

The Sikh diaspora and revival of Khalistan movement in Canada



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Abstract

The resurgence of the Khalistan movement, a separatist endeavor with the objective of establishing an independent Sikh state in the region of Punjab, India, has found significant support and impetus from the Sikh diaspora residing in Canada. While the origins of the Khalistan movement can be traced back to the 1980s, it has recently witnessed a noteworthy resurgence, particularly within the Canadian Sikh community. This revival can be attributed to several factors, not the least of which is the substantial and steadily expanding Sikh population in Canada. This research paper delves into the intricate interplay between politics, the Indian diaspora in Canada, and the Khalistan movement, aiming to furnish readers with an in-depth understanding of how these elements have not only influenced but continue to exert a profound impact on the dynamics of bilateral relations. This research endeavor undertakes a nuanced exploration of a multifaceted issue, aiming to elucidate its intricate historical underpinnings, its contemporary expressions, and the profound ramifications it bestows upon both nations. The paper critically explains how the Khalistan movement, finds its deep-seated origins within the rich historical and religious tapestry of the Sikh community in India. This is a movement that has evoked profound sentiments and ignited impassioned political discourse not merely within the confines of India but also amongst the expansive Indian diaspora dispersed on Canadian soils.

Keywords: *Sikh diaspora, Khalistan movement, Canada, Punjab, Sikh migration, transnationalism, identity, Diplomacy, activism, multiculturalism, Politics.*

Introduction

A diaspora represents an ethnic minority of migrant origin that retains deep emotional and material ties with their country of origin. Diasporas, by nature, exist at the crossroads of domestic and international politics, holding a unique position in the realm of international relations. Over the past two centuries, individuals of Indian descent have dispersed to nearly every corner of the globe, constituting the second-largest Asian diaspora worldwide, surpassed only by the Chinese. These people of Indian heritage, numbering over 15 million and scattered across 70 nations, significantly form more than 40% of the population in countries such as Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, and Surinam. Furthermore, they constitute notable albeit smaller minority populations in Malaysia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Uganda, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.

Canada, in particular, hosts a substantial contingent of Indian immigrants, chiefly hailing from the Sikh community. In such background, the Sikh diaspora in Canada signifies those Sikhs who have resettled in the country while maintaining a diverse array of connections, whether tangible, tangential, or constructed, to

their ancestral homeland in the Indian state of Punjab. Notably, Sikh nationalism within the Canadian Sikh diaspora, emphasizing a distinct Sikh ethnic and national identity, has experienced a pronounced resurgence since the mid-1980s. Drawing inspiration from historical and contemporary developments tied to Sikh nationalism in India, it becomes evident that diaspora Sikh nationalism persists, manifesting its vibrancy in regions harboring a significant Sikh expatriate population.

Colonial Networks, Multiculturalism, and Sikh Immigration

Indian immigration to Canada has, historically, exhibited a unique geographical and social composition. The historical significance of India-Canada linkages can be traced back to the intricate colonial networks connecting Britain, Canada, and India. Canada, renowned for its steadfast commitment to multiculturalism and diversity, has emerged as a favored destination for numerous Indian immigrants, notably the Sikh community. For nearly 120 years, the Indian diaspora has been making influential contributions to Canada. The first Indian immigrants arrived in 1887 on a ship bound for India, making a stop in British Columbia. Most

of these early immigrants were Jat Sikh laborers from Punjab, drawn to British Columbia by its burgeoning resource industries. The majority of Indian immigrants in this period hailed from a specific region within Punjab known as Doaba. Colonial economic changes in Doaba led to a significant exodus of young men seeking economic opportunities overseas to support their families and maintain land holdings. Such migration pattern has evolved into a vital element binding the two nations of India and Canada over the course of the last century.

At the outset, India and Canada were both British colonies, and Indians did not require visas to enter Canada. As the number of Indian immigrants increased, concerns among white Canadians grew about job competition in factories, mills, and lumberyards. Anti-Asian sentiments, initially directed at the Chinese and Japanese, soon encompassed Indians as unwelcome Asian ethnic groups. However, in 1967, Canada implemented a new immigration policy that eliminated racial, religious, and national origin discrimination, shifting towards a points-based system that considered various qualifications. This policy change also allowed former Sikh migrants, who had been few in number until the 1940s, to sponsor their parents, initiating a chain migration process. Since the late 1990s, an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 Indians have been arriving in Canada annually. Presently, the Indo-Canadian community stands as arguably the largest Indian diaspora globally and the second-largest immigrant group in Canada, closely trailing – and potentially surpassing – the Chinese immigrant population.

History of Sikh extremism for Khalistan

The partition of Punjab in 1947, dividing it between India and Pakistan, brought about a significant demographic shift as Sikhs migrated en masse to the Indian portion. This migration resulted in Sikhs becoming the majority in central Punjab. Despite the efforts of the Akali Dal to establish a Punjabi state, Indian national leaders were initially skeptical and uncooperative. It was only after the formation of Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh that a smaller Punjab, excluding the Punjabi-speaking Haryana region, gained recognition as a state in India. From 1982, Sikh mobilization in India surged, as the Akali Takht's influence in Punjab grew significantly. A pivotal moment was the Indian government's military action, Operation Blue Star, in June 1984, which

resulted in the death of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale within the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar. This event triggered the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, leading to widespread anti-Sikh riots in India, causing the loss of many Sikh lives and destruction of their properties. This period was marked by political instability in Punjab, driven by a blend of political unrest, religious tensions, and economic grievances. These factors fueled the rise of the Khalistan movement, as some sought an independent Sikh state to address these perceived injustices and affirm their identity. Consequently, Punjab witnessed a civil war, with various militant factions emerging, some explicitly advocating for Khalistan. This movement extended its influence beyond India, impacting the Sikh diaspora and affecting India's international relations, notably with countries like Canada, home to a substantial Sikh community.

Moreover, a significant number of Sikhs chose to emigrate from Punjab to nations with thriving Sikh communities like the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Consequently, while Punjab witnessed a return to "normalcy" in the mid-1990s with the restoration of democratic elections, the idea of Khalistan persisted within the diaspora, particularly in multicultural societies like Canada, which welcomed many Punjabi migrants. Sikh nationalism within the Canadian Sikh diaspora, characterized by a unique Sikh ethnic and national identity, experienced a noticeable upsurge starting from the 1980s. This movement was accompanied by a growing demand among activists for the establishment of an independent Sikh state (Khalistan) in India. The Sikh diaspora's nationalism in Canada has fostered a significant political and social mobilization aimed at raising community awareness and enhancing political participation. A closer examination of Sikh diaspora nationalism reveals that "civic" and "ethnic" nationalisms have become intertwined, coexisting in parallel.

The Sikh diaspora in Canada is not solely defined by economic migration; it transcends geographical boundaries, intertwining with political, identity, and diaspora dynamics. This diaspora has evolved into a conflict diaspora, venerating figures like Bhindranwale while criticizing India's armed forces more than the militants. Although the Khalistan movement has

waned in modern-day Punjab, it persists among certain Sikh diasporic communities. Bhindranwale is now an emblem of resistance for many young Sikhs in India and abroad, much like Che Guevara. Even within India, he is revered as a fighter for Sikh interests, symbolized on car stickers, posters, framed photos, and T-shirts. Presently, the current generation of Canadian diaspora nationalists predominantly identifies as Canadian, while also connecting to the idea of a sovereign Sikh nation (Khalistan) in India. With an estimated Sikh population exceeding 490,000, Canada hosts one of the largest Sikh communities outside India. This distinct migrant community has achieved considerable success in various sectors, including agriculture, forestry, trade, and commerce, primarily under Sikh ownership or supervision. Sikhs maintain significant political influence at the local, provincial, and federal levels in Canada. That's why scholars suggest that Sikh nationalism in Canada is a form of 'long-distance nationalism,' characterized by a lack of responsibility or accountability.

Impact on the diplomatic ties

The increasing influence of the Indian diaspora in Canada has shaped India-Canada relations, both positively and negatively. These relations are founded on shared values like democracy and pluralism, and the strong people-to-people connections that exist today. The widespread Indian diaspora in Canada, present in various Canadian cities, wields significant influence in determining the nature of diplomatic ties between the two nations. The origins of diplomatic relations between Canada and India can be traced back to India's independence in 1947, when both countries embraced democratic values and multilateralism, united under the British Commonwealth. While it seemed that Canada and India were destined to become close partners bridging the East and West in the postwar world, their relationship has witnessed more challenges than breakthroughs. Notable events, such as Secretary of State for External Affairs Allan MacEachen's 1983 visit to India, aimed at improving bilateral relations, were met with enthusiasm. However, they were marred by the temporary closure of the Indian Consulate in Vancouver and violent protests in Toronto in 1984 in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star. These incidents led to the signing of an extradition treaty in 1987 but didn't resolve the

blame game between the two nations. The present generation of Canadian diaspora nationalists, while primarily identifying as Canadian, also maintain a connection to the Sikh nation (Khalistan), which aspires to sovereignty and claims territory in India. Canada hosts one of the largest Sikh populations outside of India, with an estimated 490,000 Sikhs. As a distinct migrant community, Sikhs have achieved remarkable success in various sectors of Canadian society and politics. Their influence extends to agriculture, forestry, trade, and commerce, particularly in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario. Sikhs maintain strong connections in local, provincial, and federal politics, further underscoring their significance in the Canadian social and political landscape.

Moreover, as Sikh nationalism in India transitioned from a 'civic' to a more 'ethnic' form during the 1980s and 1990s, numerous militant organizations surfaced between 1982 and 1993, resulting in the emergence of approximately 60 Sikh separatist groups, the majority of which endorsed violent means to advance the Khalistan cause. Tensions escalated with the 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182, which originated in Canada and was targeted by one of these Sikh militant factions. Additionally, Sikh extremists carried out several terrorist attacks in Canada, targeting Indian interests and those Sikhs openly opposing violence. In the 1990s and 2000s, efforts to strengthen economic ties between the two nations were rekindled, leading to expanded trade relations and Canada becoming a crucial source of energy and minerals for India. Simultaneously, the Indian diaspora in Canada played a pivotal role in enhancing social and commercial exchanges between the two countries. Notably, their influence in fostering the exchange of ideas and business networks was paramount. In 2011, Canada designated the year as the 'Year of India,' acknowledging the substantial contribution of the Indian community to the nation's growth.

However, India feels that Canada has not taken sufficient measures to counter Sikh extremists advocating for an independent Khalistan. The Indian government strongly condemns the activities of Sikh separatists in Canada and protests against the open display of Sikh symbolism supporting Punjab's independence or autonomy in India. On numerous occasions, India has called on the Canadian government to

crack down on Sikh separatists and quell Khalistan activism, considering diaspora Sikh nationalism divisive and such activities unlawful and tantamount to treason. Canadian leaders, including Justin Trudeau and their predecessors, have attempted to assuage Indian concerns by affirming that Canada does not endorse or support anyone who poses a threat to India's sovereignty, unity, or territorial integrity. Nevertheless, they face the challenge of an "electorally significant minority of Sikhs back home," whose interests cannot be disregarded. Consequently, the Canadian Sikh diaspora, despite its underdog status, has repeatedly strained the relationship between Canada and India.

The 2023 diplomatic row between the nations

The dynamic has evolved over time, influencing the foreign policies of both nations, their domestic politics, and their international standing. While the Indian diaspora in Canada has played a dual role in the development of India and India-Canada relations, the waning of terrorism in Punjab has transformed this community into a positive force, strengthening the ties between these two Commonwealth nations. Instances like the Ontario provincial government's declaration of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots as a genocide in April 2017 have consistently triggered adverse reactions from the Indian government. However, while New Delhi's concerns about a potential resurgence of Sikh extremism within Canada's Sikh community and the perceived support from Canada's political leadership may appear exaggerated to some, Prime Minister Trudeau's reluctance to distance himself from Khalistani elements in the Sikh community suggests that he may not be doing everything in his power to alleviate India's apprehensions and improve the strained bilateral relationship.

Further, Trudeau's week-long visit to India in 2018 was widely regarded as a diplomatic disaster, marked by a lack of welcome from Indian Prime Minister Modi. Incidents such as the circulation of Khalistani posters targeting Indian officials, attacks on the Indian High Commission premises, and a pro-Khalistani parade commemorating the 'Operation Bluestar' anniversary with controversial displays further exacerbated tensions in India-Canada ties. In December 2018, Public Safety Canada, under significant pressure from Sikh organizations in

Canada, included a section on "Sikh (Khalistani) extremism" in its annual report on terrorist threats to Canada, only to remove it in April 2019. This episode highlights the delicate balance Trudeau's minority government must maintain between securing votes from the Sikh community and maintaining a reliable partnership with India, which seeks to curb challenges to its sovereignty. Overall, these developments have pushed the already fragile Canada-India relationship to new extremes, as New Delhi seeks a trustworthy ally to manage sovereignty challenges while Trudeau's government must navigate the complex political landscape within Canada.

The recent G20 summit in Delhi provided a glimpse into strained international relations, notably evident in Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's brief and tense meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Adding to Trudeau's diplomatic discomfort, his departure from Delhi was delayed for two days due to technical issues with his plane. Upon his return to Canada on September 18, Trudeau addressed the Canadian Parliament, revealing that Canadian security agencies had been actively investigating potential links between Indian government agents and the killing of Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Canada based its allegations on intercepted electronic communications among Indian diplomats. The situation escalated with tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats, with New Delhi vehemently rejecting Trudeau's claims, deeming them "absurd" and politically motivated. India countered by accusing Canada of providing refuge to "Khalistani terrorists and extremists" and urging the Canadian government to take swift legal action against those operating against India's interests on Canadian soil. India also expressed concerns about threats made against Indian diplomats in Canada and the absence of official action against the individuals responsible. In response, India suspended all visa services in Canada, citing compromised security for its diplomatic missions. Subsequently, on October 3, the Indian government announced the expulsion of 41 out of 62 Canadian diplomats in India within one week.

Against a backdrop of strained relations, India issued a warning to its citizens and travelers bound for Canada, advising them to exercise the utmost caution due to escalating anti-India activities and politically-tolerated hate crimes and

violence within the country. The removal of Canadian diplomats from Canada has dimmed hopes for a diplomatic thaw between India and Canada. Canada has temporarily halted visa and in-person consular services in Bengaluru, Chandigarh, and Mumbai, making them exclusively available at the Canadian High Commission in Delhi. On October 19th, Canada's Foreign Minister Melanie Joly announced the withdrawal of 41 Canadian diplomats from India in response to New Delhi's threat to revoke their diplomatic immunity, describing it as an "unprecedented" move. In the short term, an India-Canada confrontation will hold geopolitical implications. If Canada continues to issue strong statements and directly accuses India, it will pose a unique challenge to Western governments, particularly the UK and Australia. However, the underlying issues in the India-Canada relationship, rooted in differences in rights and values and the historical distrust related to Canada's Sikh diaspora community, are intricate and challenging to resolve. Complicated further by Prime Minister Trudeau's perceived political alignment with pro-Khalistani forces in his country, India's deep-seated distrust of him hinders any prospects of reconciliation as long as he remains in office.

Conclusion

India's rising global influence is vital in addressing various global issues, including the Indo-Pacific, climate change, and global economics. Therefore, a partnership with India is mutually beneficial for the West and India. To foster a meaningful relationship, it's imperative that the Canada reciprocates India's security concerns, as exemplified by nations like the UK and Australia. The Canada-India relationship, with its immense potential, has largely remained unfulfilled. Despite sharing commonalities like democracy and Commonwealth ties, the relationship has faced challenges primarily due to the evolving Khalistan issue. This issue offers both obstacles and opportunities for India, the Sikh diaspora, and the international community at large.

Canada's approach to the Khalistan issue, driven by domestic political considerations, has strained India-Canada relations. While Canada seeks to frame the relationship within shared values, India, as a self-reliant nation, seeks a more balanced partnership. Politicians should devise measures that garner public support without interfering in other countries' internal affairs.

This can include policies for greater community integration and tailored welfare programs. Simultaneously, the government must convey its commitment to preventing misuse of its territory for unlawful activities. Such expectations align with the principles of educated, cultured, and progressive societies and governments. If this situation persists, the negative feedback loop in India-Canada relations will continue, potentially involving other nations in this downward spiral.

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