

## A relationship adrift: on India-Canada ties

The red flags had gone up long before Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau arrived for an eight-day state visit to India. For some time now, New Delhi has been sending messages of protest to Ottawa — especially after his Liberal Party shepherded a resolution in the Ontario provincial legislature calling the 1984 anti-Sikh violence “genocide”; he went on to attend a rally in Toronto organised by Khalistani groups. More recently, Mr. Trudeau’s office and the Ministry of External Affairs differed over the details of the visit. While New Delhi would have preferred a shorter, more business-like itinerary beginning with the official engagement in Delhi, Ottawa opted for a five-city tour, with a [bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#) on the penultimate day. New Delhi would have also liked the delegation to exclude Canadian ministers suspected of sympathising with extremist Sikh groups in Canada, especially as they had already been in India controversially in the past few months — but Ottawa was adamant they be included. Finally, the government wanted Mr. Trudeau to reach out to Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh well ahead of the visit, as the latter had been denied a trip to Canada in 2016 and was understandably offended. But till his arrival, Mr. Trudeau’s office did not confirm a meeting with the Chief Minister. As a result, the controversies that followed the Canadian Prime Minister through the visit had gathered their own momentum. The responsibility lies on both sides, on Ottawa for its tone-deafness to Indian sensitivities, and on New Delhi for failing to press its concerns or have the visit discreetly put off until the differences were resolved. Mr. Modi’s decision to stick to protocol, and not welcome Mr. Trudeau as effusively as he has tended to do for many foreign visitors, was a signal.

The final straw in a visit steadily turning icy was the [appearance of Jaspal Atwal at an official reception](#), which had an embarrassed Mr. Trudeau left explaining how a man who attempted to assassinate an Indian minister in 1986 had slipped into his entourage. In turn, the Indian government was left scrambling for answers on how Mr. Atwal was even allowed into the country. The real casualty amidst all the controversies was the India-Canada bilateral relationship, which has turned frosty after a decade of excellent progress. In this period, the two sides had forged close cooperation on energy and trade, including a civil nuclear cooperation agreement and a commitment from Canadian pension funds to invest in India. India and Canada have much in common as two pluralistic, diverse democracies with very strong people-to-people ties: there is an Indian diaspora of 1.3 million in Canada, besides 100,000 Indian students. The handling of Mr. Trudeau’s visit by both Ottawa and New Delhi doesn’t do justice to these ties; both countries must work to repair the rupture.

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