

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

On June 18th, 2023, a case of a politically motivated violence culminating into the murder of a religious figure occurred in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. The victim was Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a 45-year-old Canadian citizen who at the time of his death was renowned for being an active leader and member of the Khalistan Movement, both in India and among the Sikh diaspora community in Canada, where Nijjar has obtained citizenship since 2007. CCTV evidence obtained from the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) parking lot revealed that Nijjar was shot down by two unidentified gunmen. As an ongoing investigation, per May 2024, four non-permanent resident Indian nationals living in Canada– Kamalpreet Singh (22), Karan Brar (22), Karanpreet Singh (28), and Amandeep Singh (22) – have been arrested and charged with first-degree murder and for the crime of intent to murder (Morris, 2024; Donnelly, 2024).

The affiliations of Nijjar to the social movement known as the Khalistan Movement is political, as it advocates for the creation of an independent, theocratic Sikh state by way of separating the region of Punjab and other parts of Northern India from the Indian subcontinent (The Hindu American Foundation, n.d.). During the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, the movement was at its most aggressive as Sikh militants in Punjab carried out a decade-long separatist insurgency that was then retaliated by the Indian counterinsurgency known as Operation Blue Star (Westfall, 2023). However, the Indian counterinsurgency operations have not done much to

eliminate the tensions between Hindutva and Sikh groups, both in India and among the Sikh diaspora abroad (Westfall, 2023). With recent developments on the case of Hardeep Nijjar's assassination, tensions have reached new heights by garnering attention and outcry not only in the physical sense but also among online communities, where political and religious discourse has navigated its way onto the digital sphere.

Violence as a means to an end has been evidently used in historical and religious texts and narratives throughout human social reality ever since the emergence of communal social frameworks (Perliger, 2015). Such is the case for the act of assassinations, a form of disruptive violence that has a number of definitions due to the complexity of actors that can be responsible for the act in order for a murder to be classified as an assassination (Mandala, 2019). For instance, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) defines assassination as "the murder of a specific and prominent individual or individuals that is politically motivated" (Mandala, 2019), differing from the Union of International Associations stance where it is "murder for a political end, often by a non-interested agent" (UIA, 2016). The presence of politics as a motivation for assassination is also referenced in its given definition in the Oxford Companion to Politics of the World 2nd Edition, where it posits assassination as "the premeditated murder of a political figure for reasons associated with the victim's prominence, political perspective, or some combination of both" (Krieger & Crahan, 2001). With the given nature of assassination as politically motivated, victims of this act of political violence are oftentimes prominent heads of state or government officials whose deaths caused

serious political repercussions and eventually give rise to significant events that shaped the course of human politics and history. For instance, the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand kickstarted the series of events culminating into World War One, while the death of U.S President John F. Kennedy accelerated a constitutional change through the creation of the 25th Amendment of the United States Constitution (Hinckley, 2024; Bomboy, 2022). In more recent times, the act of assassination has since moved beyond the historical viewpoint as a legitimate means of political conduct and instead is a form of political violence and terrorism (Bell, 2021). Regardless of occupation or political affiliation, Hinckley (2024) stipulates how targets of assassination have expanded beyond simply being heads of nations and governance, but also religious figures, social activists, and members of the military or police force. Some examples of contemporary assassinations across the world were of Filipino bishop Benjamin David de Jesus in 1997, Saudi Arabian prince Talal Ibn Abd al-Aziz al-Rashid in 2003, Dominican Republic Environment Minister Orlando Jorge Mera in 2022, and Japanese Member of the House of Representatives and former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022 (Los Angeles Times, 1997; Bashir, 2003; Hauteville, 2022; Tan, Y., & Murphy, M, 2022).

Perliger (2015, p.18) regards the logic behind political assassinations to be about promoting or preventing political, social or economic changes related to the collective, and posits three arguments to support why this form of political violence is wielded: it is the most effective to promote the desired changes, in comparison to other methods of enacting change; other alternatives are not viable due to

operational or logistical handicaps; and lastly assassination is used because the target/victim has the most power and responsibility in promoting or preventing change in the context of a collective political and social sphere, wherein this change is politically motivated for achieving a goal that is of good service to the public in which the perpetrator is part of (Gupta, 2021). The characteristics of modern assassinations in the context of being an act of political violence lie in its increasing frequencies and subsequent targets that come from an array of backgrounds, including those associated with a particular wing of ideology, religious or environmentalist concerns, and nationalist agendas (Boyd, 2017). Through identifying the rise of global political unrest and instability, it was surmised that increasing oppressive and radical regimes brought about by these conditions correlated positively with the rising rate and probability of crime and political violence their respective nation-state (Bell, 2021).

Hardeep Nijjar's status as a Canadian Sikh leader has generated many online conversations, not limited to articles questioning his affiliation to the Khalistan Movement, reported diplomatic falling-out between India and Canada, and arrests into potential suspects with investigations into motives of killing from news agencies reporting the development of the case, including BBC News, CNN, The Washington Post, and The Associated Press. The complexity of the case surrounding the identity of Hardeep Singh Nijjar has highlighted the convoluted nature associated with religious and political activism. Among the Sikh community's supporters for the independent enthostate called Khalistan, he was seen as "a prominent leader and a strong voice for the cause" (Al Jazeera, 2023).

On the other hand, communities opposing the creation of the ethnostate of Khalistan, both in Canada and India, instead label Nijjar as the opposite, with The National Investigation Agency (India's counterterrorism law enforcement agency) in September 2020 designating Hardeep Singh Nijjar as a terrorist under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (Arora, 2023). The assassination's controversy lies in the divide amongst the online communities that was further exacerbated by a statement made by the government of Canada. Three months after the initial investigations to the murder of Nijjar, on September 18, 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated that there were "credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the Government of India and the killing of a Canadian citizen, Hardeep Singh Nijjar," in a speech to the House of Commons (Tasker, 2023). Such accusations have garnered protest both in offline and online platforms. In response, India's ministry of external affairs issued a statement Monday night rejecting Trudeau's allegations, calling them "absurd." (Tasker, 2023). Diplomatic tensions between India and Canada have since seen an incline as of the latest arrests and charges towards Nijjar's suspected killers this May of 2024. The dissemination of news has not only been through mainstream online news agencies, but have also throughout popular social media apps such as X.

X, formerly known as Twitter prior to rebranding in July 2023, is seen as one of the most used online microblogging platforms in the world, with an average 23% of the adult population in the United States having used the platform (Pew Research Center, 2024). In an interview with Linda Yaccarino, CEO of X. Corp, the rebranding of Twitter will not deter the application's function as a means for

creating "a global marketplace for ideas, goods, services and opportunities." (Feiner, 2023). This aligns with the notion of the functions of social media on being a means for internal and external dissemination of societal information, piloted by ordinary people in everyday social networks for the creation of user-generated media using internet-based technologies (Spagnoletti et al., 2015; as cited in Kapoor et al., 2018).

In the case of Hardeep Nijjar's death, online users quickly engaged in the production and reproduction of texts, news and opinions appraising the situation. There has been a growing conflation on the association of the Khalistan movement with violence and terrorism, and an influx of questions regarding foreign interference on Canada's sovereignty due to allegations of the involvement of the Indian government, use of social media for religious freedom activism amongst the Sikh diaspora in the North American continent in between the continuous updates made in the homicide case by the Canadian investigative bodies (Yousif, 2023; Bharath, 2023). According to reports by The Economic Times (2023), Hindustan Times (2023) and Al Jazeera (2023), protests against the head of the Canadian government have emerged from varying groups: pro-Hindu groups accuse Trudeau of being partisan to the Khalistan Movement that seeks to disrupt Indian unity, while pro-Sikh groups are protesting the Indian government for being complicit in violating Canada's sovereignty. In light of the development of events, reporting and journalism of the event has incorporated both traditional and modern forms of media. Of the modern aspects, social media applications such as X plays a major role in generating peak public interest in the matter.

Research using corpus sourced from Twitter/X has been widely conducted in various fields of studies. In the context of the current research paper, the author of this study has reviewed works pertaining to the use of social media as a means of political or religious discourse. For example, the study by Farzam et al., (2023) on the Farsi Twitterspace describes the manner and dynamics in which a social media application becomes a platform for manipulating public opinion and shaping narratives on political issues including the spread of inauthentic news. The analysis of the consumption of news, particularly fake news, in the scope of online political discourse has also seen much traction. Such has been exemplified in studies conducted by Igwebuike & Chimuanya (2021) of analysing linguistic strategies used to peddle falsified information during the 2019 Nigerian general elections using van Leeuwen's Discourse Legitimation approach; Allcott & Gentzkow's (2017) study on the impacts and marketisation of fake news circulation on social media ahead of the 2016 United States presidential elections; and McKay & Tenove (2021) study on identifying structural vulnerabilities to disinformation campaigns in contemporary social media networks. Readings about the intersection of social media and political violence are also of interest, with prior studies by Dimitrakopoulou & Boukala (2018), Chilwa & Ifukor (2015), Teixeira et al (2018), and Bhatia (2022) indicate the overlap of religion and ideology discourse, public engagement and framing of online users evaluation on political scandals, analysis of democracy and the hegemony of struggle or violence, and social media to campaign for the rights of victims of violence, to name a few. The scope of social media/X political discourse research may also encompass studies of sentiment

analysis in electoral campaigns, identifying hashtag strategies for online political activism, multimodal analysis to analyse discursive digital interactions, comparative and exploratory analyses of the use of social media by political leaders globally, and the circulation of politically-motivated hate speech online, as exemplified in the studies of Yaqub et al (2017), Konnelly (2015), Bisbee et al (2020), Stegmeier et al (2019), Bolgov et al (2019), Yopez-Reyes et al (2023), and Ibrohim & Budi (2023) respectively.

The instances for research on social media political and religious discourse is a vast wealth to uncover. Narrowing the scope further, in the context of the current study, there exists prior literature showing the intersection of the religion/culture, social media and political-religious discourse, particularly those connected with the Sikh faith. One example is a study by Udupa & Kramer (2023), an exploratory analysis on social media practices as an enabling force in reenergizing religion as a subset of political activity in India and its diaspora situated in the U.K. Another example is Mann (2019) whose study delves into the specific category of the Sikh religion and the analysis of its framing in Canadian media during the 1980s as a means to understand the conflation between religion and national identity. The Venn diagram of the Sikh religion with political discourse has fashioned a variety of research, including: the issue of alienation in the process of constructing a standardised Sikh identity in the diaspora (VanderBeek, 2019); analysis of the internal dynamics in Sikh social and economic life in India (Jodhka, 2009); an analytical case study into the role of female agency in Sikhism in theory and social practice (Bertolani, 2020); typology development to describe forms activism

conducted by the Sikh diaspora with a distinction into the religious and political motivations (Singh, 2020); and sentiment analysis on YouTube comments of the controversial Khalistan issue (Kaushik & Satvika, 2024). In these instances of previous research, the majority fall under the umbrella of social sciences and political science studies, with a notable disparity in researching Sikhism on the forefront of language studies and linguistic discourse studies.

Of the aforementioned samples of prior studies, it can be noted that a gap in research between them and the current study lies in corpus novelty and theoretical framework. The object of this study is the ‘tweetwar’ occurring on X as a result of the ongoing India-Canada conflict that arose from the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Prior examples of ‘tweetwar’ discourse that also revolve around the areas of political and religious divide tend to follow topics of either a political election or religious blasphemy, as in the case US politician Donald Trump, whose usage of X as a means of political campaign, foreign policy, steering of public opinion, deflection and dissemination of accusations of falsified news, and populist messaging being widely researched (see Abbas & Zahra, 2021; Pain & Chen, 2019; Marlow et al, 2021; Lacatus, 2020; Ross & Rivers, 2018; and Gonawela et al, 2018), and not as much on investigating of the response of the public pertaining to the case of the murder of a religious figure/ activist. The lack of prior literature within the narrative of linguistic discourse analysis, social media and political violence against a Sikh religious leader serves as a gap in research, and subsequently form the basis in which the author of this current study is interested in researching upon, particularly on the social media platform of X (formerly Twitter).

These users on X aid in driving the online traffic of conversations about the assassination case, and what it means for the future of their respective communities. As such the author hypothesises the possible existence of a pro-and-contra see-saw of users on X: those in favour of justice of Hardeep Nijjar and the overall Sikh community, and those denying the allegations of India's involvement as foul play and are also in opposition to the identity of Hardeep Nijjar as a peaceful religious leader. The influx of news also points towards the probability of fluctuations in news reporting, which may be further examined under the scope of cultural hegemony.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What is the pattern of language used by X users regarding the issues emerging out of the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar?
2. What comparative evaluations can be conducted on the varying stances realised through the language used by X users about the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar?

1.3 Research Scope

The scope of this study focuses on analysing and comparing the stances taken by Twitter users over the assassination of Hardeep Nijjar, in particular from the perspectives of the hypothesised groups of Twitter users. The scope of research encompasses appraisal of language used on Twitter regarding the progression of the homicide case and the generated traffic of opinions formulated on the basis of Hardeep Singh Nijjar's identity as a religious leader, both positive and negative

over the span of three months, being July 2023 until September 2023, using the method of purposeful stratified sampling, in order to collect samples relating to the previous hypothesis. The limited timeframe for data collection is because the research is focused on the production of texts by Twitter users from the initial reporting of the victim's death until the international interventions and diplomatic dispute caused by the allegations of the Canadian government towards India.

1.4 Research Limitations

This research only encompasses and is limited to the analysis of a selected sample number of tweets in a limited timeframe on the murder of Hardeep Nijjar. Hence, the resulting research may not accurately reflect the entirety of the population concerned in the case. The object of research is a relatively new case due to the case being only one year old (The Canadian Press, 2024). In addition to this, as of 2024, there is still an ongoing trial and investigation at the moment this research is being written (Gandham, 2024). Lastly, the research will only encompass analysis on textual data. Data containing audiovisual elements will not be used in analysis, hence the scope of the research may be lacking in terms of multimedia analysis.

1.5 Research Objective

This research aims to evaluate and compare the language of public opinion formation and expression on the platform through the appraisal of language used by Twitter users. In particular the research aims to show how the recent conflict has heightened the political and religious divide between users abroad in Canada and

India about the Sikh diaspora online from July 2023 until September 2023. This would subsequently indicate the manner in which an online phenomenon contributes towards the heightening of diplomatic tensions between the two nations, as well as illustrating the manner in which news regarding political and/or religious issues fluctuate over a period of time.

1.6 Significance of the study

The research is still understudied. It is hoped that the research aids further studies pertaining to the actualisation of deploying the concepts and applications of language appraisal and text-orientated discourse analysis in the modern field of social media.

