Khalistan and the Sikh Diaspora

Why in news?

A tableau celebrating the assassination of late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards went around the city of Brampton in Canada.

What is the background of the issue?

- The 39th anniversary of Operation Bluestar, the controversial Army action to flush out Khalistani militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar, was observed on June 6.
- In the lead up to it, on June 4, a parade was organised in Brampton, Ontario, in Canada.
- The tableau drew strong reactions from India, with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar registering his disapproval.

What was the course of the Khalistan Movement?

- The Khalistan movement is a Sikh nationalist movement that wants to create an independent state for Sikh people, via armed struggle.
- The movement aims to carve out the North-Western Republic of India as existed from 1709 to 1849 as a separate country.
- The idea of Khalistan was first created in 1940s, remained idle but was revived by an NRI seeking a separate homeland for Sikhs.
- In early 1980s, the movement had emerged as a major separatist movement, fed mostly by bias of Indian Government against Punjab in the case of Chandigarh and sharing of Ravi-Beas waters.
- Demands for separate nation-hood for Punjab was carried out through violent protests and killings of high profile persons in Indian government.

What are the historical events responsible for Khalistan?

- **1947 Partition of India -** Independence of India was not a joyful event for Sikhs, partition left Sikhs in a lot of discontentment with regard to their traditional lands being lost to Pakistan.
- **Punjabi Suba movement -** A movement was initiated in 1955 under Akali Dal a Sikh dominated political party.
- It seeks the re-organisation of Punjab along linguist lines, seeking division of the state into Punjabi and non-Punjabi speaking areas.
- The movement resulted in trifurcation of Punjab into Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh.
- **Water sharing -** The disputes of sharing of waters of Ravi-Beas and Sutlej between the two states, Punjab and Haryana were the foundation on which the Khalistan dispute was created.

How Khalistan and Canada are connected?

- As per the 2021 Canadian census, Sikhs account for 2.1 per cent of Canada's population, and are the country's fastest growing religious group.
- After India, Canada is home to the largest population of Sikhs in the world.
- Sikhs lawmakers and officials serve at all levels of Canada's government.
- The first declaration for a separate Sikh state was made in the United States: on October 12, 1971, an advertisement in The New York Times proclaimed the birth of Khalistan.
- Today, the movement finds little resonance in the Sikh population within India.
- However, it survives in parts of the Sikh diaspora in countries like Canada, the US, and the UK.
- However, not all Canadian Sikhs are Khalistan supporters.

What is the relationship between Khalistan and the Sikh diaspora?

- The support for Khalistan within the Sikh diaspora is in its lack of connection to the ground realities of Punjab.
- For most in the Sikh diaspora, Khalistan is not a hot issue.
- The diaspora comprises people who chose to leave, including those who left during the 1980s, when the movement was at its peak.
- The Indian state was extremely hard on Khalistani separatists, with a lot of extra-judicial arrests and killings.
- The memories of those times have kept the movement alive among these people, even though the ground realities of Punjab are very different today.
- However, even within the diaspora, support has dwindled over the years.
- There is a small minority that is clinging to the past, and that small minority remains significant not because of popular support.

What is the way forward?

- The Khalistan movement is not about popular support rather it is about geo-politics.
- Countries like China and Pakistan tolerate, subsidise and assist in various ways the Khalistan movement on the basis that it is making trouble for their enemies in India.

Reference

1. The Indian Express │Khalistan and the Sikh Diaspora

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