

## **The Impact of the Khalistan Movement on India-Canada Bilateral Relations**

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### **Abstract:**

The Sikh community are a distinctive cultural and religious community in South Asia with a vibrant diaspora and a rich history, calling the Punjab region of the Indian Subcontinent their homeland. Although a largely peaceful community, starting in the early 1980s, radical separatists spearheaded a bloody campaign to carve out an independent, theocratic Sikh state known as Khalistan (Land of the Pure) in Punjab and the surrounding areas of Northern India (HAF, 2023). The Indian government came down strongly on the movement, and in the civil war that ensued, the domestic demand for a separate state eventually became dormant. Although 'normalcy' returned to the Punjab region in the mid-1990s, Khalistan lived on in the diaspora, particularly in multi-cultural democracies such as Canada, which accepted and assimilated many migrants from Punjab (Shani, 2023). With around 4% of Canadians of Indian ethnicity (1.3 million individuals) and 1,00,000 Indian students, Canada has one of the largest overseas Indian communities (Singh, 2023). As such, India and Canada share ties of democracy and pluralism and have deep interpersonal bonds; however, the Khalistan movement, which has adapted itself well to the workings of democracy, is greatly pressured by the diaspora in the country. The support it has been receiving from the Canadian government, particularly in recent years, has often been a major obstacle in bilateral discourse. This paper makes a humble attempt at analysing the factors responsible for the popularity of the demand, particularly among the Indian diaspora in Canada, and its subsequent impact on various aspects of Indo-Canadian relations, particularly in the Narendra Modi- Justin Trudeau years. While the years preceding the Modi-Trudeau era did witness some of the more violent flashpoints between the two countries, the present dispensation has once again seen their bilateral relations floundering over the Sikh separatist issue, the dealing with which requires skill and acumen as has been rarely witnessed before.

**Keywords:** Khalistan movement, bilateral relations, India, Canada, Sikh ethnonationalism

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*Note: The article was written in late 2023 and reflects the views of bilateral situation then.*

## **Introduction**

The genesis of Khalistan can potentially be traced to the policies followed by the British administration in the later part of the 1800s and early 1900s that tried to split Sikhs and Hindus. Sikhs were recruited in great numbers in the British army and were deployed against Hindu monarchs who rebelled against the British Empire. After independence and the subsequent split of the Indian subcontinent, disputes between the state of Punjab and the central Indian government emerged, resulting in grievances against the Indian government among many Sikhs (Singh, 2023). It was at this time that a demand for Khalistan or a separate homeland for Sikhs gained traction, but wasn't pushed ahead as its leaders realised that such a demand wouldn't find favour with the leadership in New Delhi, who were already reeling under immense pressure in the aftermath of the partition of the country and the violence that followed. However, this did not mark the end of aspirations among various Sikh groups for a Sikh homeland. Initiatives such as Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) in 1948 and moves for a Punjabi Suba from the 1950s onwards sustained this desire (Jetly, 2008). While the Indian government wasn't prepared to divide the state on religious lines, in 1966, it agreed to a division of the state on linguistic lines, with the Sikh-majority, Punjabi-speaking 'Punjab' and the Hindu-majority, Hindi-speaking 'Haryana' emerging out of the process. However, the creation of a separate state too didn't completely assuage the demands of the Sikhs. Many Sikhs in Punjab also resented the sharing of the joint capital of Chandigarh with Haryana and viewed water-sharing agreements with Haryana in a negative light, as being detrimental to the interests of the Punjabi farmers. (HAF, 2023). Finally, a mix of these and various other resentments that the Sikhs held against the Congress government at the centre, particularly Indira Gandhi's attempts at undermining the Akali Dal, the Sikh political party and adopting a highly authoritarian approach, saw a violent political movement brewing. Leaders during this time even asserted that Sikh interests would be safe only in an independent Sikh country like Khalistan.

Violent clashes between radicalized Sikh groups led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and the Nirankari sect (considered heretical by the former) in April 1978 are seen as the beginning of the violent phase of the movement. In 1980, Bhindranwale and his supporters started targeting Hindus and murdered Lala Jagat Narain, the publisher of *Punjab Kesri*, a vernacular newspaper and a vociferous critic of Bhindranwale (HAF, 2023). What ensued was large-scale violence in the state. Bhindranwale, who was the Congress's own creation and was considered a political masterstroke against the Akali Dal, now became a thorn in the flesh of his own masters. The militant movement that he spearheaded reached its apex in the 1980s when the state witnessed bombings, assassinations, kidnappings and killings of civilians. In June 1984, Indira



Gandhi responded by launching ‘Operation Bluestar’, which had the objective of neutralising Bhindranwale and his armed supporters; the army was directed to take control of the Golden Temple, where Bhindranwale and his supporters were taking shelter (Singh, 2023). This contentious operation didn’t go well with India’s Sikh community, which considered it to be a destruction of their holy shrine, and later that year, in 31st October 1984, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards in an act of vengeance. In response to this, the Congress party was accused of unleashing a pogrom targeted at the Sikh community, and the country experienced violent religious unrest. Following this, several attempts were made by the Centre to promote peace in the region, including the signing of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, but it was only in 1992 that normalcy was finally restored to the region when the government made a firm resolve to tackle the uprising using the Punjab police, the army and the para-military forces. This period also saw popular support for the largely militant movement decline, following large-scale atrocities being committed on civilians, regardless of community and religion (Jetly, 2008).

Although ‘normalcy’ returned to the Punjab region in the mid-1990s with the restoration of democratic elections, Khalistan lived on in the diaspora, particularly in multi-cultural societies such as Canada, which accepted many migrants from Punjab (Shani, 2023). While India and Canada shared cordial relations based on common values like democracy and respect for the cultural diversities of its citizens, marked occasionally by differences in their ideological constructs, particularly during the Cold War, the Khalistan demand, propagated mainly by the diaspora, added a whole new dimension to Indo-Canadian relations. India expressed concerns regarding the activities of Khalistan sympathisers in Canada, who espoused Punjab’s secession from India. This created tension in the bilateral ties, which reached one of its lowest ebbs in 1985, when Sikh extremists blew up Air India flight 182 off the coast of Ireland, killing all 329 passengers and crew. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) were blamed for not actively pursuing the case and filing missing reports (Mehta, 2019). Canada was also accused of providing asylum to Talwinder Singh Parmar, who headed the Babbar Khalsa International and was considered the mastermind behind the bombing of the Air India flight. The country also proved a convenient point for Khalistani figures to travel to Pakistan to meet and train with their handlers from Pakistan’s intelligence wing, the ISI, as in the case of Parmar (Hindustan Times, 2023). This acted as a serious deterrent in fostering good bilateral ties between India and Canada. In the years that followed, the Canadian government did their best to foster a relationship to gain India’s confidence and in 1997, both sides decided to create a bilateral Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism (JWGCT) to coordinate against Khalistan separatist groups. Following India’s liberalisation in the 1990s, economic cooperation between the two countries improved significantly. In 2000, under the leadership of Jean

Chrétien and with John Manley as foreign minister, Canada fostered a broader economic partnership with India, eventually removing all economic sanctions in 2001.

Relations between the two countries particularly blossomed when Stephen Harper's government assumed power in Canada in 2006, which marked a departure from the days of the Axworthy doctrine, which hindered especially economic cooperation with India. In 2010, India's then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Canada to attend the G-20 Summit saw India and Canada achieving a major breakthrough on civil nuclear cooperation, this was indeed a watershed in bilateral relations since India's reluctance to accede to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) was one of the major reasons for the widening gulf between New Delhi and Ottawa (Mehta, 2019).

As will be analysed in the later sections, relations between the two countries in the days of the Prime Ministership of Narendra Modi and Justin Trudeau in India and Canada, respectively, faced their own shares of ups and downs, but the resurgence of the Khalistan movement in recent days among the Indian diaspora in Canada has caused a significant stir in the relations.

## **2. Discussion**

### *2.1 Reasons for the resurgence of the Khalistan movement among the Sikh diaspora and its subsequent impact on bilateral relations*

In the 1990s, Benedict Anderson (1992) suggested that Sikh nationalism in Canada was a form of 'long-distance nationalism' by which he meant nationalism without 'responsibility or accountability' (Shani, 2023). While the statement is open to debate, the way Sikh nationalism, as displayed by its diaspora, has played out in recent years, seems to all but confirm this idea. Whereas today, the key issues in their homeland of Punjab are farmer suicides due to high debt burdens, the central government's planned liberalisation of the agricultural sector, which was the main reason behind the farmers' protest in 2021, youth unemployment and the persisting drug menace, which has paralysed the state often, the spectre of Khalistan still looms large in the diaspora.

The reasons for this are manifold. The first reason is that sovereignty for the Sikhs is embodied; i.e. all baptised Sikhs wear symbols which continuously serve as a reminder to them that they are part of a religious and political community: the Khalsa (Shani, 2023). Going back historically, this order of the Khalsa, which translates as 'the community of the pure', was initiated by the tenth and final human guru of Sikhism, Guru Gobind Singh. The practice of the gurus of naming their human successors was established by the first guru



of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Dev; as such, this practice has been continued as each successive guru named their successor. However, in 1708, the 10th Guru, Gobind Singh, brought the line to an end by conferring spiritual authority on the Sikh Holy book, the Adi Granth, which was given the name 'Guru Granth Sahib' (Jathol, 2019). Temporal authority lay upon the community of baptised Sikhs through the doctrine of Guru Panth—the corporate body of the community (a collective gathering of the Khalsa), in whom his spirit is eternally present, which eventually led to the emergence of a discourse that identifies the Sikhs as a political as well as a religious community that shared collective memories. The Sikhs' yearnings for an independent homeland thus have their origins in the Guru period, with the creation of the Khalsa, followed by the Misl period of the 18th century and finally, under Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the 19th century, after he had amalgamated all the self-governing Misl territories to bring them under his own control (Thandi, 2023). Although the empire of Maharaja Ranjit Singh stretched up to the borders of modern-day Afghanistan and was multi-religious, in practice, the Sikhs formed a 'dominant minority', and after his death, it took the British two wars to formally annex the territory (Shani, 2023). Sikhs are reminded of their history every time they visit a gurudwara and witness the community of believers upon which their temporal authority lay.

A second reason is that the practice of secularism in the Indian state has been waning in recent times. Although the Indian version of secularism has always been the positive notion of the term, which entails acceptance of religious and cultural differences in the public sphere, the state, in theory, was to be a neutral arbiter between competing claims from religious communities and was to maintain a 'principled distance' from religion (Shani, 2023). While the Sikh community has been the target of alleged state-sponsored violence, especially in the aftermath of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the subsequent emergence of Hindu nationalism as espoused by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in recent times has only served to accentuate the consolidation of an Indian national identity around a Hindu ethnic core. This has served to cause frantic desperation among minorities, including the Sikh community, who have always believed themselves to be distinct from the Hindu fold.

The third and by far the most pertinent reason is that the present international order only grants recognition to nations that can claim statehood (Shani, 2023). Accordingly, claims to Sikh nationalism are based on an ethnic Punjabi core, the Punjabi language and a territorial homeland, as Giorgio Shani and Gurharpal Singh have argued in their book *Sikh Nationalism*. They further postulate the argument that while the Sikhs developed a political system of their own to take back control of the Gurudwaras during British colonial rule, which led to the establishment of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the



control of the SGPC doesn't extend to the diaspora, where different factions have emerged committed to the establishment of a Sikh homeland. Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in whose assassination the discreet hand of India was visible, as alleged by Canada, was a leader of one such faction organising a referendum on Khalistan (Shani, 2023).

In recent times, ever since Justin Trudeau assumed the Prime Ministership of Canada in 2015, the Khalistan issue has cast its shadow over the relations it shares with India. Trudeau's government is dependent on the support of Jagmeet Singh's New Democratic Party (NDP) to survive and retain power. Jagmeet Singh, a vocal supporter of Khalistani politics, has associations with violent Khalistani leaders. While Trudeau previously patronised Khalistani elements in Canada, his competitive wooing of Khalistanis intensified after Singh emerged as a rival claimant for Khalistani votes (ET Online, 2023). Prior to this most recent incident, the Indian government has consistently expressed worry about Canada harbouring pro-Khalistan separatists. The country has witnessed an upsurge of Khalistan-related activities in 2023, with anonymous insurgents vandalising a Ram temple in Mississauga with anti-India graffiti on February 17. Khalistani extremists also defiled the Gauri Shankar Mandir in Brampton, Ontario, on January 31, spray-painting phrases like 'Khalistan Zindabad, Hindustan Murdabad' on its walls (Singh, 2023). However, by far, the incident that has really escalated tensions between the two countries was when the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accused "agents of the Indian government" of killing Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023. The claims, which came immediately after the top leaders had met each other on the outlines of the New Delhi G20 Summit, were denounced as "absurd and motivated" by India and strained bilateral relations between the two countries (Singh, 2023).

## *2.2 The Khalistan Movement's impact on Economic relations between India and Canada in recent times*

India has been a top destination for Canadian investments from entities such as the Canadian Pension Plan Investment Board and asset management firm Brookfield in sectors ranging from infrastructure to start-ups. According to Invest India, Canada is the 18th largest foreign investor in India with a cumulative investment of \$ 3.3 billion calculated from the period spanning from April 2000 to March 2023, representing 0.5% of the total FDI inflows into India (Surabhi, 2023). India was also Canada's ninth-largest trading partner in 2022, with bilateral trade between them touching \$ 8.16 billion in the financial year 2023. As per data, in the first quarter of the 2023 Financial Year, from April to July 2023, India's exports to Canada stood at \$1.24 billion, while imports amounted to \$1.32 billion. Top exports from India to Canada included pharmaceuticals, iron and steel products and telecom instruments, while coal, fertilisers and pulses account for India's top imports from Canada (Surabhi, 2023).



However, since the September 2023 allegations on India, the two countries have been embroiled in frenzied official recriminations involving mutual suspension of visa services and reduction in diplomatic missions. Instead of following the due diplomatic process by concluding the probe beforehand and prosecuting based on evidence, Justin Trudeau's allegations were much like a bolt of lightning, completely out of the blue. Ottawa's contention, backed by intelligence inputs from the Five Eyes, has opened a Pandora's box for both countries' economic ties (Singh, 2023). Prior to Prime Minister Trudeau's visit to India on the outlines of the G20 Summit, the Canadian government officials had said trade negotiations between the two countries had been paused. The India-Canada Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) negotiations were formally re-launched in March 2022, and the two countries had been keen on completing the negotiations by 2023-end, but due to this frigid development in the relations, no progress is expected so soon (Surabhi, 2023).

While bilateral trade between the two nations is unlikely to be affected given the strong economic relationship, the complementarity in demand and supply between the two nations and people to people connect between India and Canada, the pause in the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations could have an impact on momentum, as businesses might become more circumspect about future expansion plans (Singh, 2023). If industry estimates serve as an indicator, the prospects of a ripple effect on commercial ties could be especially detrimental to Canada's economy. Economic projections demonstrate that concluding an FTA could boost bilateral trade significantly, yielding a GDP gain of \$ 3.8 billion to \$ 5.9 billion for Canada by 2035.

Additionally, this feud could also have an adverse impact on the student community in India, who view Canada as a preferred destination for their higher studies. India is by far Canada's largest source of international students, making up for roughly 40% of total study permit holders, which also helps the higher education institutes to provide subsidized education to domestic students. Canada's suspension of visas could potentially see a rise in tuition fees for its citizens, even if for the short term (Singh, 2023). Additionally, the savings of the Canadian working class are under acute risk. According to data available, some of Canada's biggest Public Pension fund managers have invested tens of billions of dollars in Indian firms and projects. The Canadian Pension Plan Investment Board, for instance, has investments totalling \$21 billion, with experts suggesting that the margins on investment could be dampened if the diplomatic feud and Canadian investigations linger on. (Singh, 2023).

In addition to these economic impacts of the recent diplomatic spat between the two countries, coming amidst accusations by Canada, the country is on the losing side in geostrategic terms as well. Its Indo-



Pacific Strategy, which it made public in November 2022, describes the plan as striving for a “sustainable, meaningful and engaged” Canadian presence in the Indo-Pacific. Crucial to this vision, as with most Western countries, is the diversification of trade away from China towards other Southeast Asian countries and, most importantly, towards India. Ottawa, taking into account India’s growing economy and salience, remained intent on not only signing an FTA with India but also joining the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), a grouping that involves Japan, Australia, and India. However, in the current scenario, it remains unlikely for India to pursue a deeper bilateral or regional economic partnership with Canada (Singh, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

Over the years and particularly so in recent times, India-Canada relations have struggled to prosper, despite the two countries sharing various complementarities, including their democratic character and associations with the Commonwealth. Starting with ideological differences during the Cold War, as each country took a different stand regarding the happenings of the day, Canada’s inability to take into consideration India’s strategic realities has festered differences between the two sides. On the home front, India’s Canada policy has almost always been informed by the presence of Khalistan sympathisers who espouse anti-Indian sentiments. It is in New Delhi’s strategic interest to display large-heartedness and understand that the past events affecting the Sikh diaspora in Canada have gradually become a part of the political discourse there. Even so, it is more pertinent for the policy makers in Indian to realise that not all of the Sikh immigrants in Canada are Khalistan supporters and hence, branding events as pro-Khalistan demonstrations, as it did when the farmers of Punjab held protests in Delhi against the farm laws in 2020, is only detrimental to the interests of the country as it angers the Sikh diaspora and attracts ill will from them. Similarly, it is equally important for the Canadian dispensation, particularly Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, to avoid jeopardising Canada’s bilateral relations with India solely for the sake of a few votes. Canada would do well if it could find its way out of the diplomatic hazard it has created, as soon as possible. It should either produce evidence to back its claims or retract its statement and seriously address India’s claims regarding the issue. It lies in Canada’s long-term economic and geostrategic interests to eschew short-term political considerations and realise the substantive benefits that its ties with India promise to guarantee. Mutual cooperation is essential for any relationship to prosper, and it lies in both countries' interests to develop bonds of cooperation soon.

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