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The Persistence of Sikh Nationalism in Canada

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Canada's political system offers opportunities for diasporas to play an outsized role in shaping politics. As transnational Sikh nationalism quickens in response to Hindutva in India, diplomatic ties between India and Canada will remain strained.

In 1914, Canada refused to let Sikh prospective immigrants on the *Komagata Maru*, to disembark at Vancouver. The country had been swept over by anti-Asian migrant sentiments and the authorities forced the Sikhs to sail back to India. When the ship finally made it to Calcutta, a brawl broke out, and British troops opened fire on the passengers.

This episode had a wider impact. From Vancouver to San Francisco to London, Sikh groups and societies mobilised in response. Protests were organised, new dailies and magazines were launched to spread the word regarding the oppression of migrants. Radical political parties came into being to fight for the representative rights of the Sikh diaspora. The *Komagata Maru* incident became a symbol of the humiliation migrant Sikhs faced across the Western world.

About a century later, this time on the eastern side of Canada, several Sikh families, mostly working in the trucking industry, began **settling** in Woodstock, a town two hours away from Toronto. In Havelock Corners, a subdivision of Woodstock, 700 Sikh families accounted for four in five houses sold. The area's real estate developer, Mathew Casteli, was so grateful to the Sikh community that in 2018 he **gifted** them nearly three acres of land to build a gurudwara. The then mayor of Woodstock, Trevor Birch, who regularly attended Sikh community events, said, "I have been enjoying knowing them."

Woodstock is emblematic of the remarkable transformation and rise of the Sikh community in Canada over the past century. Canada today has more Sikh members of parliament and federal ministers than India has. The third largest federal political party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), is headed by a Sikh, Jagmeet Singh. Sikhs are often considered as one of the most well-integrated migrant groups in Canada and are referred to as a 'model minority'.

Sikhs were not a territorial entity to be encompassed within a political boundary on grounds of their faith and specific religious tradition. A relationship between land, people and territory is not present in the Sikh theology.

What makes the political and economic success of Sikhs in Canada even more remarkable is the fact that they **account** for just 2.1% of the country's population (around 0.77 million). This makes Canadian Sikhs one of the leading success stories amongst all diaspora communities across the world.

On the flip side, this success is also partially responsible for the diplomatic row between India and Canada, which sees no signs of resolution. As some migrant Sikhs in Canada mobilise and demand a separate Sikh state out of India, some sections of the Canadian domestic political class engage them for political gain. The Khalistani minority, within the larger Sikh minority in Canada, has become politically salient enough to **sabotage** the Indo-Canadian relationship, especially over the past few years.

The same Khalistani movement is marginal in India. Why does it garner reasonable attraction in Canada? The answers may lie in the structure of the domestic Canadian politics, which has helped Sikhs develop a "long-distance nationalism," a term used by the scholar Benedict Anderson. Alongside, the historical experience of the Sikhs has helped them build an outsized influence on Canadian domestic and foreign policy.

Sikh nationalism in the diaspora

Central to the emergence of a sustained long-distance nationalism amongst Sikhs in Canada and beyond is a premodern and extra-territorial conception of nationalism.

By the time Komagata Maru happened, Sikhs had been severely discriminated against, and a large number of them found a way to return to India.

The Sikh religious and political identity are closely intermeshed. Sikhism developed in a period when its leaders had regular [run-ins](#) with the Mughals, Afghans, and the British. This overlapping and mutually reinforcing nature of the Sikh identity is captured in the religious idea of *miri-piri*. Introduced by the sixth guru, Hargobind, the compound word represent the interplay of politics (*miri*) and spirituality (*piri*), and finds visual representation in the two crossed swords that is a symbol of the Sikh religion.

The scholars Gurharpal Singh and Giorgio Shani in their book *Sikh Nationalism*, [contend](#) that presence of a holy book, the persecution of Sikhs in the 17th and 18th centuries, Guru Gobind Singh's formation of the Khalsa – the Sikh “community of the pure” – and territorialisation under the Sikh empire of Ranjit Singh – contributed to the formation of a pre-modern conception of Sikh nationalism. Yet, the Sikh community is not a spatial entity, as argued by Joyce Pettigrew. “According to the idea of the Panth, Sikhs were not a territorial entity to be encompassed within a political boundary on grounds of their faith and specific religious tradition.” The community is the collective body of those believing in Sikh faith, she [writes](#).

Sikh migration to Canada can be [categorised](#) into three separate phases. The first phase started in the early 20th century. These early migrants largely settled on the west coast, in the province of British Columbia, and their numbers reached 5,000 by 1908. Many of them worked as labour in the building of Canadian railroads. Others worked at sawmills, shingle factories, cow ranches, plantations, and some joined caretaker gangs on construction sites.

This was also a period of rising anti-migrant sentiments across the United States and Canada, leading to laws restricting Asian migration. By the time *Komagata Maru* happened, Sikhs had been severely discriminated against, and a large number of them found a way to return to India. By 1915, only 700 Sikhs were left in Canada.

|| The year 1984 emerged as a fundamental rupture in Sikh politics, within India and beyond, even though the seeds of this rupture had been laid in the lead up to the partition of India during the 1940s.

Nevertheless, it was in this period, that the earliest Sikh organisations were established in Canada. The oldest gurudwara society in Canada, the [Khalsa Diwan Society](#) of Vancouver, was founded in 1906. Sikhs mobilised to challenge restrictive migrant laws in the US and Canada and gain religious rights. “Early political mobilisation focused on gaining recognition and protection for the Sikh dress code so Sikhs could wear turbans at work,” write Singh and Shani in their book.

The transnational shadow of insurgency

The early Sikh migrants saw their political identity as predominantly that of Punjabi and Indian. The [Ghadar Party](#) in the United States, whose aim was to liberate India – their “homeland” – from British rule, shaped their political outlook.

Yet, Sikh nationalism and identity were soon to be redefined by developments in India. “The Punjab was so pivotal to the nation-building efforts of the Congress and the Muslim League, the Sikhs could not be but the minor ‘other’ of these nationalisms, nothing more than a subnational minority even in the Punjab,” write Singh and Shani.

The consequent internal churning amongst the Sikhs resulted in the formation of key institutions such as the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and the Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). Over the next several decades, the SAD would continue to dominate the mainstream political representation of the Sikhs by capturing the support of the dominant Jat-Sikhs – until its hegemony was challenged by radical militant outfits during the Punjab insurgency.

Such was the backdrop when the second phase of Sikh migration into Canada began, which followed the passing of more [liberal migration laws](#) in 1967. Most of these migrants were educated and had professional expertise in one field or the other – in stark contrast with the first wave of migrants. According to Canada's national [census](#), the country had 67,100 Sikhs by 1981.

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The year 1984 emerged as a fundamental rupture in Sikh politics, within India and beyond. The decade after Operation Bluestar, the military assault on the Golden Temple that year, was marked by exceptional violence from militant insurgency and the Indian government's counterinsurgency operations.

Diaspora Sikhs in Canada and elsewhere might have been Khalistani sympathisers before 1984, but saw the demands and vision of these groups as utopian. In the aftermath of Operation Bluestar, though, “Loyalty to the Indian nation state was displaced by assertions of Sikh national identity, a transformation in Sikh consciousness, and mobilisation for an independent Sikh state,” write Singh and Shani.

Sections of the Sikh diaspora in Canada and elsewhere also got deeply **involved** with these Khalistani groups. These groups were quite diverse and their idea of an independent Khalistani state and modus operandi often significantly **varied**. On the more radical side were organisations like the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), which **was** more radical in nature and had close ties with radical militant groups in Punjab like Babbar Khalsa and Khalistan Liberation Force, and with Pakistan’s intelligence agencies. Similarly, the Babbar Khalsa International advocated for a more theocratic state with an orthodox interpretation of Sikhism. On the other side were organisations like the Council of Khalistan that advocated for a more secular and pluralist independent Punjab.

Like in Punjab, Khalistani supporters used gurdwaras to mobilise the community. “[Khalistani groups] controlled the largest gurdwaras and dominated the representation of Sikhs in the host countries,” write Singh and Shani. “The weekly congregations in gurdwaras became occasions for mobilising the community by denouncing the actions of the Indian state, valorising the deeds of the militants and remembering the Sikh nation’s heroic past.”

The ‘model minority’

The scholar Benedict Anderson described Sikh nationalism in Canada as “long-distance nationalism”: fostered by migrants who supported the movement in homeland from afar. As insurgency in Punjab died down in the mid 1990s, the diaspora demand for a separate Sikh state also diminished. Whether it was the larger elite and intelligentsia in Punjab or in the diaspora, neither quite bought into the idea of an independent state.

|| The impact of Sikhs on mainstream Canadian politics can be discerned by the fact that current Trudeau’s government since 2019 has featured several Sikh Canadian ministers.

Yet the movement did not die out. In whatever limited capacity, the locus shifted from Punjab to the Sikh diaspora in Canada, US, UK, and other Western countries.

The end of the insurgency marked the beginning of the third and current phase of Sikh migration to Canada. This wave found an even more hospitable host nation. By the turn of the century, Canadian politics shed its anti-migrant idiom and took on the mantle of multiculturalism. The number of Sikhs in Canada **rose** to nearly 800,000 by 2021 from 147,440 in 1991. They gained significant positions of power in both the economic and political realms.

“The rise of the Sikh community is in many ways a powerful argument for Canada’s model of multiculturalism,” **noted** an article in the *New York Times*. Canadian Sikhs began to be categorised as a “model minority” and Sikh culture went mainstream. Jeevan Sangha, an Indo-Canadian herself, **noted how, growing up**, “listening to Punjabi music was something we were encouraged to do at home [...] Today, I hear people unapologetically blasting Punjabi music in the same streets where I grew up.”

In the political arena, Sikhs in Canada **account** for a large number of MPs, federal ministers, and provincial politicians. From Ujjal Dosanjh – the first Indo-Canadian to become the premier of a province in the early 2000s – to Jagmeet Singh, the current leader of the NDP, Sikh politicians have left their imprint across the Canadian political landscape. The Trudeau government since 2019 has featured several Sikh ministers.

Controlling the gurdwaras

Sikhs aren’t the only migrant community that accumulate such disproportionate influence over Canadian domestic politics and foreign policy. Ukrainians living in Canada have had an **outsized** impact on Ottawa’s outlook on the Russian-Ukraine war, much like the Tamils’ impact on the Canadian state’s views on Sri Lanka’s insurgent group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

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What drives this? The answer lies in Canadian political parties’ “pay-to-play” nomination system for parliamentary candidates. Parties select their respective candidates through a constituency-level vote by local members. Over the years, most local party organisations have shed committed members. Most of those who vote in these local elections buy party memberships just a couple of months before the election.

The Sikh community has managed to leverage this electoral process to expand their political influence. “Fifty, seventy-five, or a hundred Sikh Canadians voting at a party’s constituency nomination meeting where only two-or-three hundred people in total may be voting constitute a significant proportion of the electorate,” writes former Canadian foreign service officer, Roy Norton for the Wilson Center. This means that even in constituencies with a small Sikh population, the community often plays a significant role in the nomination of candidates.

What allows Sikhs to play this role is their phenomenal organisational and mobilising capabilities. Canadian Sikhs are regular in attending religious congregations.

“At the grassroots level, substantial politicking among Sikhs begins at board elections for gurdwaras. Eventually, a group of 10 to 20 men gain control of a gurdwara, and can use it to raise campaign money and influence about 40 to 50 extended families,” I reported in an earlier piece for *The Print*. There are 151 gurdwaras in Canada, in addition to around 50 Sikh societies. This expansive civil society network is a major asset for Sikhs in their quest for more political power.

Between Khalistani and Hindu nationalism

Maintaining control over gurdwaras is central to this political exercise. Over time, as the status of Sikhs in Canadian politics has risen, so has the profile of the minority within a minority: the gurdwaras controlled by supporters of the Khalistani movement.

Over the past decade, the ascendance of Hindu nationalism as the dominant political force in the Indian political discourse has played a role in marginalising the Sikh identity.

While the mainstream Sikh Canadian political class does not openly support the Khalistani cause, some of them have expressed opinions on it or have had some indirect links to it. Even the wider non-Sikh political class in Canada, can’t entirely ignore their demands. On several occasions, significant non-Sikh Canadian politicians – from all parties – have visited events organised by Khalistani groups and shared the stage with their members.

“I don’t believe that it’s fair to say that Canadian politicians of all parties support terrorism or the Khalistan movement. They simply have agreed to look the other way and to say nothing in return for votes,” says Terry Milewski, author of *Blood for Blood: Fifty Years of the Global Khalistan Project*.

Where does this leave the future of Indo-Canadian relations? Unfortunately, not in a good place. Ottawa was all astir when Trudeau’s former foreign policy adviser, Omer Aziz, went public with his criticism. “What I saw in government was how Canada’s ethnic domestic battles were distorting our long-term foreign policy priorities, and politicians, who never understood South Asia or India anyway, were pandering in lowest-common-denominator ways in B.C. and Ontario suburbs, and playing up ethnic grievances to win votes,” wrote Aziz.

This feature of Liberal party politics is unlikely to change. Moreover, given the influence of the Khalistani groups in Canadian politics, Conservatives might not find it easy to completely ignore some of their demands.

An underperforming economy, a delegitimised political class and the assimilative nature of Hindu nationalism is giving a shot in the arm to the Khalistani movement in Punjab.

In India, a slew of factors are increasingly driving the re-emergence of the Khalistani movement, which was assumed to be effectively dead.

First, a rapidly declining economy in Punjab has resulted in societal decay and electoral volatility. Over the past three elections, no political party been voted back to power. As the perception of political unrepresentativeness grows, radical Sikh politics fills the political vacuum.

Second, over the past decade, the ascendancy of Hindu nationalism as the dominant political force in the Indian political discourse has played a role in marginalising the Sikh identity. Hindu ideologues of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Arya Samaj have long denied the existence of Sikhism as a separate religion and have argued that it is nothing but a minor offshoot of Hinduism. This has meant that the Bhartiya Janta Party has failed to win any sizeable share of votes in Punjab over the past few elections.

An underperforming economy, a delegitimised political class and the assimilative nature of Hindu nationalism gives a shot in the arm to the Khalistani movement in Punjab. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, two self-professed radical Sikh leaders were elected as MPs. Beyond these reasons, the thriving Khalistani movement outside of India is also playing a role in exacerbating the movement in India.

The actual size of the Khalistan supporting population in either Canada or elsewhere, might not be that large, but its presence does not bode well for the long-term health of Punjab’s politics. And for the new government that will come to power in Canada this year, domestic political constraints will make it harder to restore normalcy in ties with New Delhi.

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