

Addressing Transnational Repression Against the Sikh Diaspora in North America

Submitted by:

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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing: Transnational Repression: Trends and Policy approaches

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I. Introduction: Upholding Human Rights and Protecting the Sikh Diaspora

This statement is submitted on behalf of the Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) America to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on transnational repression. Our purpose is to highlight the escalating campaign of transnational repression orchestrated by the Government of India (GOI) against the Sikh diaspora in the United States and Canada. We urge Congress and relevant U.S. agencies to adopt a clear, comprehensive approach to protect fundamental American values, including freedom of speech, and to safeguard the civil rights and liberties of all Americans, especially those from targeted diaspora communities.¹ The U.S. must remain a safe harbor for dissent and free expression, free from foreign coercion.

Transnational repression (TNR) is a grave violation of international human rights law and a direct assault on host nation sovereignty. The U.S. Department of Justice defines TNR as "a range of tactics that foreign governments employ to reach beyond their borders to harm, intimidate, threaten, harass, or coerce individuals".² These tactics range from killings and abductions to online harassment, digital surveillance, targeting of relatives, and abuse of consular services, creating a profound chilling effect on individuals' freedom of expression and association.²

Globally, TNR is a growing problem. Freedom House reports that over 20% of national governments have engaged in physical TNR since 2014, with 25 countries responsible for 125 incidents in 2023 alone, including assassinations and abductions.³ This normalization of TNR

demands that democratic nations like the U.S. and Canada elevate it from a peripheral law enforcement issue to a central foreign policy and national security concern. Alarming, the Indian government has been credibly accused by both Canadian and U.S. authorities of direct involvement in the assassination of Canada-based Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar and the planning of an assassination attempt against U.S.-based Sikh activist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun.³

IV. Indian Government's Campaign of Transnational Repression Against Sikhs in North America

The Indian government's TNR campaign against the Sikh diaspora in the U.S. and Canada is multifaceted, employing direct physical violence, digital manipulation, and legal coercion.

Direct Physical Violence and Assassination Plots

On September 18, 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced "credible allegations of a potential link" between the Government of India and the June 2023 murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian citizen and Sikh temple president, in British Columbia.¹⁰ Nijjar, a prominent Khalistan advocate, was shot to death with 34 bullets.¹² The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) stated Nijjar's slaying signaled "a significant escalation in India's repression efforts against the Khalistan movement and a clear intent to target individuals in North America".¹⁰ Canada expelled six Indian diplomats due to their direct involvement in intelligence gathering on Sikhs who were later killed, threatened, or attacked by India's criminal proxies.¹² The RCMP alleged Indian officials were behind Nijjar's murder and a wider wave of violence across Canada, orchestrated with organized crime groups.¹⁶

On November 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) unsealed an indictment against Nikhil Gupta, an Indian national, who allegedly collaborated with a GOI representative to plan the assassination of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a Sikh American activist, in New York City.¹² Text messages indicated the murder was to be timed around the Nijjar assassination, with Gupta noting "so many targets".¹² On October 17, 2024, a second indictment was unsealed against Vikash Yadav, a Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) officer, who was directing this plot, stating he "got the message from boss".¹² The Indian official implicated remains on the FBI's Wanted list.¹⁴ Public reporting suggests senior RAW officers and others in Prime Minister Modi's government likely knew of these plans.¹² Canadian police claim Indian diplomats worked with criminal gangs, including Lawrence Bishnoi, to orchestrate extortion, intimidation, and coercion against South Asian communities in Canada, aiming to collect information, carry out

intimidation, and interfere in Canada's democratic processes.¹⁶

Systematic Surveillance, Intimidation, and Harassment

Following Nijjar's death, the FBI warned at least three prominent U.S. Sikh activists, including Dr. Amarjit Singh and Dr. Pritpal Singh, that their lives might be endangered, issuing an advisory in Punjabi.¹² Dr. Pritpal Singh reported suspicious activity, including a dark SUV photographing his home.¹² Sikh Americans and Canadians report surveillance at events, and their family members in India face intimidation, arbitrary questioning, and travel bans.¹⁶ One witness testified to the Hogue Commission that after a protest in Ottawa, police in India visited his family and threatened his mother and brother.¹⁶ A U.S.-based Sikh academic was surveilled and threatened by Indian police in Punjab, forcing him to abandon his fellowship.¹²

Pressure has been exerted on Sikh religious institutions (gurdwaras) and community leaders. In September 2023, a man claiming to be a GOI representative visited a gurdwara in Stockton, California, warning that the GOI was monitoring Khalistan activism and that members would be denied visas. He allegedly requested phone numbers, and subsequently, the gurdwara's president and former secretary received calls offering immigration assistance if they "work with us" for the BJP.¹² Sikh temple elections in Canada were also alleged targets of India's consulates.¹⁶

Weaponization of Mobility Controls and Immigration Systems

The Indian government systematically weaponizes its immigration and citizenship systems. It has refused entry to Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) holders, suspended OCIs of critics, refused visas to human rights activists, and suspended passports of journalists, activists, and students, effectively rendering them stateless.¹² Angad Singh, an American-born journalist, was denied entry to India and had his OCI status revoked due to a documentary India deemed "anti national propaganda".¹² News outlet Article 14 documented over 100 OCI revocations for Modi critics.¹² Witnesses in Canada reported being told to sign pre-written letters to obtain visas, describing it as "a form of harassment" and "an operation of interference".¹⁶ Sikh individuals traveling to India, including U.S. citizens, have faced arbitrary and intrusive questioning at Indian airports about their Sikh identity and activism.¹²

Digital Censorship and Online Disinformation Campaigns

The Indian government actively pursues online censorship by issuing "legal removal demands" to social media companies like X (formerly Twitter) to censor posts by organizations like the

Sikh Coalition, alleging violations of India's Information Technology Act.⁹ Prominent Sikh Canadians, including Rupinder Kaur and Jagmeet Singh, reported their content on X was withheld by the Indian government.¹⁹ There's been a dramatic increase in GOI-driven online censorship and orchestrated harassment campaigns, often amplified by entities like "Disinfo Lab," reportedly run by Indian intelligence officers, which spreads conspiracy theories and directs harassment.¹² The Hogue Commission reported Sikh Canadians were targets of coordinated disinformation and misinformation campaigns on social media, alongside online harassment.¹⁶

Undermining Academic Freedom and Democratic Processes

Anonymous Sikh scholars reported GOI-connected individuals attempting to undermine Sikh Studies programs at Western universities since the 1990s, pushing for a broader 'South Asian Studies' focus instead.¹² Academics reported ideologically-driven questions about their work after job appointments or public speaking, fostering a climate of surveillance.¹²

Canada formally labeled India as the second most serious foreign interference threat, after China, with its campaign largely focusing on the Khalistan movement.¹⁶ Witnesses testified to the Hogue Commission that India "exerts influence in the Canadian political party nomination process" and pressures to "red light" candidates critical of India's human rights record or advocating for the Sikh community.¹⁶ A municipal council candidate alleged being targeted by "online bots and agents" of the Indian government.¹⁶

India views any advocacy for an independent Sikh homeland as "terroristic" and a direct threat.¹¹ This "Khalistan" narrative is a primary justification for repressive actions, seeking to deflect international criticism and legitimize extraterritorial actions. This complicates host countries' responses and creates a chilling effect on peaceful political expression within the diaspora.

The range of tactics—from assassinations involving intelligence agencies (RAW) and criminal proxies to visa denials, academic interference, and online censorship—indicates a highly coordinated and sophisticated state apparatus.¹⁹ Countering this requires an equally sophisticated, multi-agency, "whole-of-government" approach in the U.S. and Canada.

The repeated mentions of visa denials, OCI revocations, and passport suspensions¹² highlight the weaponization of administrative control over mobility and citizenship as a tool of repression. This impacts individuals' ability to travel, visit family, and maintain cultural ties. Host countries need robust legal and administrative mechanisms to protect their citizens and residents from such manipulation.

The consistent involvement of "**criminal gangs**"¹⁶ and "**Hindu nationalist supporters**"²⁰ in

orchestrating violence and harassment, often with Indian government agents, suggests a deliberate strategy of using proxies. This allows plausible deniability. Identifying, prosecuting, and sanctioning these proxies, and holding state actors accountable, is critical.

Table 1: Documented Tactics of Indian Transnational Repression and Their Manifestations

Category of Tactic	Specific Manifestation	Examples/Context
Physical Violence/Assassination	Extraterritorial killings	Murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar ¹⁰
	Assassination plots	Plot against Gurpatwant Singh Pannun ¹²
Surveillance/Intimidation	FBI warnings to activists	Warnings to Dr. Amarjit Singh, Dr. Pritpal Singh ¹²
	Threats to family in India	Family members of Canadian Sikhs threatened by police in India ¹⁶
	Pressure on Gurdwaras/Community Leaders	Stockton Gurdwara incident, attempts to control temple elections ¹²
Mobility Control/Legal Manipulation	Visa denials/OCI revocations	Angad Singh's OCI revocation; over 100 OCI revocations for critics ¹²
	Arbitrary airport questioning	U.S. citizen questioned at New Delhi airport about Sikh identity/activism ¹²
Digital Censorship/Disinformation	Social media censorship/content withholding	Sikh Coalition posts censored on X; Sikh Canadian content withheld ⁹
	Coordinated online	"Disinfo Lab" operations;

	harassment/misinformation	targeting of Sikh Canadians with disinformation campaigns ¹²
Undermining Democratic Processes/Academic Freedom	Influence in host country elections	Indian influence in Canadian political party nomination process, "red lighting" candidates ¹⁶
	Interference in academic programs	Attempts to undermine Sikh Studies programs at Western universities ¹²

Table 2: Documented Impacts of Transnational Repression on Sikh Diaspora Communities

Area of Impact	Specific Impact	Examples/Context
Individual Well-being	Mental health deterioration (stress, anxiety, paranoia, trauma)	Profound exhaustion, sleeplessness, paranoia among targeted individuals ¹³
	Risks to physical safety	FBI warnings to U.S. Sikh activists about endangered lives ¹²
Freedom of Expression	Self-censorship	Activists ceasing public participation, avoiding media, withdrawing from activism ¹³
	Withdrawal from activism	Individuals becoming too fearful to speak out publicly ¹²
Community Cohesion	Fractured family/social relations	Stress and fear of reprisals against family in India;

		mistrust within community ¹³
	Ostracization of targeted individuals	Other diaspora members avoiding targeted individuals due to fear of retaliation ¹³
Host Country Sovereignty	Interference in democratic processes	Indian influence in Canadian political party nominations; "red lighting" critical candidates ¹⁶
	Undermining national security	India labeled second most serious foreign interference threat to Canada ¹⁶

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