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**Cover Picture:** Portrait of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar made by Varinder Dabri.

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**RADICAL**  
DESI

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

*~ Desmond Tutu*

## Where is Ambedkar's India?

December 6th marks the 58<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a towering social justice activist and an undisputed intellectual of India. An architect of the Indian Constitution which enshrines secularism and democracy, Ambedkar has won international recognition over the years for leading the movement for liberation of the so called “untouchables” or Dalits in caste-ridden Indian society.

Born in a depressed class of the Mahar community on April 14, 1891, he started facing caste-based discrimination in the early years of his life. His family followed the sect founded by Kabir, a revolutionary saint and poet of the 16<sup>th</sup> century who opposed the rituals and inhumanity of the caste system. Young Ambedkar was often ridiculed and harassed at school by those belonging to the “upper castes”. So much so he was denied the right to study Sanskrit, a language reserved by the priest class for itself. The barbers refused to give him a hair cut. Despite all odds, he rose up to become a well-read scholar after studying in the US and London. Upon coming back to India, even as he was doing a respectable white collar job, he continued to endure humiliation both at the hands of his colleagues and subordinates.

He organized the depressed classes not only to fight for equal rights, but also encouraged them to educate themselves to break the shackles of slavery and gain political power. His parallel struggle against caste-based oppression

coincided with the independence struggle launched by the mainstream political leadership of India against the British occupation of their homeland. Unfortunately, the Indian leadership that was mainly in the hands of the dominant caste groups failed to recognize the urgency to challenge this centuries-old inhuman tradition of orthodox Hindu society. They lacked the political will to show resistance against such practices. Ambedkar bargained for special rights for the oppressed groups with the British government, but always believed that the people of India would be better off if they won the right to choose their own government through a democratic process. He publicly challenged the ban on the entry of Dalits in Hindu temples, and he fought against social codes that barred Dalits from taking water from public pools and wells. A believer in scientific thinking, he discouraged his people from practising blind faith. To give voice to Dalits, he launched a journal and a political party. These actions instilled self-confidence in the Dalit community that respectfully addressed Ambedkar as Baba Sahib. The community that was repressed for centuries had a new messiah for whom they continue to chant the slogan of *Jai Bhim* (Victory to Bhimrao). Thanks to his rigorous efforts, the mainstream Indian leadership slowly started recognizing untouchability as a social evil, but still shied from challenging the caste system and the Hindu norms that sanctioned it.

After India gained independence in 1947, Ambedkar was appointed the law minister and

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given the responsibility to write the Indian Constitution that bans untouchability and guarantees equal rights to everyone. He also wanted to amend the Hindu code bill to ensure equal rights for women. However, he faced stiff opposition from orthodox Hindus for doing so. These bottlenecks forced him to quit the job. Before he passed away in 1956, Ambedkar had announced that though he was born Hindu, he would not die a Hindu. He had embraced Buddhism and encouraged his followers to do the same to free themselves from caste-based discrimination. He was convinced that caste system had crept into other modernist religions of India, such as Islam, Christianity and Sikhism too.

It's a shame that in spite of a rich legacy left by Ambedkar in the form of a Constitution that defines India as world's largest secular democracy, his home country is not as the deceased leader wanted to see it. The untouchability against which he fought throughout his life continues to prevail in Indian society. Many Hindu temples still deny entry to Dalits. The most recent example of the brutality of this system was that idols inside a temple in Bihar were washed to "purify" them following the visit of a Dalit Chief Minister of the state. Sexual violence and systemic exploitation against Dalit women is almost a daily occurrence, particularly in rural India. Manual scavenging by Dalit women still goes in India, despite a ban and tall claims of development and progress.

The secularism which is one of the main pillars of the Indian political system remains under threat, not only from non-state actors, but from the establishment itself. The current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who rode to power with

a brute majority given to his Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) by voters, was responsible for the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat. The BJP has time and again played sectarian politics by polarizing Hindus and whipping up their emotions against religious minorities and Dalits. Many BJP leaders wish to see pluralist Indian society turned into a Hindu state. Not surprisingly, the BJP is opposed to religious conversions which are common among Dalits. Notably, on December 6, 1992, when Indians were paying tributes to Ambedkar, goons led by the BJP razed an ancient mosque in Ayodhya. There is no denying that it was a direct attack on the doctrine of Ambedkar. The BJP still claims that the mosque was built there by the Islamic rulers after demolishing a temple built at the birthplace of Lord Rama. Ever since that incident, the communal environment of India has remained disturbed, culminating in the Gujarat violence of 2002. That anti-Muslim massacre followed the burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims from the disputed site of Ayodhya, where the BJP wants to build a grand temple. Over 50 passengers died in the fire that engulfed the train. The Modi government in Gujarat at the time blamed Islamic fundamentalists for the incident.

Mere symbolic tributes to Ambedkar on his death anniversary are not enough. There is a need to build an India of Ambedkar's dream where there is no room for caste-based oppression, sexual violence, blind faith or religious intolerance.

**-Editors**

### Jai Bhim

Ambedkarism gains popularity in North America, but his doctrine remains under threat from the Hindu right in India

On December 6, 1992, followers of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution that guarantees religious freedom, were busy paying tributes to their beloved leader. Meanwhile, Hindu extremists had gathered in Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Rama, with a mission to demolish an ancient mosque. With the first stroke that brought down the domes of the structure, the doctrine of Ambedkar came under assault. What can be more ironical than the chosen day? The date that marked the death anniversary of a great Indian scholar, one of the builders of secularist India, will also go down in history as a day of shame for the act of sacrilege committed in the name of faith.

Almost a quarter-century later, when India gears up to observe the 58<sup>th</sup> death

anniversary of Ambedkar, the forces that demolished the Ayodhya mosque have ascended to power under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party which now enjoys a brute majority in the lower house of the Indian parliament, was instrumental behind the Ayodhya episode which became a major turning point in Indian politics. The BJP rode to power in May this year with an open mandate to build a Rama temple at the controversial site in its election manifesto.

The ancient mosque was built by Islamist rulers under Babar. The BJP continues to claim that it was constructed after demolishing a Hindu temple that once stood at the birthplace of their most revered lord. The BJP had started organizing its cadre for the act much earlier, and finally in 1992 thousands of its supporters gathered at the



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disputed site and demolished it in the presence of top party leaders, including former Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani. This was allowed even though the Congress party, which boasts itself as a secular alternative to the BJP, was in power in New Delhi. The BJP government in the state where Ayodhya is located was dismissed as a result of this incident. Since then, the BJP has continued to march ahead even as the country witnesses repeated violence between Hindus and Muslims. A series of bomb blasts in Mumbai and subsequent anti-Muslim riots engineered by Hindu fanatics followed the Ayodhya incident. The worst culmination of the happenings in Ayodhya came in 2002 when a train carrying Hindu pilgrims from the disputed site caught fire in Gujarat, where Modi was the Chief Minister. Over 50 Hindus died, and the Modi government blamed Muslim fundamentalists for torching the train. An anti-Muslim pogrom followed, orchestrated by the ruling BJP.

Modi was denied a US visa in 2005 for the massacre of Muslims. However, as the new PM, he was given a warm welcome in the US this year. Interestingly, Modi had showered praises on Ambedkar during his election campaign. While some saw it as simple gesture of respect for an undisputed intellectual and leader, others think it was a deliberate attempt to appropriate Ambedkar to garner the Dalit vote bank. Whatever may be the most convincing explanation, the fact remains that Ambedkar was critical of Hindu orthodoxy. That Ambedkar and Hindu nationalists were in constant conflict cannot be denied. Even in his death Ambedkar has always haunted Hindu supremacists.

Ambedkar was born into a Mahar family that belonged to the depressed Dalit caste that

was marginalized by the orthodox Hindu society. He began experiencing untouchability during the early years of his life. His family followed the sect of Kabir, a revolutionary 16<sup>th</sup> century saint who opposed the caste-system imposed by Hindu society. Ambedkar grew up as a dedicated social justice activist, under the influence of the teachings of Kabir and also due to his own hardships. Throughout his life he fought against the caste system and the conservative brand of Hinduism that justified such evils. Not only did he organize his followers to challenge the caste-based discrimination by temple priests, but even the caste segregation practised in public places. He tried to empower the weak and downtrodden through the constitution. His most provocative statement came in “Annihilation of Caste”, which he wrote in 1935 for a reformist Hindu sect that invited him to speak against the caste system. In this paper, Ambedkar suggested that the Hindu scriptures that preach the caste system should be blown up with dynamite. His talk had to be cancelled following pressure from the fanatical Hindu lobby. Before his death, he embraced Buddhism and renounced Hinduism, a very radical political action of its time. At every step he was criticized and cornered by the orthodox Hindus, including Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the pacifist Indian liberation movement and a



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practising Hindu. Although he denounced untouchability, Gandhi believed in the caste system. It is pertinent to mention that Gandhi was assassinated by a die-hard Hindu fanatic for opposing violence against Muslims when India and Muslim Pakistan were separated in 1947. Stiff opposition also came when Ambedkar, as law minister, tried to empower Hindu women by challenging gender discrimination within Hindu society through Hindu Code Bill.

Following his death, it took years to get him recognized domestically and internationally. While Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violence have always enjoyed wider influence across the world, a sustained campaign by Dalit activists has seen an increase of Ambedkar's popularity outside India. In Canada, followers of Ambedkar are celebrating ten years of the installation of his bust at Simon Fraser University Library in Burnaby. Incidentally, a portrait of Ambedkar is also installed inside the Burnaby City Hall. A room at Surrey Central Library is also named after him. In 2010, US President Barack Obama acknowledged him as a "revered human rights champion", and elected officials in BC have time and again recognized his work.

But these steps have stirred strong reactions from a section of upper caste fanatics. Back in India when a university in Maharashtra was named after him in 1978, upper caste Hindus reacted strongly, resulting in an agitation and anti-Dalit violence. Disturbing reports of vandalizing the statues of Ambedkar in India keep coming in. Most of the time, these acts are followed by violent clashes. A case in point is the 1997 incident when 10 Dalits were killed in police action after Ambedkar's statue was vandalized in Mumbai. This happened when Maharashtra was under Shiv Sena rule. Shiv Sena is another Hindu nationalist party aligned with the BJP. It is a separate matter that the two parties have broken ties after failing to reach an amicable agreement

### **A visitor from India garlands Ambedkar's statue at SFU library in Burnaby.**

over distribution of seats during a recent assembly election. Ironically, the Republican Party of India, which was originally founded by Ambedkar, entered into alliances with Shiv Sena during later years. In 1990 when Ambedkar was posthumously given the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, the BJP objected, according to Mayawati, a senior Dalit leader and former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Mayawati is credited for installing many statues of Ambedkar during her regime.

If these instances are not enough to indicate how far the Hindu right can go on bashing Ambedkarism, a startling revelation came from former Indian Supreme Court Judge,

Justice P.B. Sawant. In an interview with Teesta Setalvad, a renowned secularist activist and the Editor of *Communalism Combat*, Justice Sawant warned that there is a concerted effort to change

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the basic secular character of the Indian Constitution, a legacy of Ambedkar. He cautioned that attempts were afoot to convert India into a theocratic state where Hindus enjoy superior rights, but would be resisted and challenged.

Setalvad has been consistently raising her concerns over the growing threat of Hindu militancy. She has noted how an increasing number of Hindu extremist groups have started making bombs and getting armed over the years. She has been writing about atrocities on Dalits and other minority groups who face threats and intimidation. Recently, when the leader of the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh – a group of Hindu nationalists dedicated to the establishment of Hindu nation - was given an opportunity to make public address through Doordarshan, a state broadcast service in India, Setalvad saw it as an attempt to turn India into a theocracy. “With Modi government in power the Hindu nationalist organizations, such as RSS, are getting legitimacy which does not bode well for a diverse country like India”, she told RDNB over the phone. She warns that the BJP is now aiming to muster a majority in the upper house of the parliament of India to gain enough numbers to change the constitution. “Right now the party is focusing on the assembly elections in various states, as an increased representation in the provincial governments is a key to maintain hold over the upper house of the parliament.” She believes that once the BJP has enough strength in

both the houses of parliament, nothing can stop it from bringing major constitutional changes.

She is not alone in worrying about this scenario and has many allies in North America who feel the same. In October this year, when the followers of Ambedkar gathered at SFU library to celebrate ten years of the installation of his bust, at least two elected officials, MP Jasbeer Sandhu and Burnaby city councilor Sav Dhaliwal, observed that Ambedkar's fight against injustice and for an egalitarian society remains unfinished. Nevertheless, they did not touch upon the issue of Hindu nationalism explicitly.

California-based Dalit activist and author M.R. Paul says that the danger to the secular fabric of India from the Hindu right wing is real and should be taken seriously. “Hinduism is being openly propagated through TV serials and public airwaves under the BJP government. What can be more insulting to Ambedkar than this?” He feels that more than symbolic tributes to Ambedkar both in India and North America, his ideology needs to be saved. “I am not surprised at attempts to change the constitution by those who are bent upon seeing India turned into a Hindu nation.” He believes that after winning a brute majority in this year's election, the BJP is now trying to rope in the support of minorities through grassroots level organizations like RSS. Attempts are even being made to appropriate

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Ambedkar. Not only is the RSS trying to appropriate him through its depressed classes' wing, the BJP too has started glorifying him alongside Lord Rama. "Their social engineering program needs to be watched. Ambedkarism and Hindu nationalism have nothing in common. True followers of the ideology of Baba Sahib (Ambedkar) should try to bring all minorities, including the depressed classes under one umbrella to isolate the Hindu nationalists."

Bhajan Singh of the US-based Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Sikh Foundation thinks that the growing threat of the Hindu right wing should not surprise anyone. "As a well read scholar, Baba Sahib was ahead of his times and had identified the danger of the Hindu nationalism when it had not yet entered into our collective consciousness." Singh is opposed to any attempt to give a symbolic

tribute to Ambedkar as it equals "idol worshipping" by orthodox Hindus. "What we need to do is follow his ideals rather than making him a cult figure". He feels that doing so violates the principles of Ambedkar. Singh has been instrumental in getting Ambedkar's work recognized at the legislative level in US. He points out that when Ambedkar decided to embrace Buddhism, he also toyed with an idea of adopting

Sikhism, which also denounces the caste system, but he was partly discouraged by those influenced by the Hindu philosophy. Notably, while Sikhism is against the caste system, casteism prevails in the Sikh community as well. "We need people who follow real ideals of Sikhism and Ambedkarism instead of those who have turned these philosophies into dogma."

Varinder Dabri, a Vancouver based Dalit activist, has been raising awareness against caste system through films. He thinks that though it is important to recognize Ambedkar as an icon of the social justice movement, the challenges to his ideology in the contemporary world cannot be ignored. "Especially, the faith-based politics and religious violence cannot be tolerated in a country whose constitution enshrines secularism and diversity." Dabri thinks that the secularist political parties must also share some blame for not doing enough to eradicate corruption and win public support leaving a vacuum for Hindu nationalism to grow in India.

Jai Birdi of Chetna Association, a group dedicated to Ambedkarism which has been instrumental in getting Ambedkar recognized across Canada, agrees. "While we cannot minimize the strength of the recognition of Ambedkar in public spaces, we do acknowledge that efforts to fulfill the dreams of Baba Sahib must continue to keep his struggle alive."

Undoubtedly Ambedkar has grown larger than life, and every political group, including his detractors, are obliged not to ignore him. The appropriation of his image is certainly an outcome of that reality, but with the growing control of power by the Hindu right in India his legacy remains under constant challenge. What remains to be seen is how long it will take the current Indian government to drastically change its constitution to officially transform a secular republic into a Hindu theocracy.

-RDNB

### Dr.B.R.Ambedkar

“Rosa Parks sat So Martin Luther King could walk.

Martin Luther King walked So Obama could run.  
Obama's running so we all can fly” -Jay-Z

he broke the rule of the twice-born  
to cross the seven seas and  
gaze at the statue of liberty.

he conquered the 26 letters,  
his descendants could  
coin the word “caste provocateur”.

he navigated a middle path  
through the labyrinth of scriptures,  
to retrieve the philosopher  
lost in translation from Pali to Sanskrit.

*Chandramohan.S(b.1986) is an English poet based in India. His poems reflect the socio-political struggles of the marginalized, the working class and the nomadic outcasts of the world who are victimized and then forgotten as nations clash and wage relentless war. His work has been profiled in New Asia Writing, Mascara Literary Review and About place journal, Counter-Punch poetry, Thump Print magazine and The Sentinel.*

## Who is this that came so early in the morning

There is much excitement in the homes of the  
poor  
who is this that came so early in the morning.

time's continuous flow of centuries has stopped  
the old ideas have been defeated  
the faces of old laws have been smoked  
who is this that came so early in the morning.

when he walks the rocks crack  
when he speaks the palaces stumble  
in his presence others seem as dwarfs  
who is this that came so early in the morning.

what is he planning to give and what is he  
planning to take  
what is he planning to hear and what is he  
planning to say  
the elders are no longer able to comprehend  
who is this that came so early in the morning.

he is signalling the slaves to rebel  
even the dead in the graves are responding to  
him  
the orphans have become much more  
courageous  
who is this that came so early in the morning.

he has a new theory and a new temperament  
he wants to change the direction of life  
the robbers are crying while hiding  
who is this that came so early in the morning.

when he badgered them with his pen  
it shattered everything all around  
the darkness left the Vedas and the temples  
who is this that came so early in the morning.

the glow in thatched huts and sheds is  
informing  
there is something about to happen in the  
world  
hundreds and thousands have gather around  
him  
who is this that came so early in the morning.

*Gurdas Ram Alam was a famous progressive Dalit poet. Originally written in Punjabi, this poem was dedicated to Dr. Ambedkar.*

***Translation by Sadhu Binning.***

## The mother from the jail

dear Bhagat Singh!

your mother, the one from the jail  
is still very sad today  
you may not believe it  
in many parts of this democratic country  
her son doesn't have the right  
to mount a horse  
during the celebration of his own wedding  
he can neither walk wearing shoes  
by the mansion of the feudal lord.

even today, the dead mutilated bodies  
of this mother's daughters  
are hanged from the mango trees  
after multiple rapes.

dear Bhagat Singh! the sand walls are very strong  
in the burning sun  
making bricks at the brick-kiln  
the feet are covered with the blisters  
bigger than black grapes  
foreheads are labeled  
with the caste based insults.

dear Bhagat Singh!  
from the time of your sacrifice to this day  
medicine science has become very healthy

but it has failed to cure the tuberculosis  
that ails the system.

dear Bhagat Singh! forgive me  
i don't know why I am making you  
uncomfortable by telling you all this?  
to cross this dark tunnel  
i have to wear fire clothes  
and turn into a torch myself  
i just happen to see you in the public square  
and my pen became overwhelmed with  
emotions  
so that you may know  
that your mother  
the one from the jail  
is still very sad today.

*Amrit Diwana is Surrey-based progressive Punjabi poet. This poem has been translated by Sadhu Binning and is a tribute to the towering Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh, who denounced caste based oppression and affectionately called the sweeper in the jail as bebe (mother). Bhagat Singh believed that if mothers do not get polluted for cleaning the human waste of their children, why are those indulging in menial jobs considered as untouchables?*

## Lessons from Bhopal

This December marks 30 years of the worst industrial disaster in Indian history.

The Bhopal gas tragedy of December 1984 shook the world after a massive gas leak at the Union Carbide pesticide plant instantly killed about 5,000 people. The number of the dead later rose to 20,000. Union Carbide is now owned by Dow Chemical.

Union Carbide CEO Warren Anderson was charged and arrested for the deaths in India, but was allowed to flee the country back to the United States. The victims' families, who have been campaigning for his extradition, lost that battle after Anderson died in September this year. The victims' families and activists wished that the "Butcher of Bhopal" should have rather died in jail. They strongly feel that the Indian establishment lacked the will to get him extradited from US, and the main political parties – such as the ruling BJP and the opposition Congress - have accepted favours from Dow Chemicals at different times. It has already been established that the tragedy was preventable and the government did not listen to suggestions to relocate the plant before the tragedy happened. Anderson's death has only added to their frustration. However, the campaign to make Dow Chemical accountable for the contaminated water of Bhopal still goes on.

Notably, Dow Chemical was one of the sponsors of the Vancouver Olympics in 2010. In spite of pressure from activists, the sponsorship was not cancelled. So much so, the opposition NDP in BC failed to raise this issue, despite the fact that Indo-Canadian MLA Harry Bains was the Olympic

critic in its shadow cabinet. This year two Indo-Canadian NDP MPs, Jasbeer Sandhu and Jinny Sims, made a statement seeking justice for the victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. Whether they will make another statement for the victims of the Bhopal tragedy remains uncertain.

Thousands of Sikhs were murdered across India following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. The goons led by Gandhi's Congress party orchestrated violence against the community. To seek justice for the victims of that violence is the right thing to do, but the tragedy of Bhopal should also be on the radar of elected officials. Both tragedies which occurred during the same year have in common the state complicity and lack of political will to punish the guilty. Instead of focusing on just one to attract Sikh vote bank, our politicians in Canada should value the victims of both tragedies.

The Bhopal episode also needs to be remembered as Canadians witness fierce debates over pipelines. Environmentalists and indigenous communities in BC are rightly worried about the adverse long term affects of leakages. Already the community in Likely is battling with the Mount Polley disaster, which has impacted drinking water, fish and wildlife. Such accidents should alert everyone globally about corporate greed and insane industrialization that hardly cares for human lives. For this, the political parties and the corporations need to be made accountable

—RDNB

# Bhopal tragedy is a stark reminder of the dangers of industrial extraction on environmental and human rights

This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the horrific Bhopal gas disaster. The world's worst industrial disaster occurred on the night of December 2nd 1984 at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Over 500,000 people were exposed to methyl isocyanate gas and other chemicals. An estimate 8,000 people died within two weeks and another 8,000 or more have since died from gas-related diseases. A government affidavit in 2006 stated the leak caused 558,125 injuries.

This tragedy is a stark reminder of the dangers of industrial extraction on environmental and human rights. Here in BC, over the past week, at least 75 people have been arrested protesting Kinder Morgan's \$5.4-billion Trans Mountain pipeline in Burnaby.

Kinder Morgan's \$5.4-billion Trans Mountain proposal consists of a pipeline carrying over a million barrels of tar sands crude every day from Alberta to Vancouver, B.C. and a tanker proposal that brings more supertankers into the Burrard Inlet. Over 70 per cent of Burnaby residents are opposed to Kinder Morgan's expansion, and the Tsleil-Waututh Nation as well as the City of Burnaby are challenging the National Energy Board's decision to allow Kinder Morgan to operate in Burnaby Mountain.

Blockades like the one at Burnaby Mountain that are affecting companies' profit margins. Kinder Morgan has said that project delays due to opposition cost the company \$88 million every month.

The Kinder Morgan project is part of a

matrix of pipelines, refineries and supertankers all geared towards rapid expansion of the Alberta tar sands. Fracked gas pipelines are also a key component of the tar sands infrastructure: up to 60 per cent of fracked gas extracted in Canada is actually used to fuel other parts of the oil and gas industry, including the tar sands.

The most well-known tar sands pipeline is the \$5.5-billion Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline. This pipeline would cross 1,000 rivers and streams through the territories of 65 First Nations from Alberta to Kitamat, B.C., enabling a 30 per cent increase in tar sands production. Emboldened by the Supreme Court of Canada's Tsilhqot'in decision, the Haisla Nation, Gitxaala Nation, Council of the Haida Nation, Gitga'at Nation, Heiltsuk Tribal Council, KITASOO/Xaixais Nation, Nadleh Whut'en First Nation and Nak'azdli First Nation have all announced constitutional legal challenges to Harper's recent approval of the pipeline. Twenty municipal governments and the Union of BC Municipalities also oppose the project.

Another Enbridge project is the Line 9 reversal to transport tar sands crude from Alberta through Ontario to Montreal and then Maine via the Trailbreaker project. With a 160 per cent expanded capacity, Line 9 would travel through or near dozens of waterways and major urban centres including Hamilton, Toronto, Kingston, Cornwall and Montreal. In Toronto, predominately racialized communities are along the Line 9 route; over 60 per cent of those along the pipeline route in Toronto are recent migrants. An Enbridge facility already operates on the edge of Aamjiwnaang reserve, which is surrounded by more than 60 refineries and chemical plants.

Taken together, these are stark examples



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of Line 9's environmental racism.

Though lesser known, the \$12-billion Energy East pipeline is the largest oil pipeline project in North America. Energy East is a 4,500-km pipeline proposal by TransCanada to transport 1.1 million barrels of tar sands crude daily across 960 waterways from southern Alberta to New Brunswick. Geared for export, two oil export terminals off the St. Lawrence River and Atlantic Ocean are also being proposed as part of the project. According to a Pembina Institute report, the amount of greenhouse gas emissions that would be generated is equivalent to 7 million cars.

Says Ellen Gabriel of Kanehsatàke, a Mohawk community along the route of Energy East, "In the absence of our free prior and informed consent, it would be illegal for the National Energy Board to grant TransCanada an application for Energy East."

### **Tar sands exports fuel U.S. military**

Though there has been a focus on pipeline and tanker projects providing infrastructure to export tar sands to Asia, little attention has been paid to tar sands exports to the U.S. Activists Maryam Adrangi and Syed Hussan write, "Over half of Alberta's tar sands oil goes to the U.S., making Canada the single largest foreign supplier of oil to the United States."

The U.S. Department of Defense is the world's leading single buyer and consumer of oil. With the growing U.S. military industrial complex and its never-ending War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, demands for imported oil have increased. The U.S. Energy Policy Act explicitly designates tar sands production to serve the fuel needs of the U.S. military.

According to the Polaris Institute, Canadian oil exports are the U.S.'s primary source of imported oil, making the Alberta tar sands pivotal for the American military economy.

### **Stopping tar sands expansion at the source**

Movements against tar sands infrastructure

are in solidarity with Indigenous communities living around the tar sands in Alberta who are facing slow industrial genocide through soaring cancer rates and poisoned food systems.

In the case of the Lubicon Cree, over 1,400 square kilometres of leases have been granted for tar sands development on Lubicon lands and almost 70 per cent of Lubicon territory has been leased for future development.

The Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) is also right in the heart of this mega industrial project. The ACFN recently announced that they plan to oppose all future tar sands projects proposed within their traditional homelands and have launched a legal challenge against notorious oil giant Shell.

The Beaver Lake Cree nation is similarly taking the government to court for no less than 17,000 treaty violations. They are arguing that tar sands projects are violating their inherent and constitutionally protected treaty rights to hunt, fish and trap.

"From one end of Turtle Island to the

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other, Indigenous people, people of colour, and our allies have made a commitment that we will stop the capitalist destruction of our Mother Earth. We are holding a line of opposition -- with moccasins and boots on the ground," says Crystal Lameman of Beaver Lake Cree Nation.

### **Mount Polley: Mining is disaster**

Another example of industrial disasters locally is the Mount Polley mining disaster is the largest mining disaster in Canadian, history. Yet the notorious Canadian mining industry, actively supported by provincial and federal governments, has largely escaped public and media scrutiny.

There are 20 operating mines with similar tailings pond dams in B.C. Yet The Tyee reports that since the B.C. Liberals took office in 2001, mine inspections have reduced by nearly half while environmental orders have decreased by over 90 per cent. Furthermore, there is no requirement in B.C. that mining companies have emergency response plans including insurance for such spills.

This is part of Premier Christy Clark's aggressive mining agenda. She has announced the plan to build 17 new and expanded mines by 2015, all on unceded Indigenous lands. In 2010, the International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School found that in B.C., "First Nations bear an unfair burden at every point in the mining process," including the burden of a lack of consultation and detrimental environmental, health and spiritual consequences.

The mining industry in Canada is a key example of Canada's colonial and capitalist foundations. Capitalist accumulation explicitly requires dispossession of Indigenous communities from the lands on which they subsist. Both locally and globally, Canadian mining corporations have been devastating the environment, dispossessing communities, and committing egregious human rights violations in order to continue extracting resources to secure their profits.

Over 75 per cent of the world's exploration and mining companies are

headquartered in Canada, and mining and energy investment is the third largest component of Canadian direct investment abroad. A leaked report by the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada, the biggest industry lobby group, confirms that Canadian mining corporations are responsible for almost half of all the documented mining-related rights violations around the world, and in the global South are implicated in four times as many violations as companies from other countries.

A recent Globe and Mail article reveals startling facts about Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) poverty-reduction aid funds being prioritized to countries that have deposits of mineral resources and are of "strategic" and "commercial" interest to Canada's resource-extractive sector. According to Maude Barlow, CIDA has approved \$50 million in projects linked to the mining industry since the Harper government took power.

Simultaneously, Canada continues to pursue international trade agreements designed to ensure that multinational mining companies can access mineral resources. These corporate rights agreements -- like NAFTA, CETA, FIPAs, and TPP -- create mechanisms for investor-state arbitration that allow corporations to pursue compensation for any regulatory regimes that limit their profits. These pre-emptive corporate bailouts provide the economic certainty needed to attract corporate investment and secure profits, particularly in sectors such as mining that face significant opposition. A recent example is of Canadian-based mining company Pacific Rim pursuing \$301 million in compensation for lost investment and future profits from El Salvador, that has a de facto ban on mining, for refusing their extraction permit.

Within Canada, Stephen Harper has changed key environmental regulations. Though not previously used, since 2006 the Conservative government has been approving mining projects under Schedule 2. Introduced by the Liberal

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government, Schedule 2 is a loophole in the Metal Mining Effluent Regulation of the federal Fisheries Act that allows metal mining corporations to use lakes and rivers as toxic dump sites. Mining companies have applied to reclassify at least 13 natural water bodies across the country as "tailings impoundment areas" to get around the anti-dumping prohibition.

This loophole is in addition to the long list of environmental changes and Indigenous treaty rights in the two federal omnibus bills, Bill C-38 and Bill C-45, that are designed to ensure easy access to resources on Indigenous lands. In true colonial fashion that perpetuates the racist myth of *terra nullius*, Canada is one of the few countries with a free-entry (a.k.a. Wild West) model of mineral tenure, where the mining industry is given free and virtually unlimited entry, access, and tenure to "stake a claim" on a first-come, first-serve basis without public consultation, environmental assessment, or Indigenous consent.

Given this local and global context, it is perfectly apt, then, that Jon Baird, President of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada, declared: "If the USA is the world's policeman, Canada is the world's miner."

### **Resistance to mining injustice**

All across this land and around the world, Indigenous communities are organizing to halt mining exploration and resource extraction activities.

In an unprecedented move this year, the federal government rejected Taseko's proposal for New Prosperity Mine due to the tireless efforts of the Tsilhqot'in Nation. Similarly, persistent legal and political mobilization by Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) -- including blockades which led to a number of arrests and sentences -- led to an astounding victory two years ago when Ontario announced that over 23,000 square kilometres of KI territory would be off-limits to mining. KI and Tsilhqot'in are developing their own mining protocols, published in their own languages as well as

English, laying out rules for if and how mining companies can operate in their territories. In response to the recent Mount Polley disaster, Klabona Keppers of the Tahltan Nation have blockaded Imperial Metals Red Chris mine in their territory and Secwepemc Neskonlith Indian Band have issued an eviction notice to the company's proposed Ruddock Creek Mine there.

To address Canada's global role in mining, notably in Latin America, a Permanent Peoples' Tribunal last month investigated Canadian mining abuses in South America, where over 230 Canadian mining companies operate. Bringing together impacted communities from across the continent, the Tribunal found the Canadian government directly responsible for massive human and environmental violations. This comes on the heels of decades of grassroots community organizing, including prolonged blockades in Guerrero, operational shut-downs in El Salvador, popular assemblies across Guatemala, seizing workers in Bolivia, continent-wide protests of Canadian embassies and officials, and two significant legal challenges against HudBay and Tahoe Resources in Canadian courts.

This global chorus of resistance is envisioning not merely environmental regulation of the mining industry, but a fundamental opposition to infinite resource extraction under capitalism that perpetuates colonial pillage and dispossession. A Cree prophecy is a sobering reminder: "When all the trees have been cut down, when all the animals have been hunted, when all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover you cannot eat money."

*Harsha Walia is a social justice activist who is associated with No One is Illegal. She has also authored a famous book, "Undoing Border Imperialism" and is very articulate on issues like racism and colonialism. She is part of the editorial team of Radical Desi.*

### Speak out against the politics of intimidation

**A**fter the violent events in Ottawa and Quebec during late October, there is a push from the top to use such tragedies to impose new restriction on civil liberties and democratic freedoms.

The Harper government is clearly attempting to intimidate Canadians against expressing criticism of its policies, by expanding surveillance of the activities and communications of Canadians. This ominous trend towards police state tactics will have dangerous consequences for democracy and freedom.

Instead of adopting an "evidence-based approach" to dealing with violent crime, the Harper government seeks to gain votes while using "hot-button" issues to head off serious debates. Examples include their claim that terrorist threats pose a mortal danger to the entire country, or that "cyber-bullying" can only be stopped by giving police sweeping new powers to monitor online communications.

As civil rights groups point out, the myth that "perfect" security and safety can be achieved by giving governments and police the unchecked ability to spy upon and even incarcerate people for their thoughts and beliefs is the real danger.

The recently tabled Bill C-44, "The Protection of Canada from Terrorists Act", gives CSIS new powers to expand its international espionage activities beyond the borders of Canada. Even before this legislation, the CSEC (Communications Security Establishment Canada) was monitoring our communications data, despite express legal prohibitions against

such conduct. Both CSIS and the RCMP have a long record of espionage against trade unions, Aboriginal movements, environmentalists, radical activists, and many others who express criticisms of government policies. Given the absence of genuine oversight or accountability, we have little idea of the extent of this espionage. Bill C-44 would also cut judicial oversight out of the admission of information from confidential informants at trial, automatically preserving the anonymity of these informants and eliminating the right to confront such accusers in court.

Meanwhile, Bill C-13 (the "Cyberbullying Bill") gives law enforcement agencies even wider surveillance powers, and allows Internet Service Providers to voluntarily turn over huge volumes of information about individuals to the government.

This legislation is not based on any serious threat. Only a handful of Canadians have ever been the victims of terrorist actions or so-called "lone wolf" attacks. A far larger problem is the breakdown of social programs and services, caused by neoliberal austerity cutbacks imposed by federal and provincial governments. Instead of turning Canada into a police state, governments should be funding community-based prevention programs, better mental health support, and anti-racism and pro-diversity campaigns to protect disadvantaged groups and racialised communities. As the recent attacks showed, monitoring text messages and Facebook postings did not prevent violent actions; but unlimited surveillance of communications will fundamentally weaken civil rights and democracy.

Bills C-13 and C-44 must be viewed within the larger context of the drive by corporations and right-wing governments to impose austerity policies. In response to increasing resistance against austerity and pro-corporate policies, governments

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are devising even more draconian tactics.

Here are just a few examples of this anti-democratic trend: the government's voter suppression tactics in federal elections; the massive police operation to monitor every protest demonstration across Canada; sweeping efforts to ban street protests by youth in Quebec; the prohibition against media interviews by federal scientists; the Revenue Canada campaign to prevent non-profits from addressing any issues of public concern; the use of injunctions and "SLAPP" lawsuits by corporations to prevent citizens from challenging their actions; escalating measures to limit the ability of trade unions to campaign around issues on behalf of their members; legislation to allow federal bureaucrats and politicians to arbitrarily remove Canadian citizenship rights.

The aim of the Harper Conservatives is not to protect is from terrorist attacks or cyber-bullying; their strategy is to spread paralyzing fear, leaving

governments and security forces free to block the emergence of broad popular movements and coalitions to demand pro-people policies. To impose neoliberalism, they seek to intimidate Canadians from even discussing how to build a powerful resistance struggle for real change.

The struggle to defend democratic freedoms and civil rights, including the rights to free speech and assembly, to communications privacy, to organize and bargain collectively, and to cast a ballot in elections, is not an abstract question. To act collectively, we must be able to organize and speak out without fear of constant surveillance and harassment. With a federal election coming in 2015, people's movements should demand that all political parties and candidates speak out against expanded security state tactics.

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

### How many deaths or disappearances does Canada need to accept that Mexico is not a safe country?

While some Canadians think of Mexico as a nice place with beautiful beaches and an interesting precolonial history, Mexicans have been facing a human rights crisis for decades. The recent tragedy of the 43 missing students from the teachers school *Raúl Isidro Burgos (Ayotzinapa)* in Guerrero, plus another three killed (including Julio César Mondragón, who was found with his face skinned and his eyes gouged out, leaving behind a young wife and a two month-old baby), is the straw that breaks the camel's back, the seed that stirred the conscience not only of Mexicans but of all humans in the world, including students, teachers, parents, politicians... except the Canadian and the Mexican governments? The first one with an unjustifiable silence, the second one through its Ambassador in Canada, Francisco Suarez, who had the cynicism to declare to CBC News that "Mexico is a democracy, with its difficulties", that any change "could harm Canada's ties to one of its largest trading partners", and "do you want to damage a very vast relationship, acting on ill-conceived, inadequately informed requests of a limited group of people?"

This offensive statement was public on November 22, after more than twenty social justice and immigrants rights organizations, from Canada and Mexico, such as No One is Illegal Vancouver, Mexicanos Unidos por la

Regularización, Justice for Migrant Workers, and also activists and independent journalists, endorsed a petition for the Canadian government to *Remove Mexico from the refugee list of safe countries*. Cipo-Van (Consejo Indígena de los Pueblos de Oaxaca-CIPO-Vancouver) launched another petition, basically with the same purpose, but emphasizing four cases of indigenous human-rights defenders in Oaxaca.

In response to the massive rallies organized by different groups across Canada in solidarity with the families of the 43 missing students, which get the attention of the media, a faint political reaction came. Replying to the mistaken declaration of the Mexican Ambassador, NDP foreign affairs critic Paul Dewar said it makes no sense to list Mexico alongside some of the safest countries in the world. "We should re-evaluate that and not say that the whole country is safe, and therefore people who are fleeing should have no issue in returning. They do, because their life hangs in the balance. Just because we have good diplomatic relations with a country doesn't mean it's safe."

At the same time, John Babcock, a spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, said "the Government of Canada is deeply concerned with the recent series of violent events in the states of Guerrero and Mexico. Canadian officials will continue to closely monitor the unfolding situation".

But beyond speeches, the fact is that since Mexico signed NAFTA in 1994, 20 million



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Mexicans were forced to migrate, fleeing out of fear, only to die at the hands of organized crime or a repressive narco-state government. They looked for a safe life in countries like Canada, which has a responsibility to Mexicans because its capital, its mining businesses, are provoking displacement, poverty, violence, natural disaster, social collapse and death!

It is truly concerning that almost two months after this crime of the state, carried out with total impunity by organized crime, municipal police, and the army, just a couple of Canadian politicians have weakly talked about the frightening reality of millions of Mexicans facing death, extortion, torture, kidnapping, and forced disappearances. Both regimes have accomplished the 200 concessions to Canadian mining companies in "Costa Chica" and about 100 in "Costa Grande" (only talking about Guerrero), granted for up to 50 years, without consulting the population. According to the Centre for Human Rights Tlachinollan, 200,000 hectares of land have been ceded to Canadian mining companies to exploit and expropriate resources such as gold, silver, and zinc among 32 of the 42 mining deposits that exist in Guerrero.

It is also of concern that on Nov. 20, after around 80,000 people raised their voices for the 43 missing students at a peaceful rally in Mexico City (thousands more rallied in the whole country, in spite of the media which reported 30,000), 11 students (some of them of PhD, one Chilean) were arrested by the police and charged by the "authorities" for organized crime and terrorism. They were transferred to maximum security prisons in Nayarit and Veracruz (both very violent and corrupt entities) far from their families and the main Judicial system!

How is it possible that Governor Ángel Aguirre, ousted from his position without any legal responsibility, Iguala mayor José Luis Abarca Velázquez and his wife María de los Ángeles Pineda, leader of the drug-cartel Guerreros Unidos were fugitives until Nov. 4, and the municipal police chief, Felipe Flores, is still a fugitive, while these 11 students are treated as criminals, and the parents of the 43 missing students have received death threats if they keep up the public demand for their sons to be returned alive?

Is it morally and humanly correct that the Canadian government, through its immigration policies and institutions, believes more in the word of corrupt politicians (including the president and the Ambassador) than in us, the citizens who live with fear because of the increase in brutal violence since the stupid-fake "War on Drugs", which, far from reducing consumption, has only brought death and panic? How can the immigration system in Canada ask Mexican citizens to trust in their government, police and all the institutions supposedly responsible for our security, if these are infested with negligence, corruption, and impunity? How, if justice is for the economically privileged people in power?

How can Canada say Mexico is a safe country, while warning Canadian citizens about travel there?

Why did the former minister of immigration, Jason Kenney, put Mexico on the list of Designated Countries of Origin (CDO), considering it as a safe country, a democracy? Does Canada know that the majority of Mexicans want the resignation of Enrique Peña Nieto? Is it fair that a huge amount of officials from Canada Border Services Agencies (CBSA) and IRB (Immigration and



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Refugee Board), have called Mexicans *bogus refugees* who take advantage of the noble Canadian system, and legitimized an inefficient regime lacking in transparency?

What are the reasons Canada has in mind for us to leave our families, roots, weather, friends... and come to beg for asylum, for protection? What are the reasons that Canada pushed the Mexican migrant Lucía Vega Jiménez, to commit suicide hours before she was to be deported to Mexico? Why did she come twice, resisting the fear of being here without legal status? Does Canada think it is just about money, and not safety? Then, let's go to statistics.

Ayotzinapa is not an isolated tragedy, and it is not only about organized crime:

\*43 students (16 to 22 years) from the rural teacher's college in Ayotzinapa-Guerrero, Mexico, were declared missing after a violent encounter with municipal and military corps, leaving a total of six people dead, three of them students. More than twenty graves filled with corpses have been found in Iguala's surrounding area. There is a precedent of violence against Ayotzinapa: in 2011, two students from the same school *Normal Raúl Isidro Burgos* were shot to death and another 20 tortured by the State of Guerrero Ministerial Police.

\*On June 30 (2014), 22 people were killed (3 of them underage) by military forces in Tlatlaya, Estado de Mexico, the same state where Lucía Vega Jiménez, the 42 year old Mexican migrant who committed suicide while in CBSA custody on December 20, 2013, at the Vancouver's Airport "Holding Centre", was fleeing from; it is more than obvious she didn't want to be deported to the most violent place in Mexico during 2013, also with the highest rates of femicides. Everyday

6.4 women are murdered in the country, between 2006 and 2012 femicides increased 40%.

\*Approximately 130,000 Mexicans have been killed (including children and pregnant women) from 2007 to 2013. 36,718 people have died in the first twenty months of the current administration of Enrique Peña Nieto.

\*According to Human Rights Watch more than 26,000 citizens have gone missing from 2005 to date. In the last two years alone, 4,397 people have disappeared in Guerrero.

\*102 journalists have been killed since 2000, 24 are officially missing, and 222 have been assaulted in 2014 alone; also the National Commission of Human Rights has stated that every 26 and a half hours a journalist is attacked while 90% of these cases go unpunished.

\*United Nations Human Rights office of the High Commissioner, after its Periodic Universal Exam, declared that Mexico and Central America are sub-regions with the most social inequality and come second place in the world in terms of violence with 26 people murdered per each 100,000 residents.

\*Human rights violations include 4,841 reported cases of torture and 9,758 cases of kidnapped migrants and trans-migrants. Of these, 158 cases are collective, with no fewer than 50 victims each. There are countless numbers of immigrants from Central and South America who have been murdered, disappeared, kidnapped, extorted, raped and/or assaulted while crossing through Mexico. The tragedy of the 72 migrants brutally killed in 2010, San Fernando, Tamaulipas (58 men and 14 women, although some journalists talked about more migrants murdered), remains unpunished!

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\*The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights has recently denounced Mexico for 2,000 children disappeared or been killed; they have been proven to be connected to Mexican state-forces.

\*According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in terms of economic inequality, Mexico ranks second worst in the world. 45.5% of the population (53.3 million people) live in poverty, of which 9.8% (11.5 million) live in extreme poverty; likewise 23.3% (27 million) of the population are living in food poverty with 12.5% chronically malnourished.

\*As a result of a failed state, there are self-defense and community police groups in 15 states of the country, which covers at least 106 municipalities (5.11% of the Mexican territory). These are mainly located in three states: Michoacan, Guerrero, and Chiapas.

\*From 2008 to date, 90 activists were unofficially executed at the hands of public officials while defending human rights, also 669 arrested. The activism in Mexico has a terrible reputation in terms of security and freedom but it is rich in spirit and history. Just to mention: *Mariano Abarca was assassinated on the night of November 27, 2009 in Chicomuselo in front of his house; he was shot in the head and chest by a man on a motorcycle who was a Blackfire (a Canadian mining company) employee. He had been abducted in August 2009, and again received death threats during the week of his death and had filed a complaint against the company one day prior to his death.*

\*The indigenous activist for human rights, Nestora Salgado, was unjustly incarcerated in 2013 for defending her community from organized crime and mining. She was the Regional Coordinator of the Community Police

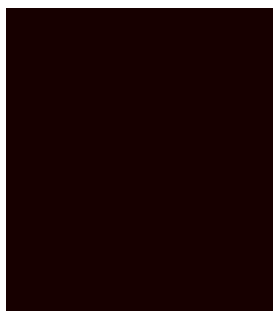
Community (CRAC-PC) when the navy detained her illegally.

\*The expense of corruption in Mexico is 1.5 billion dollars annually, according to the Center for Economic Studies of the Private Sector.”

Sign the petition and read more about why Canada must Remove Mexico from the refugee list of safe countries: <https://www.change.org/p/conservative-government-remove-mexico-from-the-refugee-list-of-safe-countries>

*Karla Lottini is a Mexican writer and journalist who came to Vancouver in 2008, as a refugee claimant. Her case was initially denied and finally accepted by H/C in 2012, thanks to community supporters who recognized her as a Mexican whistle-blower. She has published in a number newspapers, anthologies such as 72 Migrants, and is the author of The Talent of Charlatans. Before she came to Canada, she worked in the National Ministry of Culture and Arts of Mexico (Conaculta, by its name in Spanish), where she discovered and denounced corruption, but without success because of corruption, death threats and impunity. Since 2011, she has collaborated with the radio program Latino Soy with a political column (focus on Human Rights and Immigration), and has been part of the Vancouver South Cultural Project. In 2013, she started a learning and inspiring adventure as a member of No One is Illegal Vancouver. Along with more than 20 organizations, activists and independent journalists, she is one of the persons who support the petition for Canada to Remove Mexico from the list of safe countries for refugees.*

# Why is it important to have a Human Rights Commission in British Columbia?



There have been many changes to the human rights legislation in British Columbia since 1973. The NDP government under the leadership of Dave Barrett introduced the first *Human Rights Code* in 1973 which prohibited

discrimination in public services, rental housing and to the purchase of property as well. The 1973 *Human Right Code* also established a Human Rights Commission.

The BC Human Rights Commission was dismantled by the Social Credit government in 1983. In 1984, the social credit government established the British Columbia Council of Human Rights in place of the Commission. The Council was given the mandate to investigate human rights complaints but did not have the broader educational mandate of the Commission.

In 1993 the NDP government appointed Professor Bill Black of the University of British Columbia to conduct a review the human rights in British Columbia and make recommendations for statutory and administrative reforms. Professor Black issued his report in December 1994. The government accepted Professor Black's recommendations and enacted a new *Human Rights Code* in January 1996 and established a Human Rights Commission and a Human Rights Tribunal.

In abolishing the British Columbia Human Rights Commission in 2002, the government ministers stated that there was duplication of services between the Commission and the Tribunal and that the system could be made better by abolishing the Commission. The fact is there was no duplication between the two agencies as both had separate mandates.

The mandate of the British Columbia Human Rights Commission was to prevent and eliminate discrimination. The Commission did this by:

- receiving and investigating complaints of discrimination
- by filing complaints and becoming party to complaints filed by others alleging systemic discrimination
- undertaking research into equality issues
- by providing mediation services to parties to complaints
- referring certain cases to the human rights tribunal for hearings
- intervening in important human rights cases
- promoting and approving equity programs; and
- educating people about human rights law and equality issues in British Columbia

The Tribunal's mandate was to adjudicate complaints referred to it by the Human Rights Commission.

One aspect of the Human Rights Commission's mandate that is seriously missed is

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the mandate for education on human rights issues. The Commission developed and conducted a program of public education and information designed to promote an understanding and acceptance of the *Human Rights Code*. The Commission did this by making presentations to employer organizations, unions, schools, colleges, universities and community organizations. The Commission also put out fact sheets and brochures on a number of subjects related to human rights.

More importantly the Commission often made statements to the media on human rights issues, thus generating debate and discussion. The Commission also issued annual reports which were educational tools. We no longer have that capacity or these sorts of educational tools in British Columbia with the abolition of the Human Rights Commission.

Research and consultation were an important aspect of the work of the Commission. The Commission established working

relationships with community organizations and human rights advocates, and met frequently with them in order to keep current on issues of importance to the Commission's stakeholders. Several significant human rights research projects were undertaken by the Commission.

The Commission represented broader public interest in addressing systemic discrimination by becoming party to complaints filed by others. The Commission often intervened or became party to complaints that raised important legal issues and that were of significant importance to the community. We no longer have the ability to tackle systemic discrimination in British Columbia.

We need strong human rights legislation in British Columbia. We need and deserve to have a human rights commission in British Columbia.

*Harinder Mahil is a community activist and is a director of Dr. Hari Sharma Foundation. He is a former Commissioner of the British Columbia Human Rights Commission.*

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### Day of shame

**D**ecember 10, International Human Rights Day, should also be remembered as a day of shame for the Conservative government. The date is an ugly reminder of this government's adamancy behind forcing a paralyzed refugee claimant to leave Canada in 2007.

Lehmber Singh was a failed refugee claimant, who became a victim of the high handedness of the government and deception of the apologists of the establishment. Singh came to Canada from Punjab, India as a political refugee in 2003. His claim was denied and he faced deportation. However, following a spinal infection Singh became paralyzed and was at George Pearson Center, a long term care facility in Vancouver, when his story came out and soon turned him into a newsmaker.

I was one of the first journalists in the Punjabi community to know about his case in the summer of 2007. It all began when a Punjabi nurse from the center where he was being looked after called me at Radio India, where I previously worked as newscaster and talk show host. All she told me was that this man would be deported soon and needed a special chair, for which she was looking for some monetary help through fundraising. I immediately announced that on the radio, and had Singh on air from his care facility. Singh told me every thing honestly. He told me in very clear terms that he was an economic refugee. He had come here to make money to support his poor family back home, and cooked up a story of being a political refugee at the suggestion of the travel agent who prepared his documents. He had claimed that he might be

persecuted if he was deported back to India for his association with a Sikh separatist organization. At no point during the live interview did he express his desire to stay in Canada. All he was asking was for a special chair.

As the word spread, the radio station started receiving calls. Some philanthropists and self-styled human rights activists began phoning in to get all the particulars about Lehmber Singh. Slowly the story was picked up by the rest of the media, and a campaign began in our community. Almost everyone started demanding that the Canadian government should let him stay here on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. A petition was launched, and No One is Illegal – a credible advocacy group for the rights of immigrants - stepped in. Some politicians, including those aligned with the Conservatives, came forward to make assurances that Singh would be allowed to stay. As the Lehmber Singh case gained popularity, some saw it as a good “photo op”. His support group started getting organized. Almost all Punjabi radio stations were closely following the development. But the mainstream media and politicians were not being nice to Singh. Questions were being raised about his credibility. Some suggested that he would be okay once he was given the immigration. Mainstream newspapers were full of negative stories and hostile commentaries. It became very clear that the government would not let him stay. As a result he was discreetly shifted by his supporters to Gurdwara Kalgidhar Darbar, a Sikh temple in Abbotsford. The Canadian Border Services Agency made it clear that it would respect the sanctuary of a religious place and not enter to arrest him. Unfortunately, Singh needed medical care and had to be taken to hospital,

from where he was picked up one evening. As the community got news of his arrest, there were angry protests. However, he was released on certain conditions and shifted back to the temple. Meanwhile, public rallies in support of Lehmbur Singh continued. Indo-Canadian politicians started showing up at these rallies. Cutting across ideological lines, the members of different political camps, such as the moderates and fundamentalists within the Sikh community, also came together to support the cause. Women, children, and seniors came out in big numbers in spite of snow and poor weather conditions as the Lehmbur Singh campaign entered the month of December. But although the campaign received support from indigenous communities and renowned public figures, like author Naomi Klein, the mainstream media by and large showed it in a negative light. On one occasion, a rally held during a heavy snowfall in Surrey was completely blacked out by the media.

After several months of speculations, he was asked to be present at the Vancouver Airport on December 10 for deportation. Radio India and a rival Punjabi radio station, Shere Punjab, teamed together despite differences in the past on this issue. My colleague from Shere Punjab, Gurvinder Singh Dhaliwal, also became an ally in the campaign. We sank our differences for this cause. A call was given to show up at the Airport,

as the managements of both stations were now openly supporting the campaign. Upset over the attitude of the mainstream media, as a journalist who was expected to follow the story from the sidewalks, I actually broke the line and joined the campaign. Close to 2,000 people showed up at the Airport rally. What added insult to the injury was that the date chosen not only marked International Human Rights Day, it was also the martyrdom day of Guru Teg Bahadar, the ninth master of the Sikh faith. He was executed for standing up against the persecution of Hindus by the Islamist rulers in India. The community was obviously angry and felt humiliated at the government's decision, and many forced the organizers of the rally not to hand over Lehmbur Singh to the authorities. The vehicle carrying him was surrounded by the crowd and people chanted angry slogans. I had suggested to let him go and mark the date of December 10 as a day of shame permanently to embarrass the Conservative government. But nobody listened. The size of this protest was unprecedented, with

traffic disrupted. At the end of the rally, parking staff let almost everybody leave without charging anything. Lehmbur Singh had missed his plane and was taken back by the temple leaders. My throat was aching after all the sloganeering and anti-establishment rhetoric. This was the first

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time I had protested publicly in my lifetime for a collective cause. In the back of my mind, I kept asking myself whether I did the right thing. After all, I am a professional journalist. I not only fell in love with the story of Singh, but also became one of its characters. Undoubtedly, I had crossed my journalistic boundaries and that's why *Georgia Straight* editor Charlie Smith refused to allow me to write a story about the Lehmbur Singh campaign—and I must admit that he was right.

Nevertheless, my protest was legitimate. There is a saying in Punjabi, "Even a child can't get milk from mother without protesting." That's what we had been doing, but the government was not listening. We all signed petitions, went on radio talk shows, and sent our representatives to Parliament seeking residency for Singh on compassionate grounds, but these efforts all fell on deaf ears.

The mainstream media was bent upon portraying Singh as an illegal alien who had entered Canada with the help of a fake passport. His supporters were obliquely branded as extremists, as one of the key campaigners was formerly aligned with a banned terror group. Lehmbur Singh was shifted to a different Sikh temple in Surrey that was under the control of moderates. Shortly after the airport rally, the community gatekeepers who were leading the campaign began showing signs of weakness. The management of Radio India also turned volte face on this issue. So-called human rights activists in the community who had initially shown interest in the case began attacking the credibility of Lehmbur Singh as well. All these turncoats now began feeding Lehmbur Singh with an idea to leave voluntarily with a promise to give him money. There was a lot of bad mouthing against Lehmbur Singh and his honest supporters. Some even attacked his cultural background. Singh belongs to the oppressed Dalit community, considered as "untouchables" by the so-called

upper caste groups. The management at the temple where he was now hiding went to the extent of saying that if the authorities showed up to arrest him, they would hand him over without any confrontation. This was in sharp contrast to the churches, who continue to give sanctuary to political refugees without fear. The Sikh temples rely more heavily on the government, as they need visas for visiting priests from India.

However, Singh was shifted back to the Sikh temple in Abbotsford. It soon became clear that the efforts had started to make a compromise with the government, and also save the skin of the Indo-Canadian MPs from the ruling Conservative Party. This all became too much to bear, and I mentioned everything on air, leading to a heated argument at work. I had almost decided to quit, but was asked by friends and well-wishers to stay calm. Slowly things settled down and I went to India during the summer of 2008 for a vacation. I visited Singh's village to see for myself the condition of his family that lived in poverty. The village was very far from the main city of Jalandhar and lacked a long term care facility for Singh. I wrote a story about my first hand account for a weekly paper in Vancouver. But all this was in vain. Shortly after I came back I was told that Singh had decided to leave, as the government remained adamant. The day he finally left, only his close supporters came to see him off. There were many sad faces in the crowd. Harsha Walia from No One is Illegal was in tears.

Sometime after Singh left for India, the story of another failed refugee claimant appeared in the media. Baljit Ram had also come to Canada cooking up the story of being a political refugee. He was arrested after a violent incident in Surrey. It was then that the police learnt about his status. He was facing deportation and had been in hiding. How come Baljit Ram still moved around whereas Lehmbur Singh had to bear humiliation?

## ||| SPECIAL ARTICLE

What separated the two individuals was that Lehmer Singh was paralytic, whereas Ram was in good health. Had Singh been healthy, probably he could have given the slip to everyone and wouldn't have needed anyone's sympathy at all.

The public memory is short and people have their own priorities, but December 10 will not be forgotten, at least by people like me. It will continue to remind us that a government that claims to be a human rights leader in the world lacks compassion. Ironically, the current Prime Minister Stephen Harper had apologized for the Komagata Maru episode in 2008. The Japanese vessel carrying over 300 South Asian passengers was forced to return in 1914 under the discriminatory continuous journey law by the Canadian government. What's the point of seeking an apology for something that happened in the distant past, when the government lacks passion for refugees like Singh and many others? I remember that a Punjabi Conservative MP, Deepak Obhrai, had once said during an interview with me that if men like him were in the Canadian

parliament in 1914, the Komagata Maru incident wouldn't have happened. If that is so, how come at least four Conservative Punjabi MPs could not raise a voice against the injustice done to Singh? The community gate-keepers and the apologists of the state within the Punjabi community cannot be spared criticism either. The Lehmer Singh story shows how activism is waning in our community. On one hand, we celebrate the centenary of the community heroes who fought against racism and the British occupation of India, while we are least bothered to carry on the struggle for a just society which they started. The saddest part of the story is that Singh never wanted to stay in the first place as soon as his application for refugee status was rejected. All he wanted was a special chair to travel back home. It was the fault of the community gate keepers who gave him false hope and took his case into their hands, only to discredit and disown him later while the government remained adamant.

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## Founding editor of Bheem Patrika receives Tara Singh Hayer Journalism Award

The founding editor of *Bheem Patrika*, Lahori Ram Balley has received this year's Tara Singh Hayer Journalism Award. The award was established by the Chetna Association last year in memory of Tara Singh Hayer, the founding editor of *Indo-Canadian Times*, who was murdered in Surrey on November 18, 1998.

Balley's son Anand Balley from Toronto received the award on his behalf. Those present on the occasion included Tara Singh Hayer's daughter Rupinder Hayer Bains and her brother Dave Hayer. Rupinder is the current editor of *Indo-Canadian Times*, while Dave Hayer is a former MLA.

*Bheem Patrika* is the longest Dalit periodical, published since 1958. Dedicated to the renowned social justice activist and intellectual of India, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Bheem Patrika* gives voice to the so-called untouchables who continue to suffer atrocities in a caste-ridden Indian society. The award was instituted in recognition of Hayer's support to the oppressed communities in Vancouver.

Hayer died as a critic of violence and terrorism. He was first attacked in 1988. That incident left him paralyzed, and ten years later he was fatally shot. Until now his murder remains unsolved. He was a potential witness in the conspiracy case of the 1985 Air India bombings which claimed 331 lives. Blamed on Sikh separatists, the bombings followed the ugly political events of 1984. In June 1984, the Indian army attacked the Golden Temple Complex, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar, to flush out

religious extremists who had fortified the place of worship. The incident sparked angry protests by Sikhs across the world. The Indian Consulate office in Vancouver was vandalized by the protesters. The Sikh separatists had given a call to boycott Air India flights, and the bombings happened close to the first anniversary of the army invasion.

Hayer was to testify against suspects in the plot. He claimed to have overheard about it during a discussion that took place in the office of *Des Pardes* newspaper in London. The editor of *Des Pardes*, Tarsem Singh Purewal, was also murdered in 1995. One of the former Air India suspects, Ajaib Singh Bagri, who was acquitted in 2005, was previously charged with attempted murder in connection with a 1988 attack on Hayer. But the charge was later stayed.

Hayer had previously supported the Sikh separatists, and authored a book that glorified Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the Sikh preacher who had fortified the Golden Temple Complex. He was also upset at the army assault on the Golden Temple, and frequently supported Sikh militants in his editorials and published their pictures on the front cover. Later, he fell apart with them and started writing against their actions consistently. Ironically, his family describes Hayer as the 332<sup>nd</sup> victim of the Air India tragedy, although he had in the past glorified Talwinder Singh Parmar, the alleged mastermind of the bombings. Parmar died at the hands of the Indian police in 1992.

-RDNB

## Punjabis all the way in BC civic elections

**T**he Punjabis have made a significant impact in the BC civic elections. At least two Punjabis have been elected Mayors, along with many city councillors and school trustees during the November 15 municipal elections held across the province.

Collin Basran has been elected as the youngest Mayor in the city of Kelowna, while Akbal Singh Mund has won the mayoral election in Vernon. In Williams Lake, Surinderpal Singh Rathore was defeated in the mayoral race.

At least a dozen Punjabi or South Asian candidates have been elected as city councillors in different municipalities. Moe Gill has been re-elected in Abbotsford, which also elected Kelly Chahal as city councillor. Preet Rai has been re-elected as a school trustee in the same city. In Burnaby, Sav Dhaliwal has been re-elected as city councillor, while Baljinder Narang and Harman Pandher have been re-elected as school trustees. Dave Birdi has been re-elected as city councillor in Fort Saint James, and likewise Tom Gill has been re-elected for the same position in Surrey. Terry Gidha, a long time city councillor in Mission, was defeated. Mission had once elected the first Indo-Canadian Mayor, Niranjan Singh Grewal. There is a street renamed after him in the city. Garry Thind has been elected as a school trustee in Surrey. Arjun Singh and Mohini Singh have been elected

as city councillors in Kamloops and Kelowna respectively. From Prince Rupert, Gurvinder Singh Randhawa was elected as City Councillor. Also elected as city councillors are Sarabjit Rai from Osoyoos, Tarak Sayeed from Penticton, Sushil Thapar from Quesnel and Dalvir Nahal from Vernon. Despite high hopes for Niki Sharma in Vancouver, she could not win the city councillor election.

These victories came in the centenary year of the Komagata Maru episode. The Japanese vessel carrying over 300 South Asian passengers was forced to return by the Canadian government in 1914 under the discriminatory immigration law. The Indo-Canadians were disfranchised back then, and did not have a right to vote. The right was won back in 1947 after years of struggle. Earlier on election day, Surrey Newton MLA Harry Bains reminded a gathering inside a Surrey gurdwara to exercise their right to vote and elect Barinder Rasode as Mayor of Surrey. The occasion was the special prayers for his deceased parents. The first Punjabi MLA in BC, Moe Sihota, was present during the occasion and made a similar appeal to the devotees. Although Surrey has a sizable Punjabi population, with three Punjabi MPs and two MLAs, Rasode came third in the mayoral race that was won by Linda Hepner.

**-RDNB**

### Mohammad Singh Azad's legacy of secularism remains relevant

Udham Singh alias Mohammad Singh Azad has always been known for assassinating a former British official in India in cold blood. But the beautiful legacy of secularism he left behind needs to be recognized and kept alive when religious sectarianism continues to challenge world peace.

Born in British India on December 26, 1899 in Punjab, Udham Singh lost his parents during his childhood. He and his brother were looked after by a Sikh orphanage in Amritsar, a city that witnessed a bloody massacre in 1919 that shaped Udham Singh's political ideology. The police had indiscriminately fired at supporters of a passive resistance movement who had gathered at a public park named Jallianwala Bagh to protest against the detention of their leaders by the British government. Scores of people died in the incident, leaving a deep scar on the psyche of hot-headed young Indians. Among the dead were Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Prior to the massacre, the Hindus and Muslims had celebrated their religious festivals together to show people's unity to the British rulers.

The bloody episode became a catalyst in the lives of men like Udham Singh, who wanted to avenge the deaths of peaceful protesters. Bhagat Singh, a towering Indian revolutionary who was hanged for killing a British police officer in 1931, was also deeply affected by the incident. Udham Singh always considered Bhagat Singh as his role model.

Years later in 1940, Udham Singh assassinated Michael O'Dwyer in London to avenge the killings. Dwyer was the governor of Punjab at the time of massacre. Udham Singh took a concealed weapon inside the Caxton Hall where Dwyer was to speak at a meeting of the East India Association and the Central Asian Society. He was hanged for his action on July 31, 1940. Before being sentenced to death he had

announced that he should always be addressed by his alias name of Mohammad Singh Azad, that symbolized secularism and bonding between Sikhs and Muslims. It was a significant political statement of its time, especially when the Sikh clergy had sided with the British government when the massacre took place. The man in charge of the killer squad was actually honoured by the custodians of the Akal Takhat, the highest temporal seat of the Sikhs in Amritsar, which is not very far from the Jallianwala Bagh.

The idea of secularism cherished by Udham Singh had its roots in the mandate of the Ghadar Party, a group of South Asian radicals in North America. The party was formed by Indian immigrants in 1913 to resist racism abroad and fight against foreign occupation back home. The party was opposed to any form of theocracy and faith-based politics. Among its founders were members of different communities who wanted to build a secular and egalitarian society in free India. One of its founders, Kartar Singh Sarabha who was hanged in 1915, was the role model of

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Bhagat Singh, who later became a source of inspiration for the generation of Udham Singh. Bhagat Singh also emphasized secular unity and denounced religious fanaticism of every shade. He died as an atheist.

It is believed that Udham Singh may have actually murdered Dwyer under the influence of the Ghadar Party. Dwyer was instrumental behind the executions of the Ghadar Party activists, who had started returning to India in 1914 to launch an armed rebellion.

It's a shame that when India gained official independence in 1947 the country was divided on religious lines. Muslim Pakistan was separated from India, as a result of which there was a lot of bloodshed on either side of the border. The partition of India can be best described as the murder of the Ghadar Party's philosophy. Bhagat Singh or Udham Singh would have never accepted such division. There are a number of instances where the former Ghadar Party members formed peace committees to save people from the religious fundamentalists during riots sparked by the partition.

In today's world, when violence in the name of religion continues to pose threat to peace and harmony, Udham Singh's legacy of secularism needs to be kept alive. Unfortunately, in his own home country, Hindu nationalism has grown as a bigger threat over the years. Those seeking to transform India into a Hindu nation have ascended to power. This is not to suggest that religious fundamentalists from the minority communities are any better, but the

growing threat of the Hindu right under the Hindu nationalist BJP government may fuel more violence and indirectly encourage more extremism from minority fundamentalist groups. So much so, these forces are bent upon appropriating icons like Bhagat Singh and Udham Singh to their advantage. Particularly, the Sikh separatists in North America have been overemphasizing the Sikh heritage of secularist political activists like Udham Singh. Nobody can deny the Sikh heritage of these men, but any suggestion that brackets them with any theocratic movement is baseless. Instead of falling into their trap, people should recognize what these men actually stood for, and pursue their unfinished task to make this world a better place.

**-RDNB**

### Religious ideas are among the most dangerous

Islamophobia. What does this word mean? Is there even a coherent definition? Is it synonymous with racism? I will attempt to work through these questions but first some context.

Now that Canada has “lost its innocence” as some reporters have commented, it is time for Canadians to have a frank and open discussion about terrorism and its implications. I for one do not believe we have in fact lost our innocence. That ship has sailed. We have already seen several homegrown terrorist plots defeated (the Toronto 18, the Millennial bomber to name but two). One can go back to the Air India bombings and the FLQ crisis to name two that in some sense, “succeeded”.

While the terrorist attacks above were well orchestrated with clear objectives, the recent murders of two Canadian soldiers, on Canadian soil, appear to be the work of “lone wolves”. The two assassins did not appear to know of each other or of each other's plans. The methods and weapons used were different but there do appear be a few common threads. They were both recent converts to Islam and both said very clearly, that their religious conviction was a major factor in their heinous crimes. They both were “self radicalized”, which is to say, they made their conversion and internalized their need to act out on their own by surfing the Internet finding justification for their crimes in virtual (to use both

definitions in one) anonymity. While inspired by other Jihadists, they were not groomed or lured by any individual or group. But they did get their inspiration from somewhere, this is clear.

Call them terrorists, call them criminals, call them deranged, it does not matter, they articulated their motives and we should take them at their word. This cannot be swept under the carpet as racist or anti-Muslim, to do so will prevent us from fully understanding what caused these Canadian citizens to go on murderous rampages. If we cannot, or will not keep religion on the table as a possible motive, we will hamstring ourselves from the start.

For the purposes of this article I am going to focus on the homegrown terrorism we have seen recently, the same type that inflicted so much horror on July 11<sup>th</sup> 2005 in London. The type of person who grows up in a free and democratic society, with all the advantages that entails, but never the less, turns to radicalization, and its attendant violence. I agree that terrorists in parts of the Middle East have grievances far beyond a “hatred of our way of life” or simple religious differences. Dropping bombs on you neighborhood, foreign soldiers patrolling your street, these have a negative influence to be sure. But what does it take to turn a Canadian against his or her own country?

I will argue that like the situation in the Middle East, the reasons are multi-faceted. Mental health is one factor. But not all people with

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mental health issues go on killing sprees. Social isolation can be another factor but again, not every loner who feels the tug of isolation has a need to act out violently. Drug use has been cited in one of the recent cases. All these things should be considered but at the end of the day, there is usually some trigger, some factor that tips the balance; that pushes an already fragile person to act out in ways that they would ordinarily not. What seems obvious to me is that, in the most recent cases, that trigger is religion.

Let me be clear, as an atheist I find all religions wrong. The problem with the world is not people, it is the ideas people hold, and religious ideas are among the most dangerous. Religious ideas are dangerous for many reasons, even the most benign. Religion robs us of our humanity, it tells us that we cannot know right from wrong without a book or self imposed leader to tell us. Religion tells us we not only cannot know right from wrong, but if you deny the religious pronouncement of what is good, you deserve punishment, horrible punishment, just for having different ideas. This is powerful stuff in the mind of a loner, suffering from mental health issues, with no other apparent escape from their reality. Religion gives certainty and comfort in a world where none seems forthcoming.

I have read the Koran and many books on Islam (some critical, some not) as well as several biographies of The Prophet. I am not an expert but I do have a passing knowledge of the religion. I could cite passages from the Koran and the Hadith to confirm that war and violence are an integral part of the religion. But I do not have to. I only need the words and actions of those who claim to speak in its name.

Claim to speak; this is an important phrase, as no one person or Mosque speaks for Islam. It is by definition, open to interpretation, as are all religions. Just the fact that it can be interpreted such that great good and great harm can be gleaned from its teachings tells us that it cannot be a reliable source of knowledge or truth. If the sum total of your belief system is based on your interpretation, then it is by definition, not a universal truth. The fact is; whether you agree with the terrorists' version of Islam or not is unimportant, what is important is that for some people, this is the version they hold.

There is a strong case that this brutal interpretation of the religion is one of the factors involved in tipping a person to commit acts that they would normally not consider. Even Thomas Mulcair who says these incidences were not terrorism and Justin Trudeau who says this is not Islam; say we need to engage the Muslim community. If the religion is not the issue, then why engage religious leaders? Because they know that the mosques and Muslim leaders are our first line of defense in uncovering these extremists. We have already seen the Burnaby Mosque have concerns about the Ottawa shooter. The killer in Quebec gave signs for months that he was being radicalized and both were on the RCMP radar. Fortunately we have a Charter of Rights and Freedoms that prevents the government from imposing thought crime laws, I argue that religious leaders have no such restrictions. It is in fact, those extremist ideas and thoughts that religious leaders are best able to notice and act upon. We need to engage and work with those leaders, not shut them out for fear of being seen to place blame. Most Muslim leaders recognize this, for

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those who do not; they are part of the problem when they could be part of the solution.

To reiterate, it does not matter if you agree with the terrorists' version of the faith, it only matters that they hold those beliefs, and we need to find ways to stop them. Is this racist? Is this a phobia? I do not think so.

If we ignore the elephant in the room for fear of bringing offence, if we side-step the problem of a violent interpretation of the Koran, for fear of being labeled Islamophobic, if we are so afraid of being labeled racist that we willfully ignore the one common thread in all these cases, we run the risk, of not seeing the warning signs and instead, we will direct our energies towards solutions that miss the mark.

There are many reasons why people commit atrocities. Are we, as a society, going to ignore the most obvious ones for fear of offending? Muslims should be as offended as anyone that their religion is being used in this way. It is a sad fact that more Muslims die at the hands of other Muslims than any other group. I cannot tell Muslims what to do or how to deal with this problem. Neither I nor anyone else outside the religion can go into the Mosques and denounce these violent acts, but denouncing is not enough, we need to encourage those Muslims who are sick of being tied to radicalization and terrorism to root out the problems within their community. We should be there to

help, not spinning cartwheels in a vain attempt to impose some post-modern multiculturalism that says all beliefs are equal. All beliefs are not equal and beliefs have consequences. We must stand with our Muslim brothers and sisters to help them fight the aggressive interpretation of their religion that exerts such a strong pull on the marginalized and help usher in a new age of acceptance; acceptance for those of different beliefs, and, if I may, acceptance of those with no beliefs.

*Pat O' Brien is the leader of Center for Inquiry in Vancouver and a regular columnist of Radical Desi*

## Modi's superstition should not upset anyone

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's suggestion that science was really advanced during an imaginary period of gods and goddesses has made many rationalists angry and upset.

The Hindu mythology believes that Lord Ganesha – the elephant god - had his original human head replaced by the head of an elephant after being decapitated. Close to the 125<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India, Modi shocked the nation by suggesting that this must have been done by a plastic surgeon and shows that the Indian civilization was developed and ahead of its time.

The rationalists have reacted strongly, since while Nehru believed in adoption of scientific temperament for the progress of Indian society, Modi has shown how ignorant and superstitious he is.

But there is nothing to be angry or upset about. After all, Modi represents a Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) which has nothing in common with Nehru's ideology of secularism or modernism. On top of that, Modi represents a superstitious majority of the public in a country that blindly believes in countless numbers of gods and goddesses. As a matter of fact, in 1995, India was gripped by a rumor that the statues of Ganesha were drinking milk. Thousands

of devotees lined up at the temples with milk bottles to please their god. The pilgrims continue to throng temples across India almost year around to pay obeisance to an unseen force, often getting killed or injured in stampedes or road accidents, without questioning why the god never came to their rescue.

Such unscientific sentiment has proved to be virtue for the success of politicians like Modi, who was the Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2002 when Muslims were murdered by BJP-led goons with the help of police. Despite such controversial baggage, Modi was elected to power with a brute majority in a so-called secular democracy. If voters can't see this, then who really cares what rationalists are saying? Who really cares what Nehru believed in or what the Indian constitution says about scientific education?

It's very simple. Society gets what society is. If the people can kill fellow human beings without questioning their leaders in the name of faith, or if they are too naive to understand the tricks played by the temple leaders who spread rumours of miracles, then what kind of leaders can be expected to come forward and represent society? Modi has been duly elected by the majority of people blinded by religion and superstition. So what he is saying or doing should not upset anyone. His actions and words are a representation of this collective consciousness.

**-RDNB**





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

***Issued by:***

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