

8-6-2012

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Recommended Citation

Dawinder S. Sidhu, *Violence against Sikhs stems from ignorance and fear*, *The Baltimore Sun* (2012).

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Violence against Sikhs stems from ignorance and fear

By Dawinder Sidhu

The Baltimore Sun

August 6, 2012, 10:45 AM

We do not yet know for certain what motivated a gunman to open fire on a Sikh temple in Wisconsin Sunday, killing six and wounding many others. But we do know that the Sikh community in America — for no reason other than its members' appearance — has suffered extensive harassment, prejudice and violence in the years since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Sunday's shooting was a tragedy, but it offers Americans an opportunity to learn about the Sikh community and to quell the ignorance that may have enabled the shooting to occur in the first place.

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion, established in the 15th century in the Punjab region of South Asia. The religion emerged in a time of conflict between Hindus and Muslims. In this context, Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, sought to highlight the underlying humanity and equality of all people. Indeed, Guru Nanak argued that anyone, regardless of caste, creed, or gender, could be content and achieve enlightenment if he or she lived by three simple instructions: first, to reflect and meditate upon God; second, to earn a decent and honest living in society; and third, to give back to the less fortunate when feasible.

Guru Nanak was followed by nine other living spiritual teachers, or gurus. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last living guru, installed a book of hymns penned by several gurus and other spiritually-minded Hindu and Muslim poets as the permanent guide for Sikhs ("Sikh" literally means "student"). Guru Gobind Singh also established a group of saint-soldiers who abide by a code of conduct that, among other things, requires adherents to keep five articles of faith, including unshorn hair. Observant Sikh males thus do not cut their hair and wear a turban on their heads.

While the Sikh turban is an integral part of a Sikh's physical identity, carrying with it deep religious and symbolic meaning, it has served as a marker for hate violence and discrimination, particularly in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The Sikh footprint in the United States can be traced to the late 19th century. Early Sikh migrants arrived primarily in Western America, working in farms, mills and foundries and helping to build railroads. Sikh immigration to the United States was relatively modest at the beginning and first part of the 20th century, but a wave of Sikh migration corresponded with the relaxing of federal immigration laws in 1965. The new laws favored professionals, and Sikhs in these occupational areas were

among those who were able to take advantage of these preferences. Today, though figures vary widely, roughly 700,000 Sikhs reside in the United States.

Despite the general, inherent difficulties that immigrant and minority groups encounter, and despite the additional problems associated with discrimination and harassment tied to their unique appearance, "our country," as President Barack Obama noted in a statement Sunday, "has been enriched by Sikhs." Perhaps most notably, Dilip Singh Saund became the first Asian-American, let alone Indian- or Sikh-American, member of Congress. Today, Sikh Preet Bharara is the chief federal prosecutor in Manhattan, while South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley is the daughter of Sikh parents. Caucasian converts to Sikhism, who are concentrated in the American Southwest, have demonstrated the ability to start thriving businesses. These converts' entrepreneurial initiative stemmed in part from their sense that non-Sikhs may not hire individuals with turbans and beards.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 represented the start of a defining era for Sikhs in the United States. Because of Sikhs' physical appearance and the fact that the architects of the attacks, including Osama bin Laden, wore turbans and had long beards, Sikhs encountered significant violence and discrimination immediately after the attacks. On September 15, 2001, for example, turbaned Sikh Balbir Singh Sodhi was killed in Mesa, Ariz., by a self-proclaimed "patriot" who sought that day to kill some "ragheads." Aside from murder, stabbings, physical assaults and verbal harassment, Sikhs have been profiled, ejected from airplanes, terminated from and refused employment, and bullied in schools, among other things, all on account of their appearance and specifically some Americans' hostility to it. All told, Sikh-Americans have suffered the disproportionate brunt of the post-9/11 backlash in America.

Sikhs largely lacked an existing framework within which to take on the significant breadth of incidents of discrimination that were taking place. A handful of Sikhs — most of them young, and born and raised in the United States to immigrant Indian parents — quickly succeeded in forging relationships with the media, government agencies and law enforcement officials to combat ignorance of Sikhs, provide descriptive information on incidents against Sikhs, and ensure the safety and security of Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim in America. They also obtained relief for victims in the courts of law and worked with federal and state legislatures on policy affecting post-9/11 civil rights in various contexts, including schools, airports and the workplace. Relying on a confluence of Sikh and American values, Sikh leaders have argued for tolerance of all communities impacted by the backlash, signaling that civil rights are not group-specific but are shared and must be protected by everyone in this country.

The Sikh-American experience after 9/11 also demonstrates the ability of the marginalized and disfavored in America to successfully defend these rights through nonviolent means and established civic mechanisms. While the post-9/11 backlash represents another chapter in the wartime mistreatment of minorities who look like our true enemies, the Sikh-American response becomes the latest iteration of a solemn, powerful movement for civil rights in America that has the potential to resonate in all corners of the globe.

The shooting in Wisconsin shows that Sikh-Americans cannot rest in their efforts. It underscores the work that remains if religious minorities are to be truly embraced in American society, if Americans are to move out from under the cloud of hate and division, and if we are to give full meaning to our national values of pluralism and religious liberty.

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