



LARRY VALENZUELA CalMatters

HARSIMRAN SINGH learned players had been intimidated into dropping out of his Stockton sporting event.

Indian gangs terrorize diaspora

BY GAGANDEEP SINGH

Last fall, Harsimran Singh was well on his way to bringing 15,000 fans to Stockton for an international tournament of the ancient Indian sport kabaddi.

Then, suddenly, athletes started dropping out.

They seemed to manufacture excuses to avoid the sport's world cup. As president of the American Kabaddi Federation, Singh felt increasingly shaken as the cancellations mounted. He began pressing for answers.

He learned from athletes, and then from law enforcement officers, that someone was threatening players to shape the outcome of the event. They received phone calls from gangsters, many of them incarcerated in Indian prisons, who directed them not to participate, and warned of consequences if they defied the orders.

"The players were very afraid; if they got a call, they didn't want to go against gangsters. They were unwilling to play because they didn't want to compromise their own safety and their family's security," Singh said.

The intimidation of Singh's tournament was not an isolated incident. It was, as he would come to understand, part of a much larger wave of international threats, extortion and violence targeting Indian and Punjabi Sikhs in California.

The method is straightforward: A gang member calls a victim and demands money. If they refuse, a criminal network threatens or carries out attacks against their relatives, families, or businesses — whether in the United States or back in India.

More than 250,000 Sikhs live in California, the largest population in the U.S. Like other members of the diaspora, they retain strong ties to India, with many regularly traveling to visit their families or ancestral homes.

California law enforcement agencies say the combination of wealth, tight relationships and cross-border movement has made them attractive targets for criminal networks with roots in India's northern and western states — Punjab, Haryana, New Delhi and Rajasthan.

Police in India told CalMatters that the gangs often target "real estate developers, liquor contractors, transporters, and local businessmen" — people with higher incomes or assets. "One of the primary reasons is the large Indian diaspora in California, which provides a degree of anonymity and social cover," a spokesperson for an organized crime task force in India's Haryana state said in a written statement.

The FBI Sacramento field office began sounding alarms in early May 2024, urging members of the Central Valley's Indian community to report these sorts of shakedowns.

"In recent extortion attempts, subjects demanded a large sum of money and threatened physical violence or death if the demand was not met," the FBI said in a statement at the time.

At least two homicides in California have been connected to the criminal networks targeting people from the Indian diaspora. Two suspected members of the

Lawrence Bishnoi gang — described by the FBI as India's most wanted criminal organization — were killed in Stockton and Fresno, according to local law enforcement agencies.

San Joaquin County Sheriff Patrick Withrow said that the criminal pattern was unlike a network with purely domestic roots. "Most of them have an international type of link to them, where it stretches back to India because the threats are being made to family members and businesses back there," he said.

Withrow explained that the initial demands were deliberately calibrated to avoid triggering a police response. "They usually start with amounts between \$4,000 and \$7,000 — they figure that that's a range that somebody might pay and still not contact the police," Withrow said. "The victim families sometimes paid, with a calculation that a single payment would protect their family and business in India and the United States as well."

It rarely worked out that way. "Most of the time, a few months later, the extortion crew will come back and want more money again," Withrow said.

Withrow said his office has been receiving roughly two extortion-related cases per month over the last year or two. In July, his office arrested eight alleged members of a gang led by Pavittar Preet Singh, who in India faces charges related to firearms violations, assaults and homicides.

India's most wanted criminals

At the center of the criminal operation, the Lawrence Bishnoi gang, commonly known as the Bishnoi gang, has members across India, the United States and Canada.

Bishnoi gang leader Lawrence Bishnoi is incarcerated in an Indian prison, but federal investigators in recent criminal indictments say he has continued to direct his global network of extortion and target killings by using encrypted messaging applications, cross-border coordination and a cadre of U.S.-based associates to extort victims in both countries.

Investigators believe Lawrence Bishnoi is able to access contraband cell-phones and oversee the criminal activities of the Bishnoi gang despite Indian authorities placing him in a form of custodial confinement.

In December 2023, Lawrence Bishnoi personally contacted an extortion victim via an audio call, according to the FBI, then turned on his camera to confirm his identity to the victim. The victim captured a screenshot, a rare documentary evidence linking Lawrence Bishnoi directly to an extortion threat.

The FBI found that U.S.-based Bishnoi gang members and associates routinely used WhatsApp and Signal to relay threats and demands to victims in India. "If the victims do not pay, Bishnoi gang members and associates arrange to have members in India conduct shootings, their associates, their residences, and their businesses," the federal agency said in a November indictment against an alleged gang member.

In November 2024, Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested Anmol Bishnoi — Lawrence Bishnoi's younger brother — in Nebraska, according to the FBI.

Indian authorities allege he played a central role in two of India's most sensational homicides: the killings of globally acclaimed Punjabi rapper Sidhu Moose Wala in May 2022 in Punjab and of Baba Sadique, a prominent politician and former Maharashtra state minister.

Within weeks of Anmol's arrest, Sunil Yadav, an Indian national and a suspected member of the Bishnoi gang, was killed in Stockton. In Fresno, Banwari Godara, a suspected Bishnoi gang associate, was fatally shot near a truck repair yard Oct. 18.

The homicides took a transnational turn in January, when Indian authorities announced the arrest of four suspects allegedly responsible for the two killings. According to Indian investigators, the suspects were members of a gang that is a rival to Bishnoi's. Investigators believe the suspects fled the U.S. after the killings. Law enforcement agencies in California have not announced arrests or suspects in the homicides.

Police in Sacramento County link the Indian-based gangs to 20 shootings in the last four years, according to Sheriff's Detective Steve Hernandez.

Enforcement actions continued throughout 2025, with multiple arrests reported by the FBI and the California Highway Patrol. In April 2025, FBI Director Kash Patel trumped the arrest by FBI Sacramento of Harpeet Singh, whom Patel described as an alleged terrorist responsible for attacks in Punjab, and also linked to two international terrorist groups.

A California-based Sikh businessman told CalMatters he received an extortion demand from a Bishnoi gang member based in the Central Valley. The victim has been receiving calls for the last two and a half months, he said on condition of anonymity due to the threats he faces.

The gangster at one point demanded \$1 million, he said.

"It has had a psychological impact on my life; it has restricted me, and I can't move freely if I have to travel to India," he said. The man has reported the threats to police in Fresno and to the FBI.

Threats followed victim to Canada

One of the most recent cases involves Jasmeet Singh, an Indian national who was living in the Stockton and Fresno areas when he allegedly made a series of threats to a victim who had relocated to Canada from India, according to a December indictment in federal court.

The victim retained an Indian phone number after moving to Canada. Months later, Jasmeet Singh obtained that number to unleash a series of threats via phone calls and voice messages, and became furious after learning that the victim had cooperated with Indian law enforcement, the indictment said.

Jasmeet Singh reportedly identified the victim's vehicle as a white Range Rover, showing a surveillance

capability that spanned international borders.

"You're going to die in Canada. I won't even leave you capable of going to India," Jasmeet Singh told the victim, according to the indictment.

"Go complain to whoever you want to complain to, go complain over there too. We'll kill you over there too," Jasmeet Singh said in a voice message sent that day.

Although Jasmeet Singh did not directly mention the Lawrence Bishnoi gang's name during those alleged calls, the FBI concluded that the nature and context of the threats — specifically the references to the victim's cooperation with law enforcement — indicate Jasmeet Singh's association with the gang.

The FBI investigation was triggered by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who had initially flagged Jasmeet Singh's conduct and shared information with their American counterparts.

He was arrested and taken into federal custody in December and is awaiting trial. His next court date is in May. His lawyer has not responded to CalMatters' requests for comment.

Naindeep Singh, executive director of the Jakara Movement, a prominent Sikh advocacy group based in California, described transnational extortion gangs as being active in the state for some time.

Many Sikh community members "choose to remain silent because of a fear of reprisal to them, their body, their business, and to their loved ones in the United States or India," said Naindeep Singh.

The Fresno County Sheriff's Office and San Joaquin County Sheriff's Office acknowledged this underreporting. "We believe there are more crimes occurring than we have records of," a Fresno County Sheriff's Office spokesperson said.

Naindeep Singh and other community members have approached Fresno police and federal agents to raise the alarm about the extortion attempts.

Security at kabaddi tournament

Back in Stockton, Harsimran Singh sat in his business office, explaining to a visitor that his world cup event went forward after all.

The sport, part tag and part wrestling, has been plagued in recent years by a series of murders in India involving players and various organized crime factions, even as its popularity has mounted in California.

Harsimran Singh believes it was the Jaggu Bhagwanpuria gang that targeted his tournament. Its leader, Jaggu Bhagwanpuria, is in prison in India.

"The law enforcement officials also wanted us to be careful, and we had to hire a lot of security and make sure everything went smoothly," he said.

Police and FBI agents showed up to supplement the private guards, even though Harsimran Singh never filed a formal complaint with them.

"We do not want to engage in any of these activities that could harm our property or our lives. We would want to avoid that," Harsimran Singh said.

The security held.

Singh writes for CalMatters.