"SO MANY TARGETS"

CONTEXTUALIZING MODERN INDIAN TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION AGAINST THE SIKH COMMUNITY

SECOND EDITION — UPDATED NOVEMBER 2024

THE SIKHCOALITION

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Printed in the United States of America.

Report design by The Sikh Coalition.

The Sikh Coalition is the nation's largest Sikh American civil rights organization. Our organization was founded by volunteers in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, when Sikhs across the nation faced an unprecedented wave of bias, bigotry, and backlash against our visible articles of faith and other aspects of intersectional identity.

For more than 20 years since, we have fought to defend and expand Sikh civil rights in the United States; provide pro bono legal support to Sikhs who face acts of hate, workplace discrimination, and severe school bullying; and push for a generational shift in Sikh awareness via proactive advocacy, education, and community empowerment efforts.

We are proud to serve as a resource on Sikhs and Sikh civil rights concerns for governments, organizations, and individuals. For more information, please visit www.sikhcoalition.org.

A NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Sikh Coalition is the largest Sikh civil rights organization in the United States. We were founded by volunteers in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, in response to a torrent of hate and discrimination, both individual and institutional, against Sikhs throughout the country. For more than 20 years since, we have worked towards a world where Sikhs and other religious minorities in America can freely and fearlessly practice their faith.

Today, in addition to dangers rooted in xenophobia and white supremacy native to the United States, the Sikh Coalition is rising to answer another challenge: Threats to the civil rights and lives of U.S.-based Sikhs from the government of India.

We firmly believe that transnational repression, which is defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as "when foreign governments stalk, intimidate, or assault people in the United States," represents both a violation of U.S. sovereignty and international democratic norms. It is also an unacceptable attempt to intimidate voices and invalidate the rights of marginalized communities like ours. Accordingly, we are undertaking work on this issue because we are gravely concerned about efforts to harm or kill peaceful, law-abiding Sikhs in the United States, as well as broader narratives that seek to paint some or all of the Sikh community as dangerous extremists.

Our hope is that this report serves as a resource for policymakers and other allies to better understand the context, forms, and potential countermeasures of Indian transnational repression against the Sikh community in the United States.

Sincerely,

Harman Singh
Executive Director
Sikh Coalition

WHAT IS TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION?

Transnational repression is defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as when foreign governments "stalk, intimidate, or assault people in the United States."[1] Such behavior is often used to "silence the voices of their citizens (or non-citizens connected to the country), get information from them, or coerce them to return to the country of origin." Per the FBI, transnational repression can take many different forms, including but not limited to:

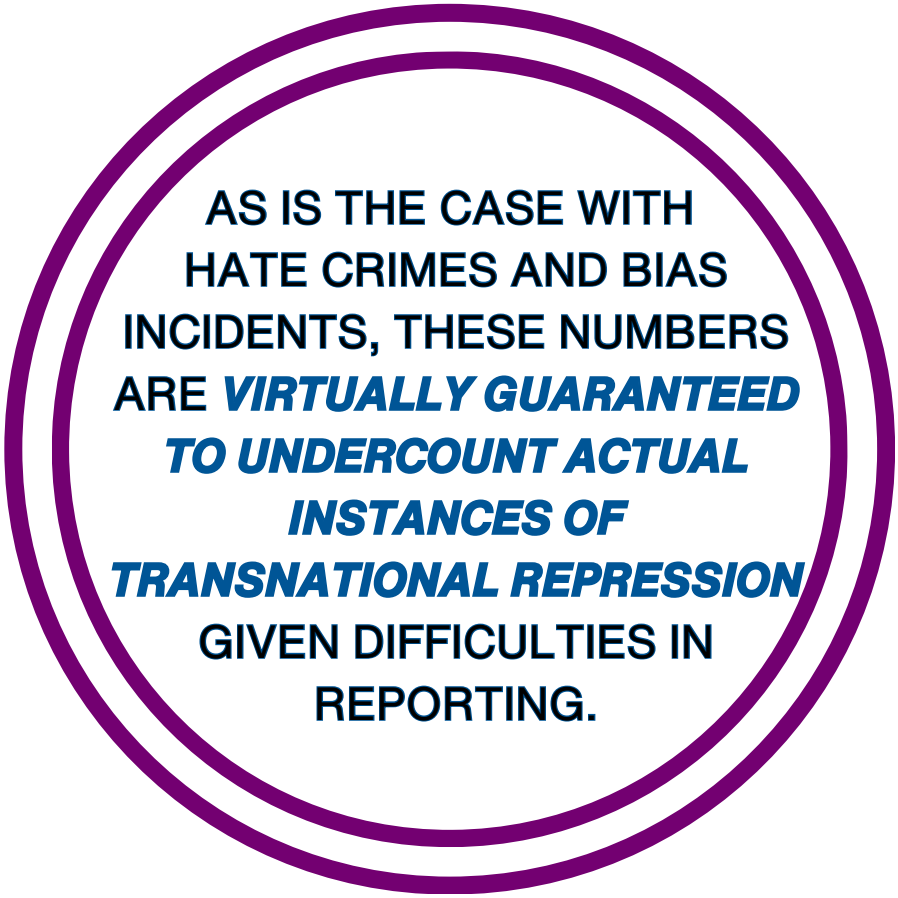
- Stalking
- Harassment
- Hacking
- Assaults
- Attempted kidnapping
- Forcing or coercing the victim to return to the country of origin
- Threatening or detaining family members in the country of origin
- Freezing financial assets
- Online disinformation campaigns

Based on extensive research, Freedom House offers a more comprehensive spread of possible forms of transnational repression, divided among four categories: [2]

Direct Attacks	Long-Distance Threats	Mobility Controls	Co-Opting Other Countries
• Assassination • Assault • Physical intimidation • Unexplained disappearance • Rendition, i.e. abduction or kidnapping	• Coercion-by-proxy such as family intimidation • Digital threat • Spyware	• Passport revocation • Denial of consular service, including issuing or renewing passports • Reporting passports as lost or stolen in order to detain individuals in transit	• Unlawful deportation • Detention • Rendition • Interpol abuse

Transnational repression is often used to target activists and dissidents, journalists, and members of religious, ethnic, or political minority groups. Perhaps for this reason, the conventional wisdom in Washington, DC, primarily views transnational repression as a tool of authoritarian regimes and traditional rivals or adversaries of the United States like Russia, China, and Iran. The problem, however, is more widespread: in its 2024 report referenced above, Freedom House identified more than 1,000 cases of transnational repression originating from 44 different countries (an increase of 6 countries since 2023). As is the case with hate crimes and bias incidents, these numbers are virtually guaranteed to undercount actual instances of transnational repression given difficulties in reporting, including a lack of awareness of resources or recourse among targeted communities and victims' justifiable fears of retribution for speaking out or seeking aid.

Finally, it must be noted that the concept of transnational repression committed by a strategic partner and ally of the United States—and one that holds itself to be a democracy—presents a unique policy challenge. There is a low political cost, an obvious national security advantage, and a simple motivation rooted in American values to push back against authoritarian adversaries of the United States who conduct operations within our borders. What is less immediately clear in Washington, as evidenced by both the Biden Administration's lukewarm response to Indian transnational repression and the Trump Administration's failure to react to a high profile instance of Saudi Arabian transnational repression in 2018, is how to respond forcefully when U.S. strategic interests are at play.[3] Thankfully, there is bipartisan momentum to address the issue of transnational repression in Congress, as well as positive examples from allies abroad who have found ways to push back on India's aggressive behavior in particular—both of which are explored in the Policy Recommendations section of this report.



INDIAN TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION AGAINST THE SIKH COMMUNITY

Many in the global Sikh diaspora have long harbored fears and suspicions that the government of India (GOI) has worked to chill dissent from, discredit, threaten, or harm Sikhs around the world. For several decades, U.S.-based Sikhs in particular have raised the alarm about the role of Indian consulates, proxies, media sources, and hired informants or "agents" in targeting Sikhs. Explicit allegations of Indian transnational repression by other nation-states, however, did not become part of the mainstream international dialogue until a series of events beginning in June of 2023. In addition to an accounting of these events, however, at least some historical context is necessary to better understand this modern wave of Indian transnational repression.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For the past four decades, a Sikh independence movement has sought to carve out a separate nation-state called Khalistan in the Punjab region of South Asia. This self-determinative demand for Khalistan, while not shared by all Sikhs, has roots in both the historical and cultural differences between Sikhs and the modern Indian state. The Sikh Empire, once an independent political entity, existed for roughly 50 years in Punjab, pre-dating both modern India and British colonial India. Moreover, Sikhs have a distinct cultural and religious identity, and many believe that their rights and interests have been ignored or even suppressed by the Indian state since the mid-20th century.

Operation Blue Star,[4] the 1984 Sikh Genocide,[5] and a subsequent "Decade of Disappearances" organized by the GOI[6] also play a significant role in these calls for self-determination. There is ample history of anti-Sikh discrimination and violence in South Asia pre-dating the 1980s, but the genocidal violence from 1984 to the mid-1990s (and additional political repression since) greatly informs some opinions in the diaspora about the viability of or need for Khalistan—especially given that it fueled an emigration of Sikhs from India seeking asylum or simply greater security and opportunity in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere.

Pursuant to laws on international human rights, communities have the right to determine if they want to be a part of a nation-state or not. Regrettably, India has criminalized the right of self-determination for Sikhs and overbroadly deems any expression in support of this political belief as terroristic.[7] Political movements for Khalistan in Punjab, which amassed electoral strength in the 1980s and 1990s, have lost momentum in recent years given ongoing repression by the GOI. As a result, much of the movement's organizing focus has moved overseas throughout diasporic communities—including in the proposal and execution of non-binding 'Khalistan Referendums,' where Sikhs can vote in favor of or against the idea of establishing a Sikh nation-state. Canadian Sikh Hardeep Singh Nijjar was participating in the organization of one such referendum upon his assassination in 2023 (see more below).

As a final note, the increase in modern Indian transnational repression cannot be discussed without reflecting on the political trajectory and ideological bent of India's current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Mr. Modi, a member of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has served as Prime Minister since 2014. Under his tenure, international human rights organizations have charted significant democratic backsliding in India, including a continual decline in press freedom,[8] increasing mistreatment of religious minorities,[9] frequent suppression of peaceful protests,[10] prolific use of internet blackouts,[11] and instances of harassment of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).[12] Mr. Modi makes no secret of his government's ideological orientation, nor that it is willing to indulge in extrajudicial assassinations abroad: Speaking at a campaign rally in April of 2024, he boasted that, "Today, even India's enemies know...[t]his New India comes into your home to kill you."[13]

RECENT FLASHPOINTS (2023 TO PRESENT)

On September 18, 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that Canadian intelligence agencies were "pursuing credible allegations of a potential link" between the government of India and the June 2023 murder of Canadian Sikh Hardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia.[14] Mr. Nijjar—a plumber, gurdwara (Sikh house of worship) president, and Khalistan referendum organizer—was shot to death in his car outside of a gurdwara. His assailants, who riddled his body with 34 bullets, fled the scene on foot before escaping in a getaway car—details suggesting not just a premeditated murder, but a planned assassination.[15] Prime Minister Trudeau's announcement was significant to many in the Sikh diaspora because it marked the first time a world power was openly accusing India of transnational repression—specifically against the Sikh community.

Roughly one year after Prime Minister Trudeau's announcement, the Canadian government ordered six Indian diplomats to leave the country, including India's top representative in Ottawa.[16] According to the Washington Post, they did so after finding that those diplomats were directly involved in gathering intelligence on members of the Sikh community who were later killed, threatened, or attacked by India's criminal proxies.[17] On the same day, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) broke from their general practice of refraining from publicly disclosing information about ongoing investigations, saying that they were motivated to address the public now due to "the significant threat to public safety" in Canada posed by the GOI's activities.[18] The RCMP shared that they have uncovered information about the "breadth and depth of criminal activity orchestrated by agents of the Government of India, and consequential threats to the safety and security of Canadians and individuals living in Canada." One such finding was that agents of the GOI have used individuals and businesses in Canada and elsewhere—sometimes by threatening and coercing them or their family members back in India—to collect information, and then used that information to target Sikhs in Canada.

The Washington Post expanded on this finding, stating that Canadian officials "described an operational 'chain' in which Indian diplomats in Canada collect intelligence on alleged Sikh separatists that [was] then used by [India's Research and Analysis Wing, or 'RAW'] to identify targets for attacks carried out by a criminal syndicate led by Lawrence Bishnoi . . . Specifically, officials told reporters that they have uncovered evidence of the GOI's involvement in home invasions, drive-by shootings, arson, and at least one additional killing—the murder of Sukhdool Singh, who was shot in Winnipeg two days after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau publicly acknowledged a potential link between the GOI and the murder of Sikh Canadian Hardeep Singh Nijjar last June."[19] The Post also reported that Ajit Doval, India's national security adviser and "one of [Indian Prime Minister] Modi's closest confidants," admitted to Canadian officials during a meeting on Saturday that India used its diplomats in Canada to follow people, take pictures, "et cetera." Shortly afterwards, Canadian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister David Morrison publicly confirmed that he told the Washington Post that Indian Home Minister Amit Shah had ordered a campaign of violence, intimidation and intelligence-gathering targeting Sikhs in Canada.[20]

Following the RCMP's announcement, Prime Minister Trudeau was joined by Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly and Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc in emphasizing that the RCMP was sharing this information now despite the ongoing status of their investigations in an attempt to (1) keep Canadians safe, (2) disrupt the information sharing pattern involving Indian diplomats uncovered by the RCMP, and (3) ensure that Canadians feel safe knowing that the RCMP is acting on this matter.[21] Of note, Minister Joly also stated that she hoped Canada's actions were "sending a strong message to other Western democracies that are dealing with this, because this is not only happening in Canada."[22]

Canada, however, was not the only country approaching a reckoning with Indian transnational repression in 2023. On November 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) unsealed an indictment detailing charges against Nikhil Gupta, an Indian arms and narcotics trafficker, who was allegedly recruited by a representative of the GOI to plan at least one assassination of a Sikh American in New York City.[23] Per text messages included in the indictment, the murder was to be timed around both the Nijjar assassination and Mr. Modi's June 2023 state visit to the United States. Moreover, at least three additional similar plots were in the works; Gupta wrote to his contact (actually an undercover Drug Enforcement Administration agent) that there were "so many targets" to pursue.

Again, roughly one year later on October 17, 2024, the DOJ unsealed a second indictment against the then-RAW officer, a man named Vikash Yadav, who was directing this plot.[24] Allegations in the indictment, along with public reporting, have suggested that more senior RAW officers and other individuals in Prime Minister Modi's government likely knew about the plans to assassinate Sikhs abroad. The DOJ's indictment states that Yadav shared with Gupta real-time intel on the movement of their intended victim, at one point telling Gupta that the targeted individual "is not at home according to our sources," and advising Gupta to ensure "his presence before entering inside." On the same occasion, Yadav also told Gupta that he "got the message from boss." These allegations imply that Yadav was in contact with "sources" in New York City who were tracking the movements of the intended victim, and that someone apparently more senior to Yadav, whom he referred to as "boss," was also involved in tracking the intended victim's movements.

Though the GOI has broadly denied any culpability in plots to assassinate Sikhs in Canada or the United States, a steady stream of further reporting continues to provide evidence that this is not the case. The Intercept confirmed that Sikhs in the United States were warned about threats to their lives by federal law enforcement following Mr. Nijjar's death—just as Mr. Nijjar himself had been.[25] Moreover, the Washington Post's interviews with dozens of "current and former senior officials in the United States, India, Canada, Britain, Germany and Australia" have provided additional critical insights, including the abovementioned point that more senior RAW officers and other individuals in Mr. Modi's government likely knew about the plans to assassinate Sikhs abroad.[26]

The Post's reporting in particular explores the context of the growing reach and changing philosophy (shifting to a strategy of "offensive defense") of the RAW and other elements within Mr. Modi's government, including Indian national security adviser Ajit Doval. The Post's inclusion of former RAW chief Samant Goel as someone who likely green-lit the assassinations is particularly relevant given his documented role in GOI's previous genocidal violence against Sikhs. Per human rights organization Ensaaf, which studies and documents the Sikh Genocide of 1984 and subsequent repression, "at least 128 enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions were committed under [Goel's] command during his tenure as Senior Superintendent of Police in various jurisdictions of Punjab in the 1990s." [27]

This general assertion that the GOI is increasingly willing to use transnational repression to accomplish policy goals is corroborated by an alleged memo from India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), leaked in December 2023, which "instructed its consulates in North America to launch a 'sophisticated crackdown scheme' against Sikh diaspora organizations," including organizations in the United States.[28] The MEA memo lists the names of several members of the Sikh diaspora, including Mr. Nijjar, who was assassinated two months after the memo was issued. In the MEA memo, Sikhs' expressions of free speech and political dissent were conflated with extremism and terrorism as the MEA mischaracterized its targeting of Sikhs abroad as a fight against Khalistani "extremism."

More worryingly, the MEA memo admits India's frustration with those who were "actively engaged in anti-India propaganda, attempting to degrade India's international image" and that the United States and Canada were "asserting that these organizations have not committed any crime within their territories." Nonetheless, the MEA memo identifies three requests of Indian missions and consulates in the United States:

1. Increase clandestine security operations, including a "sophisticated crackdown scheme" on Sikhs in the United States and Canada and increased surveillance between Sikhs and elected officials;
2. Influence authorities, think tanks, and political figures to foster a "favorable atmosphere"; and
3. Cultivate a "vital force in the street" through U.S.-based organizations (including the U.S.-India Business Council and Indiaspora, among other organizations).

Taken together, the MEA memo, the emerging evidence in and research around the Canadian and U.S. investigations, and the continued hardline rhetoric from the GOI and its media apparatus make it clear: India is increasingly willing to engage in transnational repression.

CASE STUDIES: U.S.-BASED SIKHS IMPACTED BY TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

To be sure, the assassination of Mr. Nijjar and foiled plot to conduct similar extrajudicial killings throughout the United States are the most egregious examples of Indian transnational repression. The reality, however, is that many U.S.-based Sikh individuals, journalists, activists, elected officials, and organizations have experienced other behavior under the broad umbrella of transnational repression on the basis of their Sikh identity and/or their political views.

To showcase the range of Indian transnational repression against the U.S.-based Sikh community, the Sikh Coalition conducted numerous interviews with individuals who have experienced such threats and dangers firsthand. Unless otherwise sourced, the below information comes from those conversations. Some accounts have been anonymized to protect the subjects or their families from retribution—a near-universal fear that continues to limit the number of transnational repression reports filed with the federal government.[29]

MANY U.S.-BASED SIKH INDIVIDUALS, JOURNALISTS, ACTIVISTS, ELECTED OFFICIALS, AND ORGANIZATIONS ***HAVE EXPERIENCED BEHAVIOR UNDER THE BROAD UMBRELLA OF TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION*** ON THE BASIS OF THEIR SIKH IDENTITY AND/OR THEIR POLITICAL VIEWS.

THREATS OF VIOLENCE AND SURVEILLANCE:
DR. AMARJIT SINGH, JOURNALIST, AND DR. PRITPAL SINGH, ACTIVIST

Four days after Hardeep Singh Nijjar was assassinated, 70-year-old Sikh journalist Dr. Amarjit Singh was traveling from a protest in Washington, DC, back to his home in New York when he received a phone call from someone who identified themselves as an FBI agent. The caller told him that his life might be in danger and recommended that he take precaution and avoid further traveling. In response, Dr. Singh canceled an upcoming trip to Canada, and for the following several months, remained primarily at home and exercised increased vigilance during his necessary commutes to and from work. Dr. Singh hosts a live news show on YouTube, where he also began to notice more threats against himself than usual in the show's live chat—including messages that said "it is your turn now."

This was not the first time the FBI had warned Dr. Singh to be cautious. In a conversation with the Sikh Coalition, Dr. Singh explained that in 1992, FBI agents visited his office and expressed that they were concerned about his security as a high profile figure and advised him to never travel alone or openly share details about his schedule. More than 30 years later, Dr. Singh believes that his life remains in danger: He never commutes to work by himself, and he doesn't share his upcoming business travel destinations as early as he did before. He told the Sikh Coalition that he is even mindful of the food that he eats, given concerns among the Sikh community that poisonings have been used to mask Indian transnational repression in years prior.[30]

Similarly, Dr. Pritpal Singh, the founder of the American Sikh Caucus Committee, was one of the first members of the Sikh American community to publicly confirm that he had received a "duty to warn" phone call from the FBI shortly after Mr. Nijjar's assassination.[31] Per a conversation with reporters from the Intercept, Dr. Singh said that two FBI agents informed him in person in late June of 2023 that "they had received information that there was a threat against [his] life." He went on to tell the Sacramento Bee that two days after that conversation with the FBI, security cameras at his home in Fremont, CA, captured images of the driver of a "dark SUV" taking cell phone photographs of the building.[32] According to Dr. Singh's interview with the Bee, this was the third such surveillance incident at his family home, but he was "particularly alarm[ed] that [this] vehicle appeared to have one of its side windows removed and replaced with a flexible membrane through which a weapon could be fired."

The public reporting that has featured Dr. Amarjit Singh and Dr. Pritpal Singh's experiences make one common point clear: Additional stories of individuals experiencing warnings, threats, and surveillance exist, but the majority of the targeted individuals are too fearful for their own safety to speak out publicly, lest doing so paints an even bigger target on their own backs. This is just one measure of the cost of transnational repression: A deliberate chilling of diasporic communities under threat, with a particular interest in stopping those whose trades—in this case, valuable journalism and activism—contribute to civic engagement and civil society.

MOBILITY CONTROLS
ANGAD SINGH, JOURNALIST

In 2022, Angad Singh—then working as a journalist for VICE News—wanted to return to India for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic nearly claimed the lives of several of his relatives, including his grandmother who is sick with cancer. An American-born citizen, Singh visited India more than a dozen times since his childhood, facilitated by his status as an Overseas Citizen of India (OCI), which allows lifelong entry to India for personal reasons. Arriving at the airport, Singh was detained at customs, had his passport confiscated, and spent hours answering questions from Indian immigration officials before being denied entry into the country without explanation and sent back to New York.

Singh contacted the Indian Consulate for an explanation, but ultimately had to sue the Indian government to get an answer. Through that process, he found out he had been "blacklisted," and his status as an OCI would be revoked, all because of a 2020 documentary he worked on with VICE News about India's constitution and a new citizenship law that excludes Muslims; India claims he "indulged in blatant anti national propaganda to defame the country," and "presented a very negative view of India's secular credentials." Reception to that film was quite different in the United States: "India Burning" was awarded the prestigious Columbia DuPont Silver Baton Award, The Overseas Press Club: Edward R. Murrow Award, and was quoted by the U.N. Under-Secretary General on the Prevention of Genocide in a letter about India's discriminatory treatment of Muslims.

Singh's case to get off the blacklist and have his OCI re-instated is still in court. Unfortunately, his circumstances are not unique. News outlet Article 14 has documented more than 100 cases[33] of the OCI cards of those critical of Mr. Modi being revoked, and Human Rights Watch notes that individuals without OCI status simply have their visas denied.[34] Moreover, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression has alleged that "some journalists from India living abroad have reported that the harassment of family members at home has led them to self-censor or desist from applying for asylum" in the first place.[35] In a conversation with the Sikh Coalition, Singh noted that none of his colleagues at VICE were ever granted a visa after the release of the film for which he was blacklisted. Additionally, Singh was told by a journalist that an Indian government official had referred to him on the record as "that Khalistani journalist"—an alarming conflation of Sikh identity and political views on Khalistan, which India views as a terrorist movement, even though the issue of a separate Sikh homeland had never been a part of Singh's work.

MOBILITY CONTROLS

STOCKTON GURDWARA, CALIFORNIA, AND OTHER ACCOUNTS

Members of the Indian diaspora, regardless of their level of power and influence, have long expressed concerns that the GOI might limit their mobility in retaliation for criticism. In 2024, U.S. Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, a vocal critic of the Modi regime, said "I'm always thinking about the impact on my family ... if there was some attempt to not allow me back into India." [36]

These concerns are not unfounded. Established in 1912, the gurdwara in Stockton, California, is the oldest gurdwara in the United States.[37] Today, it is both a place of worship and a well-known hub for conversation and political activism for individuals who support the Khalistan movement.[38] Security footage from the gurdwara on September 7, 2023, shows a man walk into the gurdwara and have a conversation with one of the gurdwara's granthis (religious leader who has studied Sikh scripture extensively), before making a call on his cellphone and getting picked up in a black 2023 Cadillac Escalade.[39] According to the gurdwara's former secretary, the man told the granthi that he was a representative of the GOI; he warned the granthi that the GOI is watching them and is aware of their activities, and that the gurdwara must stop its activism for Khalistan. He showed the granthi an ID card and said that he worked for U.S. immigration, and that members of the gurdwara would not get visas if they continued their activism. He allegedly asked the granthi for phone numbers of other members of the gurdwara, which the granthi provided him.

The gurdwara's president and the former secretary later received phone calls from an unknown person. The former secretary said that the person on the phone told him "if you work with us, you'll be happy forever." Speaking in Hindi, he told the former secretary that he knew the "head of immigration," and that if the former secretary wished to bring his brother or sister to the United States, he could help him—as long as he agreed to work for "them." Later, the former secretary received a text message from an unknown sender, who asked if the former secretary wanted to "work with us." The sender did not provide their name, but they said that they worked for the BJP, and that they would pay the former secretary if he worked in the United States as a BJP leader and told Indians to vote for the BJP.

Several gurdwaras located in the midwest, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, have expressed similar concerns, telling the Sikh Coalition that individuals claiming to be acting on behalf of the GOI have attempted to gather information on their political activities. Their concerns include potential monitoring of local gurdwara elections and questioning community members or gurdwaras as a whole on their support of Khalistan.

Additionally, the Sikh Coalition spoke with a Sikh male in his 20s, who is a U.S. citizen from California and traveled to India in 2019. Upon arrival in New Delhi, customs officials initiated a line of questioning related to this individual's Sikh identity—specifically asking about his affiliation with various gurdwaras in the Bay Area, as well as aggressively pursuing information about his family, their immigration status, and their reason for leaving India for the United States decades prior. The individual, who wishes to remain anonymous, believes the line of questioning was intended to gather information on U.S. based gurdwaras and their political activism. In all of these cases, the trend of transnational repression targeting houses of worship represents not just how India's behavior blurs the line between attacks on political speech and freedom of religion, but a broad effort to cast a pall over Sikh public life in general by undermining the notion of the gurdwara as a safe, open place foundational to Sikh communities across the country.

POLITICAL INTIMIDATION

SWARANJIT SINGH KHALSA, CITY COUNCIL MEMBER IN NORWICH, CT

In 2018, Swaranjit Singh Khalsa—then a Norwich, Connecticut, Board of Education member and small business owner—spearheaded a state-level resolution recognizing the 1984 Sikh Genocide.[40] Upon introduction of the resolution, Mr. Khalsa learned that individuals representing the GOI approached then-Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy to influence his decision-making and encourage him to not support the resolution. Simultaneously, Mr. Khalsa learned that the Consul General of India (New York) sent a letter to discourage State Senator Catherine Osten from supporting the resolution. In this letter, the Consul General asserted that there was "no persecution of Sikhs in India," placed the blame for any anti-Sikh violence on "Sikh terrorists," and claimed that Connecticut-based Sikhs in support of the resolution were "fringe" and "radical."[41] The letter also confirms that the Consul General "met with the Hon'ble Governor of Connecticut in this regard."

In June of 2019, Mr. Khalsa, alongside other Sikh community members in Connecticut, went on to work with Norwich City Council members to install a Sikh Genocide memorial, which included a plaque highlighting Sikh history and artwork depicting a Sikh martyr, in Norwich's Otis Library. The memorial, however, was removed within just a few months; Mr. Khalsa learned through conversations with library officials that the Consulate directly pressured the Library Director to remove the Sikh Genocide Memorial, and the Associated Press corroborated these accounts.[42] Then, in November of 2022, a digital billboard containing messages about the Sikh community—including one that said, "Stop promoting Pakistan sponsored Khalistan terrorists" and images of individuals with turbans and guns—were spotted around Norwich.[43] Mr. Khalsa and local Sikh community members believe these digital billboards were intended to spread fear and disinformation about the Connecticut Sikh community among the general population, and to intimidate members of the community themselves.

Overall, the experiences of Mr. Khalsa and the Norwich Sikh community confirm that the GOI, via its consulates, is intimately familiar with the state- and local-level political activities of at least some Sikhs. The willingness to flex political power against state resolutions or even local library displays betrays a granularity to such operations. And while unconfirmed to be connected to the GOI, the billboard trucks certainly fit the pattern of a deliberate conflation of Sikhs with Khalistanis and Khalistanis with terrorists or extremists.

In any case, all of this behavior cannot be viewed in a vacuum—especially given that Canada's Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference continues to yield evidence of the GOI's willingness to use "foreign interference [that] aims to align Canada's position with India's interest on ... how the Indian government perceives Canada-based supporters of an independent Sikh homeland." [44]

INFRINGEMENT ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

NUMEROUS ACCOUNTS

The Sikh Coalition spoke to several individuals who had experiences at the nexus of academic freedom and transnational repression:

- One anonymous Sikh scholar based in the United States described two separate occasions in their career—once in the 1990s, and one in the 2020s—wherein they witnessed individuals connected to the GOI working to undermine the founding of Sikh Studies programs at Western universities. These efforts ranged from undermining Sikh community fundraising for endowments to pushing universities to focus on 'South Asian Studies' rather than Sikh Studies.

- This individual also described multiple instances in their career where they were confronted, including after new job appointments or following public speaking engagements, by individuals seeking information on the direction of their work, the agenda behind their teaching, and other such ideologically-driven questions. This academic also detailed a years-long campaign to discredit their work, and, in general, described a persistent climate of surveillance throughout Sikh academic spaces for the last several decades.

- Another U.S.-based Sikh academic who wishes to remain anonymous told the Sikh Coalition that he was surveilled by Indian police while conducting fellowship research in Punjab in the early 2010s. The police threatened him as well as members of his family. As a direct result of these threats, and under the guidance of his academic advisers and fellowship adviser, the academic surrendered their fellowship, returned to the United States, and has yet to return to India for fear of their safety.

- In 2020, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, a Canadian think tank, published a report alleging that the desire for Sikh self-determination is an artificial movement driven by the government of Pakistan;[45] in response, more than 50 Sikh scholars published an open letter objecting to the contents of the report.[46] The Sikh Coalition spoke with multiple signers of that letter about the pushback and repercussions that they faced; one of them, Tejpaul Singh Bainiwal, shared how Indian media subsequently began smearing the signatories as affiliated with or connected to Pakistan as well.[47]

- Mr. Bainiwal was also involved in organizing several panels for the American Academy of Religion in 2021. He invited several Indian scholars to speak on the Farmers' Protests taking place in India. Initially, these scholars accepted his invitation, only to later cancel; according to Mr. Bainiwal, they told him that they could not participate in the panels, because they were not allowed to discuss domestic issues abroad under Indian policy. Of note, that same year, several participants withdrew from an academic conference on the issue of Hindu nationalism sponsored by Harvard and 52 other universities, over fears that their participation would lead to them being barred from or arrested in India.[48] Those who did participate received violent threats against themselves and their families, and university officials received more than one million emails pressuring them to withdraw, likely as part of an organized campaign by groups in India and the United States.

Clearly, threats against individuals in academia represent a nuanced and varied form of transnational repression. Like threats at gurdwaras, however, these efforts are inherently connected to a wider effort to chill discussions about history, culture, and self-determination throughout the global diaspora; as one individual who spoke to the Sikh Coalition explained, attacks on Sikh academics are inherently related to the ability of the diasporic community to both define and reflect on itself independent of Punjab or India.

CENSORSHIP AND DIGITAL THREATS

THE SIKH COALITION—AND NUMEROUS OTHER ACCOUNTS

In February 2024, the Sikh Coalition sent a letter to President Biden urging his administration to take a principled stand in support of the human rights of protesting farmers in India. Within two weeks of posting about the letter on the social media website X, we received a received a "notice of withholding" explaining that "X [had] received a legal removal demand from the Government of India" alleging that our post about our letter to the president "violate[d] India's Information Technology Act, 2000." As per X's policy, the post in question remains censored in India. As if to underscore the connection between Indian transnational repression and the complex nature of digital, ideologically-driven harassment, a post from the Sikh Coalition about the notice of withholding received a threatening comment from a since-deleted account: "follow the land of law if you don't back off next nijjar gonna be you [gun emoji]".

The Sikh Coalition, of course, is far from the first to face these issues. Individuals, organizations, and journalists both in India and around the world have experienced a dramatic uptick in GOI-driven online censorship across platforms, including X and Meta's Facebook and Instagram. Waves of censorship have come in response to specific events (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic[49] or the Farmers' Protest[50]) or anniversaries like remembrance of the 1984 Sikh genocide;[51] they are also often targeted specifically at journalists.[52]

This behavior is not limited to Sikh, Indian, or India-based voices, with more recent censorship targeting a British documentary about Mr. Modi's human rights record[53] and a Canadian documentary on transnational repression.[54]

Moreover, all of this repression is often linked to online harassment campaigns driven by the likes of Disinfo Lab, an industrial scale covert influence operation run by Indian intelligence officers that whips pro-Modi online accounts to amplify conspiracy theories and direct online harassment.[55] Even U.S.-based, non-Indian reporters are not exempt: When Wall Street Journal reporter Sabrina Siddiqui asked a simple question of Mr. Modi about India's human rights record during the 2023 state visit, she was subjected to a torrent of abuse online from accounts claiming to represent Mr. Modi's supporters.[56]

INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND JOURNALISTS BOTH IN INDIA AND AROUND THE WORLD HAVE EXPERIENCED A DRAMATIC UPTICK IN *GOI-DRIVEN ONLINE CENSORSHIP ACROSS PLATFORMS.*

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The rapid pace of revelations around Indian transnational repression risks any static list of policy recommendations becoming outdated within weeks of publication. To this end, the Sikh Coalition has created and maintains a list of policy recommendations pertaining to transnational repression for multiple stakeholders in government—including the White House, various federal agencies, and Congress—in a separate and easily updated file online.

Please don't hesitate to email advocacy@sikhcoalition.org with any questions about our recommendations or the context and experiences detailed within this report.

CONCLUSION

The United States cannot afford inaction or inconsistency on transnational repression. A robust response is necessary for the sake of U.S.-based Sikh communities, who deserve to have their civil rights and lives protected by their government. It is also necessary, however, to maintain U.S. national security at home and both leadership and standing on the world stage. When speaking to the Washington Post for the above-cited piece, a Western security official was "[a]sked why India would risk attempting an assassination on U.S. soil;" the individual replied "Because they knew they could get away with it."

The lesson of 2023, then, could not be more clear: To stand for international norms and democratic values, project strength, and keep our communities safe from malign influences abroad, consequences for India's specific behavior and a broad, thoughtful, and proactive approach to countering transnational repression by allies and adversaries alike must be a bipartisan priority in Washington moving forward.

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