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Cover Picture: Kailash Satyarthi, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for 2014, saved Sikhs during 1984 pogrom.

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RADICAL
DESI

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

Politics of genocide

As the Sikh community gears up for commemorative events to mark thirty years of the anti-Sikh massacre, little has been done to punish the guilty and bring a dignified closure. All that is being heard and seen is blame game and politics of genocide both in India and North America.

The massacre of innocent Sikhs across India (otherwise known as world's largest secular democracy) in the first week of November 1984, will go down in the history as an irremovable blot. No amount of apology, real or fake, after three decades can ever assuage the wounds inflicted on the families of those who were killed for merely being Sikhs.

The well organized massacre followed the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, who wanted to avenge the sacrilege of the Golden Temple Complex in Amritsar, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, by the Indian army in June that year. The military

operation was launched to flush out militants who had fortified the place of worship. Continued violence against the Hindus and political murders at the behest of the militants led to the operation, which turned out to be counter productive as it alienated the Sikh community at large from the national mainstream. It fuelled more bloodshed and strengthened the hands of separatist forces seeking a Sikh homeland.

The leaders of Indira Gandhi's Congress party lost no time in engineering violence against the Sikhs in different parts of India. With the help of police, they incited their goons to burn Sikh men alive and rape their women. The electoral rolls were used to identify Sikh homes in states ruled by the so-called secularist Congress party. The army was called in to deal with a handful of militants hiding inside the Golden Temple Complex, yet the security forces were nowhere to be seen when Sikhs were being murdered. Rather, many uniformed Sikh soldiers were also murdered by the mobs.

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Years have passed but not a single Congress leader has been punished. People are repeatedly told that it was a spontaneous public reaction. Indira Gandhi's son Rajeev, who became Prime Minister following her death, went to the extent of justifying the violence saying that when a big tree falls, the earth around it shakes. Such propaganda still continues, while a number of independent inquiries have proved beyond doubt that it was a state sponsored mayhem. If the reaction was "spontaneous", why was a similar reaction missing when Rajeev Gandhi was himself assassinated by Tamil separatists? Or for that matter, when Mahatma Gandhi was murdered by a Hindu extremist in 1948? Was Indira Gandhi a bigger tree than Mahatma Gandhi? It must also be acknowledged that the Sikhs were largely safe in West Bengal state, where Communists were in power. There is no dearth of anti-social elements or criminals in Calcutta. Why then did no such reaction happen in that city? Of course there were some stray incidents of violence in Calcutta, but they lacked the intensity seen in New Delhi, the national capital, due to the intervention of the Communist government. All these simple facts suggest that the Congress has misled people by portraying the carnage as a Hindu reaction to violence by Sikh separatists. In reality, real secularist Hindus and social justice activists tried to save as many Sikh lives as they could. Such people included Kailash Satyarthi, the children's rights activist who has been given the Nobel Peace Prize this year.

The Congress can never escape from the blame of being complicit in this crime against humanity. Its arch rival, the Hindu nationalist BJP

which is now in power, repeated the same in 2002 by engineering an anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, where current Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister. The carnage followed the burning of a train in which over 50 Hindu pilgrims died. The incident was blamed on Muslim fundamentalists. Interestingly, both parties keep blaming each other for inciting sectarian violence. While both have blood on their hands. Some Congress leaders argue that the Muslims feel unsafe under the BJP, much as Jews felt insecure under the Nazis. If that is the case, why does Congress not acknowledge that the Sikhs felt the same way under their rule during 1984? If Congress can conveniently use such analogies to its advantage, then why can't its critics? When the Sikh organizations decided to reframe the massacre as genocide, the Congress reacted sharply. If Congress has a problem with that, perhaps it should stop attacking the BJP with the same stick.

Having said that, the Sikh clergymen who directed the Sikh community across the world to call the anti-1984 carnage genocide also owe some answers. Why did the clergy remain silent when the Golden Temple Complex was turned into a fortress? Why it did not act in time to stop hate propaganda against Hindus from inside the temple? Why didn't it ask the militants not to stockpile weapons inside the temple? Weren't

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they also responsible for the sacrilege?

Besides, this year when India went to the general election, H.S. Phoolka, a well respected human rights lawyer who has been fighting for the victims of 1984, lost his parliamentary seat in Punjab. This happened even though the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), which is solidly behind the Sikh clergymen, is in power in the state. SAD has always used the 1984 tragedy to isolate Congress within the Sikh community. Instead of supporting Phoolka, an Aam Aadmi Party candidate, both the SAD and a separatist faction SAD (Amritsar) fielded their own candidates, leading to Phoolka's defeat. Why did the clergy remain silent about the attitude of the so called Sikh parties towards Phoolka? Why for that matter is the clergy mum about the BJP's complicity in the anti-Muslim pogrom? After all, the BJP is an ally of the SAD. It is pertinent to mention that the BJP is now in power in New Delhi, with a brute majority in parliament. Will this benefit the victims' families? Only time will tell. With an absolute majority on their side, the BJP and SAD have no excuse.

The Sikh activists in North America who have been petitioning and lobbying to reframe the carnage as genocide must also ask themselves: can the US and Canadian governments be counted on to take an honest position on such matters? These nation states are built on the stolen land of the indigenous peoples. The indigenous population on Turtle Island has been subjected to worst form of genocide. Instead of making them accountable for their own wrongs, why see them as allies? The fact is that the Sikh separatists have enjoyed political patronage in these countries for years, gradually gaining strength to position themselves as politically powerful enough to deliver block votes. By continuing to revive the ugly memories of 1984 in North America, they want to keep their separatist movement alive. But the Indian

establishment, which lacks the political will to punish the guilty of 1984, is itself responsible for giving them oxygen and providing grounds to reactivate the Sikh homeland movement in foreign countries. The pseudo secularist apologists of the Indian state in these countries, who have been fighting against the separatist forces, could have done a better job to press their political masters in New Delhi for justice. Instead they let this territory be occupied by those seeking a theocratic Sikh state, and wasted their energy in temple politics. Moderates, as they are generally called, never dared to question the Congress or the BJP for indulging in anti-minority violence. Their secularism remained selective as they continued to fight against the Sikh separatists only to please Indian officials.

All the sides that are too busy playing the politics of genocide should be isolated, and the real secularist and humanist forces should come forward to continue the ongoing struggle for social justice in the world. Only a real collective, secular and apolitical initiative can bring meaningful closure.

The anti-Sikh massacre should be an ugly reminder of injustices that still go in our society, where mass murderers go unpunished, and even gain political power by whipping up emotions against religious minorities. If Rajeev Gandhi was able to muster a brute majority after 1984, Modi has become Prime Minister exactly thirty years after that bloody experiment. Both leaders were able to come to power by riding an anti-minority wave. To check this trend a real secularist political alternative is needed, rather than half hearted efforts by pseudo secularists, who have no shame in rubbing shoulders with the power and remaining indifferent to such atrocities.

-Editors with illustrations by Jarnail Singh.

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Bloody November

Canadian Sikhs answer state sponsored bloodbath by saving lives

“*Khoon kaa badla khoon se lenge*” (We will avenge blood by blood), roared the goons targeting Sikhs when the news came of Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi’s assassination. Two of her Sikh bodyguards murdered her in a fit of rage on October 31, 1984. The high profile murder was the culmination of the infamous military attack on the Golden Temple Complex, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, in June that year. The controversial military operation was launched to flush out armed militants who had fortified the place of worship in Amritsar. The

assault left many people dead and buildings inside the shrine destroyed. As a result, there were angry protests throughout the world, including a big demonstration by Sikhs outside the Indian consulate in Vancouver. Following the murder of Indira Gandhi, innocent Sikhs were murdered across India by goons led by members of her Congress party. The police were seen helping the rioters and doing nothing to stop the mayhem in the Congress-ruled states. Even New Delhi, the cosmopolitan national capital, became unsafe for turbaned Sikhs. The first week of

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November that year became the most horrific period for the minority community after India's independence in 1947.

Thirty years later, as the ugly memories of 1984 refuse to die and the leaders involved in the massacre remain unpunished, Sikhs in Canada continue to save lives by giving blood in memory of the victims. Organized by the Sikh Nation annually, the blood drive has so far saved more than 90,000 lives, according to the organizers. First started in 1999 in North America, this unusual blood donation campaign has reached as far as Australia and is likely to start in Europe. An initiative of a small Surrey-based group of activists, the volunteer campaign gradually expanded its support base to other parts of British Columbia, provinces like Alberta and Ontario, and across the border in cities such as Seattle, Chicago and New York. It's not a coincidence that Surrey, with its sizable Sikh population, remains on the top when it comes to the tremendous community response.

As November approaches, signs bearing the name of Sikh Nation with an appeal for blood donations to save human lives, greet people from street corners and highways. Each year nearly 600 individuals show up to donate at one of the several Sikh Nation blood donation camps held in November, according to a Canadian Blood Services official.

Sukhdeep Singh, a volunteer with Sikh Nation, explains that the idea behind the campaign is that nobody has a right to take away human life. "We want everyone to respect humanity. Those in power have no right to kill people in the name of any ideology or nationalism. That's what we wish to express by

Sunil Kumar Sharma, another volunteer, says the idea behind the campaign is to keep the memories of the victims alive in a dignified manner through life saving. "The thought came from the spirit of Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scriptures of the Sikhs that teach universal brotherhood and equality. Sikhism does not discriminate against anyone. It's all about compassion and that is the foundation of our movement." To prove his point, he says that Sikhs in India organize free kitchens in memory of their martyrs who were brutally murdered, which reflects their resilience and kindness.

Sharma was in Punjab when the violence occurred, and met many Sikhs who migrated to the state after the massacre. Despite being a Hindu, he has consistently worked in solidarity with social justice activists who have been spearheading the campaign to prosecute the top leaders involved in the killings. He feels that the

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campaign has at least helped in opening conversations and dialogue on 1984 in North America, where human rights groups have been exposing the Indian government for denying justice to the victims' families. For the past several years, visiting Congress leaders in Canada and the US have been greeted by protesters, and on a few occasions summons were issued to these leaders through US courts.

Sukhdeep Singh agrees. "The blood donation drive has definitely broken silence on this issue and the stories of survivors have started coming out."

One such story of 83-year-old Daljeet Kaur, whose family lost three men, is appalling. A resident of Surrey, Kaur still remembers how her son, a son-in-law and his father and two other male Sikh guests were murdered in New Delhi.

With tearful eyes she goes on to say that her 20-year-old son Hardeep Singh worked in a factory in Delhi. He was staying at his sister's house the day the violence started, and they had two male Sikh guests. A Hindu neighbour tried to help by providing them refuge in his house when the mobs came. In all, she had four sons and four daughters before Hardeep Singh was killed during the pogrom. Since the mobs were threatening to attack the house where they were hiding, all the adult Sikh males tried to go elsewhere only to be met by death. "They just vanished and their bodies were never found."

Kaur tells with a choked voice that she is a

witness to the sectarian violence that occurred immediately after the independence of India in 1947, when Muslim Pakistan was separated from India. Thousands of Sikhs and Hindus were murdered on the Pakistani side of the border, while Muslims were brutally murdered by mobs on the Indian side. The partition led to a massive exchange of refugees. Kaur's family migrated to India from Pakistan. "We could not imagine that our community will go through the same madness in independent India." She is still bitter about the fact that the government machinery

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was directly involved in the crime. “The Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi (son of Indira Gandhi) himself was responsible. He had publicly justified these killings.”

Although for her the blood drive will do little in terms of justice, it shows how kind and humane the Sikhs are. She once attended a conference organized by the Sikh Nation. “Thirty years have passed and not a single Congress leader has been punished. Where is the hope of justice?”

But H.S. Phoolka, a senior human rights lawyer who has been fighting for the families of the victims of 1984 violence for all these years, thinks the blood drive has a potential to raise public awareness. He has been to Vancouver in the past and has seen the affects of the drive himself. Phoolka is coauthor of the famous book, *“When a Tree Shook Delhi”*, based on his personal experience as legal counsel and activist. He is instrumental in a similar public awareness campaign in New Delhi, where his group worked to plant 3,000 trees in memory of the victims. “These gestures are necessary to educate public about the injustice and gather people’s support.” He is strictly opposed to angry protests and roadblocks that cause public inconvenience.

It is not surprising that the campaign came under criticism from Indian officials five years ago, when Sikh Nation supporters started holding a moment of silence for the victims of 1984 on November 1. “We were virtually branded as separatists”, remembers Sharma. Claiming that they are not aligned with any political group or any particular temple, Sharma acknowledges the political statement underlying the blood donation drive. As he says, “this is a

form of silent protest against the genocidal mindset”. He never denies that their campaign signifies dissidence.

On being questioned whether the name Sikh Nation excludes others, even though it talks about saving human lives, Sharma says, “Sikh Nation here is not about physical border space. We chose this name to motivate the Sikh community at broader level. This kind of name is handy to motivate people and remove lack of awareness and general fears associated with blood donation in the Sikh community. The blood goes to everyone and non-Sikhs too actively participate in the campaign.” He also feels that this campaign has helped to build a positive image of the Sikhs in Canada, a community which came under the microscope following the Air India bombings that left 331 people dead in 1985. Blamed on Canada-based Sikh separatists seeking revenge for the ugly political events of 1984, it was the worst crime in the history of aviation terrorism before 9/11.

A near acknowledgment of this came from a Territory Manager at the Canadian Blood

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Services, BC and Yukon, Saraha Jasmins. “Sikh Nation’s annual blood drive supports Canadian Blood Services’ efforts to make inroads in diverse communities and increase our donor base”. For this reason, Sikh Nation has become the organization’s lead Partners for Life group.

A Prince George resident, Surjit Singh Minhas has donated blood 67 times since the drive first began. His motivation comes from the Sikh philosophy which encourages people to serve humanity instead of being vindictive. “The Sikh Gurus never hated anyone in spite of oppression they had to suffer. So, service to the humanity is service to God.” He thinks that justice has been denied to the victims only because of lack of political will. Being a Canadian Sikh he can at least perform a real service to humanity by donating blood. “Even the Sikh politicians who have been trying to take political mileage out of this issue have done nothing to bring justice to the victims’ families. They only know how to exploit such issues to gain power.”

Ramandeep Singh of Vancouver is not only a part of the drive, but has been continuously donating blood for the past 30 years. He believes that the donors at the annual Sikh Nation blood drive beat the national average. “I guess we are double the national average of 3.75 percent donors.” Each time he donates blood, he goes home with a sense of accomplishment of saving a human life, rather than harboring a feeling of revenge against anyone. “Although I do want justice to the victims’ families, donating blood is a better way of turning the anger in a positive energy.”

Daljeet Kaur tries to sum up her feelings about the drive in a most telling comment. “Some people take away lives, while others save them. That’s the difference between those who killed our community members in India and the people behind the blood drive.”

-RDNB

A saviour called Jyoti Basu

It was January 2010. I was on my first visit to Kolkata. Previously known as Calcutta, the city is the capital of West Bengal state of India. The province was under Communist rule when I was travelling in that part of my home country. I went there mainly to visit Budge Budge, the site where the Komagata Maru ship passengers were shot in September, 1914. The Japanese vessel carrying over 300 South Asian passengers was forced to return by the Canadian government under the discriminatory continuous journey law, designed to stop Indian immigrants from permanent settlement in BC. Following a scuffle with the British India police at Budge Budge shore, the deported passengers were shot at, leaving many dead. A Sikh temple in memory of the deceased passengers greets visitors in the town.

My host Sohan Singh, a staunch supporter of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), directed me inside the temple. As a devout Sikh, he stood inside for a moment with eyes closed and hands folded in prayer before the holy scriptures. Another man, a baptized Sikh and caretaker of the temple, told us about the history of the place. They said that the town was once populated by many Sikhs when the transport business was flourishing, but they started moving to other parts of West Bengal once the industry went through an economic

downturn. The Sikhs are the backbone of the transportation industry in the state, and many I met were the second generation of Sikh migrants from Punjab, who can fluently speak Bengali.

Most intriguing, both these Sikh men supported the communists, who are otherwise infamous for being "anti-religion". Although the current Trinamool Congress government has earned the goodwill of the Bengali Sikh community and has a turbaned Sikh minister in the cabinet, the Sikhs in that region have mainly supported the communists.

The reason is simple. The communists had saved the Sikhs during the 1984 carnage, while the community was targeted by goons led by supporters of the Congress party, seeking

■■■■ IN MEMORIAM

revenge for the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. While Sikhs were being killed with the help of police in Congress-ruled states, the community felt protected in West Bengal. Almost every Sikh I met during my visit felt indebted to the Marxist former Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, for protecting the lives and properties of the Sikhs.

An ailing Basu was battling for his life in those days. I had a chance to visit the hospital where he was under treatment, but no one could glimpse the veteran communist leader, who was born during the year of Budge Budge shootout. I had interviewed him for radio over the phone a few years earlier. He wanted his body parts to be donated for scientific research after his death. He was against religious rituals. I really wanted to talk about it on my radio program. Since he couldn't hear anything over the phone due to aging, I interviewed him through an intermediary. Because of this, some confusion arose over my line of questioning, and he got agitated and left the conversation.

Basu wrote in his memoirs that he was near Chennai for a national conference of the Water Transport Workers' Federation when Indira Gandhi was murdered. He rushed to New Delhi the next day. Basu's government called out the army in Calcutta, and once he was back to West Bengal, his party supporters worked hard to protect the Sikhs and organized an "Amity Rally". He accused the Congress in his memoirs of using the communal card to win the parliamentary election after the riots. He pointed out that the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist organization, backed the Congress while targeting the Sikhs.

During my visit to the hospital another

important development took place. A prominent film star, Amitabh Bachchan, visited Basu. His fans crowded a street near the hospital entrance to get his picture on their cell phones. That was the first time I saw Bachchan live. As he walked out after seeing Basu, the crowd cheered boisterously. Ironically, Bachchan was elected a Congress MP following 1984 carnage. Born to a Sikh mother, Bachchan never uttered a word to publicly denounce the anti-Sikh violence. Known as angry young men, Bachchan and other Congress MPs got elected with a brute majority, riding on the anti-Sikh wave. I wondered who the real hero was: the one who faked fights on the silver screen, or the one who stood against the current in real life.

Obviously, the real hero was inside the hospital under medical care, whose legacy even affected the critics of the communists. A case in point is a Sikh driver who took me to different places in Calcutta. He had a big sticker of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a fundamentalist Sikh preacher, pasted on the rear window. Bhindranwale had started Sikh militancy in Punjab. His followers killed close to 300 communists. Yet, this Sikh driver acknowledged that Basu will always be remembered as a saviour.

The day I returned to Delhi, Basu passed away at the age of 96. The Punjab government declared a holiday to mourn his death. Basu was also a politician and had his own limitations and contradictions, but he proved himself a real defender of secularism by helping a minority community at the time of crisis.

Gurpreet Singh is an independent journalist and one of the founders of Radical Desi.

A request for striking off

all my life i have thought and written against
her
if the whole country is mourning for her
then strike off my name from this country.

i know too well this India of
deep blue seas,
of fields, of mines, of factories
that was the very ordinary corner of this very
country
where for the first time
the slapping hand on daily agriculture labourer
was twisted
in the hands of unknown rustic hands
that was the exact time
when the conspiracy for this murder was hatched
no police can find out the location of this
conspiracy
because tube-lights twinkle only in the capital
and india of fields, mines and factories is very
dark.

and getting aware right in this cold dark
alongwith living
when for the first time, began thinking about this
life
i found myself party to this conspiracy
whenever nubbing the revolting noises
i tried to find out the screaming creature
saw my whole world participating
in this conspiracy of murder.

i had always murdered her
by locating her in the heart of every acquaintance
if her murderers are to be butchered at roads like
this
then i shall also get my due punishment
i do not want to save myself on the ground
that Bhajan Lal Bishnoi does not know me.

whatever is the name of this – rogue kingdom
i spit on being its citizen
i am the India
which hurts the cunning eyes of the pilot
yes, i am India which hurt his eyes
if he has any ancestral India of his own
then strike off my name out of that right now !

Originally written in Punjabi, this poem was translated by Prof. Chaman Lal. Paash, a revolutionary poet who used very harsh words for Indira Gandhi, her son Rajeev, and controversial Congress leader Bhajan Lal Bishnoi, who was accused of inciting anti-Sikh violence in Haryana state. This protest poem was written after the 1984 carnage, yet Paash was assassinated by the Sikh separatists for denouncing theocracy.

Which country may I call mine

blood is flowing everywhere
deadly silence is all around
where may i bury peace
now which country may i call mine.

nanak's arms have been broken
shiva's hair pulled out
who may i say is suppressing whom
now which country may i call mine.

this corpse resembles my daughter
this someone else is like my sister
whose nakedness may i be able to cover
now which country may i call mine.
who will recognize the corpses of their parents
all corpses are alike
for who and for how many may i obtain the shroud
now which country may i call mine.

the moonlit nights have begun to cry
grandmother's stories are finished
how may i fire-worship for the bygone
now which country may i call mine.

you, the ruler, here take my emotions
return my beloved songs back to me
how may i crush my desires
now which country may i call mine.

Originally written in Punjabi, this poem was translated by Sadhu Binning. Sant Ram Udasi was another revolutionary poet who was deeply affected by the violence of 1984.

Nobel Peace Prize winner saved Sikhs during 1984

The winner of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, Kailash Satyarthi, had saved Sikhs during the 1984 pogrom that rocked India following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Satyarthi, a children's rights activist, had founded Bachpan Bachao Andolan (Save Childhood Movement) to free poor children from the shackles of bonded labour and abuse in different parts of India.

The announcement came close to the 30th anniversary of the massacre, as Sikhs across Canada gear up for commemorative events and blood donation camps. Thousands of Sikhs were murdered across the country by goons led by leaders of Indira Gandhi's Congress party, with the help of police. On October 31, 1984, Gandhi was murdered by her Sikh bodyguards, who were enraged by the controversial military operation launched by the Indian government in June that year to flush out armed Sikh militants from inside the Golden Temple Complex, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar. The army invasion left many people dead and the buildings inside the shrine destroyed. This sparked angry protests throughout the world, and there was a huge demonstration of the Sikhs in Vancouver.

Satyarthi gave refuge to Sikhs in his house when the massacre began in the first week of November, despite threats from those involved in rioting.

Revealing this to the RDNB over the

phone from New Delhi, one of Satyarthi's close associates, prominent human rights lawyer H.S. Phoolka, said that he first came in contact with Satyarthi when he saw him working at refugee camps to help victims of the violence. Phoolka has been single-handedly fighting the cases of the victims of anti-Sikh violence and has also coauthored a book *"When a Tree Shook Delhi"*, based on his own experience as a legal counsel for the victims of 1984.

"He was one of those rare people who dared to protect Sikhs by taking them into their refuge when they were being hounded by the goons with the help of the police," says Phoolka.

Phoolka has also given free legal aid to Satyarthi's initiative against child abuse. "Together we have launched many public interest litigations to stop child exploitation in factories." Doing this was not easy. According to Phoolka, Satyarthi received many threats from business people. "Eventually we were successful in getting some of the businesses involved in child labour shut."

Phoolka thinks that since Satyarthi is a humble person and not publicity hungry, he did not get enough prominence in the media. "He believes in working without much effort to gain media attention. That is one reason that not many people know about his good work, but he is a well respected figure in the activists' circles."

Indigenous Peoples' Day – an important symbolic change

There has been considerable media attention to a recent decision by Seattle City Council to support a proposal from indigenous activists to rename Columbus Day, traditionally celebrated as a U.S. federal holiday on the second Monday of October. In Seattle and Minneapolis, this is now Indigenous Peoples' Day.

The response to this change has been varied. Some lament what they consider a slight against Italian immigrant communities. Others welcome the long-overdue recognition of indigenous peoples. And some have called the new holiday name a cosmetic gesture which does not truly address the legacy of anti-indigenous racism.

Columbus Day marks the arrival in the western hemisphere of Christopher Columbus, the Italian-born sailor who led a three ship expedition across the Atlantic Ocean in 1492. In the popular understanding encouraged by governments and the education system, this is usually considered the so called "discovery of America".

In reality, of course, the "Americas" were first discovered by the human beings who arrived in Turtle Island from Asia at least 14,000 years ago, and possibly as long as 40,000 years. These

ancient travellers are the ancestors of the indigenous peoples who spread throughout the hemisphere, using sophisticated skills and knowledge to create hundreds of societies and languages. An estimated 70-110 million people lived in this hemisphere at the time of Columbus whose voyage came hundreds of years after various other Europeans, such as Nordic explorers who established settlements in Newfoundland, and Portuguese fishing fleets. There is also credible evidence that some ships arrived on the west coast from destinations in east Asia during the centuries prior to Columbus.

There is strong justification to recognize "Italian Heritage Days", considering the many contributions by this community. But the arrival of Columbus marked a horrifying conquest of the so called "New World". In their search for gold, silver and other treasures of the original peoples, the conquistadores and their fellow invaders from England, France and elsewhere conducted a well documented and ruthless slaughter. Plunder, murder and disease on a shocking scale led to the extermination of some indigenous peoples, an overall population decline of about 80% by around 1900, and permanent poverty for most of the survivors. As long-time Communist leader Tim Buck said from the dock during this 1931 trial on trumped up "sedition" charges, the bourgeois state in Canada was created "first to enforce the robbers' will on the suppressed Indians, and later

||| CURRENT AFFAIRS

on the working class."

To this day, most indigenous peoples face lower standards of living, shorter life expectancies, and sharper repression of their democratic and civil rights than the rest of the population. Renaming a holiday will not change this oppression.

But it would be simplistic to view this move from one single perspective. The struggle for recognition of the inherent legal rights of indigenous peoples has been gaining momentum for over a century. This struggle takes place simultaneously in the political arena, in the courts, in the realm of popular culture, and so on. Every step forward, large or small, contributes to the overall progress of this epic campaign.

In this sense, symbolic gestures can reflect wider social trends. For example, the name change of the Strait of Georgia and associated waterways to "Salish Sea" is a welcome reminder that we are living in the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples of the Pacific Northwest.

On the Prairies, the defeat of the Métis Resistance of 1885, and the brutal hanging of Louis Riel in a Regina barracks, marked the beginning of some 40 years during which the Métis people (including some of my own ancestors) were driven to the margins of society, living in extreme poverty and not allowed to organize or speak out.

This began to change by the 1930s, but the racist legacy of the Canadian state's military victory at Batoche lives on. Decades of grassroots community organizing has won important social progress, and the Métis are recognized by the

Canadian Constitution as one of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

But the Métis still face stubborn resistance against even symbolic moves to recognize our crucial role in history. Manitoba finally declared "Louis Riel Day" on the third Monday in February, which is the "Family Day" statutory holiday in some other provinces. But Riel's birthday, October 22, 1844, which is highly significant for the Métis, is still ignored by mainstream Canadian society. Just as telling, Métis people and our allies have rarely succeeded in having streets, buildings, parks and other public places named after our heroes. Riel and his military commander Gabriel Dumont are still considered "traitors" for their armed resistance against the Canadian state's theft of Métis lands, and therefore unfit to be honoured. So like many others, I dream of a time when I can celebrate Louis Riel Day by walking down Jim Brady Avenue in Regina, to relax at Gabriel Dumont Park, looking at statues of these leaders.

Yes, symbols do matter. The declaration of Indigenous Peoples Day by Seattle City Council will not eliminate the terrible poverty faced by Native Americans. But this decision is one more step along the road to a society in which the legacy of colonialism is truly eradicated (though never forgotten), and in which equality is a reality rather than a dream.

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

The Death of Lucia Vega Jimenez in Canada's migrant dungeon

Lucia Vega Jimenez was a 42-year Mexican hotel worker who died while under Canadian Border Service Agency's custody in December 2013 after being turned over to immigration authorities by TransLink police. Just prior to her scheduled deportation to Mexico, she hung herself in cells at the Vancouver International Airport. She died eight days later, on December 28, 2013. Lucia's death was kept secret by CBSA and public officials for over a month.

Community members uncovered this horrific tragedy and sounded the alarm to media. Lucia's death sparked national outrage. A petition by community groups with over 8,688 signatures calls for a full, transparent and independent civilian inquiry and investigation.

An inquest was announced and over one week during the first week of October, a Coroner's inquest into Lucia's death took place. The inquest clearly revealed how every institution that Lucia came into contact with was most interested in law enforcement and least interested in her safety. Though this is not shocking to anyone familiar with the immigration system, the facts that are emerging about what happened to Lucia while in custody are illuminating to those unfamiliar with how

immigration enforcement really operates.

Facts about Lucia's tragic death at the Inquest

1. Transit police officer Jason Schuss stopped Lucia for an unpaid fare. Schuss testified that he subsequently turned Lucia over to CBSA, in part, because Lucia had an accent and that he believed "she wasn't originally from Canada." Three hundred and twenty eight people were reported to CBSA by Transit Police last year, one-in-five of whom faced a subsequent immigration investigation.
2. Even a RCMP officer who interviewed Lucia's fellow detainees (who have all since been deported) testified that Lucia appeared visibly distressed and "extremely nervous" to them. Nurse Lilia Hernandez-Cazares testified that she referred Lucia for a mental health assessment and that Lucia showed her scars from violence she suffered. But on the day of the appointment, the computer system mistakenly showed that Lucia was no longer in custody. The appointment with the mental health coordinator was never rescheduled.
3. The Mexican consulate interviewed Lucia several times. They were also to arrange for Lucia to see a counsellor after she told them about her experience of domestic abuse, but they never followed up. Instead, they started to process the Mexican travel document needed for her deportation from

||| CURRENT AFFAIRS

Canada.

4. It took Lucia over three weeks to get a lawyer through legal aid, and when she finally got one it was only five days before the filing deadline for a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA). It was not CBSA or prison staff or any institutional support, but rather other detainees at Alouette prison that helped her access legal aid.
5. Lucia told her lawyer, Emma Andrews, and CBSA that she intended to file a PRRA to remain in Canada and that she was afraid to go back to Mexico. However, Andrews told CBSA that Lucia did not intend to file a PRRA. Lucia clarified to CBSA officer Raman Vandher that she did want to file a PRRA, Vandher testified that Lucia had missed the deadline and it wasn't her priority to inform Lucia about extensions. An internal email by Vandher referred to Lucia as a "very frustrating Mexican removal."
6. A former employee of the private security company Genesis admitted to falsifying room check records due to chronic understaffing the morning that Lucia was found. Although Lucia was in the shower stall for at least 40 minutes, these falsified records show her as being in a cell at the time.

Some of the recommendations from the Jury

1. Instead of prisons, create a dedicated Holding Centre for immigration detainees
2. Centre should be staffed by CBSA employees, not private security.
3. Detainees must have access to legal counsel, medical services, NGO's, family visits, internet access, telephones, access to natural light and ventilation, and their own

money.

4. Detainees should be provided with translators and orientation kit with legal information in their language
5. An improvement committee consisting of NGOs to discuss current concerns and recommendations
6. Detainees should have their first mental and physical health assessment within 72 hours.
7. Any visual signs of physical abuse must be brought to the attention of medical authorities
8. Detainees should be able to wear civilian clothing. Handcuffing & shackling should only be used when absolutely necessary.
9. Appoint an independent Ombudsperson to mediate any concerns or complaints put forward. Create a civilian organization to investigate critical incidents in CBSA custody.
10. PRRA Legislation be changed to empower the CBSA to extend the PRRA deadline

Josh Paterson, Executive Director of the BC Civil Liberties Association, reacted to the Coroner's verdict: "This verdict is a loud wake-up call to Canada Border Services Agency. The jury's recommendations for change confirm the thick catalog of problems in CBSA's detention system in general, and the way Ms Vega Jiménez was treated in particular. All together, these problems appear to have set the stage for her tragic death.

Refugee exclusion and migrant detention in Canada

In Canada, there have been a number of migrant deaths in detention, while awaiting deportation, or upon deportation. In the past five years, these include Jan Szamko, Habtom Kibreab, the Walji

||| CURRENT AFFAIRS

family, Hossein Blujani, Grise, and Veronica Castro. These migrant deaths within Western colonial states are not random acts; they are enabled through systematic policies of racism and exclusion. People don't happen to die in detention or at the border or in cargo ships, they die precisely because securitized detention centres and militarized borders make their bodies, journeys and humanities vulnerable. Geographer Mary Pat Brady describes migrant deaths as "a kind of passive capital punishment."

Over the past 10 years there has been an average of 11,000 migrant detentions per year, including up to 807 children detained each year. In 2013, migrant detainees spent a whopping total of 183,928 days (that's over 503 years) in immigration detention. According to a ground-breaking report, fewer migrants are being released from detention each year, with a national release rate average of just 15 per cent. One-third of all migrant detainees are held in provincial prisons, including in maximum-security facilities.

Migrants are the only population within Canada who can be incarcerated simply on administrative grounds without being charged with a specific criminal offence. This makes migrant detention incredibly arbitrary and can lead to indefinite detention. The detention review process is inconsistent to the point of being unacceptable: the rate of release varies from 5% to 38% depending on the Immigration and Refugee board member (who is a civil servant appointee, not a lawyer or judge). Release rates also vary by region, from 9% in Ontario to 27% in Western Canada. On top of that, these detention reviews are themselves administrative processes: no avenues exist for

detainees to appeal detention reviews decisions in front of a judge to secure their release.

There are countless cases of people behind bars for one year, four years, six years, with no release date in sight.

Canada is now also becoming one of the few Western countries to practice mandatory detention. Due to Harper's recent Refugee Exclusion Act, many refugees, including children, face mandatory incarceration upon arrival, such as the Tamil asylum-seekers who were aboard the MV Sun Sea.

For migrants like Lucia, the Refugee Exclusion Act also means a discriminatory two-tier system based on nationality. Countries like Mexico are classified as "safe" -- making it essentially impossible to seek asylum -- and Canada fast-tracks deportations to these countries. Between 2006 and 2011, CBSA carried out 83,382 deportations. Canada has also imposed visa requirements on Mexico and other countries, making it much harder to even come to Canada, let alone claim asylum. The number of refugee claims has decreased by 50 per cent and the number of accepted refugees has dropped by 25 per cent. Many refugees face limited legal options including no right to appeal, while drastic cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program for refugees means no access to basic health care.

It is evident that Canada's laws are increasingly geared towards keeping people out unless they represent cheap labour or capital. Refugees are stereotyped as "floods of people" from "over there" who are "fraudulent" or "security threats." These narratives buttress moral panics about "keeping borders safe and secure," and hence justify refugee exclusion and

||| CURRENT AFFAIRS

migrant detention.

It is tiring to regurgitate statistics on detention, to emphasize that there are children behind bars, to repeat that detainees are incarcerated indefinitely without charge. The reality is that migrants are not seen for their humanity but instead as a problem to be managed. This is not new; anti-migrant racism is central to this settler nation.

Conclusion

While the inquest into Lucia's death uncovered some shocking facts and made some important recommendations for reform, the core issue of migrant detention and deportation was not interrogated. Some radical visionary recommendations to transform this system would have been:

1. An end to the wide, discretionary and arbitrary powers given to CBSA officers to detain migrants;
2. An end to all processes of immigration detention especially given that migrant detention in Canada is unjust, arbitrary and often indefinite;
3. An end to deportations and permanent status for all migrants upon landing;
4. An end to the criminalization of migration;
5. Addressing the root causes of displacement and migration.

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.

A police officer's widow who snubbed Modi dies

The widow of a police officer who died fighting against terrorists in 2008 succumbed to a brain hemorrhage in September. Kavita Karkare, who once snubbed the current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was the widow of Hemant Karkare, a police officer who exposed a network of Hindu nationalists involved in terrorist activities. For that, Karkare was hounded by the Hindu fundamentalists and branded as “anti-national” and “anti-Hindu”. But the unfazed officer continued his investigation without buckling under political pressure.

Posted with the Anti Terror Squad of the Maharashtra Police, Karkare was killed on November 26, 2008, when Islamic militants from Pakistan attacked the city of Mumbai. Some conspiracy theorists believe he was murdered as part of design during the terror attack. Modi, who

was then Chief Minister of Gujarat state, wanted to give a cash award of Rs. 1 crore to his family, which Kavita refused to accept. The Modi government was blamed for shielding Hindu fanatics involved in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom.

Before Kavita's death, she willed to donate her organs, which saved the lives of two people.

-RDNB

Bhagat Singh's only surviving sister passes away

Parkash Kaur, the sister of towering Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh, passed away in Toronto at the age of 94. She was the last surviving sibling of Bhagat Singh, who was hanged for assassinating a British police officer in 1931. He was part of a group of radical activists that believed in an armed struggle against the British occupation of India. Incidentally, she died on September 28, the birth anniversary of Bhagat Singh. According to her nephew, well known social justice activist Prof. Jagmohan Singh, Parkash Kaur had tried to keep the legacy of Indian revolutionaries alive in post-independent India. She participated in a farmers' agitation in the Rajasthan state of India. She was also in the headlines for fighting a legal battle

with the Punjab police when Kuljeet Singh Dhatt, the brother-in-law of her daughter, was eliminated in a fake police shootout. This happened during the 1980s, when Punjab was going through Sikh militancy. Although Dhatt had no association with the Sikh separatists, he reportedly was killed for opposing police repression during that period. Following a 25-year legal battle, three former police officers were convicted. Two other officers involved have already died. One of them, Ajit Singh Sandhu, had committed suicide. “This became an important symbolic fight of her life against injustice”, according to Jagmohan Singh.

-RDNB

Vancouver City proclaims Punjabi Literary Day

In a significant development, the City of Vancouver has proclaimed October 25 as Punjabi Literary Day. Vancouver Park Board Commissioner Niki Sharma presented the proclamation at an event held at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, on behalf of Mayor Gregor Robertson.

Organized by the Barj Dhahan Foundation, the event was held to honour Punjabi authors with literary awards. The biggest award worth \$25,000 went to Avtar Singh Billing for his famous novel "*Khaali Khoohan Di Katha*". Others honoured at the event included Jasbir Bhullar and Pakistan-based writer, Zuber Ahmed.

The main speaker, Waryam Singh Sandhu, congratulated the Dhahan Foundation for strengthening cultural ties between east and west Punjab which were split by the Indo-Pak partition of 1947. Sandhu, a story writer himself, had traveled to Pakistan in the past and wrote his famous book "*Wagdi Hai Ravi*" based on his first hand experiences there.

Others who spoke on the occasion were Advanced Education Minister Amrik Virk, and Barj Dhahan of Dhahan Foundation. The event was opened by Cecilia Point of the Musqueam Band on whose indigenous territory the UBC

exists. Cecilia welcomed the South Asian writers to the unceded Coast Salish territory on behalf of her band, and drew a link between the indigenous struggles against colonialism and the struggles of South Asians for equal rights.

-RDNB

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of

BHAI BHAAG SINGH'S MARTYRDOM

Let's resolve to continue our struggle for social justice and carry on the fight against racism and discriminatory immigration policies.

Issued by : Shaheed Bhai Mewa Singh Society

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Action sought against those vandalizing the signs of minority candidates

The former Chairman of the BC Human Rights Commission has asked for action against those who deliberately vandalize the signs of minority candidates running for civic elections. Harinder Mahil says the police need to identify and charge those involved, and also check if there is a pattern behind these acts. "It only reflects that racism still prevails which is totally unacceptable".

As BC municipalities head toward the November 15 civic elections, a number of South Asian and Chinese candidates are complaining that their signs are being vandalized on purpose. Even in Surrey, which has a sizable population of South Asians, signs of Punjabi candidates have been repeatedly targeted. The candidates suspect the involvement of racist elements. **-RDNB**

COPE candidate accuse Vancouver City of slighting Deewali

A Vancouver Park Board candidate with the Coalition of Progressive Electors feels that the City's by-laws on fireworks have slighted Deewali. Imtiaz Popat, a renowned activist and an independent broadcaster, says that the fireworks are essential part of Deewali, a festival of lights celebrated by the Indian community. This year

Deewali falls on October 23. However, the by-laws state that fireworks are only allowed from October 25 to 31. "How come the city has allowed fireworks for Halloween and not for Deewali?" Popat wants the City of Vancouver to make changes to accommodate a South Asian festival.

-RDNB

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MLA Bruce Ralston honoured

Surrey Whalley MLA Bruce Ralston was honoured by the Chetna Association's Dr. Ambedkar Social Justice Award at an event held at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a prominent social justice activist and intellectual, and an architect of the Indian Constitution that guarantees socio-economic equality, religious freedom and democracy. His statue was installed at the SFU library ten years ago following sustained efforts by the Chetna Association. At an event held on October 14 to mark the ten years of the installation

of the statue, Ralston was presented with the award for challenging racism and inequality. Those who spoke on the occasion included MP Jasbeer Sandhu, Burnaby City Councilor Sav Dhaliwal, Lt. Col. H.S. Sajjan (who is seeking a federal Liberal nomination in Vancouver South), Counsel General of India, Ravi Shankar Aisola, and Chetna Association leader Jai Birdi.

-RDNB

SANSAD congratulates the recipients of Nobel Peace Prize

Vancouver-based South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy has welcomed the recognition of the work done by two South Asian recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize. In a statement issued to the press, SANSAD described both Malala Yousefzai of Pakistan and Kailash Satyarthi of India as remarkable people.

SANSAD feels that these individuals have put their lives on the line for the empowerment of suppressed and enslaved children, and Pakistan and India ought to be proud of the recognition they have received. Notably, Malala had survived attempted murders by the Taliban. She was attacked for advocating for the rights of female students who are barred by the Islamic extremists from attending schools.

"The Nobel Peace Prize, which has been discredited by its recent awards to such entities of dubious merit as the European Union and Barack Obama, has gone some way toward reclaiming credibility by its award of the prize for 2014 to

Malala and Kailash Satyarthi", says SANSAD President Chinmoy Banerjee. He added that the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded within the context of global politics. "Its list of recipients also includes such notorious warmongers as Henry Kissinger. This year's award is no less political. This year's contenders included Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, who have made contributions of historical proportions toward human freedom from state surveillance and yet remain one in exile and the other in prison. But since Snowden and Manning had dared to challenge the imperial power of the United States of America, they could not be awarded the prize they richly deserved."

Banerjee thinks that this global recognition shines a spotlight on the cause for which these champions have been awarded. "In Pakistan the recognition of Malala has generated a vitriolic attack, not only from the expected quarters of the Taliban, but also in mainstream media. In India the occasion has brought attention to the extent of the problem of child labour in conditions of slavery, the laxity of effort in curbing it, and the complicity of politicians in enabling it." -RDNB

Community engagement requires a variety of voices

I love telling our untold stories. This year, I had the honour of not only curating exhibitions at the Museum of Vancouver and the Surrey Museum that marked the 100th anniversary of the Komagata Maru, but leading a team of eight institutions across Metro Vancouver to collectively commemorate this Canadian story.

For the last several years, I've been focused on community engagement and building bridges between diverse communities to discover our shared values and aspirations. Learning from community elders and stakeholders, artists and activists has informed my views on how to make our parks and community centres responsive to neighbourhood needs. In my experience, it's not about "giving voice" to a community—that voice always exists. Rather it's about providing a space and platform for multiple voices to be heard.

From listening to speakers on reversing climate change, to hearing that a park needs more benches for seniors, I understand our green spaces are important resources for creating a sense of home. For me, that's a big part of why I'm running for Vancouver park board with Vision Vancouver.

As park board commissioner, I will work with my fellow commissioners to foster a strong intergenerational and intercultural engagement strategy, one that includes diverse voices, and works towards fulfilling the goals of the Greenest City Action Plan to increase the amount of parks, green spaces,

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and community gardens in Vancouver.

With my background in museums and art galleries and as a member of Vancouver's public art committee for the past two terms, it will come as no surprise that I'm a passionate advocate for arts and culture. I think our parks and recreation network can do a lot to support artistic development in our city, whether it's continuing to offer affordable arts space in our field houses, hosting cultural events in our community centres, or looking at new opportunities to place public art within these shared spaces.

Community engagement requires a

||| GUEST COLUMN

diversity of voices at the decision-making table—voices that understand the barriers to our public services. I am a strong supporter of the Vision-led park board's introduction of the OneCard, which has helped to break down some of those barriers. Of Vancouver's 135,000 OneCard holders, 40 percent are from low-income families. I am proud of what Vision has done to make equal access for every resident our top priority, and it's something I'd like to see continue at park board.

Of course, as a Vision park board commissioner, I'll also be focused on sport, health, recreation and fun. Every day in Vancouver parks and community centres, I see places where seniors and kids can come together to take a yoga or dance class, or play hockey, soccer, or kabaddi. Our goal of creating more community garden spaces can aid local food security and revitalize neglected areas to

further that sense of community. It's an important part of what makes our city so special.

In order to bring about real, progressive change in Vancouver, we need to build consensus. I'm looking forward to helping to build this consensus with my colleagues at the park board table.

As a historian of the city I know there was a time when women and people of colour could not vote in municipal elections. This civil right that we share is the result of a long struggle by our community pioneers and has only existed for a handful of decades. I ask that you honour that struggle by voting in this year's election and I hope to earn your support on November 15.

Naveen Girn is a Vision Vancouver candidate for park board.

Courtesy: Georgia Straight

A soldier's fight for dignity

Twenty years ago, during the Remembrance Day ceremony on November 11th, 1993, Lieutenant Colonel Pritam Singh Jauhal and his colleagues became embroiled in a year-long battle to be allowed to wear the *pagh* (turban) in the sacred halls of the Royal Canadian Legion, a national Canadian icon symbolizing military prowess and patriotic pride.

I had the immense privilege to interview Pritam Uncle Ji many times, so that we could together write his story and his biography based on his memoirs. Pritam is indeed a great man, a proud man, and a man who to this day remembers every single detail of what happened twenty years ago. For those of us who may have been too young to understand the weight of the battle Pritam waged with the Legion, perhaps what we should be doing instead is reflecting on the impact of this 'incident' twenty years later.

Twenty years later, perhaps we should be reflecting on the questions of what role does the turban or *pagri* play today in society? Has enough knowledge about the *pagri* helped to hinder racism or ignorance? Does mainstream Canadian society understand the great religious symbolism the *pagh* holds for a Sikh? Perhaps I have just answered my own questions.

Below is an excerpt from a book I have been lucky enough to co-author with Pritam, "A Soldier Remembers" is the biography of Lt. Col. Pritam Singh Jauhal based on his memoirs. Taken from

PART FOUR: BATTLE FOR MY FAITH AND FAITH DENIED, these are the words of Pritam as he recalls the most trying of his times during the legion battle. Take note, this was in from 1993-1994, what has changed since then, and what can we do to encourage more positive changes in the future?

There is certainly a lesson that can be learned from Pritam (among many). For if one man was able to gain the recognition from Queen Elizabeth herself, perhaps each and every one of us can do more to spread the many positives' of Sikhi and the true spirit of *chardi kala*.

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra is a Coordinator with Centre for Indo Canadian Studies at University of the Fraser Valley.

While Pritam was fighting for the widows of Indian war veterans and while he was managing and participating in the many activities associated with the Indian Ex-Servicemen Society of BC, he did not realize that he would soon be facing the greatest battle of his life.

The battle was fought on Canadian soil against an iconic Canadian organization, but it showed remarkable strength of courage and character on the part of Pritam. This remarkable story unfolded on November 11, 1993 when Lt Col Pritam Singh,

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along with fellow WWII Sikh veterans: Flying Officer Harbhajan Singh Minhas (Ret'd), Subedar Puran Singh Saran (Ret'd), Sepoy Waryam Singh Bains (Ret'd), and Subedar Major Honorary Captain Mehar Singh Baring (Ret'd) were denied entrance into the Newton Legion Branch by its President Mr. Frank Underwood during the annual war veterans Remembrance Day ceremonies.

A few weeks before the Remembrance Day ceremonies in 1993 Pritam had read a public invitation by the Newton Legion Branch in the local community newspapers for veterans to gather to pay respect to fallen soldiers. Five Indian veterans decided to attend the Remembrance Day ceremonies and on November 8th, exactly three days prior to the ceremony itself, Pritam visited the Newton Legion Branch and received clearance from Mr. Arni Bayless, the Parade Commander to wear his formal army jacket displaying all his medals and his turban.

On November 11th the proud Indian veterans wore their formal army jackets and joined the ceremonies at the Cenotaph in Newton, Surrey. After the formal commemorative event, they joined the parade of veterans as they marched to the Legion hall for speeches and refreshments. But as the Indian veterans approached the door, they were refused entry by the Legion President, Mr. Frank Underwood, while others continued to stream by into the hall.

Pritam and the veterans were shocked and humiliated when they found that they were not going to be allowed to enter the Legion hall. They stood outside pleading their case to the President but it was to no avail. What was the cause of this humiliation? It was their turbans - they were told the turban had to be removed in order for them to go inside the Legion hall. No headdress was allowed in the Legion Hall as it was considered

disrespectful. As proud Sikhs they naturally refused to remove their turbans considering their lifelong commitment to the honour of their sacred symbol. Under these circumstances Pritam thought how could he even begin to convey his dismay, humiliation and frustration to those who were standing in front of him - fellow veterans? The four other veterans were also completely baffled, as they wondered how was it that every veteran was given an open invitation to attend the ceremonies and yet these few men could still be denied entry. They questioned how was it that Pritam had received prior approval to join the ceremonies knowing full well he was a turbaned Sikh, and yet he and the other veterans were still denied entrance as invited guests of the Legion? The contradictions had become endless.

Six senior female members of the Newton Legion who heard Pritam's arguments outside the door with Mr. Underwood were considerably upset. They told Pritam and the others with folded hands, "Gentleman, we are extremely sorry for the manner in which you have been insulted as a guest by our President. We apologize to you on behalf of our Legion." But their apology held no weight to remove the ban on turbans within the hall at that moment. Even more shocking was that there were women in the Legion hall with berets on who had been allowed in. When Pritam asked why the law was not restricting them, he was told that women have been wearing such a head-dress for seventy years and so it was acceptable. For the Indian veterans the hypocrisy of the rules was reaching incredulous limits.

As a result of what was happening at the door Ms. Penny Priddy, MLA for the Surrey-Newton constituency and a Minister in the British Columbia Government, walked out of the lounge in protest against the way the veterans were being

||| SPECIAL ARTICLE

insulted in public. She had been scheduled to deliver a speech which she never gave. Councillor Bruce Ralson and a few other dignitaries also walked out of the ceremony. This unfolding real life drama inevitably brought the national and international media on the scene.

Baffled and upset, yet determined to find resolution, Pritam drove back to his house where he found news crews with two TV trucks waiting for him. They asked him to accompany them to the very doors of the Newton Legion where he was denied entrance. They wanted to interview Pritam at the spot where he had been refused entry to the Newton Legion. Pritam agreed and accompanied them. When he arrived at the Newton Legion there were over fifty media crews waiting for Pritam. He was bombarded with questions by a throng of media. Seeing that so many of them wanted to talk to him, he told them that he would not return home until all the interviews were done and his voice was fully heard. He stayed there for nearly an hour and a half giving interviews. Pritam knew full well that through the media their case could be made known to the entire world. It would turn out that the various forms of media would end up serving as Pritam's greatest allies. Many members of the Newton Legion there were sympathetic toward Pritam and they promised to go alongside Pritam in the battle of rights and respect that Pritam promised he would wage.

The next day on Friday, November 12, 1993 - Pritam's story was featured in the main headlines of both The Vancouver Province and The Vancouver Sun. The Vancouver Province's headline exclaimed "No Sikhs allowed," and the Vancouver Sun's headline exclaimed "Legion slams door in Sikhs' face."

Pritam truly felt that at this moment in time his battle to legally protect the Sikh turban had

begun. What commenced for the next year was a barrage of newspaper, television and radio interviews, filing a case with the BC Human Rights Council against the Newton Legion Branch #175, letters to the Queen of England, the Prime Minister of Canada, the Premier of BC, local MLA's and politicians, and the World Sikh Organization.

Pritam was asked to speak on various national TV Channels and radio talk shows to give detailed accounts of the incident. He also received numerous telephone calls from many countries for interview requests. A television team came from Australia to interview him. Journalists from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) interviewed him on the phone many times. Journalists and reporters called Pritam from all across North America. As a result, Pritam was kept occupied around the clock. During this ordeal Pritam had the full support of his family including Harjit and their three children; although their children feared for Pritam's very life at times. In the end they all decided that this was a fight that Pritam had to pursue and they encouraged him to never give up.

At times during the ordeal because of the very viable physical threats he faced, there was a point in time that Pritam thought that he would not be able to fight the legion policies. It was here that he was reminded of the story of Sant Baba Nidhan Singh. Nidhan Singh was the only turbaned Sikh doing seva at Nanded (earlier Hyderabad State, India and now Andhra Pradesh) and was often ridiculed and tormented by people around him. Feeling much hurt, he decided to return to his home in Punjab. While waiting at the railway station he experienced the darshan of the tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh Ji who asked of him, "*Bas, ho gayee seva? (Is that all? Have you done your service)?*" Overcome by this vision of the tenth Sikh Guru and his challenge filled

||| SPECIAL ARTICLE

question, Nidhan Singh returned to Nanded and built the Gurdwara Sachkhand Sahib, where millions of devotees come to worship and take part in its *guru ka langar*.

Pritam Singh like Nidhan Singh was among the few turbaned Sikhs who have faced ridicule and verbal torment and done something about it in a very public manner. One day as Pritam prayed to Guru Gobind Singh Ji, he also heard a voice telling him to not worry and advising him not to keep his turban in the front during his battle with the Legion, but to advocate behind the narrative that he came to the Legion as an invited guest and was still denied entrance. By remembering these words of advice and the strength from the voice he heard very much like what that the tenth Sikh Guru Gobind Singh Ji imbued into Baba Nidhan Singh, Pritam also forged on with his battle. And forged on he did, not in malice or in anger, but with formidable strength and courage. This was because when Pritam first saw himself on television being interviewed immediately after being denied entrance into the Legion he saw himself full of anger. Pritam realized that if he was to fight an honest fight and with his *pagh* as his strength, he should remain calm and straightforward and simply let the Canadian viewers/listeners be the judges.

While the national media (television, newspapers and radio) gave the issue a constructive, analytical and

appropriate airing, Pritam was to fight the battle of his honour and turban on many other fronts. Pritam started by writing letters giving details of the incident and explaining the symbolic significance of the turban to all related authorities and figure heads. He wrote to every Member of Parliament of Canada, all organizations dealing with religious discrimination, Canadian justice agencies, the Governor-General of Canada, the Prime Minister of Canada, the Premier of BC, and even the Queen giving his point of view. Pritam also addressed the Dominion Command of the Royal Canadian Legion at Ottawa to keep them informed of the developments.

Ghadar newspaper centenary marks an important anniversary for journalism

This November marks 101 years of the Ghadar newspaper, a publication brought out by radical South Asian political activists on the Pacific coast of North America.

Launched on November 1, 1913, the Ghadar represented the liberation struggle started by the South Asian immigrants in this part of the world against racism and Britain's occupation of India.

Most of these men involved in the Ghadar movement came here as British subjects. Many chose to live in Canada, which was a British colony.

Rampant racism against these people and indifference toward their grievances by Britain's representatives disillusioned them and transformed them into social-justice activists. The racist policies of the Canadian government that denied them right to vote and bring their families to this country fuelled their anger.

They soon realized that the root cause of their sufferings was foreign rule back home in India. As a result, South Asians began getting organized and formed Hindi Pacific Association in April, 1913 in Astoria, Oregon, with a mandate to drive out British rulers from India and resist racism abroad.

The association resolved to form a democratic republic and a secular society in free India and later launched its paper, titled Ghadar, to expose the tyranny of the British Empire and educate South Asians across the world.

The name Ghadar was borrowed from the

first uprising against the British Empire in 1857. The British government that gave this revolt its name—an Urdu term that means mutiny—only to see it appropriated by South Asian activists years later.

The paper was published from association headquarters in San Francisco through volunteer efforts, without any monetary considerations. The production and distribution of the paper relied on dedicated supporters of the group.

The radical content caught the attention of the Canadian authorities as the association had a big following in Vancouver.

It regularly published the provocative Ghadar narrative, some of which was written by Vancouver-based activists. The Ghadar promoted secularism and social equality and openly challenged Indian feudalism and the Empire.

Although a majority of these men were Sikhs, the association was secular in character. It had members and supporters from among the non-Sikh communities and discouraged any discussion on religious matters. Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims were treated alike and there was no room for caste-based discrimination. It emphasized people's unity.

The paper became so popular that the association widely came to be known as the Ghadar Party. The paper also brought out a special issue on the Komagata Maru episode in 1914.

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The Japanese vessel with over 350 South Asians aboard was forced by the Canadian government to remain in Vancouver's harbour under the discriminatory continuous-journey law that aimed to prevent Indian immigrants from settling in Vancouver. Eventually, the boat was forced to leave and return to India with its passengers.

The Ghadar newspaper also encouraged Indians to return to their home country to launch an armed rebellion with the help of Indian soldiers in the British army while the Empire was locked in a war with Germany.

Even those actively involved in the publication and composing of the Ghadar returned to India, sometimes facing the gallows and long imprisonment. Prominent among those were Kartar Singh Sarabha, who looked after the Punjabi edition of the Ghadar and wrote regular columns. He was hanged in 1915.

The history of the Ghadar newspaper shows that media activism was alive in North America 100 years ago. Those involved were courageous enough to do what they preached.

Although in today's materialistic world, it's difficult to recreate a paper like the Ghadar, its history can still provide inspiration to those in the media in the contemporary world. The minimum they can

do is to stand up against the establishment and give voice to the underdog rather than being embedded journalists in exchange for the patronage of the rich and powerful.

Rather than profiteering through the media, the profession should focus on serving the interests of the society at large. The challenges of neocolonialism—like free markets, the arms race, and invasions—should be questioned much as everyday social challenges, like systemic racism, religious extremism, and social inequality.

-RDNB

Remembering two martyrs

November 16 is the martyrdom day of a great Indian revolutionary, Kartar Singh Sarabha, who was hanged in 1915 by the British Empire that occupied his motherland until 1947. Although it's a matter of sheer chance that his martyrdom day coincides with that of Louis Riel, the Métis hero of Canada, the two men had one thing in common: they challenged colonialism at different times and in different forms.

Kartar Singh Sarabha was born in 1886 in Punjab, when India was under the British rule. He migrated to the USA in 1912 for studies at the University of California, where he came in contact with Indian revolutionaries who believed in armed rebellion to free India from the foreign invaders. He became an active member of the Ghadar Party that was founded in 1913 and helped in running

the party newspaper.

He later went to India to participate in an armed revolution and tried to incite Indian soldiers who worked for the British Empire to revolt. He had also participated in robberies to raise funds for arms and ammunition. While the planned rebellion failed, he was later arrested by the police with the help of an informer and hanged.

Louis Riel was born on October 22, 1844. Known as a founder of the province of Manitoba, he led two resistance movements, the first one being the Red River Rebellion, which established a provisional government that later negotiated the terms under which Manitoba entered the Canadian confederation. He was executed on November 16, 1885, after the second Métis resistance was defeated at Batoche. Although Riel

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was not the only person hanged for struggling for Aboriginal rights, he symbolizes the continued indigenous resistance in Canada.

The two men set an example for those who believed in social justice and equality. Their sacrifices have made some difference, but there is still a long way to go. The imperialist wars and the plunder of resources are still going on in the world. Colonialism in the garb of globalization is still posing a threat to the life and liberty of people, especially those belonging to economically weaker sections. And above all the exploitation of indigenous peoples continues shamelessly both in India and Canada.

Known as the world's largest democracy, India has witnessed systematic discrimination against the so-called untouchables or dalits, who are the First Nation of that country. Ironically, Kartar Singh Sarabha's Ghadar Party had denounced caste discrimination, yet this social ill is prevalent in free India.

In Canada, Aboriginal peoples are still

struggling to retain the rights over their lands, rivers and cultural heritage. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has apologized for the abuse of the students in the residential schools, and US President Barack Obama has opened dialogue with First Nations on the other side of the border. Instead of making tokenistic gestures, these leaders should check institutional racism.

In both the secular and culturally diverse countries, right-wing thinkers and historians have always tried to demonize the First Nations as savages one way or the other. The Indo-Canadian pioneers used to call the natives Tae Ke (those belonging to the elderly uncle's family). This informal sense of association should be popularized to strengthen relations between the two communities. Progressive groups can make some beginning by organizing a commemorative event to mark the martyrdom of both these men.

-RDNB

Tragedy in Ottawa being used to justify curbs to civil liberties

While the deadly events were unfolding on October 22 in Ottawa, the Conservative government was already beginning to use this to bolster its move to restrict civil liberties and democratic freedoms. Even before the murder of Cpl. Nathan Cirillo at the National War Memorial, the government had been ready to introduce its latest “anti-terrorism” legislation to expand the legal scope for CSIS surveillance of the activities and communications of Canadians, and to allow “disruption” tactics – the authority to arrest anyone considered a potential threat, even those not engaged in any illegal activity. This legislation is expected to be brought before Parliament shortly.

Ever since taking office, the Harper Conservatives have directed state security agencies to focus on those they consider “enemies”, such as environmentalists opposed to the expansion of tarsands extraction and exports, Aboriginal movements which resist the destruction of their traditional territories by governments and resource corporations, or critics of the G8/G20 summits. The new legislation may create a basis for even more police spying and repression against grassroots opposition forces.

Such domestic activists have been the main target of security operations for every federal government since Confederation. For nearly 150 years, attacks on civil rights and democratic freedoms have been accompanied by ominous speeches warning of “dire threats to our way of life”. This was seen during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, the RCMP attack on the On to

Ottawa Trek of 1935, the blacklisting of militant labour activists during the Cold War era, the mass arrests during the G-20 Summit in Toronto and the student protests in Quebec, the criminalization of Aboriginal land defender movements, etc. The “pre-emptive” arrest of “potential terrorists” would open the door to police actions against virtually any movement or organization which speaks out against government policies.

The murderous attack in Ottawa clearly seems to have been the act of an individual killer, not an organized assault by any group affiliated with ISIS. But these events take place in the context of the Canadian government’s enthusiastic participation in war-making and militarism as a key partner in the US-led NATO alliance. The U.S. itself has repeatedly overthrown governments and invaded countries which it considers unfriendly to its interests. Joining wars launched by the U.S. will only exacerbate crises rather than resolve international problems.

The ugly events are being used to justify further limitations of democratic rights, including the rights to free speech and expression, assembly, privacy, and legal due process. Recently there is a particular tendency by the corporate media and some politicians to vilify the Muslim faith and people from the Arab communities. Canadians should resist this racist stereotyping, and exercise our democratic rights, including the right to express opposition to Canadian participation in the new war in Iraq and Syria.

Courtesy: People’s Voice

Reaction after Ottawa episode shows racism continues to prevail in this country

Ever since the October 22 shootout at Parliament Hill that left Cpl. Nathan Cirillo and the gunman Michael Zehaf-Bibeau dead, the Muslim community has come under a microscope once again. In some instances hateful messages have been received by different mosques across Canada.

Although details are still sketchy and more needs to be done to unravel the truth behind the tragedy, Bibeau was believed to be a radicalised Islamic extremist, who died at the hands of the police after he shot Cirillo, a reservist guarding the National War Memorial. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police has a video reportedly made by Bibeau before the attack. In it, Bibeau made references to Canada's foreign policy as motivation for his action, suggesting that he may have been driven by political reasons. This incident comes three weeks after the decision of the Conservative government to get involved in the war against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Only two days before this bloody episode, Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent died in a hit and run in Quebec by a suspected extremist. Whether these two separate incidents were connected or linked to the Conservatives' foreign policy is too early to say, but the signs of Islamophobia have started showing in this country.

Particularly, the Burnaby mosque that was attended by Bibeau in 2011 has received threats. This is despite wide condemnation of the Ottawa attack by the Muslim community and its leaders. These reactions are an ugly reminder of the anti-Muslim rhetoric that followed 9/11.

The police and the intelligence agencies

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which have swung into action around the happenings in Ottawa and Quebec must also pay serious attention to the threats being made against Muslims. While there is no justification for what happened in Ottawa and Quebec, or extremism in the name of Islam or any other religion, any tendency to paint an entire community with one brush should also be checked. The whole Muslim community cannot be held responsible for an act of violence committed by a few individuals. Much as the entire Caucasian race cannot be blamed for the acts of racist violence committed by men like Tim MacVeigh in the past, the act of Bibeau cannot be blamed on the Muslim community.

The authorities should also enlarge the scope of investigations into so-called radicalization of youth in Canada. Rather than being selective, the investigators must also check the radicalization of youth by white supremacists, who also pose a threat to peace and harmony in Canada. It's a shame that white supremacy continues to exist in this country in spite of apologies and recognition of historical wrongs. The Muslims are being targeted only because of their religion, exactly one hundred years after the Komagata Maru episode, showing that more needs to be done to eradicate racial prejudices. This government has apologized for the turning away of the Komagata Maru vessel carrying over 300 South Asian passengers under the discriminatory immigration law, but it must stand up against these challenges if it really wants to stop racism.

- RDNB

