

It Takes a Massacre: The Sikhs are Really Americans Now

By Harold A. Gould

When the news came out that an unidentified gunman had murdered five members of the Sikh faith within the confines of their temple in a Milwaukee suburb, most Americans, and even most members of the press, had no accurate idea of who and what the Sikhs are. Media reporters could not pronounce the community's name properly, calling them Sikks rather than Sikhs (pronounced *seeks*). Because Sikh men traditionally wear turbans and beards, and their women traditionally wear *saris* or other native garments (like the *salwar kameez*), most ordinary Americans assumed that Sikhs are some kind of Muslims, which means they had not the slightest clue as to what their customs and religious beliefs actually are. At most they probably knew that Sikhs are originally from some part of India, who came to this country, God knows how and when, as immigrants of some kind. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney called them *Asheiks* (a Muslim term) instead of *Sikhs* (the name of their non-Muslim cultural community).

However, now that Sikhs have died at the hands of a psychopathic racist bigot displaying a Nazi Swastika and using a gun, which the NRA and the Gun Lobby are implicitly responsible for putting in his hand, the American press and general public now can finally pronounce their name correctly and are learning that Sikhs, like so many other immigrant communities, are in actuality a national treasure who are respectable, industrious, educated contributors to the American Dream, who practice a religion which, albeit originated in India, promotes peace, tolerance, integrity and love; and under normal circumstances there is not an ounce of fanaticism or extremism in their doctrinal bones.

Yes, it took a massacre to make it clear that the Sikhs are one of us. This is something that has happened repeatedly among the ethnic communities who have come to our shores and been gradually woven into the fabric of American life. Think of the violence that was inflicted upon African Americans, the Irish, the Italians, the Chinese, the Japanese, *etc., etc.*, before they took their place in the mainstream of society. Because in the end the cruelty and violence perpetrated by the ignorant bigots in our midst eventually produced a public backlash which resulted in the victims receiving the welcome, respect, understanding and social justice that our Constitution guarantees and inspires.

In short, it seems that ultimately it took a massacre or two to awaken the mainstream public to the fact that an injustice had been done here; that one more immigrant group had been knocking at our cultural door for a long time and deserved admission to the main event, access to the American Dream.

This has now happened in the case of the Sikh community who has languished in comparative anonymity for more than a century; quietly enduring the prejudice and indignities that go with ignorance-driven minority status.

The longevity of their wait is actually being commemorated in Stockton, California, on September 22nd even as we speak. This is when the Sikh community gathers under the auspices of the *Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society* and the *University of the Pacific* to

commemorate the 100th anniversary of this society and, of course, the migration and assimilation of Sikhs as well as other South Asians into North American society.

This was a process which began at the turn of the century after a smattering of the Sikhs who were serving throughout East Asia in the British imperial armed forces discovered= Canada and the United. The smattering of demobilized soldiers who formed the vanguard came mainly from farming backgrounds in the region of India known as the Punjab; they saw the opportunities which the fertile land and the bustling economies of the Pacific coast offered, and soon their numbers grew; and with this, of course, came the racism, as resistance to their presence emanating from the already established White communities intensified. Confrontations mounted, such as the 1907 riots in Bellingham, Washington, the *Komagata Maru* incident= (the refusal to allow a shipload of Sikhs to disembark in Vancouver in 1913-14), the founding of the *Ghadr* Party in the U.S. in 1913, the San Francisco conspiracy trial in 1917 (which sent Taraknath Das to prison), until in the end the combined mobilization efforts of South Asian Indians in the U.S. led to immigration and citizenship rights by 1946.

But despite these achievements, Sikhs have never been recognized fully as equals in the the American civil community. That is why Wisconsin happened. Their lot has been compounded by the terrorism frenzies which have flowed from 9/11 and the backlash from the Afghan war and the myriad manifestation of Islamic extremism emanating from the Middle East. But the racist prejudice has always been there, as has been true of other ethnic communities. According to an article in the Palm Beach Post by Toni-Ann Miller, The New York-based Sikh Coalition has reported more than 700 hate crimes in the United States since Sept. 11th, plus thousands of complaints from Sikhs about workplace discrimination and racial profiling.

My point, however, is that the Wisconsin massacre will, indeed has already, injected a higher measure of public consciousness and contemplation into the presence and nature of the Sikh community in this country. The murder of innocents on a significant scale is different than an individual killing, much as the latter is in its fundamentals no less tragic and heartbreaking than the former. Put another way, it takes a massacre, i.e., collective suffering, to focus the mind and this is the case for the American Sikh community. **The public is now conscious of them as never before, aware of their majesty, their magnanimity, their civility, and their worthiness to be an accepted and honored part of mainstream American society. The public will know them more and better because they have suffered and sacrificed more.**

Indeed, sad to say, it takes a massacre! Henceforth, as one Sikh has put it, We want this opportunity to pretty much educate everyone around us... We are not al-Qaida or Taliban because some of us wear turbans... We are other Americans just like you.

I would welcome any comments. halgould22554@gmail.com