

The Sikh Diaspora: In the Shadow of Khalistan

Written by Giorgio Shani

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GIORGIO SHANI, SEP 27 2023

The assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian Sikh leader, by alleged agents of the Indian state outside a Surrey Gurdwara in British Columbia in June 2023 has caused a major diplomatic incident between India and Canada. Nijjar was a religious leader accused by India of being the chief of the banned Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF). Although he was born in the Indian state of Punjab, he was a Canadian citizen and his assassination by two unidentified gunmen with alleged links to India on Canadian soil was described by Canadian PM Justin Trudeau as an 'unacceptable violation of our sovereignty'. Irrespective of alleged Indian state involvement, Nijjar's assassination has wider implications than Indo-Canadian relations. It sheds light on the phenomenon of Sikh Nationalism and the relationship between the Sikh diaspora and its 'homeland' in Punjab. Furthermore, it brings into question the meaning of Sikh identity and sovereignty in a globalising world.

The Sikhs are a distinctive cultural and religious community in South Asia, with a vibrant diaspora and a territorial homeland. They are distinctive because most baptised male Sikhs wear uncut hair in turbans and may carry ceremonial swords, called *kirpans*, in line with the teachings of their tenth and final Guru, Gobind Singh. There are approximately 26 million Sikhs globally with the vast majority living in the Indian state of Punjab where they form a slight majority. The Punjab is their homeland and Amritsar is the Sikh Jerusalem or Mecca where the holiest shrine, *Sri Harmandir Sahib*, is located in the Golden Temple complex.

Around 2 to 3 million Sikhs form a diaspora scattered throughout the world. These include settlers who migrated to the former dominions of the British Empire, including Canada, and its colonies. Many, however, were forced to flee the Punjab during the civil war which broke out between Sikh militants and the central government following the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the holiest shrine in Sikhism, by Indian troops on the orders of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984. Gandhi was subsequently assassinated by her Sikh bodyguard leading to a pogrom allegedly organised by members of the ruling Indian National Congress party (INC) which claimed 3,000 lives. This gave rise to a civil war in Punjab as various militant factions, some explicitly supporting the establishment of a separate Sikh state of *Khalistan*, rose up against the central government. Some may have been supported by Pakistan, but they enjoyed a degree of legitimacy in the Punjab as the central government suspended elections and deployed the military to crush the movement for 'national self-determination' at the cost of an estimated 30,000 lives.

Although 'normalcy' returned to the Punjab in the mid-1990s with the restoration of democratic elections, *Khalistan* lived on in the diaspora, particularly in multi-cultural societies such as Canada which accepted many migrants from the Punjab. Three decades ago, Benedict Anderson (1992) suggested that Sikh nationalism in Canada was a form of 'long-distance nationalism' by which he meant nationalism without 'responsibility or accountability'. Indeed, Nijjar was campaigning for a referendum in Canada on independence for *Khalistan* when he was gunned down. Sikhs constitute 2% of the Canadian population which is roughly the same as in India. Whereas today the main issues in the primarily agricultural Punjab are farmer suicides due to high debt burdens, the planned liberalisation of the agricultural sector which spawned the farmer protests three years ago, youth unemployment and a drugs epidemic, the spectre of *Khalistan* still looms large in the diaspora. I suggest three reasons below.

One reason is that sovereignty for Sikhs is *embodied*; that is, that baptised Sikhs wear symbols which remind them that they are part of a religious and political community: the *Khalsa*. The order of the Khalsa, or 'community of the pure,' was initiated by the tenth and final human Guru Gobind Singh (1658-1707). Guru Gobind conferred spiritual

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authority on the Sikh Holy Book, the *Granth Sahib*, and temporal authority upon the community of baptised Sikhs through the doctrine of *Guru Panth* – the corporate body of the community (a collective gathering of the *Khalsa*) in whom his spirit is eternally present. This has led to the emergence of a discourse that identifies the Sikhs as a political as well as a religious community which shares collective myths and memories dating from the creation of the order of the *Khalsa* and the subsequent empire of Maharaja Ranjit who once ruled an Empire stretching to the borders of modern-day Afghanistan. Although in practice, Ranjit Singh's Empire was multi-religious, the Sikhs formed a 'dominant minority' and, after his death, it took the British two wars to formally annex the territory. Sikhs are reminded of their history every time they visit a *gurdwara*, their place of worship.

A second reason is that India can no longer claim to be a secular state. Unlike the North American and French versions of secularism, Indian secularism was always based on the acceptance of religious and cultural differences in the public sphere. The state was to be, in theory, the neutral arbiter between competing claims from religious communities and to maintain a 'principled distance' from religion (Bhargava 1998). In practice, however, the Indian state was born in the aftermath of the violent Partition not only of the sub-continent but of the Punjab by the British into a Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. The Sikhs were caught in the middle. They sided with India, but many became refugees forced to flee ethnic cleansing in Pakistan.

Attempts to secure a homeland within India bore fruit with the linguistic reorganisation of the Punjab. Sikhs claimed Punjabi, which is widely spoken by all religious communities in the Punjab, as their own. When they sought greater autonomy within India, the central government under India Gandhi sought to divide the Sikh community by sponsoring militants. This backfired as they waged a violent campaign of intimidation against Hindus and members of minority Sikh sects. Finally, the state sought to crush the militants who took refuge in the Golden Temple complex. In their attempt to 'flush them out' Indian troops, many of them Sikh themselves, desecrated the Golden Temple killing many pilgrims. From that moment on, a significant section of the Sikh community was at war with the Indian state. Although the state finally succeeded in crushing the movement, it could no longer claim to be secular. Even the election of a Sikh Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, could not assuage many Sikhs. The subsequent emergence of Hindu nationalism as espoused by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) accentuated the consolidation of an Indian national identity around a Hindu ethnic core. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has become a Hindu state or *Hindu Rashtra*.

However, perhaps the most important reason, is that the present international order only grants recognition to nations which can claim statehood. The Sikhs arguably have been a nation since before the independence from British colonial rule. Claims to Sikh nationhood are based, as Gurharpal Singh and I have argued in our recent book, *Sikh Nationalism*, on an ethnic Punjabi core since Sikhism is not a proselytising religion, the Punjabi language and a territorial homeland. However, all of these components of Sikh nationality can be contested. Indeed, the nation itself is best seen as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). What is indisputable is that the Sikhs have a political system of their own which developed out of the *Akali* movement to take back control of *gurdwaras* during British colonial rule. The establishment of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) afforded Sikhs a mechanism to regulate *gurdwaras*. Competitive elections were held to control the SGPC dominated by various factions of the Shiromani Akali Dal, the main Sikh political party. However, the control of the SGPC doesn't extend to the diaspora where different factions have emerged committed to the establishment of a Sikh homeland. Hardeep Singh Nijjar was a leader of one such faction organizing a referendum on *Khalistan*. The allegation that there was Indian state involvement would, if proved true, merely confirm what many minorities, particularly Muslims, have long felt: that India under BJP rule is a homeland for Hindus.

Despite the deeply embedded and often violent racism which confronts many Sikhs in the diaspora, in many respects, Sikhs have become a 'model minority'. The success of many Sikh migrants in integrating into Canada's multi-cultural society can be seen in the election of a practising turban-wearing Sikh, Jagmeet Singh, as leader of the New Democratic Party, a crucial election partner of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Nevertheless, it remains difficult for many diaspora Sikhs to go beyond *Khalistan*. I have suggested three reasons: Sikh sovereignty in embodied in the *Khalsa*; India is becoming a *Hindu Rashtra*; and the present international order primarily recognises nations which can claim statehood. *Khalistan*, in short, continues to cast a long shadow over the diaspora.

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