



**KHALISTAN
CENTRE**

WHO SPEAKS FOR KHALISTAN:

NARRATING SIKH LIBERATION

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Written and produced by the Khalistan Centre

The Khalistan Centre is dedicated to supporting and cultivating Gurmat-driven leadership to further the struggle for Khalistan.

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Executive Summary

As another example of the ongoing Indian interference in foreign countries to erase the Sikh *sangarsh*¹ for Khalistan, an Ottawa-based think-tank, MacDonald-Laurier Institute (MLI), recently released a report written by Terry Milewski. The report presents itself as a factual account of the Khalistan movement but amounts to little more than a rehashing of Indian state talking points aimed at obscuring the political realities of the struggle for Khalistan today.

The report claims that there is no grassroots support for Khalistan in Punjab, and that Pakistan intelligence agencies are the real driving force behind the Sikh *sangarsh*. This rhetoric is not only completely divorced from the facts on the ground, but it also makes the report effectively useless for any public policy purposes. The manner in which Terry has failed to cite any references for several heinous allegations, his failure to engage with any credible sources, and reliance solely on commentary from Indian state officials and media reports highlight the lack of credibility in the publication. His arguments mirror Indian propaganda so closely it is difficult to distinguish any original thought.

This biased narrative fails to recognize the centrality of sovereignty to the Khalsa panth and the political realities of grassroots advocacy for Khalistan today. The Indian state's vicious military operations have been well documented in the way they eliminated Sikh political activists, guerrillas, and their families

from the political arena in the early 1990s.² This repression has continued since then through the ongoing omnipresence of state violence in Punjab and impunity for those guilty of mass human rights violations.³ Since 2017 alone, at least 150 activists have been arrested by Indian security forces for explicitly rejecting the Indian electoral system and engaging in Khalistani activism through a variety of means. This includes advocacy over social media, supporting calls for a referendum in Punjab, and distributing Sikh literature—all activities which India has criminalized and forcibly shut down using its arbitrary anti-terror legislation.

It is crucial that these recent waves of repression are understood in this context of an ongoing conflict between two political entities rather than misrepresented by Terry, and those who think like him, as a problem of extremism or conspiracies around Pakistan's supposed involvement.

Further, there is clear evidence of Indian political interference and espionage in foreign countries available in the public domain. This has particularly impacted journalism and media coverage in Canada. In a recent judgement, the Federal Court of Canada denied citizenship to a newspaper editor who worked closely with Indian intelligence for several years and was explicitly tasked by Indian intelligence to convince Canadian policy makers that there is a nexus between Pakistan and Khalistani activism.⁴

While it is not possible to educate or convince a bad faith actor, it is important to reject and combat the narratives being spun by Indian intelligence operatives and recycled by racist platforms. Terry's report fits within a pattern driven by covert Indian intelligence initiatives to push a manufactured narrative. By **distorting and repressing** the Sikh struggle, these manufactured narratives lead to racist national security measures and compromised foreign policy based on the distortion of facts.

Rather than reacting to the report's commentary, **the purpose of this publication is to provide an interpretative framework** for common allegations made against our *sangarsh* **within an ongoing pattern of Indian interference and the amplification of Indian targeted messages.** For panthic *naujawan*, we hope to provide a foundation of knowledge in order to develop an effective collective response that is farsighted and dedicated to the advancement of the *sangarsh* itself.





SECTION 1

BACKGROUND⁵



In order to fully contextualize Terry's disingenuous writing, it is important to place it squarely within the framework of the repression of Sikh activism in Punjab and foreign interference around the world. To do so, it is necessary to understand the genesis of the Sikh liberation movement for Khalistan.

Since the annexation of the Sirkar-i-Khalsa by the British in 1849, the Sikh panth has been resiliently resisting colonial dispossession and mobilizing to re-establish its sovereignty in accordance with the Sikh principles of *patshahi*⁶ and *miri-piri*.⁷ The manifestations of Sikh liberation movements over the past 171 years have taken a variety of forms that continue to inspire and drive Sikh self-determination today.

In the face of growing Sikh resistance and calls to decentralize the subcontinent in 1984, the Indian political establishment, led by Indira Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, shifted gears from a policy of assimilation to annihilation. In June 1984, the Indian army invaded the capitol of the Sikh panth as the state embarked upon a genocidal campaign—that would last up to a decade—with the aim of eliminating the dissenting community.

Through indigenous mechanisms of self-governance, including the 1986 Sarbat Khalsa and the establishment of several Khalsa *jujharoo jathebandiyan* (warrior bands), the Sikh panth has repeatedly declared the intention to secede from the Indian state and establish an independent Khalistan. The unequivocal support for this objective can be seen in the resounding electoral results of 1989 and 1992 in support of secession, and repeated ratification of this goal as recently as the Sarbat Khalsa in 2015.

In response, Indian security forces were mobilized to eliminate this resistance with the full backing and support of the political and judicial establishment. By firmly rejecting a political settlement on self-determination, the Indian state has remained determined to crush dissent militarily, and forcibly impose its political hegemony over the region.⁸

The state's vicious counter-insurgency strategy to eliminate and permanently foreclose Sikh dissent was escalated in a well-documented formulaic process⁹:

- Militarizing the police and overwhelming the region with an armed military presence

- Enforced disappearances of human rights activists, journalists, and democratic Sikh political leadership

- Incentivizing the extrajudicial murder of activists and guerrillas with impunity through an elaborate bounty system using unmarked funds

- Crushing popular support through illegal detention, enforced disappearances and draconian laws

The enforced peace since the decline of the armed insurgency is maintained not through political settlement, but by maintaining the omnipresence of repressive state violence—and making this violence felt upon the bodies and voices of potential Sikh dissidents today. Restricting the public space of Punjab exclusively to Indian nationalist forces and discredited “Sikh leadership,” the state has maintained its coercive judicial-military apparatus to swiftly eliminate Sikh political opposition through extrajudicial killings, judicial repression, and the lived reality of the omnipresence of state violence. The genocidal violence maintains its lingering presence and is reproduced daily upon those who seek to dissent—forcing them to live under a regime in which violent perpetrators of crimes against humanity maintain positions of power over survivors.

The reassertion of Indian political hegemony over the region is thus not the result of a political settlement or the resolution of Sikh political demands but the **imposition of a violent “peace” built upon genocide.**

INDIAN REPRESSION OF SIKH ACTIVISM AROUND THE WORLD

Countless Sikhs from various backgrounds around the world have enthusiastically supported the *sangarsh* for Khalistan in a variety of ways. While many have donated *dasvandh* to various related causes and organizations, others left their homes to attain *shahadat* (martyrdom) on the battlefield, while countless others have provided support through developing community infrastructure and engaging in political advocacy.

This degree of global support has always been perceived as a threat for the Indian state. Alongside state violence in Punjab, the Indian state has sought to repress the *sangarsh* in diaspora communities through a variety of means, including:

- infiltrating Sikh institutions to surveil and control political activity¹⁰

- surveilling and harassing Sikh activists to cease activities contrary to Indian interests¹¹

- interfering in cultural and political processes in the diaspora to repress voices advocating for sovereignty and self-determination¹²

- diplomatic means to encourage foreign partners (Canada, US, UK) to repress Sikh activists

- covert means to manipulate foreign partners to repress Sikh activists¹³

While a forthcoming report from the Khalistan Centre will analyze this full spectrum of activities in greater detail, the present publication will focus primarily on **disinformation in the media**, driven by Indian officials and agents in order to secure their foreign policy objectives abroad.

Analyzing sources in the public domain,

there is significant evidence on the record establishing that Indian officials and intelligence operatives have **manufactured** news, offered **bribes** to media outlets for favourable news coverage (ie. unfavourable coverage to Sikh activists), and **amplify** certain targeted messages.

Central among these targeted messages has been:

- Khalistan is a political project created and supported by Pakistani intelligence

- Sikhs are extremists and terrorists who actively engage in illegitimate violence

- There is no longer any support for Khalistan on the ground, due to which Punjab is now “at peace”

According to a four-month investigation published in a series of articles by the *Globe & Mail* in the 1980s, Indian intelligence agents were “using a network of paid informers and agent provocateurs to penetrate Canada’s Sikh communities... some of the violence and conflict in the Sikh community had been inspired by such agents.”¹⁴ Canadian security officials were cited for the claim that “Indian consulates not only provided diplomatic cover for intelligence operatives, but also paid informers in the Sikh community, gained control of three Punjabi newspapers here and sowed disinformation in the mainstream media.”¹⁵ One article in the series stated that:

“India conducts intelligence operations in Canada at two levels—directly through its consulates in Toronto and Vancouver and indirectly through infiltration of the Canadian Sikh

community. **India's target is a well-organized international Sikh lobby that is the financial, intellectual and administrative backbone of the drive for a homeland in Punjab...** According to the sources, India's intelligence activities in Canada include the spreading of fals [sic] information, the use of paid informers and the instigation of activities to discredit the Sikh separatist movement."¹⁶

Examples of disinformation cited in the report illustrate how Indian officials embellished information—originally provided by their Canadian counterparts—and then “leaked” it to the Canadian press. The report also cites specific examples of the **consulate offering Punjabi media outlets in Canada cash for publishing stories** written by the consulate.

A former officer of the Vancouver Police Department, Don McLean, corroborates this *modus operandi* in his testimony in front of the Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182. He stated that **Indian intelligence officers had access to large sums of money to obtain information and “manipulate the media”** which noticeably “exasperated the situation on the ground.”¹⁷

The 2019 annual report of the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) states that one specific **goal of foreign interference is to “create a single narrative or consistent message that helps to ensure the survival and prosperity of the foreign state.”**¹⁸ Two soft targets identified for this kind of activity are the media and academic institutions. While such actors can “**use mainstream and ethnic media outlets to amplify targeted messages, propagate disinformation, and discredit credible news and journalists,**”¹⁹ they may also interfere in academic institutions under the auspices of sponsored events and/or organizations on campuses, and the sponsoring of institutes affiliated with research universities. Such activity seeks to covertly manufacture opinion

and debate, “thereby obstructing fundamental freedoms such as speech and assembly, and the independence of academic institutions.”²⁰

This was clearly seen in the case of Justin Trudeau's 2018 India trip reviewed in another NSICOP report.²¹

Since the election of the Trudeau government in 2016, and particularly in the lead up to the February 2018 trip to India, Indian media outlets and government officials consistently hammered a narrative that the Trudeau government itself harboured support for alleged “Sikh extremism,” or at the very least was “soft” on so-called “extremists.” In fact, Punjab's sitting chief minister refused to meet with Canadian Defence Minister, Harjit Sajjan, in April 2017 after accusing Sajjan of being a Khalistani “sympathizer.” This would become a constant refrain for Indian diplomats and media outlets alike.

On February 20, 2018, images surfaced of Jaspal Atwal and members of the Trudeau family at an official reception at the Canadian High Commission in Delhi.²² The story soared to international headlines to allegedly illustrate that the Trudeau government was not only soft on “Sikh extremism,” but actively endorsed “extremists”. In an unprecedented move however, National Security & Intelligence Advisor (NSIA), David Jean, offered a confidential briefing to Canadian journalists in response. Jean's comments suggested that **the story was actually manipulated** in order to discredit the Trudeau government for its perceived soft approach to alleged “Sikh extremists” in Canada.

A key question to consider, is that if Indian officials were so incensed at Atwal's presence and used this as an example of Canada supposedly harbouring alleged “extremists,” why would the Indian government grant him a visa? By Atwal's account he has received three different visas for 2017 alone, despite being convicted of attempting to murder a

sitting Indian government minister in the 1980s.²³ This is particularly important when the Indian government has used the visa issuing process as a **political tool to coerce applicants to disengage from their activism**. Countless other Sikh activists remain blacklisted for far less than Atwal; activities that have led to visa refusals include mere criticism of India's human rights record.²⁴

Following the partisan politics domestically around this issue, the NSICOP was tasked to review the allegation of Indian foreign interference among other details of the controversy. Despite being *heavily* redacted with regards to the actual findings of foreign interference by India, what is made clear by this report is that²⁵:

- there had been an **ongoing campaign** in the lead up to the trip to **amplify a single narrative**, emphasizing Indian national security and nationalism while **delegitimizing Canada's Sikh community as extremists**.
- Canada's security agencies, led by NSIA, David Jean, went to significant lengths to communicate with their Indian counterparts in order to assuage any such concerns and reaffirm Canada's commitment to prosecuting unlawful behaviour within its borders.
- The NSIA had reasons to believe that a **false narrative was intentionally being fabricated and promoted by Indian intelligence operatives** in order to discredit and embarrass the Trudeau government.

India has consistently used strongly-worded rhetoric regarding the presence and freedoms of Sikh activists in Canada exercising their fundamental freedoms in advocacy of political sovereignty—pushing a narrative that conflates political advocacy with extremist or terrorist activity.

While the actual findings of the

committee with respect to the allegations of foreign interference are fully redacted, the NSICOP suggests that Atwal's appearance at the government event cannot be understood only in the context of the day of the picture, but rather "as part of a long continuum of bilateral irritants and engagements."²⁶ Given the classified information shared with the committee and the number of facts now confirmed, the NSIA reiterated that he offered his briefing because he "came to the conclusion that there was a very high probability of an orchestrated disinformation campaign to tarnish Canada."²⁷ Further expanding on his reasons for the media briefing, the NSIA made it clear that he felt such a step was warranted in order to **counter foreign interference in real time**.²⁸ The "strategically released" media articles combined with Indian officials' incessant raising of concerns around Sikh "extremism" and separatism—even after multiple efforts by Canadian officials to refute those claims—"fit the pattern that the NSIA now saw emerging: **an orchestrated attempt to 'shine a spotlight' on Atwal's invitation in order to embarrass the Canadian government.**"²⁹

It is important to note that while the report emphasizes an attempt to discredit Canada and the Trudeau government through this entire affair, any supposed embarrassment is **hinged on a premise which accepts that Sikhs in Canada are extremists**. In other words, Canada can only be discredited if it is engaging in "embarrassing" behaviour. In this case, respecting the rights of Sikh activists in Canada can be considered "embarrassing" only by accepting the characterization of such activism as extremism.

MANIPULATING MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES IN CANADA

In another blatant case of Indian foreign interference, a recent judgement from the Federal Court of Canada made normally classified information public with regards to **Indian intelligence efforts to interfere in Canadian electoral processes, government policy, and media independence.** An Indian journalist, named only as AB, applied for permanent residency in Canada in 2015. During his second interview, it was alleged that he may be inadmissible to Canada pursuant to s 34(1)(a) and (f) of the *IRPA* because “he had **cooperated with the Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and had engaged in espionage against Canada.**”³⁰

While the decision of the court focuses on questions of procedural fairness and cites the editor’s denial that he carried out the task, the decision remains hugely significant because of the evidence brought forward and the nature of the requests made of him by the agencies. Regardless of whether he actually carried out the tasks or not, the fact that the IB and RAW actively attempted to recruit an asset to seriously interfere in Canadian electoral processes and government decision-making was not rebutted by any party.

The Security Screening Branch of CSIS prepared an assessment report regarding the editor, referred to as AB, and provided it to the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA). The CBSA subsequently conducted its own assessment and concluded that “there were reasonable grounds to believe that AB was inadmissible because he had engaged in espionage against Canada.”³¹

According to the summary document of his June 2015 interview, AB stated that both IB and RAW formally requested his assistance in 2009, specifically

with the task to “**covertly influence Canadian government representatives and agencies on behalf of the Indian government.**”³² The summary goes on:

You stated that RAW had also tasked you to meet with government officials in Belgium and Canada **in an effort to influence their views in favor of the Indian government.** You stated that you were told to **identify random Caucasian politicians and attempt to direct them into supporting issues that impacted India.** You stated that the guidance from RAW included that you were to *provide financial assistance and propaganda material to the politicians in order to exert influence over them.* As an example, you stated that you were tasked to **convince politicians that funding from Canada was being sent to Pakistan to support terrorism.** You stated that you met with your IB and RAW handlers outside of Canada at least once every two months, and that the last time you met with them was in May 2015 (i.e. about one month before the interview took place) [emphasis added].³³

It was found that **AB met with representatives of the agencies more than 25 times over a six-year period preceding the interview.**³⁴ Throughout the proceedings before the court, AB did not deny his numerous contacts with Indian intelligence officials, nor did he dispute that he was asked by the agencies to perform these functions although he claims that he had refused to carry them out at the time.³⁵

This scenario is not unlike a case of a journalist in Germany who, along with his wife, actively engaged in espionage at the behest of Indian intelligence agencies and was convicted of the offence in a German court. The journalist and his wife were given an eighteen-month sentence for **receiving €7000 in payments from**

RAW in exchange for spying on Sikh activists and passing this information along to RAW's Frankfurt station.³⁶

These examples establish a clear pattern through which Indian officials and intelligence operatives work in tandem to not only erase the Sikh *sangarsh* for Khalistan, but also seek to manipulate the domestic policies of their partners, including Canada, UK, Germany and others.

This not only impacts Sikhs as a racialized group by convincing governments to repress vulnerable communities, but it also emboldens Indian officials to continue violating human rights in Punjab due to the lack of condemnation from the global community. **The ongoing criminalization of Sikh activists in foreign countries as a result, is an extension of India's criminalization of dissent domestically and a result of its foreign interference.**



SECTION 2

**AMPLIFYING PROPAGANDA:
THE GLOBAL CIRCULATION OF INDIAN
TARGETED MESSAGING**

A report published by the EU DisinfoLab in November 2019 uncovered up to 264 fake media outlets serving Indian interests and narratives, primarily pushing an anti-Pakistan narrative. At least 20 of those sites had been identified as having Canadian links, with many using names of now defunct Canadian newspapers, such as Toronto Mail, the Quebec Telegraph and the Times of New Brunswick. Alexandre Alaphilippe, executive director of the EU DisinfoLab, stated that the degree of organization within these networks suggested that they had been carefully planned.³⁷

The report notes a highly coordinated effort to “influence public perceptions of Pakistan... influence international institutions and elected representatives...” and create an online environment in which it was “making it harder for the reader to trace the manipulation.”³⁸

It is worth noting that the disinformation network also had ties to a Canadian writer regularly touted by Terry as a source for his disingenuous claims regarding the Sikh *sangarsh*—Tarek Fatah. According to the EU DisinfoLab, all of the fake news sites are run by the Srivastava Group. The owner of Srivastava Group, Ankit Srivastava, also registered several sites for Tarek. Tarek denies his connection to the network, although he states that it must have been “some ridiculous Indian bureaucrat’s idea of propaganda.”³⁹

Indian disinformation is not limited to fake news networks however. Immediately after the release of Terry’s report, Indian embassy twitter handles around the world tweeted the report in their host-nation languages. At least ten embassies retweeted the article, including Poland, Cuba, Tajikistan, Peru and Bolivia. The embassy in Poland would tweet: “This radicalization is a danger for all the countries where the so-called Khalistan movement is being pushed by its sponsors.”

In the follow up to the MLIs report release, it is important to register which Indian media networks invited Terry for interviews. Terry’s report was not picked up by most mainstream media networks, nor any progressive ones in the subcontinent. Instead, he found himself being interviewed by primarily far-right Indian nationalist networks with questionable backgrounds.

A major far-right network in which Terry appeared is Republic TV, led by Arnab Goswami, where he was hosted by a retired army officer, Gaurav Arya. Both have been heavily criticized for unquestionably relaying government narratives and placing the parameters of citizenship around a hypernationalism committed to the state and its ruling party, the BJP. Further to this, both have used their shows to spread hostilities toward Pakistan and stoke communal tensions in the country.⁴⁰

The head of Republic TV, Arnab Goswami

has had multiple criminal charges laid against him for stoking communal tensions which have led to fascist violence targeting minority communities.⁴¹ One such FIR was lodged after Goswami had suggested that Covid-19 was being spread by Muslims attending a Mosque.⁴² In a country wrestling with a history of bloody communal violence against minority communities and a burgeoning fascist government, it seems incredibly short-sighted to give interviews on networks that are conduits for Hindu nationalism and have direct links to causing fascist violence in the country.

Given the uncovered evidence of staunch anti-Pakistan narratives being pushed intentionally by various Indian networks, it is hard to dismiss the significance of their receptivity and India’s brazen dissemination of the MLI’s publication.

Considering the clear evidence on the record of Indian officials manufacturing and disseminating targeted messages worldwide, the focus of the conversation does not stop at Terry or the MLI. The important thing to note is the wide web of institutions and intelligence machinations as a whole, that are **spreading and disseminating a similar narrative** for a specific foreign policy purpose.

Before delving into the details of the Indian allegations that Terry parrots, it is necessary to establish a baseline of his approach to Sikh issues and other racialized groups. Terry’s racist moorings and hyperbolic understanding of the *sangarsh* are illustrated in his comment that the bombing of Air India 182 was the worst mass murder in Canada’s history—erasing Canada’s violent foundations in the genocide of Indigenous peoples. This is arguably not a mere oversight, but an indication of Terry’s own position within discussions on the question of violence. From his comments, it appears that his outrage is reserved solely for violence allegedly associated with

racialized groups rather than outrage at oppression and violence in any form. Reviewing his work, it is apparent that his disdain and utter disregard for anti-Sikh violence committed in India is grotesquely intertwined with a deep-seated undercurrent of Islamophobia.

A brief glimpse of this can be seen in the foreword to the report, authored by Ujjal Dosanjh and Shuvaloy Majumdar:

They provide a steady and predictable drumbeat of victimization, persecution and genocide commemoration, presented as steps to assist a community in need of healing. It is through this guise that the building blocks for an independent Khalistan are assembled.

While Terry and the MLI continue to insist that the report only targets alleged “extremists” rather than the Sikh panth as a whole, the endorsement and publication of this foreword alone contradicts these claims. This statement (and the report as a whole), does not solely condemn militant tactics seeking an independent state, it **vilifies the intentions and actions of an entire community as something inherently sinister**. The publication, as a whole, categorically denies the significance of vast human rights atrocities committed, and more importantly, the collective trauma of the Panth that experienced this unfettered violence at the hands of the Indian state.

Overall, the underlying thrust of the publication paints the political aspirations held by widespread swathes of the Sikh population as either non-existent, or inherently evil.

While Terry tries to inject some objectivity into his vitriol by mentioning anti-Sikh violence in passing, he consistently dismisses the trauma of Indian state violence by suggesting its insignificance in comparison to Partition violence when Sikhs were “hacked by Muslim mobs,” while belittling commemoration of genocide as “complaining.”

His myopic focus on Partition violence mimics an Indian tendency to sacralize India’s borders due to which defending these lines becomes justified at any cost. In many ways, Partition seared the “lineaments of India’s territorial boundaries deep into the nation’s consciousness... [through] the popular sacralization of territory.”⁴³ This can be seen in a number of cases where India has sought to eliminate secessionist demands from political discussion, including the criminalization of secessionist advocacy post-1962 and the brutal counter-insurgency operations unleashed in regions like Punjab, Kashmir, and the Northeast. India continues to assert and defend these boundaries boldly—and extrajudicially, by “*eradicating* those who step outside the line.”⁴⁴

Further, his comment is narrowly limited to the genocidal pogroms in November with the blame strategically placed on uncoordinated “Hindu mobs” in order to obscure the state orchestrated nature of the violence. Similar to Indian state narratives, this ignores and masks the wanton violence and crimes against humanity committed against Sikhs by Indian security forces and the state itself, for over a decade. While he purports to “see” the violence against Sikhs in November 1984, Terry refuses to see the wholesale state violence that tortured, mutilated, sexually assaulted, and disappeared Sikhs across Punjab in the service of the “unity and integrity” of India.⁴⁵

ARMED STRUGGLE: MANUFACTURING “SIKH TERRORISM”

As with much of Terry’s writing on the Sikh *sangarsh*, the report paints a picture of mindless “fundamentalist” violence targeted at enforcing religious uniformity and homogeneity in Punjab—devoid of any political context.

In this depiction he attempts to characterize Sikh *jujharoos* as “puritanical Sikh fundamentalists who demanded strict religious observance and killed, with equal zeal, both Hindus and Sikhs deemed insufficiently devout.” This projection of an apolitical religious violence has a receptive audience in certain spaces due to Orientalist understandings of non-Western politics, but this unfounded depiction has grave policy impacts.⁴⁶ **Not only does it promote a gross misunderstanding of the Sikh *sangarsh* based on manufactured media coverage, it fully exonerates the Indian state of its atrocities and the circumstances that it created in Punjab.**

While Terry fails to cite any sources for heinous allegations made with regards to specific incidents including the killing of a school teacher or several doctors, he intentionally ignores the discourse of Sikh militancy during the period—including unequivocal condemnation of any excesses. This approach seeks to villainize an entire community and political movement—despite its vast internal diversity—by erasing the political context of its origins and ignoring the dialogical nature of Sikh armed struggle.

As with other hit pieces shrouded as journalism, what Terry says is not as interesting as what he *does not* say.

Citing the likes of KP Gill, Terry presents a picture of the *sangarsh* in which he counts 21,469 killed between 1981–1993—all of them placed in the account

of *jujharoos*. This summary makes no mention of Indian state violence or the political nature of the conflict between an overwhelmingly majority of Sikhs in Punjab and the Indian establishment. As such, he seeks to look at Khalistan and the armed struggle without any political context or background.

Sikh conflict with the Indian state emerged out of two driving forces: Sikh aspirations to sovereignty driven by the principles of *patshahi*⁴⁷ and *miri-panthi*⁴⁸, as well as the subjugation of Punjab to serve the Indian nation- and state-building project. This project subordinated Punjab’s economy and natural resources to serve state-building and industrialization across the rest of the region—despite the devastation it wrought on Punjab itself.⁴⁹ At the same time, Delhi used the institutions of the state to assimilate the region’s diverse peoples into an artificial Indian “nation.” These initiatives led to the overriding of Punjab’s constitutional powers over its own hydroelectricity, river waters, capital city, economic development, and other areas.

While Sikhs in the region sought to mobilize non-violently in order to decentralize the political structure through electoral politics and civil disobedience, the armed struggle eventually emerged in the face of intense state repression.⁵⁰

While over 100,000 courted arrest during the Dharam Yudh Morcha to non-violently pressure the government into accepting the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, the genesis of armed Sikh resistance can be found in the murder of Sikh protestors under police supervision in 1978 and the police torture and killings of panthic Sikh *naujawan* in 1982 and 1983.⁵¹ While the early militancy featured

limited retributive assassinations of particularly cruel security officials, the state's brutality during the army invasion of Darbar sahib in June 1984, the subsequent mass arrests dubbed "Operation Woodrose" that summer, and the genocidal pogroms of November 1984, gradually transformed this militancy into a full-fledged war for national liberation. The tone and pitch of violence steadily escalated thereafter as the state continued to treat the political conflict purely as a law and order problem.

The theory and praxis of Sikh political violence has been developed and deployed by Guru Granth-Panth for centuries. Not only is armed force justified for self-defence in this framework, but also expected of a Sikh to ensure the *protection of the poor, destruction of the tyrants and sarbat da bhala*.⁵² It is on these terms that Sikh *jujharoos* engaged in an armed political struggle against the Indian state. In their own words:

It should be clear to every person that the concept of Khalistan is no sudden revelation to Sikhs. This is neither a romantic dream of some youth who have been swept by the irretrievable emotions nor is it a conspiracy of a 'handful of disappointed' and astray people against the so-called unity and integrity of India, as we are accused each day. The sacred concept of Khalistan is already inscribed well before us in the historical phrases of '*Raj Karega Khalsa*' and '*Khalsa ji de bol bale*' that have become and shall remain an inseparable part of the *Khalsa Ardas*. This concept has emerged from an intense desire to realize the grand ideal of *Ardas* into a 'definite geographic territory' with a 'distinct milieu' on this land...⁵³

Fabricated claims that the Sikh *sangarsh* aimed at imposing religious uniformity or widespread killing are countered by assessing the stated objectives of the *Khalsa panth* within this spiritual

framework. The *gurmatta* (Guru-Panth's resolutions) of the 1987 Sarbat Khalsa clearly set forth the vision of the armed struggle:

This congregation proclaims for the information of the whole world that the Khalsa, who wishes welfare of all, never attacks the poor and oppressed. The present Sikh struggle is directed against those plundering and destructive raiders who have assaulted our principles, gurdwaras, Guru Granth Sahib, our form/dress and truthful earnings. The Khalsa Panth will always support the struggle of those institutions that follow the principle of equality, doing labour and sharing its products while reciting the Name. This assembly of Sarbat Khalsa strongly endorses armed struggles of the peoples of the world, especially those in India who are fighting against the tyrant colonial rule for their rights and independence...⁵⁴

To this end, the *jujharoo jathebandiyan* "unanimously discarded their 'terrorist' identity since they took to violence under compelling constraints from the Indian nation-state. They were selective and purposeful about the use of violence against the exploiting classes and the state apparatus."⁵⁵

For Sikh *jujharoos*, such violence was tactically employed as a last resort due to the inhibitions on political organizing as a result of intense state repression which indiscriminately targeted all Sikhs.

Manufacturing "Sikh Terrorism"

The role of India-based media in manufacturing news coverage during the armed struggle, and its global circulation is key to understanding popular depictions of the Sikh *sangarsh* today.

Not only did Indian media uncritically convey the official accounts of security forces without question, media outlets

often operated as active participants in the Indian counter-insurgency by manufacturing and distorting facts to villainize Sikh political mobilization and the *ujharoo lehar* (movement).

Leading up to the invasion of Darbar sahib in June 1984, the image of Sant Jarnail Singh jee was conflated with the “Punjab problem” in the Indian mainstream while the Sikh panth was collectively projected as an “enemy within.”⁵⁶ Indian MP, Subramaniam Swami, explicitly stated on the record that the government had intentionally spread mass disinformation to create a pretence for the invasion, portraying Darbar sahib as the “citadel of the nation’s dismemberment conspiracy.”⁵⁷

Analyzing the global circulation of this coverage, Ram Narayan Kumar notes how these media narratives legitimized state repression and violence. Looking at the coverage of the conflict in foreign outlets specifically, he notes how foreign correspondents’ reliance on local experts enabled the government to “manipulate the thrust of international reporting, to sell their perception and convert them into deliverable news.”⁵⁸ He goes on:

It is my contention that the vast majority of international media practitioners who covered Punjab in the conflict period fell to the spin and hype of the Indian establishment and indirectly contributed to legitimization of state violence... [and] suppression of knowledge about the plight of those under atrocities... They also abdicated their responsibilities of their watchdog functions of neutral international reporters by investigating reports of official wrongdoing...⁵⁹

Jaspal Singh Sidhu, a journalist who retired after thirty years with the United News of India (UNI) news agency, describes Indian media’s role in Punjab as an ideological state apparatus to help implement the state’s political agenda.⁶⁰ The press aggressively pushed the discourse of terrorism in such a way that the word terrorist and Sikh became

“synonymous in the public mind, so that people are not very interested in knowing if the Sikhs killed in the encounters are in fact terrorists.”⁶¹ With regards to “fake encounters”:

The news usually given after each such ‘encounter’ is that a police or paramilitary team was fired at by ‘terrorists,’ and on returning the fire in self-defence, a number of them were killed. The correspondents file such stories, the editors accept them, and the newspapers feature them prominently. Seldom, if ever, do national dailies launch their own detailed investigation of such encounters.⁶²

Sidhu reiterates this assessment of reporting at the time, noting how the young Sikhs being killed by security forces were turned into lifeless statistics whose murders were robotically portrayed as encounters by the press.⁶³ This remains an ongoing pattern today.⁶⁴

A similar approach was taken with regards to allegations of violent excesses committed by Sikh *ujharoos*. Kumar, investigating allegations of militant violence in the media—particularly egregious allegations of a wave of rapes in late 1992, discovered that the source of these allegations were limited solely to briefings by police officials. Digging into a report supposedly published by a Sikh religious organization which alleged 55 cases of rape and murder, Kumar eventually traced the manufactured origins of the allegations back to the office of Vijay Chopra, the head of a right-wing Hindu paper, *Hind Samachar*.⁶⁵

Further, as an official part of the state’s counter-insurgency policy into the 1990s, **all unrelated crimes** in the state—including vindictive murders, robberies and rapes **were officially declared and reported as crimes committed by *ujharoos***.⁶⁶ Through this politicization of government statistics, state agencies effectively transformed everyday crimes into “terrorist violence”—consciously contributing to the portrayal of the Sikh *ujharoo* as an apolitical violent criminal.

Going even further, security forces eventually mobilized death squads—police personnel and auxiliary officers trained and paid to masquerade as *ujharoos*—carrying out “massacres of innocent people and other activities intentionally displaying vicious violence.”⁶⁷

In a cable sent on December 19, 2005, Robert O’Blake, deputy chief of the US mission in New Delhi stated:

With regard to former senior superintendent of police (Jalandhar) Mohammad Izhar Alam, we can confirm that he now [as of 2005] holds the position of additional director general (administration), a senior police posting. During the insurgency, he assembled a large, personal paramilitary force of approximately 150 men known as the “Black Cats” or ‘Alam Sena’... The group had reach throughout the Punjab and is alleged to have had carte blanche in carrying out possibly thousands of staged ‘encounter killings’.⁶⁸

Ram Narayan Kumar, a human rights activist with considerable work experience in Punjab, provides remarkable insights into the workings of the state that sought to discredit the *ujharoos*:

My own research on Punjab...suggested that the state agencies were creating vigilante outfits in order to infiltrate the Sikh radical movement and generate a climate of moral revulsion by engineering heinous crimes which they then attributed to armed Sikh groups.⁶⁹

This was further compounded by state attempts to plant news stories by “feeding disinformation on letterheads of militant organizations.”⁷⁰

Overall, the evidence points to a concerning process in which Indian media consciously manufactured false news stories; parroted the official version of encounters without further investigation; promoted the demonization of Sikh *ujharoos* and the wider Sikh panth, while state agencies intentionally manufactured misleading

data, and security agencies intentionally spread disinformation to the media and mobilized death squads to discredit Sikh *ujharoos*. With the support of unquestioning foreign correspondents, these images were circulated around the world and successfully established a hegemonic narrative of “Sikh terrorism.”

Despite the evidence of government-led disinformation, and police authorized death squads however, this is not to say that no excesses were committed by other non-state actors. While the context of Sikh armed resistance and the role of the media in demonizing Sikh *ujharoos* has been established above, there were other incidents of violence that occurred during the period.

What is important to a clear understanding of this reality however, is a critical analysis and assessment of the facts rather than allowing disinformation and state propaganda dictate the narrative.

During the course of a fierce armed struggle and significant degrees of state breakdown that occurred in 1980s/1990s Punjab, it is undeniable that some unscrupulous elements took advantage of the circumstances to perpetrate crimes against unarmed populations. What is clear however, is that Sikh *ujharoos*, the militant leadership, and *ujharoo jathebandiyan* constantly condemned indiscriminate forms of violence.

One of the earliest allegations of excesses committed by alleged “Sikh terrorists” revolved around an incident in which a bus was hijacked in Dhilwan, Kapurthala in October 1983. Passengers were allegedly separated on the basis of religion and six Hindu passengers were gunned down. No one was charged following the investigation and no *ujharoo jathebandi* took responsibility for this attack. To the contrary, Sikh leaders across the spectrum—including Sant Jarnail Singh jee clearly condemned their murder repeatedly.⁷¹ These condemnations

were clear, unequivocal, and ongoing in response to similar events.

The *jujharoo jathebandiyan* made their intentions clear:

Once again we want to make it clear that our struggle is not directed against any religion, community, caste or race. We respect the great cultures of the subcontinent and diversity of its people, their cultures, customs, rituals and modes of dress. But we also expect from them a reciprocal recognition of the distinctive and divine truth of Khalsa culture. We wish to see India a good and gentle neighbour... We believe in coming together after breaking off because that would let you realize the real meaning of equality among nations.⁷²

Where such incidents *did* occur under the leadership of the *jathebandiyan* however, it was swiftly acknowledged and condemned by the leadership who took initiatives to address it.⁷³ In this regard, it is important to note that there was a clear, coherent chain of command and leadership that spoke for the *jujharoo lehar*. This took the form of the *Sarbat Khalsa* and the *jujharoo jathebandiyan* organized under the umbrella Panthic Committee.⁷⁴

It is important to recognize however, that other entities chose to operate autonomously outside of this organizational framework despite all efforts to coordinate a single, united front.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the hostile and chaotic environment that Sikh *jujharoos* were operating in at the time—organizing underground while confronting the brutal, widespread violence of the state. Investigation, communication, and accountability were not always possible when individuals deviated from official policy. While Sikh *jujharoos* may not have been able to

stop each occurrence of indiscriminate violence from occurring, they made clear attempts to do so in order to ensure accountability for perpetrators wherever possible. They were forthcoming in acknowledging wrongs committed, clearly condemned those incidents, and affirmed their commitment to hold responsible parties accountable.

What is clear from countless statements and resolutions of the *jujharjoo jathebandiyan*, is that indiscriminate violence was not a part of the discourse or movement for Khalistan, nor official policy of the *jathebandiyan*. It is undeniable that there is a need for accountability for any excesses committed during the conflict, but the occurrence of such incidents by those who may or may not claim allegiance to the struggle is not characteristic or defining of the Sikh *sangarsh* or Khalistan as a whole.

Overall, Terry's approach to the Sikh armed struggle is akin to hounding today's Quebec separatists as violent extremists for the worst of the Front de libération du Québec's (FLQ) activities or, perhaps more appropriately, citing Louis Riel—and reverence for Louis Riel, as a springboard to attack Métis political activism for supporting an armed rebellion against the Canadian state.



“A PROJECT OF PAKISTAN”

In “Khalistan: A Project of Pakistan” veteran journalist Terry Milewski reveals the concept of Khalistan as a project of Pakistan, designed to subvert the national security of both Canada and India.

Terry is clearly fixated by the motivations behind Khalistan and its manifestations. It is evident from his writing however, that he refuses to explore how Khalistan is conceptually drawn from the very core of *Sikhi* itself, nor does he honestly delve into the historical background of the Sikh *sangarsh* for Khalistan beyond his myopic lens of extremism. Not only would this take serious intellectual effort, it would take Terry into territory that he has shown he is not comfortable venturing into.

This hesitancy is visible in his reactions to commentary on the article. Terry has made a clear push back against repeated claims that his document maligns the Sikh panth as a whole. In his writing, it is essential to manufacturing the trope of “puritanical Sikh fundamentalists” that a distinction is maintained between “Sikhs” and “Khalistanis.”

The Khalistani of Terry’s writing is an irrational, violent being that is not sophisticated enough to have any autonomous political vision and is thus readily manipulated by various actors—principle among them being “Pakistan.”

In the article, Pakistan is not presented as a rational political actor in the world but rather as “the heartland of world terrorism.” A place that, like Terry’s idea of Khalistan, is devoid of political context and nuance—relegated to the status of a villain frozen in time. It therefore flows naturally in Terry’s mind that **Pakistan is the driving force behind the movement for Khalistan.**

The sources Terry cites for this commentary clearly illustrate why his writing lacks credibility on this topic.

Firstly, he cites an interview with Tarek Fatah who narrates an interaction with former Pakistani Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, where the latter states that Pakistan would “tear off a piece of India – Khalistan – to avenge the loss of the 1971 war within India.” Second, he cites a conversation with former Pakistani ambassador to the US, Husain Haqqani. In these interviews, Haqqani states that “bleeding India was the main motive” to supporting Khalistan as well as subsequently creating a buffer with India and blocking India’s access to Kashmir.

Aside from these anecdotes, Terry then pulls at a number of strings in order to substantiate the report’s claims that **Khalistan was conceived and driven by Pakistan in order to hurt India.** The evidence marshalled by Terry in this regard consists primarily of an “Indian inquiry” alleging Pakistan’s logistical support to Sikh *juhharoos*, and unsubstantiated allegations leveled by Indian agencies against several Sikhs in Canada.

The so-called “smoking gun” in his article is a copy of an Indian inquiry into the extrajudicial murder of Shaheed Jathedar Talwinder Singh jee Babbar in a fake encounter. An inquiry by Indian agencies—who are known to manufacture evidence to discredit opponents—alleging that its arch-nemesis (Pakistan) is providing logistical support to India’s enemies is hardly credible—or a shocking revelation.

Terry’s insistence on the Indian version of events with regards to the fake encounter which led to Bhai Talwinder Singh jee’s torture and *shaheedi* (martyrdom)

however—despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary—is illustrative of his willingness to reproduce Indian propaganda and his lack of objectivity.⁷⁵ Similarly, the allegations leveled at several Sikh activists in Canada remain unsubstantiated as some matters are currently before Canadian courts.

Lastly, the degree of Terry's incompetence fully comes to light through the link he seeks to draw with Khalid Awan, a Canadian citizen who recently returned to Ontario after spending many years in several US prisons. From Terry's racist point-of-view, the fact that Awan is a Muslim of Pakistani descent is enough to project him as an intricate node in a Pakistani conspiracy to bleed India—despite there being no evidence whatsoever of any links to the country other than his religion and ethnicity. Further, Awan's case is actually a lesson on how overzealous policing of racialized groups—driven by stereotypical tropes and biases—actually leads to malicious prosecutions and grave human rights violations.⁷⁶

Terry's principle claim in the article, regarding the role of Pakistan, is also the principle pillar of Indian rhetoric demonizing Khalistan.

It is a common talking point that is the mainstay of Indian journalists and politicians which permeates every level of public discourse in India. This claim is utilized as a tool of securitization to mark Sikh bodies as a threat and silence dissenting Sikh voices.⁷⁷ Shaheed Bhai Jaswant Singh Khalra eloquently captured how the spectre of Pakistani support was used to delegitimize human rights works in his famous speech at Ontario Khalsa Darbar.⁷⁸ Bhai Jaswant Singh was himself labelled an "ISI agent" by mass murderer, KP Gill. After the June 1984 invasion of Darbar sahib, it was noted that:

The Government is now energetically insisting that the Sikh insurrection

in the Panjab was a "deep-seated conspiracy of a certain foreign power" or, when pressed, claims that some of the terrorists were trained in Pakistan. This is the first time that such a claim has been made, and it smacks of Mrs Gandhi's playing the familiar old Pakistan card for all it is worth. After all, there is an election looming on the horizon and a touch of war fever may not do any harm. But in the long run this sort of propaganda will not solve the Panjab's underlying problems.⁷⁹

The idea that Pakistan is the driving force of the Sikh *sangarsh* is rooted in a Soviet disinformation campaign that began in the 1960s which was able to "penetrate virtually every sector of Indian society" to achieve the aim of disrupting US-India relations.⁸⁰ The mechanics of this Soviet program is outlined in a detailed, now declassified, report originally produced by the CIA in December 1985. The program primarily played on Indian fears of "dismemberment"—which has been a recurring discursive theme of Indian political discourse to explain the motivations of Sikh resistance and simultaneously used to erase Sikh agency. One objective of the program was to push messaging that "the United States and Pakistan support, finance, and train Sikh separatists and terrorists in India and that the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United State harbor Sikh terrorist leaders and financial contributors."⁸¹ This narrative, manufactured and disseminated under a Soviet disinformation campaign, has clearly managed to outlive the Soviet Union itself.

Details of this program have also been uncovered by former KGB operative, Christopher Mitrokhin, who states that one of the KGB objectives was to manufacture evidence that the CIA and ISI were behind Sikh militancy in Punjab.⁸² While its origins may lay in Moscow, various Communist parties in India, as well as the pro-Soviet Congress party vehemently promoted this position. On October 19, 1982, the UNI news agency published a new story in India with a

Moscow dateline alleging that the CIA was responsible for instigating trouble in Punjab through the Pakistani ISI; a line that members of Indian Communist parties vigorously promoted.⁸³

An analysis of Indian state-run media, Doordarshan TV and All India Radio (AIR), similarly exposes the nefarious ways in which the media not only cooperated with the military and political establishment to stoke fires against Sikhs but actively sought to provoke Hindu nationalist sentiments. Analysis of these sources uncovers the fabricated nature of claims regarding the details of weapons found in Darbar Sahib in June 1984, as well as allegations of narcotics and prostitutes being discovered in the complex—all allegations were found to be patently false.⁸⁴

More objectionable however, was the manipulation of these media narratives to mobilize Hindu nationalist elements by demonizing Sikh activists and projecting a dubious nexus with Muslims and Pakistan.⁸⁵ In one incident, news bulletins were repeatedly flashed regarding details of two individuals in Sikh attire, found to be circumcised. Based around this one fact, the media automatically surmised the individuals were Muslim, and thereby concluded that this must be a Pakistan connection. In another incident, both Doordarshan and AIR repeated headlines about “terror training camps organized in Jammu & Kashmir” for numerous days. Despite the government’s own official statement mentioning camps in a handful of Indian states including Bihar and UP, these outlets chose to focus solely on Jammu and Kashmir—presumably because of their Muslim-majority character and proximity to Pakistan.⁸⁶

In this regard nothing Terry has said is conceptually original. This point is only the regurgitation of long standing Indian state logic.

Besides the deeply flawed factual basis of the allegation, there are several important implications that need to be considered on this point as well. Although it may be the case that in the long-standing reality of geopolitics, neighbours will take interest in the domestic issues of their region, this does not necessarily put them in the driving seat of political movements.

This narrative seeks to erase Sikh thought and agency that drives the Sikh *sangarsh*.⁸⁷ Overlooking the **philosophical and organizational foundations of Khalistan embedded deep in Sikh ethos since the establishment of Kartarpur Sahib**, the Pakistan allegation ignores a **long line of sovereign polities that illustrate the continuity between the principle of patshahi and its manifestation in various forms of Khalsa Raj**.

Secondly, limiting the discourse of Khalistan to Pakistani machinations overlooks the historical development of the concept and the movement.⁸⁸ While the specific word was coined in the early 20th century, the concept of Khalistan captured the imaginations of Sikh *naujawan* as the only viable option to restore Sikh sovereignty in the modern world. Khalistan has since animated modern Sikh politics organically and continuously.

Lastly, as established above, there is a long line of evidence that illustrates how Indian intelligence has manufactured this Pakistan narrative along with the Soviets during the Cold War. The immigration case involving “AB” is an excellent example of the ongoing effort by Indian intelligence to demonize Pakistan.

KHALISTAN BY THE NUMBERS: STATISTICS, TRENDS AND ELECTORAL RESULTS

One of the central themes of Indian messaging on this issue, dutifully accepted by Terry, is that there is no support for Khalistan in Punjab today.

Attempting to move beyond mere rhetoric, Terry seeks to bolster this argument using electoral statistics of the 2017 Vidhan Sabha elections in Punjab. Completely ignoring the basic principles of electoral analysis, Terry overlooks a variety of factors that influenced the results. Unconvincingly, he tells readers that the election was a mass rejection of Khalistan and an endorsement of the “fervently anti-separatist” Captain Amarinder.

A cursory glance at even mainstream Indian media however, would have actually revealed the opposite. **A simmering Panthic resurgence in Punjab’s sentiment and increasing polarization as a result of the BJP’s fascist project is what led to the widespread rejection of the traditional Akali Dal in 2017.**

While Punjab’s urban Hindu vote appears to have consolidated behind the Congress in opposition to revitalized Sikh mobilization in the region,⁸⁹ widespread Sikh anger toppled the Akali government for turning its back on the Panthic agenda and for its violent crackdown on Sikhs protesting the desecration of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee in 2015.⁹⁰ The 2017 election was not a rejection of Khalistan as much as it was the decimation of a faction of the Akali Dal which became an enthusiastic accomplice to the Indian state’s repression of Panthic political mobilization. Under Prakash Badal’s leadership, the Akalis sought to stamp out Panthic politics by replacing it with the discourse of “development” and regularly unleashed Indian security forces on those who violated this settlement.

Developments over the past five years make it abundantly clear that a renewed Sikh mobilization has been simmering organically in Punjab; the formation and leadership of which is currently developing in the crucible of political struggle and state repression.

A lack of support for the one secessionist electoral party in the fray does not indicate a lack of support for secession altogether. This is particularly the case in conflict zones like Punjab and Kashmir where most activists consciously mobilize in realms outside of the Indian electoral system. While that party’s own lack of efficacy and credibility is an undeniable factor in its inability to channel Punjab’s Sikh discontent, there is another important angle.

The reality of ongoing state violence today must be addressed in order to address fears of repressions and reprisals, in order to allow meaningful democratic expression in the region.

Sikhs For Justice’s 2020 referendum, seemingly at the centre of Terry’s work, is a prime example of the issues with the democratic space (or lack thereof) for Sikh dissent in India. Proponents of a democratic referendum for Punjab’s secession (who have explicitly and aggressively disavowed armed struggle) have not only been legally criminalized as a terrorist organization,⁹¹ but have seen countless young activists arrested and tortured simply for painting slogans, or organizing registration drives for voters.⁹² On one occasion alone, five *naujawan* associated with the referendum were arrested and faced repeated electrocution on their earlobes, testicles, nostrils and nipples; beaten on their tailbone making it difficult to sit or lie down; beaten on their feet with a thick wooden stick making it difficult to stand in addition to

further physical and mental abuse.⁹³

Considering the grave implications of public advocacy for Khalistan and the restrictive conditions of Indian electoral politics, it is imperative to assess the broader field of political engagement from the grassroots to determine the degree of support for Khalistan. Even during agitations that do not explicitly make secessionist demands, it is clear that the Sikh *sangarsh* for Khalistan remains the animating focal point of Sikh agitation in Punjab today.

Recent examples include the uprisings against the pending execution of Sikh political prisoners and in support of their immediate release in 2012 and 2014. These respective movements heavily featured themes of Sikh sovereignty at the centre of political discourse outside of the Indian electoral system and brought Punjab to a complete halt through general strikes on several occasions. These mobilizations revolved around Sikh guerrillas, incarcerated for their unapologetic participation in the armed struggle for Khalistan, and received widespread support from all segments of Punjab's society.

With the rejection of discredited Sikh leadership in the form of the Akali Dal, the momentum of these uprisings have been channelized into attempts to reconvene the Sarbat Khalsa, a collective assembly of the Khalsa panth, to re-establish independent institutions of Sikh self-governance. This represents a strategic maneuver to establish sound leadership—**while rejecting Indian political institutions**—under the leadership of revered guerrilla commander, Bhai Jagtar Singh Hawara, as the Jathedar of Sri Akaal Takhat Sahib. Further, this gathering ratified and reiterated the *gurmattay* (Guru-Panth's resolutions) of the 1986 Sarbat Khalsa which dismantled and replaced the SGPC (a creature of Indian legislation) and set the panth on its current course towards

Khalistan.

While Indian sources regularly paint such mobilizations as “fringe radical elements,” the pervasiveness of these sentiments can be gauged from several *adesh* (edicts) from Sri Akaal Takhat Sahib—the Sikh panth's capitol and highest temporal authority. It is important to note that the current functioning of the office of the Takhat Sahib is highly contested due to its ongoing domination by the Akali Dal faction ousted by Sikhs in the 2017 election. **The fact that the following statements and messages come from representatives tied to some of the most vehemently pro-Indian factions of Sikh leadership says a great deal about Sikh sentiments of all political stripes.**

Giani Harpreet Singh, appointed as Jathedar of Sri Akaal Takhat Sahib by the Badal-dominated SGPC, made clear the widespread nature of support for Khalistan within the Sikh panth. Answering a question in June 2020 regarding Khalistan slogans at the Takhat Sahib, Harpreet Singh reiterated that there was nothing questionable about this: “What Sikh in the world does not want Khalistan?”⁹⁴ He later reiterated this sentiment in August, insisting that political sovereignty is necessary for the Panth to flourish.⁹⁵

On August 30, 2020, Harpreet Singh announced that Bhai Gajinder Singh would be awarded the title of “Panth Sewak” (Servant of the Panth) by Sri Akaal Takhat Sahib in recognition of his work and sacrifice for the community.⁹⁶ Bhai Gajinder Singh, a revolutionary poet and co-founder of the radical Dal Khalsa, was one of several activists who hijacked an Indian plane in protest of Sant Jarnail Singh jee's arrest in 1981. After serving a prison sentence in Pakistan, he remains there in exile—maintaining his staunch advocacy for Khalistan. Similarly, Bhai Dilaavar Singh Babbar, the *shaheed* who assassinated Chief Minister Beanta using a suicide vest in 1995, had his portrait installed at the Central Sikh Museum and was coronated as a “*qaumi shaheed*”

(national martyr) by Harpreet Singh's predecessor in 2012.⁹⁷ Gurdwara Yaadgar Shaheedan was similarly established in the Darbar Sahib complex in 2013 in memory of Sant Jarnail Singh jee and other *shaheeds* (martyrs) of the Battle of Amritsar (1984).

The canonisation and veneration of these *juhharoos* (warriors) as *shaheed* carries deep meaning in understanding the pervasiveness of this sentiment and the place this movement and the armed struggle have in the very practice of what it means to be a Sikh. Within Sikh ethos, a *shaheed* is the most hallowed status of a Sikh—second only to the Guru.

Alongside this rejuvenation, a handful of Sikh guerrilla organizations have also regrouped as evidenced by the spike in militant strikes across the region and the high-profile arrests of several guerrilla commanders in 2014 and 2015. This resurgence is a strong indication of the simmering discontent, particularly due to the closing of political space for Sikh dissent through peaceful means.

It is evident from the above that Sikh tension with India and movements for Khalistan have not disappeared or “faded into irrelevance” as the Indian establishment claims and amplifies through its servile media apparatus. These developments clearly illustrate the lack of closure to Sikh demands for self-determination and the ongoing nature of this political conflict.



“PEACE” IN PUNJAB TODAY

The last of Terry’s regurgitated talking points echoes the problematic Indian assertion that Punjab is now “at peace,” primarily because of the lack of support for Khalistan in the region today. He reproduces this constant refrain verbatim, quoting Manmohan Singh during a trip to Toronto in 2010:

Sikh extremism, separatism and militancy were a problem in India more than two decades ago. Today, Punjab is at peace and there is growth and prosperity... There are however, some elements outside India, including in Canada, who try to keep this issue alive for their own purposes. In many cases, such elements have links to or are themselves wedded to terrorism.

Not only does this assertion overlook the macabre and Orwellian implications of this statement—that there is only peace because there is no longer Sikh dissent—but it also reproduces the “outside agitator” trope through constant warnings from the Indian establishment of the looming “threat” of Khalistan from “outside” Punjab.⁹⁸

The ongoing killings of Sikh activists, extrajudicial murders in custody, and surveillance of young activists all illustrate the ongoing lack of democratic space for dissenting Sikh political expression within the legal framework of India today.⁹⁹

After the Sikh genocide between 1984–1995, to quell the armed Sikh liberation movement, the Indian state continues to use its judicial and coercive security apparatus to criminalize and repress Sikh political dissent and expression that challenges the legitimacy of the status quo.

Indian security forces routinely use indiscriminate firing on civil

demonstrations and have killed Sikh protestors on multiple occasions, including Bhai Darshan Singh Lohara (Ludhiana protest – December 5, 2009); Bhai Jaspal Singh Sidhwan (Gurdaspur protest – March 29, 2012); Bhai Jasjeet Singh (Jammu protest – June 4, 2015); Bhai Gurjit Singh and Bhai Kishan Singh (Bargadi protest – October 14, 2015).

Sikh activists also continue to face torture and extrajudicial execution in police custody regularly.

Bhai Shaminder Singh Shera was illegally detained by police on October 31, 2010 and severely tortured for 18 days. A week after filing legal action against his perpetrators, Bhai Shera was attacked and killed by a gang of masked men—leaving the investigation and legal proceedings at a standstill.

Bhai Kulwant Singh Varpal was arrested in the summer of 2010. In August, he was admitted to the hospital with life threatening injuries due to repeated electrocution and severe beatings during interrogation. The day before he was set to testify against his perpetrators in court, he was killed in his jail cell on February 11, 2012.

In response to a renewed increase in Sikh political activity in Punjab in recent years, Indian security forces have been clamping down on activists in Punjab and the diaspora. Since 2017 over 150 *naujawan* (young activists) have been arrested under draconian measures of the Indian penal code. Those arrested are predominantly young Sikh men, active in democratically organizing their communities to advocate for an independent Khalistan *outside of the electoral system*.

According to a 2018 report by the Intelligence and Analysis Section of the Canada Border Services Agency, a significant rise in refugee claims was noted that year—particularly among Indian nationals. The report stated that “a frequent basis of claim cited by Indian nationals is the fear of arbitrary arrest or abuse by the police based on accusations of supporting militant organizations. It should be noted the vast majority of these claims are filed by Indian Sikhs.” Citing renewed support for independence in Punjab, the report suggests that “as government pushback against the Sikh community continues, fear of arbitrary arrest and abuse by authorities will likely prompt more Indian Sikhs to leave the country.”¹⁰⁰

Using the backdrop of a spike in insurgent strikes in Punjab over the past five years and proliferation of widespread grassroots advocacy for Khalistan and Sikh self-governance, state security forces have manipulated this context to debilitate Sikh political activism by criminalizing Sikh dissent as sedition and terrorism. In a set pattern discussed below, Indian security forces have alleged foreign conspiracies to destabilize the country and have swooped in to neutralize activists across the region—with reverberations abroad.

As a result of this, *naujawan* engaged in a diverse range of activism from social media advocacy, to political organizing, and Sikh *parchar* (education) have faced arrest and torture, prolonged incarceration, and ongoing surveillance and harassment after their release. Such “crimes” include “liking” pro-Khalistan social media posts,¹⁰¹ possessing Sikh literature¹⁰² and participating in WhatsApp groups.¹⁰³

These incidents clearly illustrate the *modus operandi* of Indian security forces: maintain a close watch on young activists and inflict extrajudicial violence on them through the use of arbitrary anti-terror legislation. Analyses of various chargesheets expose how officials use

a “copy paste” method of laying false allegations on trumped up charges.¹⁰⁴ Once youth are inducted into the Indian penal system, they can face several years of incarceration without bail due to their alleged “terror” affiliations and the nature of the legislation. This prolonged incarceration takes place before activists are even tried or convicted of any crime. Cursory looks at the outcomes of these cases reveal that 162 out of 235 accused under the legislation have all been exonerated. Of the remaining cases, only three have led to initial convictions (all pending appeal)—the rest are still facing trial.¹⁰⁵ In other words, **Indian security forces have been using anti-terror legislation to arbitrarily detain and incarcerate Sikh activists—removing them from their communities—as a political tool to restrict activism rather than ensuring “law and order” as it is claimed.** According to human rights activist, Colin Gonsalves, security forces are not interested in convictions because they know the cases will likely end in acquittal; “police used the law to keep people in jail for five years or more, because bail provision is very strict... That is the trick.”¹⁰⁶ Once released, these *naujawan* often face continued harassment, pressure to become police informants,¹⁰⁷ and are frequently rearrested when their activism doesn’t come to a halt.¹⁰⁸

Despite these challenges, a new generation of Sikh *naujawan* remain committed to exercising their Guru-granted *patshahi* by resisting state violence and remaining resolute in their explicit commitment to the struggle for Khalistan.



SECTION 3

THE POLITICS OF RACE AND CAPITALISM

While the problem of Indian foreign interference is the key issue at hand, it is also necessary to reckon with the forces of capitalism and racism that sit within social, political, and economic systems around the world. While the primary conflict of the Sikh panth has manifested in resistance to the Indian state specifically, it is also imperative to address our collective position as a Panth situated within a global system that has been constructed on foundations of racism, capitalism, and colonialism. Articulating the relationship between the Sikh panth and today's modern/colonial¹⁰⁹ world order not only sheds light on the nature of our conflict with the Indian state, but also why the spectre of "Sikh terrorism" is so easily accepted by Western states.

As a colonized people in today's world—in Punjab as well as in exile/diaspora, Sikhs are socialized and policed to only engage in certain modes of politics which are deemed acceptable to Eurocentric norms and the institution of the state. Through this assimilatory logic, colonized peoples are rhetorically allowed to maintain their independent existence, *but* this is restricted to a limited space of private (apolitical) culture while the public (and political) space is dominated by the state and its Eurocentric ethos.

Racialized peoples are thus *permitted* to engage in “identity politics” which seek inclusion and integration of their *private/cultural* identity within the established and predetermined political order—based on their subordinated minority status.¹¹⁰ This means that while citizens with certain cultural identities in their private life can engage in politics to address public “discrimination,” they cannot *transgress* the predetermined parameters of state and society in order to *transform* the political order itself.¹¹¹ Instead, racialized peoples are expected to obediently celebrate the politics of *tolerance*, rather than struggle for dignified coexistence and decolonization. This integration is therefore premised on assimilation into the figure of the secular/universal “citizen” to achieve equality while relegating the “cultural” self to the apolitical private sphere.

The struggle for Khalistan¹¹² on the other hand, centres around our drive to exercise our Guru-granted *patshahi* and establish a society-polity built around the Guru’s vision of *sanjhivalta*¹¹³ and *sarbat da bhala*.¹¹⁴ This is the definition of Khalsa Raj and our vision for decolonization—a political structure which roots our being and existence in this world as *Sikh* rather than projected as a minority, or an “Other” to the supposedly universal “citizen.”

Within the confines of this racializing logic however, the Sikh *sangarsh* is thereby misconstrued as inherently illegitimate “extremism” due to its connection to the imposed Eurocentric category of “religion” and a racialized identity constructed by Orientalist tropes.¹¹⁵ This is why Western media and foreign security establishments are quick to condemn the *sangarsh* as extremism and terrorism rather than a recognized movement for self-determination and liberation.

Looking specifically at the 1984 Indian army invasion of the Darbar Sahib complex and the violence associated with it, it was the entry of “religion” into the

theatre of politics that was construed as ‘fanaticism’ in the mainstream to produce an impression that the secular state had *no other option* but to swiftly eliminate Sant Jarnail Singh jee. This episode is reflective of a coercive secular modernity obligated to repress and control different ethnic minorities to conform to the colonial split between religion and secularism.¹¹⁶

This subsequently facilitates the classic sensationalized talking points about our supposedly irrational violence (“Sikh terrorism” rather than just regular “violence” because only White/state violence is secular and capable of politics). This is most relevantly exemplified in the original edition of Public Safety Canada’s *2018 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada*. Whereas White supremacist groups are capable of politics and fit onto a spectrum of political ideas and values (“right-wing extremists”), violence projected on racialized peoples is inherently characteristic of and tied to our being/identity rather than politics. **It is only within this conceptual framework that the imperialist violence committed by the likes of Harjit Sajjan on behalf of the Canadian state is valourized as heroism, while the revolutionary violence of Sikh *jujharoos* is derided as extremism and terrorism.**

There is undeniably robust debate within the community as to what physical form Sikh sovereignty ought to take today. **Trying to erase the entire context of Sikh political aspirations and struggles in the past century however, is more than an unwitting oversight.** This report’s attempt to gloss over India’s violent foundations and paint the Sikh panth within a fantasy of Indian nationalism must be placed within its appropriate context.

While racism and the influence of Indian interference are undeniably the driving forces of the narratives spewed within the MLI’s report, there are a great number

of questions that must be asked as to why these half-baked allegations have been so readily received and reproduced without any critical analysis by seemingly disinterested parties.

The answer lies not only in the increasing geopolitical complexity of the South Asian region, but also the direct economic interests of specific parties involved in the production of the report and Western countries in general.

A recent investigative report tied MLI's Program Director, Shuvaloy Majumdar, to Harper & Associates, a consulting firm built around the former Canadian Prime Minister. The report found that while Majumdar was involved in the production of the report, he also served as a Global Director for Harper & Associates which has worked on a contract from the Saskatchewan government for \$240,000 to "help expand access to India."¹¹⁷

While some shifts towards India are tied to policy imperatives to counter China's rising political influence in the region, there are also other important economic considerations. With the recognized significance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, there have been increasing attempts by certain entities to delegitimize and vilify Pakistan within the global community. Additionally, there has been a long time interest in access to Indian markets.

When comparing Canadian trade with India to other emerging economies however, figures currently appear to be significantly less than the weight given to the idea of Canada-India trade within the political rhetoric. Instead, **a pattern may be emerging in which certain partners are given preferential access to Indian markets in exchange for their political support** which may explain why certain individuals have begun aggressively parroting pro-Indian narratives.

While there is evidence that some individuals may have direct political and financial interests in pandering to

Indian narratives about Sikh activists and thereby pursuing closer political and economic ties, this is also indicative of a broader policy shift within several NATO allies. Individuals such as Stephen Harper, Shuvaloy Majumdar, and Jason Kenney may be more vocal in their support and enabling of Modi's fascist project in South Asia, but other political parties are not entirely immune. The current Liberal government's decisions to begin maligning and harassing Sikh activists in Canada at the behest of India in 2018 is illustrative of the pervasiveness of this approach.¹¹⁸

In response to these business interests being uncovered, an MLI spokesperson emphasized the importance of Canada-India ties and pointed to the strain that Sikh activism in Canada places on this relationship.¹¹⁹


Within all of these calculations, it is clear that the fate of Sikhs is not even an afterthought. Despite the rhetoric of liberal multiculturalism and human rights in Canada, these developments make it abundantly clear that for many influential political actors, **Canada's "national interest" does not include promoting the rule of law with its international partners, protecting the integrity of Charter rights in Canada, or promoting human rights in the global community.**

The precarious position of Sikhs around the world is once again laid bare in the absence of political sovereignty, despite every attempt to ingratiate ourselves to our host societies. It is imperative at this time, that we take stock of the current geopolitical realities and chart our own autonomous policy initiatives in order to implement our own strategic objectives and achieve our collective political vision.



SECTION 4

**NEXT STEPS: INDIAN INTERFERENCE AND
A PANTHIC RESPONSE**



The subsidiary problem with the circulation of India's targeted messaging is that it traps many well-meaning Sikh organizations and individuals. Internalizing myths of the "model minority,"¹²⁰ some Sikh organizations engage in self-censorship in response to antics such as Terry's. These approaches often narrow the Sikh sangarsh into depoliticized monikers like "human rights advocacy," and erase the ongoing context of political objectives and struggle altogether. **Rather than active agents in a political movement, they circumscribe Sikhs to the sphere of a powerless victim.**

When Indian propagandists and their racist counterparts define Khalistani activism as extremism, these organizations often succumb to accepting the classification and try to distance themselves from the political struggle as a result. **Attempts at responding to such attacks often avoid the substantive issues and limit themselves solely to pointing out the impacts of racism or challenging the methodologies of the allegations.** This further empowers figures like Ujjal Dosanjh as the parameters and framework of the conversation fundamentally remain unchallenged.

It is imperative to remain above this trap—**reject the definition altogether and celebrate our resistance.**

During Trudeau's trip to India in 2018, many voices accepted the label of extremism applied to the armed struggle for Khalistan but sought to restrict the *sangarsh* to something *in the past*—erasing the reality of conflict and resistance today. Rather than defend the legacy of resistance to genocide and claiming the *ongoing* right to self-defence as granted by the Guru and international law, these responses left the Panth wide open to the repressive measures taken against Sikh activists by

the state soon after. These measures have included adding activists to no-fly lists, laying the groundwork for extraditions, and increasing other policing measures.

Sikh advocacy must not limit its critique of Indian violence to violations of freedom of speech or purport to take a neutral stance with regards to a real and ongoing Sikh political struggle. Instead, such endeavours must confidently articulate Sikh policy objectives and boldly represent the interests of the panth.

Keeping the Panth's sovereign *hond-hasthi*¹²¹ at the forefront of our response and actions, our political consciousness and praxis must be centred around Guru Granth-Panth by developing the Panth's political power through our own institutions.

Our political solutions will come from self-empowerment and sovereign infrastructure; not submitting to the whims of electoral politics or representation through systems of borrowed power.



Next Steps

Vigilance

Remain vigilant of Indian interference and White supremacy/racism in your respective local communities.

Cultivate resilience within your local sangat and Panthic institutions to withstand these physical and/or discursive assaults.

For those individuals and organizations who engage in lobbying and advocacy with the state: organize your engagement with political representatives around these issues. Pursue meaningful responses to Indian interference through criminal prosecution and diplomatic channels.

Database

It is imperative that we lay the foundations for a collective database project that will record ongoing incidents of Indian interference and repression throughout the world. This is a project that the Khalistan Centre can coordinate.



Analysis

Panthic scholars and journalists must continue to conduct a thorough analysis documenting exactly how media reporting around Sikhs and Khalistan has bolstered racism and served an Indian foreign policy agenda.

In particular, we must clearly pinpoint:

Details and origins of specific manufactured news stories

Track the patterns and mechanism by which these stories are disseminated around the world

Trace the impacts of these strategies and how they have influenced policy outcomes in Western countries

Panthic Response

Coordinate Panthic responses that centre around our sovereign being as the Khalsa panth, not a model minority.

Be unapologetic in celebrating and defending the Sikh *sangarsh*.

Consider the long-term implications of our responses: ignoring or erasing the reality of *sangarsh* and all of its facets is not just shortsightedness, it will contribute or acquiesce to the physical harms faced by Sikh activists around the world today.

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