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Honors English 10

2 April 2023

Sikh Americans after 9/11

Sikhism, which was founded by Guru Nanak Dev Ji in the Punjab region over five hundred years ago, is today the fifth largest religion in the world. A large Sikh diaspora exists within the United States—Sikhs started coming to the United States in the late 1800s and have since established tightly-knit communities in areas like Yuba City, New York City, and Sacramento (“The Sikh Coalition”). Sikhs have maintained a physical identity that makes them particularly conspicuous—most notably, Sikh men wear turbans and keep long, unshorn beards, and many Sikh women wear head scarves. Due to widespread societal ignorance, Sikhism is often confused with Islam due to the resemblance with turbans traditionally worn by Arab males. The attacks of 9/11, carried out by al-Qaeda, an Islamist extremist group, unleashed a wave of misdirected Islamophobia toward Sikhs across the United States (“9/11 Memorial & Museum”). Examples include bullying and assault in schools, workplace discrimination, and hate crimes. Most horribly, the hate-driven murders of Sikh individuals, as well as the desecration and shooting of Sikh Gurdwaras, significantly impacted the Sikh community. In September of 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi, the owner of a gas station, was shot by a white man who arrived in a pickup truck, justifying his crime on the grounds of patriotism. By a Yale law professor’s estimate in 2004, as many as seventeen more Sikhs, Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians died in a similar manner after 9/11 (Kaur). Not only were Sikh individuals the victims of hate—Sikh places of worship were also targeted. On August 5th, 2012, seven Sikh worshippers lost their lives as a

white supremacist yielding a semi-automatic handgun arrived at the Sikh Gurdwara in Wisconsin and began shooting (“Sikh Temple of Wisconsin”; “The White House”). In the wake of these attacks, instead of breaking apart as a community, Sikhs came together to stand up for themselves in the face of oppression. In response to the tragic violence and hate crimes following 9/11, Sikh Americans responded by forming organizations to advocate for Sikh rights, helping to create a legacy that embodies the values of Sikhism and continues to motivate Sikh advocacy efforts today.

The devastating effects of 9/11 helped lead to the formation of Sikh advocacy organizations, most notably the Sikh Coalition and the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (“SALDEF”), dedicated to protecting the Sikh community. The Sikh Coalition was founded by a group of volunteers on the night of September 11, 2001, in a moment of national emergency. The goal of these volunteers was to take a stand against the civil rights abuses that Sikh Americans faced in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. This organization has since transformed into the largest Sikh American advocacy and community development organization in the US, providing legal, policy, and community development support to more than 500,000 Sikh Americans (“The Sikh Coalition”). SALDEF is another important organization for the Sikh American community. Originally founded in 1996 as the Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force (SMART), the aims of SALDEF changed drastically in 2004 in response to the pressing threats facing the Sikh American community post-9/11—namely, civil rights, legislative, employment, and accommodation issues. SALDEF worked tirelessly to address the issues faced by the Sikh American community during this time and continues to carry out its mission today by focusing on legal defense and advocacy, educational outreach, and media relations (“SALDEF”). Sikh Coalition and SALDEF are groups

that emerged initially as grassroots, volunteer-driven organizations, responding to emergency situations faced by the Sikh community. Their mission statements—to advocate for Sikh American rights, spread Sikh values, as well as support rights for other minority communities—continue to influence Sikh advocacy movements today. For example, the work of such organizations has inspired the creation of organizations like We are Sikhs, as well as motivated grassroots, youth-based initiatives to bring more visibility to the Sikh community. The mobilization of the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF following 9/11 shows how the Sikh community took positive action to protect their rights.

Sikh values drove, and continue to drive, the efforts of Sikh advocacy groups. Important Sikh values include *chardi kala* (high spirits), forgiveness, *seva* (selfless service), *nimrata* (humility), *sangat* (community), and *sarbat da bhala* (for the welfare of all). *Chardi kala* is the idea that no matter what difficulties come one's way, one should remain in high spirits and confront challenges with optimism. After the shooting of the Gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, the Sikh community insisted on coming back to the Gurdwara to clean it themselves. Every year since then, the community has held a memorial to honor the victims of the hate crime. Despite the atrocity of the crime, the event bears the words *chardi kala*—eternal optimism—a message that emphasizes the resilience of the Sikh community in the face of hardship (“The White House”). Forgiveness is another critical value that Sikhs strive to follow in their daily lives. A line in Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the holy scripture of the Sikhs, states, “ਫਰੀਦਾ ਬੁਰੇ ਦਾ ਭਲਾ ਕਰਿ ਗੁਸਾ ਮਨਿ ਨ ਹਚਾਇ” (*farida bure da bhala kar, gusa man na handa*). This translates to “forgive others for doing wrong unto you, and do not harbor anger in your mind.” This approach is demonstrated in day-to-day interactions following 9/11; one such example was at the Sodhi convenience store. Four teenagers entered the store and shouted, “Bin Laden, go back to your

country!” to Lakhwinder Sodhi, who was running the gas station. Instead of retaliating, Sodhi handed them a brochure that explained the Sikh religion, and the teenagers apologized for their ignorance (Anton and Glionna). In this situation, Sodhi forgave those who were rude to him and responded to the situation by spreading awareness to fight ignorance. Furthermore, *seva* is the Sikh value of selfless service, and is tied closely to the value of *nimrata*, or humility, and *sangat*, or community. *Seva* can be seen through the many individuals who volunteer at the Sikh Gurdwara, cleaning the halls, preparing and serving food, and washing dishes. Prior to 9/11, Sikhs did not engage in large-scale community service outside the Sikh community. 9/11 led to the proliferation of new Sikh community service organizations to demonstrate to the larger population the values that the Sikh American community stands for, counteracting widespread ignorance that associated Sikhs with terrorists. For example, Sikhcess is an international organization founded in 2007, and it has since conducted numerous public service projects, such as meal programs, health fairs, and education programs, both in the United States and in areas of the world struck by disaster (“Sikhcess”). Conducting such projects not only helped serve the community but also spread awareness of the Sikhs. Finally, the Sikh value of *sarbat da bhala* means “for the benefit of all.” Sikhs believe in the unity of all of humanity and in praying not only for themselves and their families but for everyone in the community (Singh). This is shown in how the Sikh community stood with other oppressed groups, such as Muslims, who were significantly targeted post 9/11, in addition to advocating for their own rights. For instance, Sikhs marched in solidarity with Muslims in demonstrations against hate crimes in the years following 9/11, and Gurdwaras across the United States continued to open their doors to Muslim Americans and other targeted individuals to provide them with food and shelter (“United

Sikhs”). These examples demonstrate how deeply-held Sikh values drove Sikh Americans’ response to 9/11.

Building upon Sikh advocacy efforts that directly followed 9/11, Sikhs continue to advocate for their rights today. They carry out this advocacy in multiple ways—examples include continued efforts by large organizations at the government level, Sikh youth leadership opportunities and youth-based grassroots organizations, and efforts to promote Sikh awareness among the general public and improve Sikh visibility in the media. SALDEF and Sikh Coalition continue to advocate for Sikh American policy interests. The Sikh Coalition policy priorities document of 2020 outlined important goals for the year of 2020, such as including the Sikh perspective in the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, recruiting Sikh staff members to Congressional offices, recognizing Vaisakhi as an observed holiday for the Sikh community, creating safe and inclusive classrooms, reducing hate crimes, and ensuring equal employment opportunities for Sikhs (“Sikh Coalition”). Actions like including the Sikh perspective in White House initiatives and recruiting Sikh staff members to congressional offices are important because they help to bring Sikh representation to the halls of power to effect changes through legislation and governmental programs. Furthermore, proposing Vaisakhi as an observed holiday is important to increase awareness of the Sikhs, helping the larger American public recognize the Sikh community and what it stands for. Reducing ignorance will in turn help to reduce much of the hate-driven violence toward Sikh Americans. SALDEF also carries out important work at the level of government by maximizing Sikh American advocacy power with national and state-level surveys, research reports, and collaboration with policymakers (“SALDEF”). These programs provide policymakers with concrete data on Sikh Americans’ circumstances today so that they are better poised to address the issues of Sikh Americans.

SALDEF also provides a way for victims of hate crimes to report such incidents and find legal support (“SALDEF”). By helping victims of hate crimes receive legal aid, SALDEF is able to help bring justice to Sikh Americans, a historically disadvantaged group, in the American court system.

Bringing youth into leadership spaces is another critical way in which the Sikh community is increasing its presence today. For example, the program SikhLead nurtures, develops, and trains the next generation of Sikh American leaders through internships, skills training, and leadership training. Its Washington DC division partners with congressional offices and federal agencies to provide internship opportunities for college students (“SALDEF”). Programs like these are important because they help encourage Sikh youth to pursue careers in government and public service to bring more Sikh representation into government. Jakara is another important Sikh youth group. Originally founded in 2000, the Jakara organization evolved into a full-scale movement in 2005. This California-based initiative focuses on community building and youth empowerment in the Sikh community. To do this, it hosts conferences, camps, and other events that promote leadership development and Sikh identity, as well as brings together Sikh American youth from different backgrounds to collaborate to address issues in education, health, and social justice (“Jakara Movement”). By creating a space in which Sikh youth can discuss ideas on how to address key issues of social justice and work together to bring these ideas to fruition, this program is both helping to effect direct change in society as well as to inspire the next generation of Sikh leaders that can carry the torch of advocating for the Sikh community’s interests.

Increasing Sikh American visibility, both through educational resources and media representation, is another important tool to counteract widespread ignorance of Sikh Americans.

For example, We Are Sikhs is an initiative of the National Sikh Campaign, and its goal is to educate Americans about Sikh communities and values. To carry out this mission, We Are Sikhs collaborates with PBS to create public service announcements that depict interactions between Sikh and non-Sikh children. These short segments explore common questions that people have about Sikhs, such as why Sikh men wear turbans, why Sikhs do not cut their hair, and why Sikh boys and girls have the last names “Singh” and “Kaur,” respectively. These small announcements, which air during the commercial breaks of popular children’s shows like Calliou and Sesame Street, help educate non-Sikh children, from an early age, about the physical identity of Sikhs and their core beliefs (“We Are Sikhs”). Additionally, efforts by the cartoonist and advocate Vishavjit Singh are critical to increasing Sikh Americans’ visibility. Through his comics platform, Sikhtoons, Vishavjit Singh strives to increase Sikh representation by making Sikhs the main characters of his cartoons, helping Sikh Americans seem more relatable to the general public. He also works with creatives like filmmakers, documentary creators, writers, and nonprofit groups on projects to expand the cultural and educational landscape in America, providing educational resources and tools to help increase awareness of the Sikhs and spreading Sikh values like fighting hate with compassion. For instance, Singh worked with Monisha Dey, a filmmaker, to produce the short film *Turban Fever*, which describes the racism Sikh Americans faced in the aftermath of 9/11 (Singh). These initiatives are critical in transforming the mindsets of the American people, helping to stop hate-driven violence from the source.

The dramatic consequences of 9/11, including widespread bigotry and hate, can still be seen affecting the Sikh community in profound ways, including school bullying, discrimination in employment, religious profiling, and hate crimes. However, the positive spirits of grassroots change and advocacy spurred by these attacks are still present today and continue to grow

stronger. With values like *chardi kala*, *nimrata*, and *seva* driving members of the Sikh community, Sikhs seek to bring positive change to society. Organizations like SALDEF and the Sikh Coalition continue to press for Sikh interests at the local, state, and national levels, as well as offer legal services to protect Sikh Americans' civil liberties. In addition, the increasing involvement of Sikh youth in leadership opportunities, as well as their desire for grassroots change, continues to have a substantial influence on tackling issues like school bullying and representation. Sikhs continue to expand their presence in media and literature, bringing their experiences to the eyes of the larger American public, helping to counteract ignorance and inspire real change. The reaction of Sikh Americans to the post-9/11 hate crimes is important to study because it demonstrates how in a time of crisis, a community came together to fight violence with peace, ignorance with wisdom, and hate with compassion. The grassroots efforts of Sikh Americans demonstrate how the power to bring change resides within us—when people come together, dedicated toward a common goal, they can bring about a significant positive impact, despite the large obstacles that they might face along the way. People can accomplish much more together than they can on their own.

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