

COURTESY: SURAJ YENGDE



Tireless Crusader Prem Chumber in Yuba City at Nagar Kirtan in 2023

The Memory Keepers

A handful of media enterprises have worked hard to keep the Dalit diasporic community informed of their roots and responsibilities

Artality



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THE history of the Ambedkarite movement abroad has been well documented. Kanshi Ram had written about his travels to the United Kingdom in *The Oppressed Indian*, a periodical he ran for several years. Memoirs and articles were published in various Punjabi and English-language journals. The Tamil language sphere certainly had its diasporic anti-caste element active. Several stalwarts of the anti-caste Ambedkarite movement in the UK and the United States have written about their lives and their struggles.

Chanan Chahal, the defiant activist, organiser and businessman, came to the UK with a passion to repudiate the caste hegemony that looked down on people across the board. Chahal was among the first generation of Ambedkarite leaders who honed the community and gave it an intellectual direction. He was a trained cadre of the Republican movement that was posthumously organised by many of Dr Ambedkar’s lieutenants.

Then there were a few from Maharashtra state who put together the first Buddhist organisation in the UK. The influence of Buddhism was yet to reach the Punjabi masses in the UK. Bishan Dass Bains was the first Dalit Mayor outside India. He led the Wolverhampton Council from 1986-87. I have learned a great deal about the diaspora through organic journalism dedicatedly organised in the odd corners of the internet.

Several activities continue to happen in the Ambedkarite diasporic realm the world over. Whether it is celebrating days of importance of Bahujan history, organising protests, writing intellectual missives, visitors from India visiting various Ambedkarite organisations, installing Dr Ambedkar's busts and portrait across university campuses and government buildings or honouring noted activists. News such as these are promptly reported and archived by a handful of volunteers. Its curator is Prem Kumar Chumber, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Ambedkar Times* and *Desh Doaba*, a Punjabi newsletter.

Ambedkar Times was conceived by Prem Chumber, who drew inspiration from his elder brother, C.L. Chumber, who was known for his fearless stints. C.L. Chumber worked in the government as a welfare officer. After meeting Kanshi Ram, he resigned and concentrated on publishing. *Bahujan Samaj Bulletin*, a Punjabi weekly, was started under the editorship of Kanshi Ram and C.L. Chumber as its Resident Editor.

C.L. Chumber was known as a man with uncompromising principles. Prem Chumber informed me that C.L. Chumber had stepped into journalism in 1985, publishing *Kaumi Udarian* in English, Punjabi and Hindi. In it, he also started to experiment with his writing skills. This helped him in venturing into independent mass journalism. It is thanks to people like Prem Chumber that the ecosystem of diasporic Dalit memory for over two decades is alive. He not only contributed his resources and talent but also his time that demanded equal attention to keeping a full-time job, raising a family and publishing.

There are several incredible scholars who have researched and recorded the history of the Dalit movement abroad. We have Chanan Chahal, Arun Kumar, Mark Juergensmeyer, Eva-Maria Hardtmann, Nicolas Jaoul, Dag Erik Berg, Purvi Mehta, Santosh Dass and Shrikant Borkar. Most recently, we also have admirable sociological research done with an emphasis on diaspora and the Dalit question by Prema Kurien in the US, and Asang Wankhede and Vikrant Kishore in Australia. Several writers, scholars and organic intellectuals fit the bill of recording the Dalit story abroad. Even more talented younger people and students are writing elaborate theses on this question. I have also contributed to this debate first in the UK, then in South Africa and recently in my book *Caste A Global Story* (2025), covering nearly 15 countries from near to distant diasporas.

However, there is one source that I keep going back to that furthers our understanding of the diasporic reality, and it is in enterprises like the *Ambedkar Times* where we see humble yet splendid work being done almost single-handedly and without institutional support.

Journalism as Archiving

Prem Chumber was inspired by his brother. After earning the role of a writer, Prem moved to California to take up a job in the aughts. There, he worked in some insurance companies while also pursuing the objective of writing and publishing, but that didn't come straight to him.

He used to read Punjabi newspapers avidly, only to see the stories of his community and the optics of politics being surrendered to the Jatt dimension of Punjab. He debated with well-minded editors, and they opened up the space for his articles. In 2001, he started to write for a Canadian Punjabi newspaper, *Chardi Kala; Desh Pardesh*

THE STORY OF THE BAHUJAN MEDIA IN INDIA IS A GLITTER IN THE THROES OF IRRITATING MEDIA BYTES OF CAPITALIST HINDUTVA AND CULTURAL BRAHMANVAD. THE DALIT DIASPORIC MEDIA DEFIES THE TIMOROUS PEDDLING.

Times, *Amritsar Times* and *Sikh Virsa*. That was further expanded to other outlets like the weekly *Punjab Times*, which was one of the first few newspapers he engaged with over a longer period. Being in the diaspora, his reach was immediately recognised. The first article that he wrote was on the Punjab elections.

Noticing the success of his writings, the editor asked Prem to contribute more on Punjab. So, he put out supplements on Mangoo Ram Mugowalia, his personal hero, who he continues to advocate for to this day by gifting Juergensmeyer's readily available classic in his car, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*, to the people he meets. Eventually, he curated supplements for *Punjab News* on Ravidas and Arjan Dev by recording their contributions to the social justice paradigm. He noted how Arjan Dev, the compiler of the Guru Granth, recognised the importance of the intellectual history of Dalit liberation. Then he planned for a special on Dr Ambedkar, but he was already being pushed back by the readers of the *Punjab Times* for obvious reasons caste.

Frustrated, he launched his own *Ambedkar Times* on August 4, 2006. He registered the domain and started to contribute. He wasn't aware of the digital world, but was advised that it was a viable option. That was the time when email digests and groups were a primary medium of seamless communication. So, he was able to reach many people across the globe. Three years later, the issue started in print on March 15, 2009, on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Kanshi Ram.

The work garnered wider attention, attracting as many as 100,000 visitors to the site. Many reached out to Prem, who was coordinating the publishing of *Ambedkar Times*. In 2012, *Desh Doaba*, a Punjabi-language newspaper, was launched on April 13, 2012. The regular contributors to the newspapers in both English and Punjabi were Professor Ronki Ram, Ambassador Ramesh Chander, Arun Kumar and Raj Kumar Hans, among others. These contributors moved between the English and Punjabi editions.

While in California, Prem was the one who took me to places of interests introducing me to a host of diverse actors in the region from Ravidas *gurudwaras* to Balmiki *mandirs*. He is always available to promote the cause he so dearly believes in. Approaching the dusk of retirement, Prem continues to do all of the work on the publication of the paper and the YouTube/Facebook reportage while keeping a day job in security.

Ambedkar Times, *Desh Doaba*, *Kanshi TV* and *Lotus TV* are among a handful of media enterprises that have kept the Dalit diasporic community informed of their roots and responsibilities. The story of the Bahujan media in India is a glitter in the throes of irritating media bytes of capitalist Hindutva and cultural Brahmanvad. The Dalit diasporic media defies the timorous peddling and instead tells the story of this important and distant community that was unavailable to those from a century ago in the distant lands of the Caribbean. If it were, the diasporic story out there would not have been solely Hindu but also proudly Bahujan. ☑