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# An Era of Apologies

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**Cover Picture :** Sahib Singh Thind of the Prof. Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation that first launched a petition seeking apology for the Komagata Maru episode, standing next to a stage during the Surrey Vaisakhi parade to express gratitude to people who supported his campaign.

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**RADICAL**  
DESI

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

~ Desmond Tutu

## Looking beyond apologies

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's announcement of an upcoming official apology for the Komagata Maru episode has been widely appreciated by members of the South Asian community. The apology will be made this month, close to the 102nd anniversary of the arrival of the Japanese vessel carrying more than 300 passengers of Indian origin. The ship arrived on May 23, 1914 and was forced to return in July under the discriminatory immigration policy, designed to discourage permanent settlement of Indian immigrants and "keep Canada white". This was despite the fact that those aboard the ship had arrived as British subjects, at a time when both India and Canada were part of the British empire. The passengers wanted to settle in British Columbia for a better livelihood, but this opportunity was denied to them under pressure from the white supremacists. For the past many years, the South Asian community has been campaigning for a formal apology from the Canadian government. In this era of reconciliation and multiculturalism, Canadian officials have repeatedly acknowledged the incident as blot on Canada's history, but an official apology in Parliament was long overdue. While former Prime Minister Stephen Harper made an apology at a community event in Surrey in 2008, his government remained adamant not to make an apology in the House of Commons. Trudeau has certainly scored a point by announcing that an apology will now be made in Parliament, and he deserves appreciation for accepting the demand. That said, there is a need to look beyond apologies and symbolic acts of repentance for historical wrongs. It is sometimes easy to acknowledge mistakes made in the distant past, but there is always a tendency to overlook inconvenient truths of the present. Never forget that Harper also made apologies to the Chinese community for the racist head tax imposed a century ago, and for the Indian Residential Schools that were opened to assimilate Indigenous peoples, yet his Conservative government was accused of high handedness against immigrants and the First Nations. Strict immigration laws were passed under his right-wing government. Muslim women wearing veil came under assault, and his government refused to accept the demand for a national inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal women. So what was the point of apologizing for the past? Trudeau has not completed his first year in office, so we need to give him some more time to deliver. However, systemic racism continues even under Trudeau's Liberal government. Undoubtedly, he has made some positive changes by giving significant representation to First Nations, visible minorities and women in his government, and also reversing controversial decisions, such as barring Muslim women from wearing niqab during citizenship oath ceremonies. But we need to be alert about some serious challenges and the way his government handles them. It is certainly refreshing to see that his government has started the process of initiating the national inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal women, but more needs to be done to win the confidence of the Indigenous population. Attawapiskat has witnessed over 100 attempted suicides in the past seven months. It's a shame that former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien, rather than acknowledging the impact of structural racism against First Nations, has advised the affected community to move on. The Trudeau government has opened doors for Syrian refugees fleeing from violence, but has also cautioned against taking in lone males, who could be "potential terrorists". Unfortunately, this reinforced similar stereotypes that were promoted by the previous government. Afro-Canadians continue to face police brutality, as a result of which Black Lives Matter rallies were held across the country shortly after Trudeau's announcement about the upcoming apology. It becomes the duty of all of us to make any government accountable, instead of getting carried away by gestures which have no more than a historical value. Unless people in power learn not to repeat the history, any amount of apology for historical wrongs becomes meaningless. To make it more meaningful, the politicians should ensure not to repeat past wrongs, and show leadership by bringing fundamental change in the power structure to make our society more inclusive and compassionate.

-Editors

## **An Era of Apologies**

**Canada continues to repent for historical wrongs, but is that enough?**

Ahlib Singh Thind today feels vindicated after years of struggle for an official apology for a racist incident that happened a century ago. As Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that the formal apology is coming this month for the infamous Komagata Maru episode, Thind thinks that his efforts finally paid dividends, but also that history has proven the community elders right.

The Komagata Maru, carrying over 300 South Asian passengers, was turned back under the

discriminatory immigration policy by the Canadian government in 1914. The ship was forced to return as per the controversial continuous journey law that was adopted to discourage permanent settlement of Indian immigrants in this part of the world. While Canadian authorities in an era of reconciliation and multiculturalism have repeatedly acknowledged that it was wrong thing to do, there has been some hesitation behind asking for forgiveness in the House of Commons, where the apology will

be made on May 18.

Thind's organization, the Prof. Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation, launched a petition asking for the apology in 2002. Though tabled in Parliament back then with close to 6,000 signatures, it took more petitioning and a sustained campaign to convince the government of Canada to make a formal apology.

The South Asian community is understandably excited over the upcoming apology. But a more

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critical look at the whole issue against the backdrop of ongoing racism in the lives of the First Nations and structural discrimination against people of colour in Canada leaves one wondering whether it is enough.

### **Komagata Maru story**

To understand the genesis of the Komagata Maru episode one needs to go into the events leading to the standoff.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Indian immigrants had started arriving in Canada for better livelihoods. Their home country was under British occupation, and the economic policies of the foreign government had badly impacted agriculture and domestic industry in India. This greatly contributed to the migration of Indians abroad in search of greener pastures. The most impacted were farmers who had to pay heavy taxes. This had brought many of them into debt, and going abroad to do labour was their only option. Upon coming to Canada and the US, especially on the West Coast, a majority of them worked in orchards, farms, saw mills and the construction industry. Desperately in need of money, they were willing to work for low wages; as a result, they were seen as a threat to the survival of white labour. Soon the white supremacists started attacking them. Since most had migrated to this part of the world as British subjects, they looked to the British consulates for help in an event of racial violence. But the British officials remained indifferent to their plight. It dawned

upon them that the root cause of their sufferings in an alien land was the foreign occupation of their home country. Gradually they started getting organized to fight back against racism and the colonization of India. In the meantime, the Canadian government, buckling under the pressure of white supremacy, began adopting exclusionist policies. In order to discourage permanent settlement, Indians were prevented from bringing their families. They were disfranchised in 1907, and a conspiracy was hatched to relocate them to British Honduras. It is believed that the British government in India was also in agreement with such policies, fearing that the Indian immigrants exposed to a liberated political environment in Canada and the US might turn into potential freedom fighters. However, community activists continued to resist all these measures. In response to the institutional racism, they established the Khalsa Diwan Society, the oldest Sikh body that not only managed temple affairs but also provided space for political activism. Since Sikhs were in a majority, the Khalsa Diwan Society represented the collective interests of the Sikh community, but it never discriminated against non-Sikh immigrants, and an injury to one in a racially charged environment was seen as injury to all. The activists belonging to Hindu and Muslim communities fully cooperated with the Sikh leadership in their joint fight against racism and foreign rule in India.

Under these circumstances, the Canadian government passed a highly controversial continuous journey law, forcing Indians to come via direct passage from the country of their origin. Gurdit Singh took upon himself the task of challenging this act and chartered Komagata Maru, a Japanese vessel, and picked 376 passengers to come to Canada. Like others, he believed that the British Empire must not discriminate against its subjects. He trusted that British laws allowed its subjects to travel freely from one colony to the other. He also desired to fight the case legally through the courts, if the authorities did not let the passengers disembark.

As the ship reached Vancouver in May 1914, the atmosphere was filled with tension and uncertainty. The white supremacists wanted it to be turned back. The government declined to allow the passengers to get down. Barring a handful of passengers who were allowed to disembark, the rest were denied access to land. Even Gurdit Singh was not allowed to get down and negotiate peace. The Khalsa Diwan Society and others in the community tried hard to get justice, but all in vain. The Caucasian lawyer J. Edward Bird, hired to represent passengers in court, also received life threats. After two months of campaigning and legal battles, the ship was forced to return on July 23, under the shadow of guns. As the ship reached India, a police shootout near Calcutta left about 20 people dead. The incident happened when the passengers were being arrested and forcibly

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transported to Punjab through a special train. The British authorities in India suspected that these passengers might have turned seditious following the events in Canada. Many passengers resisted preventive arrests, and that led to a scuffle and shooting deaths.

The whole incident had galvanized the freedom movement. The radical camp in Canada and the US encouraged its followers to return and launch an armed rebellion across India.

The story did not end there. Following the standoff there was tension within the South Asian community, divided between a pro-establishment faction led by Bela Singh, and the radical camp led by Bhaag Singh, who was a towering leader of the Khalsa Diwan Society. A fight broke out between the two sides and there was a bloody shootout at the Vancouver Sikh temple in September 1914, leaving Bhaag Singh and his comrade Badan Singh dead. Bela Singh was arrested for that incident, but was later acquitted and given a safe passage to return to India, where he was assassinated by the revolutionaries years later. Mewa Singh, another radical activist, assassinated controversial Immigration Inspector William Hopkinson to avenge the shooting inside the temple. Hopkinson had patronized Bela Singh, and was instrumental behind aggressive policies against Indian immigrants. Mewa Singh was hanged in 1915 for his action. He became the first Indian martyr to be executed in Canada.

**RADICAL DESI**

Thus, the Komagata Maru incident was the culmination of the racist policies of British Empire.

### Correcting historical wrongs

Komagata Maru was not the only historical wrong to be acknowledged by the Canadian government, nor were the Indians or the South Asian immigrants the only community who had to endure racism in this country. The Canadian state was built on the stolen lands of the Indigenous peoples, and racism can be traced back to the times when the Europeans started colonizing Canada. The indigenous peoples were seen as culturally inferior by the European settlers. The first historical wrong was committed when Europeans set their feet on Canadian soil with an attitude of having discovered an “unoccupied land”. The indigenous peoples were forced to abandon their culture and languages. With a paternalistic idea of “civilizing” the indigenous population, their children were forcibly sent to Indian Residential Schools, where they

were compelled to give up their traditional identity and adopt European and Christian ways, to assimilate them in the name of progress defined by the settlers. As soon as immigrants from China, India or other parts of the world started arriving, more historical wrongs followed in the form of exclusionist policies against these communities to keep Canada a “white man’s land”.

Things started changing when period of decolonization ushered in. India gained its official independence from British in 1947. The Indians in Canada got back the right to vote in that same year as their home country gained freedom. Embarrassingly though, the Indigenous peoples who are the original inhabitants of Canada, were the last to get the right to vote in 1960. Gradually, they started participating in political activities aggressively. This gave hope to many Indo-Canadian political activists to make history after being elected to the BC Legislature and the House of Commons. Today, there are a significant number of Indo-Canadian MLAs in provincial legislatures and MPs in Ottawa as a result of that struggle. The growing involvement of the people of colour in Canadian politics partly set the stage for correcting the historical wrongs.

Interestingly, in 1997, Indo-Canadian MP Gurmant Grewal first raised the Komagata Maru incident in the House of Commons. Ironically, he belonged to the right wing Conservative Party, which was formed after the merger of

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Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives (PC). Notably, the original Conservatives were in power when the Komagata Maru was returned. But doing that was not easy. Grewal had to face hostility both inside and outside the party for raking up an old issue and stirring a debate about the dark history of Canada. Even the South Asian community was never unanimous on this issue. A section within the community felt there was no need for an apology as Indian immigrants had been accepted in the mainstream. Others were not convinced and believed in the official story that those aboard the ship had broken the law. The post-British Indian government never recognized Gurdit Singh's act of resistance, and rather saw him as a travel agent. Still, the supporters of apology remained undeterred by these challenges.

In 2002, the Prof. Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation collected 6,000 signatures on a petition seeking a formal apology for the incident. The petition was tabled in the house by Grewal. Call it irony or lack of political will, Trudeau's Liberal Party was in power when the petition was first presented in the Commons and was rejected.

Since then, the Prof. Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation kept the pot boiling. Every summer, the foundation organizes an annual community festival in Surrey in memory of the Komagata Maru heroes and other freedom fighters of India. Each year they continued to collect on an average 6,000

signatures on an apology petition which was repeatedly presented in the House of Commons. At least five petitions were presented through MPs belonging to different political parties. Ultimately, former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper came to their event in 2008 to make an apology. But it was promptly rejected by the community, which wanted an apology in Parliament. After all, the Harper government had made an official apology for the Indian Residential School abuses in Parliament during the same year, and another for the Chinese Head Tax in 2006. On top of that, the BC government had made an official apology in the legislature in 2008.

Sahib Singh Thind could not let this go. He followed Harper to India on his first official visit to that country as Prime Minister in 2009. While Harper was paying obeisance at the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar, Thind and his associates organized a rally at Jallianwala Bagh garden close to the temple to highlight their issue. Incidentally, British troops had killed scores of peaceful demonstrators at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919. The protestors had gathered there to show solidarity with the leaders of the freedom movement who were arrested for opposing draconian laws. A memorial is built at the garden in the memory of the victims. Another petition seeking an apology for Jallianwala Bagh massacre was also launched from Surrey by *Mehak Punjab Di TV*.

In 2014, the year when the

centenary of the Komagata Maru incident was held, Thind attended a sitting in the Punjab state legislative assembly in India to get unanimous support from the MLAs to press the Indian government to ask Canadian authorities for an official apology. Trudeau attended the community festival organized by Thind in August last year, and announced that if elected to power he would make an official apology.

Eventually, the issue became a hot button in the South Asian community. Jaswinder Singh Toor, who represents the group of descendants of the Komagata Maru passengers, whole-heartedly supported the campaign for a formal apology. His maternal grandfather Puran Singh Janetpura was aboard the ship and later joined the freedom movement. Toor insisted that the descendants of the passengers want nothing less than a formal apology. Running in the 2015 federal election, Trudeau also promised Toor that he would ask for forgiveness in Parliament.

Obviously, for individuals like Thind and Toor, the upcoming apology is a great achievement, but for critics more needs to be done. The East Indian Defence Committee, for instance, thinks that the Komagata Maru incident was not the only act of racism. The Indians were disfranchised and weren't allowed to bring their families, which contributed to resistance by the radical activists. The committee has therefore initiated a petition seeking recognition of Mewa Singh as a Canadian hero. Parminder



Swaich of the EIDC feels that Mewa Singh killed Hopkinson because of the Komagata Maru standoff and other repressive measures against immigrants, and the values he stood for are today enshrined in the Canadian charter of rights. Trudeau's announcement has raised her hopes and she continues to collect signatures on her petition. So far, 7,000 people have signed the petition. But she is also cautious of ongoing racism in Canada against First Nations and immigrants. She insists that making the government of the day accountable for these challenges is as important as revisiting the history.

### Politics of apologies

In a reversal of role, the current Liberal government is going to make an official apology for Komagata Maru incident, something the past Liberal government under Jean Chretien refused to do when the petition was first tabled in the parliament in 2002 by former Conservative MP Gurmant Grewal. This was despite the fact that Indo-Canadian MP Herb Dhaliwal was a federal minister in that government. Though Dhaliwal acknowledged that the Komagata Maru was a wrong thing to do, the Liberals were not willing to make an apology. They instead attacked Grewal's party for opposing the recruitment of turbaned Sikh officers in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. As a matter of fact, the Conservatives were up in arms when the RCMP recruited Baltej Singh Dhillon, the first turbaned Sikh to become a

Mountie in 1990.

It is pertinent to mention that Chretien was recently in the news when he suggested the Attawapiskat indigenous community should move on when there was a public outcry over reports of 100 attempted suicides in the past seven months. Chretien's embarrassing statement came as the Trudeau government has started the process of initiating a national inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal women. This was something the previous Conservative government refused to do, although Stephen Harper had apologized for the Indian Residential School abuses in 2008.

If all these dots are connected, one can easily see clear inconsistencies between apologies for the past mistakes and modern day practices of politicians in dealing with minority groups.

For the record, the Harper government apologized for the Chinese Head Tax, Residential Schools and Komagata Maru (though not officially), but still his government had become highly unpopular among minority groups by election time last year. Immigration and citizenship rules were tightened, Muslim women were forced to remove the veil during the citizenship oath ceremony, family reunions became difficult, citizenship tests became harder, anti-Muslim rhetoric had grown, and relationships between the government and indigenous peoples were strained. Not surprisingly, Indigenous

communities that generally remained indifferent to elections voted heavily last time and helped ensure the defeat of the Harper government.

Trudeau's spectacular win and the significant presence of MPs from minority communities in the Liberal caucus can be partly attributed to the electorate's rejection of hardliner policies of the Harper government.

But numerous challenges face the new government. While the Liberals initially announced to welcome a large number of Syrian refugees escaping from conflict, the actual number of those to be taken in annually was reduced from 25,000 to 10,000 in the aftermath of the November 2015 Paris terror attack that left 130 people dead. The attack was blamed on extremists of Syrian heritage. This invited knee jerk reactions from Canada. Also, the new government, in an apparent bid to allay public fears, announced that only Syrian families will be taken in, not lone Syrian males.

Afro-Canadians and indigenous peoples continue to face systemic racial violence at the hands of police. The two communities came together to hold a big rally under the banner of "Black Lives Matter" in Vancouver on April 17, not long after Trudeau announced his decision to make an official apology for the Komagata Maru tragedy. The Attawapiskat crisis and Chretien's controversial remarks sparked angry demonstrations outside Indigenous and Northern Affairs offices across

The politics of apologies for the past is not confined to Canada. In India, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a regional political party of Punjab that largely represents affluent Sikh farmers, claimed that a Komagata Maru apology has been their long-pending demand, and that they have been working hard for years to press Canada's government for a formal apology. In a bid to woo support of Non Resident Indians settled in Canada during the assembly election in Punjab next year, SAD party president Sukhbir Singh Badal has welcomed Trudeau's gesture. SAD is sharing power with the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), known

for its tough stance against religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. The BJP has always seen Sikhs as part of the Hindu mainstream, something vehemently denied by many Sikh scholars. Incidents of violence against Muslims and Christians have grown under the current BJP government. Apart from religious minorities, other oppressed communities, such as Dalits or so-called untouchables, continue to endure centuries-old discrimination in the caste-ridden society of India. Neither the BJP nor its alliance partners, including SAD, have displayed a strong will to eradicate the caste-system or stop structural violence against Dalits.

Repenting for something that

happened in the distant past is one thing, but there remains a general silence over the ongoing attacks on minorities, especially oppressed communities both in Canada and India. Activism limited to the issue of apologies has also left the much larger problem of racism and discrimination embedded in the society and power structures unaddressed. Whether such apologies help in building an egalitarian society and bringing fundamental change in the mindset of policy makers is hard to figure out, but the task of eradicating hatred certainly remains unfinished due to lack of political determination.

-RDNB

## Religion must be kept out of public space in a secular society

**O**n the occasion of Vaisakhi last month, Sikh religious prayers were held at Parliament Hill in Ottawa. While many practicing Sikhs are delighted at this, the news did not sit well with secularists within the South Asian community. According to the critics, the development is a clear reflection of pandering to religious groups by the Liberal government.

Vaisakhi is a very old festival of South Asia, to mark the beginning of the harvest season. However, it has a special significance for the Sikh community, as their tenth master Guru Gobind Singh chose this day in 1699 to lay the foundation of the Khalsa, an army of devout Sikhs, raised from among the oppressed communities to fight against injustice. Since the Sikh community dominates the South Asian Diaspora in Canada both politically and socially, the birth of the Khalsa is largely recognized as a Sikh festival.

Though there is no harm in recognizing the birth of the Khalsa and the special significance of Vaisakhi for the Sikh community, elected officials must know their boundaries. To join the Khalsa Day

parades is one thing, but opening public space for religious rituals for a particular community is problematic and sets a wrong precedent. This kind of pandering will gradually lead to other religious groups asking for similar concessions. Canada is after all a

secular society, and religion must be strictly kept out of public space.

I want to mention that a few years ago the Center For Inquiry wanted to place ads on Translink spaces in Vancouver to spread their message, "Good without god." And guess what? The request was turned down. The reason given was that the public space is not available for spiritual messages. But Translink continues to provide buses for the annual Vaisakhi parade in Vancouver. If this isn't hypocrisy, then what? Spirituality has its rightful place in temples across Canada, but under no circumstances it should be allowed to be practiced in places like Parliament.

Honestly, I am very delighted by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for including significant number of Sikhs and people from other minority groups in his government, but by allowing

space in parliament to be used for prayers he has gone too far. To give equal representation to minorities in a government is always good, and makes our democracy inclusive, but any attempt by the state to please a priest class is a bad example.

## CURRENT AFFAIRS

Keep in mind how the collusion of church and the state in Canada devastated the lives of the First Nations. The dangerous cocktail of religion and power culminated into the massive abuse of aboriginal children in residential schools. On one hand Trudeau wants the Pope to address this, and on the other he lets Sikh MPs bring religion onto Parliament Hill, even for only a day.

Certainly, Sikhism has its own virtues, but let its followers cherish them in their personal lives, homes and gurdwaras. If Sikh MPs are really passionate about their religion instead of holding rituals on Parliament Hill, they should follow the ideals of Sikhism in their practical lives by holding on to values such as honesty and integrity, and standing up for social justice in any event of repression against indigenous peoples in Canada, or the continued occupation of Palestine by Israel, or for that matter their own brethren in India.

It pains one to see that some Sikh activists are rightfully critical of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party that rules India seeking recognition of *Geeta*, a Hindu scripture, as national book, while here they justify the Sikh prayers being held in Parliament. This only shows their double standards. We have already seen the results of such pandering

to religious groups in India. It has only given legitimacy to fanaticism and fundamentalism of every shade, ultimately leading to sectarian violence and bloodshed. To ensure that Canada remains peaceful and that people coexist in spite of religious and ideological differences, this kind of pandering must stop.

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

## Human rights complaint against racist publication in Toronto

campaign is growing to press Canada Post and the federal government to take quick action to end the distribution of hate literature to an estimated 80,000 homes in east Toronto. "Your Ward News" is edited by James Sears and supported by a varied group of individuals long associated with ultra-right, fascist and racist movements in Ontario. Some are linked to the so-called New Constitution Party, an openly anti-immigrant, anti-women and pro-nazi organization based in the east end of Toronto.

A human rights complaint has recently been filed against Canada Post and the Canadian government over the distribution of the newsletter, which is regularly full of misogynist, homophobic, anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic articles and commentaries. Several of the publication's backers are on record advocating rape and murder of women, and urging violence against members of racialized communities.

Canadian Union of Postal Workers members have objected to delivering the newsletter, but their union says that some have been threatened with disciplinary action if they refuse to put it into mailboxes.

Ottawa lawyer Richard Warman has filed the complaint alleging that Canada Post is in violation of human-rights laws by continuing to order postal workers to deliver the newsletter. Warman argues that under the Human Rights Act, it is illegal for a business like Canada Post to distribute hate propaganda either in the workplace or into the public. He says that Canada Post is acting unlawfully by exposing postal workers to hate propaganda inside their workplace, and also by

circulating this material to the public.

Your Ward News has apparently been under police investigation for alleged hate crimes going back as far as May 2015, judging by online debates over the matter. But so far, no charges have been laid. Responding to previous complaints, Canada Post has argued that it is only responsible for delivering the mail, not for vetting its content. But Warman says that the federal government has signed numerous international and legal agreements that obligate Canada to suppress hate propaganda, not to allow crown corporations to profit by the delivery of such materials to private homes and businesses.

CUPW president Mike Palecek has released a statement welcoming the human rights complaint. He says that many union members are fed up with being part of the distribution network for Your Ward News.

At the moment, the Human Rights Commission is seeking a response from Canada Post and the federal government before deciding whether to refer the matter to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal for a formal hearing.

Critics argue that "Your Ward

News" and its political backers are not interested in democratic, open, political debates. They have been compared to Hitler's Nazis and their 21st century counterparts in many European countries, who encourage violent attacks on women, the LGBTIQ community, Jews, and particularly South Asians and Muslims. It appears that their objective is to create a fascist Canada, in which women are totally subservient to a patriarchal order, and in which the population has been "cleansed" of non-white, non-Christian residents. Organizations and movements which oppose this racist agenda would be brutally suppressed, just as millions of trade unionists, Communists, social democrats, Jews, Roma people, gays and lesbians, Slavic peoples and others were killed in Nazi Germany. Ironically, the publishers of the newsletter often attempt to hide their agenda by proclaiming support for First Nations people. This tactic has often been used by white supremacists, who argue that North America should be cleansed of everyone except people of European origin and indigenous peoples - that way, they can direct their venom against all immigrants from Africa and Asia, while claiming that they are not racist. But few are deceived by this rhetorical trick.

At a time when violent racist sentiments are being whipped up against immigrants and refugees, especially people from the Muslim faith, there is much at stake in this case for all those who support the ideals of an anti-racist and inclusive Canada.

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

### Time for a national inquiry into Gustafsen Lake standoff

**O**n March 22, 2016 Secwepemc elder William Jones "Wolverine" Ignace, who gained international recognition after the 1995 Gustafsen Lake standoff, died in his home on Secwepemc territory.

Wolverine, as he was affectionately called, was a 84-year old elder, warrior and farmer who was most famously known as one of Canada's unfairly detained political prisoners by Amnesty International in the late 1990's. AI report notes, "The Gustafsen Lake standoff gave Wolverine a global platform that saw him travel to places like the United Nations and to Zapatista territory in Chiapas, Mexico. Kanahus Manuel, who was there at the time of his death, said Wolverine's name is known from the Pine Ridge Oglala Lakota reservation down to Mapuche territory in Chile."

Wolverine died shortly after writing a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Attorney General Jody Wilson calling for a national inquiry into the Gustafsen Lake standoff. Under federal Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and former BC Attorney General in NDP Government Ujjal Dosanjh, Canada's largest paramilitary operation was carried out on the

sacred Sundance lands at Ts'Peten in 1995.

#### Background to Gustafsen Crisis

In 1995, after a long history of peaceful attempts to have Secwepemc sovereignty respected, Indigenous people from the Secwepemc nation and their supporters took a stand on sacred Sundance lands at Ts'Peten, aka Gustafsen Lake. The incident began after a local white rancher, Lyle James began demanding that the sacred Secwepemc Sundance Camp leave land to which he claimed ownership. Approximately 24 Sundancers set up camp to defend Ts'Peten.

Beginning in August 1995, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) surrounded the Ts'Peten Defenders. Over the next month police, politicians, and media escalated the situation to make the siege the most expensive and largest domestic military operation in Canada's history: armoured personnel carriers, .50 calibre machine guns, land mines, and an astonishing 77,000 rounds of ammunition were directed at the land defenders.

Land defenders were arrested and forced to endure one of the longest criminal trials in Canadian

history. During this time, startling testimony by police was revealed. This included open admissions of a "smear and disinformation campaign" and a police note by Chief Superintendent Johnston: "There are 6 hardliners in the camp WHO WILL REQUIRE KILLING." Despite this admission of state targeting and repression, thirteen of the Ts'Peten Defenders received jail sentences.

Wolverine received the longest sentence; he was sentenced to eight years in prison. During the trial and ever since, Wolverine cited the Royal Proclamation Act of 1763, which states that until an Indian territory has been purchased by the Crown, non-Indians cannot legally occupy land, never mind subject Indians to the jurisdiction of the Crown.

#### Current Relevance With Indigenous Land Rights

In his letter to the prime minister, Wolverine wrote, "Despite the twenty years that have passed since the Ts'Peten standoff, the core issues that so forcefully clashed against each other remain at the forefront of the hearts and minds of Indigenous people. That is our right to self-determination, autonomy and protection from the dispossession of our lands and

territories. ...The use of Canadian paramilitary forces against the people of the Secwepemc nation asserting our inherent jurisdiction and title over our own territories therefore is a serious abrogation of the Nation to Nation relationship between the Canadian government and the Secwepemc Nation."

And he highlighted, "An inquiry into the Ts'Petén standoff would demonstrate that the Canadian government is truly committed to a new era of respectful, Nation to Nation relationships in which the wrongs of the past are thoroughly understood and acknowledged, ensuring that threats, intimidation, defamation and force are never again used against Indigenous people in Canada."

Wolverine is right. Since the inception of Canada, settler-colonialism has sought to forcibly displace Indigenous peoples from their territories, destroy self-determination within Indigenous governance, and assimilate Indigenous cultures and traditions. Most recently, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has painstakingly recounted how Canada clearly participated in "cultural genocide" and how this is ongoing in the present-day.

One of the areas the Truth and Reconciliation Commission highlights in the issue of land rights, stating that Canada needs to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and that all levels of government

and industry need to "commit to meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships, and obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before proceeding with economic development projects." Another one of the primary calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is an explicit repudiation of concepts such as the Doctrine of Discovery and *terra nullius* that justify ongoing European and Crown sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples.

Colonialism is not a thing of the past. According to Mi'kmaq lawyer and scholar Pamela Palmater, "The failure of Canada to share the lands and resources as promised in the treaties has placed First Nations at the bottom of all socio-economic indicators -- health, lifespan, education levels and employment opportunities. While Indigenous lands and resources are used to subsidize the wealth and prosperity of Canada as a state and the high-quality programs and services enjoyed by Canadians, First Nations have been subjected to purposeful, chronic underfunding of all their basic human services like water, sanitation, housing, and education."

Decolonization of settler-colonialism on these lands requires a commitment to fighting colonization, and a resurgence and recentering of Indigenous worldviews of another way of living

and protecting the land. The obligation for decolonization rests on all of us. Indigenous Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson urges non-Natives to seriously take on the struggle against colonialism. "We don't have to uphold this system any longer. We can collectively make different choices," she writes.

For twenty years, the Ts'Petén Defenders have been calling for a national public inquiry. From Gustafsen to Kanesatake and Elsipogtog, state violence has been unleashed on Indigenous peoples asserting their inherent and constitutional rights to protect their lands. Reconciliation also requires us to act on the specific demands for justice and restitution from Indigenous peoples. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says, "It is time for a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with First Nations peoples." A nation-to-nation relationship and genuine reconciliation requires accounting for past violences. In honour of Wolverine, the time for this national public inquiry into Gustafsen Lake has come.

***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.***

## Vancouver names street after Punjabi pioneer

The city of Vancouver made a history on Wednesday by naming a street after Punjabi pioneer Jack Uppal.

The late Uppal is the first Punjabi whose name will appear on a street sign in the city that discriminated against immigrants and people of colour a century ago.

Uppal was a prominent Punjabi businessman who came to Canada as a toddler to join his immigrant father Dalip Singh in 1926. He grew up facing blatant racism against people of colour. His father, who had moved to Canada in 1907, faced difficulty bringing his family to the city because of discriminatory immigration policies that prevented people from India to bring their wives and children in order to discourage their permanent settlement.

Uppal had to endure bullying at school and often barbers would refuse to give

him a haircut. He also fought for the right to vote. The Indo-Canadians were disfranchised in 1907. The right was restored after a 40-year-long struggle by the community activists. Uppal passed away in 2014 at the age of 83.

On April 6, Vancouver passed a unanimous resolution to designate a street in his name. His relatives were presented a replica street sign bearing his name by the city mayor Gregor Robertson after the resolution was passed amidst thunderous applause from the South-Asian community members and councillors present in the city hall.

"This is a very significant day for Vancouver as it recognises an extraordinary Vancouverite who fought racism and discrimination and created many jobs, particularly in South Vancouver. He was a great leader from the South Asian community who became a leader across the

entire city," Robertson said while talking to RDNB.

Uppal's daughter Cindy Bains said that it is not just an honour for her family but for the entire South Asian community.

While addressing the gathering at the event, former BC attorney general Wally Oppal said that Uppal should have been recognised long ago for his contribution to Canadian society and his compatriots.

"The regrettable aspect of his life is that he could have done something lot better - as he faced racism, he couldn't go to university."

Others in attendance included former federal minister Herb Dhaliwal and former BC minister Moe Sihota. Notably, both Dhaliwal and Sihota made history after becoming the first Punjabi federal minister and first provincial legislator respectively.



## Vancouver Vaisakhi parade organizers create history by including LGBT community

or the first time ever, breaking social taboos over homosexuality within the local South Asian community, the organizers of the Vaisakhi parade on April 16 created history by including the LGBT community in the event.

Members of Unifor, Canada's largest private sector union, joined the parade with rainbow flags and signs with a message in solidarity with gay pride movement. Unifor supports the LGBT community and its equal representation at workplaces.

According to Pall Singh Beesla, who was in charge of floats that participated in the parade under the aegis of the Khalsa Diwan Society, the oldest Sikh religious body in Canada, this was the first time that LGBT people not only joined the Vancouver Vaisakhi parade, but it was the very first time that they got an opportunity to participate in the Sikh religious

parade anywhere in Canada.

The development is important considering the religious significance of Vaisakhi, which also happens to be the birthday of the Khalsa Panth created by the tenth master of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The Khalsa was an army of devout Sikhs raised by Guru Gobind Singh to fight against repression. Those who became Khalsa were mainly from the oppressed communities, and the idea was to not only eradicate the age-old discriminatory caste system, but also to establish an egalitarian society.

Keeping in mind the underlying message of social justice behind Vaisakhi, Beesla readily agreed to include the Unifor contingent with a message in support of LGBT when the latter approached him.

"The Sikhism is a forward thinking religion that does not discriminate against anyone, so why

discriminate against people on the basis of sexual orientation?", Beesla told the RDNB.

Notably, an orthodox section within the Sikh community, like other orthodox religious groups, opposes homosexuality. It is pertinent to mention that the Sikh clergy in India had advised Canada-based Sikh lawmakers not to support a bill in support of same sex marriages. Only recently, when the lesbian premier of Ontario, Kathleen Wynne, visited India, the Sikh priests announced that she would not be honoured at the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar. However, several prominent Sikhs in Canada have been consistently supporting the rights of gays and lesbians in accordance with the Canadian Charter of Rights that guarantees equality to visible minorities.

## Two Indo Canadian women elected for Vancity Board of Directors

**N**iki Sharma and Rita Parikh, two women of Indian origin, have been elected to the Vancity Board of Directors. A former Vancouver Park Board Commissioner, Sharma was attacked on social media for her South Asian background. She faced the challenge without bitterly responding to a woman who hurled racial abuse at her. Instead, Sharma had forgiven the woman after she apologized, and received tremendous support for showing restraint and wisely handling the situation. Sharma is known for her progressive views and has shown up at public rallies organized in support of indigenous peoples, refugees and

immigrants. In the past, she supported initiatives such as recognition of the Punjabi language by the City of Vancouver. Likewise, Parikh too has an experience of working with indigenous communities, refugees and environmentalists. With the election of Sharma and Parikh, the number of Indo-Canadian women sitting on Vancity Board has grown to three. Lily Grewal is already serving as a director of the body.

-RDNB

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## **Survivour of sexual violence**

" ahut dukhta tha madam.. din me kam se kam 10-12 aadmi aate the. Par kya karti.. Maa bimar thi aur karza chukana tha (It used to hurt a lot, madam. About 10-12 men used to visit me daily. But what could I do? My mother was sick and I had to repay a debt)," when I read these lines, I just decided that I have to tell this story to everyone.

Joy-sorrow

Pain-relief

Win-lose

Life-death

Are the facts of life and all go hand in hand.

Similarly in my stories there's a sad part somewhere but yes "All is well that ends well."

Here in this real story too, there's pain in the beginning but yes life changes at one point.

I am talking about Mahananda Metri from Kappalguddi village in Belgaum district, Karnataka.

She is speaking about those terrible days when she was just 13. Her mother Chandrawa was a devadasi. She took a loan from her brothers when she was sick and had to be admitted to the hospital. To repay the loan, she sold her daughter Mahananda to a sex trader in Sangli.

Mahananda used to bleed for months. And when the bleeding finally stopped she was pregnant. She aborted her first baby when she was 14 and the second when she was 16.

She told media that no one forced her to abort, that was her own decision as she wanted to repay the loan..... I am feeling pain and I am so much angry while writing this story. Chandrawa had a problem in her leg when she was a kid and she could not walk. Her parents - Mahananda's grandparents - promised 'Yelamma', the goddess of devadasis, that if the goddess will bless their daughter and she could walk again, they will make Chandrawa also a devadasi. Chandrawa was not happy for her recovery because her parents kept their promise.

Now when Mahananda was born the family took her to some so-called holy man who said that if she married, her husband will die, Chandrawa had taken the loan from her brothers at that time, and then the holy man said this about Mahananda, so they decided to make Mahananda also a Devadasi.

After all those years of pain and aborting a few times, Mahananda delivered a baby girl. She was happy that she did not have to be a part of the flesh trade again as the loan was repaid now.

But it never happened. She was illiterate and weak physically and financially, so she had to continue.

After three years, she gave birth to her second child. At this point she made the decision to give up her work as a devadasi and begin afresh.

Mahananda started working as a

farm labourer. She also took training in tailoring that was arranged by the government. She worked in the farms in the mornings and left for the training in the afternoon with her 6-year-old and 3-year-old in tow.

It took three years to learn tailoring properly and another two years to buy a sewing machine. But once she did, she was unstoppable.

After all the years of struggle, pain, hard work & determination, now her elder daughter is pursuing a BAMS degree and the younger daughter is in Class 10. A year-and-a-half ago she took a loan of Rs. 20,000 from Milaap, with which she paid the fees for her daughters and bought two new sewing machines. She has now started her own tailoring classes.

But now she doesn't have to do all that back again, and her daughters also don't have to be part of that disgusting, painful life. They will lead a fresh and respectable life.

"I hope every human being could become human first, could bring glory to a nation and the parents

each flower on a branch should be beautiful and fragrant

so that we can all together turn this world into a garden. "

***To listen to Gaurav Shah's good story every morning Monday thru Friday, tune in Spice Radio 1200 AM Band at 8:45 am. Also listen to his entertainment program Spicy Chah With Shah from 10-12 pm on the same frequency.***

## **Cold-Flesh**

oon as Eesher Singh entered the room, Kalwant Kaur got up from the bed, stared at him with her sharp eyes and locked the door. It was past midnight and a strange and mysterious quietness seemed to have gripped the entire city. Kalwant Kaur sat on the bed yoga-style and Eesher Singh, who was probably unraveling his thoughts, stood there with a dagger in his hand. A few moments passed in complete silence. Annoyed with the silence, Kalwant Kaur moved to the edge of the bed and started dangling her legs. Eesher Singh still didn't say anything.

Kalwant Kaur was a well-built woman with wide hips, large and juggling upright breasts, sharp eyes and voluptuous grayish lips. The structure of her chin signified a strong woman.

His tight headgear loosened, Eesher Singh stood quietly in the corner. His hand that held the dagger was trembling. From his built one could tell that he was a perfect man for a woman like Kalwant Kaur.

Kalwant Kaur finally broke the silence, but the only words she could utter were "Eesher darling." Eesher Singh looked at Kalwant Kaur but unable to bear the heat of her piercing eyes, looked the other way.

"Eesher darling," Kalwant Kaur

shrieked but immediately controlled her tone, "where were you all these days?"

"I don't know." Eesher Singh moved his tongue over his dry lips.

"What kind of answer is that?" asked Kalwant Kaur angrily.

Eesher Singh dropped his dagger on the floor and lied in bed. It seemed as if he had been ill for many days. Kalwant Kaur looked at the bed that was now filled with Eesher Singh and felt sorry for him.

"What's the matter with you, darling?" Covering Eesher Singh's forehead with her palm Kalwant Kaur asked lovingly.

Eesher Singh, who was staring at the ceiling, looked at Kalwant Kaur and gently stroked her familiar face. "Kalwant."

His voice had deep pain. Kalwant Kaur hugged him hard and, biting on his lips, said, "Yes darling?"

Eesher Singh took his headgear off, looked at Kalwant Kaur as if he were looking for support, spanked her wide hip, shook his head and mumbled to himself, "this girl is crazy."

His long hair fell open when he shook his head. Kalwant Kaur ran her fingers through his hair and asked affectionately, "Eesher darling, where were you all these days?"

"Grandma's house," said Eesher

Singh squeezing her breasts. "I swear to Waheguru, you are a real woman."

Charmingly hitting his hand to move it away, Kalwant Kaur said, "You swear on me and tell me where you were. Went to town?"

"No," said Eesher Singh folding his hair and making a knot.

"You went to town, looted a lot of money and now are not telling me." Kalwant Kaur was very annoyed with him.

"I'm not son of my father if I tell you a lie."

Kalwant Kaur was quiet for a minute, then she suddenly started yelling, "But I don't understand what happened to you that night. You were fine lying with me and had me wear all that jewelry you had looted the other day. You were kissing me all over then I don't know what came over you that you suddenly got up, got dressed, and left."

Eesher Singh turned pale. Kalwant Kaur immediately noticed it. "See! Eesher darling, I swear to Waheguru, I smell a rat."

"I swear there's nothing wrong." There was no life in Eesher Singh's voice.

Kalwant Kaur was now even more suspicious. Holding her lips tight and emphasizing each word, she

## RADICAL NARRATIVE

said, "What's the matter with you, Eesher darling? You are not the same person you were eight days ago."

Eesher Singh got up quickly as if someone had assaulted him. He held Kalwant Kaur in his strong arms and ran his hands all over her body. "Darling, it's the same old me. I'm gonna hug you so hard that heat will be coming out of your bones."

Kalwant Kaur did not resist but kept complaining. "What happened to you that night?"

"Grandma's fever!"

"You aren't gonna tell me?"

"There's nothing to tell."

"Burn me with your hands if you lie."

Eesher Singh put his arms around her neck and pressed his lips hard against hers. His mustache hair got into her nostrils, she sneezed, and both started laughing.

Eesher Singh took his jacket off, looked at Kalwant Kaur amorously, and said, "Let's play cards."

Kalwant Kaur's lips moistened, she rolled her eyes charmingly and said, "Get lost!"

Eesher Singh pinched her buttock. Kalwant Kaur moved away painfully, "Don't do that Eesher darling, it hurts."

Eesher Singh sucked on her lips and bit on it. Kalwant Kaur melted like hot wax. He threw his shirt off. "So let's deal the cards."

Kalwant Kaur's lips quivered. Eesher Singh peeled her clothes off as skin off a goat. He stared her at naked body, pinched her arm, and said, "I swear to Waheguru, you're some woman!"

Kalwant Kaur glanced at the red

mark on her arm left by his pinch.

"You're so cruel, Eesher darling."

Eesher Singh smiled underneath his thick black mustache, "Let the cruelty begin."

He began his cruelty by kissing her lips and biting on her ear lobes. He squeezed her breasts, spanked her buttocks red, kissed her cheeks, and sucked her nipples wet. Kalwant Kaur started to boil like a hot pot on a blazing stove. But in spite of all that foreplay Eesher Singh could not get it up. Like a skilled wrestler, he used all the tricks in the book but none worked. Kalwant Kaur, who was brimming with sexual intensity, was getting irritated with his unnecessary moves.

"Eesher darling, that's enough. Just throw the trump card." She moaned. As if Eesher Singh's entire deck of cards fell hearing that. He loosened his grip and fell next to Kalwant Kaur panting. His forehead was sweating bullets. Kalwant Kaur tried very hard to get it up for him but to no avail. Disappointed and infuriated, Kalwant Kaur got off the bed, picked the chador hanging on the nail on the wall and wrapped herself.

Her nostrils expanded, she said furiously, "Eesher darling, who's that bitch you've spent all these days with who has sucked you dry."

Eesher Singh kept lying in bed panting without saying a word.

Kalwant Kaur was steaming. "I asked who's that whore?"

"No one, Kalwant, no one." Eesher Singh sounded very tired.

Kalwant Kaur put her hands on her wide hips and said with utter determination, "Eesher darling, I must know the truth, I swear to Waheguru.

Is there another woman?"

Eesher Singh tried to say something but Kalwant Kaur cut him off. "Before you swear, you should know that I'm the daughter of Nihal Singh. I'll cut you to pieces if you lied. Now, swear to Waheguru. Is there another woman?"

Eesher Singh shook his head sadly but affirmatively.

Kalwant Kaur went berserk. She picked up the dagger from the floor, removed its cover like a banana-peel, and stabbed Eesher Singh in the neck.

Blood gushed forth from Eesher Singh's neck. In a frenzy, Kalwant Kaur kept stabbing him and cursing the other woman.

"Let go, Kalwant, let go," Eesher Singh said with his voice weakening. He had deep sadness in his voice. Kalwant Kaur pulled back. Blood was jetting to Eesher Singh's mustache. He looked at Kalwant Kaur with the mixed feeling of gratitude and protest. "My darling, you acted too quickly. But it's for the better."

Kalwant Kaur's intense jealousy raised its head again, "Who's she? Your mother?"

Blood was now reaching Eesher Singh's mouth. He tasted it and his whole body shivered.

"And I...and I...killed six people with this same dagger."

"I asked who's that bitch?" There was no other thought on Kalwant Kaur's mind.

Eesher Singh's listless eyes sparkled for a brief moment, "Please don't curse her."

"Who's that bitch?" yelled Kalwant Kaur.

## RADICAL NARRATIVE

"I'll tell you." Eesher Singh's voice was breaking down. He touched his neck, felt the blood and smiled. "Man is so weird."

"Get to the point." Furious Kalwant Kaur was waiting for an answer.

Eesher Singh smiled again underneath his blood-filled mustache. "I'm getting to the point. You've slit my throat. I've to tell it very slowly."

Cold sweat ran down his forehead as he began to recount. "Kalwant, my life, I cannot begin to tell you what happened to me. When the riot broke out in the city, like everyone else I also participated. I gave you the loot but did not tell you one thing."

Eesher Singh groaned with pain. Kalwant Kaur had no feelings for him and paid no attention to his suffering. "What was it?"

Blowing on the blood-cot forming on his mustache, Eesher Singh said, "The house I attacked had seven people in it. I killed six of them, with the same dagger you stabbed me with. There was a beautiful girl in the house. I took her with me."

Kalwant Kaur was listening intently. Eesher Singh once more tried to blow the blood off his mustache. "Kalwant darling, I cannot tell you what a beautiful girl she was. I would've killed her too. But I said to myself, no, Eesher Singh, you enjoy Kalwant Kaur every day. Taste a different fruit."

"Oh" was the only word out of Kalwant Kaur's mouth.

"I put her on my shoulder and got out. On the way...what was I saying...oh, yes...on the way, near

the river, I lay her down by the bushes. First I thought deal the cards. But then I decided not to..." Eesher Singh throat was completely dry.

"Then what happened?" gulped Kalwant Kaur.

"I threw the trump card...but...but..." Eesher Singh's voice was now a mere whisper.

"Then what happened?" Kalwant Kaur shook him.

Eesher Singh opened his tired and sleepy eyes and looked at Kalwant Kaur whose whole body was trembling.

"She was dead, Kalwant, it was a dead body...a cold flesh...please

hold my hand."

Kalwant Kaur put her hand over his. His hand was colder than ice.

*Saadat Hasan Manto was a progressive Pakistani story writer. Originally written in Urdu, Cold-Flesh is about sexual violence endured by women during sectarian riots following the partition of India and Pakistan on religious lines in 1947. Translated by Alok Bhalla, this story has been reproduced here in recognition of Manto's birth anniversary which falls on May 11.*



