
‘I’m An American’

By Jerome L. Sherman

“I take pride in who I am,” says Gurpreet Singh, “and I’m an American.”

Ever since he first stepped on Queens soil 9 years ago, Gurpreet, 24, has had that sense of pride, a belief in the values of his adopted homeland – grounded in freedom and equality – where he can practice his religion, Sikhism, unhindered.

The last year and half, however, has strained his ties with the American dream, even though the Richmond Hill resident is now officially a citizen of the United States.

Following September 11 terrorist attacks, Gurpreet’s fellow citizens started casting suspicious looks at the deep black of his full beard and layered turban, symbols of the Sikh religion.

Across the country, Sikhs have become the targets of a rash of bias crimes. One was murdered in Arizona only a few days after 9/11. They are often confused with Muslims, even though there are significant differences between the two religious groups.

“It’s the land of the free and the brave,” said Gurpreet. “But I don’t feel as free anymore.”

He used to regularly take the subways and trains. But constant stares from other passengers made him uncomfortable, and now he prefers to drive.

On occasion, a passerby on the street will yell at Gurpreet, calling him a terrorist, or using more explicit language.

Gurpreet's early experiences in the United States could not have been any more different. At the age of 15, he left his native Punjab, India in 1994 with his family.

"There was no hesitation," he said. "It was a cool thing at the time."

His father, Aiani Hardev Singh, had come to Richmond Hill two years before and was serving as a priest at the local gurdwara, a Sikh house of worship.

Although he had reservations about leaving behind a close-knit circle of friends in India, Gurpreet soon found a place for himself in his new country. Richmond Hill's almost 40,000 Sikhs - the largest Sikh population in the eastern United States - had a firm support network in place for recent arrivals.

Gurpreet also already had a strong command of English, having studied the language at a young age. He was able to immediately enroll as a junior at Richmond Hill High School.

And he quickly began to appreciate the freedoms of American life.

"I saw similarities between Sikhism and the American way of life," said Gurpreet, who studied computer science at Queens College. "Everyone is equal, and everyone has the same opportunities."

Despite his young age, he was old enough to draw comparisons between Queens and India, where the majority Hindu population has long discriminated against Sikhs.

Thousands were killed in India during the early 1980's, when government troops stormed the Golden Temple of the Sikhs - a period known as the "Sikh Holocaust."

The scars from those years are visible in the Richmond Hill community. A short while ago, Gurpreet was spending time with a group of friends at a gurdwara on a Friday evening. When they left, the group found "Granny," grandmother of Gurpreet's friend, Anshu, sitting and waiting on the steps of her home. She had lost a son during the turbulent 1980's in Punjab, and she could not bring herself to go to sleep until all of her loved ones were safely inside.

"She was worried about us," said Gurpreet," even though we were just at the gurdwara."

Despite the aftermath of 9/11, Sikhs still see the U.S. as a haven from the political instabilities of India. But the new, daily difficulties are taking their toll.

Most of his turban-wearing friends have experienced some kind of trouble, says Gurpreet. One was kicked off a plane at JFK airport. Another was stopped and harassed by police officers. Gurpreet himself has been the target of insults on dozens of occasions.

But he does not view this as a rejection of his culture. Instead, he argues the actions are grounded in misunderstandings.

In response, Gurpreet has joined a group known as the "Sikh Americans," promoting general awareness about the tenets of the Sikh religion, which stresses meditating on the name of God, earning a living through hard work, and sharing one's earnings with those in need.

So far, they have organized a number of events to educate the larger public about their religion. For instance, students from a Long Island school recently attended a service at a Richmond Hill gurdwara.

The group has also formed links with interfaith organizations throughout Queen. And gradually, Gurpreet has noticed a drop in comments and stares.

He does have some fond memories of life in Punjab, where he used to spend long, lazy summers on a farm with his cousins, plucking sugar cane.

"Punjab is the breadbasket of India," he said. "The food is wonderful."

Last year, he felt the depth of his connections to his new home. He went to a Brooklyn courtroom with hundreds of other recent immigrants and pledged the American flag, receiving his citizenship.

"I was overwhelmed," he said. "For me to own an American passport - it's a big deal. Wherever I go, I represent America and the values it stands for."
