

DIASPORA AS PARALLEL POLITY: THE KHALISTAN MOVEMENT ABROAD AND THE LIMITS OF LONG-DISTANCE NATIONALISM

Fizza Ali Janjua

fizza.ali@numl.edu.pk

Lecturer Pakistan Studies National University of Modern Languages Lahore.

Anam Sajid

anam.sajid@numl.edu.pk

Lecturer English Language and Literature National University of Modern Languages Lahore.

Abstract

The Khalistan movement demands an independent Sikh nation from Indian Punjab. Its most prolific political activity has occurred in gurdwaras, courts, and city parks of Toronto, Vancouver, London, and California in recent years, rather than in Punjab. This article focuses on how diaspora groups have maintained a political project with little support within Punjab. Sikhs for Justice and its Khalistan Referendum movement have established a parallel polity in the outside world: one which has its own way of voting, its own laws, its own lobbying front, and except for the presence of Punjab, has no geographical base at all. It draws on the idea of long-distance nationalism of Benedict Anderson and the empirical evidence that has since tested it to suggest that the asymmetry has a predictable logic. Distance eliminates the material and security considerations that influence political decisions in the home and creates organisational space where the state of India's authority is closed in Punjab. To illustrate the difference, the 2024 Lok Sabha outcome in Punjab, where mainstream parties maintained their control and just two independents managed to bring with them khalistan sympathies to narrow locally-contingent victories, is read against six-figure referendum turnouts in the rest of the world. Finally, the article suggests an insight from this case for the study of diaspora nationalism in its general form: distance can be a structural benefit to sustaining a maximalist political stance, rather than a limitation.

Keywords: *Khalistan, Sikh diaspora, long-distance nationalism, Punjab politics, Sikhs for Justice*

1. Introduction

In March 2026, roughly 27,000 people cast ballots in a single afternoon in Seattle, voting on whether Punjab should separate from India. Similar tallies have been reported from Surrey, Sacramento, and San Francisco since 2021, run by the advocacy group Sikhs for Justice under its Khalistan Referendum campaign. None of these votes carry legal force. None will be recognized by any government. And none took place in Punjab. That last fact is the puzzle this article takes up.

Punjab held its own election in June 2024. Congress won seven of thirteen parliamentary seats, the Aam Aadmi Party won three, and the Shiromani Akali Dal—the state's oldest Sikh-identity party—held onto exactly one seat. Two independents with Khalistan-adjacent sympathies won narrow victories in Khadoor Sahib and Faridkot, but neither ran as part of an organized separatist bloc. Neither result reflects a coordinated mandate for secession. No party represented in Punjab's Vidhan Sabha or its Lok Sabha delegation campaigns for Khalistan as a platform.

So the movement's center of institutional gravity sits abroad while its stated territorial claim sits in Punjab. Sikh diaspora organizations, chiefly SFJ, have built something closer to a parallel polity than a support network: a structure that runs its own referenda, files its own lawsuits, and speaks at UN forums, all without controlling an inch of the territory it claims. This article asks how that structure has been sustained for so long against so little traction at home, and what the answer reveals about long-distance nationalism as a general phenomenon rather than a Sikh-specific one.

There are four steps to the argument. Section 2 discusses the time frame of 1984 and the end of militancy in the middle 1990s to understand the modern movement in its proper context.

Section 3 covers Anderson's original arguments, Glick Schiller and Fouron's elaborations on Anderson's notions, and more recent empirical studies that tested Anderson's original claim of distance as radicalizing. Section 4 explores the role of the institutional set-up of the diaspora in greater detail. Section 5 discusses the drawbacks in the electoral system of Punjab. Sections 6 and 7 connect both and answer the main question.

2. Historical Background

Ambitions for autonomy, short of secession, have been consistent in Punjab's political history since partition. Some points in history have seen action in the state go beyond the autonomy line and toward secession. The 1973 Anandpur Sahib Resolution, drafted by the Akali Dal, asked for greater regional autonomy within India and stronger protections for religious minorities generally. It did not ask for a separate state.

The demand escalated only after 1984, when the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar to root out an armed faction under Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Casualty estimates for that operation range from the government's own count of under 500 to independent estimates several times higher. Indira Gandhi's assassination by two of her Sikh bodyguards followed months later. The anti-Sikh violence that swept Delhi in its aftermath killed thousands more, largely with the complicity or inaction of local police.

What followed was a decade of insurgency and counterinsurgency that left Punjab exhausted rather than radicalized. By the mid-1990s, Indian security forces had killed, tortured, or disappeared thousands of people in the name of suppressing the militancy. Militant factions had carried out bombings, extortion, and killings of their own, including the 1985 destruction of Air India Flight 182, which remains the deadliest terrorist attack in Canadian history. Punjab's 1997 election returned moderate leadership. No organized insurgency has operated in the state since. This is the fact that most shapes everything that follows: the militant phase of Khalistan ended in Punjab roughly thirty years ago. What has continued since then has continued mostly somewhere else.

Event	Year	Location	Impact
Operation Blue Star	1984	Amritsar, Punjab	500–2,000+ casualties
Assassination & Delhi violence	1984–85	Delhi	2,000–8,000 deaths
Counterinsurgency Phase	1984–97	Punjab	10,000+ casualties
Air India Flight 182	1985	Atlantic/Canada	329 deaths

3. Long-Distance Nationalism as a Frame

Benedict Anderson coined the term long-distance nationalism to describe a pattern he saw forming among migrant communities who retained, and in some cases intensified, an attachment to homeland politics from a position of physical and material safety.

Taking this further, Glick Schiller and Fouron suggested that some diasporas don't merely endorse homeland political projects but actively create non-sovereign transnational varieties of the nation-state, complete with symbolic institutions to mimic the nation state without its attendant powers. The strong version of the thesis would be that diaspora groups by definition are more maximalist than the people they stand for: because they will not pay the consequences of the stance they adopt.

Fair, in one of the few studies to be a comparative analysis along similar lines between the Khalistan movement and the Tamil diaspora support for the LTTE insurgency in Sri Lanka, has concluded that diaspora funding and organizing outlasted the ability of both groups to sustain their fight on the ground.

Recent research has thrown complicated light on the issue. In testing their thesis with matched surveys of Greek and Turkish Cypriots and their respective diasporas, Bonnenfant et al. found no consistent evidence that diaspora communities were more hardline than those in the

homeland. On several measures, the diaspora samples were actually less hardline and more open to compromise than those in the homeland. Earlier, Hall found that Bosnian refugees in Sweden, compared to those who remained in Bosnia, came to a similar conclusion.

One way to read this literature is that distance always radicalizes. Another is that it reshapes the incentives to political behavior, which can act in either radical or consolidating direction, depending on the case.

Four features dovetail neatly to make Khalistan a useful test of the mechanism and of the outcome:

First, there is no material risk to a Punjabi diaspora member that compares to that of a resident of Punjab: no forfeiture of the agricultural subsidy, no risk of a security crackdown, no risk to family already under the thumb of the state they are treading on.

Second, both the assembly and speech are guaranteed in the host countries of North America and western Europe in ways that Indian authorities do not provide for the movement of separatists in Punjab.

Third, there is the organizing infrastructure and funding from existing institutions in the diaspora which can outlast the electoral life of Punjab and gurdwara management committees most of all.

Fourth, the trauma of 1984 is quite distinct from the experiences of both peoples: it is a settled and foundational moment of identity in the diaspora and needs to be commemorated generation by generation, but for Punjabis it is set against the now more present dispiriments of unemployment, drug addiction, agrarian debts, and the lack of governance on a day-to-day basis, which all impinge on electoral consciousness.

Another issue in literature mentioned by Koinova is that the level of radicalism or moderation of the diaspora may not be related to distance but to the opportunity structure in the homeland and internationally at a specific time. This time, a diaspora is not permanently "up" or "down", but rather moves towards maximalism or accommodation depending on opportunities and roadblocks.

Applied to Khalistan, this implies the character of the movement in its current form outside Punjab is owing to a confluence of a number of factors: Western host countries accommodating open organizing; a challenging diplomacy between India and Canada and the U.S. since 2023; and an electorate in Punjab more focused on other grievances, beyond issues of Khalistan. But if either of those three factors were to alter, so too, would the form of the movement abroad: not that distance would transcend its radicalism, but that the reverse would also be true.

4. The Diaspora's Institutional Infrastructure

Sikhs for Justice was founded as a civil action legal group, challenging Indian officials who it believed were accountable for the 1984 violence. It has since become the main facilitator of pro-Khalistan referenda on a global scale. Given the paramount role of the central Punjab Referendum Commission, the Khalistan Referendum campaign began in October 2021 in London and has been ongoing in Switzerland, Italy, Australia, Canada, and several cities of the United States under its nominal control.

Turnout has been considerable for diaspora organizing, with 27,000 turned out at a May 2026 rally in Seattle, more than 60,000 in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and more than 100,000 in Sacramento. These are the estimates of SFJ itself and friendlier sources than the electoral commission and should be interpreted as claims, not necessarily exact counts.

Location	Date	Reported Turnout	Status
Sacramento	2026	100,000+	SFJ estimate
San Francisco & LA	2021–26	60,000+	SFJ estimate
Seattle	March 2026	27,000	SFJ estimate
London	Oct 2021	Unreported	Campaign launch

One other factor that has been criticized is the very structure of the exercise itself: it cannot be said that the people who took part in this poll were the residents of Punjab proper, as they chose to send their votes elsewhere by emigrating.

The referendum is not as legally or demographically solid but as strong in its institutional durability. SFJ has also sued in United States federal courts, including the civil lawsuit filed before a Federal Court in the Southern District of New York in 2026. SFJ has created dossiers accusing what it sees as continued repression of Sikhs in India for submission to United Nations bodies. The organization has been proscribed in India. Diplomatic ties between India and Canada, as well as the United States, have been under pressure since 2023, including allegations that Indian state actors were responsible for killing Canadian Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar and an attempted assassination of SFJ's general counsel in New York.

The infrastructure is deeper than SFJ operations alone. Since long before the referendum campaign commenced, individual gurdwaras in the Central Valley of California and in Surrey near Vancouver have served as organizing centres, holding commemorations of 1984 as well as providing community services like free clinics and Punjabi language schools. This is important in terms of durability as the base infrastructure of the movement is not reliant on any one piece of legislation or any court decision.

Funds are raised locally through a gurdwara committee, which exists outside of the financial structure of the SFJ. Funds are not affected by turnout for any individual referendum or by the outcome of a suit or lawsuit. Several examples show how younger members of the diaspora have been appointed as community organizers and advocates, despite not having experienced 1984, but rather through commemoration. That's what has sustained the infrastructure staffing, funded and running for four decades rather than any single legal or diplomatic success.

5. Punjab's Electoral Record

Bearing this in mind, Punjab's own politics seem disconnected. The result of the 2024 Lok Sabha election is completely under the control of the parties which are not waging any kind of campaign on the issue of Khalistan in any form. Congress won seven seats on the basis of anti-incumbency, while it still has three seats with a sitting Aam Aadmi Party government. However, for the first time since 2017, when it suspended its alliance with the Akali Dal, the Bharatiya Janata Party more than doubled its vote share in Punjab, while failing to win a single seat.

Party	Seats Won	Vote Share (%)	Platform
Indian National Congress	7	23.5%	Anti-incumbency
Aam Aadmi Party	3	19.2%	Governance
Shiromani Akali Dal	1	14.8%	Sikh identity
Bharatiya Janata Party	0	11.6%	National integration

Special mention may be made about the Akali Dal's own performance, because it undermines the biased expectation. SAD changed its name to an explicitly panthic (Sikh identity-based) party for this election, after breaking its BJP alliance, and won only one seat in Bathinda. A party about Sikh religion, without being able to cling to its traditional constituency on that banner, has even less space for expansion as a party with a secessionist element.

Khadoor Sahib and Faridkot stand out as the two exceptions that make for this more complicated picture, as independents—who were known to have visible Khalistan sympathies—emerged victorious in these two local polling stations. In Punjab, Amritpal Singh, who was jailed under the Preventive Detention Act while contesting the election from Assam, won Khadoor Sahib with the biggest majority of all winning candidates that year. The Faridkot result was also a fragmented situation with a four-way contest with Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa (son of one of Indira Gandhi's assassins) winning with less than 30 percent of the vote.

These two successes do not necessarily translate into an endorsement of secession. The other two are better understood in the context of a combination of anti-incumbency, sympathy for the jailed candidate, family politics and localized panthic grievance politics and the levels of votes in the two elections reflect a diffuse electoral map rather than a cohesive ideological formation of Khalistan.

It's not difficult to see the structural reasons for this gap. Any actual bid for independence would bring first and direct losses to Punjab's people: the forfeiture of agricultural subsidies and price guarantees from the Indian government, the return of security operations, and the loss of economic stability from its cooperation in an integrated national market. Punjab also experienced the human impacts of the 1980s and 1990s insurgency first hand—something the diaspora by and large did not—and that makes a difference to the political calculation possible at a gurdwara in California to commemorate 1984.

6. Reading the Two Records Together

The central issue this article aimed to address is whether and how diaspora groups have been able to maintain a political project that has had so little impact in the precisely the space they purport to represent. What this implies for long-distance nationalism more broadly is equally important.

The solution is in the asymmetry spread over the final two parts. The point is that rely upon the electoral game, diaspora Khalistan never became or was never made. It is financed by the Gurdwara committees. Its public organizing activities are protected by the civil liberties of its host state. Devotion to 1984 is still passing down the generations and the founding grievance has not been diminished in utility by other yet more urgent issues that often contest the actual vote of Punjab. None of these supports are based on winning a Punjab election and that is why the movement has lived on for 30 years beyond its electoral potential in Punjab.

This does not imply that the parallel polity is theatre for no reason whatsoever. It has completely changed the tone of two Western democracies with India's diplomatic relations. It has produced viable institutions that have their own sources of revenue that will outlast individual news cycles. But it still has a political frame to call on and dust off when there is a change in Punjab—and there is little appetite in the electoral register for it to happen in that direction right now.

The empirical literature on long-distance nationalism concurs with both the Bonnenfant et al. study on Cyprus and the study on Bosnia conducted by Hall that "distance" does not necessarily breed more extreme views. What it reliably yields is other incentives. Depending on what the diaspora is asked to surrender for peace or reconciliation, those incentives will push one way or the other. In the case of Khalistan, there is essentially nothing requested of the diaspora since even if it is asked to abstain from holding a lease, they claim that no part of the territory is theirs while no tax is being imposed. These are all three ingredients to be dealt with by Punjab's electorate. Since a referendum by the latter is unlikely, the presence of a party in the opposition that believes it fulfills would be what that difference, not any talk of diaspora psychology, might explain.

7. Conclusion

The Khalistan movement today is better described as a diaspora-based parallel polity with limited and contested traction in Punjab than as a Punjab-based movement with an overseas support network. The institutional weight sits abroad. The territorial claim sits at home. The two have grown further apart rather than closer together since the militancy's collapse in the 1990s. Nothing in Punjab's 2024 electoral results suggests that gap is closing.

This case adds something specific to the broader study of diaspora nationalism: distance is not simply a limitation on a political project's reach. Under the right conditions—freedom of assembly abroad, independent funding, no direct exposure to the costs of the claim being

made—distance can function as a structural advantage for keeping a maximalist position alive well past the point where it retains a viable base at home. Few cases offer as clean a comparison as this one, because few diasporas have both run a repeated, well-documented referendum abroad and left behind a homeland electorate that keeps voting in ways that make the referendum's result look increasingly beside the point.

Two limits on this analysis are worth stating plainly. Referendum turnout figures come from the organizers themselves and have not been independently verified. Punjab's electoral results are a proxy measure for Khalistan sentiment specifically rather than a direct survey of it, since no party on any ballot ran on that platform alone. Future research grounded in independent field survey work inside Punjab would sharpen the empirical picture considerably.

What can be said with the evidence available is that the durability of the diaspora's parallel polity looks less dependent on any near-term shift in Punjab's own politics than on how long host states keep tolerating it and how long the generation that remembers 1984 keeps passing that memory forward.

References

- Anderson, B. (1992). *Long-distance nationalism: World capitalism and the rise of identity politics*. Centre for Asian Studies, University of Amsterdam.
- Bonnenfant, I. K., Morgan-Jones, E., Psaltis, C., Popp, R., Sudulich, L., & Loizides, N. (2026). Long-distance nationalism and peace settlement preferences. *International Studies Quarterly*, 70(1), sqag008.
- Fair, C. (2005). Diaspora involvement in insurgencies: Insight from the Khalistan and Tamil Eelam movements. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 11(1), 125–156.
- Glick Schiller, N., & Fouron, G. E. (2001). *Georges woke up laughing: Long-distance nationalism and the search for home*. Duke University Press.
- Hall, J. (2016). Are migrants more extreme than locals after war? Evidence from a simultaneous survey of migrants in Sweden and locals in Bosnia. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 60(1), 89–117.
- Kallepalli, N. (2025, August 15). "It's homeland or death": The separatist movement roiling the Indian world. *The Nation*.
- Koinova, M. (2011). Can conflict-generated diasporas be moderate actors during episodes of contested sovereignty? Lebanese and Albanian diasporas compared. *Review of International Studies*, 37(1), 437–462.
- Sidhu, K. B. S. (2024a, June 5). Decoding Khadoor Sahib and Faridkot (SC) results in Punjab.
- Sidhu, K. B. S. (2024b, June 5). Punjab Lok Sabha results: Insights for political parties and the people.
- Sikhs for Justice. (n.d.). FAQ. <https://www.sikhsforjustice.org/faq>
- Sikhs for Justice. (2026). Events. <https://sikhsforjustice.org/events>
- Singh, D., & Moliner, C. (2026). Punjab: Relocations of Hindutva in a Sikh majority state. *Forum for Development Studies*, 53(1), 75–83.