

Sikhism in the United States of America: On Cultural and Social Ignorance

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A Misunderstood Religious Community

A survey done by the National Sikh Campaign and Hart Research Associates (NSC & HRA) finds that 60% of Americans do not know about Sikh Americans (2015). When shown images of different Sikh individuals in turbans, very few individuals correctly identified the people in the images as Sikhs (NSC & HRA, 2015). Instead, significantly more individuals labeled the turban-wearing Sikhs in the images as Muslims or of Middle Eastern descent (NSC & HRA, 2015). Additionally, certain survey respondents even admitted to feeling wary and nervous around Sikh individuals who sported turbans (NSC & HRA, 2015). When asked to name a positive quality they associate with the Sikh community, a consequential number of respondents stated that they did not know “enough to associate positive qualities with Sikh Americans” (NSC & HRA, 2015). American Sikhs are an underrecognized community of immigrants who come from India to chase after the American Dream and build a better future for generations to come. Since the earliest immigration of Sikhs to the United States, Sikhs have attained substantial achievements in nearly every field; nevertheless, the religion and culture of Sikhs is still greatly misunderstood by the American public.

Background on Sikhism

Sikhism is a relatively young religion that originated in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent. Sikhism — outside of the Western world and amongst followers of the religion — is termed *Sikhi*. The Sikh religion was founded in the late fifteenth century by Guru Nanak (Discover Guru Nanak, 2019). Guru Nanak is the first of eleven Gurus in Sikhism and is credited for creating the underlying basis of the Sikh religion. Sikhism is the predominant religion in Punjab, India, with nearly 60% of the state following the Sikh faith (SikhNet, 2019). Punjab is the only state in India where Sikhism is the most-followed religion. The population of Sikhs in India is reported to be close to 20 million, whilst the Sikh population in Punjab — specifically — is closer to 16 million (Dopico, 2019). On a global scale, the Sikh population is estimated to be approaching 30 million (Dopico, 2019). Despite the aforementioned statistics, Sikhs make up merely 2% of India’s ever-growing population, which currently stands at 1.4 billion. Moreover, Sikhs only comprise 0.38% of the total world population (Dopico, 2019). Statistics — relating to the Sikh population on a global scale — reveal a significant observation: Sikhs are minorities in both the Western world and the Eastern world.

Sikhs in the United States of America

The first Sikh immigrants to have come to the United States of America can be traced to the 1890s. These individuals came “to work in the lumber mills of the Pacific Northwest, in the farms of California, and to build the railroads that would connect America” (SALDEF, 2019). In 1912, despite continued violent efforts by the government and other California residents to impede development, the first Sikh place of worship was built in Stockton (SALDEF, 2019). In 1923, a Sikh man — Bhagat Singh Thind — fought against the many laws that were set in place to prevent people of Asian descent from becoming naturalized citizens. Sikh immigration to the United States was fairly inert until 1965 when the modification of federal immigration laws occurred (Sidhu, 2019). Currently, the United States of America is home to approximately 500,000 Sikhs (Singh, 2021). Sikhs have been an integral part of American society for nearly 130 years; therefore, being culturally knowledgeable about the Sikh religion and culture is owed to the American Sikh community.



Beliefs of Sikhs

Gradual growth over the past 500 years has allowed Sikhism to become the fifth-largest world religion (Discover Guru Nanak, 2019). Sikhism is a monotheistic religion that believes in one eternal, omnipresent, all-knowing, and formless God (Singh, 2018). Waheguru is the name used in Sikhism to speak of God. As mentioned earlier, Sikhism was founded upon the principles taught by Guru Nanak during his lifetime. The term Guru can be more readily understood in Western society as meaning “messenger” or “prophet.” The first ten Gurus of Sikhism are spiritually enlightened humans, whereas the eleventh Guru is the ever-living Guru Granth Sahib — the Sikh holy book. It should be recognized that amongst followers of Sikhism, the Guru Granth Sahib is more than a sacred scripture. The Guru Granth Sahib was to be regarded by Sikhs as “the eternal Guru” after the passing of the tenth Guru (SikhiWiki, 2019). The reasoning behind this belief is rather simple: The contributions made to the Guru Granth Sahib by the Gurus and other saints are eternally relevant.

Identities of Sikhs



The turban is perhaps the most identifiable aspect of the Sikh individual's appearance. The appearance of a Sikh is meant to be unique for good reason — to stand out amidst a crowd and to represent one's faith with the utmost pride. The turban signifies many teachings of the Sikh faith: an individual consciousness, a united front, devotion, love for oneself and others, spirituality, peace, equality, self-respect, and courage (Sidhu, 2019). Furthermore, the turban — referred to by members of the Sikh faith as the dastar — is also worn to protect one's unshorn hair or kesh. Sikhs are not to cut their hair for two primary reasons: out of respect for the way that God created humans and the belief that hair acts as a "spiritual antenna" (Sikh Dharma International, 2018). Although the turban serves as a highly important feature of the Sikh identity, it has — in the present day — become a marker for hate crimes and discrimination against the Sikh community (Sidhu, 2019).

Conclusion

Ignorance about the American Sikh community has led to the occurrence of multiple unfortunate events. After 9/11, violence against Sikhs saw a dramatic rise. One of the first victims of a fatal hate crime against Sikhs — after 9/11 — was Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was specifically targeted for wearing a turban (SALDEF, 2019). On August 5, 2012, a man killed six and wounded four Sikh worshippers at a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin (SALDEF, 2019). Many unconscious biases are formed against Sikhs simply due to what they look like and what they wear. The average American has little to no knowledge of the Sikh religion and the culture of Sikh Americans. It must be acknowledged that the only cure for ignorance is knowledge. The potential for cultural and social improvement amongst those who are uneducated about the Sikh population is limitless.

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