



From Stockton to Oak Creek: A Sikh century in United States

The Sikhs began to arrive in California at the turn of the 20th century. Mistakenly labeled as “Hindus,” they were seen as a threatening harbinger, a “tide of turbans,” washing down upon the shores of the Pacific. In their first decade, their numbers slowly increased and they incorporated the first Sikh gurdwara (“temple”) as “The Sikh Assembly of the Pacific Coast,” in Stockton, California, on May 27, 1912.

Working within a context of hostility towards Asian immigrants, the Sikhs had to navigate their way through a maze of racial and legal discrimination (Alien Land Law, 1913, Asiatic Barred Zone Act, 1917, and Oriental Exclusion Act, 1924). Having evolved as a small religious minority in India, they were well equipped to face such difficulties. They retreated and left when the threat seemed insurmountable (Bellingham, 1907); sought legal redress when available (United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 1923); and in moments of utter despair took justice into their own hands (Pakhar Singh v. Victor Sterling, Imperial Valley, 1925). Predominantly male, Sikhs made their living on the railroads, in the lumber mills and agricultural fields of the American West, and by the 1920s

achieved a degree of success with agricultural holdings spanning tens and thousands of acres in California.

Opportunities for Sikhs further developed when immigration laws changed in the late 1940s. One outstanding achievement was the election of the first Sikh American, Dalip Singh Saund, to the House of U.S. Representatives from California’s Imperial Valley (1957-1963). With the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, the foundations were laid for a significant increase in numbers, and over the past half century, the community has grown to include approximately 350,000 people; from one gurdwara in the first-half of the century there are now over two hundred gurdwaras adorning the American landscape.

At the turn of the 20th century, the first Sikhs in the United States were mistaken as “Hindus,” and it is a historical irony that in post-9/11, they have been misidentified as Muslims.

Ever since the world was inundated with images of Osama bin Laden and his ilk, the turbans of the Sikhs have been confused with those of the Taliban. As a re-

sult, a number of hate crimes have exacted a toll on innocent Sikhs, and community representatives are awkwardly forced into emphasizing the fact that “Sikhs are not Muslims.”

Furthermore, a large number of Sikhs had come to America in the 1980s seeking protection from political persecution in India, and

now that many of them have become proud American citizens, they have been targeted in their adopted homeland for incomprehensible reasons with eerily familiar outcomes.

The shooting at Oak Creek is culmination of the relatively difficult decade following the attacks of September 11, 2001. How does the Sikh community respond to the Oak Creek tragedy? It may be useful for them to consider that what happened last Sunday was part and parcel of the spiral of mindless violence that the nation has encountered at Columbine, Virginia Tech, Arizona, and Aurora. This time, a gurdwara happened to be drawn into this vortex but this site could have been a synagogue, a mosque, or any public place.

In any case, from a small two-storeyed building in Stockton

in 1912 to a 17,000-square-foot gurdwara in Oak Creek in 2012, the Sikhs have created a unique century of history in the United States. These places of worship reflect the aspirations of the Sikhs, as well as their acceptance, in their newly adopted homeland. The Sikhs have their version of “destroyed temples,” and “murders in the cathedrals,” but their historical response to these tragedies has been of gathering the ashes, washing the floors, rebuilding the knocked down walls and domes, and moving forward.

Memories of the attack on the Darbar Sahib, the holiest Sikh shrine, in 1984 are an indelible part of Sikh history, and with the shooting at Oak Creek, Sikh American history has become an indivisible part of the larger trajectory of Sikh history.

While we are all living in the midst of this difficult historical moment, Sikhs will take solace in their daily prayers. During the special services in American gurdwaras today, they will pray for the welfare of all (sarbat da bhala). This is the very nature of the Sikh prayer.

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