

GUEST EDITORIAL

KALA SEPTEMBER

CRISIS AND RESPONSE AMONG AMERICAN SIKHS

Major events and looming dangers have helped shape modern Sikhism. The Singh Sabha movement, the 1919 Punjab disturbances and the drive to take over Punjab shrines and key Gurdwaras, the 1970s and 1980s political and religious crises leading to Operation Blue Star, and the *Kala* (Black) November attacks on Sikhs—all produced new institutions, fresh dynamics in Sikh public life, and led to intellectual and social debate. The events of September 11, 2001 similarly have produced immediate and long-term problems in various Diaspora settings, but especially in the US.

The challenges arising from terrorist attack and public response differs from other crises confronting the Sikhs. First, the devastating attacks led to hundreds of incidents involving Sikh individuals and organizations. The initial police strike against perceived terrorist involved an innocent Sikh, Sher Singh, who was seized because of fear and his Khalsa appearance. The first casualty involved the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi in Mesa, Arizona. Similarly, a Sikh doctor, Manmohan Singh, experienced a harrowing series of arrests and harassment on his long journey from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Illinois. Throughout North America the Sikhs came under attack in taxis, public settings, and in religious institutions. Secondly, the events demonstrated the gross ignorance of many Americans about the nature of Sikhism, with public statements ranging from “*seize people with diapers on their heads*” to the linking of turban and beards with the image of Bin Laden. Thirdly, the earlier militant record of some Sikhs came back to haunt the community, with Sikhs being identified with terrorist activities on national news programs, with resulting debate over the wisdom of keeping pictures of recent “martyrs” or militants in prominent places within gurdwaras. Finally, underlying much of the story has been the instant communications that linked Sikhs and helped frame their response. Websites and the Internet both contributed to Sikh solidarity and served as a source for division and the reappearance of perennial disputes.

The following comments are based primarily on newspaper and website accounts, particularly the documents and comments in the *Sikh Diaspora* (SD) network. The events and implications continue to unfold daily, but at least two major themes run through much of Sikh public response.

First, the community has mobilized dramatically to address many issues and persistent threats. Secondly, as in the past, trauma and real or perceived danger has generated fresh attention to Sikh identity that has been expressed in looking inward at Sikh thought and practice as well as outward toward relations with other groups and within America as a whole.

Within a week of the terrorist attacks, the high level of education, political savvy, and strategic sophistication that characterizes Sikhs in America created an almost instantaneous network of new or invigorated organizations and facilitated communication. *The Sikh Media watch and Resource Task Force* (SMART), websites such as *Sikh Coalition and Sikh Communications*, and other valuable resources have addressed immediate and long-term issues. Most recently, for example, the arrest of Sardar Makhan Singh in an arrivals building at JFK airport in New York received immediate attention and led to swift intervention and a successful defense of the *kirpan* as a legitimate religious symbol (*Sikh Coalition message*, November 7). Several organizations have circulated important guidelines to Sikhs about travel, current Department of Transportation rules, and practical methods of handling intrusive and illegal interference with travel. The *Sikh Coalition* sends out almost daily reports and detailed suggestions, *SikhNet* has issued informative material (such as the four page memo, October 9, on security issues and Sikhs), *SikhMediaWatch* tracks stories and sends out news on DOT meetings.

On another front, several organizations keep records of specific incidents involving Sikhs and circulate that information (*Sikh Coalition* has detailed and accessible background on over two hundred events), while *Sikh Communications* has an ongoing list of newspapers and television reports on Sikhs and Sikh culture. There are numerous hotlines for reporting such events.

Press relations, influencing public opinion, and in general, familiarizing the American public with Sikh history, culture, and involvement in local events also has been a major concern. A major theme in the first weeks after September 11, on various chat rooms and especially Sikh Diaspora (SD), was American ignorance of Sikhism and mistaken identification of Sikhs with terrorists. The first response involved

floating various public relations campaigns including hiring expensive PR consultants, but that gave way quickly to a variety of more effective and localized efforts. Sikhs have participated fully in marches and mass meetings such as in New York City, worn signs such as **“I am a Sikh, God Bless America,”** and made loyalty and support for American themes in either one-day events or in the case of Yuba City, a four day festival around the first of November. News programs and journalists have been contacted, with prominence given to Sikh culture and loyalty in a variety of programs such as ABC, NBC, NPR, and through the work of local editorial writers (exemplified by *“Understanding Turbans”* an article in the *Seattle Times*, October 2). Sikhs have given lectures, met with local officials, and even set up training programs for police and officials at airports (examples in *Sikh Media Watch* press release October 26; *Sikh Coalition Community Advisory* November 8).

Realizing that information alone will not suffice; Sikhs quickly have mobilized in an increasingly sophisticated effort to influence politics at every level. In Los Angeles, for example, Sikhs involved a local sheriff in a rally at Gurdwara Vermont, at which he urged Sikhs to join the LC County Sheriff’s office as volunteers or uniformed officers, and said that the turban and beard would not hamper their chances (*Sikh Communications*, September 26). In states such as Rhode Island, where Sher Singh faced criminal charges after summarily being taken off a train by a Swat Team, Sikhs mobilized effectively, got the charges dropped, and then urged letters of gratitude to officials involved in the dismissal (*Sikh Media Watch*, November 2). At the national level, various organizations have coalesced to meet with the President, the Attorney General, and the Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta. They also have condemned knee-jerk, anti-Sikh comments by officials such as Congressman Cooksey, who talked about those with *“a diaper on their heads”* as fitting a profile of terrorist (Cooksey quickly apologized). The Congress responded with a resolution specifically condemning attacks on Sikhs and showing respect for their traditions and citizenship, followed by the Patriot Act of 2001, which incorporated discussions and documents condemning anti-Sikh crimes and calling for protection of their civil liberties (*Sikh Coalition*, November 3).

The overall sense of *“Sikhism in danger”* that generated mass mobilization, improved communication with other Americans, and political involvement also fostered a renewed examination of Sikh tradition and issues involving identity and history. These often lie below the surface of much discourse

but become public in times of crisis. One clear theme involved relations with Muslims. A concerted effort to differentiate Sikhs from Muslims opened up old debates over Sikh-Muslim relations, such the nature of the much earlier Sikh-Afghan War or Sikh responses historically to calls for *Jihad*. Warnings of Muslim men converting and marrying Sikh girls appeared sporadically. Most recently, at least some Sikhs in England reportedly have been associating with the British National Party (BNP) in its efforts to “expose” Islam and drive Muslim immigrants from the country. The summer riots involving Muslims and the BNP in Bradford and other places has become a major issue for the BNP, which wishes to resettle non-whites back in their country of ethnic origin. What actually comes of such a real or imagined alliance remains to be seen, but it has stirred great debate among Sikhs (see, for example, messages on SD during the first two weeks of November).

A second theme is a perennial issue, **who speaks for Sikhs?** Although rivalry between groups and organizations claiming to represent the community has been downplayed in a time of crisis, at least in Sikh Diaspora, Khushwant Singh’s article, *“Mistaken Identity,”* in the *Wall Street Journal* (October 12th) drew both sharp support and criticism. Although the article clearly differentiates Sikhs from Hindus and Muslims, Khushwant did say Sikhism grew out of a branch of reformist Hinduism. This led to sustained questioning of his morals, literary and historical career, and most importantly, whether he was a good Sikh and had any legitimate right to be on center stage as a representative of the *panth* (dozens of messages, *Sikh Diaspora*, October and November).

An associated and more comprehensive element of self-examination by Sikhs involved Sikh identity. References to pride in Sikhs such as Dalip Singh Saund and Ujjal Singh Dosangh playing a key role in U.S. and Canadian politics, for example, drew stinging rejoinders that **“real Sikhs”** (i.e. *Kesadhari* or *Amritdhari*) should be highlighted. Soon the discussion of the interaction of politics and Sikhism became themes, accompanied by discussions of recent history, the role of *Sants* in Sikh tradition, corruption, Gurdwara politics, and so forth. While most of the websites continued to focus on specific legal matters or current events, groups such as Sikh Diaspora debate specific or general aspects of Sikh identity.

A re-examination of such matters will contribute ultimately to a greater understanding of issues and alternative approaches and thus will strengthen the

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community and its public institutions (messages, *Sikh Diaspora*, end of October-November 11). On the other hand, as has been noted by others in the network, this potentially leads to a diffusion of energy and in-fighting that may have at least a negative short-run effect on mobilizing the Sikh community as a whole.

Balancing concern over identity and the nature of Sikh tradition with concerted and unified programs to help the community as a whole has been a persistent problem for Sikhs over the last century, especially in times of crisis. Within the Diaspora, the additional variables include adaptation to other cultures, maintaining what is vital in terms of tradition and ethnicity, and achieving maximum results from institutional and public efforts. Just as American life will never be same after the *Kala* (Black) September 11, so Sikhs beyond Punjab now have become engaged in debate and initiatives that will influence life in the Diaspora for years if not decades to come. The outcome is not certain, except that the concerns of Sikhs in the Punjab and those in the Diaspora will continue to diverge. Ultimately the intensification of threats and challenges to Sikhs in non-Punjab settings will strengthen the dynamism of Diaspora Sikhs and put them at the forefront of helping to define and strengthen Sikhism as a major component of world religion and multicultural life.

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