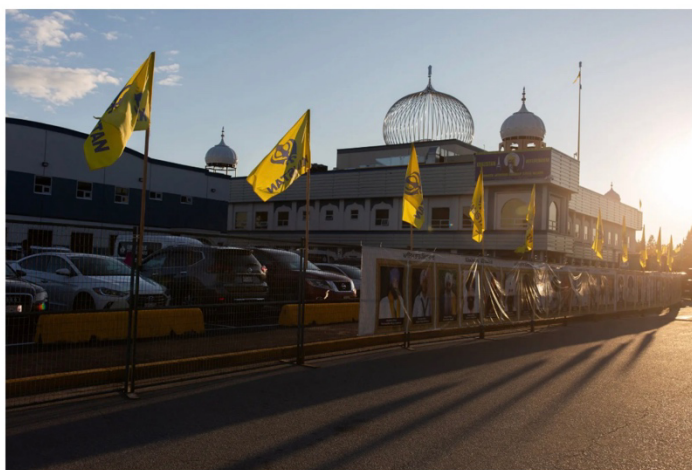


Sikh Activists See It as Freedom. India Calls It Terrorism.

Canadian and U.S. accusations of assassination plots have drawn attention to the Sikh separatist movement, which India calls a source of organized crime.

▶ Listen to this article · 10:09 min [Learn more](#)

📄 Share full article



Khalistan flags last year in Surrey, British Columbia. India has repeatedly accused Khalistan-related activists in countries like Canada of sponsoring gang warfare, drug trafficking and extortion in India. Jackie Dives for The New York Times



By **Anupreeta Das**

Reporting from New Delhi

Nov. 3, 2024 Updated 12:22 a.m. ET

In the months since Canada and the United States accused India of carrying out assassination plots against Sikh separatist leaders on North American soil, a lingering question has hung over the accusations: Why would the Indian government take such a risk?

Inside India, the Sikh cause to carve out a land called Khalistan from the state of Punjab [largely fizzled out decades ago](#). Yet the Indian government still frames the Khalistan movement as a threat to national security — for reasons more mundane but no easier to weed out.

India has repeatedly accused Khalistan-related activists in countries like Pakistan and, more recently, Canada of sponsoring gang warfare, drug trafficking and extortion in India. Proceeds from these crimes, according to India's government, sustain a campaign of what Indian officials call terrorism in the name of a religious political movement.

"The government of India has sought to project the threat as a wider national security issue, casting a number of domestic political issues in Punjab within the framework of 'terrorism,'" said Ajai Sahni, the executive director of the Institute for Conflict Management in New Delhi.

But Mr. Sahni and other independent security analysts said that international gangs, guns for hire and other criminals are indeed a problem in Punjab, where the Sikh religious community makes up a majority of the population.

While there are legitimate believers in the cause of a Sikh homeland, criminals have "opportunistically aligned themselves to the Khalistan cause, because in some sense it ennobles them in the eyes of people to be seen as political activists rather than criminals," he added.

The Indian government defines terrorism broadly, to include any actions it sees as imperiling the country's security by sowing discord or instability. India has long taken a no-holds-barred approach to stamping out movements it considers a terrorist threat, including the Khalistan cause, as well as left-wing and Indigenous insurgencies.



Praying at a gurdwara, a Sikh place of worship, last year in Punjab, India. The Sikh cause to carve out a land called Khalistan from the state of Punjab largely fizzled out decades ago. Credit...Atul Loke for The New York Times

“The threat of terrorism is used to exploit fear and justify the suppression and silencing of minorities,” said Gunisha Kaur, a medical director of the Weill Cornell Center for Human Rights.

India has long targeted Sikhs with “impunity,” leading some to call for an independent state, said Ms. Kaur, who has written about the subject. But Sikhs, one of India’s religious minorities, hold diverse views on their ties to India, she added, which are often lost in the Indian government’s singular approach to anything it deems anti-national.

In recent years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led the charge in portraying the Khalistan threat as a national security matter, analysts say. He has done this, analysts say, to burnish his image as a strongman protecting his country — or, more precisely, a Hindu nationalist leader protecting the Hindu majority.

India has forcefully rejected Canada’s accusation that Indian agents killed a Canadian Sikh nationalist leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, on Canadian soil. But on Tuesday, a top Canadian official said in Parliament that a campaign to intimidate, harass and even kill Sikh separatists in Canada could be traced to the highest levels of the Indian government.

The official said he had confirmed to The Washington Post that the Canadian government believed that the campaign was ordered by Amit Shah, who leads India’s Ministry of Home Affairs and is Mr. Modi’s right-hand man. The official did not say what evidence Canada had.

The Indian government has conveyed to Canadian officials that it “protests in the strongest terms to the absurd and baseless references” made to Mr. Shah, a spokesman for India’s external affairs ministry said Saturday.

Last month, Canadian officials [said that several Indian diplomats](#) in Canada were agents of India’s foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, or RAW, and ran the campaign of intimidation and violence. Canada expelled six diplomats, and India responded in kind.

India’s government has been much quieter as the United States has pursued a similar case involving a foiled assassination attempt against a Sikh separatist named Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. The U.S. government has charged an Indian citizen who it says was a RAW agent, accusing him of directing the plot.

“India’s attempt on my life on U.S. soil represents a brazen act of transnational terrorism,” Mr. Pannun said in a statement. “It’s a stark reminder that while pro-Khalistan Sikhs believe in ballots, India’s government resorts to bullets.”

The Canadian and U.S. cases have provided the push for an independent Khalistan more attention than it would otherwise get, given that it is largely driven by a small part of the Sikh diaspora, Mr. Sahni, the counterterrorism expert, said.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi, analysts say, has presented the Khalistan threat as bigger than it is to burnish his image as a strongman protecting the Hindu majority. Credit...Pool photo by Maxim Shemetov

In the past, Sikhs in Punjab have demanded a homeland alongside Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India, calling it a matter of justice.

The separatist cause peaked in the 1980s. In 1984, Sikh militants occupied the Golden Temple in Punjab, one of Sikhism’s holiest sites, prompting a bloody operation by Indian government forces to remove them. Five months later, Sikh bodyguards assassinated Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in revenge.

Although Sikh militancy in India was stamped out by the 1990s, a separatist movement remained in pockets around the world. Canada is among the countries where many Khalistan supporters have found a home, and India has angrily accused the Canadian government of allowing Sikh extremists and alleged criminals to operate freely from inside its territory.

On Tuesday, Canada’s ambassador to India, Cameron MacKay, told The New York Times that Canada was “not in a position to arrest people simply because they support a separatist movement in a foreign country,” citing its expansive protections for freedom of speech. “I know that the Indian government sees things very differently and wishes that we that we would do so, but we’re not going to,” Mr. MacKay added. “It’s simply not provided for in Canadian law.”

While it is India's foreign intelligence agency that has been linked by Canada and the United States to assassination plots, India's National Investigation Agency — a domestic counterterrorism law enforcement agency — has also long focused on Khalistan figures.

The agency is part of the Ministry of Home Affairs, led by Mr. Shah, Mr. Modi's close ally. It has described Khalistan separatists as operating within a "terrorist-gangster-drug smuggler nexus."

The case of Lakhbir Singh Sandhu illustrates India's anti-Khalistan efforts. Mr. Sandhu, whom the Indian government has labeled a terrorist, is wanted in connection with several Khalistan-allied outfits accused by the National Investigation Agency of conspiring to "wage war against the country." In January 2023, the agency offered a reward of about \$18,000 to anyone providing information on Mr. Sandhu.

In July of this year, the agency said it had arrested an aide to Mr. Sandhu, accusing him of supplying weapons in Punjab for extortion and other "large-scale terror activities." The criminal acts, the agency said, were "part of the larger conspiracy of various banned Khalistani terrorist organizations to destabilize India by unleashing violent acts in Punjab and other places." The Indian government has also disclosed that Mr. Sandhu is on a list that India provided to the Canadian authorities of people it wants extradited. He remains at large.



A banner with a photograph of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Surrey last year.
Credit...Jackie Dives for The New York Times

Mr. Nijjar, the Sikh leader killed in Canada, who was also on India's terrorist list, was accused of directing extortion schemes and other gang-related activities.

Another factor that makes Sikh separatism a sensitive issue is its connection to Pakistan, India's archenemy. Pakistan has aided the Khalistan movement as a way to seed instability in India, analysts say. Some see the presence of pro-Khalistan groups like Babbar Khalsa International, banned in India but with members in Pakistan, as part of a Pakistani strategy known informally in the counterterrorism community as "death by a thousand cuts."

"Khalistanis have a very robust relationship with Pakistani terrorism," said Abhinav Pandya, an expert on counterterrorism policy. Mr. Pandya said that although the drug trade on either side of the India-Pakistan border was long established, "in recent years, it has become deeply integrated with the terror network."

While the Khalistan cause is largely seen in India as a fringe movement with ties to the drug trade, there is some concern among Indian state and federal officials about so-called radicalization of Punjabi youths.

Punjab was once among India's most prosperous states. But the remnants of the 1980s conflict, combined with failed economic policies and shrinking job opportunities, have unleashed a slow-burning crisis in the state.

Widespread drug addiction is one of the biggest challenges. Although Punjab is listed as India's 15th-largest state, it accounts for the third-highest number of drug-related cases, according to government officials.

In such a tinderbox, the Khalistan movement could find more fertile ground among vulnerable and jobless young men, analysts said.

Lakhwinder Singh, a visiting professor of economics at the Institute for Human Development in New Delhi, said that generations of Punjabis had left the state, driven by "distress or hopelessness."

"If youth is not provided adequate employment opportunities, there is a likely possibility that youth can be engaged in social upheavals," Mr. Singh said. "During the '80s, the youth in Punjab picked up arms and, nowadays, are attracted toward using intoxicants."

Matina Stevis-Gridneff contributed reporting from Toronto.

Anupreeta Das covers India and South Asia for The Times. She is based in New Delhi.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/03/world/asia/india-sikh-separatism.html>