

Sikhs fight discrimination: More than 600 incidents of discrimination and violence reported

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Facing mounting discrimination since the September 11 terrorist attacks, a number of Sikh-American groups have begun a campaign to explain their religion to the American public and to differentiate their beliefs from those of Muslims.

There have been more than 600 reported instances of discrimination and violence against Sikhs since September 11, according to the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund. Because Sikh men wear turbans in accordance with their religious tradition, they often have been misidentified as Muslims and Arabs, leading some people to believe they are allied with the al-Qaeda terrorist network.

“My son and his friends were so badly harassed just because they [wear] the turban,” said Ladi Kaur, a Rockville, Maryland, woman who owns an auto parts wholesale firm and is a member of the Sikh community. “They are American children with . . . a different faith.”

A monotheistic religion founded 500 years ago in India, Sikhism is the world’s fifth-largest religion, with 23 million followers. The Sikh population in the U.S. is reaching the 500,000 mark, mainly divided between the East and West Coasts.

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and his successors compiled the Sikh scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib. This holy book, whose name means “supreme teacher,” is considered the current and final guru.

The “guru shows you the path to meet God,” said Amrit Pal Kaur Singh, a mother of two and a postal worker in Silver Spring, Maryland. She teaches at the Saturday school of her spiritual center, where classes in Sikh history and religion and the Punjabi language are offered.

Sikh believers wear symbols of their commitment to their faith, including a metal bracelet and a small ceremonial dagger, and have uncut hair, which men keep covered with a turban.

Although the earliest Sikh immigration to America dates from the turn of the 20th century, Sikhs say they are often misunderstood by their fellow Americans. As part of the campaign to change misconceptions by explaining Sikh religion to other Americans, parents make school presentations about their children's identity and films are produced to show who Sikhs are. Sikh organizations are politically involved to voice their concerns with Congress and the judicial system, and a permanent exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution on Sikhism is also helping to make more people aware.

"Discrimination hasn't really decreased at all, it has just changed," said Rajbir Datta, associate director of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, which provides pro bono attorneys to Sikhs. "[Immediately after 9-11] it was violence, murder, aggravated assaults; now [we are being] kicked out of airplanes, out of security points in buildings."

Datta said that only a fraction of discrimination incidents are reported. Besides being profiled at security checkpoints, Sikhs also face discrimination at work, at motor vehicle departments that don't allow turbans to be worn in driver's license pictures and in courtrooms that do not allow hats, including turbans. *-Religion News Service*