Khalistan Referendum in Canada

Why in news?

The participation of Canadian Sikhs in the Khalistan Referendum seeking to carve out Punjab from India has become a bone of contention in India-Canada relations.

What events were responsible for Khalistan movement?

- **1947 Partition of India**- Partition of India left Sikhs in a lot of discontentment as their traditional lands were lost to Pakistan.
- **Punjabi Suba movement** - A movement was initiated in 1955 under Akali Dal, a Sikh dominated political party.
- It seeked the re-organisation of Punjab along linguist lines with division of the state into Punjabi and non-Punjabi speaking areas.
- The State reorganisation commission rejected Akali Dal's demand for separate statehood.
- **Trifurcation of Punjab**- The Punjabi Suba movement resulted in trifurcation of Punjab into Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh.
- **River water sharing**- The sharing of waters of Ravi-Beas and Sutlej between Punjab and Haryana were the foundation on which the Khalistan dispute was created.

What was the course of the movement?

- **Evolution**- The Khalistan movement is a Sikh nationalist movement that desired to create an independent state for Sikh people inside the North-Western Republic of India.
- In early 1980s, the movement had emerged as a major separatist movement that was fed on arms under the patronage of Pakistan's ISI.
- **Emergence of Bhindranwale**- Bhindranwale emerged as the extremist voice of Sikhs and declared himself as the protector and arbiter of Sikh rights.
- **Operation Blue Star**- Operation Blue Star was conducted to capture Bhindrawale in Harmandir Sahib Complex, but the operation resulted in a strong anti-India sentiment.
- **Killing of Indira Gandhi**- The then PM Indira Gandhi was seen as an enemy of the Sikhs and two Sikh guards of her killed her in 1984.
- Her killing was followed by wide-spread riots against the Sikhs across India fuelling more anti-India sentiment.
- At the present, Khalistan movement is dormant in India but gets ideological support from Sikhs living in Canada, UK, USA and ISI of Pakistan.

Operation Sundown*- Aborted mission which was planned by the RAW agency to abduct Bhindranwale.*
Operation Metal*- It was limited to Golden Temple*

Operation Shop *- Capturing of suspects from outskirts of Punjab*
Operation Woodrose- *Carried out by Indian Army throughout Punjab*
Operation Black Thunder*- Second phase of Operation Blue Star that began in 1988 to remove Sikh militants from the Golden Temple.*

What is the current happening in Canada?

- Recently, thousands of Canadian Sikhs took part in an unofficial voting exercise, the "**Khalistan referendum**".
- The unofficial referendum is a voting exercise that is being organised across several countries by the US-based Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) organisation, which was banned in India in 2019.
- The referendum seeks to establish a consensus among Sikh communities to carve out a separate homeland called Khalistan within the Indian state of Punjab.
- The group says that it would then approach the UN and other international human rights bodies with the demand to re-establish Punjab as a nation state.
- Recently, a prominent Hindu temple was defaced by Canadian Khalistani extremists with anti-India graffiti in an apparent hate crime.
- A similar referendum was held in London in November 2021.

What is the stand of both the governments?

- **Canada**- The Canadian authorities have defended this as an exercise in freedom of speech.
- **India**- The Indian foreign ministry has accused Canada of allowing extremists to carry out politically-motivated exercises that are threat to the integrity of India.
- The Canadian government has reiterated that they respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India, and that they will not recognise the so-called referendum.

What is the history of Indians in Canada?

- Canada has a sizable Indian-origin population, making up among the world's largest Indian diasporas.
- The immigrants from India account for at least 1.4% of the population of Canada.
- Canada is a preferred destination for higher education for many Indian students today, second only to the US.
- It is estimated on the basis of Canada's Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Canada (IRCC) report, around 60 - 65% of those applying to go to Canada are from Punjab.
- Some sections of the Punjabi Sikh community have also supported and funded the Khalistan separatist movement.
- They have even hosted many individual Khalistani ideologues and extremists.

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