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TOPIC OF THE DAY (DATE: 23.09.2023)

SIKH SEPARATISM AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIA – CANADA RELATIONS

WHY IN NEWS?

- Recently, the Canadian government expelled a senior Indian diplomat accusing India for playing a role in the assassination of a prominent Sikh Canadian leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada. In the aftermath, India swiftly retaliated by issuing a statement that denied any involvement in the issue and expelled a senior Canadian diplomat.

Background

- India's Punjab state – which is about **58% Sikh and 39% Hindu** – was rocked by a violent Khalistan separatist movement in the 1980s and early 1990s, in which thousands of people died.
- Today, that movement's most vocal advocates are **primarily among the Punjabi overseas diaspora**.
- Recently, Hardeep Singh Nijjar was shot dead outside a Sikh temple in Surrey, British Columbia.
- Nijjar had campaigned for an independent Sikh nation – known as Khalistan – to be carved out of India's Punjab state.
- He was wanted by Indian authorities and had been designated as a "terrorist" in July 2020.
- Hardeep Singh Nijjar was chief of the Khalistan Tiger Force.
- India has designated the Khalistan Tiger Force as a terrorist outfit.
- This incident led to speculation on social media about whether the Indian intelligence agencies were linked to these deaths abroad, including on Canadian soil.

Why is India focused on Canada's Sikh community?

- Canada is **home to one of the largest overseas communities of Indian origin, which number approximately 1.4 million out of an overall Canadian population of 40 million. About 770,000 people reported Sikhism as their religion in the 2021 census.**
- Canada has the highest population of Sikhs outside their home state of Punjab.
- India has often complained to **Canada's governments about the activities of Sikh hardliners among the Indian diaspora who, it says, are trying to revive the insurgency.**
- India-Canada relations have previously been tested by events such as the bombing of an Air India aircraft in 1985 by a Canada-based Khalistani separatist group.

Deterioration in Ties

- India-Canada ties have deteriorated rapidly in recent years.
- The **Canadian government is soft on Khalistani supporters in Canada** and working against Indian interests.
- Indian diplomacy has been consistently raising the issue of Hindu temples in Canada being allegedly vandalized and defaced by Khalistani groups.

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- Khalistani leaders and outfits are also given free rein by Canadian authorities, including by letting them organize so-called referendums on seeking an independent state for Indian Sikhs.
- Khalistan elements have incited violence against Indian diplomats, including putting the officials' photos and other details on posters, and targeted Indian diplomatic facilities several times in recent years.

The Khalistan Shadow over India Canada Relations over the years

- 1982- Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (Justin Trudeau's father) declined to extradite Talwinder Singh Parmar accused of killing two police officers in Punjab.
- 1984- In the aftermath of Operation Bluestar (launched by the Indian army to root out militants from the Golden Temple in June 1984) bolstered the Khalistan movement among the diaspora.
- 1985- Babbar Khalsa(Khalistan separatist organisation) orchestrated the bombing of Air India Kanishka in June 1985 which resulted in 331 civilian deaths.
- Post 2015 Period
- 2015- Justin Trudeau's proximity to individuals sympathetic to Khalistan's cause strained bilateral relations.
- 2017- The then Punjab Chief Minister Capt Amarinder Singh refused to meet Canadian Defence Minister Harjit Singh Sajjan, accusing him of associating with separatists.
- 2018- India got aggravated when Jaspal Atwal convicted of attempting to assassinate an Indian Cabinet minister in 1986 was invited to dine with Trudeau during his Visit to India. Trudeau got a cool reception during his visit to India when he was received at the airport by Minister of State for Agriculture Gajendra Singh Shekhawat instead of PM Modi.
- 2019- The annual 'Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada' released in December 2018, mentioned 'Sikh extremism' and Khalistan for the first time. However, in 2019 Canada revised the report just a day before Vaisakhi, removing all mentions of Khalistan and Sikh extremism.
- 2020- India accused Trudeau of inciting extremists when he expressed concerns about New Delhi's response to the farmers' protest and pledging support for their rights.
- 2022- In March 2022, Trudeau's Liberal Party formed an alliance with the New Democratic Party (NDP), led by Jagmeet Singh, who openly endorsed the Khalistan Referendum on Canadian soil.
- 2023- During the recent **G20 summit in New Delhi, PM Modi conveyed "strong concerns" about "continuing anti-India activities of extremist elements" in Canada.**

WAY FORWARD

- Government of India should **encourage open and inclusive dialogue between all stakeholders including members of the Sikh community, Indian government representatives and Canadian officials.** Setting up of Counter Narrative Organisations to prevent further potential Radicalisation. For example: **Tech against Terrorism.**