



INDIA'S DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN AGAINST CANADA'S SIKHS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sikhs in Canada have been the target of Indian disinformation campaigns for decades. In recent years however, these attacks have become more coordinated and aim to influence Canadian politicians, media and society.

In the wake of widespread farmer protests in India, Indian disinformation campaigns have renewed with increased intensity. The goal remains the same as the 80s- to malign and marginalize Canadian Sikhs with allegations of extremism and to ensure that the Sikh community is regarded with suspicion and distrust.

Examples of these campaigns were seen in 2018, during Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's trip to India, a coordinated Indian disinformation campaign successfully maligned the Sikh community in Canada and revived a narrative of "Sikh extremism" in the absence of any evidence or precipitating incident. More recent examples include media reports on the Macdonald-Laurier Institute's report entitled "*Khalistan: a project of Pakistan*" and media coverage related to Hon. Navdeep Bains' resignation from cabinet.

Disinformation campaign targeting Sikhs and other minority groups are linked to the Sangh Parivar, a group that seeks to achieve a Hindu India. Strategically, the Sangh Parivar's political arm, the BJP is in a position to leverage the state machinery to fulfill that vision, including control over the media.

India has developed a standard methodology to push its narratives with respect to Sikhs in Canada. The sequence begins with various Indian media outlets reporting about "Sikh extremism" in Canada. These reports are carried by pro-India media outlets and also fake news sites which amplify the coverage. Indian actors run a vast network of fake media outlets, think tanks and NGOs to serve india's interests
(*EU Disinfo Lab, 2020*).

India's disinformation campaigns are not limited to influencing media. There is also evidence to suggest that India's intelligence agencies have been engaging in operations in Canada with the aim to influence Canadian politicians and media.

Biased media reports about the Sikh community have resulted in marginalization and even physical attacks.

This report examines the role that news sources like Zee News, Asian News International and many other Indian news outlets that are pro-BJP play in maligning the Sikh Community.

Engaging in advocacy or dialogue about human rights in India or about Khalistan is not extremist activity, despite what India may assert. The Canadian government and intelligence community must take a firm stand in resisting Indian interference in Canada and ensuring that foreign actors are not actively maligning the Sikh community here.



INTRODUCTION AND INSIGHTS

Sikhs in Canada have been the target of Indian disinformation campaigns for decades. In recent years however, these attacks have become more coordinated and aim to influence Canadian politicians, media and society. In 2018, during Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s trip to India, a coordinated Indian disinformation campaign successfully maligned the Sikh community in Canada and revived a narrative of “Sikh extremism” in the absence of any evidence or precipitating incident.

Indian actors run a vast network of fake media outlets, think tanks and NGOs to serve India’s interests (EU Disinfo Lab, 2020). But even amongst the legitimate media outlets in India, a great many are beholden to, and transparently biased towards, the BJP government and go so far as pushing a Hindutva agenda at the expense of minority communities in India. This is what is commonly known as the “Godi Media” or the lapdog media.

In the wake of widespread farmer protests in India that have received the support of Sikhs from across the world, including in Canada, Indian disinformation campaigns have renewed with increased intensity. The goal remains the same as the 80s- to malign and marginalize Canadian Sikhs with allegations of extremism and to demonize the term Khalistan and anyone that speaks about it.

This report will provide context and historical background with respect to India’s misinformation machine and analyze current efforts at maligning Sikhs in Canada.



1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDIAN INTELLIGENCE & INTERFERENCE IN CANADA

The story of Indian ‘fake news’ and interference in Canada begins in earnest in the aftermath of the 1984 attack on Sri Darbar Sahib and the Sikh Genocide.

In 1986-87 several Indian diplomats were asked by Canadian authorities to leave Canada because of their espionage activities in the Sikh community. One of these diplomats was Maloy Krishna Dhar, a former Joint Director and a 29-year veteran of the Indian Intelligence Bureau. Dhar was in Ottawa on a diplomatic posting from 1983-87. He writes in his 2005 memoir “Open Secrets” that his mission was to “penetrate select Gurdwaras”, create assets in the Sikh community and also to generate “a few friends amongst the Canadian Members of Parliament” (p. 293).

Dhar also was involved in targeting both mainstream and Punjabi media with stories to “tell the Indian side” and to “regularly meet Canadian Foreign Office mandarins and RCMP point men to brief them about developments back in India and to share whatever “open” information the Indian mission could cull from the community through ‘open’ means” (pp. 293-94).

In addition, he stated that Indian secret service agents (RAW) were active in the Canadian Sikh community. They made payments of \$10,000 to Indian newspapers published in Canada, in order to influence their editorial content.

During the Air India Inquiry, Don McLean, a member of the Vancouver Police Department, spoke about his concerns regarding the involvement of the Indian government and its agents in Canada during the 80s. Mr. McLean noted his concern that the Indian Consul General was inflaming the Sikh community by making references to Sikhs as “semi-literate farm workers”. In addition, he stated that Indian secret service agents (RAW) were active in the Canadian Sikh community. They made payments of \$10,000 to Indian newspapers published in Canada, in order to influence their editorial content. Mr. McLean stated that he noticed the shift in newspaper coverage following these “payments” by the Indian agents (McLean, 2007)



2. MEDIA UNDER MODI: MANIPULATION & DISINFORMATION

The Indian Government's control and manipulation of the media to serve its ideological purposes is well known. Reporters Without Borders in its 2020 World Press Freedom Index has ranked India at 142nd in the world, out of 180 countries measured (World Press Freedom Index, 2020). That ranking is down six positions from 2017 and lower than countries like South Sudan, Afghanistan and Myanmar.

The Sangh Parivar seeks to achieve a Hindu India, and as the Sangh Parivar's political arm, the BJP is in a position to use the state machinery to fulfill that vision, including control over the media. A sting by the news outlet Cobrapost revealed that nearly two dozen media houses were willing to promote a Hindutva agenda and influence coverage for the 2019 Indian elections (Cobrapost, 2020).

According to a report in the Diplomat magazine, "the BJP Government has transformed previously independent media outlets into state mouthpieces for the sake of minimizing criticism and disseminating their own narrative" (Madan, 2019).

Indian media are used to plant stories for government interests and also loudly denounce "extremism" and "anti-nationals". "For a Western audience, the term "anti-national" will be understood as a reference to those individuals who denounce a nation's constitutional principles. In India, this term has taken on an entirely new meaning. The term "anti-national" in India now includes anyone who "breaks Hindu traditions," an alleged bedrock of the Indian state itself (Mada, 2019).

In November 2019 and again in December 2020, the CBC and the BBC reported that a huge international network of fake local news sites that push a pro-Indian government position internationally had a deep Canadian connection. According to the EU DisinfoLab, a Brussels-based non-profit group whose goal is identifying disinformation targeting the European Union, the network includes at least 750 fake media outlets in at least 116 countries. At least 12 of those sites posed as Canadian news outlets and use names that either mimic current media publications or old media outlets that had folded, such as The Toronto Evening Telegram. CBC has also found evidence of a further 16 sites designed to look like local Canadian news websites, all registered by the Srivastava Group (Yates and Bellemare, 2019).

While there is no direct evidence the network is linked to the Government of India, the fake news network relies heavily on Asian News International (ANI) - India's largest wire service to amplify content produced on fake media outlets. (Please refer to ANI section further in this report).





3. RECENT ANTI-SIKH DISINFO CAMPAIGNS AIMED AT CANADA

Since 1984, India has engaged in ongoing efforts to influence media and politicians in Canada. Those efforts have continued into the present time and have intensified. In April 2020, a report published by Global News revealed that since 2009, Indian intelligence agencies used an Indian news reporter based in Canada in an attempt to “use money and disinformation to ‘covertly influence Canadian politicians”.

India’s intelligence agencies, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and the Indian Intelligence Bureau were behind the operation which began in 2009. A key actor in this intelligence operation was a Canada-based Indian reporter. According to a decision by the Federal Court, dated March 31, 2020, an editor-in-chief of an unnamed Indian newspaper, identified only as “A.B”, met with Indian intelligence over 25 times in five years and was as a result, refused permanent residency in Canada. The basis of the denial was that A.B. had been tasked by RAW to covertly influence Canadian government representatives and agencies on behalf of the Indian government. His instructions from RAW included providing financial assistance and propaganda material to politicians in order to exert influence over them, including convincing politicians that funding from Canada was being sent to Pakistan to support terrorism (Bell, 2020).

...since 2009, Indian intelligence agencies used an Indian news reporter based in Canada in an attempt to “use money and disinformation to ‘covertly influence Canadian politicians



Despite his apparent involvement with an Indian intelligence operation, A.B. remains in Canada and continues to author and publish news reports.

India has developed a standard methodology to push its narratives with respect to Sikhs in Canada. The sequence begins with various Indian media outlets reporting about “Sikh extremism” in Canada. These reports are carried by pro-India media outlets and also fake news sites which amplify the coverage. The sheer volume of reports is then used as a base to attract attention from Canadian media outlets. Indian allies and assets in Canada use social media posts to draw attention to the Indian stories or, in some cases do so through opinion pieces in Canadian newspapers.



India's greatest disinformation campaign success was achieved during the 2018 Trudeau trip to India. The trip was preceded by a series of Indian media articles accusing Trudeau of pandering to Khalistan supporters and even accusing Sikh ministers and MPs of being "Khalistanis". Once the actual trip commenced, the volume of media stories about rising "Sikh extremism" and it being the main irritant in India-Canada relations continued to grow and began to gain traction in the Canadian media, which then uncritically parroted the Indian narrative.

It was concluded by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians in its special report into the 2018 Trudeau visit that:

"'strategically released' media articles prior to the Prime Minister's visit and Indian officials' repeated raising of concerns around Sikh extremism and separatism, even after multiple efforts by Canadian officials, including the NSIA, to refute those claims, fit the pattern that the NSIA now saw emerging: an orchestrated attempt to 'shine a spotlight' on Mr. Atwal's invitation in order to embarrass the Canadian Government."

(National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, 2018, p. 25)

There has been a direct correlation between the unsubstantiated allegations of rising extremism and negative attitudes towards the community, including bullying and attacks on Sikhs (Dempsey, 2010; World Sikh Organization, 2018). Following the Trudeau visit and the negative media coverage of the community, there were two serious and violent attacks against Sikhs in March 2018 in Ottawa and Calgary and several incidents of harassment.

India's ANI news reported on a protest by the far-right nationalist group Canada Combat Coalition against "Khalistanis". As reported by ANI and reproduced in several Indian news sites, one protestor declared that "Sikhs are a threat, not all of them but the Khalistan ones. They have been brought into this country indiscriminately. They are very large in numbers and are a threat to Canadians." (ANI News, 2018). Notably, only Indian media covered this protest.

The model used by India during the Trudeau trip has served as a template for future disinformation campaigns.



3.1. MLI REPORT

In September 2020, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute released a report entitled “Khalistan: a Project of Pakistan.” The report was authored by controversial, retired CBC journalist, Terry Milewski and included an introduction by former politician, Ujjal Dosanjh, and former Conservative staffer, Shuvaloy Majumdar (*Milewski, 2020*).

The report alleged that the Khalistan movement is driven by Pakistan and that Sikh activism in Canada- a “predictable drumbeat of victimization, persecution and genocide commemoration....[is] part of a stunningly orchestrated campaign that seduces the best intentions of earnest politicians.”

The report, however, lacked references, facts and actual evidence to substantiate these scandalous allegations. Milewski had essentially produced a protracted opinion piece that parroted a narrative that was all too familiar to Canadian Sikhs as originating from India.

It was noteworthy that various fake news sites and news blogs in India published articles in support of the report and Indian embassies across the world published links to the report in a transparently calculated manner, shortly after it was released in their local languages. Some of the embassies involved were those in Mexico (India in Mexico, 2020), Tunisia (India in Tunisia, 2020), Tajikistan (India in Tajikistan, 2020), Malawi (India in Malawi, 2020), Armenia (India in Armenia, 2020), Germany (India in Germany, 2020), Poland (India in Poland, 2020), and Peru and Bolivia (India in Peru & Bolivia, 2020). Milewski was also interviewed on right-wing Indian news and YouTube channels.

In an unprecedented move, the report was condemned by a group of over 50 scholars who work closely with the Sikh community or in the area of Sikh studies. The scholars, from leading institutions across North America and the UK, including three chairs of Sikh studies at major universities, called for the report to be retracted as it “maligms all Sikh-Canadians engaging in advocacy as extremist and foreign influenced actors.” In an open letter to the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, the scholars also stated that the report “is shockingly un-Canadian in every aspect, from a lack of respect for free speech, to a parroting of a foreign, Indian government narrative on Khalistani activism” and that “the ‘reference’ section is one-sided showing a lack of literature review or effort to triangulate claims.” (*Sikh Scholars Response, 2020*).





The controversial Indian newswire service ANI produced four separate pieces promoting and amplifying the MLI report. One such report wildly alleged that the joint letter by 50 scholars was produced under the guidance of Pakistan’s intelligence agency the ISI (ANI News, 2020 a). This narrative was taken up by Zee News that published a piece titled “Khalistani Terrorist: With ISI backing, Khalistani elements targets Canadian journalist who authored ‘Khalistan- a project of Pakistan’”. The piece repeats the outlandish allegation that the letter was directed by Pakistan’s ISI but adds that the letter “highlights the ‘gagging acts’ of the pro-Khalistani elements to silence the voices opposing them” (Shukla, 2020 a).

Press Progress, a Canadian non-profit news organization looked into the MLI Report and found that the MLI and Shuvaloy Majumdar have links to a global consulting firm run by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, that has been retained to promote trade with India. Majumdar currently lists himself as a “global director” at Harper & Associates.

According to Press Progress (2020),

“A few years ago, MLI announced a “Canada-India initiative” with the Observer Research Foundation (“ORF”), a New Delhi-based think tank primarily set-up with funds from Indian oil giant Reliance Industries – Reliance reportedly struck a deal to buy millions of barrels of Canadian oil...”

The MLI-ORF partnership was announced as an achievement in further India-Canada bilateral relations during the infamous 2018 Trudeau trip to India (Prime Minister of Canada, 2018). Stephen Harper has been a key guest at the ORF’s yearly event in Delhi, the Raisina Dialogue. Reliance continues to fund the majority of the ORF budget and many of the ORF’s directors have clear ties to the corporation (Sarkar, 2020). Reliance also own the Network 18 media group (see section 4.3). The ties between the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, RAW and the ORF are also apparent. According to a report in India’s Caravan magazine, “Vikram Sood, the former director of the Research and Analysis Wing, has been an advisor to the ORF for well over a decade and ‘many’ people in the ORF have worked with RAW” (Sarkar, 2020).

In November 2019, the Saskatchewan government awarded a \$240,000 contract to Harper & Associates to help expand access to India by “setting up key meetings” with “senior government ministers and officials.”

It isn’t difficult to deduce how Majumdar and the MLI got pulled into creating a propaganda piece for the Government of India in order to promote business ties with India, at the expense of Sikhs.



3.2. INDIAN MEDIA SMEARS FOLLOWING THE RESIGNATION OF NAVDEEP BAINS

Indian media have consistently attempted to portray Canadian Sikh politicians as “Khalistani extremists” or sympathizers in order to compromise their credibility and create suspicions about their loyalties to Canada. Those targeted include Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh and also former Minister for Innovation, Science and Industry, Navdeep Bains.

On January 12, 2021 Bains stepped down as Minister for Innovation, Science and Industry citing a desire to spend more time with family. In the aftermath of his departure, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and many ministers in the Liberal cabinet sent messages of thanks and support to Bains.

Shortly after his departure from cabinet, Bains was targeted by India’s disinformation machinery. Zee News published a series of baseless articles alleging that Bains’ resignation from cabinet was to save the “Liberal Party from embarrassment on corruption charges” (*Shukla, 2021 a*).

Zee News alleged that, “besides being a plutocratic corrupt leader, Navdeep Bains is also a patron of undemocratic practices and a proponent of Chinese influence in Canada, making it increasingly tougher for the Liberal Party to defend him every day (*Shukla, 2021 a*).

In passing, the Zee News article also claimed that “Bains, who has been groomed by the pro-Khalistani radical outfit World Sikh Organisation (WSO), is believed to be radicalising the Sikh community and making efforts to divide it” (*Shukla, 2021 a*).

The article was followed up by Zee with subsequent articles targeting the Canadian government’s alleged support of the Khalistan movement. Zee alleged that, “the resignation of Canadian Cabinet Minister Navdeep Singh Bains, who enjoys close connections with the Khalistani elements, has once again set-off the debate on Canada’s appeasement politics to foster Khalistani extremism. Observers of the Canadian politics have pointed out that Bains was promoted by the Khalistanis into the Canadian politics with the craving to get the support from the Canadian institutions” (*Shukla, 2021 b*).

The article then went on to allege that NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh and Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan are also “connected to Khalistani elements and have been tacitly supporting their radical activities.”

The smear piece cites the MLI report as evidence of Pakistani intelligence agencies directing supporters of Khalistan in Canada.

Zee made a curious comment in the conclusion of the article:

“Besides damaging Canada’s reputation at the global fora, these elements pose a massive threat to the innocent Canadians. Given the fact that India is efficiently handling the Khalistani issue and the campaign has subsided therein, it is a matter of choice for Canada – whether to water it or to wither it away” (*Shukla, 2021 b*).



The final article Zee News released following Bains' departure from cabinet is titled "Explained: How Khalistanis are sabotaging the liberal Canadian society" (Shukla, 2021 c).

The article makes a litany of allegations against Canadian Sikhs and Bains and alleges that "the recent resignation of Canadian Cabinet Minister Navdeep Bains has revealed dark secrets behind the Khalistani nexus operating in Canada". Other allegations made by the article include:

- Gurdwara management committees are "using the religious sites for inciting violence"
 - Khalistanis have been "attacking empirical research pieces" such as the MLI report
 - Khalistanis "are ever ready to reach the Indian High Commission or consulate offices across Canada to protest even for internal policy issues of India" in reference to recent protests and rallies in support of farmers.
 - Khalistani elements "have also campaigned to sabotage the passage of gay marriage bill"
 - "Khalistanis are also the main forces behind several incidents of organised crime in Canada"
- None of the allegations are substantiated with any evidence or proof.

Other Indian media outlets such as ThePrint and OpIndia also published articles alleging Bains resigned due to corruption and was "considered to be a strong supporter of the Khalistan movement" (OpIndia 2021).

What makes these allegations all the more bizarre is that Navdeep Bains has on numerous occasions, engaged with representatives of the Government of India, terming the meetings as "Dosa Diplomacy" (Bains, 2017). Furthermore, he presented Zee TV chairman Subhash Chandra with the \$50,000 Global Indian Award on behalf of the pro-India lobby group the Canada-India Foundation in 2016 (Toronto.com, 2016). Notably, Chandra donated the \$50,000 to the Eklavya Vidyalaya Foundation which itself has been accused of having Hindutva and RSS ties (Bhattacharya, 2020).

Following previous attempts at attacking Sikh Canadians, the Indian disinformation network released multiple pieces on Bains, hoping that western and specifically Canadian media would pick up the story. By putting corruption, extremism and Khalistan into the mix it was hoped the story would be attractive to Canadian media. The intended result was to draw suspicion around the involvement of Sikhs in Canadian politics and to malign the term Khalistan and those that support it.



Shuvaloy Majumdar, amongst others, tweeted out the slanderous Zee article. Conservative Senator Barbara Frum also tweeted out the link to the article but later deleted it, acknowledging that the news was from a “non-reputable source in India (Frum, 2021). There was, however, no pick up by the Canadian media, presumably because the allegations were unsubstantiated and baseless.

In response to the fake news furor, Bains tweeted “we all have a responsibility to reject disinformation from foreign actors. This is not a partisan issue. Working together we can make sure interference doesn’t affect a fact-based public dialogue (Bains, 2021).

In the postscript to this incident, MP Ramesh Sangha went on a local Punjabi talk show and repeated the false Indian propaganda about Bains as well as Harjit Sajjan, including that they are unfit to be ministers because they are ‘Khalistani’ and ‘extremists’. As a result of these baseless accusations, Sangha was expelled from the Liberal caucus. Notably, Zee News returned with an article entitled “Justin Trudeau succumbs to Khalistani elements? Parliamentarian Ramesh Sangha removed from party” (Shukla, 2021 g).

The article makes a litany of allegations against Canadian Sikhs and Bains and alleges that “the recent resignation of Canadian Cabinet Minister Navdeep Bains has revealed dark secrets behind the Khalistani nexus operating in Canada



The article was yet another transparent attempt at influencing Canadian politics by repeating the earlier false allegations and then claiming that Sangha’s removal from the party would result in negative repercussions for the Liberal Party, based on information from ‘pollsters’:

“A couple of Hindu and Sikh Canadians that I spoke to have termed the move as an ‘authoritarian’ one and expressed that the Liberal Party is soon going to lose popular support amongst these communities through such moves. It is pertinent to note that those communities have been traditional Vote banks for the Liberal Party. Pollsters have argued that the move might take five lakh Hindu voters and an equal number of Sikhs, who are critical of the idea of Khalistan, away from the Liberal Party, if this continued exodus of anti-Khalistanis from the Liberal Party does not stop. (Shukla, 2021 g)”



4. UNDERSTANDING THE DISINFORMATION ACTORS

While the number of media outlets that are biased and blatantly pro-BJP is very significant, including channels like Republic TV, Times Now, India Today, ABP and many others, some of the more active channels with respect to pushing disinformation about Sikhs in Canada are below.

4.1. ANI

Asian News International or ANI is India's biggest television news agency but also produces print articles for syndication. As revealed by EU Disinfo Lab research, ANI is used to amplify and project propaganda and disinformation.

India's ministry of external affairs is an important client of ANI. The ministry's website lists two media campaigns: "India Global" and "India File." The "India File" posted on Indian embassy websites around the world is a compilation of video clips sourced from ANI.

The Caravan Magazine in an investigation found that in addition to a longstanding collaboration with the MEA, ANI also worked with "several ministries in the government and the Research and Analysis Wing, India's foreign-intelligence agency (Donthi, 2019).



Canadians protest against Khalistanis in Toronto

Updated : 2 Years, 8 months ago IST

Toronto[Canada], May 12 (ANI): Activists of the Canada Combat Coalition, a Toronto based nationalist organisation, took to the streets against Khalistani separatists, who, according to them, were using their land to carry out terror activities against India.

The Caravan also found that ANI had developed a particularly close relationship with the Modi government and had also actively engaged in subversion and inference in the Sikh community. According to Caravan reporter Praveen Donthi:

"A former video editor and a senior ANI correspondent told me that ANI runs several Facebook accounts against Punjabi separatists. For instance, an account called Khalsa Panth is dressed as a devotional page but regular posts attacks on Khalistani militants" (Donthi, 2019).

In addition to generally biased 'reporting', many of the articles published by ANI are transparently propaganda pieces that unashamedly make one-sided comments targeted at the Sikh community. Almost all of the reports link Khalistan activism to Pakistan. Some recent examples from just the past six months are as follows:

- *Pakistan using Europe's ultra-liberal ecosystem to promote Khalistani separatist movement* (Dec 13, 2020). The piece cites the MLI report to assert that Pakistan is instigating Khalistani activism in Europe and that Khalistan activism is a "test-case for some key European states as to whether they have matured as democratic liberal nations or been reduced to breeding grounds for separatist modules from across the world" (ANI News, 2020 b).

- *Is project Khalistan dead and buried? Not really* (September 14, 2020): "it appear that the only people interested in keeping alive the 'Khalistan' movement are some fringe Canadian Sikhs and the Pakistani intelligence apparatus" (ANI News, 2020 c).

- *Anti-India protest by Khalistanis fails at Times Square* (August 7, 2020): "Meanwhile, the pro-India demonstrators not only outnumbered the anti-India protesters but also had more Sikh supporters who chanted 'Jai Shree Ram' while singing and dancing on the beats of the drums" (ANI News, 2020 d).

- *After Canada, Britain rejects 'Punjab Referendum 2020'* (July 31, 2020): "New Delhi blamed Pakistani's secret agencies for creating a disturbance in Punjab then and now supporting some Sikh separatists settled in the West. Punjab is a prosperous and peaceful state where people have rejected the so-called Referendum 2020 by calling it a conspiracy of Pakistan" (ANI News, 2020 e).

- *Sikh youth going abroad getting radicalized by Khalistanis in the West: Sukhi Chahal* (July 13, 2020): citing remarks by Sukhi Chahal, a former Punjab Police informant and CAT, the ANI piece once again focuses on the role of Pakistan in promoting Khalistan activism- "Pakistan's ISI directly cannot target India so they misled the few Sikhs and have opened shops for them" (ANI News, 2020 f).

- *Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale- the man who dishonored the Sikh faith* (June 5, 2020): "Bhindranwale was, in reality, a cold blooded murderer who twisted the Sikh faith and committed the vilest acts of sacrilege in the holiest of shrines to Sikhism....In describing such a man as a martyr and saint, the Khalistanis continue to bring ignominy to Sikhism" (ANI News, 2020 g).



Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale - the man who dishonoured the Sikh Faith

Updated : 7 Months, 3 weeks ago IST

Amritsar [Punjab], June 5 (ANI): Human memory is short but falsehood factories continue to proliferate across the world today- 36 years after Indian Army launched Operation Bluestar to flush out Khalistani separatists holed up inside the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

4.2. ZEE NEWS

Zee news is widely seen as a “champion of nationalism and Hindutva, particularly after the BJP came to power at the Centre” (Cobrapost, 2018).

The chairman of Zee News is Subhash Chandra, who is a BJP member of the Rajya Sabha.

According to a report by Caravan Magazine,

“Chandra’s ideological inclinations have never been a secret. His liking for Hindu nationalism began early in his childhood and has continued till date...Chandra admitted to have attended RSS shakhas-branches- regularly for about five years, till he passed the tenth standard. Despite the trouble of having to wake up before dawn, Chandra enjoyed the experience for the patriotic and mythological tales narrated by RSS pracharaks- propagandists. He also attended a fifteen-day camp run by the RSS...” (Laliwala, 2020).

Indian non-profit news website Cobrapost reported how several media houses, including Zee News were prepared to “promote Hindutva to polarize the electorate, propagate speeches of firebrand Hindutva leaders and character assassination of political rivals” in return for cash in the lead up to the 2019 Indian elections (Laliwala, 2020).

Looking at Zee News’ coverage of Sikhs and Canada, it is clear that their coverage is agenda motivated and aims to malign Sikhs and particularly those outside India



During Cobrapost’s discussions caught on camera with Zee Senior Sales Manager Sagar Arora, Arora bragged that Zee had played a key role in defeating the Akali government in Punjab. Arora claimed “ [our channel] did not spare the Akalis even a bit ... they changed the scenario within four-five days and it helped convert some votes as well” (Laliwala, 2020).

Cobrapost concluded that “It is apparent from these on-camera confessions that for Zee Media, journalism is just a charade, serving the cause of Hindutva and BJP (Laliwala, 2020).

Vishwa Deepak, an output producer with Zee News resigned from the channel after condemning its “biased coverage” which falsely alleged anti-India slogans were raised in the JNU campus during a protest against Parliament convict Afzal Guru’s hanging. He also went on to ask if they were “the mouthpieces of the BJP or the RSS (Laliwala, 2020).

Looking at Zee News' coverage of Sikhs and Canada, it is clear that their coverage is agenda motivated and aims to malign Sikhs and particularly those outside India. Notably, Zee also attempted to amplify the MLI report with three stories.

- *Khalistani terror: India, Canada closely keep an eye on fringe elements* (July 13, 2020): "India and Canada are closely cooperating on the issue of Khalistani terrorism and separatism even as fringe elements in the latter have been proactive. The cooperation includes giving classified information on Khalistanis, given the full support Pakistan's notorious spy agency ISI has been giving to them. India and Canada already have a Framework for Cooperation on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism agreed in February of 2018 (Sibbal, 2020).

- *Khalistan is Pakistan's project designed to subvert national security of Canada, India* (September 14, 2020): The piece promotes the MLI report. In "Khalistan: A Project of Pakistan" senior journalist Terry Milewski reveals the concept of Khalistan as a project of Pakistan, designed to subvert the national security of both Canada and India (Shukla, 2020 b).

- *With ISI backing, Khalistani elements targets Canadian journalist who authored 'Khalistan - a project of Pakistan'*. (September 17, 2020) Zee reports on the letter authored by over 50 scholars condemning the MLI report however it repeats the baseless accusation that the letter was directed by Pakistan: "However, a group of pro-Khalistani elements, based out of Western Countries, soon came up to counter the report in order to neutralize its impact and delegitimize it...Still, it failed to gain organizational credibility, highlighting that the Khalistani elements are eventually losing the feeble support that they had amongst the civil society organisation and educational institutions" (Shukla, 2020 a).

- *Pakistan kills Sikhs, but funds Khalistani terror elsewhere, says Canadian expert Terry Milewski* (September 20, 2020) A third piece on the MLI report, this time reporting on an Indian panel Terry Milewski spoke on: "Pakistan has been eliminating its Sikh population for decades through killings, rapes, abductions and forced marriages of young women, yet is funding and fueling Khalistani terrorism and separatist movement globally to achieve its sinister plans to break up India, a Canadian expert, who authored a recently released report on the subject, has said" (Shukla, 2020 c).

Zee News has also shown that it is willing to engage in propaganda for the BJP government with respect to the farmer protests in India. Zee was one of the first media outlets to suggest that "Khalistan supporters" were hijacking the farmer protests. An article that appeared on Zee News stated "The chronology of Khalistan's entry into this movement reinforces our claims that anti-national forces are trying to hijack this agitation, as they want to capitalise on anti-India sentiments not only in the country but also abroad. The country needs to remain cautious against such forces (Zee Media Bureau, 2020)." Furthermore, Zee became infamous for maligning Khalsa Aid and claiming it was an extremist group (Zee Media Bureau, 2020).

Zee Senior Sales Manager Sagar Arora, Arora bragged that Zee had played a key role in defeating the Akali government in Punjab. Arora claimed " [our channel] did not spare the Akalis even a bit ... they changed the scenario within four-five days and it helped convert some votes as well



It is concerning that Indian channels like Zee are now also being broadcast on Canadian airwaves.

4.3. NETWORK 18

Network 18 is a media conglomerate owned by Reliance Industries and includes media outlets such as Firstpost and CNN-News18. Reliance's head Mukesh Ambani is known to be close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Government of India more broadly (Hussain, 2020).

In a recent fiasco, CNNNews18 withdrew a news report that named Toronto talk show host Joginder Bassi as a foreign funder of the farmers' protest with Khalistani links. The channel had claimed the story was based on an "intelligence report" (Joshua, 2021).

The accusation was widely mocked as it is well known that Bassi does not support Khalistan and regularly meets with Indian officials and has been photographed with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

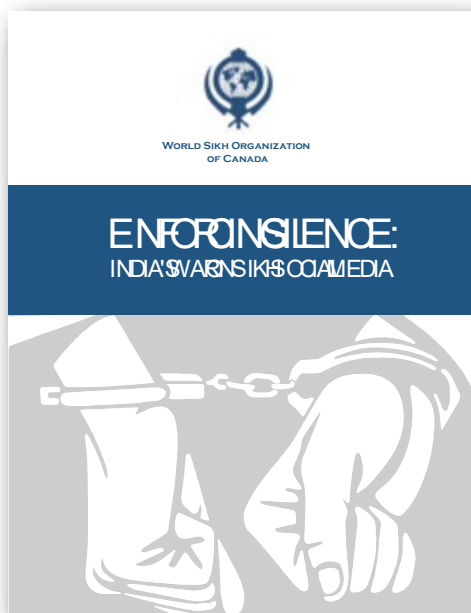
CNN-News18 also falsely reported that a "Canadian MP" and "Canadian Conservative Party Leader" Ramandeep Brar had joined the farmer protest in Delhi. The news channel went so far as to term him "Leader, Conservative Party of Canada" (2020). In truth, Brar is neither an MP nor a party leader. He was a Conservative Party candidate in the 2019 federal elections in Brampton South. The attempt however was to portray his presence at the protests as an example of Canadian interference in India.





5. CONCLUSION

Indian attempts at maligning Sikhs in Canada are an ongoing reality. The use of fake news, fake media outlets and agenda-motivated reporting is reaching new heights under the BJP government. The effects of this have already been felt in Canada during the 2018 Trudeau visit to India and its aftermath but the efforts continue on a regular basis. By force of sheer volume, Indian media pushes false narratives with the hope that giving them points of local interest will help them break into the Canadian media and result in a self-perpetuating cycle that will snowball. The goal is specifically to target Sikh involvement in politics and those Sikhs who speak out about Khalistan. As we have pointed out in our previous report *Enforcing Silence: India's War on Sikh Social Media*, there is a parallel effort at censoring and silencing Sikh voices on social media.



The WSO's #AskCanadianSikhs campaign that began in 2018 was aimed at stopping these false narratives from being repeated in Canada. When CBC New India Bureau Chief Salimah Shivji repeated the Indian government allegation that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's comments on the farmer protests in India were resulting in "extremist gatherings" outside Indian consulates, WSO encouraged Canadian Sikhs to contact the CBC Ombudsman and express concern about Canadian media uncritically parroting Indian narratives. As a result of the input, the Shivji clip was removed (WSO, 2020). Later, to their credit, Canadian media did not pick up or repeat the slanderous Indian accusations against Navdeep Bains.

As the Government of India openly embraces Hindutva and slips towards authoritarianism, the effects will continue to be felt here in Canada. Minority voices in India are being silenced. Canadian Sikhs, however, must remain vigilant and must not be intimidated. Engaging in dialogue or advocacy with respect to human rights in India or about Khalistan is not extremist activity, despite what India may assert. It is concerning that Indian channels like Zee are now also being broadcast on Canadian airwaves. The Canadian government and intelligence community must take a firm stand in resisting Indian interference in Canada and ensuring that foreign actors are not actively maligning the Sikh community here.

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