

The Sikh Political Journey After 1947: From Partition to Diaspora Activism

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Thesis

Since the Partition of India in 1947, the Sikhs have faced an enduring struggle to preserve their distinct religious and cultural identity within a centralized Indian state shaped largely by Brahminical and Congress ideologies. From the early campaigns for linguistic recognition and political autonomy to the trauma of 1984 and the later evolution of Sikh diaspora activism, this journey reflects a persistent tension between India's secular promise and its Hindu-majoritarian tendencies. The same ideological fault lines continue to shape debates today, from Punjab's history to the politics of the Indian diaspora in North America.

1. The Post-Partition Displacement and Political Realignment (1947–1951)

The Partition of Punjab in 1947 was both a physical and psychological wound for the Sikh community. More than two million Sikhs were displaced from their ancestral lands in West Punjab, now part of Pakistan. The Sikh leadership, which had rejected both the Muslim League's "two-nation theory" and the Congress Party's indifference to Sikh autonomy, suddenly found itself a minority in a Hindu-dominated India (Barrier 1966; Talbot 2016). In the aftermath, Sikh leaders reorganized around the Shiromani Akali Dal, the party that had long represented Sikh religious and political aspirations. The new Indian Constitution promised secular equality, yet many Sikhs perceived it as unitarian—lacking adequate guarantees for their cultural and linguistic identity. Jawaharlal Nehru's government sought to consolidate India as a modern, central state, while Sikh leaders such as Master Tara Singh argued for genuine federalism and protection of minority rights. Early exchanges between Nehru and Tara Singh revealed a deep ideological divide: Nehru viewed Sikh politics as communal, while Tara Singh regarded Congress as assimilationist and Brahminical in outlook (Rajya Sabha Debates, Aug 23, 1961).

2. The Akali Dal Enters Electoral Politics (1951–1952)

In India's first general elections of 1952, Sikhs decided to contest independently under the banner of the Shiromani Akali Dal, separating themselves from the Congress Party. This was a momentous decision: for the first time, Sikh political identity was to be tested at the ballot box. Nehru, a Kashmiri Brahmin (Descendent of Gangu Brahmin), regarded this move as a communal challenge to national unity. His correspondence shows clear irritation with the Akalis' assertion of Sikh distinctiveness, and his government began treating them as potential subversives. Akali demands for autonomy were met with arrests, restrictions on Sikh processions, and censorship of Sikh periodicals. Sikh leaders later recalled that Nehru's government "feared the turban more than the threat," a phrase symbolizing how cultural visibility itself became suspect. This marked the beginning of a long pattern in which Sikh political assertion was framed as disloyalty, setting the tone for decades of mistrust between New Delhi and Amritsar.

3. The Punjabi Suba Movement (1952–1966)

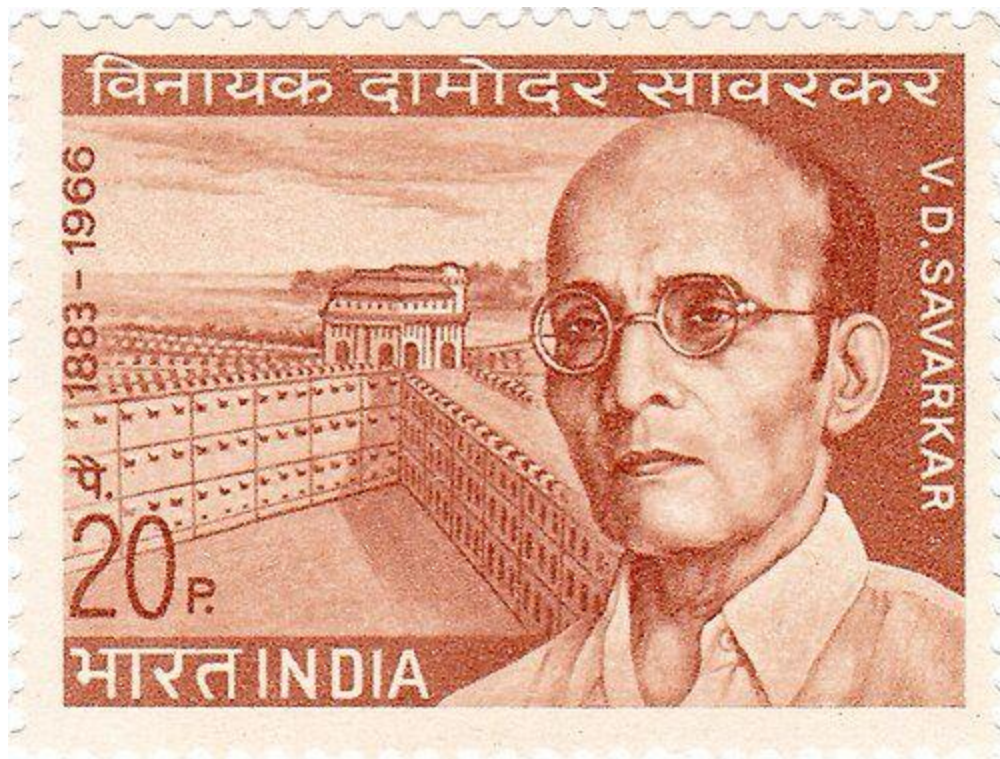
The next great phase of Sikh political activism was the campaign for a Punjabi-speaking state, known as the Punjabi Suba Movement. The Akali Dal argued that, like other linguistic communities reorganized after independence, Punjabis deserved a state based on language. However, the Congress leadership saw the movement as a veiled demand for a Sikh homeland, while Hindu organizations—including the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (founded 1951 by Syama Prasad Mukherjee, a Brahmin from Bengal) and the Arya Samaj (founded 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati a Brahmin from Gujrat)—mobilized Hindus to declare Hindi, not Punjabi, as their mother tongue in the 1951 and 1961 censuses (Kumar 2022; Times of India 2024). Congress party also helped these Hindu organizations by prolonging the decision to accept Punjabi Suba. Despite repeated arrests and hunger strikes, most famously Master Tara Singh's 48-day fast in 1961—the Akalis persisted. Only after a decade of agitation did the Indian government finally concede, reorganizing the state in 1966. The new Punjab was smaller, stripped of Haryana and the joint capital Chandigarh, and bound by new federal controls over its river waters. For many Sikhs, Punjabi Suba was a partial victory that came with long-term economic and political constraints.

4. Rising Influence of RSS and Hindutva Ideology in Indian Politics.

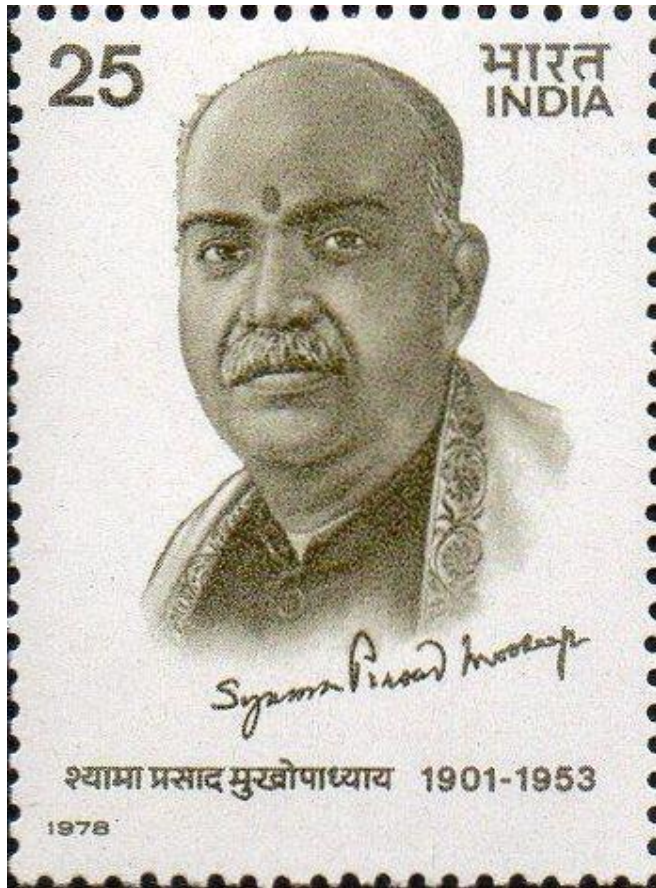
Even though the Indian National Congress remained the dominant political force for decades after independence, it could not ignore the growing influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the ideology of Hindutva that was steadily expanding its base among the Hindu majority. Aware of the shifting political climate, Congress leaders periodically sought to appease Hindu

nationalist sentiment to retain electoral support. This was reflected in symbolic gestures such as issuing commemorative stamps honoring figures like V.D. Savarkar and Syama Prasad Mukherjee—both icons of Hindu nationalism. Such acts represented a pragmatic attempt by Congress to acknowledge and partially accommodate the emotional and cultural appeal of the Hindutva movement, even while officially maintaining a secular stance. Over time, these gestures blurred the lines between secular nationalism and religious nationalism, contributing to the normalization and eventual political ascendancy of the Hindutva ideology in India's mainstream politics.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, commonly known as Veer Savarkar, was a prominent leader of the Hindu Mahasabha and the principal ideologue behind the concept of *Hindutva*, which sought to define Indian nationhood in exclusively Hindu terms. Although he was implicated in the conspiracy to assassinate Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, Savarkar was acquitted due to insufficient evidence. Despite the controversy surrounding his political ideology and his role in promoting sectarian nationalism, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, seeking to harness the growing influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the broader Hindutva movement for electoral advantage, chose to honor him by issuing a commemorative postage stamp in 1970. This act was seen by many as a calculated political gesture aimed at appealing to Hindu nationalist sentiments, marking an early instance of mainstream political accommodation of Hindutva ideology in post-independence India.



Syama Prasad Mukherjee was the founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, a Hindu nationalist organization that later evolved into the present-day Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which currently governs India. A prominent political figure, Mukherjee initially served as a minister in the first cabinet of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru but resigned in protest the Nehru–Liaquat Ali Pact of 1950, which aimed to safeguard the rights of religious minorities remaining in India and Pakistan after Partition. Mukherjee viewed the agreement as inadequate in protecting Hindu minorities in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and as compromising India's national interests. Recognizing Mukherjee's growing symbolic importance and the rising influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Hindu nationalist politics, Prime Minister Morarji Desai issued a commemorative postage stamp in his honor in 1978. This gesture not only acknowledged Mukherjee's political legacy but also reflected the increasing mainstream acceptance of the Hindu nationalist ideology he had championed.



5.. From Federalism to Militarization: Operation Blue Star and Operation Shanti (1984)

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, facing the growing political influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the broader Hindutva movement, found her authority increasingly challenged during the early 1980s. To consolidate national support and reassert her political dominance, she took a hardline approach toward the Sikh agitation for greater autonomy in Punjab.

By the 1970s, disillusionment with Congress rule deepened. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1973) restated the Akali vision of a federal India with greater autonomy for states, but Indira Gandhi's government portrayed it as secessionist. The rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, turned into a mass religious revival demanding justice, equality, and self-respect. In June 1984, the Indian Army launched Operation Blue Star, storming the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar to eliminate armed militants. The operation destroyed parts of the Akal Takht and killed thousands of pilgrims, including women and children. The use of tanks and artillery within Sikhism's holiest shrine stunned the global community and

permanently ruptured Sikh trust in the Indian state. In the aftermath, there was a vast counterinsurgency and 'peace-restoration' campaign across rural Punjab. Ostensibly meant to stabilize the region, it resulted in mass arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings, and disappearances. Human-rights organizations later documented widespread abuse and collective punishment of Sikh villagers (Reduced to Ashes, 2003). While the operation achieved its immediate objective, it deeply hurt Sikh sentiments worldwide, leading to immense loss of life and destruction within the holiest Sikh shrine. The event intensified communal polarization, alienated a large section of the Sikh community, and is often viewed as a turning point that profoundly altered India's political and social fabric.

Operation Shanti was reportedly a planned military and police campaign intended to be launched around Guru Nanak's birthday in early November 1984, with the alleged aim of "teaching Sikhs a lesson" through widespread repression and violence in Punjab and the Delhi region. However, following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984, the operation's underlying intent was unleashed prematurely and spontaneously in the form of brutal anti-Sikh pogroms. Thousands of innocent Sikhs were massacred, their homes and businesses destroyed, and women assaulted, while the state machinery largely remained complicit or inactive. What was conceived as a covert plan of intimidation turned into one of the darkest episodes in modern Indian history, leaving deep scars on the Sikh community and India's secular fabric.⁵ **Diaspora Mobilization and Transnational Identity (1984–2000s)**

Following these events, Sikh communities in Canada, the U.K., and the United States became active political lobbies. Groups like the World Sikh Organization (WSO) and the Council of Khalistan campaigned for justice and self-determination. Meanwhile, Hindu organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) and affiliates of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) expanded their presence in the same period, promoting a unified 'Hindu identity.' The ideological competition between these communities migrated with them to the West, influencing how Indian religions were represented in public life and academia.

6. Hindu-American Advocacy and the Rise of Diaspora Politics (2000–2020)

Hindu American Foundation (HAF)

In 2003, a group of Indian American professionals created the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) in Washington, D.C. Its stated mission is 'to promote understanding, tolerance, and pluralism, and to protect the rights of Hindus in

North America.' The organization operates as a registered 501(c)(3) public charity and is led by **Suhag A. Shukla**, its Executive Director and co-founder. (Shukla is a Brahman name.) HAF engages in legal advocacy, interfaith dialogue, and education initiatives, and has participated in U.S. court cases concerning religion in public life—for example, challenging Christian-themed license plates in South Carolina and filing briefs in *Van Orden v. Perry* (2004) over Ten Commandments displays in Texas. While HAF presents these actions as defending church-state neutrality, critics interpret them as part of a wider effort to consolidate Hindu identity politics in the diaspora.

Coalition of Hindus of North America (CoHNA)

In 2020, another network, the Coalition of Hindus of North America (CoHNA), was founded with its headquarters in Iselin, New Jersey. Its President, **Nikunj Trivedi**, (Trivedi is also Brahman name) describes the organization as a volunteer-driven alliance working for Hindu representation and civic engagement. CoHNA has adopted the Sanskrit maxim — “Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitah” — ‘Dharma protects those who protect it’—as a guiding phrase in much of its public material. The same line is also the official motto of India’s external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), reflecting how religious idioms of duty and protection have migrated into political and institutional symbolism. Both HAF and CoHNA argue that they advance pluralism and defend Hindus against prejudice. Scholars, however, point to their ideological overlap with Hindu-nationalist currents linked to the RSS in India (Bridge Initiative 2023).

7. The anti-caste discrimination bill passed by both the California Assembly and Senate in 2023 was a landmark effort to outlaw caste-based bias—especially within workplaces, housing, and educational institutions—recognizing the lived realities of caste oppression among South Asian communities. However, despite broad legislative support and advocacy from civil rights groups, Governor Gavin Newsom **vetoed** the bill, citing existing anti-discrimination laws as sufficient. The veto came after intense lobbying and opposition from organizations such as the **Hindu American Foundation (HAF)** and other Indian diaspora groups, who argued that the bill unfairly targeted Hindus. This decision was widely criticized by human rights advocates, who saw it as a failure to uphold the American constitutional principle that “**all men are created equal**.” By vetoing the bill, the governor effectively dismissed an important opportunity to confront caste discrimination within the framework of equality and justice that lies at the heart of the U.S. Constitution.

8. The SB 509 Controversy: A New Front in the Diaspora (2024–2025)

BJP government started killing Sikhs in diaspora. A Sikh leader was murdered in Lahore, Pakistan. A Sikh activist was killed in England by Soviet style poisoning. A Sikh activist Mr. Hardeep Singh Nijjar was murdered in Surrey gurdwara. And other Sikh activist founder of Sikh referendum movement Gurpatwant Singh Pannu's murdered was planned by India's RAW officer in USA. This was intercepted by FBI, and a trial of Nikhil Gupta a hired Indian agent is scheduled to go on next month in New York. Indian prime minister Mr. Modi was openly bragging that we will kill you by intruding into your home. To fight this transnational oppression a bill was introduced in California Senate and assembly.

In 2024, the California State Senate introduced SB 509, a bill to train law enforcement to recognize transnational repression—foreign governments intimidating or monitoring diaspora communities. Sikh and Muslim groups supported the bill, citing cases of surveillance and threats by agents linked to India's intelligence apparatus. However, both HAF and CoHNA launched campaigns to oppose SB 509, calling it vague and discriminatory. They argued that the bill could label Indian American or Hindu organizations as 'foreign proxies' of the Indian state and thereby chill free speech (CoHNA 2024; PR Newswire Sept 2024). Supporters of the bill countered that its purpose was to protect, not target, minorities vulnerable to overseas intimidation. The dispute reflects how South-Asian diaspora politics increasingly reproduces the divisions of the subcontinent itself: Sikhs and allies advocating for minority rights, while Hindu-nationalist groups frame such efforts as anti-India or anti-Hindu.

The **California anti-caste discrimination bill**, unanimously passed by both the State Senate and Assembly, represented a historic attempt to protect vulnerable communities from caste-based bias. However, despite its strong bipartisan support, **Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed the bill**, a move widely seen as the result of political pressure exerted by Indian government-linked Hindu organizations operating in the United States. This episode highlights the growing phenomenon of **transnational repression**; wherein foreign governments and their ideological affiliates attempt to influence domestic policymaking in Western democracies. While Canada and the U.S. have both recognized transnational repression as a serious threat to civil rights and free expression, the veto of this bill demonstrated how such external influence can undermine local legislative progress and the core American value of equality before the law.

Conclusion

More than 550 years after the birth of Guru Nanak, Sikhs continue to resist the enduring dominance of Brahminical ideology in India. From 1947 to 2025, a

succession of political, social, and historical developments has deeply influenced the Sikh consciousness, shaping their ongoing struggle to preserve their distinct identity, language, culture, and faith. Amid persistent efforts by the Indian state—led largely by Brahmin-controlled institutions and the BJP government—to centralize power and reinforce caste hierarchies, Sikhs have sought avenues for self-determination and protection of their heritage. The Sikh Referendum movement has emerged as a powerful expression of this aspiration, reflecting a collective yearning for autonomy and dignity. For many within the global Sikh community, the vision of Khalistan, a sovereign Sikh homeland in Punjab, is not viewed as an act of separatism but as a legitimate and necessary means to safeguard their spiritual, cultural, and political identity in an increasingly homogenized and majoritarian South Asian order.

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