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# The Khalistan Movement and Its Impact in Canada

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## Overview

The Sikh separatist movement—Khalistan—peaked in the 1980s and early 1990s in Punjab, India. The idea of Khalistan is complex and multi-layered and rooted in India’s colonial past, specifically in the 1947 partition of India, the political and religious conflicts post-partition, and a variety of incidents in the 1980s, in particular Operation Blue Star<sup>1</sup> and the 1984 Sikh Massacre.<sup>2</sup> Khalistan activism, which tapered off in India by the mid-1990s, has resurfaced several times since then, particularly in Canada.

The Khalistan movement has been associated with Canada since 1985 when Air India Flight 182 was bombed and 329 people, most of them Canadians, were killed.<sup>3</sup> In present-day Canada, Babbar Khalsa International<sup>4</sup> and the International Sikh Youth Federation<sup>5</sup> are the two listed terrorist entities that support the establishment of the Khalistan in India (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Pro-Khalistan activism in Canada is a topic that has been receiving substantial public attention over the past 4 to 5 years; however, there is still a notable dearth in primary data on the topic.

The focus of the larger study from which this research brief is drawn is compiling statistical data and information on the impact of the Khalistan movement in Canada. The study covers the following questions: (a) how has the movement evolved from the 1980s and 1990s through to the present; (b) what have been the social and political drivers of this evolution; and (c) how are the Sikh diaspora communities in Canada currently engaged with, and influenced by, the Khalistan movement. This preliminary summary is a brief synopsis of seven themes that emerged from the interviews and subsequent data analysis. Detailed findings and further analysis will be developed in a subsequent academic paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Operation Blue Star occurred in June 1984, and was an Indian military operation at the holiest Sikh shrine Harmandir Sahib (also known as the Golden Temple) in Amritsar, Punjab, India. The goal of the operation—ordered by Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India—was to remove Khalistani leaders, who had resorted to violence and militancy, from the temple. “Because it was the day of an important Sikh religious festival, several hundreds, maybe even thousands, of pilgrims were trapped in the complex and killed in the attack” (Kurien, 2018, p. 10).

<sup>2</sup> On October 31, 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her own bodyguards as revenge for Operation Blue Star. In its aftermath the Sikh Massacre (or anti-Sikh riots) occurred in many parts of India. The number of deaths varies from hundreds to thousands in official and unofficial estimates (Van Dyke, 1996). Several independent committees have been set up to investigate the massacre and those responsible for organizing it (Nanavati, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The aftermath of the 1984 violence in India continued in Canada and resulted in the bombing the Air India Flight 182 by Khalistani extremists. On June 23, 1985, the flight from Canada to India exploded over the Atlantic Ocean, killing all 329 people on board (Bramadat & Dawson, 2014). It was the worst terrorist attack in Canadian history (Public Safety Canada, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) is a Sikh terrorist entity with members in Pakistan, North America, Europe, and Scandinavia and carries out activities such as armed attacks, assassinations, and bombings. (Public Safety Canada, 2018a).

<sup>5</sup> The International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) is a Sikh organization that’s an international branch of the All India Sikh Students’ Federation, with centres in several countries, including Canada. “Since 1984, its members have been engaged in terrorist attacks, assassinations, and bombings primarily against Indian political figures, but also against moderate members of the Sikh community. The ISYF collaborates and/or associates with a number of Sikh terrorist organizations, including BKI” (Public Safety Canada, 2018b).

## Methodology

We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with members of the Sikh diaspora in five Canadian provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Saskatchewan) and in nine cities (Brampton, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, Surrey, Toronto, Vancouver, and Winnipeg). Participants came from diverse professional and personal backgrounds (e.g., faith community, community leadership, Punjabi media personnel, etc.) and different generations (i.e., adults as young as 24, and elders with exposure to earlier iterations of the movement). The researchers selected eleven participants for this study from their pre-existing professional contacts within the Sikh diaspora. These eleven participants connected the researchers with 19 other members of the diaspora for participation in this study. Out of these 30 participants, only 25 of them provided their age, and their ages ranged from 24 years old to 75 years old. Twenty-seven were male and three were female. Twenty-five participants responded in Punjabi and five in English. The Punjabi interviews were translated into English for data analysis. Fifteen participants were individually interviewed, whereas the remaining 15 participated in group interviews in 5 different groups. The first group consisted of three interviewees, the second group consisted of three interviewees, the third group consisted of two interviewees, the fourth group consisted of five interviewees, and the fifth group consisted of two interviewees. The number of years that participants had lived in Canada ranged from 1 year to 40 years.

Of the 30 participants, 21 visit India regularly (every 1 to 5 years), two participants visit India occasionally (every 6 to 10 years), four participants visit India rarely (every 11 to 30 years), two participants have not been back to India for over 35 years (since the early 1980s), and one of the participants has never been to India.

The next section provides a brief synopsis of the seven themes that emerged from the participants' responses to ten interview questions (see Appendix A). Many of these interviews were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and, therefore, do not reflect subsequent developments (such as the failure of the Referendum 2020).<sup>6</sup>

## Key Themes of Participant Responses

The seven themes derived from the interview data are as follows.

### Differing Perspectives on Khalistan

Khalistan as a concept can mean different things to different people in the Sikh diaspora in Canada. Most of the participants expressed their belief that, at present, there is little interest in the Khalistan movement and that the issue is less salient than it once was. Twenty-three of the thirty participants do not support the movement. They believe that misinformation and

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<sup>6</sup> Referendum 2020 is currently being held outside of India to get votes from members of the Sikh diaspora and to gauge the level of support for or against the idea of an independent Punjab (Kalvapalle, 2018; Sharma, 2022).

contradictory views about the movement are circulating among Canada's Sikh diaspora. They, therefore, distrust the people behind the movement. Those who are still passionate about the movement tend to be second-generation Canadians who have not lived or spent significant time in the region of Punjab; their beliefs about Khalistan are based on hearsay and an oversimplified narrative informed by pro-Khalistani social media and music. The small number of older participants who have lived in India still believe that Khalistan represents a movement for Sikh religious sovereignty.

### Shared Perspectives on Khalistan

Whereas seven of the thirty participants support pro-Khalistan activism, the remaining 23 participants clearly do not. They were, however, more or less all in agreement that the “movement” lacks focus and leadership. The participants unanimously agreed that the trauma of violent state repression in the 1980s, especially the 1980s incidents, has never been fully addressed. Among various other religious and historical factors, the Khalistan movement in the 1980s was the result of conflicts among several political leaders; as long as the responsible party leaders and subsequent government are unwilling to fully account and atone for the repression and violence, the issue of Khalistan will never entirely cease to be meaningful for some people. In reality, this means that, although the movement has largely failed to achieve its objectives, the ideology persists, and some participants have suggested that a resurgence of the issue is quite possible. Participants identified the following reasons, or a combination of them, as potential contributors to a possible resurgence: (a) unaddressed grievances from the 1980s; (b) political issues between the State Government of Punjab and the Government of India similar to 1970s and '80s;<sup>7</sup> and (c) the exploitation of the Khalistan issue by certain activists to serve their financial or political agendas.

### Foreign Interference

Fears of foreign interference have a significant impact on the members of the Canadian Sikh diaspora's willingness to speak openly about their views on Khalistan. Looming largely in the mind of many participants was an intelligence cooperation agreement signed by Canada and India (Government of Canada, 2018). This led participants to be uncertain about the extent to which they could express their political opinions in Canada. This fear was compounded by the inappropriate language used to characterize the threat by the Government of Canada in its *2018 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada*,<sup>8</sup> which some participants believed resulted from the pressure the Indian government placed on the Canadian government to take

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<sup>7</sup> The political issues include certain demands under the 1973 Anandpur Sahib Resolution by the State of Punjab for more religious and political freedoms, which were viewed by the Government of India interpreted as part of the attempt to secede (Jetly, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Public Safety Canada provided an update on April 29, 2019, in reaction to accusations that the language used in the report maligned communities of people rather than ideologies. In its update, it stated, “As a first step, the Government has updated terminology used in the 2018 report to eliminate terminology that unintentionally impugns an entire religion” (Public Safety Canada, 2019).

a stronger stance against pro-Khalistan activism in Canada, whether or not the activism was criminal.

### Politics within the Canadian Sikh Diaspora

Participants stated that the Sikh diaspora in Canada is not only affected by the politics of India but also by its own diaspora politics and the damage it causes to its image. Several participants stated that, every now and then, the topic of Khalistan attracts the limelight because of the photos of the people responsible for the Air India bombing on display during the annual *Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtan*.<sup>9</sup> Sixty-five percent of the participants said that they perceive these photos as problematic. Many of these participants stated that some Sikhs claim that agencies from India were responsible for the bombing and did so to defame Sikhs. Yet many participants also noted that the same Sikhs consider the people responsible for Air India bombing to be martyrs. Some participants further noted that the image of the Canadian Sikh diaspora is also damaged when the managing committees of Gurudwaras, places of worship, sponsor controversial Sikh preachers from India, knowing that this action might lead to violence in Canada.

### Youth Views on Khalistan

The responses of the young adults and the responses of the other participants conveyed that young adults who were born in Canada or immigrated to Canada from India at a young age attribute their interest in the movement to an oversimplified narrative informed by pro-Khalistani social media and music that is often detached from a deeper understanding of history and the complicated politics associated with this multilayered topic. As a result, 60% of the participants expressed some uncertainty about how to address this topic with young adults and how to gauge their interest in Khalistan. Many young Sikhs who immigrated to Canada later in life have a deeper appreciation for the complex history and politics of Punjab and were exposed to Khalistan as a political project only *after* their arrival in Canada.

### Lack of Support for Referendum 2020

Referendum 2020 is currently being held outside of India to get votes from members of the Sikh diaspora and gauge the level of support for or against the idea of an independent Punjab. According to most of the participants, Referendum 2020 lacks support among the Canadian Sikh community. Participants said that the Canadian Sikh diaspora is uncertain about the motive and agenda of the people who are spearheading Referendum 2020. Only two of the thirty participants agreed that holding the referendum is a way for Khalistani supporters to connect with each other, to fight for the same cause, and gather evidence in support of creating a sovereign state.

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<sup>9</sup> Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtan is an event that marks the initiation of the Khalsa (a religious order).

## Support for Movement in Canada

Questions about logistical support—such as financial or organizational—for the Khalistan movement in Canada are understandably sensitive, especially in light of the *2018 Public Safety Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada* (Public Safety Canada, 2019). All participants expressed uncomfortableness with certain wording in the report, such as “Sikh extremist ideologies” and feared that the media coverage of the issue could make members of the Canadian Sikh diaspora vulnerable to hate crimes or discriminatory incidents. A small percentage of participants acknowledged, however, that a lingering willingness remains among some members of the Sikh diaspora in Canada to provide logistical support, primarily financial, to pro-Khalistan groups. As researchers, we found it difficult to develop a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, as most of the finances that flow back to India from the diaspora go to support family or charitable activity, and the latter is sometimes mischaracterized as providing funds for pro-Khalistan purposes.

## Conclusions

Seven themes emerged from the data, conveying both unity and variation in the ways members of the Sikh diaspora in Canada view the Khalistan movement. Khalistan means different things to different people; however, all agreed that the movement lacks focus and leadership. Their willingness to speak openly about their views on Khalistan are affected by their fears of foreign interference. The Sikh diaspora in Canada is not only affected by the politics of India but also by its own politics. Young Sikh adults differ in their understanding of the movement, and that understanding is correlated with whether they were born in Canada or immigrated to Canada when they were young or emigrated from India later in life. The community is uncertain about the purpose of Referendum 2020, and this distrust manifests as lack of support for it. Finally, there are challenges in learning about logistical support coming from Canada for the Khalistan movement, as most of the finances that flow back to India from the diaspora go to support family or charitable activity.

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