

Sikhs remembered for piety, kindness

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People gathered early that fateful Sunday at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin to meditate on God and to serve others—key requirements of their religion. Six of them were fatally shot August 5 as they performed customary acts of prayer and kindness.

A man of habit, Suveg Singh Khattrra, 84, once a dairy farmer in the Punjab region of India, was on hand well before the 11 a.m. service that day. He was accustomed to getting up every morning at 4:30 to watch the news and a live broadcast from India of readings from his faith's holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib.

Then he would catch a ride to the nearby temple in the Oak Creek suburb of Milwaukee, where he would pray and help prepare meals. "Whoever needs to eat can just walk in," said Khattrra's granddaughter, Sandeep Kaur Khattrra, 24. "Nobody ever suspects [strangers] because we have a lot of visitors who watch and observe, and they join us for our meals."

That Sunday, Wade Michael Page, 40, a tattooed army veteran who played in hated-filled music bands catering to white supremacists, killed himself after he was wounded by local and federal authorities responding to the shootings.

Page shot Khattrra, police said. Khattrra's daughter-in-law saw his body in the temple sanctuary as police led her and 15 others out of the kitchen pantry, where they hid from the gunfire.

Satwant Singh Kaleka, 62, ran to confront Page—living up to the Singh name given to most Sikh men. It means *lion*. Gurus have taught for 500 years that the Sikh faithful stand for justice.

Kaleka—president of the congregation he helped to found in 1997 and who helped to build the temple in 2007—was armed only with a small knife. Police said they found it near his body.

It may have been the small, dull knife carried by faithful Sikh men, a symbol of their willingness to defend all without concern for caste or class. Or it may have been a butter knife from the kitchen, which is built next to the prayer hall in many gurdwaras, as the Sikh temples are called.

Every house of worship has people like Khattrra and Kaleka—those who come early and set up the chairs, stack the programs or prepare food in the kitchen for all who are hungry for both God and lunch.

Paramjit Kaur, 41, drove over to Oak Creek from Milwaukee every Sunday to pray and pitch in. She was living up to the Kaur name given most Sikh women. It means *princess*. Her friend, Manpreet Kaur, called Paramjit sweet, outspoken and devoted to her two sons and her faith. Her sons, Harpeet Saini, 18, and Kamal Saini, 20, told CNN that the shooter took their world away.

The Washington-based Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund estimates that more than 500,000 Sikhs live in the U.S., though the actual number may be considerably smaller. Their communities have been targeted by a growing number of hate crimes since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The New York-based Sikh Coalition reports that more than 700 such incidents have taken place since 2001. The question is why.

“The turban is the main issue here,” said Pashaura Singh, a professor of Sikh and Punjabi studies at the University of California, Riverside. “People confuse Sikhs with Osama bin Laden.”

Following 9/11, bin Laden and his al-Qaeda associates were often shown in media reports wearing white turbans. Combine that with a lack of basic knowledge about Sikhs living in the U.S. and you get tragic—and sometimes violent—cases of mistaken identity.

“Numerous reports have documented how those practicing the Sikh religion are often targeted for hate violence because of their religiously mandated turbans,” wrote a group of 92 House members to Attorney General Eric Holder in April. The

House members called on Holder to begin collecting data on hate crimes committed against Sikh Americans.

Rupinder Singh, a California health-care administrator who writes the blog *American Turban*, has heard taunts of “terrorist” and “Osama” as he shops at the mall. “When I walk into a restaurant or an airplane, all eyes are on me,” he said.

But Singh said he would never consider taking off his turban. “It is such a core part of our identity,” Singh said. “I could never imagine separating from it.”

Founded in India in 1469, Sikhism is often confused with Hinduism or Islam, but it is part of neither. The religion teaches that there is one God but many paths to the divine, and it abjures proselytism.

Each of the faith’s ten founding gurus wore turbans, called *dastars*, but it was the last guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who instructed all male members of the faith to wear them. (The requirement is optional for women.) The reasons ranged from political to theological.

Sikh gurus rebelled against India’s strict caste system, teaching instead that people are essentially equal in God’s eyes. Turbans, typically worn by the upper class, should be worn by the lower classes as well, the gurus taught, in order to symbolize that equality.

But the turban is more than a political symbol. Like Orthodox Jews who wear yarmulkes or Catholic nuns who don habits, Sikhs believe that the turban is a visible declaration of humility before God and commitment to their faith.

Out of respect for God’s creation, Sikhs do not cut their hair, instead knotting it each morning and wrapping it in five meters of cloth, which protects the hair as well as the mind, said Pashaura Singh. —*USA Today*/RNS