

## What is India's problem with Canada?

**The Indian government's insistence on flogging the threat of a dead horse called Khalistan will only strain bilateral ties between Ottawa and New Delhi further.**

**Sushant Singh**



At a press conference on 8 June to mark nine years of Narendra Modi as the Indian prime minister, union minister for external affairs S. Jaishankar's ire was directed towards Canada. At a time when offensive foreign policy headlines are dominated solely by Pakistan, the minister warned Canada that giving "space... to separatists, extremists" was "not good for the relationship". He was responding to a question after a video clip on social media showed a float as part of a parade held in Brampton on 4 June, that seemed to celebrate the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Ten days after Jaishankar's rebuke, Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar was shot dead in Vancouver as he left the Guru Nanak Gurdwara at night. Nijjar, chief of the Khalistan Tiger Force in Indian records, was [declared a terrorist](#) in India in November 2020 and a proclaimed absconder. The [charge sheet](#) filed that month by the National Investigation Agency accused Nijjar of "trying to radicalise Sikh community across the world in favour of the creation of 'Khalistan'". The agency claimed that "he has been trying to incite Sikhs to vote for secession, agitate against the government of India and carry out violent activities, through various posts, audio messages and videos posted on social media". Nijjar had denied those accusations.

Nijjar had annoyed the Indian government last fall after he organised a campaign to hold a Khalistan referendum. His lawyer [claims](#) that the Indian government had something to do with his client's murder. His allegation finds credence through the [celebratory social media posts](#) by Hindu nationalists in India after Nijjar's murder, which emphasise that he was the [third pro-Khalistan leader to die outside India](#) in only 45 days. Other [reports](#) claim that his murder was linked to rivalry between criminal gangs. Before Nijjar, Paramjit Singh Panjwar, the so-called chief of the Khalistan Commando Force, was shot dead in Lahore, Pakistan in early May while the self-styled chief of the

Khalistan Liberation Force, Avtar Singh Khanda, died in Birmingham, UK. In Canada itself, a year before Nijjar's murder, there was another killing in Surrey, of Ripudaman Singh Malik, who was acquitted in 2005 in the 1985 Air India bombing that had killed 329 persons.

## Indian 'interference'

Following Nijjar's murder, the leader of Canada's New Democratic Party, Jagmeet Singh, [wrote](#) to the then public safety minister Marco Mendicino, asking him to investigate the Indian government's interference in Canadian politics. NDP has been Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's coalition partner for a year and Singh has been known for his pro-Khalistan stance. He has publicly accused India of human rights violations against Sikhs in Punjab. In his letter, Singh underscored that the murder happened "just a few weeks after the national security adviser to the prime minister described India as one of the top sources of foreign interference targeting Canadians". At a conference held by the Canadian Global Affairs Institute in Ottawa on 2 June, Trudeau's national security adviser, Jody Thomas, had publicly mentioned India as among the top sources of foreign interference in Canada. When questioned about Thomas's claim, Jaishankar said that he was reminded of the Hindi expression "*ulta chor kotwal ko daante*", tantamount to "the pot calling the kettle black". While federal agencies in Canada have indirectly warned in recent years about India's interference, it has been rarely done by name and almost always kept buried in internal documents. Heavily redacted official Canadian documents, made available last year by the Access to Information Act, revealed the [potential for foreign interference](#) stemming from Indian students' concerns that Canada was slow to grant required study permits. Prior to that, a 2018 report prepared for deputy ministers attending a retreat on national security had warned that Indo-Canadians were among those running the risk of "being influenced, overtly or covertly, by foreign governments with their own agendas". It warned that "the lines between legitimate advocacy and lobbying and pressures imposed to advance the economic and political interests of foreign actors are becoming increasingly blurred".

## Trudeau's travails

In 2018, Thomas's predecessor, Daniel Jean had suggested that rogue elements in the Indian government had sought to embarrass Trudeau during his official visit to India in February. The disastrous visit marked the nadir of bilateral ties between the two countries. Politically, the nationalist Modi government finds the liberal values publicly espoused by Trudeau as antithetical to the ideas it espouses on most social, cultural and political issues. The Modi government was angry over Trudeau's presence at the Khalsa Day event in 2017 due to the display of Khalistani flags, posters of dead Sikh separatist leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and the celebration of a motion terming the 1984 anti-Sikh riots as "genocide".

Trudeau was visibly miffed by the treatment he received in India and the Modi government was not keen to make amends either. Ties between the two governments worsened in the next couple of years as the Indian side felt that Trudeau's government was supporting Sikh separatists for its own electoral gains. During the year-long protest against farm laws on Delhi's borders that forced Modi to backtrack, Trudeau's government issued a statement against some of the harsh policing measures unleashed on the farmers. Trudeau's coalition with Jagmeet Singh's NDP last year only fed the bias. "Frankly, we are at a loss to understand other than the requirements of vote bank politics why anybody would do this," Jaishankar alleged. "If anybody has a complaint, we have a complaint about Canada. ... the space they are giving to Khalistanis and violent extremists," he claimed.

"Vote bank" politics, the term used by Jaishankar to publicly disparage the Trudeau government, is unique to India's political lexicon. It has been used by Hindutva ideologues to target voting by religious minorities in India for opposition parties, contending that they are captive voters of such parties and thus undemocratic. Jaishankar posits the same in the case of Sikh voters and the Liberal-NDP combine in Canada—that there is an appeasement of extremist Sikh groups for their votes by the ruling coalition. Put differently, Canada should not look after its religious minorities but deal with them as Modi's Hindutva regime treats Muslims in India. For the first time in independent

India, the union government does not have a single Muslim minister even though the community forms 14% of India's population. In fact, BJP does not even have a single Muslim MP. It perhaps wants Sikhs to be politically disempowered to the same extent in Canada.

## Sikh separatism

It is nevertheless true that the Sikh community, fearing the onslaught of Hindu majoritarianism, has also witnessed the rise of extremist elements in its midst. This fanatical sentiment, harbouring fantastical ideas of an independent Khalistan, is particularly powerful in sections of the Sikh diaspora in Canada. The fear of the rise of Sikh separatism in Canada, with its direct links to Punjab, feeds into the insecurities and vulnerabilities—about India's sovereignty, integrity and unity—in the current Hindutva dispensation in New Delhi. Punjab came out of the over-a-decade-long cycle of violent separatist insurgency in the mid-1990s, and its trauma continues to afflict India's security establishment. India's top security czar under Modi is a former chief of the Intelligence Bureau, Ajit Doval, whose career highlight was intelligence operations against Sikh separatists in Punjab in the 1980s. He is aware of the networks that operated in Canada and continue to harbour renegades even now.

Doval's memories, revived during the farmers' protest that prominently featured Sikh iconography, have driven the Modi government's attitude towards Canada and the UK, two countries considered by New Delhi to be soft towards Sikh separatists. Many believe that under Doval, the Indian security establishment has taken matters into its own hands, linking it to the recent elimination of pro-Khalistan leaders based outside India. Hartosh Singh Bal, who has written and reported extensively on Punjab, has warned that "through such figures as Doval, this government shares a continuity of thinking with the kind of machinations that had led Punjab to disaster in the first place".

Sikh separatism is easy to justify by its proponents as the logical corollary to the idea of India as a Hindu Rashtra, a long-standing dream of the Hindutva ideologues that is now being vigorously pursued under Modi. Radical Sikhs argue that if India can be a country only for the Hindus, then Sikhs should also have their own sovereign state in Khalistan. The matter gets complicated because Hindutva ideologues claim Sikhs as Hindus, a claim Sikhs detest and vehemently oppose; if Sikhs—even though they may be Canadians for generations—are Hindus, then they are automatically Indians, goes the Hindutva argument. But even Sikhs, who batted for a plural India and fought against Khalistani militants as Indians, are opposed to being classified as Hindus or accepting India as a Hindu Rashtra.

Buoyed by its self-created image of a major global power, New Delhi has made tough Canadian action against Sikh groups a precondition for healthy bilateral ties. India's ultimatum has, however, fallen on deaf ears. As a liberal democracy with strong institutions, it is tough for Ottawa to do. Though ties with India are important, they are not critical enough to dispense with democratic norms about the protection of the rights of religious minorities—even when Sikh organisations cross the line into radicalization and separatism. Khalistan is a dead horse in India and has been so for decades now. Flogging the threat of a dead horse, whether by the security establishment in New Delhi or in sections of the Sikh community in Canada, will not bring it to life. A minor irritant cannot be allowed to hijack the whole gamut of bilateral ties between India and Canada, but that seems unlikely as long as Hindutva remains the driving force of the Indian regime.

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*Lead image: A file photo of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau meeting with PM Narendra Modi during the former's visit to India in 2018 from Getty Images.*

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