



America-Eurasia Center's South Asia and America Programs

October 14, 2023

Khalistan and the Assassination of Sikh Leader Nijjar in Canada



Canadian citizen and Sikh Leader Nijjar is assassinated in British Vancouver, creating international tension between Canada and India over accusations of who was responsible. Photo Credit Sikh PA

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The Khalistan Movement: The Reason for the Current Tensions Between India



*The flag of the Khalistan movement flying outside the place of worship where Nijjar was killed.
Courtesy of Darryl Dyck for Associated Press.*

Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian citizen living in British Columbia, was killed in June 2023 by two masked shooters. Approximately three months later, on September 18, 2023, the Canadian government accused the Indian government of playing a role in Nijjar's death, asserting that there were "credible allegations." The Indian government has denied these claims.¹ Tensions between Canada and India have reached an unprecedented low point regarding Nijjar's death and his involvement with the Khalistan movement.² But who is Hardeep Singh Nijjar, and how does his death and his political beliefs reveal the long-simmering tensions in India and the history of tension between Canada and India?

Born in Jalandhar, a district in Punjab, located in the northern region of India, Hardeep Singh Nijjar immigrated to Canada in 1997 and eventually became a Canadian citizen in 2007. He worked as a plumber, was married, and had two children before his death. While living in British Columbia, he

¹ Sammy Westfall, "What Is the Khalistan Separatist Movement behind the India-Canada Rift?," The Washington Post, September 20, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/19/khalistan-movement-india-canada-separatist-sikh/>.

² Nadine Yousif, "Who Was Canadian Sikh Leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar?," BBC News, September 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-66860510>.

gained notoriety for his support for the creation of Khalistan.³ The Khalistan movement advocates for creating a separate Sikh state in Punjab, where most of the Sikh population in India resides due to it being the birthplace of Sikhism in the 1400s. Twenty-four million Sikhs live in India, making up 2% of the nation's population, with an additional 2 million Sikhs spread out across the globe. Nijjar was only one of the members of the Sikh diaspora to endorse the creation of Khalistan. The movement reached its apex in the mid-1980s and ended after approximately a decade of Sikh militants operating out of Punjab and waging an insurgency against the Indian government before finally being suppressed with the aid of Indian special forces but at the cost of tens of thousands of people who were either killed or forced into disappearance. Currently, the Khalistan movement is banned in India due to being seen as a threat to India's national security, though it currently has limited support amongst Sikhs living in India.⁴

A brief overview of the history of the Khalistan movement is essential as it shall provide insight into why India is so enraged at the accusations leveled against them by the Canadian government. While the movement began almost as soon as India became independent, it became known internationally in 1984 with the raid on the Golden Temple, the most holy site in the Sikh religion.⁵ Codenamed Operation Blue Star, the aim was "flushing out Sikh separatists."⁶ Over a week, tanks, artillery, and heavy weaponry would be involved in the ensuing fight for the Golden Temple. While the Indian government claims that the death toll is at 400, with 87 of their own soldiers losing their lives, Sikhs dispute this claim.⁷ According to Sikh accounts of the raid, thousands had lost their lives, including many pilgrims who had simply been in the area for an important festival to honor the passing of an important guru. Due to the damage caused to the Golden Temple, many Sikhs felt that, by extension, it was damaging to their religion. Even nearly thirty years after the attack, the rage felt by Sikhs has been passed down to later generations. In 2013, Lieutenant General Kuldeep Singh Brar, the man in charge of Operation Blue Star, was attacked for his involvement in the military operation, having been branded as public enemy number one by Sikh militants. Brar maintains that the military operation was not an attack on Sikhs as a whole but on the militants hiding in the Golden Temple who had been responsible for several murders.

Furthermore, Brar states that the militants had received "lots of warnings" but did not respond,

³ Yousif, "Who Was Canadian Sikh Leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar?"

⁴ Westfall, "What Is the Khalistan Separatist Movement behind the India-Canada Rift?"

⁵ Westfall, "What Is the Khalistan Separatist Movement behind the India-Canada Rift?"

⁶ Poonam Taneja, "Why 1984 Golden Temple Raid Still Rankles for Sikhs," BBC News, August 1, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23514583>.

⁷ Westfall, "What Is the Khalistan Separatist Movement behind the India-Canada Rift?"

which prompted permission for the attack on the temple. Brar claims that he gave orders to his men to use as little force as possible and avoid damaging the temple, but soon told them to fight as hard as they could when it became apparent that they were being attacked from all sides. While his Sikh attackers had been children when Operation Blue Star had been conducted, one of them had lost two family members who had been at the temple during the raid and have been missing ever since.

⁸ This is a testament to how there is still a traumatic legacy to the Khalistan movement and the government's response to it, with both sides maintaining their version of the story and still feeling intense emotions regarding the conflict all these years later. Yet another traumatic event of the Khalistan movement and the government's reaction was the series of anti-Sikh pogroms in India in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star. In revenge for the carnage and destruction at the Golden Temple, the Sikh bodyguards of the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi assassinated her. As a result, "genocidal killings" soon swept the nation. Angry mobs of Hindus, demanding revenge, burned Sikh stores, dragged Sikhs out of their homes and vehicles, beating them to death or even setting them on fire. In the capital city of New Delhi, Sikh women were gang-raped, and Sikh places of worship were razed to the ground. Most appalling are accounts that "describe how law enforcement and government officials participated in the massacres by engaging in the violence, inciting civilians to seek vengeance and providing the mobs with weapons."⁹ So intense and violent were these pogroms that, at its peak, one Sikh was murdered every minute. While the official death toll is 3,000, unofficial accounts claim an even larger loss of life.

Furthermore, human rights groups have identified specific people responsible for exacerbating the mass violence. None of these people have faced any repercussions for their actions, nor have the victims of the pogroms been given any form of restitution. Additionally, many who lived through the pogroms still live in abject poverty. The traumatic legacy of these anti-Sikh pogroms cannot be dealt with because the Indian government still refuses to discuss what happened. As a result of this, it has led many to view these pogroms as a riot, making one think that it was merely a spate of random violence that the government was unable to control. In reality, according to a report commissioned by India in 2000, the Sikh death toll would not have been as high as it was if not for the involvement of powerful people. The wave of anti-Sikh pogroms should be seen and condemned as a crime against humanity.¹⁰ Until the Indian government publicly acknowledges the pogroms for what they were, and until an open dialogue can be established between both Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike, it is very unlikely that justice will be served to those responsible for the tragedy

⁸ Taneja, "Why 1984 Golden Temple Raid Still Rankles for Sikhs."

⁹ Simran Jeet Singh, "It's Time India Accept Responsibility for Its 1984 Sikh Genocide," Time, October 31, 2014, <https://time.com/3545867/india-1984-sikh-genocide-anniversary/>.

¹⁰ Singh, "It's Time India Accept Responsibility for Its 1984 Sikh Genocide."

and the victims in need of aid.

Another traumatic event occurred in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star, one which would inextricably link Canada and India together in the controversial politics of Sikh separatism and would raise tensions between the two nations long before the death of Nijjar. In fact, Nijjar's death has reopened the old wound of the deadliest terror attack in Canadian history.¹¹ "On 23 June 1985, an Air India flight traveling from Canada to India via London exploded off the Irish coast, killing all 329 people on board. The cause was a bomb in a suitcase that was transferred to the flight even though the ticket holder had not boarded."¹² Of the 329 victims, 24 were Indian, 268 were Canadian citizens, most of whom were of Indian origin. Most of the bodies were never found, presumably vaporized, with only 131 bodies being recovered.

Additionally, there was another explosion at the Narita airport in Tokyo, with the bomb meant for Air India flight to Bangkok but detonated prematurely, killing two in the process. It is believed the Sikh separatists conducted the bombing to avenge the raid on the Golden Temple. Talwinder Singh Parmar, the leader of a Khalistan militant group known as Babbar Khalsa, a militant group now banned in Canada and India, was arrested for being responsible for the attack. However, due to a weak case being made against Parmar, he was released but was eventually killed by Indian police in 1992. Before his death, the Indian government had tried to extradite him to India but failed. Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri were arrested for suspicion of their involvement in the terrorist attack. However, in 2005, both were acquitted of all charges, including mass murder and conspiracy, due to inaccuracies and the lack of credible witnesses. During the reading of the verdict, many of the victims openly sobbed. In the end, only one person would face justice for their involvement in the bombing. Inerjit Singh Reyat was arrested and convicted for aiding in constructing explosives. The rage of the victims over the verdict of Malik and Bagri led to an inquiry in 2010 declared that there had been a series of errors. Notably, there is evidence that Canadian law enforcement had been warned about the threat of an attack on an airplane months before the attack occurred. In the weeks preceding the terrorist attack, Canadian security had followed Parmar and Reyat into the woods and overheard explosions but did not report them. Even more damning, two Sikh journalists that could have been important witnesses for the prosecution were murdered in the 1990s. These embarrassments built upon a damning testimony revealed in 2000 when a former member of the Canadian secret service confessed to destroying tapes

¹¹ Westfall, "What Is the Khalistan Separatist Movement behind the India-Canada Rift?"

¹² Sharanya Hrishikesh, "Air India Flight 182: 1985 Bombing Back in News after Canada Row," BBC News, September 27, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66909820>.

containing 150 hours of telephone calls that contained evidence of conversations made by Sikh suspects. The man's reasoning for refusing to hand over the information to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was the fear of exposing the identity of his informants. In 2016, much to the chagrin and anger of many, Reyat was released from prison after finishing two-thirds of his sentence. A year later, he was allowed to live wherever he pleased rather than the halfway house. Malik was shot dead in 2022, and while the motives of his killers currently remain unknown, law enforcement suspects that it was a targeted killing. Approximately four decades later, very few Canadians remember one of the worst tragedies to befall their nation and the lack of justice properly served to the family members of the victims.

In contrast, the bombing is a source of intense emotion in India due to the victims being of Indian origin and having many relatives in the country. Family members of the victims in India feel anger over being left out of the judicial process and disbelief over how Malik and Bagri got off; recent events have prompted many to reiterate how Canadian incompetence was responsible for the tragedy and injustice. Again, the traumatic legacy is still fresh in many minds, and it's unlikely they will be able to heal anytime soon due to the lack of a resolution that satisfies all parties involved.¹³

Despite repressing the Sikh insurgency in Punjab, concerns amongst Indian security officials of a renewed insurgency have justified the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to arrest Sikh separatists it sees as a threat. One example of this can be seen in March of 2023, when Indian authorities severed internet access and text messaging for the 27 million people of Punjab over several days to apprehend Amritpal Singh, a Khalistan militant leader. In addition to being concerned about Sikh nationalists within their own borders, India has frequently voiced its concerns about Sikh nationalists abroad, having asked other nations to clamp down on the activism of Khalistan supporters. Canada is notable for having the largest Sikh population outside of India at 770,000, with some favoring Sikh separatism.¹⁴ Hardeep Singh Nijjar was one of those Canadian Sikhs who advocated for the creation of Khalistan. Amongst his supporters and fellow community members in Surrey, British Columbia, Nijjar was seen as a caring and peaceful man. Nijjar even went as far as to send a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau where he explicitly stated his unwavering commitment to the peaceful means by which he advocated for Khalistan's existence. This was done in 2016 in response to accusations of engaging in terrorist activity becoming known. Prior to his death, Nijjar had been accused by the Indian government of being in charge of the banned militant group known as the Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF) and aiding them in running a

¹³ Hrishikesh, "Air India Flight 182: 1985 Bombing Back in News after Canada Row."

¹⁴ Westfall, "What Is the Khalistan Separatist Movement behind the India-Canada Rift?"

terrorist training camp in British Columbia to carry out attacks in India, a cinema bombing in Punjab in 2007 that killed six and harmed 40 and assassinating the Sikh Indian politician Rulda Singh in 2009. In 2022, the Indian National Investigation Agency offered \$1.2 million to anyone that could provide information on Nijjar. Despite the accusations, Nijjar did not waver in his convictions or activism. Before his death, Nijjar had been working on the passage of a non-binding referendum for Sikhs in British Columbia to endorse the creation of Khalistan. This was part of a global campaign by Sikhs for Justice, located in the U.S. but banned in India. It should be noted that despite all of Nijjar’s activism and the terrorist accusations leveled at him by the Indian government, many members of the Sikh community have stated that the movement does not represent them.¹⁵



**The Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara, the place where Nijjar was killed.
Photo credit: Ethan Cairns for EPA-EFE/Shutterstock.**

Following Trudeau’s accusation of the Indian government’s role in Nijjar’s death, India’s External Affairs responded that he was moving the focus away from those that the Indian government deemed to be terrorists and threaten India’s territorial integrity, not helped by the fact that the Indian government feels that Trudeau is providing shelter to Khalistan activists.¹⁶ However, based on witness accounts and security footage, there is unmistakable evidence that Nijjar’s death was not a random accident but an organized attack. The video opens with Nijjar’s car driving out of a parking space, only to have a white sedan drive parallel to it, soon keeping up with Nijjar’s car and

¹⁵ Yousif, “Who Was Canadian Sikh Leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar?”

¹⁶ Westfall, “What Is the Khalistan Separatist Movement behind the India-Canada Rift?”

refusing to let it get away. Just before Nijjar can finally exit the parking lot, the sedan swerves in front of his car and blocks his path. Suddenly, two hooded men appear from where they are hiding and begin to make their way toward the truck before brandishing their firearms toward Nijjar. Two gunshots were heard by witness Bhupinderjit Singh, the man who pulled Nijjar's lifeless body out of his car, but not before the sedan and the two men quickly fled the scene. "Community members say investigators told them the assailant fired about 50 bullets. Thirty-four hit Nijjar."¹⁷ Members of the Gurdwara community soon began to pursue Nijjar's killers, with witness accounts describing the two men as wearing clothing that gave them the appearance of being Sikh due to wearing pughs and having facial hair. They eventually fled through a nearby park and drove off in a silver car with three other men. In total, it took six men and two vehicles to kill Nijjar. Soon, Nijjar's death was widespread on social media.

However, witnesses expressed anger at the rather slow arrival of law enforcement as it took them approximately between 12 to 20 minutes to arrive, despite frequently patrolling the area. The investigation was delayed further by debates between the local Surrey police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Integrated Homicide Investigation Team. Following the publication of these events in an article by the Washington Post, the RCMP in Surrey denied allegations of any delay, instead claiming that their officers had arrived on the scene in less than four minutes. More than a month after the shooting, the public has been asked by the authorities to aid in figuring out the identities of the shooters responsible for Nijjar's death. In August, the public was once again asked to help, this time to locate a 2008 silver Toyota Camry and its driver. Most of these businesses and homes have stated that the authorities have not contacted them. Information on the white sedan and its driver and information on the getaway drivers have not been subject to public discussion by the authorities.

¹⁷ Maham Javaid and Evan Hill, "Video of Sikh Leader's Killing Shows Coordinated Attack," The Washington Post, September 29, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/25/hardeep-singh-nijjar-killing-video/>.



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announces, in Canada's House of Commons, that India may be responsible for the assassination of Sikh leader Nijjar in Canada. Photo Credit: LA Times

Further embarrassing the Canadian government is that it was no secret that Nijjar's life would be in danger as he had been threatened before, with some of his relatives asking him to wear a vest for protection. In other words, it would seem that much like with the handling of the Air India flight bombing, the Canadian government was unable to give justice to the victims swiftly and had failed to take preventive measures despite being made aware of the situation. The organized manner of Nijjar's death, combined with intel from the Five Eyes alliance and reports of communication of Indian diplomats, including some on Canadian soil, have been used by the Trudeau administration in legitimizing its claims about the circumstances of Nijjar's murder.¹⁸ What is to be done about all of this is uncertain. At the time of this article's writing, there has been no absolute truth regarding the circumstances of Nijjar's death and whether or not it should be seen as a murder or a political assassination. Because of the terrorist accusations lobbied at Nijjar by the Indian government, it is not even certain if his death should be seen as a tragic loss of an innocent political activist or a relief due to a terrorist's reign finally ending. Both Sikhs and the Indian government have mutual reasons to distrust one another simultaneously. What is certain is that both the Indian and Canadian governments need to own up to their shortcomings and failures in bringing justice to the

¹⁸ Javaid and Hill, "Video of Sikh Leader's Killing Shows Coordinated Attack,"

communities within the two nations' respective borders. The Indian government needs to acknowledge the horrific and appalling tragedy of the anti-Sikh pogroms as a crime against humanity and not as a mere riot. Furthermore, it must concentrate on holding the individuals accountable and giving much-needed aid to the victims. Canada must rectify its inability to hold Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri accountable by doing everything in their power to bring Nijjar's killers to justice.

