

Sikh Stereotyping in the US: Looking Forward

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STEREOTYPING IS A COMMON experience everywhere. It means forming a standardized, oversimplified mental picture of members of a group. Certain fixed or general traits are attributed to all its members without regard to individual qualities. This tends to eliminate the need to know them as individuals. They are placed in a group and assigned its stereotyped characteristics.

Negative opinion formed about a group without knowledge of adequate facts is termed prejudice. Holding a person or group responsible for a particular problem and their consequent isolation is making them a scapegoat. The public's reaction in such a situation may result in the group's harassment, intimidation, even being subjected to vandalism and violence. If the Officialdom buys into the same sentiment it can result in profiling or selective screening of the group.

Media, especially TV, are major contributors in generating and reinforcing stereotypes. In some cases this may be done deliberately due to the personal predilection of the reporter, or as symbolization of editorial slant, or to sustain continued interest in the story. In other cases it could be an unintended by-product of the unfolding of an episode. We all use comparisons like the good guy vs. bad guy; organized vs. untidy; peace loving vs. militant, etc to drive home a point. These comparisons if used consistently, associated with a group, can create and reinforce a stereotype. A telling example in the US is that images shown of the poor are 62 % blacks - unsympathetic pictures of young, working age and not sick or old – whereas 29% of the poor are actually blacks.

STEREOTYPING OF SIKHS: Stereotyping is not a new experience for the Sikhs. Those of us who grew up in India, the examples of Sikh stereotyping in the home country would be plentiful. We all liked the stereotype of the brave martial race, chivalrous, unpretentious, always-willing protector, etc. We grudgingly laughed at our caricatures and being made the butt of several jokes. We looked on indulgently if the TV and the movies often projected Sikhs as taxi or truck drivers, dhabha owners, unsophisticated in dress, eating habits and so on. We also did continue to blow life into - and sustain the image of - saber-wielding, intolerant militancy. We lived through, however resentfully, being branded as terrorists, selectively subjected to intense discrimination, profiling and even organized harassment, vandalism, physical violence and killing.

For the Diaspora, moving to foreign lands had its own pluses and minuses and subjected Sikhs to varying sets of stereotypes in different societies. The awareness that certain stereotypes lurked in the American mind was not altogether missing on Sikhs. I had myself written in an article published in 2000 that there was, and continues to be, a need for the American community to know more about Sikhs, that Sikhs are mistaken for Afghans, Arabs, Iranians by many, and that these images are nurtured by what one sees in the media. Sikhs as a community had [an undefined] stereotype of militancy and orthodoxy in an environment of apathetic ignorance about each other's faith at the societal level.¹

Post-September 11, there have been pretty widespread incidents in the US, of harassment, intimidation, vandalism and violence against Sikhs. They also became the victims of profiling, as evidenced so vividly by their being selectively subjected to intense security checking at airports, on highways, bridges, etc. The first major study of bias crimes in the U.S. after Sept. 11 terrorist attacks “Backlash: When Americans Turned on Its Own,” by the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium found that 96 percent of 243 incidents of violence that were documented targeted South Asians. ‘In more than half of the incidents, the targets were Sikhs, whose men wear beards and turbans in accordance with their religious beliefs, making them similar in appearance to terrorist leader Osama bin Laden’. One of the two murders documented in the study was that of a Sikh man in Mesa, Arizona.

These have awakened Sikhs to the dangers inherent in negative stereotyping, and Sikhs, both in the US and in India, have voiced concern at the surfacing of this hate. Even if it is granted that the stereotyping, profiling and commitment of hate crimes against Sikhs may have been the result of mistaken identity, the larger question of their image in the public mind and sensitivity of the average American to what Sikhs and Sikhism are about is wide open. Also thrown open is the question of Sikh response to profiling.

A RETROSPECT OF SEP 11, 2001: To develop a coherent picture of what, why, etc. of this experience, we will start with that fateful day and go back and forth. That morning on Sep 11,2001, I was tuned into NBC as I was dressing up, waiting for the local news and weather at 8:55a.m. It took me a while to realize that the local news did not come on and Katie Couric was continuing talking to somebody about some earlier air accidents involving aircraft crashing into buildings. Then she seemed to be on phone with a woman who suddenly was shrieking – there is one more and it just came in straight and hit the other tower. I woke up from my reverie and realized that I was perhaps watching something terrible unfold. The rest, as we all know, is history.

Later, that morning, my son in law, while driving to work in New Jersey, possibly felt uneasy enough to call and ask my daughter to call me and suggest I should not go out – things don’t look good. I was going to attend the plenary at a seminar by Connecticut Inter-faith Network for Ageing at 2 p.m. and, in spite of my wife’s gentle attempt at persuasion, I did go. The atmosphere was somber. Finished, I drove straight home. In the evening I talked to my brother who told me that his son was in Lower Manhattan for a meeting which got cancelled and, returning, he could sense the uncomfortable glare and physical distance kept by co-passengers – weird, sort of made you feel unwanted, scary. Similar feelings were articulated by a number of other Sikhs [and maybe Muslims, Hindus —] who happened to be in the Manhattan area that day.

HAZARDOUS DAYS: The shocking realization of the risks that the Sikhs faced dawned slowly in the days following Sep11. On Sep12, a Sikh was searched by the Police in Providence, RI, because of his looks fitting the suspect profile and arrested for carrying a concealed weapon – a euphemism for *kirpan*. By the late evening news his handcuffed image was all over the TV news channels. Watching the news on Fox, alarm bells went up in my mind that given the charged atmosphere, these images could create suspicion about Sikh association with the Laden terrorist group and expose them to grave danger. I called Fox channel in the morning and protested

about the manner in which the incident was reported. They responded and their reporter, Lynn Jolicoeur came over to interview me at home later that morning, and I was on the 10 o'clock news that night with Fox explaining that Sikhs wore turbans as a part of religious observance and Lynn putting the reportage in perspective. **That was the beginning for me of a sustained and hard campaign for the next several weeks to get out and seek the media, community and State's political leadership's support to project the Sikh response to a grim tragedy and articulate some thing about Sikhs and Sikhism. So did many others in various other places.**

GROUND-SWELL OF SYMPATHY: The response was very reassuring. Governor Rowland and State Senate President Kevin Sullivan accepted my request to join us at the Gurdwara in prayer and to assure the congregation that the State will do everything to protect Sikhs against hate crimes. Several of my colleagues, who had worked with me earlier, called. As I returned after offering the prayer at the Connecticut Inter Faith service on Sep 14th, one of my old associates called me and said that he heard the service on radio as he was traveling and was sure that it must have been my voice he heard. He was very solicitous about the safety of family and friends. Rev Dr. Davida Foy Crabtree of United Church of Christ, Connecticut Conference, specifically came up to me after a meeting and asked that I should not hesitate at all if any among the Sikh community needed help, shelter. The Archdiocese of Hartford offered their good offices. One of our friends from the neighboring town of Avon, a widow herself, sent me a letter offering her house, board and lodge for as long as needed by any Sikh who felt threatened or unsafe. Several people who had seen me on the TV accosted me during my walks or in the shopping center to enquire how the things were with the community members. By and large the response of the community was generally one of understanding.

TELEVISION IMAGES: To explore this subject we will look at some of the samples of reportage that we have been getting and if there is something to learn there. The TV did do some sympathetic reporting on Sikhs across the country. Suddenly, Sikhs had become visible on the TV screen, an experience very different from their pervasive neglect especially by the electronic media. The Sikhs also were eager to get their message out in face of risks the community was exposed to. In this setting the TV sought out several Sikhs, especially the youth, did a great job appearing in vigils, discussions, town meetings and so on. There were others who took time to just go and sit in shows like CNN's "Talkback Live", and were seen on the TV screens as a part of the social milieu of this country. Some TV programs threw in a Sikh image in their kaleidoscope of American faces that left a positive impression. I myself either followed up with, or was asked by, other networks in the following couple of weeks and made several TV appearances, both live and recorded, on CBS, NBC [thrice], CPTV [thrice], and again on Fox a couple of times. That phase now seems to be over. Things are back to where they were so far as Sikh images on the TV go – they are not there.

PORTRAYING SIKH PERSONA: *Time*, New York did a small feature explaining, with illustrations, the distinctness of styles of Sikh, Iranian and Afghan turbans and that 'Sikh turbans, the only ones that denote a religion, are worn in part to cover uncut hair.'² They again showed a turbaned Sikh grieving over the dead body of his daughter killed by gunmen in Kashmir.³ Another issue carried a picture of a Sikh

wearing a turban sporting American National colors. The statistics below told of 143% increase in number of bias incidents against Asian Pacific Americans – significant being that both portrayal of the turban with American flag print and the face symbolizing the target of bias is Sikhs.⁴

Frances Taylor did an excellent piece in the *Hartford Courant* of 12th Oct⁵. The portrayal was sympathetic and vividly brought out the fears and anxieties of Sikh youth in schools, at campuses, at work and in homes.

San Jose Mercury News of Nov 10, 2001 carried an article entitled ‘Demystifying Turbans’, by Lisa Fernandez. The reporter painstakingly and in a sympathetic manner explained significance of turbans in Sikhism. Pictures were plentiful with detailed comments taking up over a full page of the newspaper.

FRACAS IN FREMONT GURDWARA: Her recent coverage of events at Fremont Gurdwara⁶ however shows up the darker side of our corporate life everywhere – the Gurdwara politics. Lisa tried to put a positive spin on the fact that the Gurdwara Committee had to ask Fremont Police to be at hand to ‘monitor a highly contentious leadership election debate, an event that has drawn violence and bloodshed in the past’. But she went on to say that ‘not only did the SWAT team and intelligence officers come armed with guns, earphones and riot-gear, they were culturally prepared too. Officers who went inside the Gurdwara covered their heads with white bandanas. They took off their shoes’. The unsavory part however could not be swept under the spin – she calls the proceedings a ‘yelling match — fist-shaking and shouts—’ and she also did not miss out that the meeting was held on Easter Sunday, indicating Sikh insensitivity to the religious importance of the day to the bulk of members of the force. Her mention that ‘in 1996 — Sikhs had to read their holy scripture 101 times – a seven month task – because, in part, their temple was defiled by the police officer’s shoes’ only politely leaves unasked the question if shouting, yelling inside the holy precincts is any the less defiling. The story continues on Apr 26,02 with her report that the battling Sikh factions are headed to court — ‘Versions of this same fight – in the form of fists and lawsuits – have been formally going on since at least 1996, when court ordered an election — members can’t agree if a valid one has ever taken place –.

NEGATIVE IMAGES: Another similar report dated Dec 24, 2001 in *South County Journal* said that ‘a man was stabbed yesterday afternoon at a Sikh temple at 5200 Talbot Road, Renton. The fight involved three men. The temple – which has an estimated 5000 members – has had problems in the recent past with violence. Neighbors in the area said they often hear celebratory gunshots and see fights.’ Police from four neighboring towns came to the help of local police for investigation.

Lisa also devoted more than a full page to the tradition of *Langar* in another story. She explained the tenet, its origin and purpose and brought out the generous Sikh contribution of money and voluntary effort to keep the institution going. The suggestion of potential altruistic benefit from the tradition in American setting made by the spokesperson seemed far-fetched.⁷

Two conclusions stand out from the above – one that the reporters cannot explain away a bad story [Fremont/Renton] and, second, that any subtle positive linkage [langar-altruism] has to be identified, developed and convincingly articulated by the Sikhs before any friends in the media can project it.

UNWISE INDIAN RESPONSE: The news emanating from India and disseminated here is not particularly helpful to promote a positive Sikh image. An AP photo [Prakash Hatvalne] release datelined Sep.13, 2001 from New Delhi (also carried on the Yahoo News) shows a group of Sikhs burning an effigy of Bin Laden in protest against Sep.11 incidents. The demonstration demanding extradition of Laden was held near Pakistan High Commission! The image is a stark exhibition of the group reveling in their pursuit of setting the effigy ablaze. The questions are why burning, why by Sikhs, why in front of Pakistan High Commission? It was a somber moment. The Americans were in grief. A violent demonstration was the last thing they needed as an expression of support. Compare the image in *Hartford Courant* around the same time included in 'The Sweep of Emotions: reactions' showing a group of Buddhist priests in prayer entitled 'Compassion: prayer for the suffering'.

Another similar image was of Sikh activists being held back by Delhi Police on Mar 1, 2002, post Gujarat incidents. The caption in *India Tribune*, Mar. 9, 2002, said: " – as they scream anti-Muslim slogans"—— carrying sign reading "don't repeat the mistakes of Partition." Again it is an aggressive display on a somber occasion with provocative slogans and gestures by Akali Sikhs – not Congress, Communists, TDP, DMK, or even BJP.

Aziz Hanifa reported in *India Abroad* [Apr 12, 2002] that Sher JB Singh, whose handcuffed image was beamed worldwide, was honored by the State of Virginia, where he lives, by asking him to offer Sikh prayer to open the Virginia Senate session. Abraham Thariath reported that 'Mayor Bart Peterson proclaimed "Rangeela Punjab" Day on Mar 23 and Khalsa Day on Apr 14 in Indianapolis, in recognition of the involvement and contribution of the Sikh community in the social, cultural and economic arenas of the city'.

WHAT CAN BE DONE: The brief review so far would give an indication of the nature of problem, its dimensions and consequent challenge. We do recognize that numerically we are very small, possibly half a million in over 250 million. Even though being a small minority is not a new experience for us, our numbers in the US are almost ten times less favorable than in India and we are dealing with a mainstream community that knows very little about us. Besides our resources are very limited. These ground realities are a challenge, but need not discourage us. Hopefully, the negatives of our stereotype are superficial and wider dissemination about us and our faith should help neutralize these.

WANTED: A POSITIVE PROJECTION: For one thing we must guard against our propensity to generate negative images. Significantly, we invariably expose ourselves in adverse light [also our best some times] when we are in a group. We can be visibly rough, loud and unorganized. This is partly a cultural trait. With some collective recognition we can convert this behavioral tendency to portray a positive – warm, welcoming, happy image.

The hopefully helpful part is that media is always looking for stories with human interest. Sharing real life experiences– good and bad that have a message; generally gets an empathetic viewer/reader reaction. We should however remember that the attention span of people is short and to stick the message must be brief, clear, positive and reinforced by our other real life images. In my experience even the fairly receptive are content with some discourse concerning our values, beliefs,

observances and ceremonies. History, reasons for observances, why's and why not's etc. are only for those who want to know more. The imperative is to reinforce positives, create relationships with media, academia and other groups engaged in social intercourse and progressively direct our altruism to the benefit of larger American community – even if it is symbolic.

We must not neglect or passively accept profiling. In the absence of strong watchdog groups and given our weak internal communication, we will perforce have to handle such situations on our own. I have found talking to inter-faith groups helpful. The Church Organizations and the Jewish Federation are always ready to lend their support if the cause is genuine. Call your Congressman/Senator/State rep, and if you and most of the Sikhs in the area have been casting their vote [no matter for whom], they will listen. But if you are an honest taxpayer alone, forget it – they know that those who don't vote don't decide who gets elected.

I am not suggesting an aggressive media blitz or expensive lobbying. This need is for all time; not a one time project. We must use our limited resources effectively so that we can support this activity on a continuing basis. We must remember that the image we create will be a reflection of how we relate with the society.

In the heat of the aftermath of Sep 11, one of my younger friends had written to me of his frustrations in trying to get the message out. I am reproducing some extracts from my reply because in some ways they provide a summation:

“Got your mail. You are doing a wonderful job. Do not get discouraged if you find that Americans know so little about Sikhs. We are a very small number in the country and even though we are the fifth largest faith in the world, most of the people, even in the media with whom I interacted in the last few weeks, did not know anything about us. That says something for our PR both here and internationally.”

“This is going to be a major task. We have to reach out to the hearts of people. We must be seen to be involved with the community at large and participate in interfaith and multi cultural activities. We must develop positions on contemporary social issues based on our faith teachings and articulate them. There is so much more that must be done - we have not even begun. This work will have to be done by other volunteers but, to be successful, they must have access to community and cooperation of Gurdwaras. That is not easy. Even after all our shared experience, I was the only Sikh at a major inter-faith event last week, and that possibly because I was on the panel and presenting a paper. I must have asked at least 25 people and given out brochures!”

“So take it as your mission - not because Sikhs may be at risk but because Guru Nanak spent more than 20 years of his life spreading his message of love and prayer to places as far apart as Arabia, Bengal, Tibet and Sri Lanka. People should know more about Sikhism because its message is so universal.”

CONCLUSION: We do have a problem here. We are small in numbers in the American society and our resources are limited. Our identity is distinct, but our chosen posture seems to be reclusive. Ignorance about us is pervasive.

The silver lining is that this experience has made us realize that this secluded isolation is not helping us. It has challenged us and several of us have come forward to speak for and present a different face for the community. Many of the images we

presented were earnest, informed, articulate, and received empathy. We also found out that not only the viewers but the media also know very little about us. Our own positions also were not a picture of clarity based on a shared understanding of the teachings of the faith. But we did what we could, and that is what matters. We have to keep at it for this is the way life is, has been and will continue to be. Each one of us has to share in this task, not as *seva* but as a necessity, and let us hope that any good that comes out is abiding!

References

1. See 'Inter-religious Conflict – Can Dialogue Help? ' in Dec 2000 issue of *Studies in Sikhism and Comparative Religion*, New Delhi.
2. See Headgear 101 in their Notebook Section, Nov 01, 2001.
3. 'The Agony.' *Time* Jan 14, 2002.
4. 'For the Record' section p.33, Mar 18, 2002
- 5 6 & 7. "An Identity Threatened", D section, *Hartford Courant*, Oct 12,2001, March 31, 2002 and April 13, 2002.