

# INDIAN FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

Intimidation, Disinformation, and  
Undermining Canadian Institutions



Chet, Nanakshahi 555 / March 2023 CE



BRITISH  
COLUMBIA  
GURDWARAS  
COUNCIL



ਓਨਟਾਰੀਓ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਕਮੇਟੀ  
ONTARIO GURDWARAS COMMITTEE





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The British Columbia Gurdwaras Council (BCGC) and Ontario Gurdwaras Committee (OGC) are independent, non-partisan, non-profit organizations which collectively represent over thirty of the largest Sikh institutions across the country. Both organizations were established to facilitate dialogue and consensus-building within the community on key policy issues in order to collectively advocate for the political concerns of Sikhs in Canada, as well as upholding human rights and civil liberties in Canada's engagement with its international partners.

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## Executive Summary

Foreign interference is a complex problem and a serious security threat to Canadian institutions and electoral processes. As acknowledged by government bodies and policy experts, Canada's racialized communities are simultaneously some of the most targeted—and vulnerable—for foreign interference, intimidation and harassment by foreign actors.

While there has been particular attention paid to China and Russia in the context of foreign interference, it is imperative that Canada pay even closer attention to prospective allies, like India, who actively seek to manipulate public discourse and policy in Canada to secure their own policy objectives. This is particularly important when Indian officials continue to make inflammatory public statements in a manner suggesting *quid pro quo* for criminalizing political expression that is contrary to Indian interests.

India has been a clear perpetrator of clandestine foreign interference in Canada since the 1980s, targeting both political dissidents critical of the Indian state and Canadian institutions. There is ample evidence on the public record, which will be further examined in this report, to establish that Indian political interference is an ongoing problem in Canada as explicit efforts have been made to covertly manipulate public policy, and debate. This is further corroborated by the prosecution and conviction of Indian intelligence agents operating along similar lines in NATO-allied countries like Germany.

Indian officials and intelligence operatives have manufactured news, offered bribes to media outlets for favourable news coverage, amplified targeted messages to disrupt public debate, interfered in electoral processes across the country, and have attempted to manipulate Canadian policy makers. This is not a partisan issue as all parties have been impacted by Indian attempts to manipulate electoral outcomes.

The record also demonstrates that Indian diplomats and intelligence agencies are actively engaging in conduct to ultimately influence government decision-

making in order to persuade Canadian policy makers to criminalize and prosecute Sikh political advocacy in Canada under the guise of “countering extremism”.

Combatting Indian interference is critically important to maintaining Canada's democratic institutions and meaningful *Charter* rights and freedoms, as well as stopping the further marginalization of a racialized community whose interests and democratic rights are currently being compromised and ignored. The lack of decisive action to combat Indian foreign interference in Canada thus far, appears to be largely related to discriminatory attitudes towards minority communities and the disproportionate weight given to foreign policy considerations over the long-term domestic harms caused by foreign interference.

## Recommendations

- Any public review or inquiry on foreign interference must comprehensively investigate the foreign interference activities of all culpable actors rather than being limited to a single actor, event, or election.
- Canadian agencies must publicly disclose relevant information known about Indian foreign interference, similar to how other instances of interference have been publicly acknowledged. Declassified summaries of this information may protect intelligence sources and methods while providing necessary information to maintain the safety and security of the public, as well as confidence in Canadian institutions.
- Steps must be taken to prosecute illegal foreign interference under existing legislation, enact additional laws to protect Canadians from foreign influence, and declare those diplomats *persona non grata* where evidence sustains allegations of clandestine foreign interference.
- Efforts must be made by the Government of Canada to ensure clear and transparent dialogue with the Sikh community on the issue of Indian foreign interference, including measures to collect data and information regarding intelligence activity in the community, informing the community about prospective threats, and committing resources to strengthen protections.





**“Possible consequences of such activities include undermining democratic rights and fundamental freedoms, interference with the ability of Canadians to make informed decisions and participate in civic discourse, and eroding public trust in policy decisions made by the government of the day.”**

## Combatting Foreign Interference In Canada

One of the challenges of combatting “foreign interference” is in clearly defining the term and delineating the parameters between acceptable diplomatic efforts to influence policy of global partners and the kinds of activities that are considered hostile or unacceptable.

The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) explicitly chooses to use the term “foreign interference” to “better distinguish between acceptable diplomatic practices and hostile or illegal practices.”<sup>1</sup> This definition relies heavily on the CSIS Act definitions of various national security threats—defining foreign influence (and distinguishing it from acceptable diplomatic practices) as activities that are “detrimental to the interests of Canada and are clandestine or deceptive or involve a threat to any person.”<sup>2</sup> In this regard, CSIS wrote in 2019<sup>3</sup>:

Foreign powers have covertly monitored and intimidated diaspora groups in order to fulfil their strategic and economic objectives. In many cases, influence operations are meant to support foreign political agendas, a cause linked to conflict abroad, or to deceptively influence Government of Canada policies, officials, or democratic processes. These activities continue to constitute a significant threat to Canadian national security and strategic interests.

Such activities may range from cultivating relationships to influence political processes, influencing the reporting of media outlets, and coercing or inducing diaspora communities to advance foreign interests. Possible consequences of such activities include **undermining democratic rights and fundamental freedoms, interference with the ability of Canadians to make informed decisions and participate in civic discourse, and eroding public trust in policy decisions made by the government of the day.**<sup>4</sup> The NSICOP

notes the specific threat to ethnocultural communities in this regard<sup>5</sup>:

The targeting and manipulation of ethnocultural communities is the primary means through which these states control messages and seek to influence decision-making at all levels of government. Some individuals willingly act as agents of a foreign power for a variety of reasons including patriotism or the expectation of reciprocal favours. These states also co-opt individuals inside and outside ethnocultural communities through flattery, bribery, threats and manipulation.

Further possibilities include threats, harassment, detention of family members abroad, refusal to issue travel documents or visa, and surveillance of community members for “dissident views and activities.”<sup>6</sup>

**“[Espionage]... activities may range from cultivating relationships to influence political processes, influencing the reporting of media outlets, and coercing or inducing diaspora communities to advance foreign interests.”**



## Manufacturing Narratives and Amplifying Targeted Messages

One goal of such interference is to “create a single narrative or consistent message that helps to ensure the survival and prosperity of the foreign state.”<sup>7</sup> Two soft targets identified for this kind of activity are the media and academic institutions. While such actors can “use mainstream and ethnic media outlets to amplify targeted messages, propagate disinformation, and discredit credible news and journalists,” they may also interfere in academic institutions under the auspices of sponsored events and/or organizations on campuses, and the sponsoring of institutes affiliated with research universities.<sup>8</sup> Such activity seeks to influence opinion and debate, “thereby obstructing fundamental freedoms such as speech and assembly, and the independence of academic institutions.”<sup>9</sup>

## Meddling in Policy and Electoral Processes

Beyond the manipulative construction of public narratives, foreign interference is most often ultimately aimed at elections and government decision-making. In order to achieve this, “foreign actors may mobilize third parties, proxies and lobby groups, or interfere with policy actions by attempting to discredit or attack senior public officials.”<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, a secret report prepared for Canadian deputy ministers attending a retreat on national security in 2018 noted the threat of foreign states—specifically naming India—involved manipulating diaspora communities to advance their own agendas. Potential threats included cyberattacks, efforts to spread misinformation and using diaspora communities—either directly or indirectly—to steal technology, influence elections and target Canada’s economy, infrastructure or democratic institutions. The report also noted the difficulties Canada and its allies have in deterring foreign states from targeting them, particularly because “many threat actors are adept at leveraging the restraint mechanisms inherent in democratic systems to their advantage.”<sup>11</sup> Government documents similarly revealed a concern about clandestine foreign influence operations that targeted Indian diasporas in Canada for political propaganda or disinformation through instant messaging software.<sup>12</sup>

Intelligence services reiterated these threats—again naming India—as a foreign state that leans on the work of its intelligence officials posing as diplomats in embassies and consulates across the country—primarily in British Columbia and Ontario to wield influence in Canadian elections. One of the tactics to push their agenda in this area, includes participation in nomination meetings to ensure candidates favourable to their causes are selected.<sup>13</sup>

## Vulnerabilities in Canada’s Responses to Interference

Other than the clear difficulty to detect and prevent such activity, policy experts have identified an additional challenge in that there is “no set definition in Canadian law, nor any law explicitly banning States and other entities from engaging in such activities.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, much of this activity is often not “illegal” in Canada<sup>15</sup>:

Sharp power activities such as co-optation, censorship and disinformation are undoubtedly unethical, but our legal systems are ill-equipped to address those. Those activities therefore fall between the cracks in our systems, leaving law enforcement, counterintelligence agencies, and the courts at a loss as to jurisdiction.

This is echoed by the NSICOP<sup>16</sup>:

Reactions to foreign interference remain ad hoc and case-specific, rarely putting them in their broader context. The response is typically led by single organizations and the tools to counter are most often diplomatic. **Understandably, this tends to result in foreign policy considerations being given greater weight than longer-term domestic risks, which are often harder to articulate as concrete harms. No organization represents the longer-term interests of Canadian sovereignty and fundamental values [emphasis added].**

As evidenced in the fierce public debate on this issue in 2023, foreign interference is a complex problem and a serious security threat to Canadian institutions and

electoral processes. As acknowledged by the NSICOP and numerous policy experts, Canada's racialized communities are simultaneously some of the most targeted—and vulnerable—for foreign interference, intimidation and harassment in pursuit of securing the policy objectives of foreign states. This broader issue has largely been absent in the overall debate recently.

Taken as a whole, foreign interference has a number of grave impacts on Canada as it:

- undermines the meaningful exercise of democratic rights and fundamental freedoms;
- leads to the manipulation of Canadian public discourse and policy;
- undermines the credibility and public trust in policy decisions;
- can stigmatize minority communities in a number of ways; and
- erodes space for fact-based public debate on issues of public importance as a result of disinformation.

The lack of decisive action to combat Indian foreign interference in Canada appears to be largely related to the NSICOP's observation that foreign policy considerations are often given greater weight than long-term domestic harms. In the case of Indian interference, this lack of response further leads to the continued marginalization of a minority community whose interests and democratic rights are being compromised and ignored in exchange for foreign policy objectives deemed to be of greater importance.

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## Indian Foreign Interference in Canada: Documented, Acknowledged, yet Ignored

India has been a clear perpetrator of clandestine foreign interference since at least the 1980s. Indian intelligence agencies have been covertly targeting political dissidents and critics based in Canada for years; a fact which has been confirmed by Canadian media and acknowledged by various government sources, including the NSICOP.<sup>17</sup> There is ample evidence on the public record to establish that Indian political interference is an ongoing problem in Canada as explicit efforts have been made to covertly manipulate public policy and debate in Canada.

Analyzing sources in the public domain, there is significant evidence on the record establishing that Indian officials and intelligence operatives have manufactured news, offered bribes to media outlets for favourable news coverage, amplified targeted messages to disrupt public debate, interfered in electoral processes across the country, and attempted to manipulate Canadian policy makers on a number of occasions.

### Background

Since the annexation of the *Sirkar-i-Khalsa* and colonization of Punjab by the British in 1849, the Sikh *panth* (community) has continuously mobilized to reestablish its sovereignty in some form. In this vein, the Sikh *panth* revitalized its indigenous self-governing mechanisms in 1986 and declared the intention to secede from India in order to establish an independent state, Khalistan. In response, Indian security forces sought to repress this mobilization by rejecting any political settlement on self-determination and instead, used force to crush Sikh dissent militarily in order to maintain political hegemony over the region.

In response to ongoing political mobilization by Sikhs in Canada and around the world since this

time, India's vast intelligence network continues to surveil, infiltrate, and undermine Sikh organizations and activists in Canada while manipulating Canadian media and electoral processes. These activities include infiltrating Sikh Gurdwaras, recruiting informants and agent provocateurs within the community, deceptively interjecting the Indian narratives into Canadian media reporting, and influencing Canadian diplomats, security officers, and MPs.<sup>18</sup> The ultimate goal of such operations has been to discredit Sikh support for the Khalistan movement in Canada.<sup>19</sup>

By the account of a Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) field agent stationed in Toronto in the 1980s, agents actively recruited intelligence assets inside Sikh gurdwaras and media houses—admittedly paying them large sums of money to continue working covertly to further India's interests in Canada.<sup>20</sup> Indian officials have also attempted to amplify targeted messages against Sikh activism in order to sway the international community, including Canadian policy makers, to achieve their own policy objectives. By conflating Sikh dissent with extremism, Indian officials continue to misuse their diplomatic resources to persuade international partners to criminalize, surveil, and repress Sikh activists around the world.

According to an in-depth investigation published in a series of articles by the *Globe & Mail* between 1985-1987, Indian intelligence agents were “using a network of paid informers and agent provocateurs to penetrate Canada's Sikh communities” and “some of the violence and conflict in the Sikh community had been inspired by such agents.”<sup>21</sup> Canadian security officials were cited suggesting that “Indian consulates not only provided diplomatic cover for intelligence operatives, but also paid informers in the Sikh community, gained control of three Punjabi newspapers here and sowed disinformation in the mainstream media.”<sup>22</sup> One article in the series described India's *modus operandi* in considerable detail<sup>23</sup>:

India conducts intelligence operations in Canada at two levels—directly through its consulates in Toronto and Vancouver and indirectly through infiltration of the Canadian Sikh community. India's target is a well-organized international Sikh lobby that is the financial, intellectual and administrative backbone of the drive for a



homeland in Punjab. According to the sources, India's intelligence activities in Canada include the spreading of fals [sic] information, the use of paid informers and the instigation of activities to discredit the Sikh separatist movement.

Examples of disinformation cited in the report illustrate how Indian officials embellished nuggets of information—originally provided by their Canadian counterparts—and then “leaked” the manufactured “scoops” to the Canadian press in order to stigmatize Sikh activists. The report also cited numerous examples of consular staff explicitly offering Punjabi media outlets in Canada cash in exchange for publishing stories written by the consulate.

Despite the clear harms of their activities, the *Globe & Mail* quoted a federal government source who suggested that the government was aware of the clandestine activity but allowed it to continue “because India holds an important position in the Commonwealth and the Department of External Affairs is sensitive about Indian accusations that Canada harbors Sikh separatist extremists.”<sup>24</sup>

A former officer of the Vancouver Police Department, Don McLean, corroborated this *modus operandi* in his testimony in front of the Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182.<sup>25</sup> He stated that Indian intelligence officers had access to large sums of money to obtain information and “manipulate the media” in a disinformation campaign, which noticeably “exasperated the situation on the ground.”<sup>26</sup> McLean noted a concrete change in the rhetoric of targeted media outlets, and reported the intelligence activity to superiors but no action was taken to his knowledge despite the known impacts and fears that these actions would destabilize the community.

In the Spring of 1987, several Indian diplomats were eventually identified by CSIS as misusing their diplomatic cover to engage in Indian intelligence activities and asked to leave by Canadian authorities.<sup>27</sup>

## Disinformation and Media Manipulation

Since the election of the Trudeau government in 2016, and particularly in the lead up to the February 2018 trip to India, Indian media outlets and government officials consistently hammered a narrative that the Canadian government itself harboured support for so-called “Sikh extremism,” or at the very least was “soft” on alleged “extremists.” In fact, Punjab's sitting chief minister refused to meet with Canadian Defence Minister, Harjit Sajjan, in April 2017 after accusing Sajjan of being a Khalistani “sympathizer.” This would become an amplified refrain for Indian diplomats and media outlets alike.

This was clearly seen in the case of Prime Minister Trudeau's 2018 India trip reviewed in detail through a special NSICOP report.<sup>28</sup> Considerable disinformation efforts took shape in an ongoing Indian campaign leading up to the trip through attempts to amplify a singular, manufactured narrative which undermined Sikh activism as so-called “extremism” and criticized Canada's perceived lack of response to this issue. India has consistently used strongly-worded rhetoric regarding the presence and freedoms of Sikh activists in Canada exercising their fundamental freedoms in advocacy for political sovereignty—pushing a narrative that conflates political advocacy with extremist or terrorist activity.

On February 20, 2018, images surfaced of Jaspal Atwal and members of the Trudeau family at an official reception at the Canadian High Commission in Delhi.<sup>29</sup> The story soared to international headlines to allegedly illustrate that the Trudeau government was not only soft on “Sikh extremism,” but actively endorsed “extremists”. In an unprecedented move however, National Security & Intelligence Advisor (NSIA) David Jean, offered a confidential briefing to Canadian journalists in response. Jean's comments indicated that the story was actually manipulated by Indian intelligence in order to discredit the Trudeau government for its perceived soft approach to alleged “Sikh extremists” in Canada.

A key question raised by Canadian journalists was that if Indian officials were so incensed at Atwal's presence and used this as an example of Canada supposedly harbouring alleged “extremists,” why would the Indi-

an government grant him a visa in the first place? By Atwal's account he has received three different visas for 2017 alone, despite being convicted of attempting to murder a sitting Indian government minister in the 1980s.<sup>30</sup> This is particularly important when the Indian government has used the visa issuing process as a political tool to coerce applicants to disengage from their activism. Countless other Sikh activists remain black-listed for far less than Atwal; activities that have led to visa refusals include mere criticism of India's human rights record.<sup>31</sup>

Canadian journalists astutely raised this question on the record, noting that it does not make sense for someone convicted of attempted murder of an Indian politician and former member of a proscribed organization to have been removed from India's infamous "blacklist" and given a visa to visit India. A report in the *National Post*, quoted a "senior security source within the Canadian government" that this was not an accident; the incident was "convenient" for India's intelligence agencies to embarrass Prime Minister Trudeau and amplify its pressure to clamp down on Sikh activism in Canada.<sup>32</sup>

Following the partisan politics domestically around Atwal's appearance at the 2018 event, the NSICOP was tasked to objectively review the allegation of Indian foreign interference among other details of the controversy. Despite being *heavily* redacted with regards to the actual findings of foreign interference by India, what is made clear by the NSICOP report is that<sup>33</sup>:

- There had been an ongoing campaign in the lead up to the trip to amplify a single narrative, emphasizing Indian national security and nationalism while delegitimizing Canada's Sikh community as extremists.
- Canada's security agencies, led by NSIA, David Jean, went to significant lengths to communicate with their Indian counterparts in order to assuage any such concerns and reaffirm Canada's commitment to prosecuting unlawful behaviour within its borders.
- Despite these steps, the NSIA determined that a false narrative was intentionally being fabricated and promoted by Indian intelligence operatives in order to discredit and embarrass the Canadian government.

While the actual findings of the committee with respect to the allegations of foreign interference are fully redacted, the NSICOP suggests that Atwal's appearance at the government event cannot be understood only in the context of the day of the picture, but rather "as part of a long continuum of bilateral irritants and engagements."<sup>34</sup> Given the classified information shared with the committee and the number of facts later confirmed, the NSIA reiterated that he offered his briefing because he "came to the conclusion that there was a very high probability of an **orchestrated disinformation campaign to tarnish Canada**."<sup>35</sup> Further expanding on his reasons for the media briefing, the NSIA made it clear that he felt such a step was warranted in order to counter foreign interference in real time.<sup>36</sup> The "strategically released" media articles combined with Indian officials' incessant raising of concerns around so-called Sikh "extremism"—even after multiple efforts by Canadian officials to refute those claims—"fit the pattern that the NSIA now saw emerging: an orchestrated attempt to 'shine a spotlight' on Atwal's invitation in order to embarrass the Canadian government."<sup>37</sup>

It is important to note that while the report emphasizes an attempt to discredit Canada and the Trudeau government through this entire affair, any supposed embarrassment is hinged on a premise which accepts that Sikhs in Canada are extremists. In other words, Canada can only be discredited if it is engaging in "embarrassing" behaviour. In this case, respecting the rights of Sikh activists in Canada can be considered "embarrassing" only by succumbing to the Indian characterization of such activism as extremism.

## Manipulating Media and Elected Officials in Canada

In another blatant case of Indian foreign interference, a recent judgement from the Federal Court of Canada made ordinarily classified information public with regards to Indian intelligence efforts to interfere in Canadian electoral processes, government policy, and media independence. An Indian journalist, named only as AB, applied for permanent residency in Canada in 2015. During his second interview, it was alleged that he may be inadmissible to Canada pursuant to s 34(1)(a) and (f) of the *IRPA* because "he had cooperated with the Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and had engaged in espionage against Canada."<sup>38</sup> The fact that the IB and RAW active-



ly attempted to recruit an asset to intentionally interfere in Canadian electoral processes and government decision-making is a significant development.

While the decision of the court focuses on questions of procedural fairness and cites the editor's denial that he carried out the task, the decision remains significant because of the evidence brought forward and the nature of the requests made of him by the agencies. The fact that the IB and RAW actively attempted to recruit an asset to seriously interfere in Canadian electoral processes and government decision-making was not rebutted by any party.

The Security Screening Branch of CSIS prepared an assessment report regarding the editor, referred to as AB, and provided it to the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA). The CBSA subsequently conducted its own assessment and concluded that "there were reasonable grounds to believe that AB was inadmissible because he had engaged in espionage against Canada."<sup>39</sup>

According to the summary document of his June 2015 interview, AB stated that both IB and RAW formally requested his assistance in 2009, specifically with the task to **"covertly influence Canadian government representatives and agencies on behalf of the Indian government."**<sup>40</sup> The summary goes on<sup>41</sup>:

You stated that RAW had also tasked you to meet with government officials in Belgium and Canada **in an effort to influence their views in favor of the Indian government.** You stated that you were told to **identify random Caucasian politicians and attempt to direct them into supporting issues that impacted India.** You stated that the guidance from RAW included that you were to *provide financial assistance and propaganda material to the politicians in order to exert influence over them.* **As an example, you stated that you were tasked to convince politicians that funding from Canada was being sent to Pakistan to support terrorism.** You stated that you met with your IB and RAW handlers outside of Canada at least once every two months, and that the last time you met with them was in May 2015 (i.e. about one month before the interview took place) [emphasis added].

It was found that AB met with representatives of the agencies more than 25 times over a six-year period preceding the interview.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the proceedings before the court, AB did not deny his numerous contacts with Indian intelligence officials, nor did he dispute that he was asked by the agencies to perform these functions although he claims that he had refused to carry them out at the time.<sup>43</sup>

This example establishes a clear pattern through which Indian officials and intelligence operatives work in tandem to manipulate the domestic policies of their partners, including Canada, UK, Germany and others.

### **Amplifying propaganda: The global circulation of Indian targeted messaging**

A report published by the EU DisinfoLab in November 2019 uncovered up to 264 fake media outlets serving Indian interests and narratives, primarily pushing an anti-Pakistan narrative. At least 20 of those sites had been identified as having Canadian links, with many using names of now defunct Canadian newspapers, such as Toronto Mail, the Quebec Telegraph and the Times of New Brunswick. Alexandre Alaphilippe, executive director of the EU DisinfoLab stated that the degree of organization within these networks suggested that they had been carefully planned. The report notes a highly coordinated effort to "influence public perceptions of Pakistan... influence international institutions and elected representatives..." and create an online environment in which it was "making it harder for the reader to trace the manipulation."<sup>44</sup>

It is worth noting that the disinformation network also had ties to a Canadian writer regularly touted as a source for disingenuous claims regarding Sikh activism—Tarek Fatah. According to the EU DisinfoLab, all of the fake news sites were run by the Srivastava Group. The owner of Srivastava Group, Ankit Srivastava, is reported to have registered several sites for Fatah. Fatah denied his connection to the network, although he stated that it must have been "some ridiculous Indian bureaucrat's idea of propaganda."<sup>45</sup>

## Influence on Academic Discourse

There have also been considerable concerns about inappropriate Indian interference and influence in Canadian academic institutions and think-tanks operating in Canada.

In September 2020, a Canada-based think tank published a report which largely repeated Indian state talking points regarding allegations of “Sikh extremism” without citing references or otherwise providing credible sources for many of its central claims.<sup>46</sup> Immediately following the release of the report, official Indian embassy Twitter handles tweeted the report in a coordinated campaign around the world in their host nation languages, seeking to amplify the narrative of the report.

The report was published after the think-tank announced a “Canada-India Initiative” to partner with a New Delhi-based counterpart, the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), funded by Reliance Industries. Interestingly, Canadian media subsequently uncovered ties between the Canadian think-tank and a Calgary-based consulting firm with links to the Conservative Party. The report found that while Shuvaloy Majumdar was involved in the production of the report, he also served as a Global Director for the consulting firm which worked on a contract from the Saskatchewan government for \$240,000 to “help expand access to India.”<sup>47</sup>

Reliance was the very company which reportedly struck a deal to buy millions of barrels of Canadian oil with the assistance of the conservative consulting firm. Although the status of the contract is currently unknown at the time of writing, these dynamics raise a reasonable concern about a pattern in which certain partners may be given preferential access to Indian markets in exchange for their support of Indian policy priorities and narratives.

A closer look at the individuals behind the Canada-India Initiative however, reveals an even more alarming nexus with Indian intelligence. The ties between the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, India’s National Security Advisor, RAW and the ORF are quite apparent, with Vikram Sood, former director of RAW, serving as an advisor to the ORF in addition to several who are reported to be linked to the Indian intelligence agency.<sup>48</sup> The di-

rect ties between Indian intelligence operatives and a report published in Canada aimed at demonizing Sikh political advocacy in Canada raises considerable concerns about potential foreign influence on academic and policy discourse in Canada.

## Weaponization of Visas and Intimidation of Sikh Activists

Sikhs in Canada have frequently raised alarm about Indian intelligence agents surveilling and harassing Sikhs to cease democratic activities that contradict Indian state interests, particularly by denying visas to vocal critics of India’s human rights record.

Those denied visas due to their political expression include prominent media personalities in Canada, as well as current and former elected officials in Canada.<sup>49</sup> This has also been exacerbated by Indian officials proactively intimidating vocal Sikh activists by threatening visa denials due to their political activity. Many others who wish to visit their families in India are either restricted from doing so due to the “blacklist” or are forced to sign documents affirming their commitment to India’s “unity and territorial integrity” as well as agreeing to remain silent on India’s human rights record.

## Meddling in Canadian Elections

There have been numerous incidents of direct and indirect Indian interference in Canadian elections at various levels which illustrate that this is not a partisan issue in Canada as all parties have been impacted by attempts to manipulate electoral outcomes.

This includes incidents in which figures linked to the Indian High Commission in Canada allegedly persuaded voters not to support certain candidates in federal leadership campaigns.<sup>50</sup> A follow up report on this specifically noted that people within the South Asian community had been “discouraged” by Indian officials from participating in political fundraisers.<sup>51</sup>

In another documented incident, a leader of a provincial political party allegedly came under pressure from the Indian consulate to reject a Sikh candidate during a 2017 nomination due to his father’s alleged involvement in Sikh organizations.<sup>52</sup>

## Interference in Canadian schools and curriculum

In a clear attempt to silence dissent and omit criticism of India in public schools, the Indian consulate issued an official diplomatic note in Fall 2021 in response to discussions regarding the historic *Kisaan Morcha* (farmer's agitation) between 2020-2021. The note urged Ontario's Office of International Relations and Protocol to investigate dialogue about the ongoing protest of predominantly Sikh farmers and stop teachers in the Greater Toronto Area from giving lessons on these protests as such material poses a "security threat" and could "poison" relations between India and Canada. Canadian authorities were urged to "investigate" what was being taught as it was allegedly a "conspiracy" to sabotage the "goodwill and warm friendly relations between Indian and Canada".<sup>53</sup> This incident represents a shocking overreach by Indian officials, and an unabashed willingness to go to great lengths to limit any criticism of India's dismal human rights record and increasing authoritarianism.

## Indian interference in cultural activities in Canada

Indian consular officials tried to directly dissuade Brampton's "Carabram" festival organizers from allowing a Punjab pavilion separate from the India pavilion. Indian officials threatened to "go to the highest office in the country and cancel [the] festival" if their demands were not met.

Brampton Mayor Linda Jeffrey wrote to then Foreign Affairs Minister, Chrystia Freeland, on August 18, 2017, about the "unwarranted and unwelcome interference" by the Consulate General of India. Ms. Freeland's spokesman, Adam Austen, acknowledged the inappropriate behaviour in an email to the *Globe and Mail*, stating that "interference in domestic affairs by foreign representatives in Canada is inappropriate".<sup>54</sup>

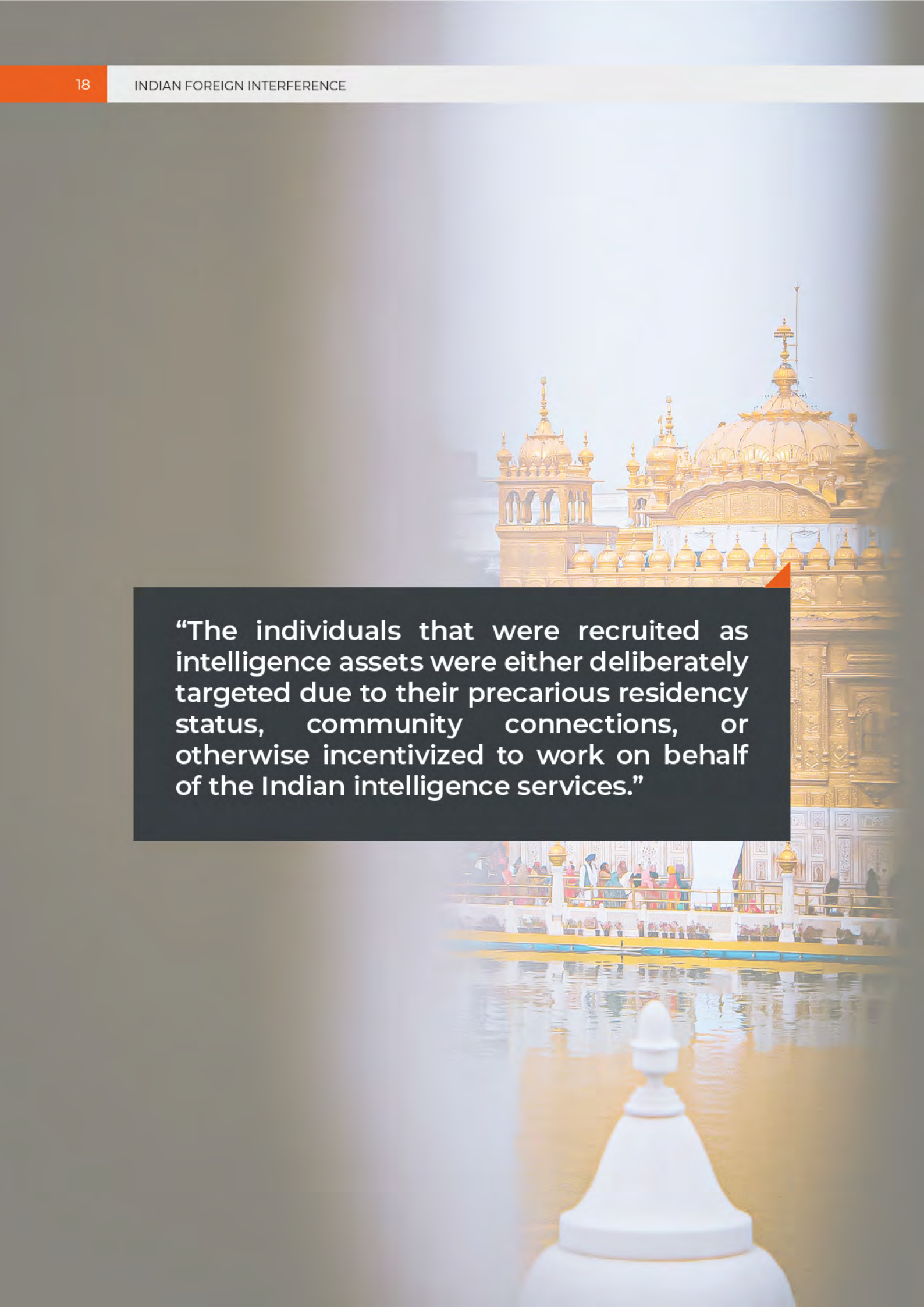
There is also extensive evidence that organizations in Canada directly linked to the governing BJP, including various RSS-affiliated units, operate to exert Indian influence through a web of humanitarian relief and social service agencies, including several charities.<sup>55</sup>

## Indo-Canadian Kashmir Forum Links to Indian Intelligence

In 2020, an Ottawa company was barred from work related to Canadian military and national security infrastructure because of the company president's "consistent contact with Indian intelligence officials". In a letter revoking the president's security clearance, Public Services and Procurement Canada noted that: "since approximately 2000, you have had consistent contact with the Indian High Commission in Ottawa, including elements of the Indian government involved in information and intelligence collection activities in Canada."<sup>56</sup> The letter outlined details of the investigation which noted that president, Ashok Koul, failed to report his contacts with foreign officials and, in fact, provided "contradictory and misleading" answers to investigators. In particular, he had been asked not to disclose sensitive information about a foreign government employee but had "breached this trust" by telling the very person in question. It is notable that Koul, president of Life Prediction Technologies Inc., was the long-time president of the Indo-Canadian Kashmir Forum, which supports the Indian government's position in the disputed Kashmir region claimed by both India and Pakistan.<sup>57</sup>

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“The individuals that were recruited as intelligence assets were either deliberately targeted due to their precarious residency status, community connections, or otherwise incentivized to work on behalf of the Indian intelligence services.”

## Prosecuting Indian Interference in Germany

Between December 2008 and December 2017, India's domestic and foreign intelligence services, the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), were found to have conducted extensive espionage activities in Germany. The targets of the coordinated and wide-ranging espionage activity were primarily the Sikh, Kashmiri and Tamil communities in Germany. Indian intelligence agencies cultivated intelligence assets to spy on German residents of Indian descent, and often German citizens. The targets were wide-ranging and, in fact, included not only individuals under investigation by Indian authorities, but also individuals who were deemed to be "sympathizers" of Sikh, Tamil, and Kashmiri political causes—or simply the family members of suspected "sympathizers". In several cases, foreign officials visiting Germany were also targeted, brazenly circumventing established legal channels for intelligence sharing or international cooperation.

As a result of this illegal activity, German courts convicted four individuals for their work on behalf of Indian intelligence in Germany. The individuals that were recruited as intelligence assets were either deliberately targeted due to their precarious residency status, community connections, or otherwise incentivized to work on behalf of the Indian intelligence services. These individuals came to light after German domestic intelligence services acted on the repeated complaints of harassment and intimidation by members of the local Sikh community.

Together, the convictions, investigations, and surveillance of Indian diplomats led to the expulsion of several Indian officials from the country. The uncovered networks of Indian intelligence agents stretched beyond Germany, to the UK where British intelligence also came into conflict with RAW during this aggressive drive to develop a European network of agents located within targeted communities and movements.<sup>58</sup>

These cases raise serious questions about the nature

of Indian intelligence activities that take advantage of vulnerable persons, circumvent official legal channels, and undermine the sovereignty of NATO-allied countries. Wider questions need to be asked about Indian intelligence activities around the world, especially in countries like Canada which is home to diverse diaspora communities originating in the Indian subcontinent.

### Ranjit S.

Ranjit S. was arrested on April 13, 2013, and charged by the German public prosecutor's office on allegations that he worked for Indian intelligence agencies operating in Germany. In return for this work, he was promised cash payments among other incentives.<sup>59</sup> Following his conviction, Ranjit S. was sentenced to nine months in prison which was upheld on appeal. The appeal decision noted that he was in contact with a senior officer of the IB operating unofficially in Germany between November 2012 to March 2013.

According to the appeal decision, Ranjit S. was working for the IB as an intelligence informant and reported on Indian nationals residing in Germany, particularly in relation to individuals and activity related to Sikh organisations. He was specifically asked to provide information about an Indian national under investigation as well as information about family members which was given in phone calls to his handler.

According to the appeal decision, Ranjit S. was participating in investigative efforts and was incorporated into the secret service of a foreign power—the activities of whom were found to have been directed against the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>60</sup> In response to his defence that his activities were targeted at those suspected of illegal activity proscribed by the European Union, the appeal judge firmly held that the unauthorized and unlawful intelligence collection conducted by Ranjit S. in conjunction with Indian intelligence services violated the legal assistance rules applicable in Germany without the cooperation or oversight of German authorities.<sup>61</sup> As a result, the judge found that he clearly acted against the interests of the Federal Republic of Germany, particularly as his activities targeted mere sympathizers of proscribed organizations and targeted family members who are completely uninvolved third parties.<sup>62</sup> Noting that

German sovereignty was gravely disregarded as a result of these activities, the appeal decision noted that the actions of Indian intelligence, targeting family members of sympathizers, trigger fear of repression and thus undermine the freedom of expression to which German residents are entitled.<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps most alarmingly however, is the fact that Ranjit S. surfaced again in 2019 in relation to the arrest of six young Sikh men in Punjab on allegations that the group had formed a militant module that had been conspiring to carry out several armed actions. According to the charges, Ranjit Singh was "the mastermind who was providing help to the accused and was motivating them to eliminate the targets".<sup>64</sup> While their trial is still ongoing, it is greatly concerning that a known Indian intelligence asset operating in Germany was linked to the alleged mobilization of young people arrested in Punjab on allegations of violent activity in a supposed transnational conspiracy. While unpacking the nature of this dynamic any further would exceed the scope of this report, it is important to note how Indian intelligence assets around the world are mobilized to criminalize and incarcerate young Sikhs. Further, this incident clearly damages the credibility of India's allegations of transnational conspiracies to facilitate violence in Punjab.

This case clearly establishes that Indian intelligence services have been operating in countries like Germany, consciously and willingly operating outside of established government channels to target suspects, sympathizers of Sikh political organizations, and their family members. It is noteworthy that Ranjit S. had previously come to Germany and unsuccessfully applied for political asylum and even though his deportation had been suspended at the time, he remained in a precarious and potentially vulnerable position due to his past as a member of a Sikh organization which actively participated in the Khalistan movement.<sup>65</sup>

## Thiyagaraja P.

Thiyagaraja P. was an employee of the central immigration office (ZAB) who was arrested on February 17, 2016, on allegations that he handed over information to Indian intelligence agencies that he procured through the access he had to German immigration databases. The 2016 court decision outlined that Thiyagaraja P. abused his privileged position in which he was particularly responsible for safeguarding the very secrets he divulged. Between 2008 and 2016, Thiyagaraja P. was found to have handed over information to RAW on a number of occasions. His sentence of three years and six months was upheld on appeal in 2017.

The court found that Thiyagaraja P. consistently communicated sensitive information to several intelligence contacts operating out of the Indian consulate in Frankfurt.<sup>66</sup> The decision further elaborated that the intelligence made over 40 requests for information on persons primarily of Indian origin, particularly those who were involved in Sikh organizations. Additional requests for information were also made related to individuals involved with Kashmiri and Tamil organizations.

Thiyagaraja P's case clearly established that there were a number of Indian intelligence officers operating covertly in Germany without registering as intelligence agents.<sup>67</sup> German reporters shed further light on the nature of requests made by intelligence agencies. Namely, that he had provided specific personal data including places of residence, dates of birth, family circumstances, travel routes, other information about whereabouts, as well as searching for these people in the nationally networked register persons maintained by immigration authorities.<sup>68</sup>

The court decision noted that in the majority of cases, the spying efforts were aimed against innocent German citizens, including foreign officials who are guests in the Federal Republic, as well as German foreign nationals residing in the country.<sup>69</sup> The verdict further emphasized that most of the queries made were against alleged sympathizers of proscribed organizations, noting that merely sympathizing with a proscribed organization is not in itself a crime in Germany.



Thiyagaraja P. was found to have been in consistent contact with intelligence agents, providing information, and in return received payments ranging from €10 to €400, as well as consular assistance in obtaining visas for India on a number of occasions.<sup>70</sup> The appeal judgment particularly emphasized that the disclosure of official secrets, given his access to sensitive information, jeopardized important public interests and undermined the public's trust in the integrity and confidentiality of the administration.<sup>71</sup> His work ultimately granted near unhindered access to official information including sensitive personal data. The purpose of this transmission of information was clearly to inform research on Indian dissidents under pressure of Indian intelligence.<sup>72</sup>

### Manmohan S. and Kanwaljit K.

Manmohan S. and Kanwaljit K. were Indian nationals residing in Germany, charged on March 28, 2019 for working with Indian intelligence services. According to federal prosecutors, the husband-wife duo worked as journalists at a prominent Sikh television channel while simultaneously working for RAW by providing information about Sikh and Kashmiri dissidents in Germany—as well as their relatives.<sup>73</sup> The two had been in contact with a senior level intelligence officer, disguised as a consul, since the beginning of 2015 and sent information about Indian opposition groups living in Germany on a number of occasions.<sup>74</sup> Kanwaljit K. joined the intelligence activity in July 2017 when she began attending monthly meetings with their Indian handler. In exchange for information, both individuals received consistent cash payments from Indian intelligence agents, totaling €7200.

The duo was sentenced in December 2019, with Manmohan S. receiving one and a half years in prison and a €1500 fine, while Kanwaljit K. was issued a €1800 fine.

### Balvir S.

Charges were filed against Balvir S in January 2020 on charges of working for Indian intelligence agents in Germany. He was ultimately sentenced to a two-year suspended sentence and ordered to pay a fine of €2400.

Balvir S. provided information about dissident groups in the Sikh and Kashmiri communities, as well as their relatives. According to reports, Balvir S.'s handler was an intelligence officer disguised as an Indian consul in Germany.<sup>75</sup> He remained in regular phone and personal contact with this handler stationed in Frankfurt and provided the requested information on numerous occasions between January 2015 and December 2017.<sup>76</sup>

**“The verdict further emphasized that most of the queries made were against alleged sympathizers of proscribed organizations, noting that merely sympathizing with a proscribed organization is not in itself a crime in Germany.”**

## Conclusion: Impacts of Indian Foreign Interference

The subtle and complex nature of foreign interference activity and the way clandestine operations are leveraged in conjunction with diplomatic channels to secure India's policy objectives requires significant attention.

Nearly every bilateral meeting of various government officials for more than a decade has heavily featured claims of "Sikh extremism" in Canada. The baseless allegations against sitting MPs and Ministers during the 2018 trip to India however, illustrate the unrestrained and outrageous nature of such complaints. Upon a closer assessment of these allegations, it is clear these complaints simply boil down to a demand for Canada to clamp down on the fundamental rights and freedoms enjoyed by Sikhs in Canada—whether they are exercised in the form of advocating for Khalistan, calling for a democratic referendum on secession, or criticizing India's human rights record.

There is clear evidence on the record that Indian intelligence agencies are actively engaging in conduct to manipulate public narratives in the media, intervene in electoral processes, and ultimately influence government decision-making in order to criminalize and prosecute Sikh political advocacy in Canada under the guise of "countering extremism". Combined with strongly-worded diplomatic rhetoric making good relations with India *conditional* on a "crackdown" against Sikh activists in Canada, Indian intelligence agencies have clearly engaged in foreign interference in order to manipulate Canadian policy makers. This is extremely concerning for Sikhs in Canada given that Canada's recent *Indo-Pacific Strategy* identifies India as a critical partner in achieving its objectives and Indian officials have made explicit comments about "cracking down" on Sikh activism in Canada in a manner suggesting *quid pro quo*.<sup>77</sup>

This is a particularly dangerous dynamic given Canada's stated ambitions to engage India economically and politically, especially in an environment where the record shows evidence of foreign states explicitly seeking to manipulate public narratives in Canada and exerting both diplomatic and covert pressure on Canada to secure their own foreign policy objectives.

The NSICOP's acute attention to the vulnerabilities of various diaspora and ethnocultural communities which are often targeted to influence Canada's position on various issues is crucial. While the committee specifically notes the activities of China and Russia, the subsequent section regarding "Other states engaged in foreign interference" is entirely redacted. All that remains is a note that: "Paragraphs 132, 133, 134 and 135 were revised to remove injurious or privileged information. Those paragraphs describe the activities of other countries which engage in foreign interference in Canada."<sup>78</sup> Considering the report's later reference to the "Indian diaspora" in Canada, and NSICOP's finding in its earlier 2018 Special Report on Prime Minister Trudeau's trip to India however, it is highly likely that this redacted section contains specific information regarding the activities of Indian intelligence and diplomatic operatives in Canada today. This conclusion is also supported by Professor Stephanie Carvin who suggests that, despite redaction, the contents of the report, including the recommendations, "suggest that at least some of [India's clandestine] activities alleged since the 1980s are real and ongoing."<sup>79</sup>

Indian foreign interference not only impacts Sikhs as a racialized group by persuading governments to repress vulnerable communities, but it also emboldens Indian officials to continue interfering in foreign states with impunity while violating human rights in Punjab due to the lack of repercussions from the global community. Given the gravity of this security threat and the risks it poses to marginalized communities in Canada, it is imperative that Canadian institutions and officials are mobilized to ensure diaspora communities are not left vulnerable to being used as cannon fodder to further the foreign policy objectives of either Canada or India.

## Recommendations

1. The scope and mandate of any public inquiry or review on this issue, including the proposed Special Rapporteur on foreign interference in Canada, must not be limited to the activities of one foreign state alone or one single event or election. Any public review process must comprehensively investigate and review the clandestine foreign interference activities of any culpable actors in Canada.
2. The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians has published two reports (2018 Special Report and 2019 Annual Report) which deal with foreign interference but redact any information regarding Indian foreign interference in Canada. Canadian officials must publicly disclose relevant information known to security agencies, similar to how Russian and Chinese interference have been publicly acknowledged. While care must be taken to maintain intelligence sources and methods, declassified summaries of this information are imperative to educate the general public about the realities of foreign interference in Canada while ensuring the safety, security and confidence of vulnerable ethnocultural groups like the Sikh community.
3. The respective Ministers of Justice and Public Safety must take steps to prosecute illegal foreign interference activity under existing legislation (ie. under the *Canada Elections Act*). Further, Parliament must consider steps to amend the *Criminal Code* or enact other legislation to ensure Canadians are protected from nefarious foreign actors engaging in clandestine foreign interference in the future.
4. Canadian officials must clearly and forcefully affirm that Canada will not tolerate any violations of normal diplomatic practice, and will take appropriate action, including declaring diplomats *persona non grata* where evidence sustains allegations of activity which constitutes foreign interference.
5. The Minister of Public Safety must take meaningful

steps to ensure direct dialogue with members of the Sikh community on the issue of Indian foreign interference and ensure clear and transparent communication. Efforts must be made to collect data and information regarding intelligence activity in the Sikh community, inform members of the community about prospective threats, and commit resources to protect and educate members of the community against foreign interference activity.

**“Indian foreign interference not only impacts Sikhs as a racialized group by persuading governments to repress vulnerable communities, but it also emboldens Indian officials to continue interfering in foreign states with impunity while violating human rights in Punjab.”**



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