



BOOK REVIEWS

H.K. Thakur & B. Bhatia (2025). Democracy, multiculturalism and security – Indo-Canadian relations under the shadow of Khalistan

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The recent “referendum” on Khalistan organised by Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) in Ottawa on November 24, 2025, has reignited a diplomatic tinderbox between India and Canada. The word ‘Khalistan’, in the Punjabi language means ‘Land of the Pure’ representing the desire of a small group of Sikhs who consider themselves as a separate nation in the northern Indian state of Punjab. The Government of India has raised concerns over pro-Khalistan actions in Canada, stating that they pose a significant risk to India’s sovereignty and security. The Khalistan Movement was originated in the 1970s which sought to establish a sovereign state governed by Sikhs. It acquired significant influence in 1980s affecting the Punjab state of India. The book titled “Democracy, Multiculturalism, and Security: Indo-Canadian Relations under the Shadow of Khalistan”, edited by Harish K. Thakur and Binesh Bhatia (2025) is anthology of research papers from scholars, academicians and subject experts dissecting the Khalistan movement’s diaspora dimension. In June 2023, the assassination of Advocate Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a renowned Sikh activist for the Khalistan cause in Canada has substantially influenced India-Canada ties. Nijjar was a separatist, seen by some people as a prominent advocate for Sikh rights within the community, while for others, notably the Indian government, a terrorist engaged in operations supporting referendums and secessionism. The edited volume by Thakur and Bhatia (2025) is a compilation of scholarly papers divided into two sections. Section-I presents a brief overview of the bilateral relations between India and Canada with special reference to the recent tensions and Section-II briefly presents the prefaces of

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different chapters compiled in the volume. The Bilateral Relations among India-Canada can be traced as a part of the British Empire. The shared colonial past facilitated early migrations and cultural exchanges. Canada and Australia were granted Dominion Status by the British in 1901, whilst the Indian battle for independence ended in 1947. This book focuses a critical blueprint for understanding and perhaps resolving the current tensions as recently vividly articulated by High Commissioner Patnaik exposing the performativity absurdity of SFJ's referendum. A non-binding poll among Canadian Sikhs advocating for a sovereign Khalistan carved from India. As the High Commissioner noted, "Referendums have a certain process. This is a referendum by Canadians done in Canada". Drawing on Canada's own Quebec referendums of 1980 and 1995 formal exercises in democratic self-determination, Patnaik highlights the illegitimacy of SFJ's stunt, which drew a modest crowd but amplified global headlines. The event's optics, featuring banners of violence, further inflamed sensitivities, prompting Patnaik's analogy: "Imagine a situation where some other country would do the same thing with Quebec...how do you feel?".

Thakur and Bhatia's volume frames this as emblematic of a broader pathology. In the opening remarks of former Consul General of Canada, Patrick Hébert message notes "India as an important partner in its Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) that focuses on democracy, diversity, and multiculturalism as core values". The chapter by Sanjeev Kumar examines the influence of Khalistan Movement on the relationship between India and Canada specifically focusing on formation of militant groups like the Sikh Youth Federation, Babbar Khalsa and the World Sikh Organization, reveals how it led to the loss of innocent lives in Punjab. Kumar further analyses Justin Trudeau's connections to the Khalistan Movement and his partnership with the New Democratic Party (NDP), which publicly supported the Khalistan Referendum in Canada.

Other researcher Pavithran Nambiar focuses on how the Khalistan Movement in Canada, bolstered by tacit support from the Canadian government, has played a pivotal role in reinvigorating the struggle in Punjab. The recent assassination of Hardeep Nijjar, the leader of the Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF) in Canada, by two unidentified individuals and the Canadian Premier's accusation of India being responsible for the murder, not only emboldened Khalistani militants but also strained India's bilateral relations with Canada.

The common objectives of democracy and multi-cultural aspects among India-Canada relation need to address to implications of the Khalistan

referendum demanding priorities of India's national interest in territorial integrity, sovereignty, and unity, a multi-pronged approach. Enhancing diplomatic efforts to counter external propaganda by engaging its community diaspora through cultural and economic ties will definitely emphasize India's democratic interest. Domestically, investing in the Punjab's development will revive its agriculture, education, and job creation to alleviate economic grievances fueling separatism could be one solution. Further, a need of strengthening legal framework against Khalistan to prevent hate speech and foreign interference without suppressing legitimate Sikh rights is the need of hour. By promoting interfaith dialogues and national integration programs may foster harmony and witness strengthened bilateral ties and may avoid direct referendums, as they risk balkanization. The editors suggest diaspora dialogue, media literacy and intelligence sharing for inclusive governance reforms among India-Canada relations to address stability in Khalistan issue.