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Sikhism: A Targeted Religion

Gagandeep Kaur Choongh

On September 15, 2001, four days after the tragic event of 9/11, Balbir Singh Sodi was helping a man plant flowers at his gas station when Frank Silva Roque shot Sodi three times from his truck (Chaudhary, 2017). Roque wanted “to kill a Muslim” as revenge for 9/11, and he mistook Sodi as a Muslim because Sodi had worn a beard and turban. Sodi was one of the first victims of anti-Muslim hate crime after 9/11. There was widespread distrust, hostility, and fear towards people of the Islamic faith because of negative stereotypes and discrimination after 9/11. The Sikh people have also been victims of hate crimes by xenophobes due to ignorance. This paper will show that Sikhs have been the target for many hate crimes for not looking “American.” The goal of this paper is to show the stigmas surrounding Sikhs and why Sikhs are targeted, including the statistics of the hate crimes against Sikhs.

Many are not aware of what the Sikh faith is and what it consists of; in order to better explain what the religion is about a quick background about the Sikh religion is needed. There is a population of roughly five hundred thousand Sikhs in America. In the Sikh religion many men and women wear turbans; to the Sikhs a turban signifies holiness, spiritual prayer, and is a reminder that in the eyes of God everyone is noble and equal (Chaudhary, 2017). It also protects the uncut hair of men and women. Many Sikhs have a beard and long hair because cutting hair is forbidden for those that are fully baptized; Sikhs believe that God has created perfection and they should try to not alter any part of themselves out of respect. However, it is the

Sikh’s decision on whether they want to wear a turban or cut their hair.

Today in America, it can be scary to be an immigrant, especially one that does not look ‘normal.’ Some Sikhs are targets because they are immigrants, while many are targeted due to their appearance. The misconception about Sikhs is not just the fact that people may think they are Muslim, but it also has to do with their darker skin, beards, and turbans. Both Sikhs and Muslims are targeted because they ‘do not look American.’ Valerie Kaur, a Sikh civil rights advocate, says, “It seems to make very little difference if the brown, bearded man with the turban calls himself a Sikh and not a Muslim. They read us as un-American.” (Parvini, 2017). Suman Raghunathan, executive director of the advocacy group South Asian Americans Leading Together, adds, “The overwhelming motivation for these attacks or intimidation incidents are part and parcel of a growing wave of hostility based on perception that Sikhs are Muslim” (Parvini, 2017).

There are no credible statistics of hate crimes against Sikhs because before 2015, most hate crimes against Hindus and Sikhs would fall into the anti-Muslim hate crime category. But if you ask any Sikh, they will know about every hate crime in their community. The first month after 9/11, the Sikh Coalition documented 300 cases of violence and discrimination against Sikhs in America. However, it was not until the 2012 Wisconsin massacre inside a Sikh gurdwara, or house of worship, where six individuals died and three were wounded, that the FBI decided to track hate crimes against Sikhs (Yaccino, 2012).

High profile attacks on Indian Americans

- September 2001: Balbir Singh Sodhi is killed in the aftermath of 9/11 in Mesa, Ariz.
- March 2011: Two elderly Sikh men are killed while out for a walk in Elk Grove, Calif.
- August 2012: A gunman opens fire in a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wis., during Sikh prayer services, killing six.
- September 2015: A teenager calls a Sikh man “terrorist” and “Bin Laden” before repeatedly punching him in his car in Chicago.
- September 2016: A Sikh man is brutally beaten and his hair is cut off while stopped at a red light in Richmond, Calif.
- February 2017: Two Indian men are shot, one of them fatally, at a bar in Olathe, Kan. The shooter reportedly told them to go back to their country.
- March 2017: Two Sikh men are attacked in separate shootings, one in Washington and another in South Carolina. The man shot in South Carolina was killed.

Image credit Parvini 2017

The FBI began collecting data on anti-Sikh hate crimes, but many cities did not report hate crimes according to the FBI Report (Smith and Singh 2018). Additionally, Sikh advocacy groups say that incidents are underreported because they do not include discrimination and hate speech. However, the 2017 FBI annual report on hate crime showed that there has been a 243 percent increase in Sikh hate crimes (Smith and Singh, 2018). This is a 19.7 percent increase over all since 2016. According to Smith and Singh (2018), “due to systemic underreporting there remains a significant gap between FBI hate crime data and the reality on the ground for Sikhs and other minority communities across the United Stateside.” Because there is limited information about the statistics of hate crimes against Sikhs, advocacy groups cannot use

statistics on anti-Muslim hate crimes to determine whether Sikhs are at higher risk. It is vital to also see what the administration is doing to acknowledge these hate crimes.

After the 9/11 attacks President Bush had called for tolerance and anti-Muslim hate crimes dropped dramatically. However, with the Trump Administration not acknowledging hate crimes, there has been an uptick in hate crimes in all of America. Rajdeep Singh Jolly, interim managing director of programs at the Sikh Coalition, says “At the moment, the risk of anti-Sikh hate crime is high. Any time there is a flare-up in anti-immigrant rhetoric we see an uptick in even an apprehension about hate crimes” (Parvini, 2017). Before President Trump, there was an average of 13 anti-Muslim hate crimes per month, but after President Trump’s speech on

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immigration during his election year there were 15 anti-Muslim hate crimes within five days of his speech (Parvini 2017).

The Sikh community is tired of everyday discrimination and hate crimes. Sodhi's brother, Rana, said, "A lot of us moved from India after 1984, when Sikhs were persecuted in New Delhi out in the open, we didn't expect those kinds of things from America" (Parvini, 2017). Hate crimes are becoming the norm in American society and we are getting desensitized to violence. There is a lack

of education when it comes to informing the public about hate crimes that occur in America and prejudice that is passed down by generations. In order to fight back, Sikhs are trying to create a balance of educating the public of Sikhism by campaigns and local outreach while making sure that they do not condone attacks on Muslims. They want to make sure that they do not bring another religion down while trying to educate the public about the differences between the two religions.

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