 21st century

When Socrates was forced to drink poison for the crimes of “corrupting the minds of the youth” and “impiety” (not believing in the state-recognized gods) in Athens in 399 BC, the clergy would not have probably imagined that he would be reborn many more times in the years to come. As society advanced, religious chauvinists were confronted with many like him. The war

that started with the execution of the Greek philosopher not only spread across the Athenian borders, but also beyond centuries and still goes on.

Though the state and the reaction jointly eliminated Socrates physically, his ideas remain alive in a social environment that continues to be toxic for anyone who dares to walk in his shoes. Be it Bangladesh, where secularist and atheist bloggers have

been repeatedly murdered in recent months by Islamic extremists, or India, where rationalists have been targeted by Hindu and Sikh chauvinists, the pattern is a reminder that the fight is only likely to intensify with the constant growth of religious bigotry.

Thirty years ago, Darshan Singh Canadian, a towering communist leader of Punjab state of India, was assassinated for challenging Sikh extremists and their

brand of Sikhism. There are some similarities between Canadian and Socrates. Both questioned blind faith, and faced death with courage and conviction. The most striking similarity was that both were aged about 70 when punished for their rebellious ideas.

If life was like a relay race, one can imagine how the baton of reason exchanged many hands before reaching Canadian after passing from Socrates' grip. Three decades after Canadian's murder, that race continues, with more freethinkers paying the price of their lives for raising inconvenient questions.

An unsung martyr whose name was Canadian

Born as Darshan Singh Sangha at village Langeri, Punjab in 1918, he came to be known as Canadian by his admirers after having lived in Canada from 1937 to 1947.

Like many other Indian migrants of his age, Canadian moved to this part of the world for a better livelihood while India was under British occupation. Due to financial hardships and heavy taxation imposed by the foreign rulers, many Indians were forced to migrate abroad to earn a decent life style. While in Canada, he lived both in Alberta and BC, and became active in the Communist movement. He not only fought for the right to vote, but also

organized sawmill workers of Indian origin to participate in the trade union movement. Indians were disfranchised in 1907 as part of the policy to discourage them from permanent settlement in Canada. Thanks to the struggle by people like Canadian, this right was restored in 1947, the year India gained its official independence from the British. During his stay in Canada, he also raised his voice against the British occupation of his homeland.

Ironically, Canadian chose to return to India rather than staying here to enjoy the benefits of the right to vote and the comforts of a

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capitalist society. It is a separate matter that his grandchildren live in Greater Vancouver and chose to make Canada their home.

Once he returned to India, Canadian became actively involved in the Communist Party of India (CPI). He was later elected as MLA and served in the Punjab legislative assembly from 1972 to 1980. During his tenure as an elected official, he consistently raised issues that affected poor and marginalized sections.

The most challenging times came into Canadian's life with the emergence of Sikh militancy in Punjab during the late 1970s. The situation got worse when a political agitation was started by the Akali Dal, a regional party of Punjab that represents mainly Sikh landlords and farmers. Akali Dal was seeking some special rights for the Sikh minority and Punjab. While the ruling Congress Party remained adamant, parallel to their agitation a religious fundamentalist movement picked up in the state. The killings of Hindus became a common occurrence. The political critics of extremists, including moderate Sikh leaders, also began to be killed across Punjab by the death squads. The holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar, the Golden Temple Complex, was allowed to become a nerve center of the militant activities by the Akali Dal. The Congress

government in New Delhi took advantage of the situation to win the sympathy of the Hindu majority outside Punjab, and ordered a military attack on the place of worship in June, 1984. The army operation left buildings inside the temple complex heavily destroyed and many devotees killed, stirring angry protests by Sikhs internationally. That same year, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, following which anti-Sikh pogroms were organized in different parts of India by the slain leader's Congress party. These developments further galvanized Sikh militancy and gave rise to a demand for a separate Sikh state of Khalistan.

The Khalistan movement continued until the early 1990s. It died partly because of state repression, and partly because of disillusionment of the masses due to atrocities committed by the militants.

Taking the challenge to question the ideology of the Sikh extremists, Canadian had written a very thought provoking article: *Are Terrorists Gursikhs?* In this write-up, he questioned the brand of Sikhism practised by the militants, who were killing innocent Hindus and dissenting Sikhs. Quoting the teachings of Sikhism, he concluded that their acts were unjustified and against

Sikhism. He denounced their actions in some of his other writings too. He often frequented different villages in Punjab to speak against the murders committed by the extremists. For this, he was branded as "anti-Sikh", even though he was equally critical of Hindu extremists who frequently targeted Sikhs outside Punjab.

As threats started pouring in, Canadian decided to be vigilant for self-protection, but never took police security. His family recalls that he always worried about their safety though.

On September 25, 1986 he was stopped and killed right outside his village while returning home on his bicycle. His granddaughter, Navjot Dosanjh, lives in Surrey. She will never forget that on the fateful day, he was bringing some fruits for her that lay scattered at the place where he was killed.

Canadian's daughter Amardeep Kaur remembers that he was visiting her in Vancouver when Indira Gandhi was murdered, and was very disturbed by the worsening political situation back home, yet he never compromised on his stand.

Canadian's wife Harbans Kaur, who lives in Langeri, credits her husband for teaching her. She wasn't as educated as Canadian when they married. He taught her enough to read newspapers.

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With a choked voice she told RDNB that her husband was a great man who will always be known for his compassion and modernism.

Canadian was not the only one who was murdered for criticizing sectarian violence in Punjab. He was among 300 communists who were systematically killed during that time period for defending secularism when bigotry had blinded almost everyone. However, the communists were not the only targeted people. Political activists belonging to other parties, such as Congress and the Akali Dal, were also on the hit-list of Khalistani extremists. Notably, all these parties,

including communists, were overtly or covertly emphasizing national unity and integrity in the face of violence from Sikh separatists, who were getting help from foreign powers, according to the government of India. Neighbouring Pakistan in particular was unanimously blamed by all these parties for sponsoring terrorism and trying to destabilize India through a "proxy war". That was enough provocation for those seeking a separate state. From their perspective, the Indian establishment, instead of addressing their grievances, was bent upon maligning them as "anti-nationals" and "terrorists".

The parliamentary communists were from their point of view no different than others. This is despite the fact that the Communists were in principle keeping an equal distance from both the Sikh and Hindu extremists, whereas others were keeping unholy alliances with these forces for opportunistic reasons. Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) were pandering to Hindu extremists, while Akali Dal was pandering to Sikh radicals. It hardly mattered to the Sikh militants that a Communist government in West Bengal state had protected the Sikhs during the

1984 anti-Sikh massacre and were consistent in their opposition to fundamentalism in all its forms.

The Sikh radicals did not even spare the ultra-leftists or revolutionary communists, who not only denounced state violence but also separated themselves from the nationalist discourse. The most prominent among them was Paash, a radical Punjabi poet, who was critical of patriotism and state repression. He even went to the length of denouncing mainstream communists in his writings. In one of his protest poems written in the aftermath of anti-Sikh pogroms, he used harsh language against the Indian state. In one of his essays, he pulled no punches while criticizing both nationalist leaders and Sikh extremists for creating religious divisions in society. In spite of such thoughts, he was assassinated by the Sikh separatists in March 1988. A week before his murder, Jaimal Singh Padha, another ultra-leftist activist and poet, was murdered by the same group. For the record, the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF) claimed responsibility for both murders. Padha had also raised his voice against repression of Sikhs. Years later, a diary of the slain KCF leader Labh Singh was published in 1995 by Surrey-based *Indo Canadian Times*, a

Punjabi-language newspaper. The diary acknowledged that it was wrong to murder men like Paash and Padha as they spoke against the state violence. Singh, who died in 1988 at the hands of the police, had observed that even though they were critical of religious sectarianism, they never compromised with the state like mainstream communists.

History repeats

Almost three decades after the murder of Canadian, another towering CPI leader from Maharashtra state met the same fate.

82-year-old Govind Pansare was shot by unidentified killers in Kolhapur while he was on his morning walk with his wife Uma on February 16, 2015. Both husband and wife were injured in the attack by motorcycle-borne men. Uma survived, but Pansare passed away four days later.

Pansare had been under constant threat from Hindu extremists active in Maharashtra. The ultra-Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), of which the ruling BJP of India is a part, has its headquarters in Maharashtra. The current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is an RSS man. Apart from RSS, some other Hindu extremist groups, like Shiv Sena have been active in the Maharashtra politics.

Much like Canadian, Pansare

had also challenged the ideology of Hindu chauvinists by quoting from the history of Hindu kings and reformists who believed in secularism. He had authored a famous book, "*Who was Shivaji?*", about a liberal Maratha Hindu King. The Hindu fanatics of Maharashtra appropriate Shivaji, portraying him as a tyrant Hindu ruler who was against Muslims. Pansare brought out the facts in his book to establish that Shivaji was not a Hindu chauvinist. According to his research, Shivaji treated Hindus and Muslims fairly and had some trusted Muslim allies on his side.

Since Pansare had challenged an oral tradition maintained by the Hindu nationalists, the latter started intimidating him publicly. The story did not end there. He frequently opposed the glorification of Nathuram Godse, a Hindu extremist who murdered Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 for standing up against violence against Muslims during the partition of India. Godse, a Maharashtrian, is treated as a martyr by Hindu extremists in that part of India. So much so, BJP MP Sakshi Maharaj sparked a controversy by describing Godse as a "patriot" in 2014. Godse and his associates believed in a two nation theory, and wanted Muslims in India to be separated to establish a Hindu state. Their campaign partly contributed to

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the creation of Muslim Pakistan, which was separated from India when the British conceded freedom in 1947. The partition led to massive violence against Muslims by Hindu extremists on the Indian side of the border, while Hindus and Sikhs were massacred by Muslim fanatics on the Pakistani side. Gandhi, a reformist and leader of the passive resistance movement against British occupation, opposed the partition. He not only tried to save Muslims from violence by Hindu extremists, but raised his voice against untouchability that was practised by the caste-ridden Hindu society against so called "low caste" people. For these reasons, Gandhi was assassinated after repeated attempts on his life. Following Gandhi's murder, the RSS was banned for some time, as Godse was once associated with the group. Pansare's opposition to Godse's glorification had enraged many in the ranks of ultra-Hindu nationalists. Sometime before his murder, he had received threats for organizing a public discussion on a controversial book written by former police officer S.M. Mushrif, exposing the network of Hindu extremists involved in terror activities.

Mushrif told RDNB that Pansare had vowed to organize more public events to

promote his book, and that might have provoked Hindu extremists to eliminate him. He had already been consistently opposing caste system and blind faith.

Following a public outcry, the police arrested Samir Gaikwad, a potential suspect in the murder, in September 2015. Gaikwad is associated with Sanatan Sanstha, a right wing Hindu organization which has been involved in bomb blasts and other acts of violence. The group is also believed to be involved in the murder of Narendra Dabholkar in August 2013. Dabholkar was a rationalist activist who had been campaigning for laws against superstition in Maharashtra. He too had been in the eye of a storm for his activities and was receiving threats. Dabholkar was murdered under similar circumstances. He was on his morning walk when the killers shot him. The investigators

now believe that the two murders are linked. Notably, then-Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Prithviraj Chavan, had equated the killing of Dabholkar with that of Mahatma Gandhi.

Pansare's daughter-in-law Megha Pansare, a political activist herself, told RDNB that the investigation is going at a snail's pace and not enough has been done to solve the murder. She too thinks that both murders are connected.

Like Canadian, Pansare had also participated in the anti-colonial movement. Ironically, the Hindu extremists who frequently label their opponents as anti-national had never been part of the freedom struggle in British-occupied India. On the contrary, they worked in the interest of British rulers who maintained their power by keeping Hindus and Muslims divided on religious lines. It is therefore

understandable why Hindu and Muslim chauvinists remained aloof to the liberation movement, and only worked for the creation of exclusionist and theocratic states that served the purpose of the British Empire.

From kangaroo justice to selective justice

Despite many similarities in the stories of Canadian, Paash, Padha, Pansare and Dabholkar, there is one noticeable difference. While the Khalistan movement has died with many of its leaders having been killed in staged shootouts by the police, the threat of Hindu extremism continues to grow, either due to lack of political will to stop them or the complicity of the state machinery.

Unlike the Khalistani extremists who were frequently killed in hot pursuit, men like Gaikwad are cooling their heels in jail awaiting fair trial. This may be partly because the Khalistani extremists represented a minority community, whereas Gaikwad and his associates represent the Hindu majority. Even though India is a secular democracy, the police and security forces are not immune to majoritarian bias. Political prisoners and human rights activists have noticed that members of minority communities over-represent their population in Indian jails. Since Khalistani extremists were working as non-state

actors, their assault on reason was not sanctioned by the state and therefore repulsed more violently. But this does not appear to be the case with Hindu extremists who have also been involved in killings and bomb blasts targeting the Muslim community.

In Punjab, the police were given a free hand to liquidate extremists by using extra-judicial means to restore peace when Sikh militants were running a parallel government. The decade-long violence left more than 25,000 dead, according to conservative figures. On the other hand, human rights groups maintain that at least 2,500 cases of people killed by the police in a clandestine manner were recorded in Amritsar district alone, indicating that the deaths of civilians, police personnel and militants all together could be much higher.

Not only were suspected militants routinely killed in so-called shootouts, their families were also harassed and tortured by the police, who got awards and out-of-turn promotions for crushing the movement.

The treatment meted out to Sikh extremists involved in violence was widely accepted as normal by the mainstream, but there was huge outrage when the network of Hindu extremists involved in terrorist methods was smashed by a handful of professionally

upright police officers. The Indian state machinery went into denial mode, and Hindu groups, including the BJP, reacted sharply.

The involvement of right-wing Hindu organizations in various bombings came to the limelight following an impartial investigation by men like the late Hemant Karkare, who was with the Anti-Terrorist Squad of the Maharashtra Police. Karkare's findings established how these people were involved in bomb blasts in Muslim localities. One of the individuals arrested was a serving Indian Army officer. The network planned to establish a Hindu theocracy by overthrowing the Indian government. Some of the members of this network explicitly support Godse's ideology. Karkare came under attack from the BJP and the RSS. Modi, who was the Chief Minister of Gujarat state back then, also condemned the authorities for arresting Hindu activists. In the meantime, Karkare was killed during a terror attack on Mumbai in 2008. That attack was blamed on Pakistan-based Islamic extremists. Those who believe in conspiracy theories think that Karkare's murder was part of a grand design. Mushrif's book that was promoted by Pansare is about this. *Who Killed Karkare?* raises many unanswered questions about his death and the likely involvement of Hindu

extremists in the crime. Ever since Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, the pressure on investigators to go slow against Hindu extremists has grown. There are reports that those already in jail might get amnesty as the investigation is being manipulated. Besides, Hindu extremists across the country have started targeting people suspected of selling or consuming beef. As Hindus consider the cow a sacred animal, the cow vigilantism has grown under Modi's government. In most instances, police have been siding with the goons. Clearly, with the backing of the state, the Hindu

extremists have an upper hand over other extremist groups because of which the risk level for rationalists and secularists has gone up. In the past, they were under threat from the reaction; now they also have to deal with a reactionary state that operates through both state and non-state actors.

Toxic region

Babu Gogineni is a worried man today. A well-known rationalist activist from South India, he sees a pattern in the growth of religious intolerance and fanaticism, not just in his own country, but all across the South Asian region. The recent murders of atheist and secularist bloggers in

Bangladesh, the killings by Islamic extremists of humanist political figures in Pakistan who stood against a blasphemy law, and violence by Buddhist extremists in Sri Lanka or Burma, leave him concerned.

On his recent tour to Vancouver, where he came to open a chapter of the South Asian Humanist Association, he spoke at length about this challenge in an interview with RDNB. According to Gogineni, because half of the world population lives in that region, the growth of religious extremism in that part of the globe is a cause of worry. He noted that while the BJP came

to power in India with a majority in 2014, the pandering of fundamentalist forces has been going on for a very long time, even under the rule of the secularist Congress party that also indulged in cow politics for short term gains. He is now trying to bring secularists within the South Asian Diaspora together to fight back against this trend. He believes that the root of the problem is mainly poverty, unemployment, ignorance and lack of education, as a result of which fundamentalist forces in South Asian countries have gained ground through faith-based politics. He pointed out that Buddhism, which is based on the principle of rational thinking, was born in the region much before Greek civilization, and yet blind faith has grown there to alarming proportions.

Whether Gogineni succeeds in his mission or not, he made a point during his presentation at an event organized by the Indian Rationalist Society in Surrey. His lecture influenced many in the audience, which heard him say how not just India, but the entire South Asian region is sitting on a time bomb.

Surrey-based rationalist leaders are in agreement with his observations. They had organized a rally following the murders of Dabholkar and Pansare.

Not long ago, the Indian rationalists came under vicious attack from Hindu extremists in Punjab for publishing books educating people about superstition promoted by Hindu priests. Interestingly, the Indian Rationalist movement was born in Punjab in June 1984,

when Sikh militancy was at its peak. Undeterred by threats from Sikh extremists who saw their actions as “anti-religious”, they continued to hold awareness camps across Punjab during violent days. Obviously increasing their headache is the continued growth of Hindu extremism that enjoys the patronage of the state under Modi. They are particularly concerned with Modi's own views on religion and science. As Gogineni points out, Modi has been confusing mythology with history, claiming that ancient Hindu gods invented plastic surgery and airplane. This baseless narrative cannot be ignored by the rationalists, but any organized opposition might be met with violence both by the right wing extremists and the police.

-RDNB

Cow worshippers shedding crocodile tears

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had recently tried to impress everyone by coming to the support of Dalits or so-called untouchables in the caste ridden Indian society, by offering himself to be shot. The provocation was the flogging of Dalits by the self-styled cow vigilantes in his home state of Gujarat.

Modi publicly announced that if anyone is angry at Dalits, instead shoot him.

The Hindu extremists in Gujarat had recently flogged four Dalit men for skinning a dead cow. As a result of this incident, Dalits came on the streets. They decided not to remove the carcasses of dead animals and the garbage.

For centuries, Dalits have been mistreated in India. As per the orthodox Hindu social order, they are forced to indulge in menial jobs, like manual scavenging, removing garbage and dead animals. On top of that they are frequently denied entry into the temples and are discouraged from social and physical contact with so called upper caste people. For this reason they are seen as untouchables. In spite of tall claims of development and progress, India has failed to eradicate the menace.

The flogging incident happened in Una district of Gujarat, the home state of Modi, where he had previously ruled as Chief Minister. The right wing Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) to which Modi belongs continues to administer the state.

Such was the impact of the anger of Dalits that not only the Chief Minister had to be changed, but Modi was forced to break his silence.

Dalits had protested across the country, giving sleepless nights to the BJP which faces tough challenges in a number of upcoming state elections. After all, Dalits form 16 percent of the Indian population and the BJP cannot afford to annoy them.

Those who are really enamoured by Modi's offer to be killed need to look beyond his speech.

First of all, if Modi really cares for humanity, why did he never display such passion in 2002 when he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat? This was the time when his party engineered anti-Muslim pogroms following the burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims. Over 50 people died in the incident that was blamed on Islamic fundamentalists, after which

the Muslims were targeted across the state. Modi had reportedly asked the police to look the other way and let Hindu activists vent their anger over the deaths of the train passengers. His supporters often argue that he was never charged or convicted. Fair enough, but he never offered himself to be shot for the sake of Muslims back then.

Not very long ago, the cow vigilantes had also targeted Muslims for consuming and selling beef. Again, Modi never offered himself to be killed.

Obviously, his statement has a meaning. Why is someone who never showed such outrage for Muslims now showing so much passion for Dalits? Why such selectivity?

One should keep in mind that in the aftermath of the anti-Muslim massacre, Modi was re-elected to power in Gujarat. Perhaps, Modi knew that he would win the election after polarizing the Hindus against Muslims, who according to hardliner Hindus were "taught a lesson". Notably, the BJP succeeded in roping in the support of Dalits at the time of the massacre. They were used as foot soldiers by the BJP and other Hindu extremist groups during violence against

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Muslims.

The Una episode has certainly disturbed the alliance between the BJP and Dalits. If Dalits and Muslims join hands on the question of cow politics, the BJP will suffer consequences in the forthcoming elections in bigger states such as Uttar Pradesh, where Dalits and Muslims make a very strong constituency.

Modi, who is like other Hindu nationalists, a self-proclaimed cow worshipper, is shedding crocodile tears. If he really wants this madness to stop, he does not have to make such hollow statements. Instead of offering himself to be shot, all he needs is to order the police to arrest all cow vigilantes and put them in jails. Besides, cow vigilantism can be banned through a simple notification. But how is that possible when

Modi came to power with the help of such religious thugs? And how one can really expect him to get real when he himself has been spewing venom against Muslims in the past and has survived on cow politics? Ever since he got elected with a majority in 2014, the hopes of the cow vigilantes and the Hindu extremists have grown, and these incidents are the culmination of those high expectations. That Modi is fooling people can be judged from a simple fact that the police as an arm of the state has been widely seen helping cow vigilantes.

This should also come as hard lesson for those Dalit leaders who continue to align with the BJP without any shame. The BJP has an ambition to turn India into a Hindu state where

not only religious minorities, but Dalits will also be persecuted. Whatever little or symbolic the BJP has done so far in terms of Dalit issues is only an attempt to appropriate Dalit icons for political advantage. Rather than getting carried away by such fake gestures, Dalit leaders should open their eyes to what is happening in Modi's Gujarat, where their compatriots are being forced to indulge in manual scavenging and live like second class citizens. If Modi could not change this over the years in his home state who can believe in his words?

Gurpreet Singh is the founder of Radical Desi. He is a newscaster and talk show host at Spice Radio in Burnaby and freelances for Georgia Straight and People's Voice.

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Boushie killing points to racism embedded in Canadian society

The aftermath of a tragic shooting death of a Saskatchewan First Nations youth is a signal that white supremacy is never far from the surface in Canada, despite the illusions of some that we live in a "post-racist" society.

22-year-old Red Pheasant Cree Nation member Colten Boushie was killed near North Battleford on August 9, after the car in which he was a passenger apparently entered a farmyard. Gerald Stanley, a 54-year-old farmer, has been charged with second-degree murder.

Another passenger, Eric Meechance, told the CBC that after the car drove into the farm for help with a flat tire, a man with a gun shattered the vehicle's front window while swearing at them. Meechance said that as he and another occupant fled, they heard shots and kept running. Boushie died in the car, apparently the victim of a shot to the head.

As the investigation began, outbursts of racism quickly erupted against Boushie and his companions on social media outlets. Even the premier of Saskatchewan, Brad Wall, had to appeal for an end to the hate campaign.

At the same time, fundraising efforts were immediately launched to help Gerald Stanley's legal defence, including a steak night at a nearby hotel. One of the farmer's neighbours told CBC that "Nobody should have died, but we knew it was going to come to this. Things are out of control."

That sentiment seems to have been shared by the local RCMP, which at first appeared to put the blame on the First Nations youth who were attacked. A news release issued by RCMP after the shooting said that people in the vehicle were under investigation for theft and were taken into custody. Within a couple of days, they had been released without charge.

A statement from the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN, formerly the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations) called the RCMP news release "prejudicial" and "biased". The FSIN is demanding a review.

"The people of this province and this country deserve an immediate strategy to be put in place by all levels of leaders in order to feel safe, including the assurance that this

tragedy will be investigated for what it is, a crime based on race," FSIN vice-chief Kimberly Jonathan. "Colten Boushie deserves justice and anything less is unacceptable."

FSIN Chief Bobby Cameron said the RCMP "provided just enough prejudicial information for the average reader to draw their own conclusions that the shooting was somehow justified. The messaging in an RCMP news release should not fuel racial tensions."

Boushie's family members were not told about Stanley's first court appearance in North Battleford on August 11. They said they would have made the trip to attend court.

While the RCMP and the Premier went into damage control mode, others were raising questions about Saskatchewan's colonial history and its effects. One of those interviewed by the CBC, North Battleford indigenous lawyer Eleanore Sunchild, points out that it took 125 years until the provincial government stopped calling Cree Chief Poundmaker's peaceful requests in the spring of 1885 to feed his starving people the "siege" of Fort Battleford. Wikipedia still refers to the "looting of

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Battleford", illustrating the depth of historic racism in Saskatchewan, which has 15% First Nations and Metis residents among its total population of one million.

My own grandparents and parents were all from Saskatchewan, where I was also born before the family moved to Alberta. My father's grandfather Solomon Hamelin was among the Metis people of the Northwest who took "scrip" back on the late 19th century, accepting a pittance for their lands as the expanding Canadian colonial state pushed indigenous peoples onto tiny reservations and their children into the infamous residential schools. When I worked in Saskatchewan during the 1980s and early '90s, I learned that racism remained alive and well. Shortly after my arrival, a prominent trade union leader told me a typical story from that time period. Travelling on vacation during one hot summer in northern Saskatchewan, Bill Gilbey and his wife Anne stopped for a cold drink in the town of La Ronge, which is largely Metis and Cree. Entering a beer parlour, they saw several tables of noisy drinkers on one side of the L-shaped room, and a much quieter group of patrons at a few tables on the other end. They took a table on the quiet side and ordered their beers, only to have the manager come over to ask

them to move. Why? Because they had taken seats on the Indian side, not among the whites. Bill and Anne had spent a lifetime standing up against bosses, bigots and right-wing politicians. They told the manager to get stuffed (or something less polite), and proceeded to savour their cold beers among some new friends who enjoyed the little confrontation.

Not long afterward, I attended public hearings on racism in the Regina police force, sparked by the frequent use of police dogs against indigenous youth. A canine training expert from the United States provided chilling testimony that police dogs will often pick up on the internalized prejudices of officers, leading to more vicious and violent take-downs of indigenous or Black "suspects". The inquiry subsequently ordered important changes in the use of police canines.

In another case, my friend Mary Pitawanakwat, an Ojibway woman, had to wage a decade long struggle against racist discrimination and sexist harassment which led to her being fired from a federal government public service job in Regina. Mary finally won a landmark settlement, and her case exposed how even among "liberal-minded" people, racism poisoned workplace relations. Sadly, Mary died of cancer after her victory, possibly related to the stress of her struggle for justice.

The Colten Boushie case brought back many such memories. The knee-jerk reaction by some that the accused farmer had a "right" to start shooting "trespassers" shows that prejudice and bigotry remain deeply embedded in our society.

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Remembering Jatindra Nath Das who died for the rights of political prisoners

This month marks the 87th death anniversary of a revolutionary who sacrificed his life for the rights of political prisoners.

Jatindra Nath Das was born in Calcutta, Bengal state of British-occupied India in 1904. He became involved in the anti-colonial movement during his college years. He was more inclined to liberate India from the British than studies, and even defied his father who wanted him to stay away from political activism and rather be a careerist. Because of stiff opposition from his father, he left home and tried to live independently by tutoring kids.

Das also decided to remain unmarried to dedicate his entire life for the cause. He participated in both the passive resistance movement against the British, and later the armed struggle. He believed in supporting the domestic economy and boycotted goods made by British industry.

When Das was arrested in 1925 for his political activities, he launched a hunger strike to protest against the ill treatment meted out to the prisoners. He had a scuffle with an officer who was rude and disrespectful to him and others. That strike went on for twenty-three

days, forcing the jail officials to apologize. This was a major victory for Das.

During later years, he helped revolutionaries in making bombs. He was approached for this purpose by Bhagat Singh, a towering Indian radical activist. Bhagat Singh and his group believed that India could only be liberated through armed insurgency. The group was responsible for murdering a British police officer in Lahore. Das was arrested in connection with that case in June 1929 and sent to Lahore, far away from

Calcutta.

Once in Lahore jail, all the revolutionaries decided to launch a hunger strike against the discriminatory attitude of the jail officials against Indian prisoners. They had noticed that as compared to European prisoners, they were given second class treatment. This was enough provocation for the rebels to launch a hunger strike.

Das remained adamant not to break his fast unless all the demands of political prisoners were met. He continued his fast for 63 days, leading to his

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death. In order to break his fast, jail officials tried to feed him forcibly through a tube pushed into his nose, because of which he died on September 13, 1929.

Before he passed away he emphasized people's unity to fight back against colonial power. He categorically said that he is not just a Bengali, as he belongs to the entire nation. He was dead against regional chauvinism.

His death galvanized the freedom movement, especially among the youth. Both Hindus and Muslims came out to give him a tearful adieu when his body was transported from Lahore jail to Calcutta. People came out in thousands for a last glimpse of their hero at almost every major railway station along the route.

Thanks to the struggle of men like Das, the British were forced to quit India in 1947, but their fight is not over yet, as repression on political prisoners continue in India.

Only recently, disabled political activist Prof. G.N. Saibaba was arrested and interned in jail under inhuman conditions. Others who are being indefinitely held in jails as under-trials. So much so, the political activists continue to be killed and tortured outside jail by the security forces. Staged shootouts of political dissidents are a common occurrence.

It is pertinent to mention that

from Sharmila has recently ended her 16-year-long hunger strike against the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which gives sweeping power to the Indian army in so-called disturbed areas, such as Kashmir and Manipur where people are fighting for the right to self-determination. In 2000, security forces killed ten civilians in Manipur, forcing Sharmila to start her hunger strike. She has been repeatedly held for attempting suicide, and has also been subjected to forced feeding. While she continued the world's longest political

hunger strike with courage, she has now decided to give up her fast even as AFSPA still continues to exist.

In Punjab too, Surat Singh Khalsa, an elderly Sikh man, has been on fast seeking the release of Sikh political prisoners detained indefinitely.

Das's legacy has an international significance too, as Palestinian prisoners have also been using this tactic as a political weapon in the face of Israeli aggression. As long as state violence goes on across the world, Das will remain relevant.

-RDNB

The Untouchable

Our country is in a really bad shape; here the strangest questions are asked, the foremost concerns the untouchables, who count 6 crores in population of 30 crores. For instance :-

Would the contact with an untouchable mean defilement of an upper caste?

Would the gods in the temples, not get angry by the entry of untouchables there?

Would the drinking water of a well not get polluted if the untouchables drew their water from the same well?

That these questions are being asked in the twentieth century, is a matter which makes our heads hang in shame.

We Indian boast of our spiritualism, but then, we avoid accepting every human being as a fellow being just like ourselves. Western people on the other hand, who carry a reputation of being money minded, had unequivocally affirmed their faith in the principle of equality. This they did during the revolutions in America and France and above all in Russia, these days which is committed to the extension of this principle to all aspects of life and to ending of discriminations in any form whatsoever, thereby fulfilling the ideals of May Day declaration. But we Indians on our part who never tire of boasting about our gods and godliness are, yet seriously

debating whether to permit the untouchables to wear the sacred thread or the *janeu* and whether the untouchables be permitted to read *Vedas / Shastras*. We often complain about our maltreatment in other countries, and particularly when we are maltreated by the whites, do we have any moral right to voice such a protest?

In 1926, Sindhi Muslim gentleman, Mr. Nur Mohd member of Bombay Legislative Council aptly remarked:-

"If the Hindu society refuses to allow other human beings, fellow creatures at that, to attend public schools, and if The president of the local board representing so many lakh of people, in his house, refuses to allow his fellows and brothers, the elementary human right of having water to drink, what right have they to ask for more rights from the bureaucracy? Before we accuse the people coming from other lands, we should see how people...

how can we ask for greater political rights when (we ourselves) deny elementary rights of human beings?"

How true! But since this had been said by a Muslim, Hindus lost no time in alleging that the Muslim's real intention was to convert the untouchables to Islam and thus assimilate them into their own brotherhood. But then, it amounted to an open admission of the harsh truth--

that if you (the Hindus) treat them worse than your cattle, they shall desert you, join to the fold of other religions where they hope to enjoy more rights, where they are treated as fellow beings.

Would it not then be pointless to blame the Christians and Muslims, that they were undermining Hinduism?

How fair and true! Yet the Hindus tremble in anger on hearing this plain truth. In any case, it had shaken Hindus from their complacency in the matter.

Orthodox Brahmins too started re-thinking about it, also joined by some self-proclaimed reformers. At Patna a gala Hindu meet was held. Lala Lajpat Rai, known for his longstanding sympathy for the untouchables was presiding. A lot of hot arguments were exchanged as to whether the untouchables are eligible to wear sacred thread, the *janeu*? Could they read *Vedas / Shastras*? A number of social reformers lost their temper but Lala ji was able to persuade them to compromise on these two matters and thereby saved the prestige of Hindu religion; otherwise, what would have been the consequences?

Just imagine how shameful! Even a dog can sit in our lap, it can also move freely in kitchen but if a fellow human touches you, your *dharma* is endangered. So much so, even a reputed social reformer like Pandit

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Malviya ji, known for his soft corner for the untouchables, first agrees to be publicly garlanded by a sweeper, but then afterwards regards himself to be polluted till he bathes and washes those clothes. How ironical! In the temples meant for worshipping god, who lives in us all, once a poor man enters it, it gets defiled and god gets annoyed. When this is the state of affairs within the Hindu fold, does it behave us to quarrel and fight in the name of the Brotherhood? Above all, this kind of our approach to the question amounts of an ingratitude of the degree; those who provide us the comforts by doing menial jobs for us, we shun them. We could worship even animals, but would not tolerate fellow humans to sit beside us.

This is an issue of hot debate these days, the poor creatures getting special attention in this way. In the context of our advance towards national liberation, the problem of communal representation (seats in the legislatures allotted in proportion to Hindu/ Sikh/ Muslim population) may not have been beneficial in any other manner but at least Hindu / Muslim / Sikhs are all striving hard to maximize their own respective quota of seats by attracting the maximum number of untouchables to their own respective folds. Accordingly Muslims started by providing them equal rights after converting them to Islam.

This naturally hurt the Hindus. Bitterness mounted, riots too broke out. By and by Sikhs, too

woke up lest they be left behind in this race. They too started administering *Amrit*; tension mounted between Sikhs and Hindus over the removal of *janeu* or hair shaving. All in all, all the three are trying to out do the others, resulting in widespread disturbances. Christians sitting on the fence are quietly consolidating their hold.

Be as it may, this turmoil is certainly helping us to move towards the weakening of the hold of untouchability.

As for themselves, when they discovered that all this great turmoil was on their account and Hindus / Muslims / Sikhs, all were trying to profit at their cost, they have also started thinking, "Why should we not organize on our own?" No one is certain whether they are doing so as a result of official prompting or at their own but once this line of thinking had taken roots, certainly this trend is being fully backed up by official quarters. "Adi Dharam Mandal" and the like are the end result of this trend.

Here, the basic question arises, how precisely can we solve this tangle? The answer is quite obvious; above all, it needs to be settled for good, that all humans are equal without distinctions of birth or vocation. In other words since someone is born in a poor sweepers' family, he shall continue cleaning toilets all his life and thus getting deprived of all chances of progress in life, all this nonsense. Historically speaking, when our Aryan ancestors nurtured these practices of discrimination towards these strata of society,

shunning all human contact with them by labeling them as menials, and assigning all the degrading jobs to them, they also, naturally started worrying about a revolt against this system. All this is the result of your past sins; what can be done about it? Bear if silently! and with such kinds of sleeping pills, were they able to buy peace for quite some time. All the same they were guilty of a great sin on this account, since this amounted to the negation of core human values like self-esteem and self-reliance; a grossly cruel conduct by all means. Yet present is the moment of its atonement.

In a broader social perspective, untouchability had a pernicious side-effect; people in general got used to hating the jobs which were otherwise vital for life. We treated the weavers who provided us cloths as untouchable. In U.P. water carriers were also considered untouchables. All this caused tremendous damage to our progress by undermining the dignity of labour, especially manual labour. We have thus to accept it, once for all, that in order to move forward we have to give up either considering or calling them untouchables.

Everything else shall fall in place by itself.

In this regard strategy adopted by Naujwan Bharat Sabha and the Youth conference is, most apt--to seek forgiveness from those brethren, whom we have been calling untouchables by treating them as our fellow beings, without making them go through conversion ceremonies

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of Sikhism, Islam or Hinduism, by accepting food / water from their hands. On the other hand quarrelling among ourselves in the race to win them over, without restoring to them their human dignity is futile.

But the moment we went to villages with our message of human equality and brotherhood mentioned above, Government agents started inciting the Jat community saying that this would embolden these menials to refuse serving you. This was sufficient to provoke the jats, to oppose our efforts in the right direction.

But the upper castes should also realise that their own status in life cannot change for the better as long they persist in considering these people as inferiors, calling them menials, and keep them under their heels. It is argued, they are unclean. The harsh truth is that they are poor; remove their poverty and they shall be clean. Don't we find that the poor even among the upper castes are no less unclean? Besides doing unclean jobs is no bad; for example mothers perform all the unclean duties for their children. Do they become unclean?

However, ultimately the problem can not be satisfactorily solved unless and until untouchable communities themselves unite and organize. We regard their recent uniting to form their distinct identity, and also demanding representation equal to Muslims in legislatures, being equal to them in number, is a move in the right direction. Either reject communal representation altogether, else give these

people too their due share! In principle, Councils, Assemblies are duty bound to ensure full and free access for all these communities to schools, colleges, wells and roads; that too not only on paper but by actually accompanying them to wells, schools and get them admitted there. But can these legislatures, where a lot of hue and cry is raised even over a bill to ban child marriages, on the grounds that it shall be a threat to their religion, dare to bring the untouchables to their own level on their own? No, never, that is why we plead that they must persist in pressing for their own distinct representation in legislatures in proportion to their numerical strength. We mince no words in proclaiming: Arise! So called untouchables, the real sustainers of life, awake and reflect over your past, you were the backbone of Guru Gobind Singh's army. Shivaji was able to achieve all that with your participation which made him ever shining in history. Your sacrifices are worthy of being embedded in golden letters. The way in which you sustain us and add to our comforts ought to make us feel grateful to you. It is we who fail to appreciate. The land Alienation Act (banning transfer of land to non-agriculturist communities, defined as per caste) does not permit you to buy land ever if you manage the necessary amount of cost. The way you are being oppressed had prompted Miss Mayo of U.S.A. to label you "less than man." As a matter of fact, without your own efforts, you shall not able to move ahead.

"Those who would be free must themselves strike the first blow." It must be kept in mind that every one belonging to the privileged class, strives to enjoy his own rights, but would try his utmost to keep on oppressing those below him, and keeping the underprivileged under his heel. Thus might is held to be right. Then waste no time and unite to stand on your own feet and challenge the existing order of society. Let it then be seen as to who dares to deny to you your due. Do not be at the mercy of others and have no illusions about them. Be on guard so as not to fall in the trap of officialdom, because far from being your ally it seeks to make you dance on its own tunes. The capitalist bureaucratic combine is, truly speaking responsible for your oppression and poverty. Hence always shun it. Be on guard about its tricks. This is then the way out. You are the real working class. Workers unite you have nothing to lose but your chains. Arise and rebel against the existing order. Gradualism and reformism shall be of no avail to you. Start a revolution from a social agitation and gird up your loins for political economic revolution. You and you alone are the pillars of the nations and its core strength. Awake, O sleeping lions! Rebel, raise the banner of revolt.

Bhagat Singh was a towering Indian revolutionary. This essay has been reproduced here to mark his birth anniversary that falls on September 28 and to draw attention of our readers to the situation of Dalits in India, which remains unchanged in many ways.

