



Ambedkar Times

Weekly

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Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Buddhism and Dalit Empowerment

Prem Kumar Chumber

Editor-in-Chief: Ambedkar Times & Desh Doaba

Babasaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism at the historic public ceremony in Nagpur on October 14, 1956. The decision to embrace Buddhism by Dr. Ambedkar was not at all a sudden attempt. It took him more than two decades (from Yeola Conference, October 13, 1935, where he took the vow that even though I am a Hindu born, I will not die a Hindu', to the historic Nagpur conversion ceremony, October 14, 1956, the day he embraced Buddhism with thousands of his followers) to translate his vow for conversion into reality. He decided to embrace Buddhism after thoroughly exhausting all possible ways of reforming Hinduism from within and exploring the possibility of conversion to Christianity, Sikhism, and Islam for overcoming the oppressive structures of Brahminical social order (BSO) in India. Converting to Buddhism, in fact, was a unique and meticulously calculated move. It was a unique move in the sense that though there have been many instances of individual conversions to Buddhism, the real credit for systematically organizing collective conversion to Buddhism on a mass scale in India, beyond doubt, goes to Dr. Ambedkar. The historic conversion ceremony at Nagpur assumed further importance with the publication of The Buddha and his Dhamma shortly after the demise of Babasaheb on December 6, 1956.

Dr. Ambedkar discovered in conversion to

Buddhism the most desired and reliable way of overcoming the centuries-old system of social exclusion. According to Babasaheb, the central thesis of the Buddhist philosophy revolves around two major problems: the first problem was that there was suffering in the world and the second was how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy. Since caste and caste based social exclusion dehu-

ety of the country even after denouncing Hinduism publicly in 1935 and later on embracing Buddhism in 1956.

Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar used to emphasize on the application of scientific approach to solve the question of caste and social exclusion. His movement also became very popular in Punjab. He visited Punjab thrice. It was during his last visit in October 27-29, 1951 that he spoke at length to his people in Punjab about his approach and ways of Dalit empowerment. He delivered speeches at Jalandhar, Ludhiana and Patiala and also addressed the students of D.A.V. College Jalandhar. Though the people of Punjab were well impressed by



manizes the Dalits, Babasaheb underlined the urgency of caste annihilation. It is in this context that conversion to Buddhism becomes meaningful. Another aspect that underlines the importance of conversion to Buddhism encourages strategic alliance between the non-Brahminical/Shudras/Bahujan Samaj/artisans and the Dalit/Ati Shudras sections of the Indian society and calls for their united front against the oppressive and hegemonic structures of Brahminical social order. Forging unity among the victims of the 'varna order' in turn aimed at reclaiming India on the basis of the neo-Buddhist identity. The very fact that Dr. Ambedkar founded three political parties (the Independent Labour Party, All India Scheduled Castes Federation and the Republican Party of India), and the leading role that he played in drafting the Constitution of independent India, vindicated his active involvement in the polity and soci-

his great movement but they could not follow him so closely in relation to conversion to Buddhism. Late D. C. Ahir, a renowned Ambedkarite Buddhist and world reputed scholar of Buddhism, was of the opinion that due to deep faith of Scheduled Castes population of Punjab, especially of the Doaba region, in the teachings and spirituality of Saheb Shri Guru Ravidass Ji, Buddhism could not become so popular in this state. Another possible reason behind the deep popularity of the teachings of Saheb Shri Guru Ravidass in Punjab could be the concerted efforts of the great freedom fighter and founder of the Ad Dharm Mandal Babu Mangu Ram Mugowalia and the mass appeal of his famous Ad Dharm Movement. The popularity of Ad Dharm can be known from the fact that some of the scholars of late started advocating that the principles of "Ad Dharm" are also followed in Buddhism.

Ambedkar International Mission (AIM) celebrates 68th Dhammachakra Pravartan Day with great enthusiasm

Ambedkar International Mission (AIM) successfully hosted the 68th Dhammachakra Pravartan Day on Saturday, October 12, 2024, at Old Bridge, New

Jersey. The event, a momentous occasion for followers of Buddhism and those inspired by the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was attended by hundreds of people from New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

about the themes of Peace and Reconciliation. His powerful speech emphasized the Buddhist principles of compassion, unity, and non-violence

social justice for Dalit communities. The event also featured a highly insightful panel discussion on the topic 'Challenges to the Sanctity of the In-



diversity and unity within the Buddhist community, promoting a sense of belonging and collective identity. The 68th Dhammachakra Pravartan Day

Jersey. The event, a momentous occasion for followers of Buddhism and those inspired by the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was attended by hundreds of people from New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

The day was filled with spiritual reflection, intellectual discussions, and cultural performances, making it a highly anticipated and well-attended event. The event featured a keynote address by Rev. T.K. Nagakagi, President Emeritus of the Buddhist Council of New York, who spoke passionately

as the foundation for building peaceful societies. His message resonated deeply with attendees, reinforcing the relevance of these timeless values in addressing today's global challenges. The senior member of AIM Mr. Milind Awasarmol discussed the honorable Supreme Court's recent verdict on the subclassification of Scheduled Caste quotas and the concept of the creamy layer. His in-depth analysis of the legal implications of the ruling offered valuable insights into the evolving landscape of affirmative action and

dian Constitution, the Evolution of Bahujan Politics, Female Leadership, and the Future of Social Justice.' The AIM members participated actively, contributing to a robust dialogue on these important issues that shape the socio-political landscape of India today.

The event also showcased a vibrant array of cultural performances, with participants from all walks of life. Attendees enjoyed traditional singing, dancing, and inspiring speeches by children, women, and men alike. The cultural segments celebrated the rich

was a resounding success, drawing a large and diverse crowd from the tri-state area, as well as visitors from across the world. The event provided a meaningful platform for reflection on Buddhist teachings, social justice issues, and the continued relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's ideals. It also served as an opportunity for the community to come together in celebration, learning, and solidarity.

Read more:

<https://www.ambedkartimes.com/bud-dha.htm>

Sukha- A Forgotten Dalit Soldier Buried in the English Churchyard

Sukha's story is a sad account of the hard reality of India's caste prejudice. A Dalit soldier was discriminated even after his death. Such behaviour of his fellow countrymen put whole of humanity to shame. Caste is a centuries old discrimination on the basis of birth and occupation that impacted and traumatised millions of people. Dr Manmohan Singh, former Prime Minister of India had rightly termed it as a 'blot on humanity'.¹ It is a tragedy that Indians' mind set hasn't changed even today and caste is still being practiced.

At the beginning of the World War I, millions of Indians were enrolled in the British army. More than one million Indian soldiers were involved overseas in the campaign against fascism and defend democracy. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims from various regions such as Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and other states volunteered themselves and fought on the Western Front, in East Africa, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Gallipoli. One third of the British army on the Western Front came from India. Overall it contained 20,748 British and 89,335 Indian soldiers sent from sub-continent, supported by 49,273 Indian labourers.² It is obvious that majority of the labourers were from lower castes called untouchables doing cleaning, washing and other menial work. Volunteering in the army offered Untouchables an opportunity to improve their economic conditions as soldiers were paid well and also to break through the caste barriers. One of them was Sukha, a 30 year old Untouchable from a village in Uttar Pradesh who volunteered enthusiastically when the call came for recruits to serve in the army.

Sukha was posted in France. There was a fierce fighting on the Western Front and over 60,000 soldiers died and a great numbers were injured. The wounded soldiers were transferred to England and hospitalised in the military hospitals in Brighton where the Royal Pavilion was converted into a hospital and in the Lady Hardinge Hospital in the historical village Brockenhurst, New Forest District in Hampshire. In case a soldier died, there is a cemetery at Brookwood near Woking where Muslim soldiers were buried and the Chhatri memorial on Patcham Downs near Brighton marks the ghats where Hindus and Sikhs were cremated.³

Sukha was transferred from France to Lady Hardinge Hospital in Brockenhurst as a cleaner. Here he was called Sukha Kala or Sukha Kaloo (Kala means black used as contempt). He was probably a dark skinned man and the name was given to remind him of his low status. He had a first name without any surname as at that time the Untouchables didn't merit a surname. While serving in the hospital, Sukha became ill with pneumonia and died on 12 January, 1915. Now the unthinkable happened. His Hindu, Sikh and Muslim compatriots refused to accept his body. As he was an Untouchable, he couldn't be buried in a Muslim graveyard and cremated in Hindu crematorium. His body was lying unclaimed in the hospital. "They had asked the Hindus to cremate him in Patcham near Brighton, but they refused to do it because he was of low caste. Then they asked the Muslims to bury him, but the imam of Woking Mosque said he was not a Muslim, so they couldn't bury him. Sukha was quite literally lying in no-man's land, rejected by his own countrymen," said historian Shrabani Basu, author of 'For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers in the Western Front 1914-

18. 4 On hearing about Sukha's unclaimed body, Arthur Chambers, the Vicar of St. Nicholas Church, Brockenhurst said that Sukha had sacrificed his life for the British and should be given a respectful burial. He arranged for him to be buried in his church. To pay him respect the headstone on the grave of Sukha was bought by donations from the residents of the village.

The inscription on the headstone says: "THIS STONE WAS ERECTED BY / PARISHIONERS OF BROCKENHURST / TO MARK THE SPOT WHERE IS LAID / THE EARTHLY BODY OF SUKHA / A RES-

membrance Day of Commonwealth contribution to the British Armed Forces on 'the 100th Anniversary of World War-1 coming to an end' at the National Memorial Arboretum, Burton on Trent, Staffordshire. Over 800 people including Lord Lieutenants, Peers from House of Lords, Members of Parliament, senior officers from British Army,

Royal Air Force, Royal Navy, Lord Mayors,

foreign dignitaries from Commonwealth countries, community leaders, and youth from schools, colleges, universities attended. In 2018, Bheema Koregaon caught World attention as there was an attack on Dalits celebrating 200 year anniversary of the victory of Mahar soldiers over Marathas. It was felt that soldiers died in the Bheema Koregaon should also be remembered. With the efforts of General Secretary of BOPA, Devinder Prasad (former General Secretary of CasteWatch UK), I had an opportunity to talk on Dalit contribution to British Army. It was the first time when this issue was raised on a public platform. In my short talk, I brought out the sacrifice of Sukha and his ill-treatment even after his death. I pointed out how East India Company extended its control over India by recruiting Dalits in the army as initially caste Hindus were not prepared to do menial work and join the armed forces. Dalit soldiers helped the company to win many battles including Bheema Koregaon. After 1857, British Army set up a number of regiments from Dalits. In Punjab, Ravidasi and Mazhabi Sikh regiments were commissioned in late nineteenth century and after WW2, it was converted into Sikh Light Infantry. Similarly Chamar and Mahar Regiments played a pivotal role in the war efforts but their contribution is totally ignored. Mayor of Litchfield

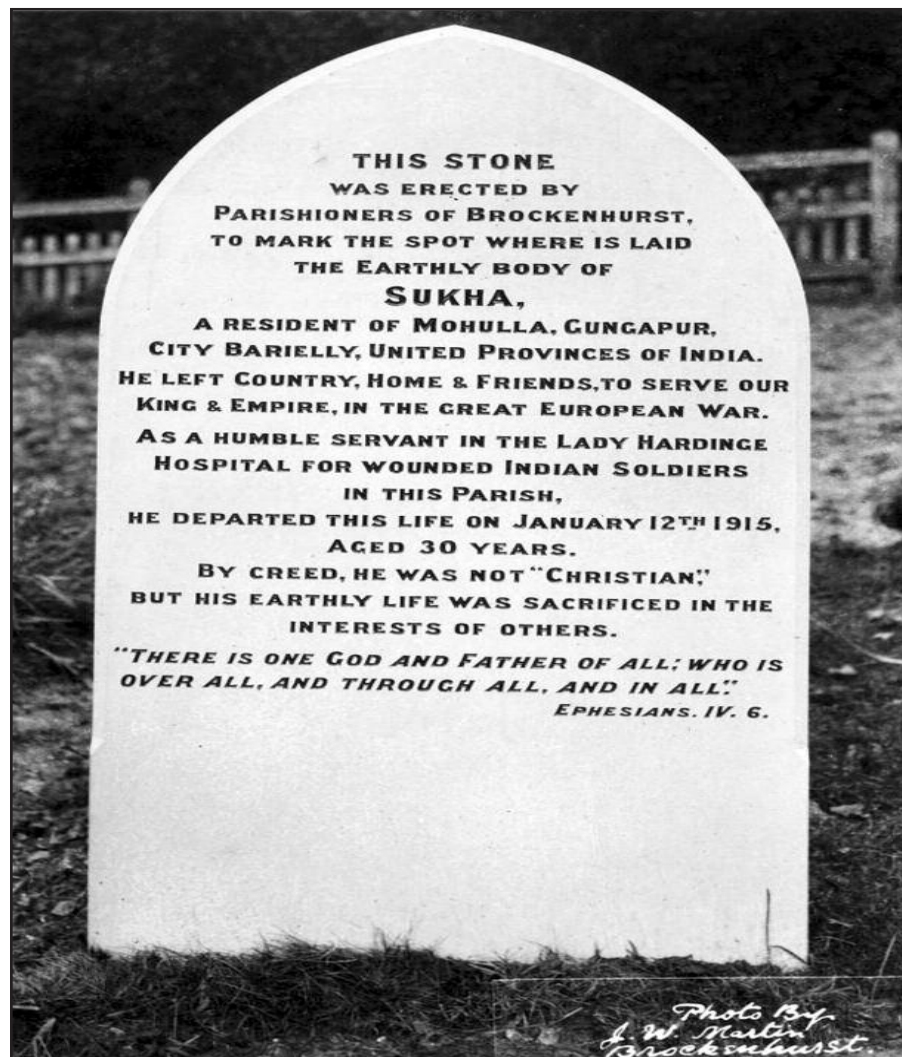
appreciated raising this issue and expressed his ignorance about the Dalit participation in the war efforts. Now it is time to recognise the sacrifices of Dalit soldiers in the war efforts. More research is needed on the Dalit's involvement in the armed forces and their sacrifices. Dalit contribution was not less than anyone else. Dalit organisations should also take responsibility and initiate a project to have a memorial honouring Dalit soldiers. A memorial in honour of Sikh soldiers has already been unveiled at National Memorial Arboretum with donations from Sikh community. If we are able to erect a pillar in memory of Dalit soldiers, it would be a great inspiration and a matter of pride for our coming generations.

Reference:

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4. *Indian Soldier: Moving tale of an Indian soldier buried in an English churchyard - Times of India (indiatimes.com)*



Arun Kumar
Bedford, UK)



IDENT OF MOHULLA, GUNGAPUR, / CITY BAREILLY, UNITED PROVINCES, INDIA / HE LEFT COUNTRY, HOME AND FRIENDS, TO SERVE OUR KING ; EMPIRE, IN THE GREAT EUROPEAN WAR, / AS A HUMBLE SERVANT IN THE LADY HARDING / HOSPITAL FOR WOUNDED SOLDIERS / IN THE PARISH, / HE DEPARTED THIS LIFE ON JANUARY 12 TH 1915 / AGED 30 YEARS. / BY CREED HE WAS NOT A CHRISTIAN / BUT HIS EARTHLY LIFE WAS SACRIFICED IN THE / INTERESTS OF OTHERS. / "THERE IS ONE GOD AND FATHER OF ALL AND THROUGH ALL AND IN ALL" / EPHESIANS IV.6

Had there was no headstone on Sukha's grave, his sacrifice and his name would have been erased from the pages of history as his other thousands of untouchable fellow soldiers who gave their lives in the same war. Thanks to the generous act of the vicar of Brockenhurst who gave him a decent burial and put a headstone in his memory.

A myth has been created that only Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims lost their lives in the war efforts and Dalits appear nowhere. Indian historians didn't consider worthy of mentioning the sacrifices of Dalit soldiers. Even in the war memorials, there is no mention of Dalit soldiers. Perhaps they were counted as Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims. Tributes are paid to those who laid down their lives but the sacrifices of Dalits are overlooked.

On 16 October, 2018, British Organisation for People of Asian Origin (BOPA) organised a Re-

UNPUBLISHED PREFACE THE BUDDHA AND HIS DHAMMA

Source Courtesy: Columbia University
www.columbia.edu

April 6, 1956

[Text provided by Eleanor Zelliot,
as prepared by Vasant Moon]

question is always asked to me: how I happen[ed] to take such [a] high degree of education. Another question is being asked: why I am inclined towards Buddhism. These questions are asked because I was born in a community known in India as the "Untouchables." This preface is not the place for answering the first question. But this preface may be the place for answering the second question.

The direct answer to this question is that I regard the Buddha's Dhamma to be the best. No religion can be compared to it. If a modern man who knows science must have a religion, the only religion he can have is the Religion of the Buddha. This conviction has grown in me after thirty-five years of close study of all religions.

How I was led to study Buddhism is another story. It may be interesting for the reader to know. This is how it happened.

My father was a military officer, but at the same time a very religious person. He brought me up under a strict discipline. From my early age I found certain contradictions in my father's religious way of life. He was a Kabirpanthi, though his father was Ramanandi. As such, he did not believe in Murti Puja (Idol Worship), and yet he performed Ganapati Puja--of course for our sake, but I did not like it. He read the books of his Panth. At the same time, he compelled me and my elder brother to read every day before going to bed a portion of [the] Mahabharata and Ramayana to my sisters and other persons who assembled at my father's house to hear the Katha. This went on for a long number of years.

The year I passed the English Fourth Standard Examination, my community people wanted to celebrate the occasion by holding a public meeting to congratulate me. Compared to the state of education in other communities, this was hardly an occasion for celebration. But it was felt by the organisers that I was the first boy in my community to reach this stage; they thought that I had reached a great height. They went to my father to ask for his permission. My father flatly refused, saying that such a thing would inflate the boy's head; after all, he has only passed an examination and done nothing more. Those who wanted to celebrate the event were greatly disappointed. They, however, did not give way. They went to Dada Keluskar, a

personal friend of my father, and asked him to intervene. He agreed. After a little argumentation, my father yielded, and the meeting was held. Dada Keluskar presided. He was a literary person of his time. At the end of his address he gave me as a gift a copy of his book on the life of the Buddha, which he had written for the Baroda Sayajirao Oriental Series. I read the book with great interest, and was greatly impressed and moved by it.

I began to ask why my father did not introduce us to the Buddhist lit-

erature. After this, I was determined to ask my father this question. One day I did. I asked my father why he insisted upon our reading the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which recounted the greatness of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas and repeated the stories of the degradation of the Shudras and the Untouchables. My father did not like the question. He

merely said, "You must not ask such silly questions. You are only boys; you must do as you are told." My father was a Roman Patriarch, and exercised most extensive Patria Pretestas over his children. I alone could take a little liberty with him, and that was because my mother had died in my childhood, leaving me to the care of my auntie.

So after some time, I asked again the same question. This time my father had evidently prepared himself for a reply. He said, "The reason why I ask you to read the Mahabharata and Ramayana is this: we belong to the Untouchables, and you are likely to develop an inferiority complex, which is natural. The value of [the] Mahabharata and Ramayana lies in removing this inferiority complex. See Drona and Karna--they were small men, but to what heights they rose! Look at Valmiki--he was a Koli, but he became the author of [the] Ramayana. It is for removing this inferiority complex that I

ask you to read the Mahabharata and Ramayana."

I could see that there was some force in my father's argument. But I was not satisfied. I told my father that I did not like any of the figures in [the] Mahabharata. I said, "I do not like Bhishma and Drona, nor Krishna. Bhishma and Drona were hypocrites. They said one thing and did quite the opposite. Krishna believed in fraud. His life is nothing but a series of frauds. Equal dislike I have for Rama. Examine his conduct in the Sarupnakha [=Shur-



p a n a k h a] episode [and] in the Vali S u g r i v a episode, and his beastly behaviour towards Sita." My father was silent, and made no reply. He knew that there was a revolt.

This is how I turned to the Buddha, with the help of the book given to me by Dada Keluskar. It was not with an empty mind that I went to the Buddha at that early age.

I had a background, and in reading the Buddhist Lore I could always compare and contrast. This is the origin of my interest in the Buddha and His Dhamma.

The urge to write this book has a different origin. In 1951 the Editor of the Mahabodhi Society's Journal of Calcutta asked me to write an article for the Vaishak Number. In that article I argued that the Buddha's Religion was the only religion which a society awakened by science could accept, and without which it would perish. I also pointed out that for the modern world Buddhism was the only religion which it must have to save itself. That Buddhism makes [a] slow advance is due to the fact that its literature is so vast that no one can read the whole of it. That it has no such thing as a bible, as the Christians have, is its greatest handicap. On the publication of this article, I received many calls, written and oral, to write such a book. It is in re-

sponse to these calls that I have undertaken the task.

To disarm all criticism I would like to make it clear that I claim no originality for the book. It is a compilation and assembly plant. The material has been gathered from various books. I would particularly like to mention Ashvaghosha's Buddhavita [=Buddhacharita], whose poetry no one can excel. In the narrative of certain events I have even borrowed his language.

The only originality that I can claim in [=is] the order of presentation of the topics, in which I have tried to introduce simplicity and clarity. There are certain matters which give headache[s] to the student of Buddhism. I have dealt with them in the Introduction.

It remains for me to express my gratitude to those who have been helpful to me. I am very grateful to Mr. Nanak Chand Rattua of Village Sakrulli and Mr. Parkash Chand of Village Nangal Khurd in the district of Hoshiarpur (Punjab) for the burden they have taken upon themselves to type out the manuscript. They have done it several times. Shri Nanak Chand Rattu took special pains and put in very hard labour in accomplishing this great task. He did the whole work of typing etc. very willingly and without caring for his health and [=or] any sort of remuneration. Both Mr. Nanak Chand Rattu and Mr. Parkash Chand did their job as a token of their greatest love and affection towards me. Their labours can hardly be repaid. I am very much grateful to them.

When I took up the task of composing the book I was ill, and [I] am still ill. During these five years there were many ups and downs in my health. At some stages my condition had become so critical that doctors talked of me as a dying flame. The successful rekindling of this dying flame is due to the medical skill of my wife and Dr. Malvankar.

They alone have helped me to complete the work. I am also thankful to Mr. M. B. Chitnis, who took [a] special interest in correcting [the] proof and to go [=in going] through the whole book.

I may mention that this is one of the three books which will form a set for the proper understanding of Buddhism. The other books are: (i) Buddha and Karl Marx; and (ii) Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India. They are written out in parts. I hope to publish them soon.

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Goodie Takhar, PhD

What Dr. Ambedkar had done for the Backward Castes?

Dr. Ambedkar is often recognized as the saviour of Dalits, while he fought for the rights of all downtrodden classes, Dalits and Backwards. But because of the Varna system, the backward castes that are Shudras consider themselves higher on the social ladder than the untouchables (Dalits). According to one definition, backward castes are Shudras, and Dalit castes are extreme Shudras. The only difference is that backward castes are considered touchable and Dalit castes are considered untouchable. It is also a

historical fact that due to being touchable, the backward castes have been exploited more than the untouchables in some areas. It is also worth mentioning that the backward castes have been caught in the clutches of fanatical Hinduism while Dalits have been continuously rebelling against Hinduism. Due to the illusion of social superiority, the backward castes have been considering Dr. Ambedkar as the leader of the Dalits instead of their own leader. This is also because most of the backward castes have been under the influence of upper caste Hindus and they have been constantly misled about Dr. Ambedkar so that they do not establish unity with the Dalits by being influenced by the ideology of Dr. Ambedkar and do not create a big challenge for upper castes. Dalit and backward leaders are also responsible to a great extent for this distance between the Backward and the Dalits, who have been baking their bread by doing caste politics.

Now, if seen from the historical perspective, where Dr. Ambedkar struggled throughout his life for the rights of the downtrodden castes, he also fought continuously for the rights of the backward castes. This fact is confirmed by the following facts: -

1. Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaikwad of Baroda, who belonged to a backward caste, had a great contribution in Dr. Ambedkar's higher education and he had given him a scholarship to study in America.
2. Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj was the second backward caste person who helped and contributed to Dr. Ambedkar.
3. Dr. Ambedkar had very good relations with Ramaswamy Naicker, who was the leader of the non-Brahmin movement in South India.
4. Dr. Ambedkar was greatly influenced by the social ideology of backward caste social reformer Jyoti Rao Phule.
5. Dr. Ambedkar supported the movement for the equality of Ezhavas, a backward caste, in Travancore (Kerala).
6. It was Dr. Ambedkar who advocated reservation in government jobs for backward castes in the future constitution of India before the Simon Commission in 1928.
7. Dr. Ambedkar, as the President of

the Constituent Assembly, had included the word "backward" in Article 15 (4) of the Constitution regarding reservation in government jobs, which later became a base for reservation for socially and educationally backward castes.

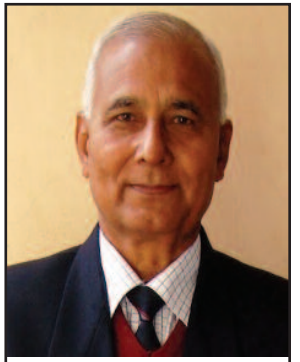
8. With the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar, a provision was made in Article 340 of the Constitution to establish a commission to identify backward castes.

9. The political party that Dr. Ambedkar formed in 1942 was named Scheduled Castes Federation, it was

backward classes. He reiterated the point of neglecting the interests of the backward classes in a big public meeting at Nare Park in Bombay.

12. Due to the pressure created by Dr. Ambedkar on the issue of backward castes, the Nehru government had to appoint the first Backward Classes Commission in 1951 under the chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar. It is a different matter that the government did not accept the recommendations of this commission; rather the chairman of the commission was forced to give an

and consulting the constitution of the Republican Party: "From this point of view, this rally of Patna was historic because in this the foundation of unity of Dalits and OBCs was



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Dr. Ambedkar at Patna Meeting

mentioned in the policy that the party would give priority to the alliance with the parties representing the backward castes and tribes and if necessary, the party would Will change its name to "Backward Classes Federation" to represent the backward classes. Therefore, the party had also made an electoral alliance with the Socialist Party at that time.

10. In 1951, when Dr. Ambedkar resigned from the post of Law Minister regarding the Hindu Code Bill, he said, "I would like to refer to another matter which is the reason for my dissatisfaction with this government. It is about the treatment of backward castes and scheduled castes by this government. I am sad that there is no protection for backward castes in the Constitution. It has been left to the government order based on the recommendations of the commission to be appointed by the President. It has been more than a year since we passed the constitution but the government has not even thought of appointing the commission." From this you can guess how concerned Dr. Ambedkar was about the welfare of the backward classes.

11. Addressing the students of Lucknow University after resigning from the post of Law Minister, Dr. Ambedkar warned about the neglect of the backward castes and said, "If they despair in their efforts to achieve a status of equality "Scheduled Castes Federation" will give preference to the communist system and the fate of the country will sink. It can also be estimated from this how much Dr. Ambedkar was trying for the benefit of the

opinion contrary to the recommendations of the commission for caste basis of reservation.

13. Dr. Chhedi Lal Sathi, who was the President of the Republican Party of India, Uttar Pradesh in the seventies, told me that Babasaheb was very disappointed after resigning from the ministerial post in 1951. At that time backward class leaders Ramlakhan-Chandapuri, S.D.Singh Chaurasia and others told him not to panic, we are all with you. For this purpose, they organized a rally of backward classes in Patna, in which a huge crowd gathered. Babasaheb was very impressed by this and again became active in the politics of Dalits and Backwards.

14. In this regard, Dr. Chhedi Lal Sathi has written in his book "Situation of Dalits and Backward Castes", on page 113 that "After coming back from Patna, Babasaheb dissolved the Scheduled Castes Federation of India in consultation with his colleagues. After losing the elections twice in 1952 and 1954, Babasaheb realized that the Scheduled Castes were only 20% of the population and so long as they did not have the support of 52% backward classes, he decided to form the Republican Party of India in its place. If he does not get it, he will not be able to win the election. Therefore; Babasaheb, in consultation with backward class leaders, especially Shivdayal Singh Chaurasia, etc., decided to include 52% backward class people and 12% population of Muslims, Christians and Sikhs in the Republican Party of India apart from 20% Dalit class. More than a year was spent in drafting

laid. Babasaheb announced the dissolution of the Scheduled Castes Federation of India on October 15, 1956, in Nagpur and the establishment of the Republican Party of India in its place. From 1957 to 1967, based on the unity of these classes, the Republican Party of India emerged as a major political force, but later the Congress, for which this party became the biggest threat, took advantage of the weaknesses of the Dalit leaders. Bought them and this party got divided into many pieces. A party like the BSP that emerged later also destroyed this alliance.

15. In the last years of his life, Babasaheb also established contact with the leader of backward classes, Ram Manohar Lohia, etc. to establish the unity of Dalits and Backwards and there was correspondence between them. But unfortunately, Babasaheb died soon and that alliance could not be formed.

It is clear from the above description that Dr. Ambedkar not only fought for the interests of the Dalits but also for the interests of the backward classes throughout his life. It was due to his efforts that provision for reservation in government jobs for backward classes was made in the Constitution and due to the pressure created by him, the first Backward Classes Commission was constituted. Later the Mandal Commission was formed and the backward classes got reservations in government jobs and education, for which the backward classes should be indebted to Babasaheb. Therefore, the backward class should accept Babasaheb's contribution to their upliftment. There is a need to restore the unity of these classes in the context of the new challenges of the present.

is also true that there are some class contradictions between Dalits and OBCs and their unity cannot be established without resolving them. It is well known that Dalits, extremely backward (Hindus, Christians, and Muslims) are natural allies. This equation can be based on common issues and not on caste alone, which can face majority Arianism and Hindutva politics in the country.

Gurdas Ram Alam's 'Achhoot Da Ilaaj'—A Translation

Gurdas Ram Alam, a prominent Dalit Punjabi poet, was known for his forthright and straightforward demeanor, as he once encapsulated with the expression, "*Sachkehen di meriaadathai, Mainvalpake gal kahendanahin*" (I don't beat around the bush, I speak the truth). Born in 1912 to ShriUmra Ram and Mata Jeoni Devi in Jalandhar district, Punjab, Alam emerged as one of the pioneering Punjabi Dalit poets. His poems, characterized by simplicity, resonate with profound significance, addressing the struggles of the downtrodden that remain pertinent even today.

Alam's early years were marked by laborious toil, earning meager wages until serendipity led him to Quetta (now in Pakistan). It was there, at a local KaviDarbar, that his recitation talents captivated organizers. One thing led to another, and he was eventually taken in by the Chief KhalsaDiwan at a monthly salary of 15 rupees, along with provisions for food and accommodation, and as Alam distinctly remembers, even his cigarettes. His association with the organization, however, couldn't survive for very long. The organizational requirement mandated Alam to compose a weekly poem, focusing on themes such as Sikhism or education. During this period, there was a concerted effort to persuade Dalits and Adivasis to undergo the Amrit ceremony, and adopt the Sikh faith. The Dalit community, historically marginalized and oppressed, often became easy targets for salvation narratives. Alam personally witnessed one such event in the village of Nangal, where Adivasis were being made to undergo the Amrit ceremony. This encounter served as a pivotal moment of deep personal reflection for him.

But the definitive moment that led to the separation was when he sent out his weekly poem for publication and it was rejected citing its anti-Sikh sentiment. This poem was 'Achhoot da Ilaaj.' Despite the fact that Alam was on the organization's payroll, he did not waver in calling out religious groups and political interests with intentions of dividing Dalits and Adivasis for their opportunistic gains. This is the reason why he was such a believer and supporter of the Ad Dharm movement. The movement led by BabuMangu Ram Mugowaliawas fiercer than other reformist and revivalist efforts of the time. The movement aimed to establish a distinct collective Dalit identity—a socio-politico-religious community, with a Dalit agenda notably divergent and appropriately articulated by Professor Ronki Ram as 'beyond conversion and sanskritisation.'

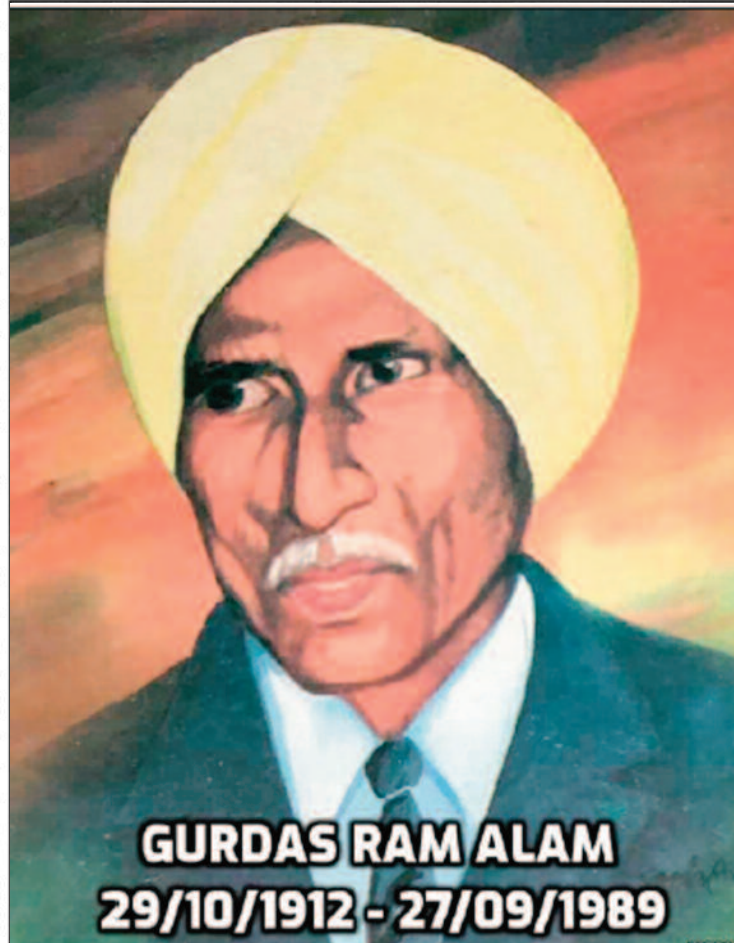
The poem 'Achhoot da Ilaaj' poem represents the crystallization of a sentiment that had been brewing within Alam for an extended duration before finding expression. This sentiment had been subtly articulated in fragments across various articles in the Jantak Lehar (see *Sohan Sehjal's MeraJeewan Pandh:Gurdas Ram Alam*). Within the corpus of his writings, the poet delineates instances of this theme, drawing from his experiences at a Valmiki school where he was acquiring proficiency in Gurumukhi. Notably, he narrates the evolution of his instructor's identity, progressing from Sheehu to Master Sheehu Ram, subsequently transforming into Master Shiv Ram, and ultimately adopting the appellation Swami Shivanand. The latter persona actively advocated the adoption of the sacred thread (janeu), while concurrently proscribing the consumption of alcohol and non-vegetarian fare. Alam's wry recollection of this transformative journey serves as a poignant reflection of his sentiments of perplexity and incredulity in response to these unfolding developments.

It is imperative to emphasize that the essence of this poem does not lie in the condemnation of diverse faiths; rather, its principal objective is to underscore the perpetual oscillation experienced by a Dalit individual amidst the turbulence of successive transitions and conversions. The poem seeks to elucidate the inefficacy and futility inherent in such endeavors, offering a critical commentary on the challenges and complexities entailed in navigating the socioreligious landscape. Alam contends that

authentic strength emerges from recognizing the political potency inherent in unity, and advocates for organized collective action along these lines.

Achhoot da ilaaj (An Untouchable's Cure) Achhoot (Untouchable)

Doctor, I implore you, show resilience in this endeavor,
For I've wrestled with my plight these many years,
and never found reprieve.
The haunting specter of untouchability, it clings relentlessly,
Though I've bathed in the Ganges' sacred stream,
so many times you wouldn't believe.
I've sought counsel from Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, of every creed,
Heeding their advice, I followed each prescription,



with unwavering belief.
Yet, I lost my hovel and hearth,
and untouchability clung to me indeed,
Even as I adhered to religious rites,
and underwent Baptism's cleansing relief.

Pandit (Hindu Priest)

A Brahmin then arose and expressed,
"As a Hindu, refrain from shearing your sacred tuft,
Untouchability, an age-old companion,
Shall dissipate; despair not, persevere.
Abstain from flesh and spirits; wear garments unsullied,
Adhere to your heritage; eschew the offerings of a Muslim.
We are all Hindus; you too, kin,
In due course, you shall be embraced."
After bestowing upon you the five sacred elements,
Milk, curd, butter, dung, and urine, gifts from the hal-
lowed cow,
You shall be integrated as one of our own."

Maulvi (Cleric)

Maulvi, checking my pulse, straightforward he spoke,
"To erase untouchability, a remedy bespoke.
Thirty days sans food, prayer five times each day,
no restrictions, save for the consumption of pork"
In Prophet Mohammad's name, assurance he bestowed,
All would be well, the burden lightened, untouchability cured, he vowed.
All Muslims, he pledged, would break bread with me,
"Wells and hotels accessible, barriers set free.
Respect from all, just utter 'Salam Alaikum,' and

Alexander himself shall refresh your hookah."

Bhai (Sikh preacher)

The Sikh proclaimed, "I know and comprehend all,
No malady can elude my discerning eye.
Barbers, Watermen, Carpenters, Ironsmiths, and Tailors,
Have all sought remedy within my healing ways.
Are you not acquainted with Sangat Singh and Jeevan Singh?
All your brethren found solace through me.
A mere sip of Amrit,

Shall dispel the malevolent specter of untouchability.
Embrace the five distinctive symbols of Sikhism, the Kakkar,
They shall stand as sentinels, shielding you from dishonor.
The populace shall respectfully address you as 'Sardarji,'
The very moment they see you adorned with the sacred beard and hair."

Padri (Christian Priest)

The Padri, inquisitive, requested scrutiny of my eyes,
Contending, "To eradicate the untouchability curse, be wise.
Embrace what has journeyed from England's distant shore,
Opt for Christianity, if heavenly realms you implore.
Adhere to the Ten Commandments of Jesus Christ,
A simple doctrine, devoid of additional tryst.
No prohibitions dictate, consume at your behest,
All Hindostaanis—Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims—treat you as a slave.
Simply don a black hat, and witness the chorus of 'Salaam Sahib.'"

Congressman

"Embrace Congress," spoke then, a follower of Gandhi to me,
"Break free from divisive faiths, they deceive cunningly.
Clerics and scholars, entangled in their debates,
Are making the nation a slave to their fates.
Claiming God resides in twenty different spaces,
They weave illusions, entwining you in deceptive embraces.
Trapped themselves like partridges, they ensnare with wordy art,
Should the Communists dissent, we'll command from Delhi's gate,
Fees' forgiven, incentives galore, reserved seats await,
Breaking the chains of disparity,
A pledge to eradicate untouchability with collective clarity."

Shāyar (Kavi/Poet):

"Listen, O my untouchable comrade, to these clandestine lines,
Three virtues—Strength, Unity, Education, life defines.
Worry not if these companions accompany your stride,
Religious dictums enforced, untouchability stems from internal divide.
You, a human, akin to others in essence,
Issues arise from the selfish few, not divine presence.
Men like you, deceived for ages, worship veiled,
By varied houses of faith, their authenticity assailed."
Poet Alam asserts, ages have passed, men misled by diverse beliefs,
in the name of varied worship, a timeless web of deceptions.



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The Valmikiya Ramayana – Bird's Eye View

The social media is abuzz with large number of stories about one of the most popular Hindu deities Lord Rama these days. A much talked about video relating to an episode of killing of Shambooka – the Shudra by God Rama is viral on the social media. Shambooka was killed for his alleged sin of performing hard Tapasya (austerities) to achieve godhood as it was transgression of assigned role of the Shudra Varna in the Hindu Social Order. Only the twice-born (High Castes) people had the privilege of undertaking such austerities. The video is the filmised version of the episode 'Shambooka Vadha' (Murder of Shambooka) contained in the Valmikiya Ramayana.

The Valmikiya Ramayana says that after the episode of defeat of Ravana, said to be the ten headed Rakshasa (demon) king of Lanka and retrieval of wife Sita from his custody, God Rama, the king of Ayodhya returned to the kingdom on completion of his exile term. Rama was a nominal King as the administration was entrusted by him to his brother Bharata. He had freed himself from the cares and worries of his kingdom and his subjects. He spent most of the time in merry making in the company of women and jesters. He never observed the ancient rule of Indian kings of hearing the wrongs of his subjects and attempting to redress them. Only one occasion has been recorded in the text when Rama personally heard the grievance of his subjects. The incident is known as the 'Shambooka Vadha' – murder of Shambooka. Valmiki says that in Rama's reign there were no premature deaths in his kingdom. It happened, however, that a certain Brahmin's son died in a premature death. The bereaved father carried his body to the king's palace. Placing the body at the gate, he cried aloud and bitterly and reproached Rama for the death of his son saying that it must be the consequence of some sin committed within his realm, and that the king himself was guilty if he did not punish the sinner. He finally threatened to end his life there by sitting on dharna (hunger-strike) against Rama unless his son was restored to life. Rama thereupon consulted his council of eight learned Rishis led by Vasishtha. Narada amongst them told Rama that some Shudra among his subjects must have been performing Tapasya (austerities), and thereby going against the Chaturvarnya Dharma (four varna system), for such austerities could be performed by the twice-born alone, while the duty of the Shudras was to only serve the twice born. Rama was thus convinced that it was the sin committed by a Shudra in transgressing Dharma in that manner which was responsible for the death of the Brahmin boy. So, Rama mounted his Pushpak Vimana (aeroplane) and scoured the countryside for the culprit. At last, in a wild region far away to the South he espied a man practicing rigorous austerities by hanging himself upside down. Rama introduced himself to the man and

enquired of him of his caste and the purpose of such hard austerities. The man informed him that he was a Shudra by the name of Shambooka practicing austerities with the aim of going to heaven in his own earthly person to achieve godhood. Hearing the word 'Shudra' Rama instantly took sparkling sword out of its sheath and beheaded Shambooka. Lo and behold! That very moment the dead Brahmin boy in distant Ayodhya began to breathe again. The Gods rained flowers on the king from their joy at his having prevented a Shudra from gaining admission to their celestial abode through the power of Tapasya which he had no right to per-



form. The gods also appeared before Rama and congratulated him on his deed. Rama thence proceeded to the nearby Ashrama of the sage Agastya, who commended his feat, and presented him with a divine bracelet. Rama then returned to his capital (Valmikiya Ramayana, Geeta Press Gorakhpur, 16th edition, Uttarkanda, Sargas 73-76 and 82 and Writings and Speeches of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar (BAWS) Vol. 4, pp. 331, 332).

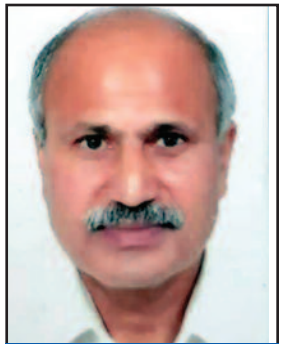
The Valmikiya Ramayana is an eye opener for everyone if it is read dispassionately with open mind. Valmiki starts his Ramayana by emphasizing the fact that Rama was an Avatara - incarnation of Hindu god Vishnu. It was on the prayer of all gods to Vishnu to save them from the mighty Ravana – the demon king of Lanka and great grandson of Lord Brahma, who along with other demons was torturing them day and night, and who was given a boon by Lord Brahma that he would not be killed by gods etc. Ravana had two brothers name Vibheeshana and Kumbhakarna and a sister named Shoorpanakha. Lord Vishnu decided to take birth as son of Dashratha, the king of Ayodhya for the purpose of killing Ravana and destroying his clan, and serving the mortal world for 11000 years. Dasharatha, who had

three wives, Kaushalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra besides several hundred concubines, ruled the kingdom for over 60,000 years, but was childless for a long time. He performed a Yajna – sacrifice under the supervision of Rishi Shringa (one-horned sage) at the fag end of his reign to beget a son. When the Yajna was underway, a lustrous dark complexioned and red faced giant person dressed in red with long and soft hair and bedecked with divine ornaments appeared from the Agnikunda - Yajna fire pit with a gold salver filled with Pinda or divine kheer (sweet delicacy made of rice cooked in milk). He told the king that his queens would conceive and deliver

sons after eating the divine kheer. He disappeared in the fire after delivering the delicacy. Accordingly, Dashratha gave half of the kheer to Queen Kaushalya, half of the remaining portion to Sumitra and remaining portion to Kaikeyee and Sumitra (Sumitra is said to be the concubine not queen of the king in some other texts of Ramayana). On eating the divine kheer, all the three ladies conceived. Kaushalya gave birth to Rama, Kaikeyee to Bharata and Sumitra to Lakshmana and Shatrughana in due course of time. Brahma asked the gods to create powerful associates of Rama, Avatar of Vishnu for the success of his mission. The gods agreed to carry out the command and engaged themselves in wholesale acts of fornication not only against Apsaras who were prostitutes, unmarried daughters of Yakshas and Nagas but also against the lawfully wedded wives of Vidhyadharas, Gandharvas, Kinnars, Vanaras and bears, and produced vanaras, bears and chimpanzees etc. as associates of Rama who were equal in valor to their father gods. Brahma himself produced bear Jambvana, Indra produced vanara (monkey) Vaali, Surya vanara Sugriva, Brahaspati vanara Tara, Kubera vanara Gandhmadan, Vishwakarma vanara Nala, Agni vanara Nila, Ashwani Kumaras vanara maind and Dwivida, Varuna vanara Sushena and Pawana vanara Hanumana. They were extremely giant and powerful like elephants and mountains. They could fly high in the sky, catch the clouds and cross over the ocean. This is how Rama, his brothers and associates took birth (Valmikiya Ramayana, Balaanda, Sarga 8-18, 20, p. 74 and BAWS, Vol. 4, pp. 324, 325).

In due course, all the four sons of Dashratha and Avatars of Vishnu were married at the same time in the family of Janaka, the king of Mithila. Rama, the eldest of the three brothers was married to Sita.

Valmiki says when King Janaka was ploughing the land in preparation for a Yajna, he found a female baby covered with soil in the furrow. That baby was brought up by him as a daughter, and having been



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found from the furrow was named Sita (the trench dug with plough) (Baalkanda, Sarga 66 and Ayodhyaanda, Sarga 118). Rama was about 13 years and Sita about 5 or 6 at the age of marriage (Baalkanda, Sarga 20, Aranyakaanda, Sarga 38, 47). When Rama came of age, Dasharatha thought of resigning the throne in his favour and retiring from kingship. While this was being settled, Kaikeyi raised the issue of fulfilment of a vow by the king which he had promised long time back to satisfy her any two demands when she wished. She demanded that her son Bharata should be installed on the throne in preference to Rama and Rama should live in forest for 14 years. Dasharatha agreed with great reluctance, and he died soon after. Accompanied by his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana, Rama went to live in the forest. In the forest, Shoorpanakha, the sister of Ravana, proposed to Rama. He asked her to approach Lakshmana saying that he was already married (Lakshmana was also already married). Lakshmana cut her nose and ears at the behest of Rama. In order to take revenge, Ravana the king of Lanka, decided to abduct Sita intending to make her one of his wives. Disguised as a sage, he went to Rama's abode. He was welcomed as a guest and hosted by Sita. She offered him a seat, worshipped him as a Brahmin guest and served food. She also urged him to wait till Rama and Lakshmana returned from the hunting expedition with variety of fruits and meat of ruru (black buck), goha (big lizard) and varaha (pig) etc. for appropriate hospitality worthy of sages. Disclosing his true identity to Sita, Ravana revealed his intension and abducted her (Aranyakaanda, Sarga 17-19, 31-36, 45-49). He kept her in the Ashok Vatika under the care of maids and asked her to make up her mind about his proposal. Rama and Lakshmana then started search for Sita. They came across Sugriva and Hanumana, two leading personages of the Vanara (monkey) race and formed friendship with them. With their help Sita was located and rescued after defeating Ravana in a big battle in Lanka. Rama's army comprised of trillions and trillions (asankhya or numbers beyond human counting) of monkeys, bears and chimpanzees/gorillas under their various mighty

(Contd. on next page)

The Valmikiya Ramayana – Bird's Eye View

(Continue from page 6)

leaders. The population of Rakshasas (Demons) of Ravana's Lanka ran into more than 10 kharabs or a trillion (Kishkindha kaand, sarga 35-39). Ravana's brother Vibheeshana switched over loyalty and Rama happily accepted him in his camp. Ravana was killed in a fierce battle causing floods of bloodshed on both the sides.

Rama arranged his last rites and attended the coronation of Vibheeshana before meeting Sita. Rama suspected Sita's character and refused to accept her back, and asked her to go anywhere. He declared that he had fought with Ravana for his honor and not to rescue her. He ultimately ordered her to pass through the fire to prove her purity and chastity. She came out unscathed from the fire but called Rama low and mean, and told him quite plainly that she would have committed suicide and saved him all this trouble had he conveyed the message through Hanumana when he first came that he had abandoned her on the ground that she was kidnapped (Yuddhakaanda, sarga 115, 116). By that time fourteen years had elapsed and they returned to Ayodhya. Rama became the king of Ayodhya and ruled for 11000 years (Yuddhakaanda, sarga, 128.95 and Uttarakaanda, sarga 104.12).

After coronation, the royal couple moved to royal pleasure resort named Ashokvanika. Rama spent half of his day in performing religious rites and duties, and the other half in the harem in the company of females and court jesters. His food, according to Valmiki, consisted of all kinds of delicious viands which included flesh, fruits and liquor. He drank himself copiously and made Sita also drink madhu (liquor or wine) the way Indra used to make his wife Shachi drink sudha or madhu. There were Apsaras, Naga girls and kinnaris to entertain the king Rama with their dancing and singing skills. There were other beautiful women brought from different parts to entertain Rama with their dance performance under the influence of intoxicating drinks. Rama sat in the midst of those drinking and dancing women and garlanded them being pleased with their performance. Sita conceived in the process (Uttarakaanda, Sarga 42, 43 and BAWS, Vol.4, pp. 327, 331). Seeing Sita in the family way some residents of evil disposition began to calumniate her suggesting that she must have conceived from Ravana while she was in Lanka and blaming Rama for taking such a woman back as his wife. This malicious gossip in the town was reported by Bhadra, the Court joker of Rama. Stung by this calumny and overwhelmed with a sense of disgrace, Rama ordered Laxmana to abandon Sita in the jungle without friends, without provision, without even her notice but with the knowledge of his brothers. When Lakshmana abandoned her in the jungle to die at the behest of Rama, Sita was shell shocked to learn that she was punished for none of her faults (Ut-

tarakaand, Sarga 43-48).

Having been abandoned and left to die in a jungle, Sita goes for shelter in the nearby Ashrama (hermitage) of sage Valmiki. The sage provides shelter and protection to her. There in course of time Sita gives birth to twin sons, called Kusha and Lava. Valmiki brings up the boys and teaches them to sing the Ramayana which he had composed. The boys lived in the Ashrama of Valmiki not far from Ayodhya where Rama continued to rule. Never once during those 12 years Rama cared to inquire what had happened to Sita whether she was living or was dead. After twelve years Rama meets Sita in a strange manner. He decides to perform a Yajna and issues invitation to all the Rishis to attend and take part in the Yajna. But no invitation is extended to Valmiki although his Ashrama was near to Ayodhya. Accompanied by Kusha and Lava, Valmiki goes to the Yajna place of his own accord and introduces the twins as his disciples.

While the Yajna was going on, the two boys performed recitations of Ramayana in the presence of the Assembly. Rama was very pleased with their performance. It is only when he makes enquiries about them that he comes to know that they were sons of Sita and that what he had done to her. He sends a message to Valmiki that if Sita was pure and chaste she could present herself in the Assembly to prove it thereby remove the calumny cast against herself and himself. Valmiki brings her to the Assembly of all the prominent gods, vasus, sages and people of all varnas, extremely powerful demons and vanaras, serpents and eagles etc. who came from far off places. Valmiki declares there that being 10th son of Pracheta (Varuna) he never tells lies, and that Sita was chaste and worshipped her husband as a God, and Kusha and Lava were Sita's twin sons. Notwithstanding Valmiki's testimony, Rama asks Sita to prove her chastity in the public so as to dispel all doubts about her character. With eyes cast down on the ground and with hands folded Sita swears "As I never thought of any man except Rama even in my mind; I always loved Rama in words, thoughts and deeds, let mother earth open and bury me".

Instantly a divine-jewel studded divine throne resting on the hoods of serpents appears from the earth and carries Sita to the nether world of death. Thus, she preferred to die than to go back to Rama. This way the life journey of about forty four years of Sita comes to a tragic end. Such is the tragedy of Sita and the crime of Rama the God. (Uttarakaanda, sarga 49, 66, 93-97 and BAWS, Vol. 4, pp.330, 331)

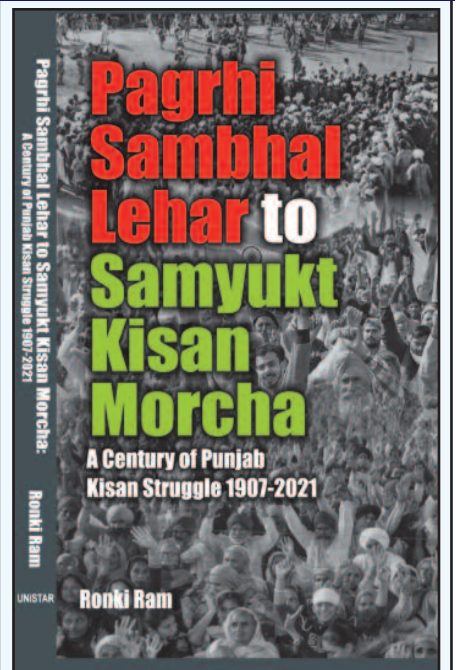
After the death of Sita, Rama lived with his sons. He did not remarry. He would use Sita's image made of gold in a Yajna where wife was required to be present. Rama performed Yajnas for ten thousand years and gave countless gold mudras – coins in Dakshina (gift or fee) to Brah-

mins. His mothers Kaushalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra left the mortal world long time thereafter (Uttarakaanda, sarga, 99).

The story of end of Rama and his brothers is dramatically tragic. It has been lucidly narrated by Valmiki in Uttarakaanda from sarga 103 to 110. The story goes that the death-god approaches Rama for a dialogue on the condition that if anyone heard or saw them talk he/she would be liable to be killed by Rama. Rama places Lakshmana at the entrance gate with strict instructions not to allow anyone to hear or see them talk and that if some happened to violate the condition he/she would be killed by him. The death-god conveys the message of Lord Brahma that Rama, incarnation of Lord Vishnu, had fixed the period of 11,000 human years to live in the mortal world and that period had since elapsed and the purpose of his mortal life accomplished. He, therefore, should leave the mortal world and assume his original form if he wished. In the meantime, sage Durvasa comes to see Rama urgently and declares to Lakshmana at the gate that if he was not allowed to see Rama instantly, he would destroy Rama's entire family by his curse. Lakshmana prefers to save the family and conveys the message of the sage to Rama while he was still in conversation with the death-god. The condition of dialogue having been broken by Lakshmana, the death god leaves Rama. After consulting his ministers and advisers, instead of killing Lakshmana, Rama disowns him which was equal to his death. Lakshmana goes to the bank of river Saryu, holds his breath and stops breathing. Rama conveys to his two brothers and other family members his wish to leave the mortal world. They coronate their sons (all the four brothers had two sons each) and join Rama to leave the mortal world. All the people of Ayodhya, vanaras, bears, demons and birds also join Rama in his pursuit. Hanumana, Vibheeshana, Jambvana, Mainda and Dwivida are ordered by Rama to stay back till the onset of Kaliyuga. Rama along with his brothers, people of Ayodhya, vanaras, bears, chimpanzees, demons and birds who were produced by various gods and sages, immerse themselves in the waters of Saryu and leave the mortal world. The God Rama, thus, dies along with his brothers, people of Ayodhya and vanaras etc. They all board crores of the divine airplanes provided by Brahma, and take flight to the heavens. Thus concludes the great epic Ramayana! The readers may draw their own conclusions.

It is just a bird's eye view of the epic which comprises of 24,000 hymns with large number of episodes. The curious may like to read the Valmikiya Ramayana themselves to have complete picture of the epic story. Many questions may arise in the mind of readers about the story, which call for an answer. Such questions will be shared soon with the readers who may find the answer themselves.

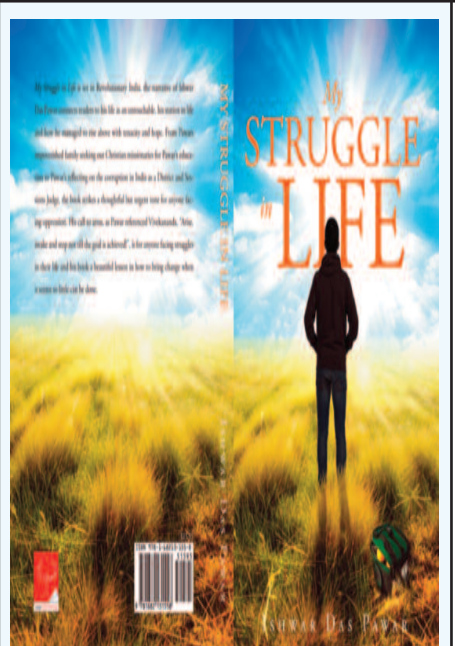
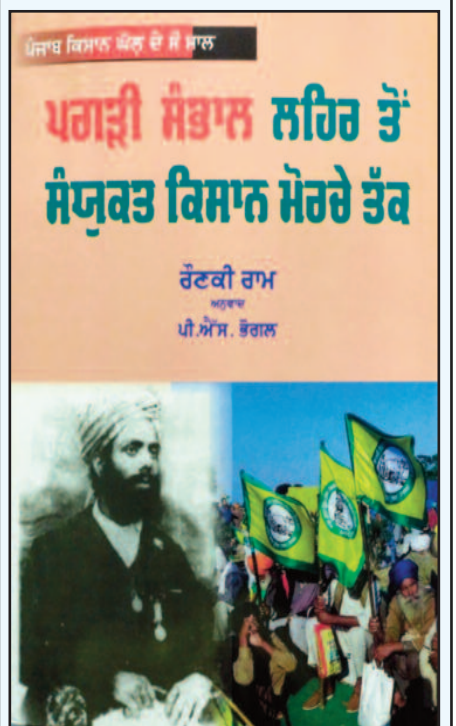
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My Struggle in Life:

Das Pawar, Ishwar: 9781682131558:

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Health is a human right, Abortion is essential health care and women's health must be prioritized

Access to the highest attainable standard of health, including sexual and reproductive health is a core human right. The ability to decide if and when to have children and access to safe, timely, affordable, respectful and person-centered abortion care, including information and post-abortion care, helps to safeguard the health and well-being of women, girls, their families and their communities. Health is a human right, Abortion is essential health care and women's health must be prioritized. Promoting and protecting access to quality abortion care is essential to achieve a World where everyone is able to access the highest standards of sexual and reproductive health services and reach their full potential. The current non-enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health rights by women and girls is a significant challenge to gender equality and reveals deep inequities. These are amplified in times of socio-economic, political, and environmental crisis which are characterized by breakdowns in health systems, lack of information and increased risks of unintended pregnancy often resulting in cases of unsafe abortion and forced continuation of pregnancy. Unsafe abortion was defined by the World Health Organization as "a procedure to terminate a pregnancy performed by a person who does not have adequate training or at least in an environment that meets medical standards" although abortion technology is now safe has been replaced by a three-tiered classification of safe, less safe and less safe that allows for the description of the different conditions that make up unsafe abortion and the increasingly broad alternative to unsafe. Safe abortion is provided by health care workers and in methods recommended by the World Health Organization. A less-safe abortion is performed by trained providers using non-recommended methods or using a safe method but without adequate information or assistance from a trained person. A less-safe abortion is performed by a trained provider using dangerous, invasive methods. September 28 is celebrated as International Safe Abortion Day. It is the global day of action to demand access to safe and legal abortion care everywhere and for all women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals. Abortion care is critical to reproductive autonomy, economic equality and our right to determine our own lives. Criminalizing abortion does not eliminate the need for abortion care. It instead drives many people to seek unsafe abortions. Worldwide more than 39,000 women die each year from unsafe abortions and millions more experience health complications. The World has been experiencing promising developments in 21st century but also there are important setbacks affecting the right to sexual and reproductive health of women, including on the right to a safe abortion. Human rights law stipulates that women must be free to decide when to be pregnant, how many children to have, and how to space subsequent

pregnancies. It is crucial to ensure that all women and girls in all their diversity and without any discrimination have adequate access to safe, effective, affordable, and acceptable methods of contraception of their choice such as emergency contraception as well as any other method to avoid forced pregnancies. It is essential to eliminate criminal abortion laws to ensure that people in all countries can access safe and legal abortion services. Each year the campaign unites activists and organizations around the world to stand in solidarity for safe abortion rights and reproductive justice. A campaign in this regard has been started by Common Health in India in collaboration with various organizations and programs are organized in this regard at different places every year. If we look at the background of this day the year 1990 was celebrated as a day of action to declare abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean where women groups had been mobilizing around September 28 for the past two decades to demand that their governments make abortion illegal were seeking to decriminalize, provide access to safe and affordable abortions. In 2011 the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights declared it as International Day. September 28 was chosen to commemorate the Birth Creation Law passed by the Brazilian Parliament in 1871 as the law was an important legal reform at the time that aimed to grant freedom to the children of enslaved people in Brazil. In the year 2015 this day was changed to International Safe Abortion Day and various activities are organized by social organizations in about 87 countries and on 28 September 2019 in Malta there are demonstrations in favor of the legalization of abortion. WHO defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Making health for all a reality and moving towards the progressive realization of human rights requires that all individuals have access to quality health care, including comprehensive abortion care services which includes information, management of abortion, and post-abortion care. Lack of access to safe, timely, affordable and respectful abortion care poses a risk to not only the physical but also the mental and social well-being of women and girls. Induced abortion is a simple and common health-care procedure. Each year almost half of all pregnancies 121 million are unintended 6 out of 10 unintended pregnancies and 3 out of 10 of all pregnancies end in induced abortion. Abortion is safe when carried out using a method recommended by WHO, appropriate to the pregnancy du-

ration and by someone with the necessary skills. However, when women with unwanted pregnancies face barriers to obtaining quality abortion they often resort to unsafe abortion. According to the available data there are approximately 5.6 Crore abortions worldwide every year. 56 percent of abortions in India are unsafe and 8.5 percent of the total maternal deaths are due to unsafe abortion and every day an average of 10 women die due to unsafe abortion. According to the National Family Health Survey, about 20 percent of abortions in the country are performed in public health facilities, about 53 percent are performed in private health centers and about 27 percent are performed at home. About 19 percent of women who have had an abortion have some type of problem after the abortion. In India MTP Act 1971 is made for abortions which has been amended in the years 2002, 2003, 2014, 2016 and now in 2021 to make it effective with some amendments including allowing all women to access safe abortion services based on contraceptive failure, increasing the gestational age limit to 24 weeks for certain categories of women and a provider opinion is Abortion can now be done up to 24 weeks of pregnancy but many women are facing difficulties even to get legal and approved abortion services and facilities and many are forced to undergo unsafe abortion which sometimes leads to the death of women. Abortion is covered 100% by the government's public National Health Insurance Fund, Ayushman Bharat and the Employees State Insurance, etc. As Nationwide complete lockdown was imposed from 25 March, 2020 in an effort to combat the Covid-19 pandemic which adversely affected access to contraceptives and safe abortion. More than 20 million couples in the country were deprived of access to contraception and termination of unintended pregnancy. Hon'ble Supreme Court made some decisions on 29 September 2022. The decision emphasizes women's bodily autonomy, rights to sexual and reproductive choices, equal benefits under the law to unmarried women and reduction of barriers such as third-party consent for adult women. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) released a report in Population 2022 which states that unsafe abortion remains the third leading cause of maternal mortality in India and around 08 women die every day due to unsafe abortion related causes. According to the reports of a study conducted by Common Health in collaboration with various organizations, during the lockdown due to Covid-19, between Janu-

ary and June 2020, approximately 9.2 lakh women who wanted to have an abortion did not get these services. According to this study, there are about 6.5 lakh unwanted pregnancies, about 10 lakh unsafe abortions and about 2600 maternal deaths in India. According to the report, 75 percent of the cases of deficiencies in family planning and safe abortion in 36 countries have been found in India. In some cases hon'ble Courts also provide relief to women. There are orders of some Courts allowing termination of pregnancy based on the opinion of the medical board and decisions already made in previous cases. On the plea of father of a 13-year-old rape victim who became pregnant in December 2017 the Mumbai Court allowed the termination of pregnancy at 26 weeks based on medical reports, in October 2017 Hon'ble Supreme Court also allowed the abortion of two women at 29 and 30 weeks of pregnancy on the basis of medical reports. The Hon'ble Himachal High Court has allowed 32-week pregnancy of a mentally unfit 19-year-old girl to be terminated on the basis of medical reports. The Hon'ble Madras High Court has also said in a case that every year approximately 17 lakh children are born with physical defects in the country so the time of abortion facility should be extended. Women's rights groups are demanding that the use of telemedicine and self-administered abortion be allowed up to 12 weeks of pregnancy, allow medical abortion in the second trimester, clinics allowing medical abortion pills on the National essential medicines list without the need for operating theater conditions with social distancing, reducing the perception of crime associated with abortion and expanding the legal base. Ensuring that women and girls have access to abortion care that is evidence-based which includes being safe, respectful and non-discriminatory is fundamental to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relating to good health and well-being (SDG3) and gender equality (SDG5). This year's International Safe Abortion Day September 28 is highlighting the collective efforts of diverse, intergenerational, and cross-border communities to advance the right to access safe abortion and reproductive justice.

Actions outlined for this year include joining a local mobilization, organizing events, running social media campaigns and taking action with activists in the community and around the World. For the protection of women the government should make abortion facilities available free of charge in all government health centers as per the MTP Act so that the objectives of International Safe Abortion Day can be fulfilled.



Advocate Kuldip Chand Dohetta
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The Ladies Brigade

A. Indra Kaur: The formidable Dadi

As a grandson I was always intrigued, during my growing up years, why my grandmother Indra had 'Kaur' attached to her name, even though she was born and brought up in Rajasthan and had no connection with Sikhism, or Punjab. Also, why my grandfather Nanig Ram sported a flowing beard and wore a turban, in the style of a true-blue Sikh, in his photographs of the 1920s. I had to solve that mystery for an explanation. Here is how it un-

around 1915. While he kept a grueling work schedule at more than one site in tough conditions, it was wife Indra who looked after the bringing up of the children. They were Mohan Lal (born 1900), Sohan Lal (b.1905), Bankey Lal (b.1908) and two girls, Jamuni (b.1898) and Shanti (b.1923).

Getting feel of the ceremonial throne

Just as the work was reaching climax at various work sites, Nanig Ram developed serious health compli-

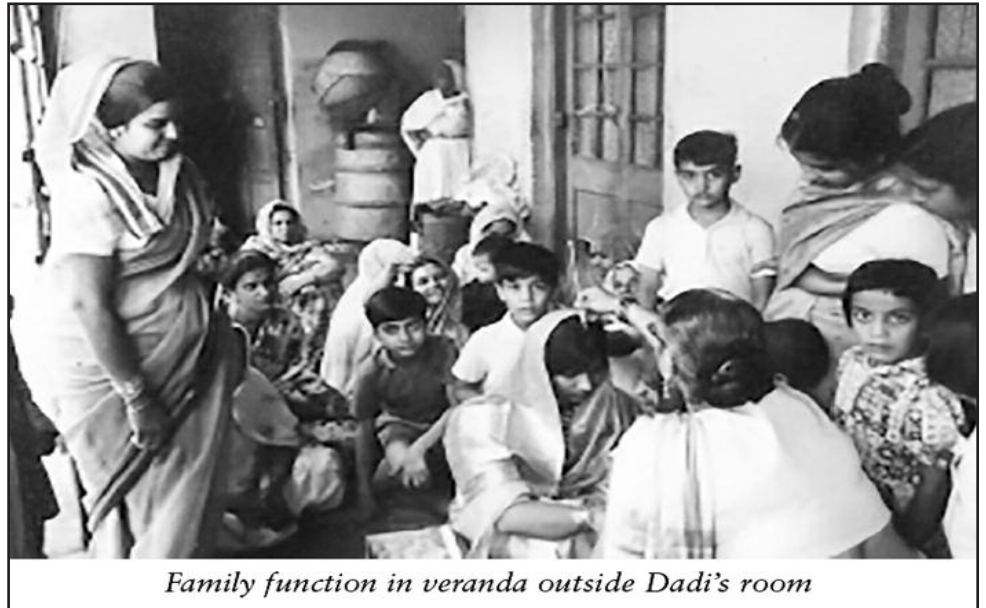
conducted the family pooja and prayers at festivals and social occasions. Not very literate, she knew the rituals and invocations and recited them like a trained pujari. All festivals were celebrated with gusto and enthusiasm under her direction. On Raksha Bandhan, Holi, Dussehra and Diwali Indian sweets, savouries and vegetarian preparations were made by the ladies at home, under her direction. The extended family and bastiwallah thronged the home to enjoy her gener-

lived close to our home and were frequent visitors, to look her up frequently.

Then towards the end of 1940s things started changing. The family



Ambesdor V.B. Soni



Family function in veranda outside Dadi's room

folded, after my research and enquiries.

Kumher, where Indra Kaur was born around 1880, is nestled in the Jat heartland, about 25 kms from Bharatpur, East Rajasthan. Not much happens there. The only landmark building there is a historical fort, dating back to the times of the Jat King Suraj Mal. In 1754 Maratha

ruler Peshwa Baji Rao sent his brother Raghoba to subjugate Suraj Mal, an ally of the Mughals, by laying a siege to the fort of the chieftain of Kumher, in which he failed.

During the ascendancy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab in the early 19th century, neighbouring Raja of Bharatpur, came under virtual tutelage of that kingdom. This had a cultural impact on the local populace. Apart from wearing turbans and flowing beard by the menfolk, women started adding 'Kaur' to their name, in place of Devi, or Kumari. That's how my Dadi became Indra Kaur.

The other noteworthy feature of Kumher is that it forms part of the Brij Bhumi Govardhan parikrama circuit, with some notable temples around. There being not much economic activity happening, except cattle breeding and limited farming in rocky/desert region, majority of the inhabitants had perforce to look for job opportunities in Bharatpur area.

The Kumher upbringing

Nanig Ram (born 1878) from Makrana, hired some labourers from Kumher for a construction job in a nearby Achnera village. During a visit there, he chanced upon Indra Kaur, the pretty daughter of their clan leader, and ended up marrying her around 1897. Soon thereafter he had to move the household to the newly planned capital city of New Delhi, for a contract

cations, around mid-1920s. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to personally receive the Sanad, in recognition of his contribution to the construction of New Delhi from Viceroy of India Lord Irwin in 1931. Before pass-



Sohan Lal family 1940s. From left Mahender, Sohan Lal, Inder, Natho, Uttam, Pushpa, Jagdish & Asba in lap.

ing away in 1929 though, he made a symbolic gesture to thank his wife, for the sacrifices she had made, by quietly inviting her to sit on the ceremonial Royal throne chair in the ornate Durbar Hall, even before the Viceroy did, in what is now called Rashtrpati Bhavan.

The matriarch takes position

It was Indra Kaur who did the honour of 'Grih Pravesh' at the newly built family haveli at 53, Hanuman Road, appropriately named by the sons as "Indra Niwas" to immortalize her name. The family had started expanding in the 1930s but functioned smoothly as a joint family unit under the control of Indra. The sons took care of the family business, which now included running the family-owned Imperial Talkies in Paharganj. She was the arbiter of all issues, whether pertaining to business or family relationship and took decisions in a fair manner.

Dadi inculcated family values among the young family members. A deeply religious person, she personally

ous hospitality.

The joint family kitchen was managed under her supervision, by the three daughters in law, who among themselves divided the responsibility of cooking, cleaning and related activity. They addressed her as Amma ji. Ration and items of common use were

size increased, becoming unwieldy. As is normal in the joint families, the problem began with the common kitchen. Increasingly it was leading to tension on a daily basis. It was thought prudent to divide the kitchen into three separate units for each independent family.

Breakup of the joint family

It broke the matriarch's heart when the actual division came about. All the assets, consisting of utensils, pots/pans, kitchen appliances were equitably split. The saddest part was that initials had to be inscribed on individual items, to avoid any inadvertent mix up. It included brass plates commemorating India becoming a Republic on January 26, 1950, gifted by Harcourt Butler School to all the students, where we cousins

studied. That scene of dividing assets was reminiscent of typical Hindi social drama film of that era. Eventually it turned out to be a good decision as the three families learnt to co-exist under the same roof.

A conscious decision was taken not to divide the two status symbols that the family possessed, the chauffeur driven car and a horse drawn carriage, tonga. Youngest son Bankey Lal was a Municipal Councillor, Delhi Municipal Committee, and Honorary Magistrate. In both capacities he had to move around in high society in official capacity, for which an appropriate status symbol was desirable. It was only after he gave up the positions around 1954, that the two vehicles were disposed of. Early 1950s witnessed some tragic happenings. Mohan Lal passed away prematurely in 1952. His elder son Uttam, followed him under tragic circumstances in 1955, not

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bought in bulk every month.

Living quarter- The Brahmasthan

The family meeting place used to be her living quarter, situated in the centre of the home, opening out to four sides. She shared it with her husband's long widowed sister "Puniya Bua". It was the 'brahmasthan' where all issues were discussed- community developments, business and family matters, ticklish matters to be sorted out and consensus reached with her intervention, if needed. The atmosphere would be invariably informal and light hearted. In a discreet corner of her room was kept a heavy iron safe, to store expensive jewelry, precious items and cash collections from the cinema at the end of each day, for safe keeping. Its key was kept under her possession in a string, carried on her person. She would not part with it under any circumstance. Dadi had Puniya Bua for company but shared a love-hate relationship with her. Our two aunts(buas), Jamuni and Shanti

The Ladies Brigade

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long after getting married. That shattered Dadi, adversely affecting her health. She used to suffer from chronic muscular pain in the legs and back, keeping them wrapped up in bandage. Massaging or pressing them by hand could only provide temporary relief. We grandchildren would volunteer to press the affected body parts. She was profuse with her blessings. Dadi was affectionate and loving to the grandchildren. She was the one who, though disturbed during the siesta hour, would come to our rescue when we smashed window panes, while playing various games in the driveway.

Somewhere along, it came to my notice that Dadi's room, with a continuous stream of visitors, could do with frequent cleaning and tidying up. On my own, I started doing that job voluntarily. That gesture pleased Dadi so much that at every conceivable opportunity she would bestow her blessings on me saying: "One day you will become a big officer". Little did I realise then that her blessings would become a reality. I got selected for Indian Foreign Service in 1967, a few years after she passed away.

Our Dadi had personal jewelry and precious ornaments acquired over the years. When she would fall ill, fearing that her time may be up, she would announce her intention to distribute these among his progeny. The two daughters were the intended major beneficiaries but the bahu would get a symbolic share too. But the moment her health improved, back would go the items in the safe till the next opportunity.

Ammaji looked after the welfare and safety of his grandchildren till the very last. Bharat, being the youngest, got her special attention. She used to be concerned whenever there was delay on his return from St. Columba's School and would often query about his whereabouts. She was particularly fond of granddaughters, some of whom used to sleep in her room.

In the early 1960s, Dadi started suffering from increasing body ailments, complaining of pain or discomfort. After my graduation in 1963 from Delhi University I shifted to Allahabad University for post-graduation and to prepare for All India Civil Services Examination. In February 1964 I got the shocking news of Dadi's passing away. I was saddened that I was not there when she breathed her last. For my generation, she was the only grandparent we ever saw and lived with. An endearing person, warmth and affection were her hallmarks.

A pen portrait of a commanding personality Indra Kaur was indeed a strong personality. She had a pretty face and fair complexion. She carried an aura around. Her personality was strong, authoritative, commanding respect. She was tough but not overbearing or arrogant. Steeped in the old school approach, she inculcated discipline all

around. Held in awe by her daughters-in-law, she kept them under tight control. She wore simple sari/dhoti but mostly Rajasthani style ghaghra for daily wear. Gold ornaments were her weakness and she displayed her collection with delight. She welded family flock together for as long as she lived. Indra Kaur was a benevolent matriarch.

B. Devi incarnate: Amma Kishan Devi

There is an endearing tenderness in the love of a mother to her child that transcends all other affections of the heart. Mother is his/her first divine figure. It turns out to be what the mother makes it to be. There has never been, nor will there ever be, anything quite so special as the bonding between



Kishan Devi with Shila on right and Pushpa on left

mother and a child.

Being the eldest son, I cherished a special relationship with amma Kishan Devi. Elder sisters Shila and Maya were normal deliveries. Amma was traumatised when two boys born before me did not survive infancy. That turned her into a deeply religious person. She would find solace, while listening to religious discourse (pravachan and katha) at the neighbouring Hanuman Mandir. Getting up early in the morning, she would pick up flowers for offering on her way for the daily darshan of the deities. She would begin with sweeping the temple floor, as an act of devotion. She would keep fasts regularly as a discipline, with a prayer on lips for a son, who would survive.

1942 was a tumultuous year in the Indian history. Mahatma Gandhi was to launch the "Quit India" movement in August, leading to civil disobedience all over the country. Midway through the World War II years, Axis ally partner Japan's Imperial Army's forces were menacingly advancing towards India's Burma border, soon to be joined by Netaji Subhash Bose's Azad Hind Fauj. Rumours were that the capital city New Delhi may well come under air raid attack, by Japanese fighter bombers. The possibility of civilian targets near Government buildings, adjoining our residential area Hanuman Road coming under their range, was considered a possibility. Tension was rife.

Birth of a son amidst Japan's air raid threat in 1942

It is under these ominous circumstances that the pregnant Kishan Devi was due to deliver a baby. May 13, 1942 turned out to be a particularly stormy evening, with thunder/lightening and rain lashing the city. Then suddenly around 7 p.m. Amma started experiencing labour pains. During those days, children's delivery used to be arranged at

home, by a trained mid-wife (daee) taking charge of the delicate child birth procedure.

Indra Kaur, mother-in-law knew that the time for delivery had come. Menfolk were away running affairs at the cinema. Private phone connections at home had yet to make an appearance. So, she had to go and fetch Manbhari, the mid wife from nearby Paharganj herself. The help came post haste to ensure smooth delivery, which happened around 8.30 p.m. Kishan Devi's earnest prayers were answered and yes it was a boy. And he survived the early glitches and that was me.

Then followed a line of siblings- Kuku (b.1944), K.B. (1945), Prabha



(1947), Saroj (1949) and Roopa (1951). All normal deliveries. It was only when the last 'unplanned' child, Bharat was born in 1954, that complications developed, causing much anxiety. She was hospitalised for weeks for the operation. All the nine surviving children were brought up with care, love and affection by Amma.

The Agra family background

Kishan Devi was born (1912) in Agra in a family of a businessman, Nand Kishore. He was a pioneer, introducing mechanisation in his Aryan Shoe Factory and putting together a team of leather experts, shoe designers and craftsmen. Nanig Ram, an upcoming builder/craftsman, found a match for his two sons, Sohan Lal and Bankey Lal, in Nand Kishore's two daughters, Natho and Kishan Devi respectively. The latter's marriage was performed in 1925, just when she turned 13. The gauna (consummation) ceremony was deferred till 1928.

On arrival at her new home in Delhi, Kishan Devi found mother-in-law Indra Devi had donned the mantle of a matriarch in 1929, following the premature death of husband Nanig Ram. She welded the joint family as a cohesive unit. Household affairs were under her direct charge. The three Bahus had their household responsibilities clearly assigned. Everything was done at home from the grinding of the spices (masalas) and grains etc. Homemade mango and chilly pickles by Kishan Devi were no match for the commercially produced packages. She made dal mungis and saboodana/rice papads at home, along with vermicelli (sevian).

Early training in household responsibilities

As the youngest bahu, Kisan Devi ended up bearing the bulk of responsibilities, cooking for a large family, three times a day. In the process she be-

came a gourmet chef, learning a whole range of dishes. Starting with snacks, her preparation of dahi bhalla/ chat papdi/aloo tikki was the talk of the town, as also the khasta kachoris and moong dal pakoda. The range of tastiest main items she was famous for, included kadhi, paneer dishes, palak saag, baingan ka bharta, masala stuffed karela/ bhindi and bharema tinde. Rajasthai urad dal and bati, cooked on slow shouldering cow dung cakes, were on offer on special occasions, but gatte ki sabzi and all kinds of daals were standard features. Her preparation of mixed moong/masoor tadka dal continues to be the family speciality.

Later on, when non vegetarian

dishes were added to the menu items, she picked up special recipes from the old Delhi Muslim families. Her muton kormas, chicken badami and keema kofta dishes are still raved about in the family circle. She used to make delicious Indian sweets at home. Her gajar

ka halwa and badam / suji halwa, along with kheer/sevian and rabri were the stuff of a dream. Everyone talked about in glowing terms about her guiya stuffed with khoya/kismish/coconut flakes.

Learning social grace for entry into higher circles

Kishan Devi's acquiring skill in the matter of social grace was the need of the hour. Her husband had to attend official functions and Receptions at Rahstrapati Bhavan and other venues regularly, in his capacity as Honorary Magistrate and Municipal Councillor. She would dress up graciously, creating a good impression.

An extremely beautiful lady, Kishan Devi exuded a charm of her own. Her wardrobe included a range of tasteful Banarsi silk sarees and Kashmiri shawl. On a charming face with chiselled features, she wore a disarming smile. Fond of jewelry she wore exquisite items crafted by the family goldsmith, sunar Dhootia based in Dariba Kalan, Chandni Chowk. The family heirloom included a necklace weighing many tolas which she wore at all times. Once, while going to the temple early in the morning, somebody on a bicycle tried to snatch the expensive item unsuccessfully, as it got stuck in her hair. Heirloom saved by the hair.

To bring up nine children was no easy job but Amma made sacrifices to give us the best she could offer, in the bringing up process. She would fetch fresh milk herself from a cow shed at the temple. As a loving mother, she felt that the daughters had to be prepared for managing household affairs to measure up to the demands after marriage, by the 'in laws. At times she may have appeared tough on the girls but they understood her reasoning and accepted her discipline, in the right spirit.

Amma was

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The Ladies Brigade

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indeed a cultured person, adept in the art of singing. No celebration or function in the family would be complete without her repertoire of melodious rendering, particularly at marriage functions, while playing on the dholak. Having heard her mimic opera singing, hesitating initially but when nudged, she would play along and entertain us with her aping the soprano's singing style. She used to be hilarious.

Teacher and guide for instilling value system

Right from our childhood days, Amma inculcated the right human values in us. We were introduced into praying every morning. She had taken over

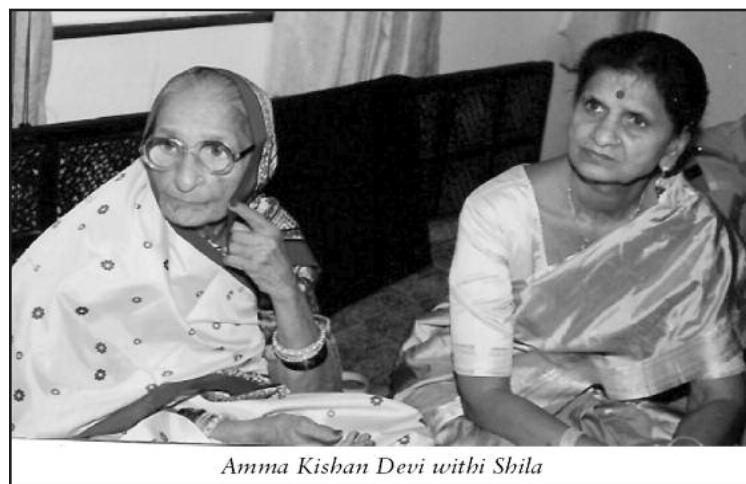
taught us to be broad in our outlook, Unaffected by the communal riots at the time of independence, she introduced us

to secular values during our growing up years. At Christmas she would make puddings and at Id the traditional sevian. Amma was a social person and freely mixed with neighbours, who would come calling on her. She used to exchange regular visits with the wives of the pujaris at the Hanuman Temple. The amazing thing was that they would invariably touch her feet as a form of respect, even though they belonged to a higher Brahmin caste. It showed the high esteem she was held.

Cultural moorings and



Amma dancing at S.B.'s wedding-22.11.1978



Amma Kishan Devi with Shila

acquired traits

A Bengali friend introduced Amma to eating betel leaf (paan) and subsequently to perfumed tobacco zarda. She became addicted to it for the rest of her life. Later, when she

at the entrance of our living place, from where she would observe all the goings on around. She had sharp eyes and sensitive ears. There was nothing that would escape her notice.

In her twilight years Amma's daily routine started with sitting around in the vast open courtyard at sun rise. Her constant companions, ranging from sparrow, pigeon, parrot, crow and kite would eagerly await their daily breakfast from her. The edibles dished out, included staple millet (bajra), but mostly atta dough, which she would roll into round pellets before offering. The same exercise was repeated at sunset time, when the throng of birds would grow bigger in size. She was probably the

failed to perform my last duty.

The thirteen-day mourning period was observed, praying for her soul. Sleeping on the floor, performing purificatory (shudhi) havan at the spot of her passing away. The chautha ceremony was held at the Arya Samaj Mandir where, apart from singing of devotional bhajans, I spoke about her endearing qualities. The terhanvi pooja at home, rounded up, with the traditional feast for the extended family. Coincidentally, her sisterly bond became to the fore, when Ratan Devi tai also passed away after a month on August 4, 2001, to keep her company in the world beyond.

The death of a mother is filled with grief and trauma. I felt sad, help-



100-year barsi havan for Kishan Devi 2002

happiest person, at peace in their

less, empty and remorseful. For me it was reflective of a son's relationship, the physical side of which comes to an end.

C The loneliest soul, if ever there was one: Puniya Bua Loneliness is emptiness, a void created by the ab-

the mantle of the high priestess from our Dadi Indra Kaur and trained us well



Amma's terhanvi July 2001. Seated front from left: Shakuntala mausi, VBS, Anant Ram, Vikramjeet, Shila, and Swaran Das. Middle row: Kalpana, Saroj, Roopa, Guddi, Vinita and Shumita. Standing back row: Om Prakash, Kuku, Sujata, Amit, Rajeev, Narendra, Sanjay and Rekha.

in observing religious practices. Breakfast was served only after we had done the arti pooja.

The spiritual lesson I remember having learnt from her was that, one does not have to go to the temple for prayers and that it could be done anywhere, anytime possible. Further one does not have to sit formally in front of a deity, to pray only in the mornings. One could meditate and pray at any hour, even while sitting or lying down. Every religious or cultural festival was celebrated with enthusiasm at home with pooja and prasad. She would take us to watch Ramlila drama performances happening in our neighbourhood during Dussehra. Accompanying her at religious discourse (katha pravachans) was a regular feature,

which taught us all about our rich heritage. At the same time, she

could not find anybody to bring the item from panwari, she had to make do with substitute of paan masala, mixed with tobacco zarda. (Baba Chhap No 120). Sometimes Ratan Devi tai, who had a pan daan of her own at home, would bail her out. It looked like scene straight from a Hindi social film of those times, when the two sisters-in-law would sit down and discuss family and issues of common interest, while a paan was prepared, with the ingredient betel nut, freshly splintered with a contraption called 'sarota'.

Amma was very fond of Shanti Bua and her own youngest sister Shakuntala. With Ratan Devi tai she developed a strong sisterly bond, in spite of difference of a generation in age. In the twilight years of their lives, they had each other for company. Amma's favourite spot was strategically located,

company.

Like a typical grandmother Amma would spoil the grandchildren, whenever they came visiting Delhi, during vacations or on family functions. She would prepare their favourite dishes and give pocket money to indulge in at mela at Hanuman Mandir. Her warmth and affection touched all. She believed in the Hindu belief that birth of a great grandchild moves one step closer to heaven. With birth of Malavika to grandson Manish in 1998, she felt happy to have moved a step higher on that journey.

The saddest part that rankles us all is, that her end could have been under better circumstances. She was left all alone to fend for herself, towards the end of her life's journey. I was posted in Ukraine then. My desire to be posted in neighbouring Bhutan/Nepal, where she could have stayed with us, remained unfulfilled. All the sons having moved out of Hanuman Road, to their respective chosen homes, she decided to stay back all by herself at ancestral home, leading a forlorn, lonely life.

An impersonal domestic help caretaker, can hardly be a substitute. In those times Rata Devi tai was her only constant companion, and sometimes Shakuntala mausi, whenever she came visiting.

On 3rd July, 2001 sitting in Kiev, sipping my morning tea I got the shattering news, that Amma had passed away. My world came crashing down. What pained me was to learn, that even the domestic help was not around, at the fateful moment at night. In the morning, she was found lying motionless and gone.

There being no direct flights between Kiev and Delhi, I had to take the circuitous route via Moscow, changing flights. By the time I landed up in Delhi on July 4, the funeral rites had already been performed by my younger brother. As the eldest son I felt terrible, having



Nanig Ram, the caring brother

sense of another. A life can be full of activity, surrounded by people and yet, the concerned person can suffer from depressing loneliness. It occurs when one feels unwanted, on being disconnected from the world around.

Some go through stressful traumatic personal experiences that make them depressed, leading to a situation where they are forced to commit suicide. All because they find no comforting soul to share and understand their situation, give them a patient hearing and empathise with their plight.

The other category includes those who go through horrendous situations, not of their making. These are inherited and inborn. In such a hopeless predicament luck abandons them. Events happen, one after another, over which they have no control, leading

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The Ladies Brigade

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them to a precipice, from where they cannot avoid the inevitable fall.

This is the story of an individual soul, Puniya Bua, whom we witnessed during our growing up years, suffering silently, as the world was going around her. Life was never kind to her, all through her almost 90 years of existence. She was a silent spectator, for what looked like eternity, suffering deep within, without finding an outlet for the anguished soul. She was our grandmother but we all addressed her as Puniya Bua, Nanig Ram's sister. All because to our elders, that is what she was. So effectively she became 'jagat bua'. Puniya Bua's is a heart-rending tale, that needs to be recounted. Just because she did not get to enjoy conjugal bliss, does not mean that she should go down in the family history unlamented. Her long period of tribulation did not involve any physical or mental abuse. She was surrounded by a caring joint family, with the built-in safety net, where she was provided with living space, food, clothing and essential needs. And respect to which she was entitled. But one does not live by bread alone.

Though she never complained, one could sense her isolation all through her living life. As a brave fighter, she never gave in. No attempted suicidal tendency.

Puniya Bua born in the last decade of 19th century, was the younger sister of Nanig Ram. As per the prevailing practice, she was married off at a young age, but the 'gauna' (consummation) ceremony was solemnised only, when she turned 16 years of age. While accompanying the husband to her new home, a horrible thing happened. Her newlywed groom was

bitten by a poisonous snake. There being no medical facility readily available in the countryside, he passed away, shattering her.

After getting remarried, it seems that she was badly treated by in laws, as she could not conceive. Her second husband too passed away mysteriously. Her world came crashing down, in quick succession. She spent the rest of her widowhood in utter loneliness.

Her brother Nanig Ram's business commitment in the construction of the new capital made him shift the establishment and household, which included Puniya Bua, to New Delhi. Puniya was good looking with slim body. In multiple piercings in her ears she wore golden ear rings, and a nose pin. She wore simple sari/dhoti, head covered with a pallu. She was graceful and dignified by demeanour, exemplifying her upbringing and cultural roots.

With the premature passing away of Nanig Ram in 1929, Indra Kaur's responsibility as the matriarch increased. She shared the load of running the household proportionately with Puniya. The three sons Mohan Lal, Sohan Lal and Bankey Lal, after marriage had addition in their respective families. The need for their respective live-in areas increased in the 1940s. Indra Kaur shared her living space with Puniya.

With the passage of time, things changed. The joint family system broke up with separate kitchens. Mohan Lal's passing away in 1952 precipitated issues. The three families were living their lives independently under the same roof. As per the arrangements worked out, Indra Kaur and Puniya were provided food and taken care of by the three families by

turn, on rotation. The two ladies drew comfort in each other's company, being of identical age group, to communicate with.

At this stage Puniya briefly shifted to Bombay, to help look after the new born baby of Sohan Lal's daughter Pushpa, where her Incometax Officer husband was posted. There she had an accidental fall, resulting in fractured legs. She never fully recovered from that injury, becoming a cripple for the rest of her life. She could not stand on her own, far less walk. She had to crawl to where ever she had to go. Frustrated by her helplessness, she became irritable and argumentative.

During our teen age years in late 1950s she showered love and affection on us. The phase of her alienation and loneliness started soon thereafter. It aggravated with the passing away of Indra Kaur in 1964. She lost her constant companion and friend of 70 years.

Just as she was getting over her loss, more challenges came along her way. She was uprooted from the room shared with her Bhabhi. She found alternative place on a small cot, placed outside the kitchen, through common passage in the veranda. She never complained and accepted her fate. The chirping birds would come hopping in from nearby open courtyard near her for company, as she offered them small atta pellets. There were not many left of her generation, to share inner feelings or open out her heart.

No shoulder to cry on. The last phase of her painfully slow and the lonely journey became unbearable. I recall the winter months, when we were comfortably snuggled in warm beds in closed rooms, poor Puniya Bua,

wrapped up in quilts and warm clothes had to face cold wind, crisscrossing the surrounding veranda. I was away from home on long absences, for post-graduation studies in Allahabad, returning home for short periods. Today I carry that guilt feeling, for not reaching out to her, when a simple gesture would have gone a long way to provide her solace.

The way Puniya Bua lived the last two decades of her life could have been better. With advancing age, her alienation became more pronounced. She became even more withdrawn and uncommunicative. Depression had taken over her. She would lose temper on trifles and mumble incoherently. Sometimes she would refuse to eat food, perhaps as a mark of protest. On other occasions, she was warm and affectionate. The mood swings came about with greater frequency. She had no unrealistic expectations from any quarter. So, there were few disappointments in her life. The distinguishing point was, that she did not allow emotions to develop into resentment.

She never harboured ill feelings against anybody. She deserved better in life. But life is hardly fair. Puniya Bua, after a long innings of around 90 years, quietly passed away on November 22, 1982, hardly mourned or missed. I was posted in London during those days and sadly could not be present at the funeral, to pay my last respects. Emotional mountains are hard to climb, far less dig in. When she was trying to climb unsurmountable height in her life, she deserved better support and understanding. That was not to be. She ended up being one of the loneliest souls, if ever there was one. She deserved better than being a dehumanised cast away.



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