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Issue Brief

Khalistan Movement: Recent Activities and Indian Response

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S*ummary*

It is essential for the government to convey to the countries hosting separatist Khalistani elements that they cannot simultaneously have good relations with India while allowing anti-India separatist movements on their soil. India will also have to build a constructive and sustained engagement with the Sikh diaspora, dispel the misinformation propagated by the Khalistani separatists and showcase the sense of contentment prevailing in Punjab.

Introduction

Khalistani separatist activities in Western countries have been on the rise. On 2 July 2023, the Indian Consulate in San Francisco was set on fire (causing minor damage) by a group of pro-Khalistani separatists. In another incident, ‘Sikhs for Justice’, a separatist organisation, put out posters instigating the radical elements to kill Indian top diplomats in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. The advertising poster of the rally featured a tagline ‘Kill India’. These posters were in response to the death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023 in British Columbia, Canada, with separatists charging Indian agencies as responsible for the killing. In addition to these two incidents, Khalistani supporters in Brampton, Canada carried out a 5-km long parade which displayed a float depicting the assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by Khalistani militants.

Intensification of Khalistani Activities Overseas

Although such incidents have taken place intermittently in the last two decades, the Khalistani activities overseas have intensified in last couple of years. Besides the attacks on state symbols, the separatists’ activities across major Western countries broadly include attacks on temples and consulates, and coordinating referendums for a separate State of Khalistan in multiple countries.

Attacks on Religious Symbols

In October 2022, Khalistan separatists and Indian supporters, approx. 400–500 in numbers clashed in Mississauga, Ontario, on the eve of Diwali. While one group waved the Indian flag, the other carried the Khalistan flag and shouted anti-India slogans. In January 2023, in a series of incidents, three Hindu temples (ISKCON, BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir and Shri Shiva Vishnu Temple) in Australia were defaced and anti-India slogans were sprayed on the walls. Similar incidents have been reported intermittently in Australia, with the most recent incident happening just before Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited that country in May 2023. Similarly, Canada has witnessed several incidents related to the defacement of Hindu temples, often with the slogan ‘Khalistan Zindabad, Hindustan Murdabad’ sprayed on the walls.

Referendum for separate State of Khalistan

Besides these events, the ‘Sikhs for Justice’ conducted its ‘Referendum 2022’ for separate State of Khalistan in the UK, Canada, the US and Australia, where a sizable Sikh population reside. Canada witnessed participation of 1 lakh people out of total population of 5 lakh. This does reflect the failure of separatists to garner full support for their agenda. The Indian diaspora have been vehemently opposing the activities

of the Khalistanis. During the referendum in late January 2023 in Australia, a scuffle broke out between Khalistanis and pro-India supporters at the voting site, Federation Square, Melbourne.¹

Attack on Indian High Commission and Consulates

The Khalistanis have also targeted Indian consulates in a coordinated manner. In February 2023, the separatists in Australia targeted the Honorary Consulate in Brisbane and installed the Khalistani Flag inside the premises. In a similar incident in March, pro-Khalistani protesters stormed the Indian consulate in San Francisco, raised Khalistani slogans and installed two pro-Khalistan Flags inside the consulate premises. On 19 March, a group of Khalistan separatists vandalized the Indian High Commission in London, taking out the Indian flag and tried to replace it with the Khalistan flag.

Activities inside India

The Khalistani separatists have been trying hard to reignite the Khalistani separatist movement in India as well. Two major incidents which saw active involvement of Khalistan elements were the farmers’ agitation in 2020 and the emergence of Amritpal Singh as an advocate of a separate state of Khalistan. As intelligence reports have suggested, the farmer’s protest did witness the involvement of declared terrorist organisations operating from abroad.² The incident of 26 January 2021, when protesting farmers entered the vicinity of the Red Fort and hoisted Nishan Sahib Flag, gives more credence to such reports. The US-based banned pro-khalistani group, Sikh for Justice, announced the reward of USD 350,000 (INR 25 million) for unfurling ‘Khalistani Flag’ at the Indian parliament.³

In case of farmers protest, it was later established that Amritpal Singh visited the protesting sites to lay the grounds for his separatist activities a year later. In February 2023, at an incident in Ajnala, thousands of Amritpal’s supporters broke through the police barricades and secured the release of Lovepreet Singh Toofan, an aide of Amritpal Singh. In an attempt to appeal to the separatists sentiments in the state and revive the issue of Khalistan, Amritpal also imitated Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. He was finally arrested on 23 April. His arrest provided another rallying point for the overseas Khalistan separatists to intensify their propaganda. On 19 March 2023, Indian High Commissioner to Canada had to cancel an event in British Columbia as nearly 200 protestors gathered in front of the venue entrance (some wielding swords) to protest against the arrest.

¹ [“Khalistani supporters, Indians clash in Australia; 2 arrested”](#), *The Tribune*, 30 January 2023.

² [“Khalistanis’ have infiltrated farmers protest, will show IB reports: Centre tells SC”](#), *The Indian Express*, 12 January 2021.

³ [“Punjab: Timeline \(Terrorist Activities\) 2021”](#), South Asia Terrorism Portal.

West’s reluctance and refusal to act

That multiple Khalistan separatist organisations and individuals could spearhead such an anti-India campaigns as discussed above, indicates the unwillingness of the Western countries, especially Canada, to act against these separatist elements.

During the period of the Punjab militancy in the 1980s, the behaviour of the Western camp led by the US was guided by the then prevailing international systemic order reflected in the Cold War dynamics. India at the time was perceived as a Soviet-leaning state, and therefore belonging to the enemy bloc. The end of the Cold War and the opening up of the Indian economy for outside investors altered the perception of the Western countries about India’s ideological leanings.

Further, the attack on the World Trade Centre in September 2001 and the subsequent war on terror led these countries to crack down on terrorist organisations. However, two decades since, vote bank politics appears to have influenced these Western countries, explaining their tolerance towards anti-India activities by the Khalistani separatists on their soil. When confronted by India, the Western countries hide behind the veil of their so-called democratic credentials, and highlight the principles of ‘freedom of expression’ and ‘peaceful protests’. Hence, Khalistanis are allowed to protest peacefully.

However, lately, the inaction of Western countries and their unwillingness to rein in the Khalistani separatists in their respective countries have been straining their relations with India, especially for countries like Canada.

Khalistan factor in Canadian politics

Canada is home to the second-largest Sikh population in the world, after India. In terms of their population, they form more than 2 per cent of the total population of Canada, with nearly 8,00,000 people. They are also the fastest-growing and fourth-largest religious community in Canada. Over the years, Canada has seen several phases of Sikh migration. They have now developed into a robust and economically flourishing community. Earlier in the 1980s, Canada had provided sanctuary to several dreaded terrorists, including Jagjit Singh Chauhan and Talwinder Singh Parmar, among others. Presently also, several ‘designated terrorists’ like Arshdeep Singh Gill alias Arsh Dalla of Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF) are residing in Canada. As stated earlier, while Canada’s actions during the 1980s were guided by Cold War dynamics, its present actions are influenced purely by vote bank politics.

In the 2019 Canadian federal election, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Party got 157 votes, 13 short of a majority. Hence, they had to form a coalition government with the ‘New Democratic Party’ led by Jagmeet Singh Dhaliwal, a pro-Khalistan leader. Jagmeet has, in the past, made provocative statements in favour of Khalistan and the human rights situation in Kashmir. Out of 338 seats in the Canadian

parliament, Sikhs are elected on 18 seats which speak of their political influence. The Trudeau-led government is under political compulsion to not antagonize their coalition partners.

Trudeau has been restrained in confronting the Khalistan separatists' anti-Indian activities. His soft peddling on the Khalistan issue was quite evident when, in the aftermath of the 'Kill India' posters incident, he stated that “We have an extremely diverse country, and freedom of expression is something that we have. But, we will also make sure that we are pushing back against violence and extremism in all its forms.”⁴

Khalistani Activities in Other Countries

The Khalistan activities are not only limited to Canada. The influence of terrorist organisations like Sikh for Justice extends to the section of Sikhs residing predominantly in the UK, the US and Australia.

Khalistan separatists' foothold has been prominent in the UK. The Sikh community got established in the UK almost immediately after India's independence. It was in the UK that the first overseas Sikh organisation, 'Sikh Home Rule Movement', was formed under the leadership of Sardar Charan Singh Panchi. The movement was organised to take up the grievances of the Sikh community with the authorities in the UK. Later on, the Sikh Home Rule Movement was taken over by separatist leader and self-proclaimed President of Khalistan, Jagjit Singh Chauhan, who moved to the UK in 1970.

Presently, more than 520,000 Sikhs reside in the UK, comprising nearly 0.88 per cent of the total population. They are the fourth largest religious community in the UK. The Canadian Sikh separatists and organisations like Sikhs for Justice have a presence among the Sikhs in the UK, as well. Recently, a report released by the UK Government reflects the increasing influence and subversive actions of some pro-Khalistan elements.⁵ Unfortunately, the UK government appears to react slowly to the activities of the Sikh separatists as was evident from the March 2023 incident in which the Khalistan separatists stormed the Indian High Commission in London and removed Indian National Flag. The Sikh separatists continued to protest with impunity days after this incident.

Khalistan activities have also intensified in the US, home to some of the designated terrorist organisations and individuals in India. During the 1980s, Khalistan activities thrived under successive US Administrations. As per reports, in 1971, *The*

⁴ [“Trudeau says Canada has freedom of expression, India argues it must not be misused by Khalistanis”](#), *Deccan Herald*, 6 July 2023.

⁵ Sriram Lakshman, [“Report asks UK government to investigate Khalistani Extremism”](#), *The Hindu*, 27 April 2023.

New York Times carried an advertisement of the declaration of a separate state of Khalistan by Jagjit Singh Chauhan. This advertisement was reportedly funded by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The driving force behind US behaviour was the Cold War dynamics and the US-Pakistan strategic alliance against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Over 500,000 Sikhs reside in the US, amounting to 0.2 per cent of the total population. Although the Sikh population is not substantive numerically, it does have a connection with the Sikh separatists of Canada as can be evidenced by the fact that within four month, the Indian Consulate in San Francisco witnessed two incidents of arson by the Khalistani separatists. The so-called Khalistani flag was also installed inside the Consulate premises. In recent years, Australia has also witnessed several anti-India activities by Khalistani separatists as discussed in pervious sections.

All the above incidents reveal that the Khalistan sympathisers and anti-India elements operate from these Western countries with impunity.

Indian Government’s Response

The Indian Government is consistently taking up the matter with respective governments, highlighting concerns about the adverse impact their inaction will have on bilateral relationships. For example, in July 2023, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said, “We have requested our partner countries like Canada, the US, the UK and Australia, where sometimes Khalistani activities happen, not to give space to Khalistanis. Because their radical, extremist thinking is neither good for us nor them nor for our relations.”⁶

The Indian Government is taking these concerns seriously and trying to convey them in high-level bilateral discussions as well. For instance, after the Brampton incident, Jaishankar expressed his long-standing concern regarding pro-Khalistan activities in Canada and blamed the Canadian government for playing vote bank politics. On 6 July 2023, he denounced Canada for propagating violence in the name of freedom of expression. In a statement, Jaishankar said,

“It is a matter of concern that freedom of expression and speech is once again being misused by anti-India elements based in Canada and elsewhere... Let me make the larger point that the issue is not about freedom of expression but its misuse for advocating violence, for propagating separatism and for legitimizing terrorism.”⁷

⁶ [“Ties will be hit: EAM on Khalistan Poster Targeting envoys in Canada”](#), *The Tribune*, 3 July 2023.

⁷ [“Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson \(6 July 2023\)”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 6 July 2023.

India strongly urged Canadian Government to take appropriate action against the anti-India ‘Khalistan Freedom Rally’, which was to be conducted on 8 July 2023. In a media interaction, the External Affairs Ministry termed the posters inciting violence against diplomats as “unacceptable” and condemned them in the strongest terms.⁸

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval met his British counterpart on 7 July 2023 and took up the matter of intensified activities by Khalistan separatists. At the 5th India-UK Home Affairs Dialogue,⁹ the Indian Government reiterated their concern regarding the Khalistan issue and the misuse of UK’s asylum status by the pro-Khalistani elements to aid and abet terrorist activities in India. The security breach at the Indian High Commission in London was also discussed.

It is important to note that in response to the inaction of the UK Government against Khalistani separatists in the London incident, New Delhi removed the outer security cover of the British High Commission and High Commissioner’s residence. India was compelled to take such an action to strongly communicate to the British Government the need to take the security of the Indian High Commission in London seriously.

The Indian Government has issued similar statements to express its displeasure about the arson incident at Indian consulate in San Francisco. India also firmly denounced the vandalism of temples in Australia. While rejecting the so-called Khalistan referendum as a politically motivated exercise by extremist elements, the government requested the Australian authorities to “ensure the safety and security of the members of the Indian community and their properties.”¹⁰

Conclusion

The Government of India has vigorously communicated its concerns regarding Khalistani activities to the highest political authority in these countries. India’s constructive engagement with the Western governments did bear some positive results. However, more needs to be done. The Khalistanis are intensifying their activities abroad, and given that the host countries seem to be looking the other way, India needs to redouble its effort to prevent the reoccurrence of such incidents. It is essential for the Government to effectively convey to the host countries that they cannot simultaneously have good relations with India while allowing anti-India separatist movements on their soil. At the same time, India will also have to build a constructive and sustained engagement with the Sikh diaspora, dispel the misinformation propagated by the Khalistani separatists and showcase the sense of contentment prevailing in Punjab.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “[5th India UK Home Affairs Dialogue](#)”, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 12 April 2023.

¹⁰ Rezaul H. Laskar, “[Probe, punish them’: India tells Australia on attacks by pro-Khalistan groups](#)”, *Hindustan Times*, 2 February 2023.

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