

Finding a voice for Sikhs in USA

Works to correct Misperceptions about Religion

*Daniel P. Jones**

** The writer is a staff report of the "Hartford Courant" published from Farmington, Connecticut, USA. Sr. Nirmal Singh has been a prolific writer on moral and cultural issues. This sketch was written a couple of years ago when Sikhs in USA were victims of mistaken identity.*

FARMINGTON — Nirmal Singh doesn't like to talk about the hot August day in 1947 when he saw the full fury of what religious hatred can do.

The 71-year-old Farmington resident even chose not to mention the experience in his just-published book about Sikh spirituality and the place of Sikhs in contemporary America. India was being partitioned along religious lines, and tensions had boiled into bloodletting. Muslims in India were desperate to achieve an exclusively Muslim Pakistan, while Hindu and Sikh families, such as Singh's in Pakistan, were equally desperate to reach the safety of a secular, if truncated India.

He was a boy on a train. The train was stopped and he stuck his head out a window to get a breath of fresh air. There, outside the train, Muslims were rounding up Sikhs they had forced from the train and on mass stabbing them to death.

A Hindu woman who was a friend of the family stashed the boy and his siblings in a bathroom in the train compartment, and pretended when Muslims came knocking that she too hated Sikhs and would be the first to hand them over if she saw any. The ruse worked, and Singh's life was saved.

After the train reached India, he saw what he believed was a Muslim man being beaten on a station platform. The presumably Hindu people around the man had taken off their shoes and were using them to bludgeon him to death.

About a million people were killed in the violence unleashed by the partitioning of India and mass migrations.

Nirmal Singh went on to become - successively - a colonel in the Indian army's corps of engineers, a business executive in the health care industry in Connecticut and a management consultant and educator.

What Nirmal Singh observed as a boy has influenced the way he looks at people to this day. Active in Connecticut's interfaith movement, he and his wife, Veena, frequently attend multifaith conferences and prayer services. Last year, on the one-year anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, he offered one of the prayers at an inter-religious memorial service at the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford.

"It did leave that instinct in me," Singh said of the massacre he witnessed, "to get involved in an activity that brings people together in inclusiveness, because hatred can cause so much damage and suffering and pain, and it doesn't do anything to solve problems."

After the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, Singh quickly realized that Sikhs were grievously being mistaken for Muslims and being negatively stereotyped. Sikhs tend to be noticeable. As part of the observances of their faith, the men do not cut their hair and they wear turbans.

He offered himself to the media as a Sikh spokesman. But he felt pained, he said, at having to define Sikhs in terms of what they are not, when he and other Sikhs cherish a message of universal brotherhood that was first spread by their religion's founder in the 15th century.

About 500,000 Sikhs live in the United States. Sikhism is the world's fifth-largest faith, with about 22 million followers, mostly in India.

There are also populations of Sikhs in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Malaysia, Thailand and parts of east Africa.

Singh's book - it was published in March by Sanbun Publishers in New Delhi - was partly a response to the stereotyping of Sikhs he observed after the Sept. 11 attacks. But it was also an outgrowth of the interfaith discussions he and his wife have been involved with in recent years in Connecticut.

The book is called, "Exploring Sikh Spirituality & the Paradox of Their Stereotyping in Contemporary American Setting." While it is not sold in America yet, Singh hopes to have it available on amazon.com sometime soon.

It is aimed at Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike. But one of his aims is to get Sikhs to make themselves known in society, to help debunk stereotypes and educate Americans about the faith.

"Whilst I look at the phenomenon of stereotyping, my message is really to the Sikhs, and I am telling them again and again that we are small in numbers, our resources are limited, our identity is distinct, but our chosen posture seems to be reclusive," he said. "Ignorance about us is pervasive."

For non-Sikhs, he said, the book's message is that the tenets of the Sikh faith are universal.

"I want people to try and see it, and become aware," Singh said. "It's a very progressive faith, a very inclusive faith, and one that encourages social responsibility."

Those who want more information about the book or from Singh can reach him at 65 Lido Road, Farmington, CT 06085, or at 860-673-6381.

□