

## **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**