

Think Globally Act Locally

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Are we acting out of desperation or is this the dawning of a new age of awareness? Do we have our proverbial back to the wall?

September 11, 2001 changed us all in more ways than we ever thought possible. But that should not have been the case. Our suffering was much greater in 1947 when thousands of Sikhs were massacred and migrated from what is now Pakistan in the worst of conditions. Another watershed was 1984 when, with the connivance of the Indian ruling class, thousands of Sikh men, women and children were brutally murdered in Delhi.

What has happened to the Sikhs in the United States after 9-11 pales by comparison. One Sikh was killed and over 200 hate crimes against Sikhs - their persons and property - were perpetrated. The difference lies in the fact that in the United States - a country run by laws - we did not expect this. India, on the other hand, is a nation where laws are discriminatory and are often enforced in a selective, capricious or partisan manner.

So, in the United States we expected justice and promptly appealed to the media and the political institutions to provide it. The establishment responded in an exemplary fashion with statements from the leadership that condemned hate crimes and were supportive of the Sikh- Americans. Clearly, much still needs to be done. And much is being done. It is these thoughts that occupy me today.

Targeting and profiling of Sikhs continues much as the war in Iraq does. But even after the war ends, targeting will likely remain because of mistaken identification and perceived needs of American security. How have we responded?

Our first gut reaction has been to raise oodles of money and take out ads in newspapers designed to distance ourselves from Arabs and Muslims. This is understandable though not a very forthright, humane or sensible response with significant longstanding benefit.

Our other major activity has been to seek meetings with high profile leaders in the political establishment and explain who we are or why we should not be tarred with the brush of suspicion. The results have been excellent. President Bush has spoken publicly in our support, as have Attorney General Ashcroft and FBI Director Mueller. Leon Minetta, the Secretary of Transportation, has drafted and issued guidelines to help Sikh travelers meet the needs of national security without being subjected to highhanded intrusive searches. Several Sikh organizations - Sikh Coalition, Sikh Communication, SCORE and SMART, for example - primarily staffed by young Sikh technocrats who are largely products of this culture worked, sometimes in concert sometimes at loggerheads, to make these things happen.

Don't misunderstand me. These efforts are excellent and much needed. But equally important are some other areas in which our activities are somewhat sporadic and haphazard but are perhaps equally vital to our survival and dignity in this country. Think for a moment. When I go away for a few days, who watches over my home? Not the police usually but my Greek neighbor across the street. Who waters my plants and collects my mail? My Jewish neighbor who lives next door. If I feel safe in my home it is because of my neighbors. If someday I feel threatened or someone bums my house down, it will be because of the collusion of those who live in my neighborhood or because my neighbors choose to look away.

It is this level - the smallest local unit - with its impact on our lives every day that our community has neglected. At a personal level, or as a community, we have built very

few bridges with our neighbors. We may break bread with them occasionally but we haven't visited them in their places of worship, nor have we invited them into ours. Our gurdwaras do not stock reasonably well-written, attractively produced, simple and brief literature that we could share with them. Our polite neighbors hesitate to ask why we look the way we do and about our life style, and we have never offered them any clue. (As is sometimes said in jest, in polite company one does not talk about religion, sex, money or politics.)

I am reminded of one Sikh friend - a physician in Chicago - who opened communication with the local interfaith group after destruction of the World Trade Center. He encountered one grand old man after his presentation on Sikhism. The man looked at the Sikh and pointedly asked, "You say your people have been here for about 100 years and you yourself came to this country 30 years ago, why is it that you are coming to us only now? Why didn't you become our good neighbor thirty years ago?"

It was a good question but the fault is not entirely ours. In the small towns of America it is common for the neighbors to welcome new arrivals into a community with a "*welcome wagon*" - gifts of fruit and flowers, etc. I wonder how many Sikhs were so welcomed. Perhaps the established communities ignored the new arrivals and vice versa. Yet the grand old man had a point. We are often oblivious to our duty to the community in which we live. Between our jobs and homes, our gurdwaras, *Bhangra* parties and Bollywood movies, **we often forget that we now have a home and a new community. We often live in a community but do not always belong there.**

Meeting political bigwigs is all very good and even in America will produce the right bureaucratic noises and memos. It may even make the right policy. But ultimately it is the low-level civil servant or the minimum-wage employee who pushes the policy buttons, and he may not understand our imperatives because our interaction with him, and his ilk, has been absent. Without his willing and ready greasing of the gears the bureaucratic machinery freezes up. **In any army the soldiers in trenches and foxholes fight the battles, not the armchair generals.**

Our gurdwaras are basically neither **proactive** nor appropriately **reactive** to most situations that face the community. Usually by the time they try to act the crisis has passed but they are absolutely great at fund-raising. On this matter of profiling of Sikhs, too, they have been true to their tradition.

There is a shining silver lining though. We are waking up a little late from our slumber but are not entirely unmindful of local needs and local concerns. Our young people particularly, both at the organizational level and individually, are moving fast to cover lost ground. I point to their initiatives to meet local Police personnel at the precinct levels. They have initiated blood donation and an occasional feeding of the homeless. They have sponsored candle light vigils and kept local Sikh politicians from hogging the show. They have stood outside shopping malls and train stations to hand simple and small brochures on Sikhism to thousands. Young people are visiting local synagogues and churches. They have developed and utilized media contacts most purposefully. The gurdwaras and their managements have provided woefully limited financial support - but little else.

The crisis that energizes us will soon pass and our memories are short. I am hoping that we do not forget what motivates us now. We need to keep telling the larger community that surrounds us that we are your new neighbors. Yes, good fences make good neighbors, but good fences allow and foster communication and do not shut off one from the other. Our neighbors need to know us and we need to know them. Even the most local action has global implications.

To act effectively, we need more, not less, smaller locally based organizations of Sikh community activists whose concept of community is broader than a collection of Sikhs. But then we need some central clearing house, not so much to design policy, but more to keep all the smaller units in the loop.

I had first heard the adage “Think globally but act locally” in some political campaign years ago and had laughed it off as being of little consequence. Now I see how true it is.

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