



THE KHALISTAN MOVEMENT: PAST ROOTS, GLOBAL DIMENSIONS, AND MODERN LANDSCAPE

BAKU 2026



THE ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY OF SIKHISM

The Sikh religious community was formed in approximately the XV century on the Indian subcontinent, in the Punjab province, which at that time was part of the Delhi Sultanate, by Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and the first of the ten Sikh Gurus (the Gurus are regarded as spiritual masters in Sikhism). Sikhism is a monotheistic and panentheistic religion. The philosophy of the religion is based on equality, social service, and harmony between spiritual development and everyday moral conduct.

Over time, Sikhs developed a distinct culture in the Punjab region, using their own language (Punjabi), script (the Gurmukhi script), and forming a structured social organization. For this reason, some scholars describe Sikhs not only as a religious community, but also as a people or a nation.



In 1799, a multi-ethnic Sikh Empire was established, with Lahore as its capital. Its founder and first Maharaja was Ranjit Singh.

As a result of the First Anglo-Sikh War, the Sikh Empire was dismantled in 1849 into separate principalities, and the largest region, Punjab, was annexed by Britain. Following the annexation, the concept of “lost sovereignty” emerged among Sikhs in connection with the loss of their independent state.



THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1947 PARTITION

The city of Lahore and the province of Punjab were historically regarded as the cradle of the Sikh religion. In 1947, during the partition of the subcontinent, the province of Punjab was divided into two parts. During this process, the specific political and territorial interests of the Sikh community did not play a determining role in the final decisions. Following the partition, the Indian subcontinent was shaken by numerous national and religious conflicts. Approximately one million people were killed, and millions were displaced. The city of Amritsar and the Golden Temple remained within the territory of India.



In the first decades following India's independence, although Sikhs achieved economic growth in the regions where they lived, their political expectations were not fulfilled. In a number of laws, Sikhs were classified as Hindus, while demands for linguistic and administrative autonomy were rejected by the central authorities. In the 1960s, the "Green Revolution" in the agricultural sector turned Punjab into India's "granary"; however, inequality among the peasantry, widespread indebtedness, and rising unemployment among youth intensified, further fueling discontent.



THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW PHASE IN THE 1970S



Against the backdrop of overt discriminatory policies toward Sikhs, some Sikh leaders laid the foundations of a movement calling for greater autonomy, while others advocated full independence—that is, the creation of a Khalistan state. The Shiromani Akali Dal party, the principal political organization operating in India's Punjab state and representing the interests of the Sikh community, began to openly support the establishment of an independent Khalistan state. As a result of sustained Sikh pressure, the Indian state of Punjab was reorganized in 1966; however, another faction within the party was not satisfied with this outcome and continued to advance independence as its primary objective.

As a result of divisive actions carried out by the Indian government within the Shiromani Akali Dal, stability was disrupted in 1975. The liberal faction advocated integration within a unified Indian state, while the nationalist faction, under the leadership of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, demanded the right to self-determination. Exploiting the violent clashes that occurred in 1978, the central authorities further intensified their repressive policies.



1980-1984: ESCALATION AND “OPERATION BLUE STAR”

Between 1980 and 1984, large-scale clashes took place between Sikh armed groups and the forces of India’s central authorities. During this period, nearly 1,200 bombings and assassination attempts were recorded. During the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent, approximately 200,000–250,000 Sikhs were killed and more than two million displaced amid widespread communal clashes.

One of the contributing factors to rising tensions in the early 1980s was the perception among many Sikhs that, although the community had achieved considerable economic progress, their political demands were



not fully reflected within the existing administrative framework. In June 1984, the Indian government launched a military operation known as “Operation Blue Star.” During the operation, army and police units entered the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, resulting in significant casualties, including the death of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Mob attacks targeted Sikh communities in Delhi and several other Indian cities. According to findings reported by judicial commissions and international human rights organizations, 3,000 - 4,000 Sikhs were killed within a few days, while thousands of homes and businesses were destroyed.

The events surrounding Operation Blue Star had a profound impact on the Sikh population and generated strong emotional reactions among Sikh communities abroad. These events had long-lasting psychological, social, and political effects on the Sikh community and continue to shape their collective memory and perception of security within the Indian state. For many Sikhs, the operation became a defining moment of trauma and is remembered in community narratives as “Ghallughara.”



THE PERIOD OF REPRESSION AND FRAGMENTATION

On October 7, 1987, a political organization “Khalistan Council,” based in Washington, D.C., US, declared the establishment of the independent “Republic of Khalistan.” Persecutions by the Indian authorities against members of the Sikh community intensified once again.

Between 1985 and 1990, tens of thousands of people lost their lives as a result of those clashes. During this period, the influential Sikh diaspora based in the USA, Canada, and the United Kingdom provided ideological and financial support to the movement. Gurmit Singh Aulakh, residing in the United States, was even proclaimed “President of Khalistan.”

THE POST-MILITANT PERIOD AND THE ROLE OF THE DIASPORA

Within the diaspora, particularly in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the USA, the idea of Khalistan continued to endure. Sikh diaspora organizations based in Canada emerged as the most active pillar of the Khalistan movement.

In 1992, elections to the Punjab Legislative Assembly were held. Most Sikh political groups, particularly the Akali Dal factions, boycotted these elections, citing government repression and the massacres of 1984. As a result, voter turnout amounted to only 23.9 percent. This outcome was described as a “victory of the boycott” and exposed a crisis of legitimacy for the government in Indian Punjab.

In 1995, the assassination of Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh significantly weakened the movement’s activities.

In 2023, following the killing of Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, who resided in Canada, India–Canada relations became further strained. A diplomatic crisis emerged between the two countries after the Canadian government stated that it considered Indian intelligence services to be suspects in the killing.

In June 2023, an assassination attempt was carried out in the USA against activist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) uncovered the plot and identified Vikash Yadav, an Indian intelligence officer, as its organizer. Following the FBI’s disclosure, the Indian government initially refrained from

commenting, but later acknowledged that Yadav was an “agent acting without official authorization.” After the incident, Pannun filed a lawsuit against the Indian government and its foreign intelligence service.

Assassination attempts were directed not only against Pannun, but also against other activists of the organization Sikhs for Justice. Among them were Hardeep Singh Nijjar, Satinder Pal Singh Raju, and Inderjit Singh Gosal. In 2023, Satinder Pal Singh Raju was killed as a result of an assassination. Subsequently, Sikhs for Justice announced that it would lay siege to the Indian Consulate in Vancouver, Canada, for 12 hours on 18 September. The organization stated that the siege was intended to protest the consulate’s alleged establishment of a spy network and the surveillance of referendum participants.



GLOBAL SIKH PROTESTS

24 DECEMBER 2025

On 24 December 2025, Sikh activists and members of Sikhs for Justice organized coordinated protests in Washington, Toronto, Vancouver, London, Milan and Melbourne. Demonstrations demanded that the Government of India take responsibility for the killing of Canadian Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Protesters accused India of conducting “transnational repression” under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and held rallies in front of Indian diplomatic mission. Slogans included: “Who killed Nijjar? India!”

Participants demanded international investigation, accountability for extraterritorial operations, and protection for Sikh diaspora activists. SFJ stated that the campaign aims not only to seek justice but also to resist “India’s global intimidation tactics.”

MAJOR SIKH ORGANIZATIONS WORLDWIDE

Sikh diaspora communities have established active organizations across North America, Europe, and Asia. These structures play a central role in political advocacy, legal defense, public awareness, and the global visibility of Sikh self-determination processes.

Key organizations include:

Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) – USA/Canada/UK; promotes referendums and legal advocacy.

World Sikh Organization (WSO – Canada) – Protection of the rights of Sikhs.

Sikh Federation (UK) – one of World's most active Sikh political organizations.

National Sikh Youth Federation (NSYF – UK) – youth mobilization and public campaigns.

Sikh Coalition (USA) – legal defense and protection against discrimination, creating Safe Schools, promoting equal employment opportunity

Khalsa Aid (UK-based, global) – humanitarian assistance (non-political).

Khalistan Center - An organization promoting the Khalistan idea

Panth Punjab - An organization that disseminates information on developments in Punjab and the defense of Sikh rights

The Sikh Network - a collaborative collective of over 4,500 Sikh activists from various organizations, including youth groups, human rights and political activists, professionals, and students.

These organizations coordinate global advocacy for Sikh rights.

PROMINENT SIKH LEADERS

Sikh political and social leadership includes historic figures, movement leaders of the late 20th century, and contemporary activists mobilizing the diaspora.

Historic figures:

Guru Nanak Dev Ji – *founder of Sikhism.*

Maharaja Ranjit Singh – *creator of the independent Sikh Empire.*

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale – *ideological leader of the 1970s–1984 period.*

Contemporary leaders:

Gurpatwant Singh Pannun – *leading figure of Sikhs for Justice.*

Harjinder Singh Dharmi – *30th president of SGPC.*

Hardeep Singh Nijjar – *Organizer of the Khalistan referendum in Canada.*

Gurmit Singh Aulakh – *President Council of Khalistan.*

Manmohan Singh Khalsa – *legal expert and human rights defender.*

Moninder Singh - *Leader of Sikh Federetion Canada*

Shamsher Singh - *Leader of National Sikh Youth Federation*

Gurnishan Singh - *Leader of Khalistan Center*

Dabinderjit Singh - *president of Sikh Federetion*

Akashdeep Singh - *president of Path Punjab Project*

Jaswinder Singh - *president of The Sikh Network*

Prabjot Singh - *Legal advisor on legal affairs of the Sikh Federation*



THE KHALISTAN ISSUE WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS FRAMEWORK

In 2024–2025, UN Special Rapporteurs sent formal communications to the Government of India expressing concern over allegations of intimidation, pressure, and acts of violence targeting Sikh activists. A joint communication issued on 19 November 2024 by five UN Special Rapporteurs highlighted credible threats, harassment, and potential extraterritorial attacks against Sikh activists — including the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar — and urged India to conduct an impartial investigation and ensure the protection of vulnerable communities. Earlier, in May 2020, nine UN Special Rapporteurs had already raised alarm over the broad application of India's Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), warning that the law was being used to suppress minority voices, including Sikh human rights defenders. The continued engagement of UN mechanisms underscores the need for sustained international attention to address the wider human rights challenges faced by Sikh communities and to support long-term efforts aimed at ensuring their safety and well-being.

OTHER PLATFORMS

DISCUSSING THE SIKH ISSUE

Canada: Prime Minister informed Parliament that Canadian authorities had received “credible allegations” linking Indian government agents to the killing of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar. (Analyst News).

United States: Written evidence submitted to the U.S. Congress describes both Nijjar’s assassination and a foiled plot to kill Sikh activist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, with related legal proceedings active in U.S. federal court. (Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission).

Human Rights Organizations: Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented ongoing violations, lack of accountability, and systemic human rights issues affecting Sikh communities. (Human Rights Watch).