

Sikhs under attack, defend their Religious Liberties

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Sher Singh with a lawyer in a Providence, R.I., court, had faced weapons charges for carrying a small knife. Many Sikhs carry *kirpan* as religious symbol. Under attack, Sikhs defend their religious liberties. Hate crimes and profiling issues have beset them since Sept. 11, 2001. But Sikhs rally to inform fellow US citizens about their faith.

Sher J.B. Singh, a young Sikh American, can at last feel vindicated in his battle for religious expression - a fight that began the day after Sept. 11, when authorities abruptly yanked him off an Amtrak train under a cloud of suspicion that he might have aided and abetted radical Islamic terrorists. Though it became clear right away that Mr. Singh had no involvement in the plot, his ordeal did not end until Nov. 2001, when the city of Providence, R.I., dropped charges that he had been carrying a concealed weapon. The weapon: his kirpan, a knife many Sikhs wear as a symbols of their faith in God.

Ignorance: Singh's case, along with at least 200 post-Sept. 11 hate crimes directed at other Sikhs, shows how little many Americans know of the world's fifth largest religion, which has no connection to Islam. But Singh's eventual victory - and the involvement of people of other faiths in a letter-writing campaign to ask the city to drop the charges - also signals Americans' willingness to stand up for religious liberties in the face of groundshaking events such as the Sept. 11 attacks.

"We appreciate that the city acknowledged that Sikhs are part of the society and recognized that our *kirpan* is essential to us," says Singh, a telecommunications engineer.

The past year and half have galvanized the US Sikh community with 300,000 adherents, its leaders are working to educate the US public and to enlist authorities to ensure that Sikhs' religious rights are not trampled upon by investigators, airline personnel, or hate-motivated individuals.

Perhaps because of such efforts, incidents of bias and harassment have begun to abate, says Amardeep Singh, legal counsel for the Sikh Coalition, which has joined other Sikh organizations in urging federal agencies to address hate crimes and profiling issues. Still, these times have been harrowing for Sikhs. Earlier, for example, Swaranjit Kaur Bhullar, a San Diego woman, was at a crossing when two men on a motorcycle pulled up next to her car and stabbed her, saying, "This is what you get for what you've done to us." She was saved when another car drove up, and attacking the men fled. In

Seattle, October 2001, a Sikh man was beaten with a baseball bat. Firebombs were thrown into a Cleveland temple. Earlier on Sept. 15, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a father of three, was killed outside his gas station in Phoenix, in what police stated was clearly a hate crime.

Sikhs have experienced "a double whammy", says Amardeep Singh. "We share the same threat all Americans face about terrorism, but then there is the fear from within - that fellow Americans may not think we are a part of them. "Many Sikhs, like myself, were born and raised here, read aloud the Pledge of Allegiance in school, played Little League or had soccer moms. We're Americans," he says.

The US Justice Department is taking the offences seriously, contacting Sikh groups daily to learn of any new incidents. "The government has been very good at investigating crimes, but we haven't yet seen an indictment," Mr Singh adds. Four Sikh groups had met with Transportation Secretary, Norman Mineta about profiling issues at airports. Even after passing through metal detectors without problems, some Sikhs have been told to remove their turbans for detecting concealed weapons. The turban holds in place long, uncut hair, another symbol of commitment to an ethical lifestyle. Worse still, one man was forced to fly with his head bared, consenting only to reach his elderly father, who was gravely ill.

Global Religion: Sikhism, a religion of 22 million adherents, originated about 500 years ago in India's Punjab region. According to Sikh sources, the faith's founder, Guru Nanak, received a revelation that countered the beliefs of the day. He rejected the caste system and the inferior status of women, and taught one supreme and universal God who is gender-free, all-pervading, and eternal. In Indian society, an individual's name reveals his or her caste, and Sikhs were freed from the caste system by having all men incorporate "**Singh**" in their names and all women, "**Kaur**". Sikhs who commit to living by the ethical code of conduct, can be initiated into the Khalsa (saint-soldiers) who wear turban and carry the *kirpan*, as well as other symbolic items. "To deprive us of wearing it would be like telling Jews they can't wear their yarmulke," says Inderpreet Singh of the New England Sikh Study Circle.

Another case involving a Sikh carrying his *kirpan* at John F Kennedy airport is pending in New York. Some US courts already recognize the religious nature of the knife: In 1995 in California, a Federal court said students could wear *kirpans* to schools if the knife is sewn to the sheath. In a 1996 landmark decision, an Ohio judge stated, "To be a Sikh is to wear a kirpan... It is a religious symbol and in no way a weapon."