

The Transnational Nexus

Organised Crime, Extremism and the Indo-Canadian Diaspora

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Organised crime involving Indo-Canadian gangs has emerged as a significant security concern in Canada, driven by factors such as socio-economic aspirations, participation in the drug trade, and access to transnational criminal networks. The allure of quick financial gains and the influence of prominent gang figures have contributed to the involvement of a segment of Indo-Canadian Sikh youth in organised crime. Simultaneously, concerns have been raised regarding the exploitation of Canada's refugee and immigration systems by certain criminal and extremist actors. These developments have intersected with the emergence of a transnational nexus between Khalistani extremist groups and criminal networks, facilitated by overseas linkages and support structures. Functioning through a transactional relationship, extremist groups benefit from the resources, logistics and operational capabilities of criminal syndicates, while criminal actors gain access to transnational networks and ideological cover. Sustained through extortion, narcotics trafficking, diaspora-based funding, and informal financial channels such as hawala, this nexus represents a complex hybrid security challenge. In response, India has increasingly adopted a network-disruption strategy focused on financial intelligence,

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inter-agency coordination, transnational cooperation, prison reforms, and enhanced cyber-monitoring capabilities to counter the evolving threat.

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2023, gangster Parmvir Chahil from the British Columbia United Nations Gang was shot dead in Toronto. The same week, Hardeep Singh Uppal (affiliated with the Brother Keepers Gang) was shot dead along with his 11-year-old son in South Edmonton. Both these cases, as per the police, are related to the high-level organised crime.¹ Organised crime emerged as a major public security concern in Canada during the 1970s. Public attention was drawn to the issue through a series of mafia-related killings in Quebec and Montreal, as well as the findings of the 1974 Waisberg Commission, which exposed the extent of organised criminal influence and violence in Ontario's construction sector. By the 1980s, the scale of organised crime had become more apparent. A joint federal-provincial committee on justice estimated in 1984 that organised crime generated approximately US\$ 20 billion annually, with narcotics trafficking accounting for nearly half of these proceeds. Beyond drug trafficking, organised criminal groups were involved in a range of illicit activities, including gambling, extortion, fraud, and the importation and distribution of controlled substances. This expansion of organised crime created a complex criminal ecosystem that increasingly attracted both domestic and immigrant-based criminal networks, thereby shaping Canada's contemporary organised crime landscape.

North America in general has been the land of immigrants. With immigrants came the big Mafia gangs that established and nurtured organised crime networks across Canada. Apart from indigenous criminal gangs like the bikers gang, Manitoba warriors, among others, the immigrant community also tried to enter the organised crime landscape in a big way through gangs like Cosa Nostra. These immigrant gangs got involved in importing and distributing drugs as well as other street violence emanating from the same drug trafficking business. Such gangs include the First Nations gang in the Winnipeg area, Jamaican criminal gangs like the Malvern Crew in the Greater Toronto Area, and Haitian gangs in Montreal. The presence of such a scenario led to violent street killings, murder, extortion and rampant drug peddling. One such immigrant community is the Indo-Canadian*² community which became quite prominent in the organised crime landscape of Canada since the early

1990s. In 2004, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) ranked Indo-Canadian gangs third in the hierarchy of organised crime in British Columbia.

Over the past three decades, gang-related violence involving Indo-Canadian criminal networks has emerged as a significant public security concern in Canada, particularly in British Columbia. The Greater Vancouver region has witnessed recurring cycles of gang warfare linked to drug trafficking, extortion, and organised crime. According to a report cited by *The Washington Post*, police recorded 76 gang-related murders in the Vancouver area between 1991 and 2004, with authorities noting that many of the victims and perpetrators were young men of Indo-Canadian, particularly Punjabi Sikh, origin.³ Furthermore, studies commissioned by the Canadian government have identified Indo-Canadian gangs as among the most violent urban gangs in Vancouver, particularly with respect to shootings and retaliatory violence. By the mid-2000s, law enforcement agencies reported that Indo-Canadian criminal groups had become one of the most prominent organised crime formations in British Columbia, with dozens of gang-linked killings connected to rivalries over the lucrative drug trade. The persistence of such violence, coupled with the growing transnational linkages of these networks, warrants a closer examination of the role of Punjabi-origin criminal groups within Canada's organised crime landscape and their connections to broader extremist and transnational criminal ecosystems.⁴ In subsequent sections, the article will explore the interface between immigration and organised crime as well as the migration of members of the Punjabi community in Canada and their association with criminal gangs. It will further investigate various sociological aspects of their involvement in such activities.

LINKING IMMIGRATION AND CRIME

With the proliferation of globalisation, the movement of man and material has not only become extremely smooth but is rather important for the functioning of an international system largely driven by the principles of a liberal-capitalist framework. With the increasing inter-connectedness, the prospects of organised crime and transnational criminal organisations also expanded. Ramiro Martinez and Matthew T. Lee have explained the immigration-crime linkage through three major theoretical perspectives.⁵ They are opportunity structures, cultural approaches and social disorganisation. These approaches can also be explained through the 'Push and Pull' structural framework.

Firstly, 'Opportunity structure' relates to the social and material structures shaping the values and activities of immigrants. In the absence or lack of adequate legitimate opportunities to prosper and graduate towards a culturally prescribed standard of living, immigrants are left to take advantage of illegitimate opportunities. Earlier generations of immigrants settled fairly well into industrialised societies which provided legitimate opportunities for immigrants to be subsumed in the emerging factory system. The emergence of organised criminal networks among a small segment of second- and third-generation Punjabi youth cannot be explained solely by immigration or cultural factors. As Martinez and Lee demonstrate, criminal behaviour among immigrant communities is primarily influenced by broader social and economic conditions rather than ethnic background. In the Canadian context, factors such as socio-economic aspirations, participation in lucrative narcotics markets, inter-gang competition, and access to transnational criminal networks contributed to the evolution of certain Punjabi gangs from localised youth groups into more sophisticated organised crime enterprises. Advances in communication technology and increasing global connectivity further facilitated coordination between criminal actors operating across Canada, India, and other jurisdictions. Secondly, 'cultural approach' explains that the disadvantaged condition that immigrant communities are structurally exposed to (in the host country) influences the community members' criminal involvement. This propels the members to be engaged in crime in order to acquire a particular social status among their community. Thirdly, 'social disorganisation' which entails the breakdown of social institutions due to adverse socio-cultural changes introduced to the host society through immigration. Partially, due to the process of population turnover, established institutions get undermined, and common values become more difficult to be agreed upon.⁶ Once the social institutions get weakened, crime tends to flourish. Another important factor is the formation of criminal gangs primarily based on the accumulation of different forms of disadvantage, such as economic disadvantage, lack of opportunities, family disruption, racial discrimination, etc. These disadvantages create conditions for street socialisation, ultimately leading to the internalisation of street sub-culture. The factor of ethnicity has been quite prominent for the probability of immigrants joining any ethnic gang or multicultural gang.

INDO-CANADIAN INVOLVEMENT WITH CRIMINAL GANGS

Sikh migration to Canada started in the late 19th century. Over the next century, Sikhs established their foothold in Canada through different

phases of migration, established their fortune and flourished economically and politically. As they assimilated themselves in an alien environment, they got swayed by the community belongingness emerging from various aspects of life. One such aspect is criminal gangs. The predominance of Indo-Canadians in the criminal gangs became prominent after the 1980s phase of migration. In the decades of the 1990s and early 2000s, the organised crime and street gang ecosystem was dominated by Indo-Canadian Sikhs. British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario became the hub of most organised Indo-Canadian criminal gangs. Among the prominent ones is the Brother Keepers gang formed by Gavinder Singh Grewal. A broad group 'Punjabi Mafia group' emerged which included Dosanjhs, Johals, Adiwal, Cheemas, Buttars, Dhaks, Duhres, among others. Another prominent family gang is the Sanghera Crime Gang formed by Uddham Singh Sanghera. Commenting on the Sikh involvement in organised crime and illegal activities in Canada, British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Wally Oppal posed a question in the early 2000s, "Why has the Indo-Canadian community raised a disproportionate number of killers?"⁷ Following factors can be attributed to the dominant presence of the Indo-Canadian Sikh community in criminal gangs in Canada.

Charisma Role Model

The decade of the 1990s saw the Indo-Canadian Sikh community rising into the organised crime scene. The likes of Bindy Johal and Dosanjh brothers left a charismatic overtone over the organised crime landscape in British Columbia, which the Canadian Sikh youth eulogized.⁸ The lure of quick and easy money from drug trafficking captured the fascination of youngsters, which compelled them to try their luck in organised crime. As a result, the roadside or school-fighting kids started emulating those on the streets of Vancouver with sophisticated weapons. Describing the sociological implications of the gun culture, leading sociologist Dr Rajesh Gill, former Professor, Department of Sociology, Panjab University, says, "In a society (Canadian society) with a huge appetite for violence and corruption, gangsters are perceived as heroes by the general public, especially the youth".⁹

Immigration and Refugee Policies

Being a liberal democracy, human rights remain fundamental to the refugee protection in Canada under Section 7 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the Constitution of Canada. Also, Canada is a party to the United Nations Convention on Refugees (1951). Both these documents illustrate that anyone physically present in Canada (irrespective of citizenship) receives Charter

protection and a safety net to individuals fleeing prosecution in their country of origin. Sometimes, loopholes in these safety nets have been utilised by the refugees, not only to perpetrate crime in the country of origin, but also to evade prosecution in the host country. As explained by Jeff Sole, “the federal government cannot deport even a known terrorist from Canada if the risk of torture is claimed under the 1951 Convention, since this would violate the individual’s constitutional guarantee of life, liberty, and security under Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms”.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Marine Collacott has also argued that “the refugee system has to date been the channel most frequently used by terrorists to both gain entry to Canada and to avoid removal once they are here”.¹¹ The Multiculturalism Act of 1988, which was initially designed to address the concerns emanating from a declining birth rate and labour shortage in an ageing population, increasingly became the gate pass for overseas criminals and members of terrorist organisations. The Canadian extended refugee system is an institutional arrangement to transition refugees from the status of irregular migrant to resident. Canada’s rate of refugee claims and acceptance is so high that it becomes virtually impossible for immigration officials to adequately screen the immigrants. Moreover, the judicial process for deportation allows the refugees to file for appeal after appeal. This allows them to either disappear or start families to escape deportation.

Some law-enforcement officials involved in investigating organised crime cases in Canada have pointed to certain familial and social dynamics among a small segment of individuals involved in gang activity. These officials argue that, in some cases, strong familial loyalty and community solidarity may discourage cooperation with law-enforcement agencies or contribute to the social prestige enjoyed by individuals who have accumulated wealth through illicit means. However, such observations should not be generalised to the broader Sikh community, the overwhelming majority of whose members are law-abiding citizens. Rather, these dynamics are relevant only in understanding the social environment within which a limited number of criminal networks have operated. Renu Bakshi, a CTV reporter in Vancouver, reported in 2002, “Eventually, a young boy will become a young man and step into a community that thrives on bravado—a world where everything is a grudge match, a fight to the finish. From Sunday sermons at Sikh temples to Friday nights at bars, police files show that disagreements among Punjabi men are regularly settled with the use of force. The difference is, youngsters have replaced the holy Sikh sword with machine guns.”¹² Others have also pointed out that parents, in a bid to secure a better and more secure financial

position in Canada, often work for 12–16 hours, completely ignoring the values their children are getting exposed to.¹³ The cultural education they are getting exposed to, and learning from, American, Canadian and Punjabi videos which are full of extravagant lifestyles and violence. In the absence of traditional values, they tend to venture into Canadian youth culture marked by “flash, cash, and women” while idolising the heroism of Indo-Canadian gangsters like Bindy Johal, Ranjit Cheema, or Dosanjh brothers.¹⁴

Indo-Canadian gang members returning to India are often involved in recruiting young boys and girls ‘on vacation’ while using them as ‘drug carriers’ within Canada and across the border into the United States. Indian security agencies have repeatedly alleged that Pakistan-based Khalistani extremist groups, often operating with the support of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), have been involved in facilitating the cross-border smuggling of narcotics and weapons into Punjab while simultaneously promoting separatist mobilisation and recruitment efforts. These activities are viewed by Indian authorities as part of a broader strategy to revive militancy in the region.¹⁵ The small gangs operating in India are often poached by the Canadian criminal gangs, provided with sophisticated arms with the help of ISI, and if needed, they are being provided with safe passage to Canada (by bribing local officials).

While most Indo-Canadian criminal networks remained motivated by profit rather than ideology, the emergence of transnational linkages between certain gang leaders and Khalistani extremist actors created new opportunities for cooperation. The overlap was not based on shared political objectives but rather on mutual utility: criminal groups offered logistics, financing and operational capabilities, while extremist actors provided overseas networks, protection, and access to radicalised constituencies. It is this convergence that forms the basis of the contemporary Khalistani–criminal nexus.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN KHALISTANI GROUPS AND CRIMINAL NETWORKS IN INDIA

Canada in the 1970s and afterwards was getting increasingly concerned with the menace of organised crime, ganglands, violence and killings. The Canadian public became acutely aware of Sikh separatist militancy following the bombing of Air India Flight 182 in June 1985, the deadliest terrorist attack in Canadian history. Beyond its devastating human toll, the incident highlighted the existence of transnational extremist networks operating from Canadian soil. Subsequent investigations revealed that the attack relied on

clandestine fundraising, false identities, covert logistics, and support networks that extended across national boundaries. The case demonstrated how extremist actors could utilise criminal methods and informal transnational networks to facilitate terrorist activities. As a result, Canadian authorities increasingly recognised the potential overlap between political extremism, illicit activities, and transnational security threats, prompting greater scrutiny of diaspora-based militant organisations. Over the years, the nexus between Sikh separatism and organised crime provided a route for Indian petty criminals to escape to Canada. They were provided with men, money and material (through extortion rackets, hit jobs, etc.) to create instability in India through their criminal networks. Some of the hardline criminals and their gangs operating from Canada are Satinderjeet Singh alias Goldy Brar from Lawrence Bishnoi Gang, Arshdeep Singh Gill or Arsh Dalla from Khalistan Tiger Force, Sukha Duneke from Davinder Bambiha gang, Prince Chauhan (an associate of jailed gangster Virender Pratap alias Kala Rana), Ramandeep Singh alias Raman Judge of Jaipal Bhullar gang and Lakhbir Singh Sandhu (a NIA-declared terrorist), an operative for Babbar Khalsa International. Sukhdool Singh, who was gunned down in Winnipeg, was a member of Davinder Bambiha Gang and was a resident of Punjab's Moga before he moved to Canada in 2017.¹⁶ He was also an accused in the murder of Kabbadi player Sandeep Singh Nangal in 2022. He harboured pro-Khalistani sentiments (also an associate of Arshdeep Singh Dalla, a member of Khalistan Tiger Force) while making explicit calls for extortion and 'supari' killings. Several high-profile killings in 2003 also include Indian-origin gangsters Karanveer Singh Garcha in Colloquitlam city and Amarpreet Samra in Vancouver.

The Anti-Gangster Task Force of Punjab has pointed out a potential nexus between Indian and Canadian criminal gangs assisted by various Khalistani groups. As reported by the *Indian Express*, a rocket grenade attack on the headquarters of the Intelligence Wing in Mohali was attributed to a crime coalition comprising terrorists of Babbar Khalsa International and local gangsters while supported by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).¹⁷ Police investigation asserted that the grenade, AK-47 and other logistical support were provided by Lakhbir Singh alias Landa (residing in Canada), in close association with Harvinder Singh alias Rinda based in Pakistan. The cross-border gang links were utilised with some implication of Bishnoi gang members. In this case, an officer was quoted saying "For the first time, we noticed that no religious ideology was involved and they worked for money".¹⁸

Similarly, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has initiated a *suo moto* case (in 2022) against the growing nexus between proscribed Khalistan groups and organised crime syndicates. In one of the latest developments, the NIA arrested a key Khalistani operative, Kashmir Singh Galwaddi.¹⁹ Through this case, the NIA revealed how terrorist outfits such as Babbar Khalsa International, Khalistan Liberation Force and International Sikh Youth Federation are smuggling arms, explosives and IEDs from across the borders (primarily Pakistan and Nepal) to carry out attacks within India. This case also revealed that foreign-based terror organisations such as BKI, ISYF, and others have established terror networks in and around India, which are responsible for providing shelter, logistical support, and terror funding to Khalistani operatives. A similar link between the criminal activities in India and pro-Khalistan groups overseas has been established by the security forces and investigating agencies in April 2026.²⁰ They found the potential link of pro-Khalistan groups to the perpetrators of the blast at dedicated freight rail corridor tracks in Fatehgarh Sahib and Patiala District, respectively.

THE OPERATIONAL APPROACH OF THE NEXUS

The evolving nexus between Khalistani extremist groups and criminal networks in India represents a hybrid security challenge combining ideological militancy, organised crime, transnational logistics, cyber-enabled operations and targeted violence. Unlike earlier separatist phases centred on territorial insurgency, contemporary Khalistani-linked threats increasingly leverage gangsters, smugglers, extortion syndicates, overseas handlers and digital propaganda ecosystems. Understanding the operational architecture of this nexus, its financing channels, recruitment patterns, geographical spread and vulnerabilities is imperative to effectively tackle this issue.

The nexus between criminal networks and Khalistani groups thrives on a mutual utility model with purely transactional exchange. While Khalistani elements need local shooters, funds, logistics, safe houses, enforcement and fear generation, criminal networks provide them through contract killers, extortion rackets, smuggling routes, underground shelters, gang muscle and street-level intimidation, respectively. At the same time, Khalistani extremists fill in the substantive requirements of the criminal networks. For instance, criminal networks need legitimacy among radical supporters, overseas protection, weapons access, political leverage and a recruitment pool. Khalistani groups, as an ideological extremist element, provide all these in the form of ideological branding, foreign handlers, cross-border facilitators,

a narrative shield and radicalised youth, respectively. The nexus is best reflected in the form of extortion as a primary revenue model. The National Investigation Agency's investigations revealed the conspicuous Khalistani-Gangsters nexus.²¹ Another operational component of this nexus is the incidents related to targeted killings and contract violence. This involves the murder of rivals, businessmen, public figures and symbolic targets. The purpose of such killings is usually for multiple nefarious intentions, which include intimidation, fundraising pressure, gang reputation building, polarisation creation and media amplification.²²

In addition to these, other operational *modus operandi* is the presence of an overseas command and control structure. Investigations into criminal activities in India have revealed that many handlers allegedly operate from Canada, the UK, Europe, Pakistan, or other jurisdictions while directing crimes in India via encrypted apps and proxies.²³ This essentially implies that domestic arrests alone may not dismantle command structures and the larger nexus. In this regard, NIA chargesheets have revealed in the past that the perpetrators of crime in India often have international nodes involving recruitment and handling of India-based terror operatives, having close contacts with drug smugglers and Khalistani operatives overseas.²⁴ This network functions through an intricate network of operatives based abroad. They recruit, motivate and handle their associates in India to carry out terrorist activities, extortion, and cross-border smuggling of weapons and drugs into India. They have linkages with major criminal gangs operating in north India, including local gangsters, organised criminal syndicates and networks.

FINANCIAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE NEXUS

The resurgence of Khalistani-linked extremist activity in India is increasingly underpinned by a sophisticated financial architecture that integrates organised crime, transnational funding networks, and informal value transfer systems. This section provides a systematic analysis of the financial ecosystem sustaining the Khalistani–criminal nexus, focusing on revenue generation, laundering mechanisms, cross-border flows and expenditure patterns.

The terror attacks, criminal activities in India, and Khalistani propaganda overseas have been on the rise. The landscape behind such attacks is usually characterised by networked operations, diaspora linkages, and increasing reliance on organised crime.²⁵ Contemporary manifestations are less territorially anchored and more dependent on financial and logistical

ecosystems that span multiple jurisdictions. Within this evolving threat landscape, finance constitutes the central enabling factor. As noted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), diversified and decentralised financial networks enhance the resilience of terrorist organisations.²⁶

The Khalistani–criminal nexus exemplifies the phenomenon of crime–terror convergence, wherein terrorist organisations and criminal groups collaborate to achieve mutual objectives. For instance, criminal networks may provide financing through drug trafficking, extortion and money laundering, while terrorist groups offer protection, ideological justification, or access to transnational networks. Similar patterns have been observed in the relationship between the Taliban and narcotics traffickers in Afghanistan, the FARC’s involvement in the cocaine trade in Colombia, and the cooperation between ISIS and organised smuggling networks in Iraq and Syria. In the Khalistani context, criminal actors have allegedly facilitated fundraising, logistical support and targeted violence, while separatist elements have benefitted from the resources and operational capabilities of organised crime groups.²⁷ This convergence is marked by functional complementarity between ideological and profit-driven actors; decentralised and diversified revenue streams; and reliance on informal and opaque financial systems. According to L. Shelley, such hybrid networks blur the distinction between terrorism and organised crime, complicating traditional enforcement strategies.²⁸ Similarly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) emphasises that transnational criminal networks increasingly serve as financial backbones for extremist activities.²⁹

There are a number of illicit ways to fund such activities. Under the broad classifications, manifestations differ across continents. First, the main source of financing is extortion networks, which work in multiple forms depending on the criminal groups and targeted subjects. Extortion constitutes a primary domestic revenue stream within the nexus. Investigations indicate systematic targeting of businesspersons, transport operators, and other financially visible individuals.³⁰ The financial chain typically follows a hierarchical structure, where locally collected funds are aggregated and transferred to higher-level coordinators, often linked to overseas handlers.³¹ This aligns with the findings by the South Asia Terrorism Portal, which documents the increasing use of coercive fundraising methods in Punjab.³² Second, narcotics trafficking represents a high-value funding source, particularly in border regions. The integration of drug trafficking with extremist financing reflects a broader global trend identified by UNODC.³³ Drug proceeds provide liquidity and facilitate operational autonomy. Secondly, narcotics trafficking represents a

high-value funding source, particularly in border regions. Beyond generating revenue, the proliferation of drugs has had broader social consequences in Punjab, where concerns regarding addiction, youth unemployment, and the penetration of criminal networks into local communities have been widely documented. Drug trafficking networks create local ecosystems of smugglers, couriers, distributors and financiers that can be exploited by organised criminal groups. These networks provide criminal organisations with a steady flow of recruits, logistical support and financial resources. In turn, criminal actors linked to extremist groups can utilise these resources to procure weapons, facilitate cross-border smuggling, and sustain operational activities. Thus, narcotics trafficking contributes to the resilience of the nexus not by directly causing extremism, but by strengthening the criminal infrastructure upon which extremist actors can draw.³⁴

Third, diaspora-based funding constitutes a significant transnational component of the financial architecture. Although precise estimates of diaspora funding to Khalistani networks are unavailable in the public domain, official assessments in both India and Canada have acknowledged that overseas donations and fundraising networks constitute an important source of financial support for certain extremist organisations. Canada's 2025 terrorist financing risk assessment identified diaspora donations and non-profit channels as mechanisms through which Khalistani extremist groups raise and move funds, while Indian security agencies have repeatedly highlighted the role of foreign-based pro-Khalistan entities and donors in financing radical activities in Punjab.³⁵ Contribution are often mobilised through religious, political, or humanitarian platforms. While such funding may originate through legitimate channels, diversion into illicit activities occurs at later stages, complicating detection and legal enforcement.³⁶ Fourth, the financial transfer mechanisms include hawala networks, trade-based money laundering, cash couriers, or informal channels.

Hawala systems remain central to cross-border financial transfers due to their efficiency and opacity. As noted by the Financial Intelligence Unit–India, hawala transactions bypass formal banking systems, leaving minimal audit trails.³⁷ FATF identifies informal value transfer systems as a key vulnerability in global counter-terror financing frameworks. Another way to transfer money is trade-based money laundering, which enables the movement of value through manipulation of trade transactions. Techniques such as over-invoicing and under-invoicing obscure financial flows within legitimate commerce. This method is particularly effective in evading regulatory scrutiny, as it exploits gaps in customs and trade monitoring

systems. Physical cash transfers continue to play a role, particularly for localised operations. Although efficient for short-distance movement, such methods expose networks to interception risks. The use of cryptocurrencies and encrypted digital platforms is gradually increasing. While still limited in scale, these technologies offer potential advantages in anonymity and cross-border transfers.

The financial architecture of the Khalistani–criminal nexus represents a highly adaptive system integrating local criminal economies with transnational financial flows. Its resilience stems from diversification, decentralisation and operational secrecy. However, these same features create identifiable vulnerabilities that can be exploited through coordinated financial intelligence and enforcement strategies. As global experience demonstrates, disrupting financial networks offers a more sustainable pathway to countering hybrid crime–terror threats than purely kinetic approaches.

INDIA'S RESPONSE TO THE KHALISTANI–CRIMINAL NEXUS

India's response to the evolving Khalistani–criminal nexus has undergone a gradual transformation from a conventional counter-insurgency model to a hybrid counter-network strategy. Recognising the convergence between organised crime and extremist elements, Indian security agencies have increasingly adopted multi-agency, intelligence-driven, and financially focused approaches to disrupt the nexus.

Institutional Framework

To effectively dismantle the criminal and Khalistani coalition, well-structured and pragmatic steps are needed. A reactive, arrest-driven approach won't work because the Khalistan–criminal nexus is adaptive and networked. The Government of India must adopt a comprehensive network-disruption strategy that treats extremist actors and organised crime syndicates as a single hybrid threat. Central to this approach is the creation of a robust inter-agency coordination mechanism. At present, intelligence and enforcement efforts remain fragmented across multiple institutions. Establishing a permanent fusion architecture linking the National Investigation Agency (NIA), Intelligence Bureau (IB), Enforcement Directorate (ED), Financial Intelligence Unit–India, and state police forces would enable real-time sharing of intelligence on gangs, financial flows and prison networks. Such an integrated framework would allow security agencies to transition from isolated, case-based responses to a holistic network-mapping and disruption

model, consistent with global best practices emphasising inter-agency coordination in countering hybrid threats.³⁸

Financial Disruption

A key pillar of this strategy should be the prioritisation of financial disruption over purely kinetic operations. While arrests of operatives may yield short-term results, the long-term sustainability of the nexus depends on its financial infrastructure. Strengthening the capabilities of financial enforcement bodies to monitor suspicious transactions, infiltrate hawala networks, and dismantle extortion and narcotics-linked revenue streams is therefore essential. The ED's use of asset attachment under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) and the analytical role of FIU-IND in processing suspicious transaction reports illustrate the importance of targeting illicit financial flows.³⁹ International evidence also demonstrates that disrupting financial networks can significantly degrade terrorist and criminal capabilities.⁴⁰

Prison Reform

In parallel, the government must address the role of prisons as operational hubs. Empirical findings from investigations indicate that incarcerated gang leaders often continue to coordinate activities through external networks, highlighting structural weaknesses in prison management systems.⁴¹ This necessitates reforms such as the segregation of high-risk inmates, enhanced surveillance of communications, and stricter monitoring of visitor interactions. Transforming prisons from centres of coordination into secure containment environments is critical for weakening command-and-control structures within the nexus.⁴²

Diplomatic and Legal Steps

The transnational dimension of the nexus further complicates enforcement efforts, as many key actors operate from foreign jurisdictions. India must therefore intensify its use of diplomatic and legal instruments, including extradition treaties, Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties (MLATs), and international policing cooperation. At the same time, financial flows routed through informal systems such as hawala and trade-based money laundering (TBML) require specialised attention. Establishing dedicated task forces under agencies such as the ED and the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence to track and disrupt these channels would address a critical vulnerability. FATF identifies informal value transfer systems and TBML as among the most significant global challenges in countering

illicit financial flows, underscoring the relevance of such measures.⁴³

Equally important is the integration of narcotics control with counter-terrorism strategy. In Punjab, law enforcement agencies have repeatedly highlighted the use of cross-border drug smuggling networks operating from Pakistan to finance criminal and extremist activities. Revenue generated from heroin trafficking and synthetic drugs has allegedly been used to procure weapons, sustain operatives, and support separatist propaganda. Beyond financing, the proliferation of narcotics contributes to social instability by increasing addiction, weakening community resilience, and creating a pool of vulnerable individuals who may be exploited by criminal networks. Recognising these linkages, agencies such as the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), the National Investigation Agency (NIA), and state police forces have increasingly coordinated investigations into cases involving drugs, arms trafficking and extremist financing. Such an integrated approach is essential because treating drug trafficking solely as a law-and-order problem risks overlooking its broader security implications.

Cyber and Digital Intelligence

In addition to financial and operational measures, the government must invest in advanced cyber and digital intelligence capabilities. The increasing reliance of extremist-criminal networks on encrypted communication platforms and social media necessitates more sophisticated digital monitoring capabilities. For example, individuals associated with Khalistani networks have used platforms such as Telegram, Signal and WhatsApp to disseminate propaganda, coordinate activities, and share information while avoiding conventional surveillance. Similarly, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube have been used to circulate separatist narratives, glorify violent actors, and mobilise supporters across national boundaries. In some cases, seemingly innocuous symbols, slogans, or coded phrases may be used to signal support for extremist causes without explicitly advocating violence. To address these challenges, law enforcement agencies can employ open-source intelligence (OSINT) tools, social network analysis, and artificial intelligence-assisted monitoring systems to identify recurring communication patterns, map relationships among key actors, and detect coordinated online campaigns. Such measures can help authorities uncover links between extremist groups, criminal operatives, and their supporters while remaining within legal and constitutional boundaries. FATF highlights the growing role of digital technologies in facilitating illicit finance and

coordination, emphasising the need for technological adaptation by law enforcement agencies.⁴⁴ These efforts should be complemented by strategies to counter diaspora-based radicalisation and funding.

International Cooperation

While politically sensitive, cooperation with foreign governments remains essential for disrupting suspicious financial flows and extremist-linked networks that sustain Khalistani activities abroad. India has repeatedly sought cooperation from Canada on issues relating to the activities of designated extremists, extradition requests, and the monitoring of organisations allegedly linked to separatist mobilisation. However, these efforts have often encountered legal, political and evidentiary challenges. Differences in threat perceptions, Canada's emphasis on civil liberties and freedom of expression, and the requirement for judicially admissible evidence have frequently complicated India's attempts to secure action against individuals accused of supporting extremist causes. Consequently, strengthening intelligence-sharing mechanisms, enhancing legal cooperation frameworks, and developing mutually accepted standards of evidence could improve the effectiveness of bilateral efforts to curb the financial and organisational infrastructure that enables extremist activities.⁴⁵

Ultimately, the effectiveness of India's response will depend on its ability to shift from a reactive law enforcement paradigm to a proactive, intelligence-driven doctrine of network disruption. By targeting the structural foundations of the nexus—its finances, communication channels, and leadership networks—rather than merely its operational manifestations, the Government of India can significantly degrade the capacity of the Khalistan–criminal nexus to sustain itself over the long term.

CONCLUSION

The effective disruption of the Khalistani–criminal nexus requires a shift from reactive law enforcement to proactive network dismantling, anchored in financial intelligence, transnational cooperation and institutional integration. In this increasingly interconnected world, human expanse both materially and intellectually has expanded, which is driving ever-increasing economic activities and prosperity. With these optimistic implications, terrorism, insurgencies and organised crime have also expanded their tentacles, making it extremely hard for the security agencies across the world to trace, investigate and execute the perpetrators of crime.

The criminal gangs involved in organised crime like extortion, killing and drug trafficking are more concerned about their illegal business interests rather than providing their material or intellectual allegiance to abstract and ideological notions. Organised criminal gangs in India are also falling prey to foreign terror organisations. As discussed earlier, members of the prominent criminal gangs in India are routed abroad in Western countries where they are free from the clutches of Indian security agencies. They are being provided with financial resources in lieu of leasing their huge criminal network in India for the terror organisations' nefarious activities in India.

In order to remain relevant and to protect their illegal yet lucrative business of extortion, contract killing, drug trafficking, among others, Khalistani sympathisers and related organisations have sheltered the leaders of Indian criminal gangs. These gang leaders, with their huge and multi-state membership, as well as their inter-gang connection, are considered an asset for terror organisations.

NOTES

1. Nishtha Anushree, 'Gang War in Canada: Brothers Keeper Affiliate Killed with 11-YO Son after British Columbia UN's Gangster was Shot Dead', *Swarajya*, 11 November 2023, available at <https://swarajyamag.com/news-headlines/gang-war-in-canada-brothers-keeper-affiliate-killed-with-11-yo-son-after-british-columbia-uns-gangster-was-shot-dead>
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