

# **The Valiant Jaswant Singh Khalra: A Human Rights Martyr Immortalized in Fresno**

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## **A Voice for the Voiceless**

Among the many chapters of Punjab's turbulent modern history, one name stands apart—Sardar Jaswant Singh Khalra. Neither politician nor soldier, he was a man of conscience who stood up against the state's darkest crimes armed only with truth. During the 1980s and 1990s, when Punjab was suffocating under the weight of fear and state repression, Khalra asked a question that no one dared to voice: Where have our sons gone?

His meticulous investigations revealed what the state wished to bury: that over 25,000 Sikh youth were abducted, killed, and secretly cremated by Punjab Police, their bodies falsely recorded as lawaris (unclaimed). His findings shocked the conscience of the world, transforming him into a beacon of human rights, and simultaneously, a target of the very forces he exposed.

## **Courage in the Face of Death**

In 1995, Khalra traveled to Canada at the invitation of the World Sikh Organization, where he testified before the Canadian Parliament. He detailed how thousands of Sikh men had been disappeared and secretly cremated. Deeply moved, parliamentarians urged him to remain in Canada for his safety. But Khalra refused.

"If I don't return, who will continue this work? My people are waiting for answers," he said.

He often reminded his supporters: "Even a single candle is enough to bring light in darkness."

For Khalra, his work was that candle fragile flame in the face of overwhelming darkness, but powerful enough to expose truth.

## **Khalra's Abduction**

On September 6, 1995, while washing his car outside his Amritsar home, Khalra was abducted in broad daylight by Punjab Police officers. Weeks later, eyewitnesses confirmed he had been illegally detained, brutally tortured, and finally killed. His body was discarded in secret, never to be returned to his family.

## **The CBI Investigation: Truth Brought to Light**

Khalra's disappearance sparked national and international outrage. His wife, Paramjit Kaur Khalra, courageously filed a habeas corpus petition in the Supreme Court of India. The Court ordered the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to investigate.

In 1996, the CBI submitted its findings, confirming what many already knew but the state denied: Punjab Police officers were directly responsible for the abduction, torture, and murder of Jaswant Singh Khalra.

The CBI report identified nine officials, detailing how Khalra was held in illegal custody, tortured, and ultimately shot dead at Jhabal police station before his body was disposed of in the Harike canal.

## **Justice Delivered: Convictions of Police Officers**

Though justice was delayed, it was not denied. In 2005, a special CBI court in Patiala convicted six Punjab Police officials for their roles in Khalra's abduction and murder.

DSP Jaspal Singh and ASI Amarjit Singh was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder, abduction, destruction of evidence, and criminal conspiracy.

SHOs Satnam Singh, Surinderpal Singh, Pritpal Singh, and Jasbir Singh were sentenced to seven years imprisonment for abduction and five years for conspiracy.

In 2011, the Punjab and Haryana High Court extended the sentences of four of them from seven years to life imprisonment, affirming the severity of their crimes.

The trial also revealed chilling testimony: a police insider, Special Police Officer Kuldip Singh, described in detail how Khalra was interrogated by senior officials—including **DGP K.P.S. Gill**—before being tortured and executed. His courage in testifying ensured that truth came to light, despite intimidation and threats.

## **Why Did Sikh Police Kill Their Own? Lessons from Stanford**

One haunting question remains: why did Sikh police officers participate in the abduction and murder of their own people? Why did those sworn to protect become agents of terror?

The answer lies partly in psychology. In 1971, psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted the now-famous Stanford Prison Experiment. Ordinary college students were randomly assigned roles of "guards" and "prisoners" in a simulated prison. Within days, the "guards" became increasingly abusive, cruel, and violent, while the "prisoners" became submissive and broken—even though all participants knew it was an experiment.

The study revealed the disturbing truth: under certain conditions, ordinary individuals conform to roles of power and authority, even to the point of committing atrocities.

Factors such as obedience to authority, loss of personal responsibility, institutional culture, and political pressure can turn individuals against their own values—and even against their own communities.

Punjab in the 1990s was such an environment. Police officers—many of them Sikh themselves—were placed in positions where systemic pressure, fear of reprisal, and blind obedience to superiors transformed them into instruments of brutality. Like the guards in the Stanford experiment, they became trapped in a role, suppressing their humanity to serve a violent system.

This context does not excuse their crimes—but it helps us understand how state machinery can corrupt human behavior on a mass scale. Khalra's murder was not simply the act of rogue individuals; it was the consequence of a political system that rewarded repression and punished compassion.

### **Silencing the Story: The Suppressed Film**

So powerful is Khalra's story that even decades later, it unsettles the Indian state. A Punjabi film titled "Punjab 1995", starring internationally renowned actor Diljit Dosanjh as Jaswant Singh Khalra, has been completed but has not been permitted for release in India. Reports suggest that senior government officials pressured the filmmakers to withhold the release, fearing that it would expose truths the state still prefers to hide.

As human rights lawyer B.T. Venkatesh observed: **"In India, if the story cannot be killed, the storyteller is silenced."** The suppression of the film is yet another attempt to erase Khalra's legacy—but like his martyrdom, the effort has only amplified global attention.

### **Fresno Honors a Martyr**

In 2025, the Central Unified School District in Fresno, California, named its newest elementary school Jaswant Singh Khalra Elementary School. This is the first school in the United States named after a Sikh human rights hero. The ribbon-cutting ceremony will take place on Thursday, June 26, 2025, at 9:00 AM, at 4061 W Fountain Way Ave, Fresno.

For the Punjabi Sikh community in Fresno—one of the largest in the United States—this is a moment of pride, recognition, and healing. For the broader American society, it is a chance to honor a global defender of human rights.

### **A Living Memorial**

Schools are more than institutions; they are vessels of memory. Each time a child in Fresno asks, “Who was Jaswant Singh Khrala?” a teacher, parent, or elder will tell the story of a man who stood against impossible odds to defend the voiceless.

Just as America honors civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and César Chávez, Fresno has now placed a Sikh human rights martyr among those remembered for their moral courage.

Khrala once said:

“Even a single candle is enough to bring light in darkness. If that candle is extinguished, another will rise to take its place.”

That candle now burns brightly in Fresno, where his name will guide generations of children toward justice and compassion.

### **Conclusion: Truth Cannot Be Buried**

Sardar Jaswant Singh Khrala lived and died for truth. He gave dignity to the disappeared, hope to be grieving families, and a lesson to the world—that silence in the face of oppression is complicity.

Though he was murdered, the CBI investigation, the court convictions, and the continuing activism of his family ensured that the truth he fought for could not be erased. And though the Indian government may suppress a film about his life, his memory now shines brightly in Fresno, California, where children will grow up under the name Jaswant Singh Khrala Elementary School.

From the villages of Punjab to the classrooms of Fresno, his story continues to inspire. It is a reminder that justice cannot be silenced, courage cannot be erased, and truth always finds its way into history.

### **Voices from the Opening Ceremony**

**Dr. Sara Martinez**, Superintendent of Central Unified School District, addressed the gathering:

“Education is not only about academics—it is about values. By naming this school after Jaswant Singh Khrala, we are teaching our children that courage, truth, and justice matter. His name will remind them daily that even one voice can change history.”

**Raj Singh, Fresno City Councilmember**, spoke to the audience:

“This is not just a school for Sikhs, it is a school for Fresno, for California, and for America. Jaswant Singh Khrala stood up for human dignity, and today his name stands

here as a lesson for generations. This is how we make sure history is remembered, not erased.”

**Navdeep Kaur, President of the Fresno Sikh Council**, shared the community’s pride:

“For years, our elders told the story of Khalra Sahib in gurdwaras and community halls. Today, that story has been written into Fresno’s history. Our children will walk into a school that bears his name, and they will know that truth is worth defending.

Even students joined in. **A fifth-grader, Amrit Singh**, who will attend the school, said shyly:

“I didn’t know who Jaswant Singh Khalra was before. Now I do. He was brave. I want to be brave like him.”

The most moving words came **from Paramjit Kaur Khalra, widow of the martyr**, who joined the event virtually from Punjab:

“My husband gave his life so the disappeared would not be forgotten. To see a school named after him in America fills my heart with gratitude. May these children carry his light forward. His candle has not gone out—it is burning here in Fresno.” The candle now burns brightly in Fresno, where his name will guide generations of children toward justice and compassion.

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