

## The Killing of a Canadian Sikh

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The killing occurred at 8:30 p.m. on Father's Day, 2023. Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a forty-five-year-old Sikh leader in Canada and father of two, had finished giving a speech at the temple over which he presided. From his pickup truck in the parking lot, he called his family and told them he'd be home soon. His son said there would be pizza for dinner, and seviyan, a sweet vermicelli dish, for dessert. But as Nijjar drove out of the temple's parking lot, a white sedan swerved in front of his car at the gate. Then two hooded men in black, wearing medical masks, jumped out from under a gazebo-like wooden structure and fired scores of rounds through the window of Nijjar's Dodge Ram.

It was an audacious murder. Sunday evening is a busy time at the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara, which, even more so than most Sikh temples, is both a place of worship and a community center, boasting a free twenty-four-hour canteen, a senior center, a pre-school, and a recreational field. A knot of people were chatting nearby in the parking lot. A few men practiced soccer in the field, and when they heard the shooting they rushed towards the Dodge Ram. One of the players chased the killers until one turned around and trained his gun on him. In the truck, Nijjar was slumped over to the right, as if reaching for something on the passenger side. His blue turban

had come off his head and his light purple shirt was darkened with blood.

Surrey, in British Columbia, is a heavily Sikh town. A quarter of its 700,000-strong population is Sikh; and Punjabi is the second-most spoken language. Sikhs started emigrating to Canada from India in the 1900s to work in lumber mills. Despite discrimination, they established themselves as a social and political force, especially in British Columbia. By the 1980s a large segment of Sikhs had moved to Surrey, a flat, cheap exurb of Vancouver with watercolor-blue mountains on the horizon. Surrey is now a collection of two-story housing developments and dun-and-white strip malls that sell everything from turbans and paan to Punjabi books, Indian fabrics, and jewelry. Immigrant law offices, travel agencies, and notaries are, predictably, rampant. The Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara is one of the hubs of the community, and Nijjar, a plumber by profession, was a well-known man. News of his death spread on social media, and within hours hundreds of angry congregants showed up at the grounds of the gurdwara. Moninder Singh, a close friend and Sikh leader, was there too. He remembers some of the younger congregants blocking off the four-lane road in front of the gurdwara. Taking control of a mic, Moninder urged calm, then said, 'Make no mistake: this is a political assassination. And it's been carried out by India.'

Moninder had reasons to suspect India. For years, Nijjar had publicly espoused the cause of Khalistan, an independent Sikh state in India, which a fringe of Sikhs in the diaspora wished to carve out of Indian Punjab, as well as Pakistani Punjab and other states that had once been part of larger Punjab under British rule. In 2014, when Nijjar started planning symbolic referendums for Khalistan in the West, the Indian government had termed him a terrorist. But the charges against Nijjar – that he was directing bombings and assassinations in India – did not meet Canada's evidentiary threshold, and Canada declined to extradite him. Nijjar continued his activism, and, in the year before his death, spoke to his followers about an active threat on his life. 'The coming time is very dangerous,' he said in what turned out to be his last speech. It was one reason the congregants were so angry; they felt Canada had not done enough to protect him.

Three months after the murder the community gained a well-placed ally: prime minister Justin Trudeau, who stood up in Parliament that September and stated he had 'credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the government of India and the killing of a Canadian citizen' – Hardeep Singh Nijjar – adding that, 'Any involvement of a foreign government in the killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil is an unacceptable violation of our sovereignty.' It was a major turn in the affair. Canada and India have been intricately connected trading partners for decades. Hundreds of thousands of Indian students flock to Canadian colleges every year, and Canada is home to the largest Sikh diaspora in the world, at 800,000 souls. But Canada would not release its evidence, and so India accused Trudeau of pandering to a fundamentalist Sikh base. Since 1967, when the Liberal Party's immigration reforms opened the gates for the arrival of Sikhs in larger numbers, Sikhs have reliably voted Liberal, so much so that in 2016 Trudeau was able to quip that, 'I have more Sikhs in my Cabinet than Modi does' – four versus two. Now, mutual expulsions of diplomats followed Trudeau's accusation. India suspended visa services to Canada. Indian and Canadian relations became strained.

This stalemate of conflicting narratives might have continued were it not for the fact that two months later, in November 2023, the US Justice Department unsealed an indictment against an Indian intelligence agent for trying to carry out a very similar hit against a Khalistani activist in New York. Indian officials again argued that an indictment was not evidence, but the US presented a cache of recordings and text messages, and India soon arrested the accused Indian intelligence operative, Vikash Yadav, on other charges, perhaps with the intent of making him appear like an officer who had gone rogue.

What appeared to be a single extrajudicial killing now looked like a program to eliminate Khalistani activists across North America.

India has changed since the election of prime minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. Dissent is no longer tolerated. Critics are hounded through the press and social media, by police, the tax department, and the judiciary. So it is not entirely surprising that India would extend its campaign of repression abroad. The Sikhs I met in North America this year were jittery but determined. A woman at Nijjar's gurdwara told me that, after Nijjar's death, she started scanning other congregants for signs they were Indian agents. When my phone call with a Sikh activist in the US briefly dropped, he asked, 'Did you hear something funny on the phone just now?' adding that he'd heard 'what sounded like a broadcast of some kind for ten seconds on the line.'

But, what is a surprise, in this case of transnational repression, are the targets. While it was true that Nijjar and his allies used their megaphones in the West to agitate for Khalistan, they were, at best, irritants. Only a small percentage of Sikhs in Canada, the UK, and the US support Khalistan. In India, meanwhile, the movement – active in the 1980s and early 1990s – is long dead, and there are few signs that it is being resuscitated. If anything, India's campaign against the Khalistanis had given the quixotic movement unexpected oxygen, alerting the world to the cause. Why did India do it?

In the new era of its geopolitical arrival, when India was seen by the US and its allies as a crucial bulwark against China – at least before Donald Trump intervened with his wild-card tariffs – India was communicating to the West that it would not wait for its dubious 'due process' to eliminate individuals it deemed terrorists. The assassination was also a warning to the prosperous Sikh diaspora not to besmirch India's reputation abroad, a message that revealed a profound misunderstanding of how Sikhs, a proud minority, have traditionally responded to threats from the majority. But, as I learned on my trip this year to Canada, there was also a more immediate political reason for the killing, one which led back, through various curves, to Punjab itself.

### 3

Sikhism arose in fifteenth century Punjab as a reaction to Brahmanism. Founded by the charismatic mystic Guru Nanak, it is a monotheistic religion with an ethos of service and volunteerism. In Sikh temples, congregants are supposed to cook and eat together, and to offer free meals to the public, all of which runs counter to the caste system. Sikhism, however, was always a non-converting minority religion – even today it is only practiced by less than 2 per cent of India's population – and its reputation rested on its martial strain and its history of resistance. Martyrs are revered. As Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru of Sikhism, supposedly said in the sixteenth century, 'The true test of faith is the hour of misery.' (Tortured to death by the Mughal emperor Jehangir, Arjan was, according to legend, boiled in a cauldron of water with red-hot sand poured onto him from above). In the seventeenth century, the military strain of Sikhism was formalized through the establishment of the Khalsa, a sect of religious warriors identified by the so-called five Ks: kesh (unshorn hair), kara (steel bracelet), kirpan (sword or knife), kaccha (cotton shorts), and kangha (a comb). The men took on the last name 'Singh' (lion) and the women 'Kaur' (princess) – a practice that continues to this day. Then, in the early 1800s, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a Sikh ruler, united a vast swathe of northern India under his reign. It was only in 1849, a decade after Ranjit Singh's death, that the British annexed Punjab. Sikhs went on to be overrepresented in the British Army, which is why they were mobile in the empire, and came to Canada as early as 1900.

When India gained independence, Punjab was partitioned, and Sikhs sided with India rather than Islamic Pakistan. They didn't gain their own country, but Nehru promised their rights would be safeguarded. By the 1960s, though, many Sikhs felt their fertile state – India's breadbasket – was giving more to India than it was gaining in return. The so-called 'Green Revolution' increased agricultural productivity in Punjab, but it also worsened indebtedness as farmers took out loans for seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and equipment. Sikh parties – dominated by the land-owning, restive Jat caste – called again for greater autonomy for Punjab, including control over its river

waters and the new capital city of Chandigarh, which was shared with a neighboring Hindu-majority state. Autonomy never arrived. Instead, in the late 1970s, a Sikh fundamentalist movement took hold, led by a preacher in his thirties named Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Bhindranwale didn't openly call for independence, but his armed followers targeted Sikh apostates and Hindus who fell afoul of them. India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, and her Congress party initially believed they could control Bhindranwale and use him to divide the Sikh vote. They were proven wrong. By 1982, Bhindranwale and his militants took refuge in the sacred, marbled precincts of the Golden Temple, the central seat of the Sikh religion, in Amritsar. They eventually turned parts of it into a sandbagged headquarters for their attacks.

The movement for Khalistan solidified in 1984. This was the year that Gandhi finally ordered the Indian Army to storm the Golden Temple to flush out Bhindranwale. But the method the army employed – a siege, with pilgrims present, using tanks and armored carriers, near an important religious holiday for Sikhs – made the event seem like an attack on Sikhi itself. 'It would be like shooting at St Paul's Cathedral in London,' the BBC journalist Mark Tully remembered. After the disastrous raid, which lasted days longer than expected, the Akal Takht (the Eternal Throne), which is where the central religious body of Sikhism holds court, lay in ruins. The Central Sikh Museum and Reference Library, housing innumerable ancient documents, was gutted by a fire. The militants were killed, but so were hundreds of soldiers and over a thousand civilians. In the days that followed, Sikh visitors could be seen pressing their faces to the bullet holes on the walls of the complex and their cheeks against the bloodstains on the tiled floors.

#### 4

**E**ven moderate Sikhs were outraged by the military action, code-named Operation Blue Star. Gurpreet Singh, a well-known journalist in Surrey who grew up in India, was a teenager when the attack occurred. 'I used to dream in Hindi,' he told me on my visit to Surrey this year. 'I used to think in Hindi. Punjabi was still alien to me, because I had been outside Punjab for most of the time. But after Operation Blue Star, I made a conscious decision to learn Punjabi and start thinking in Punjabi.' Another moderate Sikh civic leader remembers telling his wife, 'They're going to kill her.' Meaning: Indira Gandhi. These were common sentiments, and in fact, four months after the siege of the Golden Temple, Gandhi was shot dead by her two Sikh bodyguards as she strolled across her lawn. In response, Gandhi's Congress party unleashed massive 'riots' in Delhi. More than 3,000 Sikhs were murdered (50,000 are said to have fled the city entirely, with another 50,000 seeking shelter in government and volunteer camps).

Buoyed by the vengeful anti-Sikh violence, the Congress won the 1984 election by a landslide. In response, the Sikh militant movement – an insurgency devoted to taking control of Punjab and creating an independent state of Khalistan – began in earnest. Many Sikh youth took up arms against the state and Hindus; Hindu families fled the region; and thousands of Sikhs were killed, tortured, or 'disappeared' by police and paramilitary forces. A segment of Canadian Sikhs supported the movement with money, protests, media coverage, and manpower. In 1985, Canadian-based Khalistani separatists blew up an Air India jet over the coast of Ireland, killing 329, the largest terrorist attack in history before 9/11. (Another bomb, timed to go off around the same time on an Air India plane leaving Tokyo, detonated earlier than planned, killing two baggage handlers at Narita Airport.)

Hardeep Singh Nijjar was seven in 1984. He grew up in a rural Punjabi family that occasionally sheltered militants who were on the run from the paramilitary forces and police (Punjab has no real mountains or forests for guerillas to hide in). These militants included some of the top commandos of Khalistani outfits, such as the Babbar Khalsa, accused of carrying out the Air India bombing. Nijjar was inspired by these individuals, but his actual role in the movement is unclear. What is known is that in 1995, ten years into the militancy, his friends assassinated the chief minister of Punjab, Beant Singh, in a car bombing, killing him and seventeen others. This

turned out to be one of the last major actions of an insurgency that was beginning to give way. One of the reasons was that the Indian police and paramilitary repression had been brutally effective. K.P.S. Gill, the Sikh head of police in Punjab credited with crushing the insurgency, told a journalist, ‘In a war, human rights just don’t factor into it.’ By 1995, tens of thousands of Sikhs had been detained, tortured, executed and disappeared by Indian counterinsurgency forces. At the same time, the militant groups themselves began to splinter. They were guilty of their own abuses, and the population was losing patience. It began withdrawing support from the militants. ‘Khalistan’ was on its way to becoming a verboten term, even though none of the underlying problems of religious or political autonomy had been addressed.

Soon after the assassination of Beant Singh, Nijjar was picked up by police and tortured. He was released after he paid a bribe and reportedly fled to the UK, where his brothers lived. In 1997, two years later, he arrived in Canada, carrying a passport with a Hindu name, Ravi Sharma, his beard and hair shorn. Though his application for asylum was repeatedly rejected – as was an attempt to gain residency through a last-minute marriage to a Punjabi woman – Nijjar was allowed to stay on under Canada’s then-lax immigration laws.

At the time, the Khalistan movement was fizzling out in India, but could still be discussed openly in Canada. In 1998, the year after Nijjar arrived, Khalistanis in fact set up their own gurdwara in Surrey, Dasmesh Darbar, with pictures of militants on bold display in the communal dining hall – including a photo of Talwinder Parmar, widely considered the mastermind of the 1985 Air India bombing (to this day, despite ample evidence to the contrary, Khalistanis insist that India conspired to have its own jets blown up). Khalistanis began to fight for control and influence over other gurdwaras in Surrey, seizing on seemingly trivial issues such as the use of tables and chairs in community kitchens when, traditionally, they said, one was supposed to sit on the ground. Bloody hand-to-hand battles were fought in gurdwaras over the topic, though some observers wondered if this ruckus was being raised to distract from the fact that the Canadian police had finally closed in on the suspects in the Air India bombing. In 2000, four Sikh men were charged, all members of the Babbar Khalsa. Only one was convicted.

The long-running Air India trial caused a chill among Khalistanis, but by the mid-2000s, the movement began to revive again. A new generation of Canadian-born Sikhs was coming of age, and they increasingly deployed the language of identity politics and human rights to talk about the pogrom of 1984 and the state-sponsored repression that followed. Issues such as Punjab’s opioid crisis, a lack of industrialization, and an influx of poor migrants from other states were viewed as plots engineered by the Indian state to keep Sikhs in check (some of these problems, such as the drug crisis, in fact stem from Punjab’s vulnerable position as a border state). Meanwhile, a publicity-seeking lawyer in New York City, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, lobbied the UN to have the 1984 massacre recognized as a ‘genocide’. Pannun also organized educational ‘camps’ in Canada, and this is where he met Nijjar. It was 2007. Pannun remembers Nijjar being ‘very quiet, to the point . . . he talked to me about my thoughts on Khalistan – is it only about justice, what can be done?’ Soon enough the two men became close. Pannun represented Nijjar as his lawyer, and Nijjar in turn became one of Pannun’s prime activists in Canada.

Nijjar also met other Sikh activists in Surrey, such as Moninder Singh, who was deeply involved with Dasmesh Darbar, the Khalistani-leaning gurdwara. Moninder, who was three years younger than Nijjar and had grown up in Canada in a Khalistani family, remembers that Nijjar ‘came straight up to me and hugged me’ in the gurdwara after Moninder had given a speech. ‘He was very impressed that a person born and raised in the Western world was speaking so openly and powerfully about Khalistan and what happened in 1984. And from there, we just started getting closer and closer.’ Moninder was also skilled at using the internet to connect with younger Sikhs all over the world. Over time, this combination of the internet – on which images of massacred and martyred Sikhs could circulate forever – and organized petitions to international bodies gave the movement renewed prominence abroad. Whereas the original movement in the 1980s and 1990s had evolved in India out of an emotional upwelling, pressed at the point of a bayonet, this version was being conducted in the West, through the lobbying of foreign governments.

Interestingly, many of the key players in what one might term Khalistan 2.0 had not been to India in years. Moninder, born in the logging town of Clearwater, with a population of around 2,000, had last visited India when he was four. Pannun had been in self-imposed exile since he had immigrated from Punjab to the US in 1992. Nijjar too had not returned. As a result, these men were increasingly out of touch with the populace of Punjab, which, having suffered a terrible civil war, no longer had any serious interest in independence. This did not deter the Khalistanis in the diaspora. For these Sikhs, Punjab had become a mythical landscape, the land where the ten Gurus of Sikhs had once roamed, and which Maharaja Ranjit Singh had unified in the 1800s. The time for apologies and redressal by the Indian government – which had delayed justice through a parade of slow-moving inquiries – had passed. Khalistan was the only form of salvation possible.

## 5

And how could Khalistan realistically come about?

I asked Moninder Singh this question on my trip to Canada. It was the evening of Nijjar's second death anniversary at the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara. Hundreds thronged the nine-acre premises, listening to sermons and drinking thandai. We were standing on the sidelines in the rapidly cooling Surrey summer evening. From my spot in the parking lot I could see the gate where Nijjar had been ambushed and beyond that, the frazzled lively greenery into which the shooters had fled.

Moninder is a tall, bearded, bespectacled man with a confidential style and perpetually-surprised-looking eyebrows. He was dressed in the traditional blue garb of the Nihang Sikhs – a warrior order – with two ceremonial knives under his jacket, and mouthed hello to congregants as they passed by. Turning to me, he suggested that 'if one major power like the United States no longer has any need for India, or sees India as a problem,' then it would be easy for the CIA to break up India. He reminded me that, in 'the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, the Soviet bloc would never have broken in people's minds' but 'it happened.' I asked him what his Khalistan would look like. 'Constitutions are written after countries are made, right?' he said. 'Like, political systems – will it be a theocracy? Will it be a democracy?' He said a panchayat or village council system could work and that his Khalistan would be open to all faiths. And would Khalistan be limited to Indian Punjab, I asked, where the majority of Sikhs are concentrated? (There are only 5,000 Sikhs left in the Pakistani Punjab). 'I don't think any of us have it in our mind that that's where it would end,' he said. 'We would start looking at other areas – maybe towards Lahore and other places. And it's like, well, is that even feasible or possible? Once we have Khalistan, then it's up to us, how we negotiate on further terms. Would it lead to war, would it lead to clashes? Possibly.'

As for why Moninder had not been back to India in forty years, he said that his father's pro-Khalistan activism in the 1980s and 1990s had made it impossible for his family to visit India. Then, in 1997, when his father's name was finally removed from the blacklist as part of a process of granting amnesty to former Khalistanis, Moninder was unable to get a visa to visit. He chalks this up to his growing activism. It was one of the paradoxes of being a Khalistani in Canada: the more you declared yourself one, the less time you could spend in Punjab. But listening to him talk, I wondered if his lack of curiosity about the actual landscape of Punjab went deeper. Moninder had written about how Sikhs could never 'be full-on Canadians in this country', and I now wondered whether an imagined Punjab filled an important space for him and for others who born here – and whether seeing the real Punjab, with its usual Indian chaos and underdevelopment, would tamper with the imagined one.

## 6

While Khalistan 2.0 was coming into its own in Canada, another force was building in India: Hindu

W nationalism. Hindu nationalists believe that India is a holy land for Hindus and that other religions and peoples in the region must be neutralized or subsumed for the sake of Hindu self respect. Sikhism, in this regard, is something of an exception. Several of the Gurus of Sikhism bear the names of Hindu Gods, and many Hindus see Sikhism as a warrior-like simplification of their faith – a paternalistic view that religious Sikhs resent. When Modi was elected in 2014, he demonized Muslims but reached out to Sikhs. He reopened certain 1984 riots cases; referred in a speech to the 1984 riots as a ‘horrendous genocide’; gave compensation to victims; and inaugurated the Kartarpur Corridor, which allowed Sikh pilgrims from India to visit a shrine in Pakistan without a visa, a concession Sikhs had wanted for decades.

Sikhs, however, had never warmed to the BJP – precisely because it was seen as a party of Hindus. Moreover, the Modi government continued the previous governments’ and intelligence officials’ fixation with the Khalistan movement, taking an even harder line against individuals who they felt impugned Hindu India’s territorial integrity. After his arrest as a youth, Nijjar likely again became a subject of interest to the Indian government in 2013, when he traveled to Pakistan to meet Jagtar Singh Tara. Tara was the prime suspect in the assassination of Beant Singh. He had been apprehended in 1995, but escaped Indian prison in 2004 by hand-digging a tunnel and fleeing to Pakistan, where he was operating freely (India has often accused Pakistan of supporting and inflaming the Khalistan movement). Nijjar and Tara met and were photographed together on the rooftop of a gurdwara. When Tara was arrested the next year in Thailand, Nijjar flew again to meet him, as did Moninder and Pannun, the latter of whom tried to fight Tara’s extradition to India, arguing that Tara was not a terrorist because he didn’t target civilians and simply wanted to ‘put an end’ to ‘the extrajudicial killings ordered by Beant Singh.’ Pannun lost the appeal, but the intervention by North American Sikhs likely enraged the Indian government.

That same year, Pannun and Nijjar announced a plan to hold non-binding referendums on Khalistan among the Punjabi diaspora. India swiftly responded by designating Nijjar a terrorist. Nijjar was accused of being the new mastermind of the banned terrorist organization previously run by Tara – the Khalistan Tiger Force – and of planning a 2007 bombing in a cinema in Punjab that killed six and injured forty-two. India filed a ‘red notice’ against Nijjar within Interpol. This is not actually an arrest warrant, but a request for extradition, and Canada apparently declined it due to insufficient evidence. (According to *The Globe and Mail*, Nijjar’s name didn’t even appear in the court transcripts for the case. All the others accused were acquitted, with one dying in jail.)

India did not let up. In 2016, photos began to circulate in the Indian press showing a turbaned Sikh man in a Nike sweatshirt holding an automatic weapon in his right hand against a backdrop of tall Canadian firs – ‘proof’ that Nijjar was running a terror training camp in the town of Mission in British Columbia, which possesses a shooting range. In fact, the man in the picture wasn’t Nijjar at all – though the photo was often accompanied by another (real) photograph of a short, potbellied Nijjar in a red Banana Republic T-shirt standing barefoot before a door and holding an AK-47 in the crook of his right arm. India issued yet another red notice against Nijjar in connection with the 2007 bombing, and reporters swarmed the Nijjar family’s home in Surrey for several weeks to cover the training camp story, so much so that Nijjar’s son recalls having to change the route he took to and from school to avoid journalists. Nijjar initially denied to the press that he had views on Khalistan, or that he was politically active at all. Soon after, though, he wrote a letter of complaint to Trudeau in which he called himself ‘a Sikh nationalist’ campaigning for ‘Sikh rights.’ ‘In an earlier attempt to label me as a “terrorist”,’ he wrote, ‘the Indian government accused me of transporting ammunition through “paragliding” which is absolutely preposterous . . . and is more like a bad Bollywood movie plot.’ It has since been reported in the Canadian press that Nijjar had in fact given ‘weapons and GPS training’ to ‘five orthodox Sikh men in their 20s and 30s’ in 2015, though the training itself ‘did not resemble a “camp”.’ So there was a nugget of truth to India’s accusations, but it had marred its own credibility by exaggerating its evidence.

Still, India was on the rise geopolitically, and in April 2018 India and Canada signed an intelligence-sharing agreement. Nijjar was detained for questioning in Canada, only to be released 24 hours later. In 2019, Canada froze Nijjar’s accounts and put him on the country’s ‘no

fly' list. Nijjar's debts were called in, his credit cards were canceled, and he would now have to make long drives between Canadian cities for events (Nijjar, who ran a plumbing business, was not exactly poor: he owned three homes in Surrey, now worth nearly \$4 million. The source of his increased wealth is not known, though Indian critics have pointed the finger at Pakistani intelligence). The frenetic attention from the Modi government perversely raised Nijjar's profile, and he was unanimously chosen as president of the massive Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in 2019 (Nijjar was re-elected president in 2022). Though the job of president is mostly administrative, the president also delivers a weekly speech. Nijjar included a mention of Khalistan in all of his speeches, telling his congregants on one occasion that, 'we will have to take up arms . . . Those who advocate peaceful methods, we need to leave them behind. What justice will we get this way?'

Then the tide turned against Modi. In late 2020, tens of thousands of farmers converged on the outskirts of Delhi in what has been since called the largest non-violent protest in history. It was a reaction to three farm laws that Modi had tried to slam through Parliament at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, without consulting the farmers' unions. The laws might in fact have helped certain farmers by making it easier to sell their produce in the free market, but it scarcely mattered; the farmers believed this was a highhanded attempt to dismantle guaranteed price supports for cash crops like rice and onions, and to pass control to monopolistic industrial houses (a similar move in the state of Bihar some years earlier had resulted in exactly this). The protests also revealed the massive economic discontent roiling under the surface of the Hindu nationalists' success: for years there'd been a lack of investment in agriculture, and levels of indebtedness and suicide among farmers remained high.

Punjabis and Sikhs took the lead in these protests, running encampments with the same ethos of voluntary service and community kitchens seen in gurdwaras. Diasporic Sikhs joined in as well, staging protests abroad and making donations to the farmers' movement. In turn, Modi's party tried to tar the entire protest as being run by Khalistanis. This backfired spectacularly, leading to the term 'Khalistan' being normalized among Sikh youth abroad, while fundamentalist Sikh preachers gained short-lived currency in India.

When I visited Canada this year, Mo Dhaliwal, a brand consultant who used to argue with his friend Moninder Singh that using the term 'Khalistan' was 'a remarkably unstrategic and stupid call,' talked about being branded a Khalistani 'terrorist' himself by the Indian press. His crime? He had shared an activist toolkit that was then retweeted by Greta Thunberg and Rihanna. In his hipster office in downtown Vancouver with its exposed brick walls, Dhaliwal said, 'It wasn't until years later that you start realizing that the term "Khalistan" isn't actually a term for the movement in common usage. In common usage, it was actually a weapon that the Indian media and government would use to scatter any energy that would be gathering for Punjabi or Sikh activism.' He went on, 'If a term can be used against you as a weapon and it's your own term, then your only choice is to actually fully embrace it.'

Trudeau, too, picked up on his Sikh constituents' enthusiasm for the farmers' protests. In November 2020, he became the first international leader to express concern about violent clashes in India, saying, 'Canada will always be there to defend the right of peaceful protest' and that he 'had reached out through multiple means directly to the Indian authorities to highlight our concerns.' Modi's government retorted that this was an 'unacceptable interference in our internal affairs'. (In 2018, Trudeau had accidentally caused a brouhaha in India when, on a state visit, his wife had posed for a photograph with a convicted Khalistani-terrorist-turned-Liberal Party activist who was also invited to an official dinner. In 2019, perhaps to placate Modi, Trudeau's government included the phrase 'Khalistani extremism' in a security report for the first time, only to scrub the phrase when Sikhs protested.)

The farmers' protests lasted over a year, and the farmers would not back down, despite successive Covid waves. In October 2021, capitalizing on the fervor of the protests, Pannun and Nijjar held their first theatrical Khalistan referendum in the UK, with thousands of Sikhs, some still wearing blue Covid medical masks, lining up to cast their ballots on the anniversary of Indira Gandhi's assassination. (Other such referendums followed in the next couple of years in

Switzerland, Italy, Canada, and Australia.)

Soon after, in November 2021, in a rare defeat, Modi was forced to roll back the three farm laws, admitting, ‘We have failed to convince some farmers despite all our efforts.’ But Modi did not forget the role of Trudeau and the Khalistanis abroad in abetting and cheerleading protests that were already tricky to contain. This concatenation of events may have been what led to the green-lighting of the assassination of Nijjar and other activists.

7

**N**ijjar was warned in July 2022 that a hit was coming.

Canadian police officers visited him at his home and served him what is called, in Canada, a duty to warn. The police did not say who might be behind the attempt on his life. The ‘duty to warn’ policy was designed to deal with warring gangsters, and so does not come with any promise of protection: the police simply tell you to get out of town or lay low. Bulletproof vests and firearm protection are not an option since they are illegal for Canadian civilians.

Moninder Singh received a similar warning, and the two decided that India must be behind the threat. That same month, another prominent Sikh had been shot dead in the driver’s seat of his red Tesla in Surrey. The dead man, Ripudaman Malik, had been one of the four accused in the Air India bombing but had since renounced his ideology and had publicly thanked Modi for letting him visit India. For the past year, he had been feuding with Nijjar and Moninder over his attempts to print the Sikh holy book – considered the final Guru of Sikhism – in Canada, when previously it was only allowed to be published in India. Now, Nijjar and Moninder feared that India would kill them both and try to pass it off as a tit-for-tat murder for Malik’s death. In fact, mere days after Malik’s death, India’s National Investigation Agency offered a bounty of a million rupees for ‘information’ that might lead to the ‘arrest or apprehension’ of Nijjar for directing the killing of a Hindu priest in Jalandhar in January 2021. Helpfully, the NIA published Nijjar’s Surrey address online.

Moninder, the more cautious of the two men, rented another flat to be away from his kids and avoided public places like grocery stores. Nijjar, according to Moninder, shrugged off the threat and continued living as he had before. Nijjar’s family reported ‘vehicles slowing down in front of their house, then speeding off’ and a truck circling Nijjar while he was filling up his car at a gas station. In the spring of 2023, Nijjar found a tracker on his vehicle while it was being serviced. Meanwhile, in India, authorities searched the Nijjar family’s one-story farmhouse in northwestern Punjab.

Pannun and Nijjar spoke on the phone the night before he was killed. Nijjar told Pannun that Canadian intelligence had come to see him and warned him again about a threat to his life. Nijjar also mentioned that Sikh activists who hung around in clubs with gangsters had heard that individuals were out looking for ‘high-powered guns’ to shoot Nijjar and Pannun. When Pannun told Nijjar to be careful, Nijjar started laughing. ‘*You take care,*’ he said.

The next day he was gone.



*Ripudaman Malik, Getty Images*

8

At the same time a plot to kill Pannun was unraveling in New York.

In May 2023, according to an indictment released by the US Justice Department, an Indian intelligence agent named Vikash Yadav got in touch with Nikhil Gupta, a fifty-one-year-old Indian businessman involved in ‘international weapons and narcotic trafficking,’ and told him that charges against him in India would be dropped if he helped organize Pannun’s murder. Gupta contacted an American criminal who in turn introduced him to a man claiming to be a Colombian cocaine dealer and hitman. Gupta offered the hitman a payment of \$100,000, with an advance of \$15,000, and told him to track Pannun’s movements in New York. On 18 June 2023, mere hours after Nijjar was killed, Yadav sent a video clip to Gupta of Nijjar dead in his vehicle. Gupta texted the hitman to tell him that Nijjar ‘was also the target’ and ‘we have so many targets.’ Gupta added that, given Nijjar’s murder, there was ‘now no need to wait’ to kill Pannun.

Unbeknown to him, though, the American criminal he had contacted was a confidential source for the US government. The hitman himself was an undercover DEA agent. Gupta was arrested on 30 June in the Czech Republic.

Still, the US and Canada, who share intelligence, waited several months before announcing the possibility of Indian involvement in the killing of Sikhs abroad. The reason was simple. They were trying first to establish contact with the Indian government through diplomatic channels. According to the Canadian ‘Foreign Interference Commission Report’, Canada’s national security advisor met her Indian counterpart two months after the murder and passed on the information that Canada knew that Nijjar had been extrajudicially executed by India. India didn’t respond. Later that month, Canada’s minister of foreign affairs talked to her Indian counterpart, but India again did nothing. In September 2023, a Canadian delegation to the G20 Summit in Delhi tasked with improving bilateral relations instead found itself meeting with Indian government officials to ‘try to get India to cooperate with the investigation.’ Finally, during a quick powwow on the sidelines of the G20, Trudeau told Modi directly that ‘Canada knew India was involved, and that this would likely become public.’ Modi stalled by saying ‘that Canada had people that India wanted to see arrested,’ and asked Canada to share the intelligence it had about the killing. (India’s Ministry of External Affairs did not respond to a request for comment.)

Trudeau’s announcement in Parliament later that month, then, was an act of desperation – a sign of weakness in the face of India’s powerful defiance. When the US unsealed its indictment against Gupta in November 2023, Biden said nothing, perhaps to protect his county’s

relationship with the Modi government.

## 9

What were the consequences for India? Very little. By June 2025, when I went to visit Vancouver and Surrey, relations were thawing. A new prime minister – Mark Carney – was in power, and that month, after much subterranean diplomatic chatter, he invited Modi to the G7 Summit in Alberta, a big win for the Indians, who had done little in response to the various charges apart from arresting the agent who had plotted to kill Pannun. (Nor had more evidence emerged publicly of Indian involvement in the Canadian plot. In May 2024, Canadian police arrested three young Sikh men linked to a Punjabi gang and charged them with murdering Nijjar. Their trial is scheduled for 2026.) By August 2025, India and Canada would reinstate each other’s high commissioners. It was hard not to think that India had achieved all they wanted – extinguished an influential activist, and, after a moment of outrage, escaped almost without notice.

The Khalistanis, understandably, were defiant, and they protested Modi’s visit in several cities. But when I attended one of the Khalistani demonstrations in Vancouver, I was surprised by how small it was. Outside the impassive stone office building that houses India’s consulate in Vancouver, about thirty activists had gathered, and that too an hour late. Most were middle-aged and elderly, with a few younger people and kids sprinkled in. As they chanted ‘Kill Modi – Politics!’ and ‘Khalistan Zindabad!’ and ‘Raj Karega Khalsa!’ and broke an effigy of Modi dressed in prisoner’s stripes with sticks, I was reminded of something a moderate Sikh leader told me: ‘I bet there’ll be more press than there are protestors.’ He was almost right. I was beginning to see the symbiotic relationship between a tiny group of Sikhs in Canada and the Canadian press. (The Indian press is just as rabidly attentive: recently, when a sign proclaiming **THE REPUBLIC OF KHALISTAN** went up on the premises of the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara, dozens of Indian newspapers and sites ran a story on how Khalistanis had set up an ‘embassy’ in Canada.)

The gathering that same day for the second anniversary of Nijjar’s death was bigger. Hundreds of people sat on the astro-turfed lawn in front of the temple building, eating puris, chana, and halwa served on plastic trays. In the back I came across a tented area where two teenage boys hawked T-shirts of slain militants and activists in a rapper-gangster aesthetic (‘The Immortal Jathedar Hardeep Singh Nijjar’, read one; ‘Chopper Dropper’, read another.) I went to the bathroom and sure enough, as befitting a plumber president, the fixtures were top-notch: Sloan urinals with frosted dividers and automatic Sloan taps and soap dispensers, though some of these, alas, were not working.

The temple had changed since Nijjar’s death. Where there had once been a solitary Khalistani flag on the premises, there were now a dozen festooning the tatty three-story white structure with its crockery-white domes. Posters of martyred turbaned Sikh militants and activists – some holding sheathed swords, others sporting bandoliers or toting automatic weapons – had been added in the front and the back. Nijjar was there among them. The Khalistan movement had gained a new martyr.

## 10

A month later, in New York, I went to see Pannun.

It felt like going to see an outlaw. Pannun, who had been declared a terrorist by India in 2020, made hectoring Instagram videos, such as the one in 2023 in which he had warned Sikhs, ‘Don’t fly Air India after 19 November; your life may be in danger.’ He had a penchant for filing nuisance lawsuits against visiting Indian politicians. A Khalistani sympathizer in Canada called him ‘the Alex Jones’ of the movement. On the phone, though, he was more direct than I had

expected. He was the only Khalistani who talked openly to me about Nijjar's friendship with Tara and the fact that Nijjar's name did in fact appear in the court filings for the murder of a Hindu priest in 2021. And so, on a sweltering day, I went to see him in Elmhurst, Queens.

I expected a tired mildewed grey officer tower, but instead found myself staring at a surprisingly grand Art-Deco granite complex. Inside, Pannun's office was a series of dark interconnected rooms full of filing cabinets, and on arrival a white, thick-necked and tattooed bodyguard patted me down in a conference room.

Like many actors, Pannun – who is fifty-six with a bushy white beard and dramatically twirled whiskers – is much smaller and more fine-boned in person. He was dressed in black with black rectangular spectacles and a patka covering on his head instead of a turban (Pannun is not very religious and believes in Khalistan as a political, rather than religious, cause). He sat on a brown office chair, a yellow Khalistani flag draped behind him over shelves of law volumes. His videos gave the impression of being filmed in a TV studio but this studio turned out to simply be a corner of this room: a computer with a few camera lights and a green cloth covering a wall. Several identical black jackets – the kind he wore in his videos – hung from the handle of a cupboard. A small steamer was close to hand to give them a do-over.

What role had he played in the militancy in the 1990s? I asked. He was cagey: 'I would not like to discuss what happened in Punjab . . . but from my zeal and the passion that I'm ready to die, you should know what would have happened.' Pannun worked in IT in Wall Street for ten years after his arrival in 1992, but his goal, he said, had always been to dedicate himself to full-time activism for Khalistan. After enrolling in law school, he did just that. He was boastful about his achievements, claiming for instance, that there had been no Khalistani flags before he started using them in 2014. I wondered again how he could afford to run a movement from this office complex and hire full-time bodyguards. Had Pakistan ever funded the Khalistan movement? I asked. Pannun said that Pakistan gave refuge to 'worthless' Sikh militants but that he himself does not receive funding from Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI. 'ISI can't even pay their bills,' he said in his accented English. 'They can't even pay my cappuccino bills for a month.' (He then offered me a cappuccino.)

We got to a subject we had touched on over the phone. If, as he kept claiming, the new Khalistan movement was non-violent and fully legal, why did he espouse violent rhetoric in his videos and posters? In one video from 2020, he urged Sikhs in India: 'Wherever you are doing vote registrations, keep weapons. Keep weapons in your home . . . because Hindu death squads are going to come and do the genocides of you. Remember 1984.' In another video, he brought up the 1993 bombing of the Bombay Stock Exchange, adding that, 'This year, on 12 March 2024, we are going to destroy Nazi India economically and the first target is going to be India's stock exchanges.' He hedged this later: 'We won't use a bomb but we'll shut it down.'

In his well-practiced way, Pannun denied that he condoned violence. Then he said something striking. 'The audience,' he told me. 'You have to see: this is a modern world, right? How much time do you spend on videos – one minute, thirty seconds, maximum? If you feel it's interesting, you will spend two minutes, right? None of my messages go over two minutes, that is the bottom line, and also my videos are confrontational – that's the only way to put your point across.'

It was the talk of any other salesman in the attention economy. I thought about how India's over-focus on Khalistan had led to this. A murder, after all, is an extreme form of both giving and attracting attention. It creates a void that can be filled with hundreds of theories and narratives.

India, when it killed Nijjar and targeted Pannun, did not want to be caught. But it wanted status – for Modi to be seen as a strongman to whom jurisdictions did not apply, who could fell 'terrorists' abroad, just like Putin, Netanyahu, MBS, and the US Presidents: Trump, Biden, Obama. India had joined the club. Meanwhile, the Khalistanis, too, had their moment in the press. Their campaign is now a small satellite in robust orbit around Hindu fundamentalism.

And what about the people of Punjab? Nobody knew. Worse, nobody cared.