Sikhs for Justice – NIA Case

Why in news?

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has issued summons to over 40 persons in connection with a case registered against the US-based Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) in mid-December 2020.

What is 'Sikhs for Justice'?

- Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), formed in 2007, is a US-based group seeking a separate homeland for Sikhs - a "Khalistan" - in Punjab.
- Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a law graduate from Panjab University and currently an attorney at law in the US, is the face of SFJ and its legal adviser.
- Panun had launched the secessionist Sikh Referendum 2020 campaign, an initiative that eventually became defunct.
    - 'Referendum 2020' claimed it wanted to "liberate Punjab from Indian occupation".
- He was among the nine individuals designated as "terrorists" by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs in July 2020.
- Sikhs for Justice is an unlawful association under the UAPA Act.

What is the NIA case?

- In December 2020, the NIA registered a case in New Delhi under sections of Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and various sections of the Indian Penal Code:
    - Section 120 B (Criminal Conspiracy)
    - Section 124 A (Sedition)
    - Section 153 A (Promoting enmity between different groups on ground of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc., and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony)
    - Section 153 B (Imputations, assertions prejudicial to national-integration)
- Incidentally, the case was registered around a fortnight after farm activists reached Delhi border to protest against the farm acts.
- The farm organisations claim that the government was targeting individuals opposing the three farm laws.

What is NIA's accusation?

- The NIA proposes that the SFJ and other Khalistani terrorist outfits along with their frontal organisations had entered into a conspiracy.
- The aim is to create an atmosphere of fear and lawlessness and to cause disaffection in people.
- The intention is to incite them towards rising in rebellion against the government of India.
- In furtherance of the above conspiracy, huge funds are being collected abroad.
    - It goes for on-ground campaign and propaganda against missions in countries like the USA, UK, Canada, Germany and so forth.
- The FIR also stated that the campaigns were being spearheaded by designated terrorists.
- These include Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, Paramjit Singh Pamma, Hardeep Singh Nijjar and others.
- It has also been learnt that large amounts of funds so collected are being sent through NGOs to pro-Khalistani elements based in India.
- SFJ leadership has planned large scale activities intended to damage government and private property, and disrupt supplies and essential services.
- SFJ and other pro-Khalistani elements involved in this conspiracy, are radicalising and recruiting impressionable youth through their social media campaign and otherwise.
- The objective is to agitate and undertake terrorist acts for creation of separate nation of Khalistan after secession from Indian Territory.

What are NIA notices about and who have been summoned?

- Among those who have been served notices by the NIA in connection with the sedition case registered against Pannun are –
    i. a tourist bus operator, a nut bolt trader and a cable operator from Ludhiana
    ii. three journalists from Punjab
    iii. three volunteers of UK based NGO Khalsa Aid
    iv. the president of Lok Bhalai Insaf Welfare Society (LBIWS), one of the unions participating in talks with the Government over the new farm laws
    v. Punjabi actor Deep Sidhu and farmers' leader Baldev Singh Sirsa
- Others summoned include functionaries of Khalsa Aid.
    - It is a Sikh charity that provided material support to agitating farmers, and those who organised a community kitchen for them.

- NIA has served notices under Section 16 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), meaning they have been summoned as witnesses.
- The persons were summoned in connection with "foreign funding in guise of the farm agitation to further secessionist agenda of Khalistan."

What is the larger concern?

- Efforts to undermine the legitimacy of political actors opposed to the government have acquired a predictable pattern.
- Government's critics are routinely labelled anti-national by social media trolls and functionaries of the ruling BJP.
- Investigations follow, often by central agencies, the NIA and the Enforcement Directorate.
- The state responses to agitators in Kashmir, Bhima Koregaon and during the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act have been heavy-handed.
- The NIA's present move too cannot be seen delinked from this broader context.

What is the way forward?

- Sikhs abroad are a vibrant segment of the diaspora, having links with the motherland, including through donations to religious and charity activities.
- Other diaspora groups also support activities, including in the fields of education and health.
- Given this, there has to be a high threshold to consider any such community activity as anti-national.
- No consideration of religion must influence that assessment.
- Replacing political dialogue with state intimidation is not strategically prudent; the government must talk to the farmers in good faith.

Source: The Indian Express, The Hindu

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering