

**LATA PADA'S STATEMENT FOR STAGE 1 OF
THE AIR INDIA INQUIRY**

MORNING. ~~STAR~~
GOOD ~~AFTERNOON~~, COMMISSIONER
~~MAJOR~~

My name is Lata Pada, [I lost my husband

Vishnu Pada and two daughters Brinda and Arti

in the Air India bombing. [Over twenty-one

on June 23, 1985
years ago, a horrific and unimaginable

1
darkness engulfed me.] *he lived in Sudbury at that time*
As many immigrant

do
Canadians, we had planned an extended

vacation with our family in Bangalore, India. I

had gone ahead to rehearse for a performance

and Vishnu, Brinda and Arti were to follow two

weeks later. Waiting excitedly for Vishnu,

Brinda and Arti in Bombay to arrive on the Air

India flight from Toronto, a routine phone call to

the airline about the expected time of arrival of

the flight, jolted me with life shattering news –

the flight bringing my family to India had

aircraft

exploded off the coast of Ireland. In that moment of complete devastation, my life *changed irrevocably & instantly* became a meaningless void. Nothing in life can prepare anyone for such a totally crippling *tragedy* event, the snuffing out of one's entire family in such a sudden and horrific way is an act of cruelty one can never imagine.

In February of 1964, I was in my second year of university at Elphinstone College in Mumbai, India. Vishnu had just graduated with a Master's degree in Geo-Physics from the University of Toronto and was on his vacation to India to meet his family; we were introduced to each other and were engaged the same week. Vishnu was born in Bangalore, India on March 15, 1938. His basic education was completed in Bangalore and he later did his undergraduate

degree in Geology in Patna in the northern state of Bihar in India. He came to Canada in 1960 to enter Graduate studies in Geology at the University of Toronto. Breaking convention of celebrating our wedding in India, our marriage took place in the Swami Vishnu Devananda Yoga Ashram in Val Morin, Quebec in October of 1964. ^{soon after} Vishnu and I made our new home in Thompson in northern Manitoba as Vishnu had accepted a full time position as staff geologist at the INCO Ltd. operations of nickel mining. We had a full and active life and being one of the very few South Asian families in this northern isolated mining community we were quite a novelty.

Life in Thompson was wonderful, in this remote northern mining town; we experienced first

hand the essence of being Canadian. This unique experience is often absent for newcomers who come to larger urban cities like Toronto and Vancouver, where often they are provided the safety net of a larger cultural community and therefore somewhat isolated from the mainstream Canadian experience.

In the 1960's the spirit of multiculturalism was beginning to be articulated as a national theme, but Canada was still largely euro-centric. We were the only Indian family in Thompson. I was seen as somewhat of a ^{exotic} novelty. Some were taken aback that I spoke such ~~perfect~~ ^{so well} English, we became very active in our local Community. We discovered the magnificent beauty of Canada and its peoples; we went to the remote northern outposts of Churchill, Flin Flon,

Nelson, Yorkton.

Vishnu was quintessentially Canadian. He first came to Canada to do graduate studies and later worked in all kinds of remote locations in northern Manitoba, Quebec, and the Yukon. In the true spirit of a geologist, Vishnu had a great love for the outdoors and he taught me the intricacies of skiing, curling and ice-fishing. Vishnu was a gregarious person and loved meeting new people. He had an innate gift for making conversations with all ages and background of people. Vishnu's passion was singing and he was always the centre of a party with his guitar, folk songs and endless supply of jokes. Vishnu was an active Rotarian and a member of the Toastmaster's Public Speaking Club. Our first daughter, Brinda, was born in

1967.

In 1969, Vishnu was transferred to INCO's laterite nickel mining operations on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia. Our second daughter Arti was born in 1970. In the tropical climes of Indonesia, Vishnu returned to his love for cricket and tennis, pursuing them with great passion. After ten wonderful years of deep, lasting friendships and rich cultural experiences in Indonesia we returned to Sudbury, Ontario in 1979. In Sudbury, Vishnu was actively involved in the India-Canada Association and the Hindu Prarthana Samaj. He firmly believed in the principles of secular and non-denominational civic engagement and served on many multi-cultural committees. In fact, he was the driving force behind the multi-

faith service to honour the victims of the 1984 New Delhi sectarian riots and the then recently assassinated Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, killed for ~~her~~ ordering the storming of the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Vishnu was a man with a vision for a better world, always believing in his capacity to make a difference. I was always filled with admiration for his passion for volunteer work such as visits to senior citizen homes and hospices for the terminally ill.

Vishnu fully supported my life in the arts, encouraging me to explore my potential as a classical dancer. He understood my need to define my own identity, giving me the space and independence to pursue my academic and

artistic interests. Vishnu was a caring father, instilling in Brinda and Arti a deep sense of righteousness and social justice.

Vishnu was forty seven years old at the time of the Air India –bombing. He would have, by now, completed a rewarding career as a geologist with an international mining company, celebrating his retirement; and we would be enjoying our grandchildren and fulfilling our dream of traveling and experiencing new adventures.

During my marriage of twenty-one years with Vishnu, I came to know a very special human being. I never ceased to be amazed by this multi-faceted person- equally at home in the most remote mining locations as well as in the

more sophisticated urban settings, possessing eclectic tastes that spanned the cultures of the East and West, a deeply devotional person always engaged in the quest for spiritual knowledge as well as a tremendous capacity to experience and enjoy life to its fullest.


On a very cold day in March 1967 in the northern mining town of Thompson, Manitoba, our first daughter Brinda was born. She was soon the centre of attraction, being the only Indian baby ever born in Thompson. Brinda's dimpled smile, cheery disposition, capacity to make friends easily and her innate sense of optimism were her endearing qualities. Brinda adjusted quickly to a new life and culture when we moved to Indonesia in 1969. She had a gift for languages, speaking Bahasa Indonesian,

Hindi and Kannada, nuanced with local colloquial flavour with great ease. Brinda, displayed from a young age, awareness of global issues of abuse of the environment and disadvantaged economies of developing countries. Many of her school projects were about these issues and I was always struck by her wisdom, compassion and interest in subjects that were beyond the world of an eight year old.

a young girl

Brinda was always ready for new adventures, whether it was joining the Girl Guides, learning snorkeling in the coral reefs of Indonesia or teaching hygiene and sanity as a volunteer in the villages of South Sulawesi in Indonesia. Brinda was happiest when we made our regular visits from Indonesia to Bangalore; she was

passionate about experiencing her cultural roots. On every vacation to India, she took lessons in classical music and dance and spent hours with her grandparents learning about our ancient traditions and mythologies. Brinda also spent time with her relatives learning the traditional arts and crafts of India.

When we returned to Sudbury, Ontario in 1979, Brinda joined Grade 6 and adjusted quickly to the new school system; before long she had made many friends who streamed into our house at odd hours having accepted Brinda's spontaneous invitation to try her mother's  incredible culinary delights. Never hesitating to try new challenges, Brinda served on her high school's student council, learnt downhill skiing for the first time in her life and joined several

volunteer organizations such as the Student Committee for the Games for the Physically Disabled and the Chronic-Care Ward at Laurentian Hospital. She was extremely compassionate and did a large amount of volunteer work. Her particular interest was in working with senior citizens. She would have been the pride of any parent's life. She was very much like her father- the life of the party and a truly genuine person.

She joined Mary Mount College, a private girl's high school; it was here that she made an impact with her multifarious activities and interests. Brinda trained under me in classical Bharatanatyam dance and showed great promise to become an accomplished dancer. She graduated from Grade 13 in June 1985; her

graduation was the night before she, Vishnu and Arti left for Toronto to catch the Air India flight from Toronto on June 22nd.

I had left two weeks earlier for India to rehearse for a performance in Bangalore that summer. Brinda's friends ^{later} told me how beautiful she looked in her shell pink raw silk graduation dress. Photographs of Brinda excitedly celebrating her graduation are forever seared in my memory; her dreams of a life ahead are now buried with her in the ocean bed of the Atlantic.

Brinda's Graduation Year book has indelibly recorded the wisdom of this amazing young woman who was to join Laurentian University in the fall of 1985 to pursue a degree in Physiotherapy. Brinda had written "Only live

for today, because tomorrow isn't promised to you". How had she figured out this important truth at such a young age, one wonders, Brinda was just eighteen years old.

Our second daughter Arti was born in 1970.
In 1985, Arti was 15 - brimming with aspirations

of being a doctor, the clown of her class, an affectionate and doting daughter, the popular babysitter on our street, training to be a swimming coach. Arti, our beautiful second daughter was born in Bombay, (now Mumbai) India. Vishnu had joined his new position with INCO Ltd's mining project on the island of Sulawesi, Indonesia and I stayed with my parents in Mumbai awaiting the Arti's birth. Arti's lovely curly hair was always the envy of her friends; she had the most gorgeous large

black eyes that twinkled with mischief and feigned ignorance when confronted about a prank she tried to cover up. Arti made friends carefully, her loyalty and support to her friends made her a very special person.

From a young age, Arti displayed a tremendous love for nature and animals. Living in the tropics of Indonesia, Arti was fascinated with the flora and fauna of that country, always drifting off on her own, chasing butterflies or teasing a worm out of the soil. When she returned from one of her jaunts, tracking dirt into the house, she wiggled her way out of any punishment by trying to convince us that this was all very necessary in her preparation to becoming a doctor! Arti was always the champion of the underdog; even at the tender

age of six, she insisted on the Indonesian maids taking her to the nearby village so that she could observe the women at their chores, lending a hand wherever she could.

Arti loved her trips to India and the time she spent with her grandparents was always so special. Like Brinda, Arti felt most at home in the culture of India, always curious about the ancient history of its temples and monuments. When we moved back to Canada in 1979, Arti pined for Indonesia and India. Soon she adjusted to new surroundings, school and friends and quickly became the clown of the class. She would joke about the fact that one could eat a gourmet meal at any Indian hospital because families brought so much food. She had a knack for putting her Indian-ness in a

not only for the patient but for the entire family as well

funny way. She would have done well at Yuk Yuks.

Arti became quite accomplished at playing the guitar and joined Brinda on her visits to the Chronic Care Ward to entertain the seniors with her beautiful voice. Arti loved to sing *bhajans* at our weekly Hindu prayer services. Arti was also a strong swimmer and had planned train to become a lifeguard in the local community centre pool. My daughters negotiated their Canadian and Indian identities so seamlessly.

Arti's career plans were to become a doctor, though she frequently shared her anxiety about how she could continue to pursue so many other interests while committing her time a serious pursuit of medical studies. I reassured

her that she was too young to worry about it and her only goal was to excel in whatever she did; the answers to her questions would come on their own. Arti was denied the opportunity to discover that truth for herself; how was she to know that her life's journey would end when she had just turned fifteen years old.

MARK – TO ASK QUESTIONS OF LATA –

- WHERE SHE WAS ON THE DAY OF THE BOMBING**
- HOW DID SHE HEAR ABOUT THE BOMBING, LATA'S REACTIONS, FAMILY SUPPORT**
- ALL OTHER QUESTIONS RELATED TO HER TRIP TO CORK, BEING MET AT THE AIRPORT, HER EXPERIENCE THERE, THE WARMTH AND FRIENDSHIP OF THE IRISH, THE INDIFFERENCE OF THE CANADIAN**

GOVERNMENT,

**- THE IDENTIFICATION OF BRINDA AND ARTI ,
THEIR CREMATION IN DUBLIN**

- HER TRIP TO SUDBURY,

**- HER RETURN TO NORMALCY AND HER
RETURN TO DANCE**

**- HER LIFE IN DANCE AND HOW DANCE HAS
HELPED HER TRANSCEND THE PAIN AND
LOSS**

**- ASK ABOUT REVEALED BY FIRE – HER
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MULTI-MEDIA DANCE
THEATRE WORK**

**SHOW REVEALED BY FIRE VIDEO EXCERPT
AT THIS TIME**

LATA RESUMES READING

June 23, 1985 marked the beginning of a

journey of deep personal and spiritual transformation, a journey that would in time reveal dance as the metonym of my existence and a return to wholeness. My life in dance became a pilgrimage, a sacred pathway towards a new revelation of my inner being. As I danced the poetry of India's great saint poets, I came to understand the deep philosophy of my faith and the profound truths of the cyclical nature of life and death. I came to comprehend the significance of the holy scriptures of the Bhagavad Gita, ^{of} ~~where~~ self – realization and purpose for human existence.

June 23, 1985 marked a cataclysmic moment in the history of Canada. In an event that is seared in the consciousness of this country, the ugly and terrifying face of terrorism revealed itself.

A misplaced ideology, a misguided utopian dream of a homeland on the other side of the world and the manipulation of religious ideals destroyed the values that Canada had promised so many who made their home here.

As history has demonstrated with cruel regularity, terrorism intersects the lives of unknowing, innocent citizens and draws them into their web of meaningless violence and retribution. The downing of Air India Kanishka Flight 182 was one such act of senseless and cowardly revenge.

This was a tragedy of the nation, this was a tragedy of an entire community, this was the tragedy of countless families. What remains today, is that other global events have virtually

obliterated the magnitude of the Air India tragedy, and the families of the victims are left dealing with a great sense of hopelessness, frustration and betrayal.

IMAGINE coping with a life that has no more meaning, the torture of the emptiness of your home, memories of life that was and unrealized dreams of what could have been. Imagine never hearing the words 'I Love you' for whom you devoted your life. Imagine not ever fulfilling the dreams of a future with family get-togethers, not ever holding a newborn grand child in your arms, birthday celebrations and special moments. Imagine having to pack away boxes and boxes of clothes that once filled the closets, re-arranging your life without the vital presence of your loved ones, shutting a door to

the memories that paralyze you with their powerful immediacy.

IMAGINE knowing that there will never be closure, imagine living with a pervasive and lingering sadness for the rest of your life, imagine facing happiness with the inevitable 'if only', imagine not ever seeing them again. Imagine never feeling complete again.

IMAGINE dealing with a loss that makes no sense: this was not a road accident, this was not the ravage of an untreatable disease, this was the diabolical, heinous act of a few individuals who had no conscience, no sense of morality, no concern about the lives destroyed.

Imagine having to confront them in court everyday *during the trial 2005* while their 'benign' demeanour belies *✓*

the evil that resides *✓* in them. Imagine experiencing their contemptuous attitudes of 'innocent till proven guilty' and their arrogance about their invincibility. Imagine no longer trusting a justice system that acquitted those who perpetrated this heinous act of terrorism- and serve no punishment.

Three decades
IMAGINE making Canada your home for several decades only to realize that you are not regarded as truly Canadian! Imagine your own Prime Minister offering a message of condolence to the then Prime Minister of India for the loss of his citizens; the flight had over 80% Canadian passport holders.

IMAGINE the overwhelming sense of betrayal that it took fifteen years before the Government

of Canada decided to proceed with the trial. Imagine the loss of faith in a system where the incompetence and ineptitude of the RCMP and CSIS was singularly responsible for not averting a tragedy of such magnitude and national importance. *devastating consequences*

IMAGINE an entire nation that cannot begin to visualize the horror of the tragedy, their collective memory of this event dulled by years of public amnesia and crass sensationalism of more exciting news. **IMAGINE** that a nation does not care or concern itself with a growing threat of terrorism in their own backyards.

IMAGINE sitting in a courtroom where the legal proceedings play out clinical and academic arguments, and we the victims families feeling

like we are but pawns in a game, one that we have no control over. Did we miss the point? Was this not about the truth, was it not about justice?

IMAGINE, having your life thrust into the glare of the media, the exaggerated brutalization of the trauma and horror of the event, Imagine having the phone ring every time a new news bite requires a family member to make a comment, only to be mentioned on the news along with the local news of the latest pitbull attack.

IMAGINE having to accept the seeming impotency of a justice system that cannot accommodate the obvious guilt and deliver a

fair and just verdict, a deterrent to all future attempts of terrorist acts.

IMAGINE WALKING THROUGH THE CARCASS OF THE KANISHKA AIRCRAFT, PAIN OF READING AUTOPSIES THE HORRIFIC DESCRIPTION OF THE INJURIES SUFFERED

LET US ASK OURSELVES

Let us ask ourselves – why are we here today?

Is this inquiry about closure for the families?

Is this inquiry about fulfilling a campaign promise?

Is it about appeasing a group of South Asian Canadians or is it about acknowledging their patience, perseverance and dignity?

Is it about redressing a wrong that has become a stain on our national conscience?

Is it to demonstrate that Canada cares?

→ IMAGINE THE HORROR OF RECURRING NIGHTMARE OF DISTANT RETURNS FROM A LONG TRIP.

This
Is the inquiry about sending a message to the world that Canada is not soft on terrorism?

It is about all of the above + more

For me, the inquiry is about accountability, a public acknowledgement of the past wrongs that have plagued the Air India bombing. Twenty years is a lifetime, an eternity for the families who have waited with trust and faith in the justice system. Our pain ^{is} ~~was~~ aggravated by the sheer apathy that we encountered in our attempts to meet with Government in the years following the tragedy. The Air India tragedy is Canada's 9/11, it happened sixteen years before 9/11, yet no one woke up to that fact; imagine how much it hurts when people speak of 9/11 as the world's most significant act of aviation terrorism, deleting the Air India bombing from our collective memories. Canada's most

heinous act of terrorism had disappeared from the nation's radar to the extent that the events of 9/11 *were consistently spoken of* registered as the first act of aviation terrorism. The Air India bombing had been relegated to a distant past, unrelated to Canada, because a majority of the victims were of South Asian ancestry, the aircraft belonged to the Indian Government, and the cause for the tragedy was located in some obscure sectarian issues in India. Bob Rae was the first national *public* figure to call it a mass murder, a Canadian tragedy. The Air India bombing was a dastardly act of revenge conceived on Canadian soil by Canadians against Canadians. Let us not forget that ever! Let the inquiry serve to remind all Canadians that the potential for homegrown terrorism is very real! Today, Sikh terrorism may not be a threat, it has been replaced by the

even more potent terrorist ideologies, that is the real threat that we face daily with unimaginable consequences.

Today we live in an increasingly complex and unstable society, vulnerable to the passions and ideologies of misguided individuals and groups. Terrorism is nameless and faceless, it's motivation and modus operandi are unpredictable. The Air India bombing, along with many other disasters such as the World Trade Centre bombings and the recent London Subway explosions are an indication that all Governments must be ever vigilant and continue to address systemic wrongs in their information gathering and law enforcement policies to protect their citizens. We cannot

allow history to repeat itself.

We have been patient, dignified and hopeful while coping with unimaginable pain that the rest of Canada has forgotten about. Twenty years ago, a devastating tragedy irrevocably altered their lives, and the one hope we held on to was a successful conviction of ~~Malik and~~ ^{the two} ~~Bagri~~ ^{accused}

~~Bagri~~. The long and expensive trial was yet another callous miscarriage of justice.

Only this past week, we have witnessed the outcome of the Maher Arar inquiry. Justice O'Connor has made public the mishandling of the Arar case by the RCMP. How is that Canadians have been led to believe that since the 1985 Air India bombing, the existing inadequacies at that time have been addressed

and corrected. Fast forward to 2006, Canadians have yet again been given every reason to question the efficacy and integrity of our law enforcement, an agency in whom millions of Canadians place their trust on a daily basis.

In 1984 and 1985, the alarming rise of Sikh extremism was being closely monitored by the RCMP and CSIS, regrettably their assessment of the threat of radical fundamentalism was unrealistic and dangerously inadequate. Further to that grave deficiency, one knows of the then dysfunctional relationship of these two agencies and the unacceptable and inexcusable mishandling of the RCMP and CSIS investigation and the drastic outcome of the erasure of the tapes.

For us families, we have played out scenarios of 'if only' so many times in our minds over the past twenty-one years that we ~~are~~ haunted every day by ~~playing out~~ images of our family unit ~~intact~~. If only, the conspiracy was taken seriously, if only the CSIS officers had not walked away from the site of the explosives testings, if only there were officers assigned from within the Sikh community to monitor the actions of the accused, if only the suitcase had not been loaded without the corresponding passenger, if only the security staff at the airport had been trained adequately to recognize the signal from the hand held sniffer, if only --- the list goes on.

*continue to be
as it
could
have
been*

Major

~~Honorable~~ Commissioner, we deeply appreciate the onerous and heavy responsibility you have

undertaken to lead this inquiry to an expedient, fact finding and remedial outcome. You have pledged us your complete and uncompromising leadership in ensuring that the following areas are addressed in the Air India Inquiry:

- A look at the organizational and legal framework of co-operation between the CSIS and RCMP. The use of security intelligence gathering and other evidence in criminal investigations and prosecutions.**
- The law enforcement and investigation within communities ruled by fear and the adequacy of witness protection**
- Current procedures for aviation security**
- Financing of terrorism through charitable organizations**
- Review of the current judicial systems and the**

possibility of a three-judge system

➤ **Review of Canada's immigration and extradition policies**

How can this Inquiry bring hope to lives again, more importantly, how can we restore faith that Canada cares about and protects the rights of its people? How can Canada demonstrate to the rest of the world that it is a country that upholds the highest ideals of justice and civil rights and that it is a beacon to the rest of the world that such heinous acts do not go unpunished. Only an Inquiry can achieve that result. However, the Air India Inquiry cannot be used ^{to} appease the families of the victims, nor is it about retribution. We must seize this opportunity to make fundamental and lasting changes in our legislation and policies that will affect all

Canadians. We must commit ourselves to ensuring that no Canadian ever experiences what the victims of the Air India bombing underwent. We must create a Canada that provides a safe home for all its peoples.

You, Commissioner Major and the families of the victims of the Air India bombing have been brought together by an unknown ^{hand} act of destiny, a force that we cannot comprehend, but one that we are grateful for. Our joint destiny is to make the Inquiry the singular, most important vehicle to bring about lasting policy changes in our country, and to finally uncover the truth. The Inquiry must not be bound by rigid time lines, it must be uncompromising in its ultimate goal of transparency, accountability and an instrument of making sense of the murder of

329 innocent victims. This can only be accomplished if you, Commissioner Major, are as passionate about un-earthing the truth and delivering justice as we are. If this is not accomplished the Inquiry will have failed. The Air India Inquiry is as much about the future as it is about the past!