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Emergent India and its Sikh Diaspora

By: Shinder S. Thandi

Sikh activism is on the rise in the diaspora but it would be wrong to read it as all 'Khalistani'. India's outreach policies need to acknowledge Sikh pluralism and respect the democratic norms under which it operates. Otherwise India risks alienating a growing number of Sikhs in the diaspora.

The diplomatic row between Canada and India that erupted in September over the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian citizen, was a public quarrel waiting to happen. Tensions have been simmering between the two over the past two years and intensified from the beginning of 2023. (In fact, the deterioration in relations started some 38 years ago, after the Canadian authorities botched the trial in the suspected Sikh terrorist attack on Air India flight 182 in June 1985, which killed all 329 on board (Bolan 2005).)

Two months after Canada made public its allegations India was involved in the killing, the *Financial Times* reported that the United States too "thwarted a conspiracy to assassinate a Sikh separatist on American soil and issued a warning to India's government over concerns it was involved in the plot."

The extraordinary events that have taken place leave many diaspora Sikhs even more divided and yet more mistrusting of the government of India, as happened during the protracted stand-off between Sikh farmers and the Narendra Modi government during 2019–2020.

'Credible evidence' on India's involvement in the killing of Nijjar, as claimed by Canada, may never enter the public domain. Unfortunately, a growing proportion of Sikhs already believe India is guilty, despite the government's vociferous public denials. Many Sikhs – admittedly more privately than publicly – praise Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau for giving credence to something they had believed all along.

Until recent decades, the Sikh diaspora was the single largest and probably the most important component of the larger Indian diaspora in Western countries, with Indian embassies working well with the Sikh community. Severe difficulties emerged during the 1980s with the start of the Khalistan movement in Punjab and its enthusiastic support by a section of Sikhs in countries such as Canada, the UK, and the US.

Sikhs have emerged on the back of their experiences of migration as a powerfully networked global diaspora. They have a significant potential to lobby and influence hostland governments, as well as engage in homeland politics to resolve what they consider to be their real or perceived grievances.

Operation Bluestar of June 1984 was a critical event, with thousands of Sikhs demonstrating and venting their anger outside Indian consulates against military action in the Golden Temple in Amritsar. India had labelled the armed militants as a threat to its territorial unity and sovereignty, whereas Sikh militants perceived themselves as 'freedom fighters' involved in a struggle to establish an independent state of Khalistan. Undoubtedly, most Sikhs were traumatised and showed their anger at the army attack, yet this did not mean they supported Khalistan.

These two contrasting and irreconcilable viewpoints have dominated the relationship between them ever since, pitting Indian nationalism – or, as of today, Hindu majoritarianism – against Sikh nationalism, with both trying to win the hearts and minds of the wider Sikh diaspora. But the Indian government's responses to provocations by Khalistani elements have drawn more Sikhs into misinformation and legitimacy wars.

Sikhs have emerged on the back of their experiences of migration as a powerfully networked global diaspora. They have a significant potential to lobby and influence hostland governments, as well as engage in homeland politics to resolve what they consider to be their real or perceived grievances. In this, they are no different from many other diaspora groups based in rich countries, which use complex mobilisation strategies and human rights advocacy networks to lobby hostland governments to influence foreign policies.

Hostland governments, too, recognise diaspora groups' electoral and political power and engage with them constructively to further their self-interests. When their interests coincide, diasporas and hostland governments work closely together (Dewind and Segura 2014). But when their interests diverge, hostland governments pull back, show indifference, or even turn hostile. The diaspora's advocacy power and global reach cannot be neglected, as their actions can cause major international conflicts, as we are now witnessing between Canada and India.

The Sikh diaspora's transnational reach

A century-and-a-half of overseas migration transformed Sikhs into a transnational community which (a) is globally and densely networked thanks to social media, (b) exhibits a global presence with transnational families scattered across many countries and (c) shows a growing global visibility and agency in several areas. The historical experiences of the Sikhs have created a strong sense of mobility that compels them to move with the changing socio-economic environment (Thandi 2017).

Many Sikhs have experienced multiple migrations. For example, Sikhs who initially ventured abroad to Malaysia, Fiji, Singapore, or the United Kingdom later migrated to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, or the United States. This sense of 'nomadism' or 'rootlessness' became even more evident and continues in this age of technological globalisation. This enables Sikhs to remain continuously connected and to exchange information and ideas on homeland politics and immigration on a 24/7 basis.

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Over time, the Sikhs have gravitated towards the more democratic, cosmopolitan, and economically advanced locations, and over three-quarters of the diaspora have now settled in the rich countries of North America, Europe, and Australasia. Three countries – Canada, the UK, and the US – make up nearly 2 million out of the estimated 3 million Sikh diaspora. There has been a lengthy period of overseas settlement, migration experiences, upward socio-economic mobility, the development of extensive political, business, cultural and religious institutions, political participation, and representation at different levels of government.

'Misinformation wars' 1: Khalistan and the anti-India lobby

The Sikhs' yearnings for an independent homeland have their origins in the Guru period with the creation of the *Khalsa* at the dawn of the 17th century, followed by the *Misl* period of the 18th century and finally, under Ranjit Singh in the 19th century after he amalgamated all self-governing *Misl* territories to bring them under his control. The British ended Sikh rule when they annexed Punjab in 1849.

The issue of the 'Sikh homeland' was largely forgotten until talks on the possible partition of India began in the 1940s. The Sikhs, the third largest religious community, argued they also had a legitimate right to a homeland. However, their arguments did not convince the dominant political forces at the time and after vague promises of special protection, they opted to stay with India. It is perhaps worth recalling, as Khalistanis often remind us, that Hukum Singh, the sole Sikh representative in the Constituent Assembly, did not sign the draft Constitution, as he firmly believed that Article 25 defined Sikhs merely as a branch of Hinduism, rather than as a separate and distinct religion.

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In the post-Independence period, the homeland issue became embroiled with the 1950s movement for linguistic reorganisation of states. The Punjabi language issue was not resolved until 1966, when Punjab was partitioned and lost more territory. However, Punjab became a Sikh-majority state for the first time in its history. This continues today, although the Sikh majority in the state fell steadily to 58% from 63% between 1991 and 2011, according to census data.

Despite becoming a Sikh majority state governed by Sikh chief ministers, infighting amongst various political factions resulted in numerous debates on the nature of Indian federalism, centre-state relations, self-determination, and religious autonomy for Sikhs. These debates culminated in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution of 1973, which sought greater devolution within Indian federalism. However, the

union government misinterpreted this as ‘separatist’ and pushed back by providing covert support to minority factions and leaders, giving rise to political unrest in the state. This created political space for the rise of the militancy movement in the early 1980s. It culminated in Operation Bluestar in June 1984, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in October of that year, and the mass violence with several thousand Sikhs massacred in Delhi and other cities.

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Two decades of Khalistani militancy led to much bloodshed and caused hundreds to flee the violence. Many Sikhs sought refuge in countries sympathetic towards those escaping political persecution. Some of these countries, such as the UK, Canada, and the US, also happened to be places that already had large Sikh settlements. This new category of ‘political migrants’ created the ‘conflict-generated’ component in the Sikh diaspora. Their presence changed community dynamics as they began to transplant their Punjab politics to gurdwaras, causing friction and new divisions. New political organisations emerged, and many places witnessed renewed struggles over control of gurdwaras (Tatla 1999).

The Khalistan movement began to take root in the diaspora in the early 1980s, with the politics of the homeland taking centre stage in Sikh political discourse, raising tensions with India. Alongside this, a new narrative of Sikh victimhood began to be constructed and was amplified by the emergence of Sikh print, audio, and visual media. The rise of social media helped connect diaspora Sikhs instantly with each other and the homeland.

At annual rallies held across the diaspora, the narrative primarily focuses on two critical messages: Operation Bluestar as an attack on the Sikh faith and the lack of justice for the 1984 ‘Sikh genocide’ in Delhi. More lately, attempts have been made to add social and economic factors to the narrative, such as alcohol and drug addiction, soil poisoning, farmer debt and suicides and water table depletion. This is presumably to widen the movement’s appeal but does not make a convincing case for Khalistan.

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Overall, the arguments which make up the Khalistani narrative are constantly evolving, often inconsistent and confused and, more importantly, not always linked with *territory*. Many are factually incorrect (or, at best, only partially correct). They are often biased conspiracy theories based on ‘victimhood’, presented as a ‘true picture’ of the Sikh condition and repeated *ad nauseam*. Some young, impressionable minds may buy them, but most Sikhs do not and look to other reasons for Punjab’s challenges.

Amritpal Singh’s popularity, especially amongst some youth in the diaspora, was based on attempts to revive the rhetoric of victimhood, with the media playing into his hands by portraying him as ‘re-born’ Bhindranwale. The armed militia that protected him and the expensive vehicles used in his travel raised eyebrows amongst many Sikhs both in Punjab and the diaspora. Questions were asked about whether he was an Indian or Pakistani agent planted to cause political instability in Punjab. His eventual arrest, after evading police for a month, hardly prompted any protests in Punjab or the diaspora, except amongst minority Khalistani groups.

In more recent years, many Sikh groups accuse the Indian government of infiltrating Sikh institutions, sending surveillance agents to gurdwaras, intimidating Sikh activists and dissenters, and getting some organisations banned as terrorist organisations. In the aftermath of the arrest of Jagtar Singh Johal in India in 2017, allegedly after a tip-off by UK intelligence agencies, [many gurdwara committees in Canada, the US, the UK and Australia banned the entry of Indian government officials into gurdwaras](#). This ban continues six years on because Johal is still under detention, despite global pressure on India to release him.

The Indian government and pro-government media went out of their way to demean the farmers’ movement, deeming it as instigated by Khalistani terrorists. This labelling annoyed the multi-generational diaspora Sikhs who were pro-farmer but anti-Khalistan.

A significant event of the last two years was the farmers' agitation that began in Punjab in 2020, soon after the Modi government passed three agrarian laws in a rushed and undemocratic manner. Resistance continued for almost a year, eventually forcing Modi to make an embarrassing U-turn and repeal the laws. Most of the heterogeneous Sikh diaspora fully supported the farmers and held well-publicised car and truck rallies, some ending up outside consulates. These greatly irritated the Indian government, intensifying tensions (Thandi 2023). The Indian government and pro-government media went out of their way to demean the farmers' movement, deeming it as instigated by Khalistani terrorists.

This labelling annoyed the multi-generational diaspora Sikhs who were pro-farmer but anti-Khalistan. Here, Sikhs were reminded of the 'turban equals terrorism' equation in the 1980s, which had also alienated many of them. The Indian government was increasingly perceived by a growing number of anti-Khalistan Sikhs amongst the diaspora as authoritarian, Hindu-nationalist, insensitive to human and minority rights and anti-farmer. This made many in the diaspora anti-India, but not Khalistani.

Specifically in the Canadian context, following Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's dramatic allegations in the Canadian Parliament, the prejudices of Indian ministers and media about Canadian Sikhs went on full display. Vote bank politics, factional fighting amongst Sikhs and criminality were identified as having influenced the allegations. Thus, the 'terrorist-loving' Trudeau, the 'misguided and permissive' liberal Canada, and a 'Khalistanis-terrorists-criminals nexus' became the main targets. Khalistanis and their sympathisers were also accused by some Indian politicians of capturing strategic cash-rich gurdwaras to utilise their *golak* money or raise funds to fund terrorism and drug smuggling, usually in alliance with Pakistan. The existence of Sikh gang warfare in Vancouver is well known, but for the first time, Khalistani terrorism was now explicitly linked to Punjabi transnational gangsters operating under the Canadian government's watch.

'Misinformation wars' 2: Diaspora outreach, Hindutva, and emergent India

Early this century, India's policy towards its diaspora evolved from 'indifference' to 'active engagement' following the 2002 recommendations of the Singhvi Commission on the Indian Diaspora. A Ministry of Overseas Indians Affairs (MOIA) was created to facilitate linkages between India and its diaspora. However, the MOIA was merged with the more powerful Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in 2016 and became closely aligned with Indian foreign policy. The MEA has been instrumental in projecting Prime Minister Modi as a global statesman, particularly to the Indian diaspora. To promote the Modi brand to an aspirational new Hindu diaspora, which grew rapidly after the IT revolution in the late 1980s, the MEA organised high-profile events in several countries where the prime minister was able to deliver speeches to pre-selected audiences numbering in thousands.

Mobilisation for Hindutva amongst the Hindu diaspora has been going on for a while, as has been diaspora mobilisation for Khalistan (Lall and Thandi 2011). But after the BJP won power in 2014, US-based Hindu diaspora organisations became more aggressive in their mobilisation. They widened their lobbying to include political campaign financing and engaging educational institutions to promote Hindutva. A comprehensive report by Jasa Macher, [Hindu Nationalist Influence in the United States, 2014-2021: The Infrastructure of Hindutva Mobilizing](#), released online by the South Asian Citizen's Web in September 2022, tracked the activities of 24 Sangh Parivar-affiliated organisations. It found seven of these charitable groups had spent nearly \$159 million, over half between 2014–2019, on their programming, mostly on their affiliated groups in India.

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Furthermore, the global rise of India to become the world's fifth-largest economy and forecast to be the third largest within a decade, a favoured nation for foreign investors, a strategic US ally in containing China, the self-proclaimed leader of the Global South, and the 2023 chair of G20, have all combined to embolden India to be more assertive in global affairs. After the successful G20 Delhi summit and allegations about the Nijjar assassination, the MEA upped the ante. It accused the West of 'double standards' and 'cherry picking' on human rights issues and called for reform of the global economic order and more inclusive global institutions.

Thus, India was reaffirming its status as a powerful global actor, well placed to play an important role in geopolitical discourse. However, as *The Economist* magazine recently [warned](#), "rising powers, including India and Saudi Arabia, are projecting force abroad. They resent what they view as Western double standards on state-sponsored killings. New technologies make it easier than ever for governments to strike their enemies with precision, even from great distances." To justify force abroad, governments use arguments

such as a state “unwilling or unable” to deal with terrorism, “right to self-defence”, “anticipatory self-defence”, “imminent threat of attack” and “counter-terrorism”. India’s posture on its rising global status is always underscored by emphasising its shared democratic norms and values with the Global North, despite the well-evidenced democratic backsliding and low rankings on all global human development indices.

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As a counter-response to this government engagement, Sikh advocacy has grown in sophistication and matured. Many human rights groups highlight human rights abuses in Punjab and echo the work published by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (Thandi 2014).

Government attempts to label these groups seeking justice as ‘disguised Khalistan-supporting advocacy’ are misjudgements. For instance, few Sikhs in India or the diaspora supported the call for a worldwide ‘Referendum on Khalistan’ by Sikhs for Justice – a group banned in India. Most Sikhs believe referendums are no more than a cynical attempt by misguided activists to raise awareness and gain some sense of grassroots support for Khalistan. They argue that very few vote in these referendums and consider them meaningless, without legal legitimacy anywhere.

Yet, Sikhs also see the government of India's response to such activism as overreaction and undemocratic. In countries like the UK, political discourses on Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and even English nationalism are seen as part and parcel of the normal democratic and political process. Attempts by Indian embassies to have referendums banned are considered interference in the community’s internal affairs. They probably had the opposite effect of raising awareness and generating even more anti-India feelings amongst the wider Sikh community.

From the beginning of 2023 and leading to Trudeau’s allegation, the relationship between Khalistanis and other non-Khalistan anti-India groups and their relationship with India was increasingly becoming tense but also blurred. Several incidents after Nijjar’s murder and just before or soon after the long-drawn-out search for and arrest of Amritpal Singh involved vandalism of Hindu mandirs, violent demonstrations outside Indian consulates and physical threats to diplomats. Tensions intensified amongst Sikhs themselves, between Khalistani Sikhs and India, and between Canadian Sikhs and Hindus. Non-Khalistan Sikh activists argued they were merely protesting against India’s alleged involvement in Nijjar’s assassination and that they had nothing to do with Khalistan. Referring to these activists, one Indo-Canadian MP, Chandra Arya, asserted, “Snakes in our backyard are raising their heads and hissing.” The comment only raised communal tensions.

Given these events, India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) requested Canadian permission to investigate incidents and speedily extradite Khalistani leaders. Some of this heightened activity probably also related to probes into suspected gangsters involved in the murder of the popular Punjabi hip-hop singer Sidhu Moosewala in May 2022, but this was not always clear. The Canadian authorities refused to allow the NIA to conduct probes on Canadian soil and wanted due process to be followed regarding extraditions.

During this time, the NIA unprecedentedly publicly released their secret dossiers on gangs and criminals and their connections with Khalistani activists, presumably as part of India’s strategy to win over wavering Canadian Sikhs. A controversial Canadian report, “Khalistan: A Project of Pakistan”, published by the think-tank Macdonald-Laurier Institute in September 2020 and authored by former journalist Terry Milewski, only fueled the fire. This report was perceived by many Sikhs, both Khalistani and non-Khalistani, as yet another attempt to demean Sikhs and deny them any agency by projecting them as ‘puppets’ of a Pakistan project. What most irked the community was the report’s general attack on Sikh human rights advocacy groups, who were viewed as providing a “steady and predictable drumbeat of victimisation, persecution and genocide commemoration, presented as steps to assist a community in need of healing” (p. 5). Sikh community leaders and academics asked the Macdonald-Laurier Institute to withdraw the report. Despite threats of legal action, the report remains available on its website. Milewski expanded his research into a book, *Blood for Blood: Fifty Years of the Global Khalistan Project* (Harper Collins 2021).

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Even before Amritpal Singh's arrest and with political tensions running high in Punjab, Khalistani activities in many countries not only intensified but began to spiral out of control. Numerous violent incidents discussed earlier, some intentionally mischievous to raise communal tensions, put India on almost a war footing. Foreign minister S. Jaishankar termed the attacks on Indian consulates as attacks on India itself. He expressed his dismay at the attitude of Western partners, particularly Canada, which he declared, was providing space to "extremist Khalistani ideology". He warned the Canadian government that "these radical extremist ideologies aren't good for us, them, or our ties" and were "unacceptable".

More recently, the review by UK Government's Faith Engagement Advisor, Colin Bloom, "Does Government 'Do God'? An Independent Review into how Government Engages with Faith" also angered the Sikh community for its discussion of Sikh extremism. The most damning criticism came from the Council of Sikhs in Law which took Bloom to task for his discussion of "Faith-Based Extremism" (chapter 6), where religious behaviour of Sikhs is treated as both *provocative* and *extremist* without any serious attempt at defining his terminology. Critics of the Bloom Review pointed to its flawed methodology, use of anonymous respondents and lack of proportionality. Sikh respondents formed only 1.7% of total respondents, yet chapter 6 devoted 11 pages to Sikh extremism and less than a page to other South Asian religions.

Fallout and concluding remarks

The Sikh diaspora is not homogenous and contains components of varying political persuasion. A vocal minority will remain committed to Khalistan. But the majority is divided between those who are against the Indian government but not Khalistani and others who consider themselves patriotic Indians. A smaller segment is passive and non-political. The issue of Khalistan raises tensions within the diaspora. Still, the groups are united by Sikh activism that exposes human rights abuses, lack of justice, and the dangers posed to religious minorities by the ascendancy of Hindutva. Unfortunately, discussions of the rise of Sikh activism lump all Sikhs together and misreads it as Khalistani activism. Indian diaspora outreach policies need to reflect on this aspect of Sikh pluralism and respect the democratic norms under which it operates. Otherwise, they risk an even larger number of Sikhs becoming alienated.

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Despite having Canadian or British nationality, many diaspora Sikhs maintain close and multi-dimensional connections with Punjab. Seeing a thriving Punjab is high on their wish list. But they are wise enough to know the root cause of Punjab's many problems is internal to Punjab, with its misgovernance as a significant factor. The Khalistan issue does not worry them.

More tangible and immediately of concern for the diaspora are diplomatic rows with their negative consequences for visa and immigration services and the freedom to travel. Any diplomatic row between their adopted country and India is a cause for much anxiety. They worry about their families, friends, businesses, and financial and property interests in Punjab. They value their ability to travel unhindered, whether for holidays, pilgrimages, visiting sick relatives, medical tourism, or taking the ashes of their loved ones to Kiratpur Sahib. In the current spat, although Indian consulates in Canada initially suspended issuing travel visas, they have now been restored, implying a positive response to pressure from India-based lobbyists and respected Sikh organisations in Canada.

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In Punjab too, Sikhs reflect a pluralist political culture that was not always captured in a two-party dominated political system. The impressive electoral success in 2022 of the Aam Aadmi Party reflects the complexity. The Khalistan movement was crushed in the 1990s. Apart from some diehard individuals and inconsequential organisations, no one seriously entertains the idea of Khalistan, given the devastation it brought. Pro-Khalistan candidates have been overwhelmingly rejected in election after election. Many view overseas-based Khalistanis as a distraction and a nuisance. Canada, the UK, and Australia) are destinations for Sikhs to send their children and for themselves to settle in the future. Canada's withdrawal of diplomats from India and the potential for long-term disruption to immigration visas is disastrous for this planning.

Finally, despite festering tensions between India and Canada and between India and sections of the diaspora Sikhs, we are only able to move forward by learning from previous diplomatic incidents. Given the importance of the 1.86 million strong Indian diaspora in Canada, which includes 772,000 Sikhs, close trade, business, and investment connections between the two countries and their strategic relationship with the US, it is inconceivable that both countries will not learn their lessons and restore quiet diplomacy.

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