Khalistani Issue Clouds the Canadian PM's Visit

What is the issue?

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- The Khalistan issue has become a big irritant in the India – Canada relations.
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- Issues concerning this dominated the Canadian PM Justin Trudeau's recent visit to India, and it is in the interest of both countries to course correct.
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How has the Indo-Canadian relations fared over the years?

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- The previous decade saw Indo-Canada bilateral relationship going strong and co-operation across multiple sectors were established.
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- This included agreements on - energy, trade, civil nuclear cooperation and a commitment from Canadian pension funds to invest in India.
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- India and Canada have much in common as two pluralistic, diverse democracies with very strong people-to-people ties.
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- Besides this, Indian Diaspora accounts for over 1.3 million in Canada, and an 100,000 Indian students pursue their studies there.
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- Despite these overwhelming commonalities, as the recent visit of Mr. Trudeau showed, the relationship seems to be turning sour.
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What has caused the Indo-Canadian tensions?

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- Liberal Party shepherded a resolution recently in the Ontario provincial legislature calling the 1984 anti-Sikh violence “genocide”.
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- Canadian PM Justin Trudeau was even attended a rally in Toronto, which was organised by pro-Khalistani Sikh groups.
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- Such attitudes of Canada’s ruling dispensation didn’t go down well with the Indian authorities who had expressed their apprehensions.
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- Hence, tensions were simmering in the underneath, long before the Canadian PM’s arrived for an eight-day state visit to India.
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- Considering these, New Delhi had preferred to keep Mr Trudeau’s state visit a shorter, formal and more business-like.
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- But Ottawa opted for a five-city tour, with a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the penultimate day.
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What were the stress points during the visit?

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- As a symbolic snub, a junior minister was delegated to welcome the Canadian PM, in clear contrast to how other heads of governments had been received.
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- **Punjab CM -** The Indian government wanted Mr. Trudeau to reach out to the Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh during the visit.
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- Notably, this was to make up for the Canadian government’s action in 2016, when it had snubbed Mr.Singh, when he had requested for an official visit.
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- But as Mr. Trudeau’s office did not confirm a meeting with the Punjab CM till after his arrival in India, this too accentuated the tensions.
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- **Khalistani elements -** To India’s annoyance, the Canadian delegation also had members suspected of sympathising with extremist Sikh groups.
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- Notably, Mr. Japal Atwal, who was part of the Canadian delegation, is a suspected Khalistani and is said to have attempted assassinating an Indian minister in 1986.
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- While the courts in India have acquitted him due to lack of evidence, his presence has caused severe embarrassment during the bilateral meet.
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- **Overall -** Expect for the final meet with Mr. Modi, throughout the trip, the Canadian PM was unaccompanied by suitably ranked officials.
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- Ottawa had been insensitive to Indian concerns all along, which seems to have forced the India to be this vocal about displeasure.
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- Considering the criticality of the bilateral relationship, both sides could've handled the visit better.
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Source: The Hindu

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