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Diplomacy in Dispute: The Khalistan Factor in Contemporary India-Canada Relations

Uyuşmazlık İçindeki Diplomasi: Günümüz Hindistan–Kanada İlişkilerinde Khalistan Faktörü

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Abstract

The bilateral relations between India and Canada have witnessed diplomatic fallout in recent years. Despite having shared institutional values and strong cultural ties, tensions arise due to the Khalistan dispute, a separatist movement to establish a sovereign Sikh state in India's Punjab region, which has transformed into a transnational political concern, especially among the Sikh diaspora in Canada. The study delves into the origins of the Khalistan movement, the Sikh diaspora's role in Canadian politics, and India's firmness in defending its sovereignty and countering extremism abroad. This article also investigates the escalating diplomatic tensions between India and Canada through the prism of the Khalistan separatist movement, with particular emphasis on the chronological major events from the past to the present. Through the theoretical lens of norm contestation and securitisation, this research employs a qualitative case study grounded in document analysis to explain the roles of contemporary diplomatic tensions between India and Canada, focusing on the influence of competing state narratives and the mobilisation of diaspora groups. Ultimately, the paper argues that while India often frames the Khalistan factor as a security threat, Canada considers it a human rights issue; as a result, domestic political imperatives collide with international diplomatic norms.

Keywords: India–Canada Relations, Khalistan Movement, Sikh Diaspora, Diplomatic Tensions, Extremism

Özet

Hindistan ve Kanada arasındaki ikili ilişkiler son yıllarda diplomatik bir bozulmaya tanık olmuştur. Ortak kurumsal değerlere ve güçlü kültürel bağlara sahip olmalarına rağmen, gerilimler Hindistan'ın Pencap bölgesinde egemen bir Sih devleti kurmayı amaçlayan ayrılıkçı bir hareket olan Khalistan anlaşmazlığı nedeniyle ortaya çıkmaktadır; bu durum özellikle Kanada'daki Sih diasporası arasında ulusötesi bir siyasi meseleye dönüşmüştür. Çalışma, Khalistan hareketinin kökenlerini, Sih diasporasının Kanada siyasetindeki rolünü ve Hindistan'ın egemenliğini savunma ve yurtdışındaki aşırıcılıkla mücadele konusundaki kararlılığını incelemektedir. Bu makale ayrıca, geçmişten günümüze uzanan kronolojik önemli olaylara özellikle vurgu yaparak, Hindistan ve Kanada arasındaki artan diplomatik gerilimleri Khalistan ayrılıkçı hareketi perspektifinden araştırmaktadır. Norm çekişmesi ve güvenlikleştirme teorik merceği aracılığıyla bu araştırma, belge analizine dayalı nitel bir vaka çalışması kullanarak, rekabet eden devlet anlatılarının etkisine ve diaspora gruplarının mobilizasyonuna odaklanarak Hindistan ve Kanada arasındaki güncel diplomatik gerilimlerin rollerini açıklamaktadır. Sonuç olarak makale, Hindistan'ın Khalistan faktörünü çoğunlukla bir güvenlik tehdidi olarak çerçevelediğini, Kanada'nın ise bunu bir insan hakları meselesi olarak değerlendirdiğini ileri sürmektedir; bunun sonucunda iç siyasi zorunluluklar uluslararası diplomatik normlarla çatışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hindistan–Kanada İlişkileri, Khalistan Hareketi, Sih Diasporası, Diplomatik Gerilimler, Aşırıcılık

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Introduction

India and Canada maintain a long-term, multifaceted relationship in trade, education, immigration, and diplomacy; their shared ideological goals towards pluralism, multiculturalism, and the rule of law have further strengthened the bilateral bond. However, in recent years, these longstanding ties have been challenged by the diplomatic dispute over the Khalistan issue, which has become the bone of contention between these two allies. The Khalistan movement originated in the 1980s; a secessionist manoeuvre aimed at establishing a Sikh state in the Punjab region of India, which later transformed into a transnational concern due to the growing influence of diaspora politics. Khalistani sentiment persists abroad, particularly among the Sikh diaspora in Canada, causing diplomatic friction between Indian government and Canadian authorities. India views such expressions as extremist proxies; on the contrary, Canada has framed the Khalistani community within the parameters of free speech and assembly as stipulated in the constitution.

Relations deteriorated dramatically between 2020 and 2024 after Canada's criticism of India's agricultural reforms and farmer protests, with allegations of India's involvement in extraterritorial operations in Canada. India also criticized the comments of Canada about its internal affairs, further worsening bilateral relations. This was aggravated by the event of September 2023 when Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a pro-Khalistan activist and a Canadian citizen was killed in Canada following which Prime minister Justin Trudeau accused Indian agents of being involved in the incident. Rejecting the charge as politically motivated, India responded by expelling Canadian diplomats and suspending visa services for Canadian nationals. These actions cast an enduring shadow over multilateral cooperation, trade agreements, and security cooperation. The political salience of the Sikh diaspora, concentrated in key electoral districts and actively engaged in civil society, has further complicated Canada's ability to decisively respond to India's concerns.

Since the G7 Summit in June 2025 up to the present, the relations between India and Canada shifted to a period of diplomatic breakdown instead of a gradual reconsideration of these relations based on mutual economic and strategic interests. The most notable move was when in early 2026 Canadian prime minister Mark Carney paid a visit to India (27 February–3 March 2026). The visit reestablished the bilateral agenda as one of pragmatic collaboration, and renegotiated trade agreements on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) which is a historic uranium agreement, and energy, critical minerals, defence, and technology strategic partnerships. Although it failed to solve disputes on the Khalistan issue, the visit was the most tangible development in the normalisation process which entrenched the relationship in context of greater economic and security-related systems.

This paper will apply a qualitative case study method to examine the relationship between India and Canada to address these questions. Due to the theoretical approaches of norm contestation and securitisation, the article explores the influence of a competing understanding of sovereignty, security, and democratic freedoms on diplomatic relationships between the two states. The examination is based on the document and text analysis of the secondary materials, such as academic literature, policy reports, and official statements. In such a manner, the paper will show how the mobilisation of the diaspora and the politics of the divergent narratives of the state play a role in the repetitive patterns of the diplomatic friction in the relations between India and Canada.

By highlighting its historical and contemporary trajectory, the study examines the transformation of the Khalistan movement from a domestic insurgency to a contentious international diplomatic issue, which has significantly impacted India-Canada relations. Moreover, this work also analyses the reason behind the urge for a separate Sikh state-Khalistan and the evolution of the Khalistan movement, India's concern over its territorial integrity and national unity, the Canadian perspective on Khalistan demand, the growing influence of the Sikh diaspora politics in Canada, and the diplomatic dispute and its enduring effect on India-Canada relations.

1. Research Objectives and Questions

This paper focuses on how the Khalistan issue has changed to become not only a domestic separatist problem in India, but also a perennial problem of diplomatic friction in the India-Canada relationship. It is concerned with the way in which the mobilisation of the diaspora, rival narratives of statehood and the perception of security influence two-way relationships. The paper aims to provide a reason why the tensions sometimes turn into diplomatic crises by putting the conflict in context with other debates on diaspora politics and international norms. Based on this, the research questions of the article include:

1. Why is Khalistan issue over and over again brewing into diplomatic crises between India and Canada?

2. What effects do competing state definitions of sovereignty-security and multicultural rights have on bilateral tensions?

3. In what circumstances does political mobilisation of the diaspora result in the interstate diplomatic conflict?

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2. Methodology

This paper embraces a qualitative research design to look at the changing diplomatic dynamics between India and Canada in regard to the issue of Khalistan. Qualitative data is especially applicable to the analysis of intricate political processes, discourses, and interpretations in their wider socio-political framework (Creswell and Creswell, 2018: 4). The study uses a case study design; it uses the case of India-Canada relations to examine how the relations of the diaspora politics, sovereignty issues and security discourses interplay in the development of bilateral relations. Case study research fits the purpose of exploring modern political phenomena in the context of the real world (Yin, 2018: 15). Canada is chosen as the main case because it accommodates one of the most politically mobilized and the biggest Sikh diaspora community in the world who do not reside in India, and has been the focal point of Khalistan political mobilization and diplomatic conflicts between two countries.

It will be analysed based on mostly secondary sources such as academic sources, policy papers, reliable sources of international news, and statements made by the governments of India and Canada. It is important to note that the use of secondary sources is not just a practical limitation, but a methodological strategy and in line with the constructivist tradition of discourse and document analysis. The diplomatic spat between India and Canada is one that is largely realised in public speech acts, official statements and state-sanctioned narratives that are directly accessible via secondary analysis. Future research might also expand upon these findings with primary data collection methods such as elite interviews with Canadian and Indian policymakers or ethnographic observation of the political life of the Sikh community in Canada and India, yielding more nuanced interpretations of the political life of this minority group that are not clearly articulated in official documents. Moreover, the paper uses document and text analysis to investigate the way the Khalistan issue is being framed by the political actors in the context of diplomacy and popular discourses. Document analysis allows one to systematically read written texts to determine patterns, meanings and political framing of institutional discourse (Bowen, 2009: 27).

Several limitations should be admitted. Competing stories might be included in media coverage and political utterances, and should be carefully interpreted and triangulated. Another limitation of this study is that it focuses solely on the Canadian context, although there are significant Sikh communities in the US and the UK. Canada is chosen because the political visibility of diaspora mobilisation is higher and its influence has a more direct impact on bilateral relations with India. This limited focus, however, can restrict the generalisability of the results to other contexts.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper relies on constructivist international relations literature to elaborate on the cycling tensions between India and Canada over the Khalistan issue. In particular, it integrates the notion of norm contestation and securitisation in the analysis of how the various meanings of sovereignty, security and democratic freedoms are reflected in the reaction of individual states to the process of diaspora political activism. When taken as a whole, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how the two countries' divergent normative commitments and perceptions of threat have caused diplomatic tension.

3.1. Norm Contestation

This research takes a constructivist approach to investigate the influence of conflicting normative theories in the tensions between India and Canada in the Khalistan case. Constructivist scholarship highlights that material power is not the sole determinant of international politics but it is also shaped by socially constructed ideas, identities, and norms that shape the way states define their interests and interpret political events (Wendt, 1999: 1). In this context, norms are perceived as the common standard of proper behavior based on which the acting actors in the international society lead their conduct (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891).

According to recent constructivist studies, it is a common fact that norms do not have definite meanings; rather, their meaning and use are often disputed by various actors. Norm contestation involves a type of discursive and political struggle concerning the meaning, validity or application of international norms (Wiener, 2014: 7). These conflicts arise when

actors hold to the same normative principles differently, which is mostly based on the different historical experiences, political identities, and institutional structures.

Such normative contestation can be depicted by the diplomatic tensions between India and Canada regarding Khalistan activism. India poses the problem in terms of the norms of state sovereignty and territorial integrity and focuses on the duty of the states to eliminate encouragement of separatist movements that undermine the national unity. Canada, in its turn, views diaspora political activism through the prism of norms linked to the concepts of liberal democracy and freedom of expression and multiculturalism that ensure the non-violent political activism in the context of a constitutional system. The tensions that arise is not always due to a disagreement of whether these norms exist but is more because of a difference in the application of the norms in particular political situations. This is frequently the case in the context of applying general international norms to actual political circumstances, and, as a result, the actors strive to give priority to their conflicting normative commitments as it was proposed by the norm contestation scholarship (Wiener, 2014: 7; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891).

This research illuminates how diplomatic enmity may arise not as a result of strategic rivalry but as a consequence of radically divergent conceptions of acceptable political conduct in the international system by reflecting on the India-Canada dispute as an instance of normative contestation.

3.2. Securitisation

Although the norm contestation is used to explain the normative divergence of the two states, the securitisation theory offers an analytical approach to the way Khalistan issue is framed as a national security issue. Securitisation theory was developed by theorists of the Copenhagen School, especially Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, who hold that security threats are not completely objective phenomena but are made as a result of political talk and administrative practices (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 23-26).

The main idea of this approach is that securitisation takes place when political actors present a specific problem as a life-threatening problem to a highly valued referent object, e.g., the state, national identity, or social order, and hence, include the application of extraordinary measures outside the regularities of political practices. This is a process that usually involves three main aspects which include a securitising actor, a referent object which is said to be in danger and an audience whose consent is needed by the securitising move to be successful (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 23-26).

The key aspect of the theory is a speech act whereby political leaders or other institutions publicly define an issue as a security threat, in a bid to shift it out of the context of normal politics, into the context of emergency action (Wæver, 1995: 54). Effective securitization is determined by the ability of the concerned audience to accept such framing and to agree that extraordinary action is warranted.

India has always regarded Khalistan activism as a threat to its territorial integrity and internal stability in its engagements with the UN. Indian officials have made efforts to securitise the existence of diaspora-based Khalistan activism through diplomatic utterances, intelligence reviews and political speech which have attempted to present it as linked to militant formations and transnational extremism. However, Canada has been slower to embrace this securitised framing, focusing more on the difference between the constitutional safeguarding of political expression and a criminal act. Such a difference in

perception of threats is not merely due to varying domestic legal frameworks, but also to the larger normative contestation in the above.

Combinedly, the norm contestation and securitisation theory would be a complementary conceptual lens through which to explain India-Canada conflict over the Khalistan issue. Whereas the idea of securitisation describes the manner by which political actors strive to transform the diaspora activism into national security threat, norm contestation describes the reason why these assertions are perceived differently within the political and institutional arenas.

4. Historical and Political Roots of the Khalistan Demand

Colonial legacies and post-independence changes in India have shaped the historical, political, and sociological foundations of the demand for Khalistan, a sovereign Sikh state. Sikh ethnonationalism is said to have its origins in the teachings of Guru Nanak in the sixteenth century, and a separate Sikh political power came into being during the nineteenth century with Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Debates on Sikh ethno-national identity escalated in the twentieth century with the Indian National Congress advancing a wider idea of Indian nationalism, and some political discourses depicting Sikhs as an extension of the wider Hindu community with no separate religious identity, especially in the struggle to gain independence under British rule (Deol, 2018: 183). The Sikh community always viewed itself as a distinct ethnic group, distinct from Hinduism in terms of ideological, organisational, and ethnic aspects.

Sikh political demands in the early decades of independent India were mostly federalist. Under the leadership of the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Punjabi Suba movement aimed to restructure Punjab according to linguistic criteria. The Indian government initially refused to establish a religiously based state, but in 1966, it agreed to divide Punjab into Punjab and Haryana based on linguistic differences; however, the Sikhs' aspirations were not entirely met by the establishment of the Punjabi state (Singh, 1988: 1). The Anandpur Sahib Resolution of 1973, adopted by the Akali Dal, aimed to recognise Sikhism as a separate religion, devolve power to state governments, and increase Punjab's autonomy (Tatla, 1999: 1).

The rise of Sikh fundamentalism can be traced back to 1978 when Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale assumed the role of a religious preacher and leader in the Sikh community (Jetly, 2008: 61). During the 1980s, political and economic tension escalated in Punjab as the Sikh Akali Party spearheaded a movement that demanded regional demands such as increased control over river waters, handing over Chandigarh to Punjab as its capital, and increased fiscal and administrative independence of the states. These demands failing to find a political solution led to the increasing popularity of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale among some parts of the Sikh population (Singh and Purewal, 2013: 133).

Bhindranwale started to violently oppose the decision of the central government and organised a village-based armed squad to counter the administration. As a result, conflict escalated, including attacks on the police and politicians in the early 1980s. In response, the President's Rule was imposed on October 6, 1983, and Bhindranwale, along with his followers, took shelter in the Golden Temple (Jetly, 2008: 61). On 3-6 June 1984, the Indian army launched military attack, known as Operation Blue Star on the Golden Temple; according to the official statement, this attack resulted in the surrender of senior Akali leaders, the deaths of 493 civilians, including Bhindranwale and 83 Indian Armed Forces members (Government of India, 1984). According to unofficial estimates, the number could

reach 1000; this assault on the sacred site of Sikhs created huge outrage and a deep sense of humiliation. The situation worsened in October 1984, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two Sikh bodyguards, leading to thousands of Sikhs being harassed, murdered, raped, and pillaged in India, particularly in Delhi (Kataria, 2020: 548).

Operation Bluestar impacted the Sikh community globally, with many believing a Khalistan would provide political objectives and security; the transnational Sikh community found resonance in this concept, which provided a sense of homeland and a secure environment for religious practice (Fair, 2005: 129). Punjab became embroiled in violent insurgency during the 1980s and early 1990s, with militant groups conducting assassinations, bombings, and targeted killings. In 1988, Punjab was essentially turned over to the security forces with unprecedented discretionary powers for counterinsurgency operations; this led to extrajudicial killings, disappearances, secret imprisonment, arbitrary arrests, and systematic torture (Jaijee, 1995: 1).

The Indian state gained control in 1992 after a war between security forces and militants. The Sikh diaspora's efforts compelled the Indian government to run a National Human Rights Commission in 1993, and the Supreme Court took up cases of human rights violations in 1995. After over 15,000 Sikhs were killed, the central government punished some security force personnel and restored democracy by allowing Akalis back into politics in the 1997 elections; this allowed the state to manage another ethnic conflict and restore normal politics (Tatla, 1999: 8). However, the insurgency and Khalistan demands were effectively dismantled due to a combination of state repression, declining popular support, and leadership fragmentation within India.

Although the movement lost steam in India, it continued to be politically and intellectually active worldwide, the Khalistani ideologies were greatly aided by the Sikh diaspora in the US, UK, and Canada. However, some Sikh separatists started to launch extremist activities abroad, especially in Canada; in June 1985, they carried out two coordinated bombings in 1985 targeting Air India flights: one blast at Tokyo's Narita Airport killed two baggage handlers, while the other destroyed Air India Flight 182 over the Atlantic, killing all 329 people on board (Purewal, 2012: 107).

5. India's Response: Sovereignty and the Khalistan Challenge

The Indian state's reaction to the Khalistan movement, which began in the 1980s, has been largely influenced by its constitutional commitment to national unity and territorial integrity. At the early stage, the central government overlooked the Sikh ethnonationalists' aggression; rather, Congress and state actors backed the extremists like Sant Jarnail Bhindranwale for breaking off support for the Akali Dal (Tully and Jacob, 1985: 1). However, the government tried to negotiate with the Punjabi leaders; between October 1981 and April 1982, three rounds of talks failed due to the inability to reach an agreement on inter-state issues (Hultquist, 2015: 93).

The government became concerned over the issue due to the increasing amount of violence in Punjab in 1983, leading to Operation Blue Star in 1984. Sikh civilian casualties were high, and religious places were damaged during Operation Bluestar; Sikh Army mutinies, worldwide Sikh resentment, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination were all brought on by the operation. The government launched another campaign in the same year to locate extremists, Operation Woodrose expanded the military's supply-side tactics by focusing on gurdwaras and rural areas. It targeted Amritdhari Sikhs as a group rather than on individual terrorists, which led to widespread alienation and forced many to

escape to Pakistan, ultimately escalating the conflict (Gill, 2001: 30). India committed to preserving its sovereignty by countering the extremists, but the two operations resulted in a greater demand for the independent Khalistan.

In July 1985, new Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and moderate Akali leader Longowal negotiated the Punjab Accord, also known as the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, which included major concessions like the proposed transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, in the face of escalating radicalisation and secessionist fervour (Hultquist, 2015: 93). Radicals' attempts to unite Akali factions under a more extreme agenda were rejected by moderates, deepening internal divisions. The Punjab Accord and negotiation strategy ultimately failed due to the division between radical and moderate Sikh leaders, lack of control over militants, and the Centre's inability to enforce concessions on resistant state governments. During the failed 1985 and 1986 negotiated settlement approach, militants and secessionist organizations re-organized, creating alternative organizations like the Panthic Committee; this reflected a growing divide in the Sikh political system, legitimizing militant violence and forming larger groups like the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF) and Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF) (Chima, 2010: 1). In late April 1986, the Panthic Committee issued the "Declaration of Khalistan" from the Golden Temple; in response, the Centre had started to openly support the "hardline" strategy against the terrorists (Gill, 2001: 30).

India reassessed its counterinsurgency posture in Punjab, embodied in Operation Black Thunder I (1986) and Operation Black Thunder II (1988), both of which targeted armed Sikh militants occupying the Golden Temple complex. With neither civilian casualties nor damage to the Golden Temple, Operation Black Thunder was a huge success for the Punjab Police and National Security Guard; it was carried out in front of the media to ensure transparency, demonstrating police prowess and demoralising militants who had promised to protect the temple to the death.

From 1987 to 1992, Punjab was under President's rule, quasi-military with a de facto "police raj" with special laws allowing security forces to contain disorder and insurgency. The restoration of order in Punjab is largely due to security forces' assertive anti-terrorism strategies, which involved extensive police restructuring, increased paramilitary deployment, and frequent use of the Indian Army, and legislative instruments like the National Security Act (1980), Punjab Disturbed Areas Ordinance (1983), Terrorist Areas (Special Courts) Act (1984), and Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) (1985) (G. Singh, 1996: 410).

Although Khalistani violence was initially decreased by the police crackdown, its ruthlessness caused criticism. The National Front government attempted negotiations with the Akali Dal (Mann) after the Congress lost power in 1989, but the talks broke down because of the political limitations of the Centre and Simranjeet Singh Mann's inability to handle militants. PM Chandra Shekhar's second attempt likewise failed in 1990. The deadliest years were 1990 and 1991 because détente did not bring about peace but rather allowed militants to reorganise and intensify their attacks. The militants increased their attacks on cities, demanded a UN secession referendum, and used targeted murders to impose rigid religious decrees (Gill, 2001: 30).

Coordinated action was made possible by the Congress taking over the leadership of both the Punjabi and central governments for the first time (1992-1993); the Chief Minister of Punjab, Beant Singh and the Prime Minister of India, Narasimha Rao, both had strong anti-Khalistan views (Hultquist, 2015: 93). Extremist Akali elements boycotted the 1992

Punjab elections, and militant intimidation caused poor voter turnout, but the Congress won a majority, bolstering political commitment to quell the insurgency. The Indian security forces launched a more effective and coordinated strategy against the extremists by reassessing previous mistakes and building greater capacity. The Army, paramilitary groups, and Punjab Police conducted coordinated counterinsurgency operations in Punjab through Operations Rakshak I and II to eliminate militant safe havens, lower violence, and focus on Khalistani militant networks. They also addressed cross-border logistical support and infiltration routes from Pakistan (G. Singh, 1996: 410).

India perceived the Khalistan movement as a serious threat to its national sovereignty and territorial integrity due to its secessionist agenda in the strategically significant state of Punjab. From 1981 to 1993, Punjab's disorder was characterised by violence, with nearly 25,000 deaths since 1981, and an estimated 20,000-45,000 illegal detainees and disappearances (G. Singh, 1996: 410). The initial government response was marked by a mix of flawed security tactics and political negotiations, which often intensified tensions. As the insurgency escalated and internal violence, India adopted a stronger and more coordinated security strategy. By the early 1990s, with Congress in control at both the state and central levels, a full-scale counterinsurgency effort was launched, including military operations, sealing borders to stop cross-border support of the extremists, intelligence-driven policing, and community engagement to restore public confidence. Moreover, this approach capitalised on the fragmentation of Khalistani factions, dismantling their support bases and breaking their operational networks. By 1993, the insurgency had largely collapsed, marking India's response as a successful defence of its unity and sovereignty.

6. Sikh Diaspora and the Khalistan Discourse in Canada

Canada's 2021 Census stated that 771,790 Sikhs, accounting for 2.1% of the total population, made it the second-largest Sikh community globally after India (Statistics Canada, 2024). However, the migration of the Sikh community in Canada traced back to the late 19th century; they started coming in large numbers to meet labour shortages in railroads, logging, and agriculture. Officials and white communities became concerned about job rivalry in industries and mills because of their increasing presence, leading to anti-immigrant sentiments and Canada's racist policies. The Komagata Maru incident of 1914 resulted in discriminatory immigration laws denying 376 Indian passengers, primarily Sikhs, entry into Canada, forcing them to stay for two months before returning to India, which created outrage among the Indian community (Singh and Singh, 2008: 149).

Despite facing early challenges, the Sikh community gradually established itself by engaging in anti-colonial activism and founding religious institutions, most notably through the establishment of gurdwaras. Sikh immigration increased after Canada liberalised its immigration laws in the late 1960s, creating sizable communities in Surrey, Brampton, Vancouver, and Toronto. With its educated professionals in a variety of sectors, post-1970s migration has greatly aided Canada's growth in several areas, including politics and small business. Following the 1984 Operation Bluestar, riots broke out among the Sikh diaspora populations in Canada, the US, and the UK; violent protests took place in Toronto, and the Indian Consulate in Vancouver was temporarily closed (Shahed, 2019: 325). The Sikh diaspora nationalism in Canada evolved in conjunction with the increasing Sikh identity influenced by the perceived social, religious, and political grievances over India. But the geographical and political distance between events taking place in Punjab enabled the diaspora activism to develop in a specific political context.

Sikh diaspora in Western countries supported Punjab's secessionist movement, with Canada's Sikh Diaspora playing a central role. Several Sikh groups started to create chaos overseas, including Canada, by supporting extremist Sikh nationalism and the Khalistan demand in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the majority of Canadian Sikhs, despite sympathising with the Khalistan cause, primarily believe in non-violent means for Sikh autonomy or independence in India; they support broad-based political activism and believe the community's image has suffered due to militant activities (Biswas, 2004: 269).

Talwinder Singh Parmar played a significant role in organising and expanding the operations of Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), an extremist Sikh organisation, particularly in fundraising and advocacy for the Khalistan movement in the late 1970s. The number of Sikh organisations started to increase worldwide, including in Canada, after the Sikh massacre of 1984 in India; founded in 1984 in New York with international Sikh participation, the World Sikh Organisation (WSO) became a key platform for voicing Sikh grievances and advocating non-violently for Sikh national empowerment, including the demand for Khalistan. It established branches in Canada and the UK. The International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), founded in 1984 in the UK, expanded to Canada, advocating for Khalistan's creation; in the late 1980s and 1990s, it organised fundraising and public demonstrations in British Columbia and Ontario for supporting Sikh separatism. However, Canadian intelligence authorities kept a careful eye on BKI and ISYF because of possible connections to extremism and violent incidents, such as the 1985 Air India attack, and in June 2003, Canada officially identified both groups as terrorist entities and banned them under Canada's Anti-Terrorism Act (Razavy, 2006: 79).

Another group was founded in 2007, Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) is a US-based group with branches in Canada and Europe that campaigns against alleged human rights abuses in India. The Referendum 2020 campaign was started by SFJ, which called for a vote on whether Punjab should leave India. They proposed a Khalistan state, comprising Indian Punjab, Chandigarh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan; the campaign aims to establish a consensus among diasporic Sikhs (Express Tribune, 2021). Since late 2021, SFJ has conducted referendum votes across countries with significant Sikh communities, including the UK, Switzerland, Italy, Canada, Australia, the US, and New Zealand, framing these votes as exercises in democratic expression. According to the SFJ claims, they organised the Khalistan Referendum in Canada, which saw a significant turnout, over 110,000 in Brampton (2022), 75,000 in Mississauga, 42,000 in Malton, 135,000 in Surrey, and 55,000 in Calgary (2024) (Bhattacharyya, 2024).

In November 2025, SFJ held another referendum event in Ottawa, Canada; event reports showed that the event included the use of strong anti-India rhetoric and symbolic actions, including the desecration of the Indian flag, and this led to the further escalation of diplomatic tensions between India and Canada (Firstpost, 2025).It is important to point out at first that these figures are self-reported and cannot be independently verified using official electoral mechanisms and/or neutral third-party observation. This study, therefore, does not use these turnout numbers as indicators of diaspora sentiment or diaspora political power. Instead, the significance of the referendum events within the framework of securitisation lies in the fact that these events are publicly visible and are seen as a statement of Sikh political agency, and importantly, the diplomatic reaction that they clearly provoke from the government of India and the government of Canada.

The Sikhs referendums organised by the Sikh advocacy group, Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), in various cities in the West have brought a lot of attention to the Indian and Canadian

political arena. The organisers of SFJ have been recording high numbers in regard to participation, e.g. tens of thousands of participants in cities like Brampton, Surrey, and Ottawa (CBC News, 2023). The Indian government consider these referendums as separatist threats, and has protested them even though they are completely informal and have no legal standing. However, Canada, the UK, and other democracies have allowed such protests under free speech and assembly rights, causing diplomatic tensions.

A fundamental difference in analysis should be drawn between the diaspora sympathy, political advocacy and support of militancy functioning. Diaspora sympathy is typically the identification with a political cause or homeland grievance that is emotional or cultural. Political advocacy, in its turn, is an organised yet peaceful action, e.g., demonstrations, petitions, or referendums directed at affecting the political discourse or the governmental policy. Operational support of militancy is a qualitatively different type, that is, a material, financial or logistical support of violent groups. Diaspora politics scholars stress that these two categories cannot be mixed: the scope of politics and different modes of participation may be very diverse among diaspora communities (Adamson, 2013: 63; Brinkerhoff, 2009: 1). It is important to note these differences in order to properly assess the security issues of India and the constitutional dedication of Canada to safeguard any political expression that is not violence.

Canadian multiculturalism, a fundamental belief in equal citizenship for all citizens regardless of their current and previous ethnic identity, was officially adopted by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971. Furthermore, multiculturalism was constitutionally affirmed in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) to nourish the country's multicultural heritage (Kobayashi, 1993: 205). This commitment was further codified in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988), which emphasises the active inclusion of all Canadian individuals and communities in shaping Canada's social, cultural, economic, and political development (Wayland, 1997: 33).

By making it easier for diaspora populations to be represented in political parties, legislatures, and the federal Cabinet, Canada's multicultural framework has greatly increased their political engagement. Many members of the Sikh diaspora hold significant ministerial and legislative positions, making them a significant political force. Diaspora populations now have the power to voice their concerns, engage in the democratic process, and impact national policy because of this inclusionary strategy. As of 2025, there are 15 Sikh Members of Parliament (MPs), including 4 Sikh Cabinet members or Secretaries of State in Canada's federal government (World Sikh Organisation, 2025).

The Sikh community has also created gurdwaras and advocacy groups to encourage political involvement and voter mobilisations. They also play an influential role in the socio-cultural context. Sikhs have contributed significantly to the advancement of cultural diversity in Canada with their distinct religious practice and organising important occasions like Vaisakhi, which attract thousands of non-Sikhs and stimulate the hospitality and tourism sectors. They also have a vital role in small businesses and entrepreneurship, professional fields, and traditional industries, including agriculture and transportation in Canada, which boosts the nation's diversified economy.

7. Canada-India Relations from Historical Ties to Diplomatic Rift

7.1. Foundations and Frictions (1947–1990)

Though Canada-India relations illustrate a longstanding alliance and North-South cooperation, this bilateral tie could be compared with a roller coaster, experiencing a lot of

ups and downs throughout the decades. Based on similar democratic traditions and Commonwealth membership, Canada and India formally established diplomatic ties in 1947. In the first phase, these two countries had a "special relationship", largely based on the romanticised memoirs of former Canadian high commissioner Escott Reid, after the Indian Prime Minister Nehru visited Canada in 1949 (Touhey, 2007: 733).

Canada's warm relations with India led to positive outcomes, including development assistance and cooperation in nuclear technology. Through the Colombo Plan in particular, Canada was instrumental in giving India foreign help after its independence in the early 1950s. In 1954, Canada supplied India with the CIRUS (Canadian-Indian Reactor, US) reactor at Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) for the peaceful purpose only; India became the chairman of the International Control Commission, Canada and Poland were the other two members of the commission (Budhwar, 2018: 2).

Nevertheless, the shared foundations of Indo-Canadian relations were not robust enough to withstand the divergences that emerged over matters such as Korea, Indo-China, and Hungary; Canada's stance on the Kashmir issue also strained the bilateral ties, Canada often sympathized with India's stance but voted differently in international forums for balancing relations with Pakistan (Rubinoff, 2002: 838). Despite being portrayed as a "peaceful nuclear explosion", India's 1974 nuclear test further soured relations with Canada; Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau considered it a betrayal and terminated all nuclear cooperation (Budhwar, 2018: 2).

The relations remained fragile in the 1980s due to the Khalistan demand and the Sikh diaspora's growing influence in Canada. In 1984, sectarian clashes in India led to violent responses within the Sikh-Canadian community, resulting in the bombing of an Air India flight in 1985. In 1987, New Delhi and Ottawa signed a bilateral extradition treaty to contain the terrorism of Khalistani extremists, similar to the Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka, funded by Canadian expatriates (Rubinoff, 2002: 838).

7.2. Post–Cold War Reengagement and Strategic Partnership (1991–2015)

The post-Cold War era helped to make the ties normal; India's gradual economic growth attracted Canadian investment. In 1993, Jean Chretien became Canada's Prime Minister; the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade prepared a report on "Focus India", recognising the country's long-standing relationship with India. In 1996, "Team Canada" consisted of several provincial Premiers, CEOs, and companies that visited India to foster investment and trade; with the signing of 75 business deals totalling $3.4 billion, Chretien asserted, "Canada is back in India, and we are here to stay" (Wood, 1998: 397).

India's nuclear tests in May 1998, marking its status as a nuclear weapons state, disrupted the growing goodwill in Canada–India relations. Canada regarded the tests as a serious threat to both regional stability in South Asia and global non-proliferation initiatives. In response, Canada withdrew its High Commissioner, cancelled US$54.5 million development aid, suspended trade talks, opposed loans to India, and banned military exports to India in G-8 meetings (Delvoie, 2008: 102). However, the Indian economy withstands sanctions, diplomacy prevents isolation, and Canada recognises sanctions as ineffective in pursuing India's nuclear weapons change; as a result, Canada lifted the sanctions in 2001, and the ties were rebuilt once again (Banerjee, 2017: 342).

Canada began to see India as a strategic partner due to its expanding economy and worldwide influence. In October 2003, then-prime ministers Chretien and Vajpayee issued a joint statement, "Partners for the 21st Century," in New Delhi, expressing common

interests and commitment to boosting trade and investment. After Chretien's resignation in 2003, Paul Martin aimed to build on his predecessor's progress and visited New Delhi in January 2005. Since 2006, Canada-India bilateral relations improved significantly under Prime Minister Stephen Harper's leadership, who visited India twice in 2009 and 2014; besides, numerous senior minister visits, trade agreements, and close bonding in vital fields like energy, education, defense, science, and technology occurred, elevating the relationship to a "Strategic-Partnership" (Nafey and Gopal, 2018: 29). Harper's 2009 visit marked the establishment of a Joint-Study Group to explore the possibility of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and initiated negotiations on a Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (FIPA) (A. Singh, 2016: 54).

An important change in Canada's position was made in December 2009 when the two countries inked a civil nuclear cooperation pact, recognising India's non-proliferation credentials; this was further solidified in 2013 through an Appropriate Arrangement between India's Department of Atomic Energy and the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, allowing Canadian companies to trade nuclear materials and technology with India (Mishra, 2018: 44). Both countries acknowledged strong mutual ties and cooperation and declared 2011 the "Year of India in Canada". When Indian Prime Minister Modi visited Canada in 2015, he signed several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) in fields like science and technology, civil aviation, railroads, and space. Moreover, India's energy needs were also significantly met in 2015 when the Department of Atomic Energy of the Government of India and Cameco of Canada reached an agreement to a $350 million uranium deal for five years (Banerjee, 2017: 342).

7.3. Trudeau Era and Diplomatic Breakdown (2015–2025)

The 2015 administration of Justin Trudeau (Liberal Party) placed a great priority on multicultural diplomacy, strengthening ties with India, hosting high-profile visits, encouraging common values, and facilitating nonviolent diasporic expressions. However, vote bank politics became evident in the Liberal Party's substantial advantage from the Sikh vote in many constituencies following the 2015 Canadian general election. Many scholars predicted that Trudeau's perception of freedom and empathetic behaviour towards the Sikh diaspora could be detrimental to Canada-India relations, and later this suspicion came true. Tensions escalated in April 2017 when Ontario's Liberal-led legislature passed a resolution labelling the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in India as "genocide", disregarding India's sensitivities; soon after, several Canadian gurdwaras banned Indian officials from entering their premises (Budhwar, 2018: 2).

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's week-long visit to India in 2018, a mix of positive and negative publicity, prompted increased attention from citizens and experts on its unfolding and immediate outcomes. In this visit, both leaders shared dialogue on bilateral and regional issues; notably, they made their first official commitment to collaborating on countering terrorist threats by signing a "Framework for Cooperation on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism". However, the presence of Jaspal Atwal—a convict in a 1986 assassination attempt on a Punjab minister—at an official event during Trudeau's 2018 India visit drew sharp criticism (Forrest, 2018). In December 2020, Trudeau's support for Indian farmers' right to peaceful protest prompted a sharp response from India, which condemned the remarks as unwarranted interference in its internal affairs, heightening diplomatic tensions (Bhattacherjee, 2020).

Despite political frictions, bilateral trade and investment continued to grow steadily in the early 2020s. The two-way merchandise trade increased by 52% from 2021 to 2022, reaching over CAD 12 billion (Jhunjhunwala, 2024). Other areas of cooperation also represented steadiness, including agriculture, tourism, and education. India remained the top source of international enrolments in Canada from 2018, accounting for around 40% of all international students by 2022 (Al Jazeera, 2023). However, bilateral relations dramatically changed after the 2023 Nijjar assassination; a severe diplomatic rift was sparked, illustrating conflicts between national security and democratic liberties.

On June 18, 2023, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian citizen and prominent pro-Khalistan activist, was fatally shot outside a gurdwara in Surrey, British Columbia. He was a leader of Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) in Canada, and circulated petitions in 2012 urging the UN to acknowledge 1984 Indian anti-Sikh violence as a genocide. Before his death, he organised an unofficial referendum among the Sikh diaspora, sponsored by SFJ, to support the Khalistan movement for an independent Sikh state. Supporters saw him as a peaceful Sikh independence advocate, but India identified him as the leader of the Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF), a group it designated a terrorist organisation in 2023, citing its role in promoting violence and threatening national security (Fair, 2023).

The World Sikh Organisation of Canada honoured Nijjar for his outspoken support of Khalistan, highlighting his peaceful protests against human rights violations in India (Pathi and Cohen, 2023). In September, Justin Trudeau publicly accused India of a potential link between Indian agents and the killing of Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar, based on intercepted electronic communications among Indian diplomats. Canada ousted an Indian diplomat, who was claimed to be the Indian intelligence chief. India responded tit-for-tat by dismissing the top Canadian envoy and completely rejecting the accusations, which escalated tensions between Ottawa and New Delhi. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs strongly rebutted Canada's allegations, stating they were "absurd" and "motivated", accusing the Canadian government of providing "shelter to Khalistani terrorists and extremists" (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2023a).

Trudeau reaffirmed his stance against India's statement, stating concerns over Indian involvement in the murder case of a Canadian citizen, considering it a challenge to the country's rule of law and urged cooperation in determining facts. This diplomatic rift also brought the attention of other countries, during meetings at the 2023 G20 summit, Canada's Five Eyes allies: the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand- privately brought up the matter with Indian Prime Minister Modi, voicing their concerns and urging cooperation in the inquiry (Sevastopulo, Foy and Kerr, 2023). However, India appeared unwilling to cooperate with Canadian authorities. The international community, particularly the Sikh diaspora, has publicly expressed concerns, causing India's international image to be strained and damaged, particularly during the G20 Summit in New Delhi.

Canada has postponed a trade mission to India due to rising tensions, halting formal talks for a free trade agreement (FTA), and has paused the trade mission, focusing on sectors like automobiles, agriculture, and IT, before Trudeau's G20 summit. During their meeting at the G20 Summit, there was no direct exchange of dialogue between the two leaders; Trudeau emphasised protecting the freedom of expression and opposing hate, while India raised concerns about anti-India activities in Canada, accusing them of encouraging secessionism and violence against its diplomats (Hrishikesh and Pandey, 2023).

The Canadian government encouraged its citizens to "exercise a high degree of caution" in its updated travel recommendation to India (Government of Canada, 2023). In response, India issued an advisory urging its nationals and students in Canada to exercise utmost caution due to reported anti-India activities and hate crimes, also recommending registration with Indian missions for emergency support (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2023b). The reciprocal escalating measures have driven Canada–India relations to a new low, with many analysts describing the situation as a full-scale diplomatic war.

In May 2024, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) charged three Indian nationals with first-degree murder and conspiracy to murder in connection with Nijjar's death; the diplomatic rift deepened with Canada's expulsion of six Indian diplomats in October 2024, citing interference in Canadian sovereignty, to which India responded with a similar measure (Al Jazeera, 2024; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2024). However, in June 2025, under new Prime Minister Mark Carney, Canada adopted a revised diplomatic stance by inviting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the G7 summit in Alberta, despite criticism from Sikh advocacy groups. It was an effort to mend strained ties that resulted in renewed intelligence collaboration and bilateral dialogue centred on democratic values and mutual strategic priorities (Reuters, 2025).

Nevertheless, towards mid-2025, the two governments started taking cautious measures to stabilise relations by rejuvenating the bilateral diplomatic relations and practical collaboration between the two in the sphere of the economy and strategy. Analysts refer to the addition of this stage as a strategic rebalancing, where the two nations tried to accommodate chronic political differences as each visited the other, restoring ministerial-level cooperation between the two nations since the diplomatic crisis. In several meetings between officials of both nations, it was decided that both countries would work together in a joint framework to restore trust and broaden their collaboration in aspects like trade, energy, science and technology, agriculture, and people-to-people relations. The visit further showed an effort made by Ottawa to solve the security issues of India, and at the same time to raise the concerns of Canada in relation to domestic and foreign interference (Eurasia Review, 2025a).

Through these diplomatic efforts, the relationship was still weak and not fully normalised. The foreign intrusion and Khalistan activism issues in the Sikh diaspora in Canada continued to build up political tensions. In Canada, intelligence testing and partisan politics continued to mention the fears of external influence involvement, and India remained in its old stance of claiming that Khalistan activism through the diaspora is a threat to its sovereignty and national security (Reuters, 2025).

These unresolved problems implied that a diplomatic activity was done with caution, as both of them tried to avoid a fresh rise, without having to disturb the political stance of the countries. In early 2026, when Prime Minister Mark Carney paid a high-profile visit to India, the most important advancement in the changing relationship happened. In New Delhi and Mumbai, Carney and Modi sought to restart bilateral relations by advancing economic and strategic cooperation. In February 2026, the Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval paid a visit to Canada to discuss several areas, including cybersecurity cooperation, organised crimes, and intelligence sharing. Although such talks signalled a readiness to keep communication lines open, analysts report that such talks are small steps of confidence-building, but not a diplomatic overhaul. In the meantime, the issues in the bilateral relations between the two countries were complicated by the Khalistan-related activism of the diaspora communities and the occasional security issues in Punjab, which

imply that the conflict cannot be resolved despite the minimal diplomatic activity. The two governments were to expedite the process of signing a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and set a bold target of escalating bilateral trade by a significant margin within the next decade. There were also agreements in matters like critical minerals, clean energy, and nuclear cooperation with one of the multi-billion-dollar uranium supply arrangements aimed at making sure that India has the ability to sustain its energy sector (Reuters, 2026; AP News, 2026).

Besides economic efforts, the leaders were also to enhance collaboration in the fields of defence, innovation, and new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and research exchanges. It was announced that plans were underway to introduce a new dialogue on defence and increase cooperation on the issues of maritime security and Indo-Pacific stability. The two governments also supported the reinstatement of institutional solutions, including the India-Canada CEO Forum, to enhance the participation and investments between the two economies by the private sector (Government of Canada, 2026).

However, experts point out that such developments are more an incremental normalisation of diplomatic relations, as opposed to a full reconciliation. Political sensitivities on Khalistan activism, diaspora politics, and accusations of interference are also part of the bilateral perceptions. Therefore, the modern stage of India-Canada relations may be described as a pragmatic yet restrained reset, where both of the states allow themselves to engage in economic and strategic partnership, yet have to deal with unresolved political disputes that occasionally put the relationship under strain (Eurasia Review, 2026; Reuters, 2026).

8. Diverging Stances on Khalistan: A Core Diplomatic Fault Line

Canada's response to the Khalistan movement is shaped by its constitutional policy, multiculturalism and diplomatic norms. According to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canada protects civil rights such as the freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Canada's multicultural policy promotes cultural pluralism and minority rights, allowing diaspora Sikhs to express their political beliefs and peacefully organise gatherings. Consequently, the Canadian government has generally permitted non-violent advocacy for Khalistan, interpreting such activity as falling within the permissible bounds of political expression. This legal permissiveness, however, does not translate into governmental endorsement of separatism. Canada has officially proscribed several extremist Sikh organisations under its national security legislation, including Babbar Khalsa International and the International Sikh Youth Federation, both of which remain listed as terrorist entities under the Canadian Criminal Code. The Sikh diaspora, which makes up a politically substantial and active portion of the Canadian population, especially in provinces like British Columbia and Ontario, has a significant influence on the state's stance on the Khalistan issue. Additionally, Canada has not faced any significant security concerns involving the Sikh community since the 1985 Air India bombing, which has helped to promote a favourable public image of Sikh Canadians as law-abiding, peaceful citizens. The Sikh movement, despite its decline in India, has thrived in the Sikh diaspora, particularly in Canada, where constitutional protections allow pro-Khalistan advocacy (Kapur, 2023).

Moreover, the deadly Operation Blue Star and the mass killing of Sikhs after Indira Gandhi's assassination gave ethical ground to the Sikh diaspora to raise their voice. In Canada, Sikh diaspora nationalism blends civic and ethnic identities, and multicultural policies serve to both, and lessen overt militancy and symbolically maintain Khalistani

beliefs (Shahed, 2019: 325). This cautious approach is indicative of Canada's larger effort to strike a balance between its democratic principles and the mounting security and diplomatic demands of transnational political groups. Despite diplomatic disputes with India, Canada's legal and political system places a strong priority on civil liberties, underscoring the difficulties democracies have in striking a balance between human rights protections and national security.

Based on concerns for national security and unity, India has a zero-tolerance attitude towards the Khalistan movement. India domestically managed to dismantle the separatist demand by taking hardline measures in the 1980s-90s, but the Sikh diaspora around the world, mostly in Western democratic countries, was able to preserve their claim. India sees the worldwide rise of Khalistani rhetoric, which includes unofficial referendums and rallies, as a type of transnational secession that is frequently made possible by cross-cultural protections and political liberties offered by other countries (Mehra and Clarke, 2023).

As a result, India is urging host governments to curb extremist propaganda and support networks, demanding legal action against pro-Khalistan groups, extradition of accused persons, and regulation of diaspora funding linked to anti-India campaigns. With the bitter experience of the separatist violent movement in Punjab, India always keeps an eye on the Sikh diaspora's activities to examine any potential danger to its sovereignty and global status. The fundraising and recruitment activities of Sikh groups in Canada are a common source of concern for the Indian authorities. Additionally, it keeps track of a "blacklist" of Sikh diaspora separatists who are subject to greater scrutiny or travel restrictions while trying to enter India. Large-scale Khalistani violence had mostly decreased by the 2000s, while sporadic episodes continued. In the past decade, Sikh militant activity has included several notable incidents, such as the 1995 assassination of Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh, the 2007 Ludhiana cinema bombing that killed six and injured 30, the 2009 killing of pro-government Sikh leader Rulda Singh, the 2012 assault on retired Indian General Kuldip Brar in London, the 2013 arrest of a senior Sikh militant in Punjab with a large weapons cache, the 2016 assassination of a pro-government Sikh figure, and the same year's escape and subsequent re-arrest of extremist leader Harminder Singh Mintoo (Shahed, 2019: 325).

Since 2016, Punjab has consistently experienced targeted assassinations associated with Khalistani-gangster alliances, with reported fatalities including three in 2016, six in 2017, three in 2018, two each in 2019 and 2020, one in 2021, two in 2022, and six in 2023; investigations have shown that the vast majority of these acts were connected to extensive international networks involving organized crime, narcotics smuggling, and extremist Khalistani factions based outside India (Eurasia Review, 2025a). From December 2024 to June 2025, Punjab experienced multiple violent incidents including a grenade attack on the Asron police post in SBS Nagar, an explosive thrown at an Amritsar temple, a grenade assault on BJP leader Manoranjan Kalia's residence in Jalandhar, and the dismantling of a Babbar Khalsa International plot involving ISI-backed operatives planning attacks and targeted killings in Amritsar, all connected to transnational Khalistani militant networks with foreign backing from Pakistan, UK and Canada (Tripathi, 2025; Indian Express, 2025).

In late 2025, security developments in Punjab suggested that Indian authorities were still worried about the possibility of the revival of Khalistan-related militancy. The reports based on the Punjab Police data indicate that in 2024-2025, security agencies have made several counterterrorism operations, which have seen over 40 suspected operatives tied to pro-Khalistan networks arrested (The Economic Times, 2025). In November 2025, Punjab

Police busted a Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) cell that was allegedly organised by the handlers in Pakistan and seized firearms, explosives, and communication devices during operations (The Economic Times, 2025).

According to the authorities, the group had been plotting grenade attacks against police premises and places of people in an attempt to destabilise the region (Eurasia Review, 2025b). Moreover, security officials claimed that there was an increasing fear over cross-border drone operations that were employed to deliver weapons and narcotics into Punjab, with more than 100 identified drones along the India-Pakistan border in 2025 (Observer Research Foundation, 2025). Such developments have strengthened a case taken by New Delhi that the transnational networks and diaspora-related mobilisation could be a cause of new security threats in Punjab.

In essence, the completely different perspectives of Canada and India on the Khalistan issue are mainly shaped by their constitutional policies, societal structure and narratives. India views the demand for an independent Khalistan state as a severe threat to its sovereignty and national integrity, resulting in harsh measures against the secessionist supporters. On the contrary, Canada believes in democratic pluralism and minority rights within legal boundaries, giving full freedom to the Sikh diaspora to practice peaceful politics. These divergent viewpoints have created diplomatic challenges which call for a revitalised discussion that makes a distinction between violent extremism and acceptable political expression, as well as mutual acknowledgement of democratic standards and state limitations.

Conclusion

Canada-India relations have remained largely friendly since 1947, though marked by intermittent tensions and misunderstandings that have given the partnership a fluctuating, almost roller-coaster trajectory over the decades. However, they have experienced a downfall in their bilateral relationship in recent years over the Khalistan issue. Though the longstanding Khalistan movement, claiming an independent Sikh state largely marginalised within India, continues to find ideological and symbolic traction among certain segments of the Sikh diaspora in Canada. This dynamic has increasingly complicated diplomatic engagements, especially under the Trudeau Administration. Trudeau's 2018 India visit and the presence of Jaspal Atwal, his support towards Indian farmer protests in 2020, the Khalistan referendum in the 2020s, the 2023 assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, the subsequent allegations implicating Indian involvement and escalatory measures from both nations have triggered a sharp deterioration in mutual trust.

This study has demonstrated the overview of the bilateral relations, including ups and downs from the past to present, while pointing out that the ongoing dispute reflects more than a singular disagreement over a separatist cause; it reveals deeper structural and normative divergences between the two states. India's strict response to the secessionists is primarily motivated to protect its national sovereignty and domestic stability, which sharply contrasts with Canada's existing constitutional policies, civil liberties, and multicultural integrity. These divergent legal structures and political values have led to diplomatic friction and mistrust, particularly where diaspora activism intersects with geopolitical sensitivities.

Since the onset of recent tensions, repairing the diplomatic relationship between India and Canada has required more than symbolic outreach. Although Prime Minister Mark Carney's government has extended an olive branch, most notably by inviting Prime

Minister Narendra Modi to the G7 Summit, any progress remains tentative. Modi's cautious and receptive decision to engage reflects optimism to move past recent hostilities. A major move towards normalisation of bilateral relations was done later in the early 2026 visit of Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, to India. New trade agreements on CEPA, uranium transaction, energy, defence and technology strategic alliances showed some concrete improvements. Yet, the relationship contains several straining factors to sustain diplomatic disputes, particularly deep disagreements over the boundaries of diaspora activism and the interpretation of national security concerns. For genuine progress to take root, both countries will need to move beyond political posturing and commit to sustained, respectful dialogue that carefully separates legitimate civic expression from extremist behaviour.

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Hindistan ile Kanada arasındaki ikili ilişkiler, uzun yıllar boyunca ortak demokratik değerler, Britanya sömürge geçmişinden miras kalan kurumsal benzerlikler ve güçlü beşerî temaslar temelinde istikrarlı bir seyir izlemiştir. Özellikle eğitim, ticaret, göç ve çokkültürlülük alanlarında gelişen iş birliği, iki ülkeyi Asya-Pasifik ve Kuzey Amerika bağlamında birbirine yakınlaştırmıştır. Bununla birlikte, son yıllarda bu ilişkiler belirgin bir diplomatik gerileme sürecine girmiştir. Bu gerilimin merkezinde, Hindistan'ın Pencap bölgesinde bağımsız bir Sih devleti kurulmasını hedefleyen Khalistan hareketi ve bu hareketin Kanada'daki Sih diasporası üzerinden kazandığı ulusötesi boyut yer almaktadır.

Khalistan hareketi, kökenlerini Hindistan'ın sömürge sonrası devlet inşa sürecinde yaşanan siyasal, ekonomik ve kimlik temelli gerilimlerden almaktadır. 1970'ler ve 1980'lerde Pencap'ta yükselen ayrılıkçı talepler, şiddet eylemleri ve merkezi hükümetin sert güvenlik politikalarıyla birlikte hem Hindistan iç siyasetini hem de bölgesel istikrarı derinden etkilemiştir. Hareket, Hindistan devleti tarafından büyük ölçüde bastırılmış olsa da, diaspora toplulukları aracılığıyla varlığını sürdürmüş ve zamanla uluslararası bir boyut kazanmıştır. Özellikle Kanada, nüfus içindeki Sih oranının görece yüksekliği ve ifade özgürlüğüne dayalı siyasal ortamı nedeniyle Khalistan söylemlerinin en görünür olduğu ülkelerden biri hâline gelmiştir.

Bu çalışma, Khalistan hareketinin tarihsel gelişimini yalnızca Hindistan iç dinamikleriyle sınırlı görmemekte, aksine diasporanın siyasal mobilizasyon kapasitesini ve ev sahibi ülke siyasetindeki etkisini merkeze almaktadır. Kanada'daki Sih diasporası, seçim süreçleri, sivil toplum örgütleri ve medya aracılığıyla Khalistan meselesini gündemde tutmakta; bu durum ise Hindistan tarafından egemenliğe ve ulusal güvenliğe yönelik bir tehdit olarak algılanmaktadır. Yeni Delhi yönetimi, özellikle son dönemde, ayrılıkçı faaliyetlerin yurtdışından desteklenmesini terörizm ve aşırılıkçılıkla mücadele bağlamında ele almakta ve müttefik ülkelerden daha güçlü iş birliği talep etmektedir.

Makale, Hindistan ile Kanada arasındaki diplomatik gerilimleri kronolojik bir perspektifle inceleyerek, Khalistan faktörünün iki ülke ilişkilerinde nasıl merkezi bir sorun hâline geldiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Son yıllarda karşılıklı sert açıklamalar, diplomatların sınır dışı edilmesi ve güven eksikliğinin derinleşmesi, bu meselenin yalnızca ikili bir anlaşmazlık olmaktan çıkıp daha geniş bir uluslararası normlar tartışmasına dönüştüğünü göstermektedir. Kanada, Khalistan yanlısı faaliyetleri büyük ölçüde ifade özgürlüğü ve barışçıl protesto hakkı çerçevesinde değerlendirirken, Hindistan bu yaklaşımın aşırılıkçı unsurları meşrulaştırdığı görüşündedir.

Çalışmanın temel argümanı, Hindistan ile Kanada arasındaki anlaşmazlığın özünde güvenlik ve insan hakları eksenleri arasındaki normatif bir çatışmaya dayandığıdır. Hindistan, Khalistan faktörünü devletin toprak bütünlüğünü tehdit eden bir güvenlik sorunu olarak çerçevelendirirken; Kanada, diasporanın siyasal taleplerini demokratik katılım ve insan hakları bağlamında ele almaktadır. Bu farklı algılar, her iki ülkede de iç siyasetin dış politikayı şekillendirdiği bir ortam yaratmakta ve diplomatik esneklik alanını daraltmaktadır. Özellikle Kanada'da çokkültürlülük politikaları ve göçmen oylarının önemi, hükümetlerin Khalistan meselesine temkinli yaklaşmasına neden olmaktadır. Hindistan'da ise yükselen milliyetçilik ve güçlü devlet söylemi, bu tür hareketlere karşı sıfır tolerans politikasını pekiştirmektedir.

Bu çalışma, Khalistan meselesinin Hindistan ve Kanada tarafından nasıl farklı biçimlerde çerçevelendiğini incelemek amacıyla güvenlikleştirme (securitisation) ve norm tartışması (norm contestation) kavramlarını teorik temel olarak kullanmaktadır. Metodolojik olarak araştırma, akademik literatür, resmi açıklamalar, politika raporları ve güvenilir medya kaynaklarının nitel doküman analizi yöntemine dayanmaktadır ve anlaşmazlığın tarihsel gelişimini izlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bulgular, Hindistan'ın Khalistan hareketini devletin egemenliği ve toprak bütünlüğüne yönelik bir tehdit olarak güvenlikleştirdiğini; buna karşılık Kanada'nın diaspora faaliyetlerini daha çok demokratik haklar ve ifade özgürlüğü çerçevesinde değerlendirdiğini göstermektedir. Bu farklı yaklaşımlar, iki ülke arasında devam eden diplomatik gerilimlere katkıda bulunan bir normatif tartışma ortaya çıkarmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, Khalistan meselesinin Hindistan–Kanada ilişkilerinde geçici bir kriz olmaktan ziyade, yapısal ve uzun vadeli bir sorun alanı olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Ulusötesi kimlik siyasetinin, diaspora diplomasisinin ve iç politika dinamiklerinin giderek daha fazla önem kazandığı günümüz uluslararası sisteminde, benzer anlaşmazlıkların başka ülkeler arasında da ortaya çıkması muhtemeldir. Bu bağlamda, Hindistan ve Kanada arasındaki gerilim, devlet egemenliği ile insan hakları normları arasındaki denge arayışının somut bir örneğini sunmaktadır. Çalışma, taraflar arasında sürdürülebilir bir diyalog mekanizması kurulmadığı sürece, Khalistan faktörünün iki ülke ilişkilerinde kalıcı bir gerilim kaynağı olmaya devam edeceği sonucuna ulaşmaktadır.