

## Khalistan Movement in India and its Regional Implications

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### Abstract

The Khalistan movement is a struggle for an independent state by the Sikh population residing in the Punjab province of India. The struggle for Sikh independence persisted following India's independence in 1947, fuelled by perceptions of systemic discrimination and atrocities committed against the community by the Indian government. This movement stands out as one of India's most active separatist movements, garnering significant regional and international attention. The movement has far-reaching political, social, and strategic implications at the regional level. It influences India's internal dynamics, exacerbating tensions and impacting governance. Regionally, the movement's ramifications extend to various circumstances and perspectives, shaping the geopolitical landscape in South Asia. Primarily, it affects the complex relationship between Pakistan and India, adding another layer of complexity to their already strained relations. A descriptive-analytical approach has been employed to analyze and understand the Khalistan movement and its regional implications. This method aims to comprehensively examine the movement, exploring its historical roots, contemporary dynamics, and the broader geopolitical context in which it operates. This approach is being sought to unravel the complexities surrounding the Khalistan movement and its multifaceted impact on the region.

### Keywords

Khalistan movement, separatist movements, India-Pakistan relations, South Asian Geopolitics, Punjab Insurgency

### Introduction

The Khalistan Movement is a longstanding separatist movement in India, with its roots in Punjab, aiming to establish a separate homeland for Sikhs. It is deeply ingrained in

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ethnic and traditional values, dating back centuries, seeking political and cultural sovereignty and national identity. The movement has seen numerous violent clashes between Sikhs and the Indian government. It is particularly significant as it represents the aspirations of the Sikh minority, numbering around twenty million. The demand for a separate homeland, primarily in Punjab, holds immense political and strategic significance, given the region's importance to India. The movement enjoys considerable popularity and activity both within India and internationally.

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Khalistan has been renowned as the homeland for Sikhs. Even today, Sikhs continue to struggle and fight for their homeland, separate identity, and sovereignty. They have produced great leaders who have played significant roles in uniting Sikhs as a strong nation. The movement has been marked by great sacrifices made by its followers. However, India perceives this movement as a significant security threat.

In the 1980s, the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh guards and the military operation of Blue Star by the Indian government in Amritsar's Golden Temple intensified the movement. This incident sparked immense popularity and enthusiasm for the cause of the Sikh freedom movement.

Furthermore, the Punjab province of India is immensely important as a hub for agriculture and trade, contributing significantly to the country's economy. Its fertile lands are often referred to as the 'breadbasket of India.' Its geographical location enhances its strategic significance, as it shares borders with Pakistan's Punjab province and the contested region of Kashmir. This proximity influences cross-border relations and adds to its geopolitical and security importance in South Asia.

The research employs a descriptive-analytical approach to evaluate several themes related to the Khalistan movement. These include exploring the movement's background, examining the reasons behind the demand for a separate homeland, examining the significance of the Punjab province for India, assessing constitutional rights regarding the movement, analyzing atrocities against the Sikh community in India, and analyzing. Additionally, the research delves into the movement's implications for regional peace and security and its impact on India-Pakistan relations.

### **Significance of Punjab for India's Growth and Stability**

Punjab is located at a strategically vital border position and shares boundaries with occupied Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan within India and Pakistan to the west. Its historical narrative dates back to ancient times, when it witnessed the influence of diverse tribes and invaders shaping its culture and religion. Moreover, Sikhism, introduced by Guru Nanak in the fifteenth century, is the predominant religion of Punjab (Singh & Bhardwaj, n.d.). Punjab, with its historical connections to Hinduism, is predominantly Sikh populated but also home to a significant Hindu population, particularly among lower castes. Punjabi is the official language, while Hindi is widely spoken (Singh & Bhardwaj, n.d.).

The state is divided into three regions and encompasses major cities like Amritsar, Ludhiana, and Patiala. Punjab's economy thrives on agriculture, contributing significantly to India's grain and milk production alongside a diverse industrial sector. Despite historical prosperity, the region has faced challenges, including insurgency and political tensions, particularly surrounding the demand for Khalistan (Singh & Bhardwaj, n.d.). While stability has been achieved since the mid-1990s, Sikhs continue to advocate for religious recognition and express concerns about demographic shifts in Punjab (Sidhu, 2017).

Economically, Punjab was prosperous pre-independence and remains vital to India's economy. It contributes significantly to grain and milk production, supplying various agricultural products like rice, wheat, fruits, and vegetables. Around 40% of the population is engaged in agriculture, benefiting from well-irrigated land supported by government infrastructure. Punjab also meets its energy needs through hydroelectric plants and other sources. Despite insurgency impacting industrial and agricultural sectors, Punjab remains one of India's most developed provinces, boasting low poverty rates and receiving recognition from the Indian government for its achievements (Dutta, 2023). Culturally, Punjab celebrates a rich heritage through various religious festivals such as Dussehra and Diwali and ceremonies honoring Sikh Gurus and saints. These events reflect the deep-rooted traditions and values contributing to Punjab's vibrant cultural tapestry (Singh & Bhardwaj, n.d.).

Since 1995, Punjab has experienced relative stability, with the Shiromani Akali Dal winning elections and restoring local governance. However, Sikhs continue to face challenges regarding their religious identity. Many feel insecure because the government and Hindus do not recognize Sikhism as a separate religion, threatening their cultural autonomy. As a result, Sikhs demand religious recognition to maintain their distinct identity.

### **Historical Understanding of the Khalistan Movement and Demand for Separate Homeland**

The history of 'Khalistan' or 'Khalsa' traces back centuries. Before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Sikhs referred to Punjab as 'Khalistan' or 'Land of Khalsa,' envisioning it as their autonomous homeland. This concept was rooted in the teachings of their Gurus, who nurtured Sikh identity and the dream of an independent state. Guru Gobind Singh<sup>3</sup> proclaimed Punjab as Khalsa in 1699, instilling in Sikhs the belief that ruling over Punjab was their divine right. Punjab has also witnessed Sikh leadership, maintaining its independence ("What happened during 1984", 2018). The Sikh religion, introduced by Guru Nanak in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, has a significant presence in north-western Punjab and is dispersed across India and globally. The Sikh population in the 2020 census stands at 20.8 million (Minority Rights Group, 2021).

The Sikhs have a history of warriorhood, exemplified by leaders like Banda Singh Bahadur, who liberated parts of Punjab from the Mughal Empire in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Despite struggles against the Mughals and Afghans, Sikhs rose to dominance in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Maharaja Ranjit Singh expanded Sikh territory, but British colonialism ended their rule in 1849. After Ranjit Singh, Sikh leadership weakened, leading to priest control of Gurdwaras until the Akali Movement in 1920 demanded reform (Singh & Bhardwaj, n.d.; "What happened during 1984", 2018; Singha, 2000). The Sikhs also resisted British rule, culminating in the Massacre of Amritsar. Post-Independence, Sikhs sought a separate state, facing challenges during partition (Asia Samachar, 2016; Singh & Bhardwaj, n.d.; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023). They settled in the Indian Punjab, where the idea of Khalistan emerged. This led to brief autonomy before reintegration in 1956 (Singh & Bhardwaj, n.d.).

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<sup>3</sup> Guru Gobind Singh is among the last ten Gurus (The most respected and believable religious leaders) of the Sikh Community who introduced new beliefs in the Sikh religion. He established in 1699 Khalsa (literally meaning pure) community who were religiously trained and were fighters.

The Khalistan movement, aimed at establishing an independent Sikh state in north-western India, has evolved (“What happened during 1984”, 2018). It was initiated by Sikh leaders such as Tara Singh and Sant Fateh Singh after Independence (Singh & Bhardwaj, n.d.). In the 1960s, it was known as the ‘Home Rule Movement’ and later gained momentum in the 1980s as the Khalistan movement. The Indian government attempted to quell the movement through various measures, including dividing Punjab in 1956 based on language, which led to protests from Sikhs demanding a separate Punjabi-speaking state. Riots and violence ensued, with Akali Dal leader Tara Singh leading the ‘Punjab Suba Movement’ (“Explained: What led to the 1955”, 2021; Shaikh, 2015). The movement paused during the 1965 Indo-Pak war, but Sikh grievances persisted. Eventually, Punjab was divided into Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh in 1966, leading to further controversy over Chandigarh (Angelo, 1999, p.18; Singh & Bhardwaj, n.d.).

In 1966, despite Sikhs constituting the majority in Punjab, they were politically fragmented into two main factions. The first group, comprised mainly of farmers, supported the Shiromani Akali Dal, advocating for special privileges and protection for Sikhs. However, they faced stiff opposition from a party aligned with the Congress party. The second group, consisting of urban Sikhs who were affluent landowners, backed the Congress party under the leadership of Indira Gandhi.

In the 1980s, Indira Gandhi exploited these divisions among Sikhs to bolster support for her Congress party in Punjab’s general elections and to consolidate control over the state legislature. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale emerged as a prominent Khalistan movement leader, gaining international attention in the 1990s (“What happened during 1984”, 2018). Despite fading in the 1990s, the movement continues to have a presence, advocating for Sikh political and social rights (Shaikh, 2015).

During the 1980s, the Khalistan movement in India, seeking a separate homeland for Sikhs, escalated into insurgency and rebellion (Shaikh, 2015; Mogul, 2023). Human Rights Watch reported significant human rights violations during the early 1980s riots, with Sikhs committing atrocities against Hindus in Punjab, where Sikhs formed a majority. In response, the Indian army also violated human rights by killing thousands of Sikhs. Despite this, the Khalistan movement grew more assertive.

Another prominent leader, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, was born in 1947 and spearheaded efforts for Sikh independence until he died in 1984. Trained in Sikhism at the Bhindran Taksal seminary, he became its head and advocated for Sikh sovereignty. Bhindranwale gained government support to counter the influence of the Shiromani Akali Dal, a popular Sikh political party. He emphasized Sikh history and nationalism, contrasting with the Akali Dal’s peaceful negotiation approach.

Bhindranwale opposed the Nirankari sect, which aimed to merge Sikhism into Hinduism, and preached a return to Sikhism’s core tenets. He also clashed with the Arya Samajis, who advocated for Sikhs to abandon traditional practices. Bhindranwale’s actions garnered both support and opposition amid growing discontent with economic and governance issues. Violence erupted, including targeted killings of Arya Samajis and supporters of Hindu groups.

Bhindranwale’s arrest in 1982 led to riots and his subsequent retreat to the Golden Temple, establishing it as his headquarters. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered Operation Bluestar in 1984 to remove Bhindranwale and his militants from the temple, considering them a security threat (Mogul, 2023). Bluestar resulted in a violent conflict between Bhindranwale’s forces and the Indian military, causing significant casualties and damage to the Golden Temple. Subsequent operations aimed

to quell Sikh militancy, leading to further violence and controversy, including allegations of human rights abuses by the Indian army (“What happened during 1984”, 2018). By 1987, radical Sikhs had established a clandestine government and launched a rebellion for Khalistan. In response, the Indian government dissolved the Punjab government and imposed presidential rule (Tempest, 1987).

The rise and impact of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a radical Sikh leader, and the subsequent events leading to the Blue Star military operation in 1984, which aimed to remove him and other Sikh militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The operation resulted in significant casualties and ignited a violent backlash, including the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. This event led to anti-Sikh riots across India, causing further loss of life and property (Mogul, 2023). Despite the Indian government’s intention to crush the Khalistan movement, the operations fuelled resentment among Sikhs, both within India and abroad. The use of excessive force and disregard for Sikh religious sentiments deepened grievances, contributing to continued tensions in Punjab.

Recently, the movement has continued under the leadership of new figures, such as Amritpal Singh (Mogul, 2023; Bhardwaj, 2019). Amritpal Singh, drawing inspiration from Bhindranwale, has become a prominent figure in the movement, leading protests against the Indian government and calling for Sikh rights. In March 2023, Sikhs’ demand for a separate homeland was once again strengthened when hundreds of Sikhs took to the streets of Punjab, armed with sticks and swords, demanding a separatist homeland named ‘Khalistan.’ To control the law-and-order situation, Indian military forces were deployed in different districts of Punjab, resulting in the arrest of more than a hundred Sikhs and the blocking of internet services across the province. The spiritual leader of this protest was Amritpal Singh, who motivated people through his revolutionary ideas and united them for a separate homeland (“How India’s hunt for Amritpal Singh,” 2023a; Roche, 2023). The Sikhs are demanding a separate homeland for the following reasons:

- Demanding a separate homeland for political representation, religious freedom, and opposing government interference in their state matters (Mogul, 2023). In their view, Sikhs were once a distinct nation and kingdom and still possess the right to self-governance. They argue that Sikh religious practices and beliefs lack adequate protection, with adherents facing pressure to convert to other religions and instances of desecration of their sacred texts. Punjab, where 27 million people (58 %) adhere to Sikhism, is considered a religious state for them (Dutta, 2023).
- Additionally, Sikhs face cultural and traditional discrimination in India. Constitutionally, they are not allowed to live according to their religion and culture, experiencing discrimination, particularly under the BJP Modi government, which has leaned towards Hindu nationalism. Currently, hundreds of thousands of Sikhs live abroad due to religious and political discrimination faced in India for decades. These discriminatory practices have strained relations between Sikhs and the Indian state (Ali, 2023).
- Recognition of their identity as a separate nation in an independent homeland (Mogul, 2023). According to them, the Indian government perpetrated genocide against them in the 1980s, a bitter incident still remembered in their history. The Sikh nation vehemently opposed being integrated into India by Britain.
- The Sikh community is concerned about growing unemployment, drug addiction, and discriminatory farmer laws. In their view, unemployment is persistent, and

farmers' grievances are increasing, leading many people to seek opportunities abroad and negatively impacting economic growth (Dutta, 2023).

### **Sikh Diaspora in Support of Khalistan**

The intensity of the separatist movement 'Khalistan' is high both within India and among Sikh communities residing outside the country, where they actively work for the cause of this movement. Most Sikh populations reside in Britain, Canada, and Australia, with a total Sikh population of 25 million scattered across the globe (Mogul, 2023). Sikhs living abroad have significantly strengthened this movement by providing financial support ("How India's hunt for Amritpal Singh," 2023a). Many organizations support this movement, and the Indian government has designated these organizations as terrorist groups under the country's law, known as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

The Indian government views this movement as a significant challenge to its national security. Indian embassies in Britain and the US have been attacked by Sikhs residing there. They have torn down the Indian flag and replaced it with the flag of Khalistan. Sikh protests have also been reported in Canada against the perceived violations of the Indian government and in support of a separate homeland, as most Sikhs are settled in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia for better job opportunities and salaries. A significant number of individuals strongly support the Khalistan movement. During various consensus-building efforts, they have frequently cast their votes favouring a separate homeland within India.

Furthermore, protests erupted when the young Sikh leader Amritpal Singh was apprehended under the National Security Act. During the search, thousands of paramilitary soldiers were deployed, and internet services were shut down to locate him ("Amritpal Singh: Who is he," 2023b). Following his arrest, protests erupted in India and abroad, with Sikh communities organizing demonstrations in cities such as London, San Francisco, Canada, and Canberra. In San Francisco, protesters stormed the Indian Consulate, placed two Khalistan flags inside, and vandalized the premises by breaking glass and windows. Similar incidents were reported at Indian consulates in London, Australia, and Canada (Laskar & Jha, 2023).

Over time, the organizations advocating for the Khalistan movement, such as Babbar Khalsa, All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF), World Sikh Organisation (WSO), and International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), received support primarily from the Sikh Diaspora residing in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and other European countries.

### **Rights of Sikhs in the Indian Constitution**

In the Indian Constitution, the Sikh religion is referenced in certain contexts alongside Hinduism. Article 25 has been a subject of debate, raising concerns regarding its interpretation and the implied association of Sikhs with Hindus. Therefore, Sikhs have been demanding recognition as a separate religious identity in the constitution for a long time. Sikhs oppose the integration of Sikhs into Hinduism, believing that Hindus are marginalizing their identity. They pledge not to allow this and vow to use all peaceful means to protect themselves and their rights (VOA, 2009). Sikhs often advocate for amendments to *Article 25(2)(b)* of the Indian Constitution, which they argue does not fully recognize the distinct identity of the Sikh religion. Sub-clause (1) of *Article 25* affirms the right of all individuals to profess, practice, and propagate their religion, subject to public order, morality, and health considerations. *Sub-clause (2)*, however, empowers the state to enact laws for:



Regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political, or other secular activities associated with religious practice, and (b) providing for social welfare and reform or throwing open Hindu religious institutions of public character to all classes and sections of Hindus. The second part of Article 25 (2) (b) empowers the state to make any law and restriction upon minorities.

Sikhs believe that their religion cannot be equated with Hinduism, nor should it be considered a subset of Hinduism due to fundamental differences in beliefs and practices. For example, in Hinduism, certain sects may restrict access to their places of worship based on caste distinctions. In contrast, Sikhism promotes inclusivity and welcomes individuals from all backgrounds into their religious spaces. Sikhs advocate for recognizing their distinct culture and religion, arguing that they should not be classified under Hinduism. As part of this advocacy, they call for removing every article or provision that suggests their affiliation with Hinduism (Tandon, 2023).

On various occasions, members of the Sikh diaspora have expressed frustration with the Indian Constitution by burning flags and chanting slogans such as 'Sikhs are not Hindus' while voicing their demand for the creation of Khalistan. Furthermore, prominent Sikh leader Gurbatwant Singh Pannun, serving as the legal advisor to Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), has stated that the Indian government is committing severe atrocities against the Sikh community to suppress their freedom movement and struggle for a separate religious identity. He referenced the 1984 genocide of Sikhs during Operation Bluestar, carried out by the Indian government to quell demands to amend Article 25(b) of the constitution. Throughout the current decade, judicial killings of Sikhs have continued as part of this background. Pannun emphasized that the only solution to this discrimination is the establishment of Khalistan, a separatist state for Sikhs. He argues that Sikhs, being the fifth largest religion in the world with 28 million followers, have the right to a separate state. Dr. Bakhshish Singh Sandhu, President of the Washington-based Council of Khalistan, has echoed these sentiments, asserting that Article 25(b) of the Indian constitution exposes India's claims of secularism and democracy as false ("Sikh separatists protest against India," 2019; "Who is Gurbatwant Singh Pannun," 2023).

However, the Indian government has granted administrative powers to Sikhs over Gurdwaras. On March 16, 2016, the Sikh Gurdwaras Amendment Bill was approved in the Rajya Sabha by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Rajnath Singh. This bill amended the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925, delegating administrative, management, and election powers to Sikhs. The Sikh Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) was established as the authoritative organizing and management body, creating separate administration and management committees for various Gurdwaras located in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Chandigarh, etc. The SGPC and all other sub-committees are empowered to organize and manage the Gurdwaras for the Sikh community and to conduct and arrange elections for them (PRS Legislative Research, 2016).

Additionally, a Sikh organization known as 'Sikhs for Justice' (SFJ)<sup>4</sup> is very vocal and advocates for the Khalistan movement and protecting Sikh community rights.

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<sup>4</sup> SFG was established by Sikh leaders. Its main purpose is to secure the rights of the Sikhs and accelerate the separatist movement for an independent state for Sikhs known as Khalistan. To achieve this aim, this organization held a plebiscite in different foreign cities like London, Melbourne, New York, and Sydney. All sections of the referendum had extensive participation from those who voted for a separate motherland.

This organization is currently conducting a referendum targeting Sikhs residing abroad. Its objective is to assert the right to self-rule for Sikhs, a notion supported by the UN Charter and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). According to SFJ, the UN regulations recognize the Sikh community's distinct religious identity, culture, heritage, language, and history, all rooted in Punjab, India ("Sikh separatists protest against India," 2019).

### **India's Accusations of Pakistan Supporting Sikh Separatists**

On September 30th, 1981, five Sikhs hijacked a passenger airplane carrying 111 passengers en route from Delhi to Amritsar as part of their campaign for a separate homeland under the Khalistan movement. Without authorization, they diverted the aircraft to Lahore. The hijackers demanded the release of their imprisoned associates, who were detained on charges of inciting unrest in India. Holding 45 passengers hostage, they insisted on the release of their comrades. After releasing 66 other passengers, Pakistan's government conducted a commando operation, successfully arresting the hijackers. Subsequently, these individuals were executed by Pakistani law ("Pakistanis end Sikh hijacking," 1981). India expressed appreciation to Pakistan for its decisive action in this matter.

Nevertheless, India continued accusing Pakistan of supporting Sikhs seeking a separate homeland, providing them with weapons, training, and financial assistance for their cause. In 1977, India accused Pakistan's President, General Zia-ul-Haq, of showing heightened hospitality toward Sikh pilgrims visiting Pakistan, including hosting them at the President's house and offering gifts to foster goodwill (Aziz, 2015). However, concerns arose as Sikhs had published a map of Khalistan that included parts of Pakistan's Punjab. In response, General Zia directed his government to monitor Sikh visitors closely.

In June 1984, following Operation Blue Star, Dhillon was expelled from India by the Indian government. He relocated to the United States, where he held citizenship. Despite his expulsion, Dhillon frequently visited Pakistan during this period, receiving a warm welcome and hospitality from political leaders with whom he had good relations. This action by Dhillon drew fire from the Indian government, which accused Pakistan of supporting militants against India (Aziz, 2015). India further alleged that Pakistan provided military training and financial assistance to Sikh fighters. Pakistan, however, repeatedly assured India that it did not support Sikhs seeking a separate homeland and had never trained them. Despite these assurances, India continued to place strain on Pakistan over this issue.

Furthermore, the Press Trust of India, India's largest news agency, released a report blaming the US for supporting and participating in the Khalistan movement with Pakistan. The report alleged that during Nixon's presidency, a covert plan known as the Covert Action Plan was established in collaboration with Pakistan's government under General Yahya Khan to create Khalistan, a separate state for Sikhs in India's Punjab. Raman (2007), a retired Indian RAW officer, briefly discussed the plan in his book *The Kaoboys of R & W*. He claimed that the United States encouraged the Sikh separatist movement for Khalistan. According to Raman, Sikh leader Jagjit Singh Chauhan, allegedly motivated by US support, relocated to the UK and rebranded the Sikh Home Rule Movement as Khalistan.

It was said that General Yahya Khan reportedly invited Chauhan to Pakistan and presented him with religious gifts to garner support from the Sikh community. Chauhan also visited the US, briefing journalists and media on human rights violations



in India and meeting with UN officials. These meetings were allegedly organized by the US National Security Council Secretariat, led by Henry Kissinger. During Vice President George W. Bush's visit in 1984, India's government protested these claims, which were subsequently rejected (Aziz, 2015).

During the government of Benazir Bhutto in 1988, General Hameed Gul, the Director General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), suggested to Benazir Bhutto to support the Khalistan movement in India's Punjab. General Gul proposed this as a means to counter any efforts by India to support separatist movements within Pakistan. Initially, Benazir Bhutto agreed to the suggestion. However, later on, in an attempt to improve relations with India, Benazir Bhutto decided to reverse course. It is believed that she handed over all secret information regarding the Khalistan movement and activities of Sikh leaders to India's Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, through a special envoy. With this information, Rajiv Gandhi was able to effectively deal with the Sikh insurgency and bring it to an end (Aziz, 2015).

The Sikh community holds significant influence in the UK and the US. To address this, India's secret agencies are actively working abroad, particularly in these countries, with the primary goal of building diplomatic relations with Sikh Communities to counter their campaigns for the separatist Khalistan movement. Furthermore, these agencies aim to identify organizations covertly funding the Sikh diaspora. India alleges that Pakistan's intelligence agencies are involved in inciting the Sikh community to demand a separate Khalistan state, providing drones and financial support for weapons in Punjab (Sikh Coalition, 2024).

Prime Minister Imran Khan inaugurated the four-kilometer free visa Kartarpur corridor for the Sikh community. The corridor connected Dera Baba Nanak in India's Gurdaspur district with Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur, Pakistan. This fulfilled a long-standing demand of the Sikh community across the border (Syed et al., 2021). Approximately 3500 Sikh pilgrims were granted free visas to celebrate Guru Nanak's 549<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary (Pakistan High Commission, n.d.). The corridor was expected to improve relations between India and Pakistan, which had been strained since the 2008 Mumbai attacks. It was anticipated to increase people-to-people contacts across the borders and boost mutual trade (Syed et al., 2021). The Indian government hesitated to fully support Pakistan's initiative, fearing it might strain relations between Muslims and Sikhs. India has long believed that Pakistan is covertly supporting Sikh separatist movements.

Access to the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur allows Sikhs to engage in religious practices and connect with their spiritual heritage. Additionally, the corridor opens up job opportunities for the Sikh community, both in terms of employment directly related to managing the corridor and indirectly through the potential growth in tourism and related industries. The corridor's establishment represents a significant milestone for the Sikh community, fulfilling a long-standing aspiration for easier access to this sacred site. Overall, the Sikhs see the Kartarpur corridor as a positive development that facilitates their religious practices and holds promise for economic benefits and opportunities (Islam, 2018).

### **Discussion: Regional Implications of the Movement**

The Khalistan Movement is a separatist effort by the Sikh community in India to establish an independent state. Sikhs, numbering about 27 million, are a minority within India's 1.42 billion population. However, their significant concentration in the Punjab region, a crucial province, enhances their demographic and political

influence. This regional majority in Punjab is pivotal to the movement's goal of creating an autonomous Sikh state, emphasizing the community's strategic importance in the Khalistan Movement. The separation of Punjab as a separate state would result in significant strategic and economic losses for India.

This movement poses a persistent security challenge for the Indian government for several reasons: First, Punjab is a crucial province for India, known for its agricultural productivity, cultivated land, and overall development. Second, Punjab shares borders with Pakistan and Kashmir, making its separation a significant security and strategic concern for India. Third, the Separation of Punjab could have healthy implications for the situation in Kashmir, where separatist movements have persisted for decades.

Despite a smaller population, Sikhs have effectively advocated for their rights in India and internationally. Their protests have spotlighted India's democratic and secular claims, often leading to international criticism and reputational damage for the country.

The Sikh community has shown a strong determination for an independent state; their aspirations for a separate state, similar to Southern Sudan's independence, are evident. Southern Sudan, with a minority Christian and non-Muslim population, achieved independence through a referendum in 2011, mainly with support from the U.S. The success of the Khalistan Movement could inspire other separatist movements across India, potentially escalating tensions and destabilizing the country further.

The prospects for cordial and friendly relations between Pakistan and India remain low despite making valuable efforts in Islamabad, such as connecting two Gurdwaras across the border and providing free visa facilities for Sikhs.

The hostile situation in Indian Punjab, where Sikhs demand recognition of their constitutional right to a separate state, plays a crucial role in determining the cordiality of relations between Pakistan and India. These two nations share decades of enmity and a balance of power and have fought three wars over Kashmir, which remains a bone of contention. The Sikh community seeks justice for past injustices, including the Sikh genocide and atrocities committed during Operation Bluestar and after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Therefore, until the grievances of the Sikh community are addressed and resolved by the Indian government, the likelihood of achieving cordial relations between Pakistan and India remains low.

The Khalistan movement and Sikhs' aspirations for a separate state would likely continue to be a significant source of tension, even if the Indian government were to cease all discrimination and fully recognize their constitutional rights. Sikhs perceive their historical right to rule over Punjab as dating back to a time before British colonial rule when they had their kingdom. The desire to revive this historical era with all its glory forms a central part of the Sikh vision for Khalistan.

The Sikhism protests, the Khalistan movement, and the calls for a separatist state such as Khalistan have significantly tarnished India's image as a peaceful, democratic, secular, and human rights-oriented state. The recent events have drawn focus to the internal discord and dissatisfaction within India, historically seen as a symbol of democracy and religious harmony. The calls for Khalistan and the subsequent demonstrations have underscored deep-seated issues and grievances within the Sikh population, prompting concerns about India's capacity to address these concerns impartially and comprehensively. In sum, these occurrences have called into question India's portrayal as a paragon of peace, democracy, secularism, and human rights at home and abroad.

Additionally, India has been accused of mistreating and discriminating against its minorities. As a member of the United Nations, India must enact laws that support and encourage the development of minorities, as per UN agreements. However, it has been criticized for violating these principles by suppressing and discriminating against minority groups (Ali, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023). Furthermore, Sikhs also advocated for government recognition of all minorities within the state, including Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and other communities. This demand is particularly significant given that Sikhs form the majority population in the north-western region of Punjab. Additionally, the Sikh diaspora is sizable, with approximately 240,000 Sikhs residing in Indian-occupied Kashmir and around 80,000 living across various European countries. The growing international presence of Sikhs strengthens their calls for greater recognition and inclusion of minority groups in their local and global contexts (VOA, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

The Khalistan Movement represents the struggle and demand of the Sikh community in India for a separate state. It seeks to establish a separatist state primarily in Punjab and other regions where Sikhs are in the majority. The movement gained significant international attention during the 1980s. Its impact extends beyond India's borders, influencing politics, society, security, and India's peaceful image. The Khalistan issue adds new diplomatic and security dimensions to the longstanding rivalry and history of wars between Pakistan and India. It adds another layer of complexity to the relationship between the two nations, influencing their interactions across different spheres. The Khalistan Movement traces its origins to historical grievances and the aspirations of the Sikh community, evolving in response to perceived injustices and marginalization, notably in the Punjab region. Despite fluctuations in intensity over time, the Khalistan Movement maintains its significance, shaping regional dynamics and impacting the bilateral relations between Pakistan and India.

The Khalistan movement traces its roots back centuries in Sikh history. Various leaders and events have shaped it over time. Notable leaders include Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who gained prominence during Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple. Currently, Amritpal Singh is among the leaders advocating for Khalistan. Sikhs view the demand for Khalistan as their fundamental right, rooted in their distinct national identity. They seek constitutional recognition as a separate nation, religion, and culture. Sikhs demand protection of their religious and cultural identity, as well as justice for past atrocities and genocides perpetrated by the Indian government. The Indian government's actions against Sikhs, including high atrocities and severe violations, have tarnished India's peaceful, democratic, and secular image. This has repercussions regionally and internationally, introducing new diplomatic and security perspectives in India-Pakistan relations.

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