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Cover Picture : RCMP officer Baltej Singh Dhillon after being honoured by *Spice Radio* for fighting against racism.

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RADICAL
DESI

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

~ Desmond Tutu

Jallianwala Bagh massacre story still relevant

This month marks 97 years of the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in British India. On April 13, 1919, British troops fired indiscriminately on peaceful demonstrators who had gathered in Amritsar's public park known as Jallianwala Bagh in protest against the arrests of leaders of the passive resistance movement. The unprovoked firing left more than 400 people dead. The gathering was organized to show solidarity with the leaders who were detained for opposing draconian laws. Those killed in the bloody episode belonged to different religious communities who came together on the occasion of Vaisakhi, a harvest festival which is celebrated with fervour across Punjab. Vaisakhi has also a special significance in the Sikh faith, as their tenth master, Guru Gobind Singh, laid the foundation of Khalsa, the army of the baptized Sikhs, on that day in 1699. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre on an auspicious occasion galvanized the freedom movement and became a catalyst in the lives of revolutionaries who thought that India could only be liberated from foreign occupation through armed resistance rather than using peaceful means. It had a great impact on towering revolutionary figures like Bhagat Singh, who was hanged in 1931 alongside two comrades, Sukhdev and Rajguru, for murdering a British police officer. This episode also culminated in the assassination of the former Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab, Michael O'Dwyer, in London in 1940 by another revolutionary, Udham Singh. Dwyer was instrumental behind circumstances leading to the Jallianwala Bagh shootout. Such was the intensity of the massacre, that a Bengali Nobel Prize winner in Literature, Rabindranath Tagore, returned his British knighthood in protest. The incident left a permanent scar on the history of British rule in India. Even after freedom from the British, the incident remains unforgettable in the collective memory of Indian citizens. A monument built in memory of those killed in Amritsar remains an important pilgrimage for those interested in the history of resistance against colonialism. So much so that British Prime Minister David Cameron visited the site in 2013 and described the incident as "deeply shameful". As we near the centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh episode, there is a need to recognize that the horrific story of the massacre is relevant even today. More than symbolic regrets, we need to remind people across the world that state violence still remains an ugly reality, and most affected are always the oppressed and marginalized communities. In post-British India itself, state violence has been going on since official independence in 1947. There have been massacres engineered by the ruling parties against religious minorities, including the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom and the 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat. In both cases, the police openly sided with the goons who were let loose to kill members of the minority communities. Ironically, the Golden Temple Complex, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar, which is not far from Jallianwala Bagh, was invaded by the Indian army in 1984 to flush out a handful of religious extremists hiding inside. That assault left many innocent civilians and pilgrims dead. In the aftermath of that army operation, ordinary Sikhs in Punjab were harassed by security forces in the name of national security. Those who resisted this repression were subjected to physical violence in the form of tortures and forced disappearances. Staged police shootouts of political activists and their unceremonious cremations became a common practice. Likewise, the people of Kashmir and North Eastern states who have been fighting for the right to self-determination are victims of systemic violence. Mass graves of those killed in Kashmir by security forces have been found. There is no end to state repression on tribal people in areas where Maoist insurgents have been active for many years. The security personnel also frequently indulge in sexual violence in disturbed areas. The draconian laws give them immunity from prosecution. Although this has been going on for many years, under the current right-wing

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Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party government, the repression has grown manifold. Those opposing its policies are frequently branded as anti-national and charged for sedition. Interestingly, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) – an ultra Hindu nationalist body of which BJP is a part, never participated in the liberation movement. Rather it played into the hands of the British by supporting demands for a Hindu nation, which helped the foreign rulers to maintain power by keeping their subjects divided on religious lines. The Sikh priest class at that time was also a puppet in the hands of the British, as the custodians of the Sikh faith honoured an officer who was responsible for the massacre. It is pertinent to mention that before the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, people of all faith groups had displayed unity against the British Empire. The message was strong enough for the British rulers, who felt threatened by such solidarity. The politics of the Hindu right and the Sikh clergy clearly suited their interests to keep India under subjugation, both by dividing people and using force to crush any voice of dissent. The story is also relevant for other parts of the world. In Canada, the indigenous peoples continue to be pushed around in the name of development, and systemic violence against them has continued unabated. Those who resist attempts to appropriate their lands are demonized by the extraction industry, the police and the big media. In Palestine, the Israeli occupation refuses to end due to the backing of powerful Western democracies. The occupation of other nations in the name of the so-called war on terror is another reminder of the ongoing struggle against neo-imperialism. Unless the working class and the oppressed nations join hands across the world to make the rich and powerful accountable, the repression will go on. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre story should therefore be an everyday reminder of our responsibilities to stand up against injustice.

-Editors

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Turbaned Trailblazers

The Sikhs continue to fight racism in North America despite many success stories

This year the Canadian Sikhs are going to celebrate Vaisakhi with extraordinary vigour. Adding to the excitement on the occasion that marks the birth anniversary of the Khalsa, an army of baptized Sikhs, Canada has its first turbaned Sikh Defence Minister Harjit Singh Sajjan.

Sajjan is among five turbaned Sikh MPs elected in the October 2015 federal election. A former regimental commander in the Canadian Armed Forces, Sajjan was picked for the post by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. His appointment marks another milestone in the history of Sikh struggles against racism in this country. The development is a reflection of many successes made by the Indian immigrants, especially the Sikhs, who in spite of their small population both in Canada and India have achieved a remarkable representation in the Canadian government. It is no joke that Trudeau has acknowledged that his government has more Sikh ministers than the Modi government in India.

Vaisakhi parades are organized by Sikhs across Canada to celebrate the foundation of the Khalsa by their tenth master Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The parades attract thousands every year in the month of April, and the growing participation in these events

showcases their victories after 100 years of struggle for equal rights. Sajjan's appointment is clearly a culmination of that fight.

But Sajjan isn't the only trailblazer within the Sikh community. Others had to fight so that men like him could make it to such a significant post.

The election of Sajjan and his colleagues coincided with the 25th anniversary of the struggle to wear turbans in this country. Baltej Singh Dhillon, who became the first turbaned Sikh officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1990,

had to fight back against the worst racial backlash. Unlike Sajjan, who got elected by the voters, Dhillon had to face many challenges from both inside and outside the police force. His resolve to face hostilities with courage and conviction and to prove himself as a capable officer gave a ray of hope to the visible minority groups in general, and the Sikhs in particular, to continue to maintain their identity, while becoming a part of the mainstream.

Dhillon's story is a reminder of the racist history of a nation that claims to be a human rights leader in the world. It also makes one wonder whether the fight is really over, as racial profiling of Sikhs and people from other minority groups continues in North America, even though individuals like Sajjan have become policy makers.

Tracing the roots of racism

The Sikhs started coming to Canada for a better livelihood by the end of the 19th century, when their home country India was under British occupation. Many had served in the British army and believed in the fairness of the British Empire toward its subjects. However, the blatant racism in Canada and the US disillusioned them. The social environment at that time was very hostile towards all people of colour, but the Sikhs were more vulnerable

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to racial violence, as they were easily identifiable targets because of their turbans and facial hair. A devout Sikh never cuts his hair as per the religious code of the Khalsa, and that's why wearing turban becomes necessary for Sikh men.

In an event of racial attack, the British officials never came to their rescue. To "keep Canada white", discriminatory policies were adopted to discourage permanent settlement of South Asian immigrants. As part of this program, they were disfranchised in 1907, and not allowed to bring their families either. A conspiracy was also hatched to relocate them to Honduras.

The community elders at that time started getting organized and fought against racism. A group of South Asian radicals called the Ghadar Party was formed in 1913 to fight against racism in North America and foreign occupation back home. The party had a big following in Vancouver. Though a majority of its members were Sikhs, the Ghadar Party was secular in character. It had members from other faith groups, including Hinduism and Islam. The Ghadar Party treated everyone alike and it had no room for discrimination in any form. An injury to one was seen as injury to all, and the party resolved to establish an egalitarian society in post-British India. It repeatedly emphasised people's unity and encouraged everyone to keep aside religious differences. In 1914, many of them started returning to India to launch an armed rebellion, only to face the gallows and long imprisonments.

The fight went on for years and achieved several important victories, including the right to vote that was restored in 1947. Until then it was unthinkable for any Indian to get elected. Thanks to the activism of the community elders, South Asians today have a strong voice in provincial legislatures and the House of Commons.

However, the history of racism is much older than what happened to the Sikhs. The roots of racism can rather be traced back to the period when European colonizers began marginalizing the Indigenous peoples of this land. White supremacy has its origins in those times, when the indigenous peoples were seen as pagan and their cultures were seen as inferior. Not only were Indigenous lands stolen, their children were forcibly taken from within their communities and sent to Residential Schools, where they were compelled to give up their cultural and spiritual beliefs and punished for speaking in their mother tongue. Like some groups of immigrants, they too were disfranchised, in spite of the fact that they were the first nations in Canada. The idea was to assimilate them into European culture. So when the Sikh immigrants were seen as "culturally inferior" by the dominant society, they weren't the only community to become a target of systemic racism. Prejudices have continued to prevail against the "others" who do not fit into the European ways. The Chinese, the Japanese, the Blacks and the Jewish people had to go through similar pains in Canada. The indigenous children at the residential schools

were forced to cut their long hair; at the same time, turbaned Sikhs also faced discrimination at work and public places, prompting many to cut their hair. Yet because of their skin colour, racial discrimination did not stop, and Sikhs with shorn hair also had to face prejudices.

Enter Baltej Singh Dhillon

When Dhillon joined the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in 1990, he wasn't expecting a huge controversy over his appointment. Born in Malaysia in 1966, he moved to Canada with his family in 1982. He dreamed to join the police force when he started volunteering for the RCMP's Block Watch program. He thought that since the Sikh community had a long history in Canada and had contributed a lot to its development, the doors of the RCMP would always be open for a man like him. Also, the Sikh soldiers had served the empire during World War II. There was every reason for him to believe that racism that prevailed when Sikh immigrants started coming here was a thing of past. Instead he had a big shock when his recruitment created an outcry across Canada. Both within and outside the RCMP, people were upset over somebody with turban and facial hair being hired as a police officer. A campaign started to stop his appointment, and racist posters began appearing. "It was so blatant and open. They started selling buttons with offensive message on them," recalled Dhillon during an interview with RDNB. The bitter experiences of that time are still etched into his memory. Then the threats started coming in as he was sent to the RCMP Academy in

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Regina. On one occasion, when he came to BC to attend the wedding of his sister, he was warned about a potential life threat and advised to take security. Undeterred by these challenges, he continued to work with zeal. "I drew inspiration from my religion. The Sikhs had made great sacrifices during oppression. Why couldn't I bear small challenges and prove myself?" Finally his efforts paid dividends, and his senior officer, who wasn't pleased over his appointment at first, was a changed man close to his retirement. He told Dhillon that he was like his son and also apologized for his hostile behaviour in the past.

This year on March 21, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Dhillon was promoted to the rank of Inspector. Just two days earlier, he was honoured at a public event for fighting against racism. Organized by the Burnaby-based *Spice Radio* at Vancouver Roundhouse, the occasion was second annual Raise Your Hands Against Racism campaign. *Spice Radio* CEO Shushma Datt got a special memento made, that read, "Presented to Baltej S Dhillon for paving the way for us". Indeed he paved the way not only for close to 100 turbaned Sikh police officers employed across Canada, but also for Sajjan and even turbaned Sikh Tim Uppal, a former cabinet minister who ironically served in the previous Conservative government that wanted to protect "Canadian values" by banning the niqab (veil) worn by Muslim women. Interestingly, ex-Prime Minister Stephen Harper was previously

associated with the Reform Party, one of the leading forces behind a campaign against recruitment of turbaned officers in the RCMP.

Dhillon isn't the only practising Sikh who fought for the right to wear a turban. Others had to do the same for different reasons. Lt. Col. Pritam Singh Jauhal, a World War II veteran, endured a harsh experience when he was denied entry into a Canadian Legion branch in 1993. What added insult to the injury was that it happened on Remembrance Day. Right outside the Newton Legion in Surrey, Jauhal and other Sikh veterans were stopped and told that they could not enter with their turbans, as the rules did not allow anyone inside with head coverings. Yet, English women with berets on were not stopped from entering the club. Jauhal shot into prominence for fighting back. Like Dhillon, he also received death threats and hate mail from white supremacists. The biggest loss he suffered during those difficult days was the passing away of his wife, who suffered cardiac arrest under stressful circumstances.

Finally, he won with the support of progressive elected officials, and the rules were amended to accommodate men like him at the Legion. Not only did the Legion later apologise, he was invited as a special guest when it was relocated in White Rock, where he was given a seat on the podium.

At the age of 96, Jauhal still remembers the hostilities he had to face even before the incident. He had moved to Canada in 1980, and recalls how racists would call him names when he used to walk on the street.

In 2013, his memoir; "*A Soldier Remembers*" was released in the same neighbourhood of Surrey Newton. He was given a standing ovation at the event after he gave a speech about his fight for dignity.

Avtar Singh Dhillon (no relationship with Baltej Singh Dhillon) has seen many ups and downs in his continuous struggle for right to wear a turban during industrial work. He first tasted humiliation in 1971 when he applied for a job at a plywood mill in Fort St. James. He was asked to remove his turban and wear a hard hat according to safety rules. He refused and came back to the Lower Mainland, where he worked in different industries for survival, but had to continue his fight for the right to wear a turban. He used to drive a truck for the road construction industry. After seven to eight months passed, he was asked to replace his turban with a hard hat. But he again refused, and was later given two weeks' notice to comply, after which he was suspended. All efforts to convince the labour ministry to change rules for turbaned workers failed. Following this, Dhillon used another strategy to win the right. He applied for a two wheelers' driving licence in 1976, but wasn't allowed to take a road test because of his turban. In 1980, he was ticketed for driving without a helmet. After he challenged the ticket in court, he was exempted from a fine on religious grounds, but was asked not to drive a two wheeler again. In 1997, the matter was taken to the BC Human Rights Commission, which after reviewing the case, asked

the government to relook into the Motor Vehicle Act. In 1999, when the Sikhs celebrated 300 years of the foundation of the Khalsa, the BC government amended the Act to exempt turbaned Sikhs from wearing helmets while driving two wheelers. Dhillon, who became a face of this struggle, feels that the fight isn't over yet, as many industries still don't hire turbaned employees or insist on wearing hard hats.

It's not over yet

"Is that the defence minister?", somebody in the crowd asked, pointing at Baltej Singh Dhillon at the *Spice Radio* event in Vancouver. He was corrected by another person in the gathering and given the right description of Dhillon. To some this

might be very amusing, but it does represent the general ignorance about people who look different because of their facial features, skin colour, or attire that does not match with members of the dominant society. This brief and casual Q and A only reminds one how racial stereotypes still refuse to die, even though the Defence Minister Harjit Singh Sajjan and Dhillon have prominently appeared in news coverage over the years. Not only that, in the post 9/11 environment, turbaned Sikhs have been frequently taken as Middle Eastern Muslims and violently attacked by the white supremacists, particularly in the US. Some argue that it is because of ignorance, while others don't buy this. After all, the Sikhs

have been here for more than 100 years, and have been targets of racial violence for that long. How is it possible to assume that people are not sure about their identity, mainly those who subscribe to a racist ideology? So is it happening because of ignorance or racial arrogance? "Both", said Baltej Singh Dhillon in an interview with *Spice Radio*.

Early this year in February, Jasmeet Singh, a Canadian Sikh comedian, was forced to remove his turban for a security check at San Francisco airport before boarding a flight back to Toronto. The incident followed a similar episode that happened to another prominent Sikh, actor Waris Ahluwalia, who was barred from a flight because he refused to take off his turban in

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Mexico. This happened when he was about to board an Aero Mexico flight to his hometown of New York. Obviously, Sikhs were enraged over these high profile incidents in North America.

But in their responses to such incidents, Sikh leaders miss acknowledgement of racism against all visible minority groups. These attacks on turbans are part of a larger narrative, as racial profiling of people of colour by the security agencies and racist attacks by white supremacists impact everyone. Not very long ago, in relation to a question about institutional racism against indigenous peoples, RCMP Commissioner Bob Paulson admitted in a *Globe and Mail* story that there are racists on the force who he would like to remove from duty. Blacks have been fighting against ongoing police high handedness against them in the US, where Barack Obama was elected as the first black President.

Still, following any racist attack on Sikhs, the Sikh activists frequently come out with statements like "Sikhs are NOT Islamists and have nothing to do with Islam" or "Don't freak. We're Sikh. Please stop confusing us with Muslims." During the 2015 federal election, turbaned Sikh supporters of the then ruling Conservative Party went to the extent of justifying the government's proposed ban on niqab during citizenship oath

ceremonies, forgetting that the turban was also barred in the past in the name of Canadian values. Tim Uppal, the only turbaned minister in the Conservative government, adamantly stated that a turban cannot be equated with niqab.

This is in sharp contrast to how the Ghadar Party members responded to assaults on anyone. When some Sikh Ghadar activists were forced to take off turbans in British Indian jails, they resorted to hunger strikes in which Hindu Ghadar activists also participated with enthusiasm.

But the exceptions are always there, as Lt. Col. Jauhal and Avtar Singh Dhillon expressed their

solidarity with the Muslim women who were being forced to take off niqab during the citizenship oath ceremony. Jauhal was particularly articulate. He had said that the rules should not be changed, and the right to cover the face by Muslim women must be respected. Sajjan, an election candidate at the time, also condemned the ban on niqab. Notably, Baltej Singh Dhillon was stopped from talking about this to the media at that time.

In a changed political environment under Trudeau's Liberal government, Dhillon says from his own experience that racism has to be fought back collectively, as it affects everyone. He still remembers having received

whole-hearted support from the Jewish community that was persecuted by the Nazis. Giving his own example, he insists that he is not a Sikh police officer alone, as he has to serve everyone in society. "The Sikhism also teaches us to stand up against injustice to anyone and not just for your own community," Dhillon never forgets to remind those who often overlook the real message of Sikh philosophy. "Not only we need to stand up against racism from outside, but also against racism within our own community on the basis of religion and caste."

-RDNB

Proud to be anti-national

Gurpreet Singh

You are a lion, Mr. Singh. We Indians are proud of you", I still remember those kind words of a Vancouver-based leader of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist group that is currently in power in India. He showered praises on me after listening to my speech on Sikh separatists active in Canada. I pulled no punches while criticising the Sikh extremists at the launching ceremony of the Punjabi edition of my book on the Air India victims' families, back in 2013. Air India Flight 182 was bombed mid-air in 1985, killing all 329 people aboard. The crime was blamed on Sikh separatists seeking revenge from the Indian government for attacking their holiest shrine in Amritsar in 1984, and engineering anti-Sikh pogroms following the assassination of then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards later that year.

Posted on social media, my speech had grabbed the attention of this self-styled patriotic Indian leader. He was excited to see how an Indo-Canadian journalist like myself, was "boldly" criticising "anti-India" separatists who have always been considered very powerful and influential in Canada.

He kept phoning me from time to time to give updates about BJP activities in Vancouver, and I as a

reporter continued reporting them. But something terribly went wrong after the BJP came to power with a brute majority in 2014 under Narendra Modi, a controversial political figure.

Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat state when an anti-Muslim massacre took place in 2002. The massacre followed the burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims. Over 50 of them died. The Modi government blamed Islamic extremists for the incident, after which the Muslim community was targeted across Gujarat by mobs led by the BJP activists. Human rights groups and the survivors maintain that Modi was complicit in the crime. The scenario was no different from the one witnessed across India in 1984, when the Sikh community was targeted after the murder of Indira Gandhi. The only difference was that the anti-Muslim violence was orchestrated by an outright Hindu nationalist party, whereas Indira Gandhi's Congress party claims to be secular.

Being a secularist, my criticism of all the religious extremist ideologies has been alike. I used to work with Surrey-based *Radio India* as a talk show host at that time. I had joined the organization in 2001 after emigrating from India where I used to work with *The Tribune*. The Sikh separatists seeking Khalistan -

an imaginary Sikh homeland to be carved out of Punjab, India - had been very active in Canada and I was frequently warned to stay silent against them. Nevertheless, I kept bringing up crimes committed by the Khalistanis in Punjab, such as killings of Hindus and political critics, including many leftists. For the record I have been equally critical of the Indian government for its high handedness in dealing with the militants and repression of Sikhs in 1984. Also I had criticised Modi for allowing the anti-Muslim violence a year after my joining *Radio India*. But I was still branded as "anti-Sikh" and "an Indian agent" by the supporters of Khalistan. The threats started when I began criticising those involved in the Air India bombing. Luckily at that time, my employer, Maninder Singh Gill, supported me whole heartedly in spite of pressure on him to get rid of me. He also used to complain that my commentary was causing financial loss to the organisation, as advertisers who subscribe to the Khalistani ideology were reluctant to sponsor our programs. Still he stood behind me like a rock.

When Modi became the Prime Minister, the situation completely changed. Not only in India, but in other countries too, his critics began facing the heat. Hindu extremists became emboldened. They started

CURRENT AFFAIRS

harassing anyone who questioned Modi and his politics of hatred. In India, media persons who were critical of Modi began to be pushed around. Some felt that an era of censorship had been ushered in under a right wing government. With the BJP assuming power after getting elected, it gained legitimacy around the world. Modi, who had been denied visa by various countries for repression of Muslims in Gujarat, was free to go anywhere. On top of that, the BJP and its supporters also gained the upper hand within the Indo-Canadian community and increased its influence over Indian consulates. In those circumstances, several groups decided to organize protest rallies against Modi during his first official visit to US. One of them was Sikhs For Justice (SFJ), a human rights advocacy group that supports Sikh sovereignty. As a host, I decided to highlight the contentious tour of Modi and gave some airtime to SFJ. Although I strongly disagree with their political agenda of Sikh sovereignty, as a journalist I felt it necessary to talk to their leader about the upcoming visit of Modi and the planned protest in September 2014. This enraged my employer, who did not want any anti-Modi voice to be given air time. He was particularly annoyed over my interview with someone who supports a Sikh homeland. The story did not end there, as he also wanted me to start endorsing Modi's visit on behalf of the radio station. I was suggested a change in nature of my duties if I could not handle this. This led to an argument and I rather decided to quit.

This small step made me an alien among the very people who earlier appreciated my stance against Khalistan. The same BJP leader who earlier used to call me a lion and often stated "you are always in our hearts" began avoiding me, to the extent that he did not invite me to cover an event organized for a visiting BJP leader, the Chief Minister of Haryana state, Manohar Lal Khattar.

When another senior politician from Punjab Prem Singh Chandumajra came, I could see a pattern behind slighting me. Chandumajra's party, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is an alliance partner of the BJP. Its supporters have known me for years. Nobody invited me to his media conference, despite the fact that both the BJP and SAD supporters know that I still write for India-based publications, including *Hindustan Times*, for which the visits of Khattar and Chandumajra were important.

Notably, the leader of a Hindu temple that honoured me for my book on Air India actually accused me of having an agenda against Modi. During a radio interview when I grilled him about his support for Modi, he just hung up the phone. He is a die-hard supporter of Modi, but highly critical of Sikh fundamentalists.

The Indian agents in Vancouver also started to eye me with suspicion. I often hear from sources close to them that they are upset over my comments, which are obviously not favourable to the ruling party, because of its right wing policies against religious

minorities and growing attacks on Muslims and Christians under Modi. Some sources tell me that they now refer to me as "friend-turned-enemy" and I never get any personal invitation to attend any of their official events, although they had recommended my name for coverage of the annual Indian Diaspora event held in India in 2010. In the years of my frequent criticism of Khalistani extremists, before Modi came to power, I used to get calls from them appreciating my journalism. Back then I was seen as a friend of India.

When I joined *Spice Radio*, some of the Indian officials expressed their displeasure with my current employer, Shushma Datt, who did not buckle under any undue pressure and gave me freedom to work fairly and fearlessly. After all, she is a seasoned broadcaster who understands how to run a media outlet with integrity. Whenever I had Sikhs For Justice activists on air to speak their mind against Modi, or interviewed those who protested against Modi's visit, she never interfered. It's a shame that in spite of her open-mindedness, even some so-called progressives in our community questioned me - being a Hindu, will she allow me to criticise Modi? Just because she is a Hindu woman, one cannot presume her to be a BJP supporter. How many times have such questions been raised about the ethnicity of the male Sikh owners of South Asian radio stations?

So much so, the moderates and secularists within the local Sikh

community, who have been opposed to Sikh fundamentalism and often sided with India, also started neglecting me. This was despite the fact that I had defended them in an event of ostracising by the orthodox Sikh clergy at the behest of fundamentalist forces on religious matters. Some even went out of their way to meet Modi in the US, and were among those who accorded him a heroic welcome during his visit to Vancouver in 2015. Others who call themselves Marxists, affiliated with the mainstream Communist parties in India that are opposed to Modi, have remained indifferent towards any activity or demonstration in Vancouver against Modi's government. Notably, they have been supporting moderates in maintaining control over Sikh temples, to keep Sikh separatists at bay. They too continue to enjoy cordial relationships with Indian agents.

It seems that the commitment of the grand moderate coalition towards secularism is sham and selective. It conveniently overlooks the fundamentalism of Modi's party, while only targeting Sikh extremists, either due to their blind patriotism or with an agenda to please their political masters in New Delhi.

As the Modi government completes almost two years in office, the threat of Hindu extremism has grown enormously. Anyone who challenges their ideology and anti-minorities' stance is branded as anti-national. Interestingly, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, the ultra Hindu nationalist body of which BJP is a part, never participated in the

freedom struggle when India was under British occupation. Rather its supporters had helped the British rulers in continuing with their policy of divide and rule, by asking for a separation of Hindus and Muslims into two distinct nations. They assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, the towering leader of the passive resistance movement, in 1948 for standing up against both violence against Muslims and the untouchability that was permitted in orthodox Hindu society. Gandhi has always been known as the father of the Indian nation. Since Modi came to power, demands have grown for the installation of statues of Naram Godse, a staunch Hindu separatist and the assassin of Gandhi. Anyone who questions the BJP and Hindu extremists is quickly branded as anti-national. It seems that "anti-national" has become a synonym with anything that is anti-BJP. This year witnessed a spate of incidents in which students, scholars, journalists, activists and even elected officials who are critical of the growing threat of religious intolerance and Hindu nationalism were either intimidated, assaulted or slapped with sedition charges. Student leaders at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University were thrown into jail after being charged with sedition for questioning the government. When I had to quit *Radio India* and suffer the silent social boycott, I sometimes found myself very lonely. But today, when I look at the resistance being given to the Modi government by people with a burning conscience, I feel vindicated. I rather feel proud of

standing up against Modi mania. If one is branded as anti-national for standing up for reason, pluralism and humanity, then I am definitely very proud to be an anti-national.

But here is my question to those who claim to be nationalists: how do they describe a nation? Is it just a territory, a piece of land, or a composition of political borders and land mass represented by a symbolic flag or a constitution? Or is a nation represented by people? By human beings, who have dreams for a better future and who want to live with dignity? If anyone is anti-national, it's definitely not those who fight for the rights of the people, but those who lick the shoes of the power and work against people, and divide them for their political survival. How can a person like me, who actually respects the values enshrined in the Indian constitution, be seen as anti-India? Those who violate the principles of secularism and democracy enshrined in the national text are the biggest anti-nationals. If questioning Sikh separatists alone makes you a patriot, and challenging Hindu separatists makes you seditious, then the apologists of India should openly admit that the current Indian state is really a Hindu nation in the making, and not the secularist and pluralist India I loved and I was born in.

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Is the honeymoon over for First Nations and the Trudeau Liberals?

ew sections of the population in Canada were as determined as indigenous peoples to defeat Stephen Harper's conservatives at the polls last October. Their enthusiasm was fanned by Justin Trudeau's promises to change Canada's racist policies, by implementing all the recommendations of the historic Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The new PM pledged to fully implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and to respect the right of First Nations to say no to development on their territories. PM Trudeau said that he would work to renew the "nation to nation" relationship between Canada and First Nations represented by the spirit and intent of treaties.

On the first Budget Day for the new Liberal government, the Assembly of First Nations and other major indigenous organizations welcomed measures such as the elimination of the racist 2% cap on annual funding increases for First Nations education. But other voices were more critical, such as Pamela Palmater, the widely respected Idle No More supporter and author of the "Indigenous Nationhood" blog. In Palmater's words, "Today's

budget saw these promises evaporate into thin air only to be replaced by an under-funded program and service agenda."

Palmater's scepticism is important to read, since it may well point to a very different future than the dream of reconciliation and nation-to-nation equality. She starts by noting two major obstacles to understanding this budget: trying to figure out which numbers are accurate, and assessing those numbers in their proper context.

Her view is that the budget plays a shell game on the actual funding commitment during the 4 year Liberal mandate, since monies promised beyond this term in office are simply speculative. Who knows which party will form the next government in 2019? Her analysis is that from this perspective, the \$8.4 billion promised to First Nations in this budget is in fact only about \$5.3 billion over the three fiscal years before the next election.

While that sounds like a huge amount of funding, Palmater compares it to the difficult realities of life for indigenous peoples, and finds that the budget comes up far short of what is actually needed. For example, she argues that \$20 billion is needed today simply to provide adequate housing for all First

Nations people in Canada. This figure comes from her look at an internal report for Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), which calculates that "the housing needs for the 63 First Nations in Manitoba would cost \$2 billion. Since Manitoba First Nations represent only 10% of all First Nations, the national cost to address the housing crisis would be closer to \$20 billion give or take a few dollars."

This estimate may not be 100% accurate; the housing situation for Manitoba's First Nations is particularly acute, so the Canada-wide total might not be ten times higher. But the basic comment is undeniable.

Palmater goes on to point out that the 2% funding cap imposed by the former Liberal government back in the 1990s created a cumulative deficit of over \$20 billion. "In other words, First Nations are more than \$20 billion behind the starting line when it comes to infrastructure (schools), staff, training, materials, curriculum development, etc. That doesn't include extra costs for post-secondary education which has created a waiting list of thousands of First Nation students."

However, the budget contains no line for post-secondary

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education, just a promise to work with students, parents, educators and Indigenous groups to “explore” future options.

What about the crisis of utterly inadequate water and sewer systems on First Nations reserves and indigenous communities? One recent independent study found that it would cost almost \$6 billion to fix the current water and sewer stock, with another \$2 billion for operation and maintenance over the next four years. A further \$10 billion would be needed to add new water and sewer infrastructure to service all the new houses needed in First Nations. That takes the total spending on this item to \$18 billion.

The TRC report recommended substantial support to revive and protect Indigenous languages, which have been deeply endangered since Canada’s assimilation policy of the residential schools. To save these languages, Palmater says, would require investing billions of dollars to create immersion programs on reserve, develop or expand curricula, and hire and train staff.

The federal government is legally obligated to begin providing equal child welfare funding to First Nations children. This would require an annual increase of \$200 million, but this budget shows a mere \$71 million for next year and \$99 million the year after.

There is much more in Palmater’s blog, which should be required reading for all who support equality and social justice. She warns that “we have been downgraded from Nations

to people, groups, communities and stakeholders. There is no mention of UNDRIP, TRC, or free informed and prior consent. There is no mention of the ‘sacred’ constitutionally-protected Aboriginal and treaty rights in need of implementation. In fact, the nation to nation relationship based on free informed and prior consent turned into a ‘partnership’ based on ‘consultation, and where appropriate, accommodation’”. We are back to square one: letting courts determine the relationship.”

Her conclusion: “I think I can definitively say the honeymoon is over. Time to snap back to reality

and stop being distracted by the shiny beads and trinkets contained in all the flowery speeches and smiling photo ops.”

Harsh words, perhaps, but appropriate and necessary. Without a serious attempt to fulfill its promises, the Trudeau government may be setting itself up for a renewal of grassroots movements like Idle No More, sooner rather than later.

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

Saibaba gets bail from Indian Supreme Court

The readers of Radical Desi will be delighted to learn that the disabled social justice activist Professor G.N. Saibaba, who was incarcerated in an Indian jail for more than three months, has been granted bail by the Supreme Court.

Wheelchair bound Saibaba, who is 90 percent disabled below the waist, was thrown into jail after being accused of having links with Maoist insurgents active in the tribal areas of India. He has been opposing repression of tribal people by the security forces and state vigilante groups in the name of "war on terror".

A Delhi University lecturer, Saibaba was first arrested in 2014 by the Maharashtra Police, and had been granted interim bail on medical grounds in June 2015. However, his bail was cancelled last December, and he was sent to jail under atrocious conditions.

Granting him bail on April 4, the apex Indian court noted that the Maharashtra government has been "extremely unfair" to Saibaba.

The court also pulled up the counsel for Maharashtra for opposing Saibaba's bail plea.

"You have been extremely unfair to the accused, especially looking at his medical condition. If

material witnesses have been examined, then there is no point in putting him in jail."

The mistreatment of Saibaba had caused an international outrage, including angry protests in Vancouver.

Radical Desi did a cover story on Saibaba's persecution in March (see picture). Ironically, he was sent to jail in December shortly after the Indian government launched its Accessible India campaign on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Remembering Babasaheb on his 125th birth anniversary

If there is one leader who stands out as the most versatile political figure in India, it is none other than Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar. Affectionately known as Babasaheb by his followers, Dr. Ambedkar was not only the architect of the Indian constitution that guarantees freedom, equality and social justice, but a tireless activist who stood for the rights of Dalits or so-called untouchables, women, workers, peasants and religious minorities.

Born on April 14, 1891 in British India, Ambedkar belonged to the Mahar community, whose members were considered as untouchables in the caste-ridden Indian society. According to the brutal caste system, Hindus are divided in four distinct groups: Brahmins (priest class), Kshatriyas (ruling class), Vaish (artisans and farmers) and Shudras (those indulging in menial jobs). Those on the lowest ladder of this inhuman structure were seen as untouchables, not allowed entry into temples or to use public water tanks.

Born in an unprivileged class, Ambedkar had to endure discrimination and humiliation in his daily life from the so-called upper caste people. The hypocrisy of those who religiously practiced the caste system can be judged from a simple fact that as a young boy,

Babasaheb was once refused a haircut by a barber who did not have any problem cutting the hair of animals. On other occasions, he was denied drinking water by the casteist fundamentalists. In school, Babasaheb's father Ramji

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Sakpal was a follower of Kabir, a revolutionary saint and poet of his time. He encouraged Babasaheb and his siblings to learn the teachings of Kabir, who had challenged caste system in his own way. The first-hand experience with casteism and the teachings of Kabir must have contributed in shaping the ideology of Babasaheb in the years to come.

He did his matriculation in Bombay. Since he was the first Mahar child to complete matriculation, the community members arranged a meeting to felicitate.

The King of Baroda, Sayaji Rao Gayakwad, who was socially progressive, awarded Ambedkar a scholarship to pursue higher education. Later, he helped Ambedkar financially to go to America for further education. According to a contract signed in lieu of the financial help, he was to serve the state of Baroda for ten years after the completion of his education. He reached New York in 1913. While in America, he concentrated mostly on studies at Columbia University. He studied history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology and economics. He tried to compare racism and the caste system, which he found worse than racism. He strongly felt that the caste system was a component of the Indian culture.

While he was preparing himself for a long struggle against the caste system, the mainstream Indian leadership was busy fighting for the liberation of their country

from British occupation. One of the leaders of the freedom movement, Lala Lajpat Rai, approached him in America and tried to encourage him to join the liberation struggle. Babasaheb, for whom the fight against the centuries-old caste system was more important, refused to be a part of the national movement. However, he was still critical of the British rule in India. In one of his theses, he clearly wrote that the British policies were benefiting the industrialist class. He believed that the British were not doing enough for the Dalits, but also that since the Indian leadership in the post-British India would not give equal status to Dalits either, it was necessary to launch a struggle against the caste system.

Babasaheb moved to London in 1916 to study law. But since the period of his sponsorship was over, he had to return to Baroda to serve the state as per the contract. Serving the Baroda state was not a good experience for Babasaheb. He did not get accommodation because of his caste, and the employees working under him also misbehaved with him. He was not served drinking water, and often the office files would be tossed at him from a distance. He returned to Bombay, and to earn his livelihood he gave private tuitions and consultation to share brokers. Here too, many people after learning about his caste avoided taking his services.

He got a job as a lecturer in Political Science at a college in Bombay in 1918. Initially, the casteist students did not take any interest in his work because of their

prejudices, but Babasaheb soon proved himself with his dedication and this changed their opinion.

In 1924, he announced the establishment of the Society for the Welfare of the Scheduled Castes. After that he never looked back. He continued his fight to uplift Dalits. Continuing his parallel struggle for the rights of the oppressed community, when the Indian leadership mainly under Congress party was seeking freedom from foreign occupation, certainly made his task very challenging. He would frequently be branded as a traitor by supporters of the Congress, which had from time to time boycotted against British rule and resorted to non-cooperation. Babasaheb pulled no punches while criticising the Congress for remaining non-committal to address the issue of casteism. Gradually, he emerged as an undisputed leader of the Dalit community. Until then, the Congress projected itself as the sole representative of all the Indians, including Dalits. Once Babasaheb's credentials as a true dedicated Dalit leader were established, he used every opportunity to get international support for his cause. He kept the people in London well informed about the situation of Dalits in India.

In 1927, he was appointed as member of the Legislative Council for Bombay province, representing Dalits. He tried to get maximum benefits for Dalits in this capacity.

In the same year, he launched a campaign against the ban on Dalits from using a public water tank in Mahad. It was a very important

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struggle in the history of Dalit resistance. Babasaheb asked everyone to march to the tank and defy the ban, but asked them to remain peaceful. Still, the casteist fundamentalists attacked and wounded the participants in the campaign. Babasaheb showed his leadership and himself took the injured victims to the hospital.

In another radical move, Babasaheb organized an event where *Manusmriti*, an orthodox Hindu code of conduct that gives legitimacy to violence against Dalits and women, was burnt publicly.

Notably, he was equally concerned about the rights of women. He encouraged women to resist domestic violence and participate in political actions. He strongly believed that the religious texts that permitted systemic violence against Dalits and oppressed groups should be destroyed. In 1930, he launched another civil disobedience movement for the entry of Dalits into a Hindu temple in Nasik.

He announced that though he was born Hindu, he would not die as a Hindu.

He also brought out publications to educate Dalits and encourage them to organize and agitate. He wrote many books on a range of subjects. One of his most thought provoking books was the *Annihilation of Caste*. As a rationalist thinker, he opposed hero worshipping and discouraged his followers to revere him. He was opposed to unscientific thinking.

In 1936, he established the Independent Labour Party of India,

and got a chance to serve as Labour Minister in Bombay under the British government. As Labour Minister, he was instrumental in getting maternity leave for female mine workers. His efforts also helped to reduce the working hours from ten to eight. He also tried to see first-hand the dangerous working conditions of the miners.

He stood for the poor and landless farmers and fought for their rights as well.

Thanks to his continuous efforts, Dalits got special rights. When India gained official independence in 1947, he was given the responsibility of drafting a constitution and appointed as Law Minister. Within the framework he was given, he was able to draft a statute that guarantees democracy and equality. But his challenges did not end. His anticipations about post-British India were proven right. In 1951, he resigned after the government lacked the will to implement his Hindu code bill, which promised to bring reforms in the lives of women against the wishes of orthodox Hindus.

In 1956, Babasaheb embraced Buddhism. As promised in the past he denounced Hinduism that institutionalized casteism. While he was preparing himself to formally adopt Buddhism, he was approached by Christian, Muslim and Sikh leaders who wanted him to adopt their religions. He felt that Christian leaders did nothing to challenge the caste system in India, as a result of which Christians too are divided on caste basis. Similarly, the caste system had penetrated

into Islam and Sikhism. He had been studying the virtues of Buddhism for years, so he finally decided to adopt it at a public event.

On December 6, 1956 this great thinker, fighter and leader of the underdog passed away at the age of 65.

From his brief history one can see how multitalented was Babasaheb, whose mission still remains relevant, especially in his own home country where untouchability is still practiced despite being outlawed by the constitution. Violence against women, particularly poor and Dalit women, is a daily occurrence. Hindu extremism has grown under the current right-wing Modi government. There are efforts to change the constitution, which is the legacy of Babasaheb, to turn India into a Hindu theocracy. The die-hard supporters of Hindu theocracy believe in *Manusmriti* which was renounced by Babasaheb. It's a shame that some opportunistic Dalit politicians who claim to be the followers of Babasaheb are either watching all this silently or have aligned themselves with Modi. Neo-liberal economic policies have made the lives of the working class miserable. Marginalized farmers are forced to commit suicides. Education is being denied to the poor. Rather than paying symbolic tributes to Babasaheb, the Indian state should be made accountable for these crimes to build India of his dreams.

-RDNB

13 ਅਪ੍ਰੈਲ

ਕਣਕਾਂ ਦੇ ਸਿੱਟਿਆਂ ਤੋਂ ਪਰ੍ਹਾਂ
ਜਨਰਲ ਡਾਇਰ ਦਾ ਮੱਕਾਰ ਚੇਹਰਾ ਹੱਸਦਾ ਹੈ
ਪੰਜਾਂ ਪਿਆਰਿਆਂ ਦੇ ਗੱਦੀ ਨਸ਼ੀਨਾਂ
ਔਰੰਗਜ਼ੇਬੀ ਟੋਪੀ ਪਾਈ ਹੈ
ਵਸਾਖੀ ਦਾ ਮੇਲਾ ਕੌਣ ਦੇਖੇਗਾ?
-ਪਾਸ਼

