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It was mid-October 2024 in Mumbai and Baba Siddique was out on the streets preparing for a tense local election. A late monsoon was finally lifting and the air was still muggy with the last of the rains as the 66-year-old former state minister, with the thinning hair, caterpillar moustache and trademark white kurta of an Indian politician, inched his way in a dark blue Range Rover through a jumble of haphazardly parked motorbikes towards his son's office.

Siddique had spent the previous few weeks backstopping the re-election campaign of his son Zeeshan, a young parliamentarian. He'd attended statue unveilings, presided over ceremonies to celebrate the rehousing of slum dwellers and marshalled political workers. The days were long. He rarely returned home before late evening and, even then, father and son would often stay up plotting tactics until the early hours.

Siddique arrived at his son's office around 7pm. The streets were packed with the bedlam of Dussehra, a Hindu festival celebrating the triumph of good over evil. Processions crowded the roads; the bang and snap of fireworks echoed in the air. Zeeshan had been meeting a stream of petitioners since the afternoon and, at about 9pm, he slipped out for a surreptitious snack at a nearby restaurant. Siddique, a Muslim, said his evening prayers and left the office, pausing on his way out to chat with some supporters outside.

Suddenly, a burst of firecrackers exploded nearby, smoke burning the eyes of Siddique's security detail as three men closed in. Down the road, Zeeshan was midway through a plate of food when one of his aides took a phone call: "Somebody has fired on Baba." Zeeshan started sprinting back towards his office but his bodyguards bundled him into a car for protection. On the street, Siddique was clutching his chest, struck by two bullets. He was rushed to an intensive care unit at a nearby hospital. Two hours later, doctors pronounced him dead.

Investigators and the media quickly homed in on a culprit: Lawrence Bishnoi, a 32-year-old gang lord who had allegedly been involved in state-sponsored assassinations abroad, despite having been incarcerated for a decade. In that time, Bishnoi's ability to target high-profile figures from a jail cell had become the stuff of legend. Canadian police had even accused his criminal network of organising hits at the behest of India's spy agency.

"His main criminal operations revolve around extortion, murder and contract killings," said Amanjot Singh, a retired Indian police inspector who arrested Lawrence Bishnoi in 2011 for arson. "His network is vast, well-connected and deeply entrenched in the world of organised crime."

Writing on Facebook, a Bishnoi affiliate quickly took credit for Siddique's murder. More curious was the reason they gave for the assassination. The post made an unsubstantiated connection between Siddique and a notorious mob boss who had terrorised Mumbai in the 1990s. But it also highlighted Siddique's tight connection with a certain movie star who had become a hate figure for Lawrence and his fellow Bishnois, members of a rural community of eco-warriors. "Salman Khan, we did not want this war," the message read. "We did it as a righteous act."

Baba Siddique's murder stunned Mumbai, stirring up memories of the 1980s and 1990s, when gangland extortion and shoot-outs in the city routinely made the headlines. Zeeshan was devastated. He had idolised his father. As a child, he used to sit on the hood of Siddique's car at rallies, watching the crowds flock to him. It made perfect sense that he would follow in his footsteps into politics, and he'd worked hard to build a fledgling political dynasty for the family, winning a seat in the state assembly in 2019.

There were other ways to gain power and to wield it in Mumbai, India's financial centre and home to its almighty Hindi film industry. As a political fixer, Siddique had been well embedded in cosmopolitan high society. He had represented the affluent constituency of Bandra West, and his lavish *iflar* parties were a who's who of India's celebrity elite, with regular attendance from Salman Khan, the grizzled 58-year-old bad boy of Bollywood whom Siddique considered a close friend.

Today, Khan radiates the weary tough-guy persona of his popular action movies. Dramatic tales of his love life have been a staple of Bollywood gossip,



Murder in Mumbai

How a notorious young gangster waged a deadly war on a Bollywood legend. By *Chris Kay*

Above, from left: politician Baba Siddique; gangster Lawrence Bishnoi; actor Salman Khan

Below right: memorial to Amrita Devi
FT illustration; Money Sharma/AFP via Getty Images

and there have been darker allegations of misbehaviour, including a criminal charge in 2002 when he was accused of drunkenly crashing his car into a Mumbai bakery, killing one person and injuring others. Khan denied he had been at the wheel, or intoxicated, and was acquitted in 2015. He has had protracted feuds with other Bollywood celebrities, notably his fellow superstar Shah Rukh Khan. Their five-year grudge was resolved at one of Siddique's famous parties in 2013 — the moment immortalised in a photo splashed all over the papers, of a beaming Siddique with his arms wrapped around the pair.

Siddique's proximity to Salman Khan may have attracted the wrath of Lawrence Bishnoi and his gang. But the roots of the Bishnoi community's war reach way back into history, before independence, before British rule, back to the dying days of the Mughal empire some 300 years ago.

Twelve miles outside the blue city of Jodhpur in the north-western state of Rajasthan, peacocks amble around a sandstone monument to a massacre that occurred in the surrounding Thar Desert. Within a raised pagoda stands a statue of a revered member of the Bishnoi community, Amrita Devi, draped in a sun-bleached pink sari. It was in 1730 that Devi confronted soldiers who had been sent to fell a forest of khejri trees for the local Maharaja's new palace. Wrapping herself around one trunk, Devi was decapitated after refusing to step aside. The trees are sacred to the Bishnoi community, as is all of nature, and Devi was the first of 363 people to die that day as they stepped forward in a chain of defiant sacrifice.

Devi's martyrdom became a cornerstone legend for the Bishnois, Hindu followers of a 15th-century guru, Jambhoji. His 29 teachings preach harmony with nature and forbid violence against animals, even in self-defence, as well as opium trading and alcohol. Those tenets have forged a distinct identity for the small rural community, which is today estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands. Their devotion to the environment is fanatical.

So when gunshots rang out across the desert after midnight one night in October 1998, the commotion jolted awake Bishnois in the nearby village of

Kankani. Witnesses later told police that two of them rode out into the darkness on a scooter, anticipating a showdown with hunters desecrating their land. Eventually they caught sight of a jeep in their headlights and noted down its registration number. Among the passengers was a man who, despite wearing night-vision goggles, was unmistakable to any Indian.

In 1998, Salman Khan's career was soaring. He was in Rajasthan to film a family drama, *Hum Saath Saath Hain* ("We Are Together"), and his brand of macho was a big draw to many small-town men. But that made no difference. In the desert that night, the Bishnois said they had discovered the gunned-down carcasses of two of the blackbuck antelope that the community protects with devoted zeal. A crowd tracked Khan down the next morning, laying siege to his hotel and forcing authorities to arrest him for alleged poaching.

The incident brought the Bishnois national prominence through the dogged pursuit of a David vs Goliath-style legal battle. "The Bishnois recognised that they were taking on Bollywood and all the huge legal forces that were there," said Martin Goodman,

author of *My Head for a Tree*, a book about the Bishnoi religion. "They are relentless, they will go down fighting."

Khan was released on bail and the drawn-out case against him has dragged on for almost three decades, resulting in a series of convictions, appeals and suspended jail sentences. At a hearing in Jodhpur in 2018, the superstar was convicted and again sentenced to prison. But days afterwards, he was out once more on appeal, his obsessive fans letting off firecrackers outside the court in celebration. Khan has maintained his innocence throughout, and said he was framed for publicity, that the blackbucks died of natural causes and that he even tried to help one of the fawns stuck in a bush, feeding it biscuits and water. But Harsh Vardhan, a Rajasthan-based conservationist who led protests and pressed the government to prosecute Khan, says that, as the Bishnois see it, "Salman is a culprit, Salman is a poacher, he has done wrong — he has violated them . . . The judicial system is not delivering, how long will you wait?"

Soon after Khan's last appeal in 2018, one man vowed to take matters into his own hands. Lawrence Bishnoi, a diminutive young man with a lustrous handlebar moustache and beard, was being transferred between prison and court during an extortion case when a scrum of journalists lobbed questions at him. Sitting wedged between cops in a police van, he calmly explained: "Salman Khan will be killed here, in Jodhpur." Months later, an alleged member of his gang was arrested after staking out Khan's Mumbai home, in an apartment block on Bandra West's promenade with views of the Arabian Sea.

On the terrace of a guesthouse on the edge of Jodhpur, I met Narendra Bishnoi, a round-faced, 35-year-old schoolteacher and community representative, dressed in a white work shirt and beige trousers. He spoke methodically about the Bishnois' ongoing fight, against poachers and, more recently, renewable energy developers cutting down the desert's trees in the name of environmental progress.

Narendra pulled out his phone to show me footage of an off-road car chase across the sands, live streamed on Facebook. In the video, members of the Bish-

noi Tiger Force, a modern eco-warrior group, scream, "Surrender! Surrender!" as they pursue a group of suspected hunters. Through his phone's speaker, their cries filled the quiet space.

The Tiger Force, set up in the mid-1990s, is a volunteer army that can be summoned at any moment, without hesitation, to combat environmental terrorism. The vigilante group is necessary, Narendra complained, because the government's wildlife protection department pays "high salaries to [its] officials, but they do nothing". By contrast, he said, "we are doing our duty".

The next day, we travelled through the desert to Narendra's family compound in a village scattered with pink and red brick houses. We took refuge from the midday sun in a cool stone-walled room, joined by Narendra's older brother, Ram Niwas, a man in his forties with thick black hair and bushy silver forearms.

Ram Niwas was still a teenager when Khan was arrested. The case galvanised him, like many other Bishnois, to join the Tiger Force, swelling its ranks with those ready to defend their land, nature and wildlife, just as Amrita Devi had, with little regard for their own safety. He insisted that Lawrence Bishnoi's violent threats were not representative of the community. "He should be punished," Ram Niwas said of the movie star. But, "if we wanted to kill Salman Khan, we've had plenty of chances."

To some Bishnois, Lawrence is viewed as a kind of folk hero, despite his crimi-

'The Bishnois recognised that they were taking on Bollywood . . . They will go down fighting'

nal record and alleged involvement in the narcotics trade, which ought to run counter to their principles. "The Bishnoi community worships him because he's standing for the cause," a Rajasthan politician, who did not want to be named, told me. In a poor desert region, increasingly at the mercy of climate change, many find it easy to look past Lawrence's transgressions. Either that or they are themselves enjoying the material benefits of the connection, the politician added.

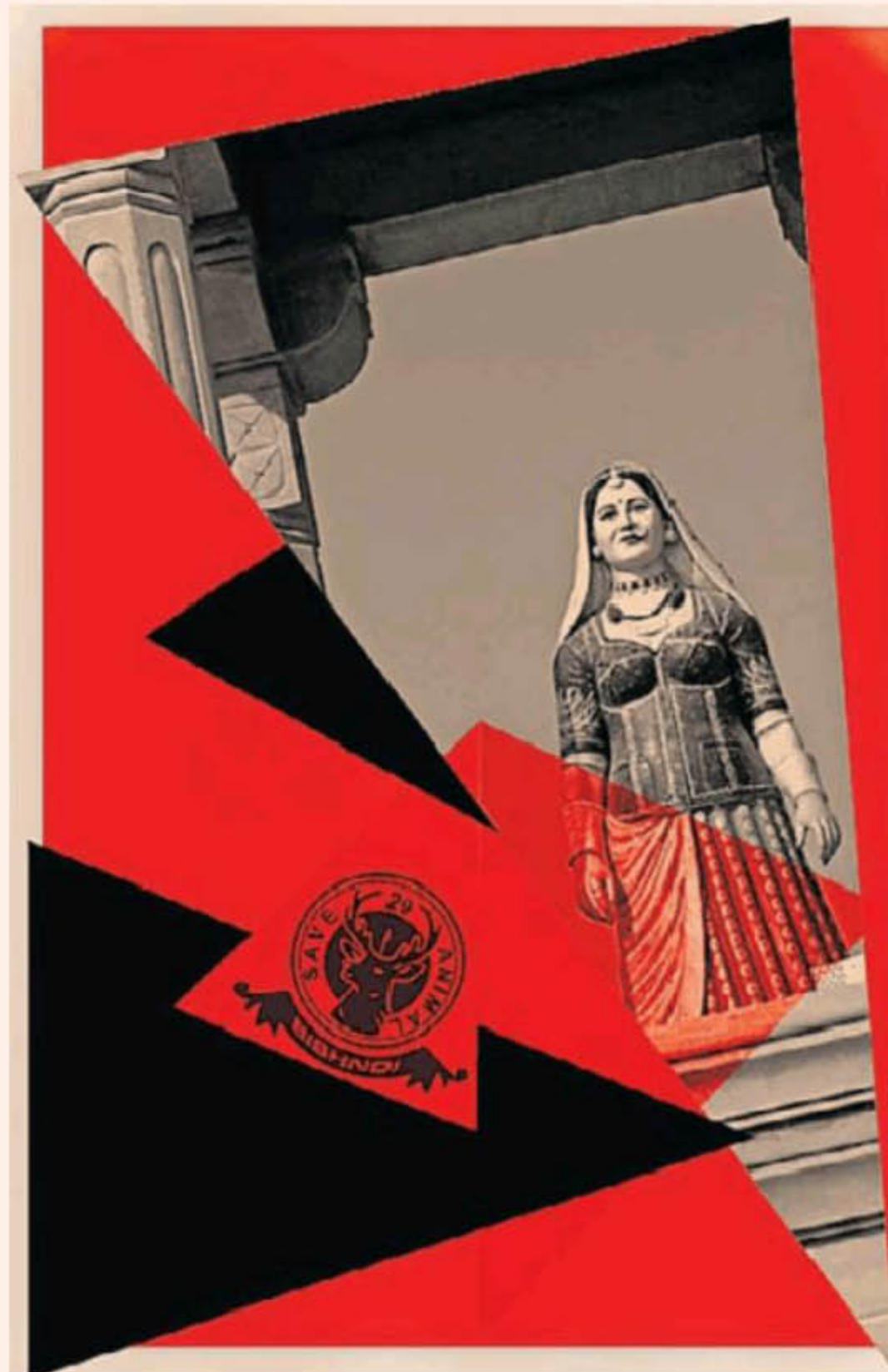
Lawrence was born Balkaran Bishnoi in 1993, in a small town in the state of Punjab, near India's border with Pakistan, to a relatively wealthy land owner and former police officer. As a child, his pale complexion earned him the nickname "milky", but his mother would later rename him after Henry Lawrence, a 19th-century British military officer and administrator who established a string of military-style schools in the region.

In the 1990s, Punjab was emerging from a bloody insurgency. Separatists among the state's Sikh religious majority had waged a violent campaign for an independent nation, Khalistan, which the Indian government crushed, culminating in the brutal 1984 siege of Sikhism's holiest site, the Golden Temple in Amritsar. That year, student elections in Punjab were banned, with universities suspected of being hotbeds of militancy. But as the insurgency waned, campus politics resurfaced, becoming a stage for young men from landowning and politically connected families in the hinterland to showcase their strength. Lawrence Bishnoi was one. "People coming from villages often get lost in the city," said journalist Jupinderjit Singh, who has reported extensively on Punjab's gangs. "Lawrence wanted to be a leader . . . to show off his power."

In northern India, student politics can be a rehearsal for the national stage and a mirror of its nexus of power, money and criminality. Campaigning involves displays of wealth and lavish rallies, with cash deployed to buy booze and votes. "These fights turned violent with the use of firearms and muscle power and help from outsiders who were not even students," said one senior Punjabi police officer. "It's a feudal set-up, basically."

When Lawrence lost one such student election he drifted towards the underbelly of campus life, falling in with a thuggish crowd. Soon he became involved in brawls and shootings. Amanjot Singh, the former criminal investigator in 2011 for torching cars, remembers the then 18-year-old as "innocent-looking", resembling any other small-town student. But, he said, Lawrence warned him: "One day, police from seven states will be trying to track me down."

After that his descent was swift. A shootout with police in Rajasthan in



2014 marked the start of the decade-long jail stretch that Lawrence is still serving. Shuttled between prisons, he was adept at forging criminal alliances with hardened gang lords, according to police officers. And while the life of an outlaw contradicts many of the Bishnois’ central tenets, there were others Lawrence held dear, including strict vegetarianism and an avoidance of intoxicants. One officer who interrogated Lawrence in a murder case described him as soft-spoken and even co-operative. Lawrence told the policeman that he’d entered into crime after a relative was killed in a gang shootout, a blood debt he’d vowed to settle. “There were so many others like him who were more violent,” he said. “He only soared into prominence because of Sidhu Moose Wala.”

In 2022 the Bishnoi gang was tied to the murder of Sidhu Moose Wala, a 28-year-old Punjabi rapper and political hopeful. Lawrence’s associates claimed responsibility for his killing after six gunmen ambushed Moose Wala’s SUV as part of an intergang feud involving the singer, who had recently lost a local election. The killing cemented the gang’s mystique in the eyes of many young Indian men, some of whom became pliable recruits.

India’s top investigative agency estimates the Bishnoi gang now has a network of about 700 full-time members, stretching across India. While Lawrence serves his sentence for the police shootout, he faces dozens of other charges for murder, terrorism and extortion. “Bishnoi knows he’s never getting out of jail and he has no intention of trying,” said Amanjot Singh. Lawyers who have acted for Lawrence Bishnoi either declined to comment or did not respond to requests for comments. In court hearings they have claimed there has been no “credible evidence” raised against Lawrence and that his charges have been based on “confessions extracted from individuals in custody”. He was already behind bars when many such charges were levelled, they said, and so could not have participated in or commissioned the alleged offences.

Lawrence seems relatively unrestricted in jail, with images posted on social media of him pumping iron and posing topless. “Most jails are very porous,” said another policeman, speaking on condition of anonymity. “There are any number of phones.” Security was so loose that in 2023 a media crew gained access to Lawrence and aired an interview with him, in which he reiterated his goal “to kill Salman Khan”. The video, watched 12mn times before it was taken down, sparked uproar. Legal submissions to an ongoing enquiry state that after the broadcast “many more young persons have started writing threatening letters to the film actor”.

Lawrence’s most trusted men, including his younger brother Anmol, have been operating outside India, added Singh. Anmol has fled the country on forged documents, according to India’s National Investigation Agency, which issued a bounty for him in October 2024.

In the early hours of a Sunday morning in April 2024, as Salman Khan slept in his Bandra apartment, two men on motorcycles rode up and opened fire on his property. Arrested after fleeing the scene, the shooters were allegedly encouraged by Anmol. “If you do the work, then history will be created,” he is alleged to have told one of them over a call, according to documents filed by police to a Mumbai court in the Baba Siddique murder case. “Newspapers will be filled . . . it will give you fame.”

The same court documents allege that the gang sought out other high-impact targets close to the film star. They set about recruiting a group of underemployed men for a “big job in Bombay”, with promises of more than \$10,000 in payment each, a fortune in rural north India. In their crosshairs were Baba and



Rapper Sidhu Moose Wala (top), allegedly killed by members of the Bishnoi gang; politician Zeeshan Siddique with his father

Baba — FT illustration; Getty Images

The businessman who contacted Heed had wired C\$3mn (US\$2.2mn) to multiple accounts under his extortionists’ instructions. But he believed he had “got off pretty easy” compared with friends who had reportedly paid double or even triple that amount. Those who refused faced violent retaliation. Their homes were shot at or their businesses burnt to the ground. Wealth and fame seemed no protection. Last September, a black-gloved, pistol-wielding shooter posted head-cam video footage online while firing multiple rounds into the Punjabi rapper AP Dhillon’s Vancouver home. A Bishnoi associate claimed responsibility on social media.

While Heed suspects that some criminals are using Bishnoi’s name in “copy-cat fashion”, he also believes Indian students in Canada are easy targets for recruitment. Some are enticed by fast money, others acting under duress, he reckons. In 2021, a court in Ottawa heard the asylum appeal of an Indian student who said Bishnoi mobsters had threatened him, pushing him to join the gang and sell drugs. After refusing, he said they demanded Rs4mn (\$47,000) and warned he would not be “spared”. Heed likened Lawrence’s influence to that of the Mexican cartel leaders who run their empires from prison. “He’s got a significant amount of control,” he said. “I believe Bishnoi has taken his tentacles all over the world . . . Canada was an easy mark for him.”

Canada’s Sikh diaspora, numbered at more than 770,000, or about 2 per cent of the national population and concentrated largely around the Vancouver region, has long been a centre for Punjabi separatist feeling — a long-standing source of tension between New Delhi and Ottawa. In June 2023, two masked men were seen running from a Sikh temple in Surrey, a city adjoining Vancouver. Slumped in a bullet-riddled car was Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a prominent Sikh separatist whom India had designated a terrorist in 2020.

Three months later, then Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau said security services were “actively pursuing credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the government of India” and Nijjar’s murder. A series of tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions followed, and Canadian missions across India remain all but closed.

In October 2024, Brigitte Gauvin, an assistant commissioner with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, publicly cited the Bishnoi gang’s involvement in Nijjar’s killing. “We believe that group is connected to agents of the government of India,” she said at a press conference. New Delhi dismissed the allegation, claiming Canada was “smearing” India “for political gains”, and pointing out that two dozen extradition requests for alleged Bishnoi gang members and other fugitives in Canada were pending. Canada’s foreign ministry declined to comment, referring queries to its police force. India’s government did not respond to requests for comment. The RCMP said, “While we cannot comment specifically on the evidence, investigations have revealed involvement of agents of the government of India in serious violent criminal activity in Canada.”

The sun was setting over Mumbai as I was ushered into Zeeshan Siddique’s small, whitewashed office. Outside, two female police officers lounged on plastic seats, assault rifles slung across their laps. Inside, TV screens relayed live CCTV footage of the street outside. The space was sparse, save for a single campaign booklet on a side table. Adorning its cover was a photograph of Zeeshan being kissed on the cheek by his dad.

Zeeshan arrived about 20 minutes later, dressed in a white kurta, black trousers and dark loafers. Nowadays the 32-year-old travels with a beefed-up security detail: 10 cops armed with sub-machine guns were stationed outside

the entrance. He had recently returned from a trip to Paris to help his grieving mother and sister avoid the constant stream of unannounced visitors who still turn up at their house each day to offer condolences, months after the murder. “We didn’t really get out of the hotel much,” Zeeshan said in his deep baritone, when I asked about the trip.

As we talked about the evening of the murder, Zeeshan’s voice faltered. “In one night I felt like I became 20 years older.” He’d plunged straight back into the melee of Indian election campaigning. “I have to move on with life,” he said. “I had an election to contest, I was out and about four days after this happened. I have the toughest time coming to my office because I have to pass that very area . . .” he trailed off. In the end he lost the election: a rightwing regional party ousted him from his seat.

Early this year, Mumbai’s police force closed its investigation into Baba Siddique’s murder and filed a charge sheet with the court. The more than 4,500-page multi-volume document laid the blame firmly at the feet of Anmol Bishnoi. But for Zeeshan, the gang seems too easy a scapegoat on which to pin his

I believe Bishnoi has taken his tentacles all over the world . . . Canada was an easy mark for him’

father’s death. Baba Siddique had made his fair share of enemies over the years. In February 2024 he’d resigned from the party he had risen through for decades, frustrated at being sidelined, and joined a regional one allied to the opposition — a move that enraged his old party loyalists. Siddique was also deeply embedded in Mumbai’s real estate industry, developing his own portfolio of properties. When he last contested an election in 2014, he’d declared assets then worth about \$12mn.

Zeeshan argues the probe overlooked his father’s feuds in Mumbai’s murky real estate business and suggests the gang might have been acting on behalf of his political rivals and unscrupulous developers. Shoaib Memon, a Mumbai lawyer appointed as the case’s special public prosecutor, also disagrees with the investigation’s conclusion. In January, Memon, who knew Baba Siddique at college and was recommended for the post by his family, resigned, frustrated by the police’s lack of co-operation. “I do not believe in the Salman Khan angle,” he told me. The Bishnoi gang, Memon said, “may be the hands, but they are not the brains” behind the assassination. The police, he added, “put the charge sheet up in a very hush-hush manner without even consulting us, without showing us”. Mumbai’s police force did not respond to a request for comment.

Salman Khan, whose representatives also did not respond to requests for comment, agrees that “there’s more than meets the eye . . . there’s more to it than the Bishnoi angle”, Zeeshan said. “There are many people who are very close to Salman *bhai* [brother] who don’t even have any sort of security. If they wanted to send a message . . . why my father and why me?”

Whatever the truth, Memon expects the trial to take up to a decade to reach a conclusion as it wends its way through India’s glacial justice system. Meanwhile, in April, another Bollywood star went public with a threat they received from an alleged Bishnoi gangster. Zeeshan still fears for his life, as does Salman Khan, who, during this March’s Eid celebrations, waved at a gathering of cheering fans crowding the street outside his home. He did so from behind bulletproof glass, newly installed.

Chris Kay is the FT’s Mumbai bureau chief. Additional reporting by Andrea Rodrigues

Zeeshan Siddique. The court filings detail how the trio hired appeared to know little about their target, relying on Google searches and campaign posters outside their homes to identify the Siddiques. In confessions to the police, one accomplice said he was lured in by dreams of expanding his scrap business; another was “inspired” by Lawrence’s social media presence.

The men confessed to renting rooms in Mumbai and shadowing Baba Siddique and his son. They practised firing the Glock pistols the gang had provided for them near a dam outside the city, posing for photos with the weapons. Burner phones were delivered to use once the hit was complete. They staked out Siddique’s home, watching the comings and goings of his car and noting its registration plate. Finally, using the festival’s crowds as cover, they made their move, heading to Zeeshan’s office. When Siddique stepped outside and lingered by his car in conversation, the shooters seized the moment, opening fire.

As the firecracker smoke cleared, the three alleged gunmen split up. Two were apprehended near a children’s park as they tried to change their clothes and discard their weapons. The third ran into a building compound close by and crouched behind a car. In the confession he made to the Mumbai police, he explained that he too put on a new shirt and deposited his gun in a backpack, hiding it under the vehicle. Then he called Anmol Bishnoi via Snapchat to confirm the job was done. Anmol told him to destroy the phone. He tossed it into a lake, before beginning a 1,000-mile journey north across the country

by train and bus. A month later, he was arrested seeking shelter from friends in the northern city of Bahrach, as he was preparing to slip over the border into Nepal, an hour’s drive away.

Mumbai’s police force moved swiftly to make more arrests. Questioning dozens of witnesses and drawing confessions from many of their suspects, the police closed in on another two dozen accomplices, many of whom had tried to cover their tracks with fake IDs and burner phones. The investigators traced money transfers and found incriminating messaging on their phones as well as Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook accounts. The investigators said the three alleged killers were in “constant contact” with

‘Lawrence Bishnoi knows he’s never getting out of jail and he has no intention of trying’

Anmol Bishnoi, who had conducted the operation through calls via Snapchat or a Portuguese mobile number.

Lawrence’s younger brother, who is named as one of the absconding accused in the case, had reportedly been on the run outside India since 2023. In April that year, a video went viral on Indian social media, showing him dancing at a wedding in Bakersfield, California, next to two famous Punjabi singers. But just a month after Siddique’s murder, reports filtered out that Anmol had been detained by US immigration officers. He is now incarcerated in Pottawattamie county jail in Iowa, according to US

Immigration and Customs Enforcement records. (The US Department of Homeland Security did not respond to a request for comment.) The FT was unable to contact any US legal representatives for Anmol Bishnoi.

The Bishnoi gang was extending its reach globally. Soon it was making its name as far afield as Canada. A few years ago, Kash Heed, a councillor in Richmond, British Columbia, began to hear first-hand accounts of the gang’s expansion in the province. Heed was a former police chief in West Vancouver — the first Indo-Canadian to hold such a post — and in his three decades on the force he had worked to confront gang violence in Canada’s sizeable south Asian community. Now in civic politics, Heed had started hearing about wealthy south Asian Canadians receiving extortion demands from gangsters claiming affiliation with Lawrence Bishnoi. “One person came to me because they didn’t want to tell the police,” Heed told me. “Some of the businesses that had connections back in India were very fearful of the Bishnoi gang.”

The pattern of intimidation was methodical. “They do their homework on the target, they know the wealth of the target, they know the family members of the target,” said Heed. Victims would receive a series of calls, often from Indian numbers. The first would be friendly, establishing a connection through mutual ties. The second hinted at hardship in India: “We know you have a lot of money.” By the third call, the demands became explicit: payment in exchange for the safety of family members, often accompanied by gruesome images of murdered children.