

## **Sikhs in California win battle for Gurdwara**

In what has been a mixed week for Sikhs in the US, the community has won a long-drawn battle to build a Gurdwara in California. But, then, in a seeming revival of hate crimes directed at the community since 9/11, a Sikh man been stabbed and, in another incident, a Sikh flag has been burnt down in an act of vandalism.

California, home to a large settlement of Sikhs, finally saw the curtains fall on a four-year battle with a US federal appeals court in San Francisco, upholding the right of the Sikhs to build a Gurdwara in Sutter county.

It had also become a test case for free expression of religious traditions in which the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a non-profit law firm, had filed an amicus curiae on behalf of the Sikh community.

“This resounding victory for the Sikh group has nationwide implications for a wide range of cases dealing with religious land interest and it will echo especially loudly in California,” a spokesman of the law firm said. The appeals court slammed the county authorities for improperly blocking the community’s bid to raise the Gurdwara, terming it a violation of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalised Persons Act. The county’s action, it said, had imposed a substantial burden on the Sikh community’s religious right in the US.

The Guru Nanak Society of Yuba City had first sought permission to build the shrine in a residential area, which was denied by the county planning board on the ground that neighbours had objected to the plan. The group then acquired land in a rural zone, but was again refused permission, this time the cited being disorderly development.

While Sikhs across the US have hailed the verdict, the celebratory mood has been cut short by two other developments in the West Coast. In California’s Santa Clara, a Sikh man was stabbed in the neck by a youth with a steak knife. The attacker suspected the victim, Iqbal Singh, to be a member of the Taliban in yet another case of mistaken assumption that Sikhs are followers of Osama bin Laden because of the turban and beard they sport. “We Sikhs are the most targeted for hate crimes. People don’t understand who we are. They associate us with terrorists. This hate is driven by ignorance,” said Gumeet Singh, brother-in-law of Iqbal Singh, who has been admitted to hospital with serious injuries.

A few days earlier, a Sikh shrine in neighbouring Oregon witnessed an attack, with unidentified vandals uprooting the flag post (*khanda*) and burning the religious emblem. The recurring incidents of selective attacks have prompted Sikh bodies to organise summer camps for Sikh youths to spread the message of what the religion stands for among the population at large. One such camp was organised in Maryland, on the outskirts of Washington, last month.

