

# Khalistan and Canada

Mark Juergensmeyer

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**Mark Juergensmeyer** is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author or editor of 30 books, including *Sikh Studies*, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*, and *When God Stops Fighting, How Religious Violence Ends*.

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This essay is a revised and expanded version of comments made by Prof. Juergensmeyer in an interview for *The Conversation*, posted at <https://theconversation.com/why-india-fears-the-khalistan-movement-and-how-canada-became-embroiled-in-diplomatic-spat-over-killing-of-sikh-separatist-213960>.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau rocked the world when he publicly accused India of an extrajudicial assassination on Canadian soil. Trudeau said that there were "credible allegations" linking the Indian government of Narendra Modi with the death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a leader in the Sikh community in Canada. He was also a prominent advocate for Khalistan, the idea that there should be an independent Sikh homeland in the Indian state of Punjab. As he was leaving a Gurdwara (a Sikh place of worship) in Surrey, British Columbia on June 18 he was accosted by two armed men who emptied up to fifty bullets into his body before they escaped in a getaway car driven by a third member of the assassination squad. The murder had all the earmarks of a hit job.

Some three months later, Trudeau made the public announcement implicating the Indian diplomatic corps in the killing. He claimed that Canadian intelligence agencies had intercepted communications involving Indian diplomats in Canada that proved they were involved in the act. With this evidence he said he had reached out to the Indian government, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally at the G20 summit in Delhi, but had not received any acknowledgement of Indian government complicity or any other appropriate response. For that reason, Trudeau said, he was expelling members of the Indian Embassy in Canada that he held responsible for the crime. Modi immediately denied any complicity of the government in the

killing, and expelled a Canadian diplomate in retaliation. He also put a temporary ban on issuing any visas to Canadian citizens applying to come to India.

The serious international tensions raised by this incident cry out for an explanation of what the Khalistan movement is, why the Indian government is so concerned about it, and why the Canadian government is so protective of the rights of Sikhs in its country. Having lived and taught in the Punjab for some years, and having just published a book with a major section on the Khalistan movement, *When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends*, I will attempt to give some brief answers.

### **What is the Khalistan movement?**

"Khalistan" means "the land of the pure," though in this context the term "khalsa" refers broadly to the religious community of Sikhs, and the term Khalistan implies that they should have their own nation. The likely location for this nation would be in Punjab state in northern India where 18 of the 23 million Sikhs in the world live. Another 5 million live elsewhere in India and abroad, mainly in the UK, the US, and Canada.

The idea for an independent land for Sikhs goes back to pre-partition India, when the concept of a separate land for Muslims in India was being considered. Some Sikhs at that time thought that if Muslims could have "Pakistan" -- the state that emerged through partition in 1947 -- then there should also be a "Sikhistan," or "Khalistan." That idea was rejected by the Indian government and instead the Sikhs became a part of the state of Punjab. At that time the boundaries of the Punjab were drawn in such a way that the Sikhs were not in the majority.

But Sikhs persisted, in part because one of the central tenets of the faith is "miri-piri," the idea that religious and political leadership are merged. In their 500 year history, Sikhs have had their own kingdom, have fought against Moghul rule, and comprised the backbone of the army under India's colonial and independent rule.

In the 1960s the idea of a separate homeland for Sikhs re-emerged and formed part of the demand for redrawing the boundaries of Punjab state so that Sikhs would be in the majority. The protests were successful, and the Indian government created Punjabi Suba, a state whose boundaries included speakers of the Punjabi language used by most Sikhs. They now comprise 58% of the population of the revised Punjab.

The notion of a Khalistan separate from India resurfaced in a dramatic way in the large-scale militant uprising that erupted in the Punjab in the 1980s and that died out in the early 1990s. There were many economic and social factors in the uprising, and not all of the militants involved in it were wed to the idea of Khalistan, but many Sikhs who joined the militant

movement did so because they indeed wanted an independent Sikh nation, not just a Sikh-majority Indian state.

In the uprising in the 1980s thousands of lives were lost on both sides in violent encounters between the Sikh militants and security forces. The conflict came to a head in 1984 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi launched Operation Blue Star to liberate the Sikh's Golden Temple in the pilgrimage center of Amritsar in order to capture or kill the figurehead of the Khalistan movement, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. He was killed in the attack on the Golden Temple, though Sikhs around the world were incensed that their sacred place was violated by police action. Indira Gandhi was assassinated later that year in retaliation by Sikh members of her own bodyguards.

In recent years, several firebrand Sikh activists in India have reasserted the idea of Khalistan, and the Indian government fears a return of the violence and militancy of the 1980s. The government of Narendra Modi wants to nip the movement in the bud before it gets too large and extreme.

### **What is the connection between the Khalistan movement and Canada?**

After the Sikh uprising was crushed in the early 1990s, many Sikh activists fled India and came to Canada, where they were welcomed by a large Sikh community -- many of whom had been sympathetic to the Khalistan idea. A sizable expatriot community of Sikhs has been growing in the country since the early 20th century, especially in British Columbia and Ontario.

Sikhs have been attracted to Canada not only because of its economic opportunities but also because of the freedom to develop their own ideas of Sikh community. Though support for Khalistan is illegal in India, in Canada Sikh activists are able to speak freely and organize for the cause.

Though Khalistan would be in India, the Canadian movement in favor of it helps to cement the diaspora Sikh identity, and give the Canadian activists a sense of connection to the Indian homeland. The diaspora community of Sikhs constitute 2.1% of Canada's population -- a higher percentage of the total population than in India. They comprise a significant voting bloc in the country and carry political clout. In fact, there are more Sikhs in Canada's cabinet than in India's.

Although Prime Minister Trudeau has assured the Indian government that any acts of violence will be punished, he also has reassured Canadians that he respects free speech and the rights of Sikhs to speak and organize freely as long as they do not violate Canadian laws. Considering the high percentage of Sikhs in Canada's population, Prime Minister Trudeau understandably wants to assert the rights of Sikhs and show disapproval of the drift towards Hindu nationalism in India.

And this isn't the only time that Trudeau and Modi have clashed over the issue. In 2018 Trudeau was condemned in India for his friendship with Jaspal Singh Atwal, a Khalistani supporter in Canada who was convicted of attempting to assassinate the Chief Minister of Punjab.

Yet both countries have reasons to try and move on from the current diplomatic contretemps. India and Canada have close trading ties and common strategic concerns with relationship to China. It is likely that in time both sides will find ways to cool down the tensions from this difficult incident. Though if India was indeed complicit in the killing of Nijjar, it is a frightening new chapter in India's relationship with the world. It is yet to be seen if this is an isolated incident or the beginning of a sordid new trend.