Sikh Disinformation Lab

WEAPONIZED

India Today sentencing report on Pannun murder plot: accurate case facts, weaponized framing

India Today's report on the sentencing of Nikhil Gupta repeatedly describes the intended victim, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, as a "Khalistani terrorist" without noting that the designation is India's own. The Lab assesses the item as Weaponized: the underlying criminal case is reported largely accurately, but the characterization and the omitted context are not.

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22 November 2026

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19 November 2026

NARRATIVES
Labelling Sikh Individuals as Terrorists Without Evidence · Portraying Advocacy for Khalistan as Terrorism

OUR ASSESSMENT

Significant omissions and framing issues - The article does not explain that the terrorism designation is India's designation, rather than a determination made by the US court hearing Gupta's case. - It does not discuss the documented connection prosecutors drew between the plot against Pannun and events surrounding Hardeep Singh Nijjar's assassination. - It emphasizes Gupta's mitigating circumstances while providing relatively little detail about the targeted activist's perspective or the political intimidation implications of the case. - It does acknowledge the involvement of an Indian government employee and that prosecutors identified political ideology as the motive. These are important inclusions and should not be overlooked in the assessment.

India Today's reporting on Nikhil Gupta's sentencing largely reflects documented US criminal proceedings. However, the article repeatedly characterizes the intended assassination victim, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, as a terrorist without clarifying that this designation originates from the Government of India under its domestic anti-terrorism legislation.

The US Department of Justice identifies Pannun as an American citizen, attorney and political activist targeted in an assassination conspiracy connected to an Indian government employee. Gupta pleaded guilty in February 2026 and was sentenced to 235 months in prison on November 20, 2026.

The article acknowledges the government-employee connection and political motive, but omits significant context from US court records linking discussions surrounding the Pannun plot to the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

Its framing reflects a recurring pattern in which Indian domestic security designations are presented as universal descriptions of Sikh political activists, even when the primary criminal proceeding concerns violence directed against those activists. The principal issue is therefore selective characterization and contextual omission, rather than fabrication of the underlying criminal case.

THE CLAIM

Nikhil Gupta to be sentenced in foiled bid to kill Khalistani terrorist Pannun in US

THE ANALYSIS

What was published

On 19 November 2026, indiatoday.in published a report headlined "Nikhil Gupta to be sentenced in foiled bid to kill Khalistani terrorist Pannun in US". The article covers the sentencing of Nikhil Gupta, who pleaded guilty in the conspiracy to murder Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, noting that prosecutors sought 24 years. India Today repeatedly identified Pannun as a terrorist, without explaining in those references that the designation originates from India under its Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The Sikh Disinformation Lab identifies this unattributed designation and the article's selective contextual framing as its principal information-integrity concerns.

The article is largely accurate concerning Gupta's criminal proceedings. Its weaknesses concern how the intended victim is characterized and which aspects of the broader case receive emphasis.

The verdict

The Lab assesses the item as Weaponized, with a severity rating of 3. The reporting on the US criminal proceeding is largely sound. The problem is selective characterization and contextual omission, not fabrication of the underlying case.

The article repeatedly characterizes the intended assassination victim as a terrorist without clarifying that this designation originates with the Government of India under its domestic anti-terrorism legislation. It is not a determination made by the US court hearing Gupta's case. The US Department of Justice identifies Pannun as an American citizen, an attorney and a political activist who was targeted in an assassination conspiracy connected to an Indian government employee.

This framing reflects a recurring pattern in which Indian domestic security designations are presented as universal descriptions of Sikh political activists, even where the criminal proceeding being reported concerns violence directed against those activists.

The claims, assessed

1. That Pannun is a terrorist. Misleading. The assertion is misleading without attribution to India's designation under its anti-terrorism legislation. The US proceeding does not characterize him this way; US authorities describe him as an American citizen, attorney and political activist who was the target of the conspiracy.

2. That Gupta pleaded guilty to three criminal charges in February 2026. True. Gupta pleaded guilty in February 2026 and was sentenced to 235 months in prison on 20 November 2026.

3. That the conspiracy targeted Pannun in New York City. True.

4. That Gupta's conduct involved individuals in India, including an Indian government employee. True. The article's acknowledgement of this connection is an important inclusion and should not be overlooked in assessing the piece.

5. That the intended victim was targeted because of his political ideology. True. Prosecutors identified political ideology as the motive, and the article reports this.

6. That Vikash Yadav directed Gupta to arrange the assassination. True.

7. That Gupta contacted a person who was secretly working with the DEA. True.

8. That the proposed payment for Pannun's murder was $100,000. True.

What is missing

Three omissions shape the piece.

First, the article does not explain that the terrorism designation attached to Pannun is India's, rather than a finding of the US court.

Second, it does not discuss the connection prosecutors drew in US court records between discussions surrounding the plot against Pannun and the assassination of Bhai Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

Third, it emphasizes Gupta's mitigating circumstances while providing relatively little detail about the targeted activist's perspective or the political intimidation implications of the case.

##The missing context: The Nijjar connection

An important omission concerns the relationship between the attempted assassination of Pannun and the June 2023 killing of Canadian Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

US court documents contain evidence that prosecutors considered relevant to the wider circumstances of the conspiracy.

According to the Department of Justice, Nijjar was murdered in British Columbia on June 18, 2023.

The following day, Gupta told an undercover US law enforcement officer that Nijjar had also been a target and indicated that there were additional targets.

Prosecutors further alleged that Gupta referred to Nijjar's killing when discussing the timing of the planned assassination of Pannun.

These exchanges appear in the US prosecution's official account of the case.

Their significance does not depend on establishing that the same individuals committed Nijjar's murder. They demonstrate that the prosecution documented communications referring to another Sikh political activist's assassination during the planning of the attempted killing in New York.

This material provides important context for understanding concerns about violence directed at Sikh political activists across national borders.

India Today's article describes the involvement of an Indian government employee but does not explore this connection.

Consequently, readers receive substantial detail about sentencing arguments without equivalent context about the broader circumstances documented by the prosecution.

##The distinction between political advocacy and violence

The language used to identify Pannun is important because the criminal proceeding concerns an attempt to silence a political activist through violence. The right to peacefully advocate political change, including independence or self-determination, is distinct from the commission of criminal offences.

Individual actions and allegations must be assessed on their evidence. A person's designation under Indian domestic security legislation does not determine their rights under US law, nor does it provide justification for violence against them. The United States prosecuted Gupta for his involvement in the attempted killing, regardless of India's position on Pannun's political activities.

Accurate reporting should preserve the difference between India's legal designation of an individual, the political activities attributed to that individual, and the criminal conduct established against the person who attempted to arrange their assassination.

##A recurring narrative pattern

The framing observed in this article is relevant to a broader pattern in media coverage of Sikh self-determination advocacy.

Three features are particularly significant.

The normalization of Indian security designations

Indian domestic legal descriptions are sometimes incorporated into international news coverage without clear attribution to the Indian government. When a person is repeatedly identified using such terminology, the distinction between a foreign government's allegation or designation and an independently established legal finding becomes less visible.

The inversion of attention from the alleged perpetrators to the intended victim

Coverage of crimes against Sikh political activists can place substantial emphasis on the political identity of those targeted, rather than primarily examining the criminal conduct, the documented evidence and the people accused of directing the violence. In this case, the article reports the government-employee connection but gives relatively limited consideration to the victim's perspective and the wider context of alleged transnational targeting.

The selective presentation of court records

The article draws substantially on sentencing submissions, including the arguments advanced by Gupta's defence. It does not provide comparable attention to the prosecution's documented references to Nijjar's killing or the broader questions raised by an assassination conspiracy involving an Indian government employee.

These patterns are analytically relevant to understanding the article's framing. Their presence does not, by itself, establish deliberate deception, coordinated publication or direction by an external actor.

Context

Seven of the eight claims examined are accurate, and the article does report both the involvement of an Indian government employee and the political motive prosecutors identified. The Lab's assessment is therefore directed at how the case is framed rather than at whether the case is reported. Where a criminal proceeding concerns an alleged state-linked plot to kill a political activist abroad, describing that activist by a domestic designation of the state in question, without attribution, transfers a contested label into reporting where it is not established. The article also leaves out relevant information from the official prosecution record concerning communications following Nijjar's assassination. These omissions and framing choices matter because they influence how readers understand the relationship between Sikh political advocacy, foreign-state allegations and criminal violence directed against political activists.

The Sikh Disinformation Lab therefore identifies the article's primary concern as misleading contextual framing, rather than fabrication of the underlying criminal proceedings.

The established fact is that Gupta pleaded guilty to participating in an assassination conspiracy targeting a Sikh political activist. India's designation of the intended victim does not change the nature of that criminal conduct. Maintaining that distinction is essential to accurate reporting on the Gupta case and on threats directed at people advocating Sikh self-determination.

CLAIMS ASSESSED

01	Pannun is a terrorist.	MISLEADING
02	Gupta pleaded guilty to three criminal charges in February 2026.	TRUE
03	The conspiracy targeted Pannun in New York City.	TRUE
04	Gupta's conduct involved individuals in India, including an Indian government employee.	TRUE
05	The intended victim was targeted because of his political ideology.	TRUE
06	Vikash Yadav directed Gupta to arrange the assassination.	TRUE
07	Gupta contacted a person who was secretly working with the DEA.	TRUE
08	The proposed payment for Pannun's murder was $100,000.	TRUE

SOURCES

01 Sources and Supporting Evidence

02 US Department of Justice — Nikhil Gupta Guilty Plea, February 13, 2026

03 Official confirmation of Gupta's guilty plea. The release describes the offences, alleged involvement of an Indian government employee and communications connected to Nijjar's assassination.

04 https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/indian-national-pleads-guilty-plotting-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york-city

05 US Department of Justice — Nikhil Gupta Sentencing, November 20, 2026Primary official statement confirming Gupta's 235-month sentence and documenting the prosecution's account of the assassination conspiracy.

06 https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/indian-national-sentenced-235-months-prison-plotting-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york

07 US Department of Justice — Charges Against Vikash Yadav, October 17, 2024

08 Official announcement identifying the Indian government employee charged in connection with the conspiracy and describing his alleged direction of Gupta.

09 https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-against-indian-government-employee-connection-foi

10 US Department of Justice — Second Superseding Indictment, October 17, 2024

11 Original indictment detailing the alleged role of Vikash Yadav, the financial arrangements, surveillance of Pannun and communications referring to Nijjar's murder. Allegations against Yadav remain unproven unless established in court.

12 https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/media/1373851/dl?inline=

13 Government of India — Ministry of Home Affairs, July 1, 2020

14 Official announcement confirming the designation of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun under India's Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Establishes the jurisdictional source of the designation used by India Today.

15 https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1635710

16 Reuters — Nikhil Gupta Pleads Guilty, February 13, 2026

17 Independent contemporaneous reporting documenting the guilty plea, Pannun's political role and the alleged involvement of an Indian government official.

18 https://www.reuters.com/world/us/indian-man-pleads-guilty-new-york-over-alleged-plot-against-sikh-separatist-2026-02-13/

19 Reuters — Gupta Sentenced to More Than 19 Years, November 20, 2026

20 Independent confirmation of the sentence and relevant developments at the sentencing hearing.

21 https://www.reuters.com/world/us/indian-man-sentenced-more-than-19-years-us-plotting-kill-sikh-separatist-2026-11-20/

22 Associated Press — Gupta Sentencing, November 20, 2026

23 Courtroom reporting describing Gupta's apology, the sentence and the intended victim's position.

24 https://apnews.com/article/862cf5a608b00694f2cc661ece763134

25 US Department of State — Press Briefing, September 26, 2023

26 Official US government briefing addressing concerns about transnational repression following questions about India's designation of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun.

27 https://2021-2025.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-september-26-2023/

Sikh Disinformation Lab

About Sikh Disinformation Lab

Sikh Disinformation Lab is an independent, evidence-based programme founded and hosted by the World Sikh Organization of Canada. It monitors, analyses and publicly documents disinformation affecting Sikhs.

The Lab examines claims against evidence, publishes assessments with that evidence attached, and tracks coordinated campaigns over time. Every published assessment names what was claimed, where it appeared, what the review found, and what that assessment rests on. Where an item makes several distinct claims, each is assessed separately.

Assessments are made against the methodology framework in force at the time of publication. That framework is public, versioned, and reviewed at each phase gate; a material change produces a new version rather than a silent edit. The full method is published at sikhdisinfolab.ca/method.

Corrections are dated entries, never silent edits. Where a published assessment is found to be wrong or incomplete, the correction is recorded against it and listed at sikhdisinfolab.ca/corrections. If you believe something published here is inaccurate, write to the programme and it will be reviewed.

Assessments are the responsibility of Sikh Disinformation Lab.

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