

Post Sep. 11, 2001

Reflections of a Sikh in the US

*Hardarshan Singh Valia**

* *Hardarshan Singh Valia is a Sikh who lives in Highland.*

I stand out in a crowd because I wear a turban. I belong to Sikhism, the fifth-largest religion in the world, whose adherents are easily recognized because they keep unshorn hair and cover their heads with a turban.

However, coming to America as a student many years ago from India and thrown as one ingredient into that big melting pot slowly changed all that. I was gradually made aware that I did not look different.

It seemed that this amazing river carried its entire load to respective destinations without any discrimination with regard to color, shape, size and density.

Whether amidst the coal miners of West Virginia discussing Matewan or the capacity crowd in the Soldiers Field contemplating loudly on the validity of calls made by coach Mike Ditka, I was an indistinguishable part of the mainstream America.

But on Oct. 17, in the sprawling parking lot of a supermarket all that changed with the speed of lightning. Four youths, approaching a young black woman, harassing her loudly and, thereafter, directing the chants of "Osama, Osama" to me, pierced my heart swiftly. Suddenly, the security blanket that America had provided me for all these years was burning in flames.

My bruised mind was running wild, alongside that of the young black woman who was a total stranger to me.

Everywhere I turned, I saw attitudes like those in Morena, India, in 1984, where my three cousin brothers and an 80 year-old uncle were being lynched and burned alive just because two Sikhs had assassinated Indira Gandhi and my relatives happened to be a handful of unfortunate Sikhs aboard the Chattisgarh Express train.

But this time the images were superimposed with the images of bloody lynching of Mary Turner, circa 1918, in Valdosta, GA.

Then, suddenly, I realized I was a Sikh born to attract and conquer challenges catalyzed by the presence of long hair and turban. I saw myself walking in slow motion amidst the mad rush of the shoppers of the strip mall.

So today, I do mourn for the thousands of innocent lives that perished in the World Trade Center while earning their livelihood.

Today, I do pray for all the people who are black, white, yellow and brown, the colors that were meant to adorn the canvas of life. May these colors not be used as labels for human segregation.

But today, I solemnly remember the heroes who represent the pages of everyday life from Sept. 11, 2001, of earth's biblical volume.

I pray that Americans, with their childlike hearts and giant shoulders, will protect the Founding Fathers' wisdom and not deviate from the slow, painful, yet courageous journey towards liberty, justice and equality for all.