Sikh Disinformation Lab

MISLEADING

Times of India's "jails as Khalistani hiring grounds" story rests on one case and unnamed sources

A 29 September 2026 Times of India report asserts that pro-Khalistan groups are recruiting operatives inside prisons across north India. The Lab's review finds the claim misleading: the article extrapolates a systemic prison-recruitment network from a single alleged case, with the core allegations traceable to unnamed police and intelligence sources.

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NARRATIVES
Linking Sikhs to Gangs, Drugs and Organized Crime · Claiming Pakistan Controls Sikh Political Activism · Portraying Advocacy for Khalistan as Terrorism

OUR ASSESSMENT

Times of India reports intelligence concerns that pro-Khalistan groups, including Sikhs for Justice, are recruiting operatives inside north Indian prisons. The article relies primarily on allegations arising from the recent arrest of Preetpal Singh, whose association with SFJ and involvement in the anti-BRICS graffiti campaign are independently supported, including by SFJ itself. However, the report extrapolates from that case to a broader claim that jails are becoming recruitment grounds for pro-Khalistan groups without providing data or additional documented cases demonstrating a systematic prison-recruitment network. The report identifies one recent alleged recruitment chain involving Preetpal Singh and another former inmate, but provides no evidence showing the scale, frequency or geographic spread necessary to establish that jails across north India are being systematically used as recruitment grounds. Preetpal's association with SFJ is supported, but the alleged prison recruitment mechanism, dead-drop financing and broader ISI-linked network remain primarily intelligence or police assertions rather than independently established findings. The article uses “infiltrate jails” where the evidence described concerns alleged recruitment between or through incarcerated individuals; no institutional infiltration is demonstrated. TOI states as fact that after his release: Preetpal “received Rs 1.5 lakh through a dead-drop location on the Faridkot-Amritsar highway.”

That allegation also appears in other reporting, but those reports ultimately trace back to Delhi Police or unnamed investigative sources. The Indian Express describes the alleged SFJ relationship as a police claim; ThePrint's detailed version relies heavily on unnamed police sources., recovered cash record, charging document, communication transcript or judicial finding linked in the TOI article demonstrating this specific transaction. The use of terms like "Foreign Masterminds" and "foot soldiers" are used for sensationalism and security framing. Those terms make an intelligence assessment sound like a settled organizational command structure. If there is evidence identifying the handler, chain of command, funding mechanism or foreign intelligence actor, that evidence is not provided.

THE CLAIM

Jails hiring grounds for pro-Khalistan groups: Intel

THE ANALYSIS

What was published

On 29 September 2026, The Times of India published an article headlined "Jails hiring grounds for pro-Khalistan groups: Intel" on timesofindia.indiatimes.com, datelined New Delhi. The report states that intelligence agencies have flagged attempts by pro-Khalistan groups, including Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), to recruit operatives inside prisons across north India.

What it claims

The article asserts a recruitment chain beginning inside custody. It reports that a detained individual told authorities he was recruited while serving a sentence at Patiala jail and was given a contact number linked to SFJ's

Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. It further states as fact that, after his release in 2026, he contacted Pannun directly and "received Rs 1.5 lakh through a dead-drop location on the Faridkot-Amritsar highway."

The report also asserts that vulnerable prisoners — first-time offenders and those in financial or legal difficulty — could be targeted; that the 2016 Nabha jailbreak demonstrates links between criminal networks and extremist groups inside prisons; and that ISI-linked "dead drops" are under intelligence scrutiny. It frames the alleged network using the language of "foreign masterminds" and "foot soldiers," and describes the groups as seeking to "infiltrate jails."

What the review found

The Lab's verdict is disinformation, with the nuance assessed as misleading, at severity 3 of 5.

The review does not dispute every element. The arrest of Preetpal Singh, his association with SFJ and his involvement in the anti-BRICS graffiti campaign are independently supported, including by statements from SFJ itself.

The problem identified is extrapolation. From that one case, the article advances a far broader proposition — that jails across north India are becoming recruitment grounds for pro-Khalistan groups — without supplying data or additional documented cases establishing a systematic prison-recruitment network. The report identifies one recent alleged recruitment chain, involving Preetpal Singh and another former inmate. It does not provide evidence of the scale, frequency or geographic spread that the headline claim requires.

The review also finds the word "infiltrate" unsupported by what is described. The conduct alleged concerns recruitment between or through incarcerated individuals. No institutional infiltration of prisons is demonstrated in the article.

On the Rs 1.5 lakh dead-drop payment, the review notes that TOI states the transaction as fact. The same allegation appears elsewhere in Indian reporting, but those accounts ultimately trace back to Delhi Police or unnamed investigative sources: The Indian Express describes the alleged SFJ relationship as a police claim, and ThePrint's more detailed version relies heavily on unnamed police sources. The TOI article links no recovered cash record, charging document, communication transcript or judicial finding establishing the specific transaction.

The alleged prison-recruitment mechanism, the dead-drop financing and the wider ISI-linked network likewise remain intelligence or police assertions rather than independently established findings. Of the six specific claims assessed, five were rated unsupported and one — the invocation of the 2016 Nabha jailbreak as demonstrating prison-based links between criminal networks and extremist groups — was rated misleading.

Framing

The review flags the article's vocabulary as a separate issue from its sourcing. Terms such as "foreign masterminds" and "foot soldiers" serve sensationalism and security framing, and have the effect of presenting an intelligence assessment as a settled organizational command structure. If evidence exists identifying a handler, a chain of command, a funding mechanism or a specific foreign intelligence actor, that evidence is not provided in the article.

Context

The Lab tracks this item under the Linking Sikhs to Gangs, Drugs and Organized Crime narrative. The pattern it exemplifies — a single arrest, sourced to unnamed police or intelligence officials, generalised into a claim about an organised and geographically dispersed network — recurs across coverage in this cluster. Readers encountering such reporting should note where an allegation is attributed to investigators and where it has been independently corroborated by documentary or judicial record. In this instance, the central systemic claim has not been.

CLAIMS ASSESSED

01	A detained operative told authorities he was recruited while serving a sentence at Patiala jail and given a contact number linked to Pannun.	UNSUPPORTED
02	After release in 2026 he contacted Pannun directly and received Rs 1.5 lakh.	UNSUPPORTED
03	Pro-Khalistan groups including SFJ are systematically infiltrating North Indian jails to recruit.	UNSUPPORTED
04	Vulnerable prisoners — first-time offenders, people in financial or legal difficulty — could be targeted.	UNSUPPORTED
05	The 2016 Nabha jailbreak demonstrates links between criminal networks and extremist groups in prisons.	MISLEADING
06	ISI "dead drops" are under intelligence scrutiny.	UNSUPPORTED

SOURCES

01 https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/intel-jails-hiring-grounds-for-pro-khalistan-groups/articleshow/134553776.cms

02 The Lab's analyst review, flagged item "Jails hiring grounds for pro-Khalistan groups: Intel" (verdict: Disinformation / Misleading, severity 3), the Linking Sikhs to Gangs, Drugs and Organized Crime narrative

03 The Indian Express reporting on the Preetpal Singh arrest (cited in the analyst review as describing the alleged SFJ relationship as a police claim)

04 ThePrint reporting on the Preetpal Singh arrest (cited in the analyst review as relying on unnamed police sources)

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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