

# Dynamics of Sikh Diaspora and its Implications for India-Canada Relations



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## Abstract

*One of the important components which remained central to understand the different dimensions of Sikh diaspora of Canada is the identity of the Sikhs. From a long history- when these have started migrating and living in troubled environment and situations, to the present, when these are enjoying a respectful and privileged position- Sikhs have preserved and used their identity to demand and gain separate minority rights in Canada. Thanks to the urge of Sikhs to preserve their identity and the evolution of Canada as a multicultural state, Sikhs succeeded in getting due rights and recognition in the host country. The attachment of Sikh diaspora with their community in homeland, also become an intervening factor in India-Canada relations. To understand its implications for Indo-Canada relations, one need to comprehend that how with time and also the formation and adoption of different laws and policies in both the countries (in host and homeland country) have changed the nature of Sikh diaspora. How the political situations and activities in home as well as host state, decided the course of activities of Sikh diaspora, which further effected the mutual relations of India and Canada, have been focused in this article?*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, Sikh, Multiculturalism, Identity, Home-Host Country*

## Introduction

India being a country of multiple diversities has given birth and preserved many religions including Sikhism. Currently ninety percent of total population of the Sikhs lives in India. Canada has second largest Sikh population in the world with 1.96% Sikh residents. According to such distribution of population, where India is considered as home country of Sikhs, Canada is considered as the most prominent host-country of Sikh diaspora. Canada is also known as 'Mini Punjab' due to the high population of Punjabis residing over here, who are mainly of Sikh religion. Sikh diaspora also remained a crucial factor in the mutual relations of India and Canada. Policy makers of both- the host as

well as the home country- cannot make their foreign policy without taking into consideration the Sikh diaspora. It is a kind of link between two countries, due to which politics of one country affects the politics of the other. Besides this, being linked to a particular religious community, it determines and effects the inter-community relations especially in host country. The religion (Sikhism) is the main source of the identity and the guideline for the social life of the Sikhs. Where on the one hand, this religious identity is a uniting force of the Sikh community; residing all over the world, on the other, due to a particular religious identity, Sikhs have been perceived as separatist and secessionist in their home country and segregating in the host country.

This paper is an attempt to comprehend mainly the dynamics of Sikh diaspora that how, from the history of its initial and forceful migration, to the changing world at present, it contributed in the improvement and strains in the bilateral relations of India and Canada?

First question, which has been set to answer in this article is linked to the wider question of the dynamics of Sikh diaspora of Canada that to what degree, Sikhs remain intact to their religion and culture by living in other country and how by preserving their identity it posed challenges to the governance of the host country? Second, what expectations and demands have been emerged and raised by Sikh diaspora from the Canadian state after its adoption of the policy of multiculturalism and what are its real implications for Sikh Diaspora and Canadian State? And finally, that how the claims of Sikh identity have impacted and influenced the mutual relations between two countries?

### **Understanding the Multiple Layers of Diaspora**

To understand the conceptual meaning of diaspora one has indeed to strive to understand the processes and developments of human history which time to time admixture many new things in the conceptual store of diaspora and still the differences in theories and opinion regarding diaspora are available and un-ignorable. The etymological and multiple theoretical derivatives are available to us which can throw light on the foundational understanding of diaspora. The etymological meaning of the term diaspora is derived from the Greek word, which denotes a scattering of seeds. The term used to be limited to population categories that have experienced forceful and violent expulsion processes, like the Jews, but presently it may also denote social condition entailing a particular form of 'consciousness', compatible with postmodernity and globalization. The meaning and understanding of diaspora have been changed with the change and transformation of world society. Different scholars define it in different way and conceptualize the term accordingly.

William Safran defined diasporic people as those who have been dispersed from a specific "center" to two or more places; continue to hold a "collective memory, vision, or myth" about the original homeland; continued to believe that the original homeland is their "ideal, true" home and dream of returning; believe that they should remain committed to the maintenance or restoration of the original home-land; sustain a strong ethno-communal bond based on that ongoing relationship with the homeland; and maintain a troubled relationship with the wider society, they can never be fully accepted and causing them to remain "partly alienated and insulated" from it (Safran, 1991, pp. 83, 87).

Robin Cohen distinguishes between victim, labor, imperial, and trade diasporas. He agrees with Sararfs' criteria, but he adds that, the dispersal may have been an "expansion" in search of trade or economic opportunities. Moreover, argues, diasporic communities continue to hold "a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement" and "the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism" (Cohen, 1997, p. 26). Michele Reis distinguishes between classical (Jewish and Armenian, among others), modern (slave and colonial), and contemporary diasporas. Contemporary diasporas, she argues, are the product of a postcolonial, globalized world, characterized by "fragmentation and dislocation," ongoing transnational communication, and an implication that "dispersal to overseas territories need not imply a decisive break with the homeland nor is the uprooting of the diasporic group considered permanent (Reis, 2004, p. 47). Carment and Bercuson argue that "today's diasporas" differ from previous generations of "ethnic migrants" because late 20th-century telecommunications advances and cheap travel allow for "a new type of 'hyper-connectivity' between diasporas and their home communities" (Carment and Bercuson, 2008, pp. 3-15). Gabriel Sheffer opines that a diaspora is "a social-political formation, created as a result of either voluntary

or forced migration, whose members regard themselves as of the same ethno-national origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host countries”(Sheffer, 2003, p. 9).

These definition seem problematic in their own way. A workable definition of a diasporic community must allow for change in the relationship with the wider society. Not all diasporic communities want or desire a return to the homeland, and indeed, there is frequently no homeland (or no single homeland) to which to return. Moreover, definitions of diaspora must allow for change in the identity of the diasporic community and its members- shifts that allow for the blurring of boundaries and for the complexity of multiple senses of “belonging” and of multiple ideas of home. The practicable definition of a diaspora must begin with what all diasporic communities have in common, and it must consider the changing international political environment and challenge of the Canadian multicultural model. Sikh diaspora cannot be understood by picking up any definition of diaspora randomly, but needs a very careful observation of its true nature. Due to its complex and dynamic nature, Sikh diaspora can only be situated in-between such given definitions. In the era of globalization, wherein the world has narrowed down in a single unit, the debates on configuration of ethnic and race boundaries have refocused academic attention on the concept of ‘diaspora’. Diaspora signifies transnational movement and ties with arguments around globalization and the growth of solidarities which are not national based (Appadurai, 1990, pp. 295-308). In contemporary context of globalization, diaspora is an alternative to the metaphysics of ‘race’, nation and bonded culture (Giloroy, 1997, pp. 301-345), for it involves a conception of identity that departs from essentialism of ethnic or cultural identities. According to Hall it focuses attention on transnational processes relating to ethnic commonalities, which can recognize difference and diversity.

The diaspora experience...is defined, not be essence or purity, but the recognition of a

necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a concept of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (Hall, 1990, p. 235).

Some core elements are clearly indicative of diaspora, namely, cross border migration and settlement, host land participation, homeland consciousness and construction of a multi-locational ‘self’. While a group of people migrate to the foreign country and settles there, it also seeks to or starts to take part in political and economic processes of host-land. Although their involvement in the affairs of new country doesn’t mean that they forget their homeland altogether; rather they still have a sense of awareness regarding the existence of their motherland. When it comes to formation of identity, it is drawn from both the host and home country and not marked by strict boundaries; generation to generations it undergoes many changes (Pande, 2013, pp. 59-60). All basic descriptions, like cross-boundary settlement in form of migration or by any other process, claims of particular identity like ethnic or religious and consciousness and awareness of preserving it, laid these fundamental concerns in understanding diaspora.

### **History of Sikh Settlement in Canada**

Indian diaspora can be classified into colonial/old and post-colonial/new diaspora. In former case migration was either government sponsored or self-sponsored laborers, small time professionals, traders etc. While in the later was skilled, semi-skilled/unskilled, students and political migrants (Pande, 2013, pp. 61,64). Migration of the Sikhs to Canada can also be divided into two phases, colonial and post-colonial. The context and position of Sikhs in one phase completely different and vary from another phase. While in the colonial phase, Sikh struggled hard to survive due to the racial discrimination; in post-colonial phase they had got the identity of free citizens of an independent country. Where the great deal of Indian migration occurs during the

colonial phase under indentured labor system, emigration of Sikhs was either free or assisted by the state. Sikhs were considered as a martial race, which was pertinent for army services. This specialty attracts the British rulers towards them, which leads to the recruitments of Sikhs in the British army in late 19<sup>th</sup> century. These army recruitments provided the first way for Sikhs to immigrate and after which independent migration also started. Sikhs were first sent to the far-east by Britishers and the early migrations of Sikhs to Canada started from here only. Due to the advancement in transportation, particularly in railways, gave impetus to such migrations.

An economic boom in Canada from 1903-1913, as there were abundant number of job opportunities were emerging due to advancing economy of Canada, number of Punjabis attracted towards this country in search of the same. The developments done by Britishers, such as railway constructions and irrigation facilities, resulted into the social mobility of Sikh peasants toward western land. A chunk of Sikhs population had become financially capable to think of migration at that time. Sikhs mainly worked in lumber mills, railway construction activities, on cattle farms or orchards etc. Due to growing presence of Indians in Canada, a sense of fear emerged in the local white community that Indians would take over factories, mills and lumberyard jobs. Such anti-migrant sentiments resulted into the disenfranchisement of Indians in 1907 and discriminatory government policies, such as the Continuous Journey regulation in 1908. Incidents like *Komagata Maru*<sup>1</sup>, are clearly indicative of the fact that many checks and restrictions were put on the immigration of Indians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which forced the existing Indian community to organize politically (Singh and Singh, 2008, p. 156). The formation of a political association, named as *Ghadar Party*<sup>2</sup>, was the emblem of political activeness of immigrants. During the First World War many Sikhs linked to this organization, returned to India, in order to wage struggle against British colonialism. But many other also remained in Canada, working

mainly in lumber mills and logging camps and some as illegal migrants. In late 1940s, Canada started to liberalize its immigration policies, which again gave impetus to Sikhs migration to Canada. The quota for emigrants, regulations regarding the entry of relatives and family members of Sikh migrants, has been allowed by Canadian state (Talta, 1999, p. 41). However, the immigration from India still remained small in 1960s. The new immigration regulations became effective in 1967, which allows professional-skilled worker from India. From 1970s a gradual process of chain migration took place. Now, immigration policies of Canada favor the young, educated and professional migrants which can fulfill the needs of the country. As some scholars opined, that Canada has benefited from this "brain drain", without bearing the cost of producing this.

### **Sikh Diaspora and Canadian Multiculturalism: Context and Claims**

Multiculturalism as a term emerged in 1960s in Anglophone countries, concerning the cultural needs of non-European migrants. At present, it means the political accommodation by the state and/ or a dominant group of all minority cultures defined by reference to race or ethnicity; or nationality or aboriginality or religion (McLean and McMillan, 2009). A multiculturalist society marked by the coexistence of various cultural groups and acceptance of cultural pluralism. In such society every cultural group, despite of its numeric strength, can secure its identity without having any fear of being dominated by the majority cultural. Canada is a renowned Multiculturalist state presently due to its post-colonial evolution of being more diverse. But since the very beginning, it was never a monocultural country. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, three cultural units, namely, the native Indians or aboriginals, the Protestant British and the Catholic French were constituting the nation, which is now called as Canada. In 19<sup>th</sup> century the process of immigration started from Europe and many Germans, Ukrainians and Scandinavians came to Canada. By the end of the century

Asian people, mainly Chinese, Japanese and east Indians also begin to immigrate here (Judge, 2003, p. 1726). People from different countries and of diverse culture have been immigrated in Canada till the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So, to accommodate all these people within a one nation in order to avoid any kind of chaos, it became essential for Canada to adopt the policy like multiculturalism. Although different cultures have been residing Canada since 19<sup>th</sup> century, the adoption of the policy of multiculturalism officially is a quite late phenomenon. The rising demands of minorities in 1960s compelled the government of Canada to act in this way. In 1963, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (B and B) Commission was formed, to inquire the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend the further possibilities of development. The illustration of Canada as composed of only two culture (French & British) was objected by those Canadians who did not belong to any of these cultures and the policy of multiculturalism properly, was the result of the claims of these people in fact. Still in the reaction of the B and B Commission the government of Canada, under the leadership of Pierre Elliot Trudeau declared the policy of multiculturalism, which would be applied within the pattern of (English & French) Bilingualism (Jedwab, 2014). While in 1970s Canadian multiculturalism was not that much able to accommodate the problems related to minorities in a proper way, in 1980s it became more capable. In 1982, multiculturalism was enacted in Section 27 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which gave the impetus to the mobilization of minorities and this mobilization resulted into the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. Such developments in the laws enacted by the government strengthen the bases of multiculturalism in Canada (Ibid). The evolution in the policy of multiculturalism, which was the result of constant demands of the neglected minorities, made Canada the first multiculturalist nation in the world literally by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now multiculturalism was not limited to some cultures but had extended

to every culture and minorities living in the country. All the people living in Canada got equal space in the Canadian society, despite of their culture, due to this policy of multiculturalism which gave the way to unite the diverse cultures within a one nation peacefully.

Multiculturalism was the need of both the Canadian state and the immigrants. The former needed it to maintain the peace and harmony in the society, while the latter needed it to protect their identity. Immigrants have been played a big role in the economic development of Canada and it can't afford to stop immigrations ever. So, the government of Canada have no option instead of accommodating the immigrants in their country and in this task the policy of multiculturalism could help it a lot more. However, immigrants look at this policy with the hope that it would safeguard their existence despite of living far from their home land. It was mandatory for Sikhs to demand for such rights to protect their identity to which they were attached by heart. Accordingly, from the very beginning they worked in this way and always tried to unite their community and try to protect as well as flourish their culture in the host state. Sikhs obtain their identity from their religion and they made the religion (Sikhism) as a base to unite their community to fight for their rights in the host land. The communal consciousness among Sikhs became a cause of their politicization. Gurudwaras (Sikh Temples), which symbolize the religion and identity of Sikhs, have been the hot-spots of every action or reaction by Sikhs from the very start of their immigration. In the colonial period, when Sikhs were discriminated in Canada, Gurudwaras in Vancouver<sup>3</sup> and Victoria, became the centers to unite Sikhs to fight against the racial discrimination and also to collect money for the independence of their home country (Singh and Singh, 2008, p. 156). Many Sikh leaders and organization generated by such Gurudwaras' gatherings. In the pre-independence era, Sikh organization like *the Khalsa Diwan Society*<sup>4</sup> and the *Ghadar* were formed in Canada aimed at abolishing the discrimination of Sikhs in the host land and get independence from the colonial

rule in the home land. In the post-independence era, the aims and objectives of diasporic Sikh organization have been changed according to the context and circumstances, yet the main focus on preserving identity remains same always. Thanks to Canadian multiculturalism (although Sikh diaspora had to do a long struggle for this) Sikhs get cultural as well as political rights in Canada, which proves as an advantage for them to stand up for their identity and against all the wrongs were being done with their people in the host land. After independence, followed by the partition Sikhs faced mass atrocities and genocide and this experience filled them with despair. The emergence of separatism among Sikhs in their homeland was the outcome of such sufferings. Due to their strong attachment and bond with the people of their community, Sikh diaspora compelled to react on the persecution of their people in homeland. When the demand of *Khalistan* popped up in India, the focus of diasporic Sikh organizations shifts towards it and Sikhs started to fight to have an independent country from Canada. Especially during 1970s and 1980s, when on the one hand demand of *Khalistan* was on zenith and on the other hand multiculturalism was becoming more favorable for Sikh diaspora, Sikh organizations like *Babbar Khalsa*<sup>5</sup> got more active, simultaneously extended more *Babbar Khalsa international*<sup>6</sup> and ultimately took a militant path. These organizations were being described as terrorist organization even by the Canadian Government (Kaur, 2009, pp. 1087-1088). It was fine to raise voice for their community, but such efforts became notorious because of the violent activities of some mischief-makers and were being seen as a threat for the unity of India.

The policy of multiculturalism helped Canada extremely in integrating diaspora in the country. By this policy immigrants get some cultural as well as political rights which improved their faith on the Canadian state. When immigrants get the citizenship in a host country, whatever may be the criteria, the chances of their resistance became less and they are more likely to integrate into the mainstream society. Yet they try to do

is to bargain the terms again, on which basis they would integrate. They claim for the more tolerance in order to preserve their ethnic he, heritage (Kymlicka, 2002, pp. 353-354). Where due to multiculturalism the host state became able attract and integrate Sikh diaspora, the failure of the home state to accommodate Sikhs made the former incapable in halting the separatist feelings among the later. Thereon the misuse of the rights given to the immigrants in Canada, made it more complex for India to unite.

### **Sikh Diaspora: Implications for Indo-Canada Relations**

Sikh diaspora affected the politics of host country as well as the country of its origin and it remained an important determinant in Indo-Canada relation. After the independence of India, the leaders of India and their counterparts tried to establish friendly relations between two countries. The continuance of and improvement in Indo-Canadian relations even after the colonial time was due to the contemporary needs of both countries and supposed to benefit them equally. Sikh diaspora has been worked as a link between India and Canada. Sikhs immigrants have been proved as more radical and politically active than those Sikhs living in the home land. Since 1984 event, and its aftermath, Sikh diaspora started participating in the politics of Punjab in India. Attacks against Sikhs and suspension of their civil liberties in their homeland, aroused the solidarity among Sikhs living in all over the world and especially in Canada. Sikh diaspora in Canada particularly got active in such circumstances and separatist groups began to organize within the diaspora. The emergence of these groups in Canada and their increasing support to the separatist movement in India impacted the Indo-Canada relations negatively. In 1985, when the Sikh extremists blew up the Air India flight 182, Canadian agencies like the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) were accused for not actively pursuing or delaying the investigation regarding this, which compelled India to see Canada with suspicion

and it weaken the mutual trust between two countries. To improve the ties and regain the faith of India, Canada began keeping check on immigrants' activities in its territory. Following the bilateral extradition treaty signed in 1987, both countries decided to create a bilateral Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism (JWGCT) to coordinate against Khalistan separatist groups in 1997 (Singh and Singh, 2008, p. 158). Due to diaspora-homeland relationship, the behavior and activities of Sikh diaspora in Canada, determined by the situations prevailing in India. Through the political participation and ethnic organizations like International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), World Sikh organization (WSO), *Babbar Khalsa*, Sikh diaspora exerted the pressure on the Canadian government which further pressurize the government of India to make its policies accordingly. Sikh diaspora lobbied the government of Canada to appeal international bodies like UN to act in favor of their community (Hoskin, 2004, p. 59). Being a part of decision-making bodies like parliament, Sikh diaspora gets chance to show its activism and influence to affect the foreign policy and decision of Canadian government toward India. For example, in the year of 2010, one of the liberal MPs (representing Punjabi-dominated constituencies) introduced a petition in parliament which was mainly requesting the Canadian Government to view the 1984's event in India as an act of genocide. The aim behind getting the consent to recognizing this event as a genocide was to compel the Canadian government to act against the Government of India, for if this event is proved and accepted as genocide, being a signatory of United Nation Convention on Genocide, Canada could not refuse to act (Singh and Singh, 2008, p. 160). While on the one hand, Sikh diaspora is the main cause of bilateral relations between India and Canada; on the other, it has also proved as the major cause of conflict between two countries. Indo-Canadian relations have been benefited both the countries a lot. Due to mutual relations between Canada and India, where the former gets benefit from the skilled and educated immigrants, the later

gets benefit from the philanthropic contributions of such immigrants for the development of their homeland. Due to the awareness of mutual benefits both the countries try to make friendly relations by considering and attracting the Sikh diaspora. Because of the influence of Sikhs in the parliament of Canada, the main decision maker of Canada always takes it into the consideration and make the foreign policy accordingly. Not only the decision-making regarding India but the activities like visiting golden temple particularly by Prime Minister of Canada (Justin Trudeau) during his visit to India, is clearly the indicative of the concern of Canadian leaders towards the Sikh community, which ultimately can help in winning the faith of Sikhs living in Canada. By such activities Canada became able to integrate Sikh diaspora in its society as well as to maintain friendly relations with India generally. So, the Sikh diaspora has been proved as the helping factor to consolidate Indo- Canadian relations, but activities of a section of the Canadian Sikh diaspora which supports the separatist sentiments in India has become the main cause of dispute between the two countries. Where India's concern about its unity and security obligate to put pressure on Canada to check the activities of Sikh diaspora, Canadian policy of multiculturalism obligate it to give due rights and space to Sikh diaspora. India has always been interested in building good relations with Canada due to anticipated economic benefits and emotional attachment with its own people. But the flourishing separatist powers always haunt the government of India to go ahead carefully on the way to strong ties.

### **Conclusion**

Sikh Diaspora in Canada is dynamic in nature and has been gone through a major transformation with the passage of time. Due to the change in time and circumstances apparent change can be seen in the status of Sikhs in the host land. Although Sikh diaspora in contemporary time is more willing to integrate with the mainstream Canadian society and culture. Still they are conscious about their identity, which they derive

from their religion and tradition and they want to protect it in host as well as homeland. Sikhs are not separatist fundamentally, but they are sensitive about their community and tradition and they always try to find the best way to protect it. Being a multicultural state, Canada gives free space for Sikh diaspora to protect its identity, but this space is used by some separatist powers to break the unity and integrity of Indian state. Such attempts by a section of Sikh diaspora become the reason of sourness in Indo-Canadian relations. Sikh diaspora in Canada is the main determinant of Indo-Canada relations, so it can either be the reason of friendship or rift between two nations. Due to the failure of Indian State to accommodating the Sikh identity in past, have been resulted into the continuous distance of Sikhs from their home country. The resentment of Sikhs about plight of their people in homeland compelled them to take separatist path and fight for the sake of their community even from outside of the home country. In such separatist activities Canada is used as a podium by Sikh diaspora. Giving space to the Sikh identity in Canada might gave the way to integrate them with Canadian mainstream but it also became a main factor to deteriorate the relations between India and Canada. Because of the significant role of Sikh diaspora in deciding the Indo-Canada relations, it becomes compulsory for both the countries to make appropriate policies to integrate them. It depends on the policy makers of both the states to accommodate Sikhs properly in order to make their mutual ties strong.

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