

Testimony of Dr. Prabhjot Singh

before the

UNITED STATES SENATE

Committee on the Judiciary

on

“Responses to the Increase in Religious Hate Crimes”

May 2, 2017

My name is Prabhjot Singh. I am grateful to Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, and the entire committee for giving me the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am a physician and scientist focused on community health. Alongside my professional work, I have a first-hand education in the impact of hate. I am an optimist by nature, but the last months have felt particularly cruel as stories of pain and hardship have rippled across the Sikh community.

On April 16, 2017, a Sikh cab driver named Harkirat Singh was assaulted and had his turban ripped off by passengers in New York City.¹ On March 3, 2017, a Sikh American man was shot and injured in his driveway outside Seattle by a gunman who told him to “go back to your own country.”² On September 25, 2016, Maan Singh Khalsa -- a Sikh IT specialist in the San Francisco Bay Area -- sustained facial injuries and had his turban knocked off by a group of assailants who also forcibly cut his hair -- which Sikhs are religiously required to keep unshorn.³

Apart from sharing a common humanity and Sikh identity with these three individuals, there is something else I share with them.

On September 21, 2013, I had just dropped off my wife, Manmeet Kaur, and my son, Hukam Singh, who was one year old at the time, before walking with my brother, Karan Singh Dhadialla, to a well-lit intersection near Columbia University. As I passed a group of 20-30 young men on bicycles, I heard ‘terrorist’ and ‘Osama’ from behind as I felt my beard forcefully pulled. I turned around in time to see that the entire group was mobilizing towards me. The group surrounded me and began punching my face and body. As a physician, I immediately knew that my jaw was fractured because I could feel my teeth moving back and forth. Thankfully, bystanders intervened and prevented an even worse outcome. The next morning I had surgery to place a stabilizing plate in my mouth, which remained in place for many weeks

¹ <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/queens/nyc-sikh-taxi-driver-assaulted-turban-ripped-head-article-1.3066567>

² <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/05/us/washington-sikh-shooting>

³ <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-da-charges-sikh-man-hate-crime-20161010-snap-story.html>

even as I returned to work.

A few days after being attacked, I wrote an op-ed that shared how deeply grateful I was, and still am, that my wife and son were not with me. Today, they are here with me, and Hukam is now four years old.

I still think about that evening.

My experience received national media attention, and many Americans opened their hearts to me. I still have a box overflowing with prayer cards from churches nationwide; I cherish the letters from Jewish leaders who shared their experiences with anti-Semitism; and I still remember letters from Muslims who shared fears about their children's safety. I experienced the professionalism of the NYPD's hate crime unit. I was also interested in whether my experience would become part of the FBI's hate crime statistics.⁴

We cannot address what we do not know. None of the headlines during that time mentioned that a recent Somali immigrant, a Muslim who wore a hijab, was also attacked by the same group of young men that evening. They threw a bottle of urine at her face, cutting her nose. I knew this because she was in the stretcher next to me in the Emergency Room. When I asked reporters why they didn't mention it, they said it would complicate the story, which was about a professor and doctor who was "mistakenly" attacked in his own neighborhood. We cannot accept this premise. There is no such thing as a "mistaken" hate crime. No one should ever be targeted. The only mistake is thinking otherwise.

The other two times I was physically attacked after 9/11 did not make the news. In fact, I did not feel comfortable reporting them to anyone but friends and family. At the time, I felt bewildered, disoriented and thoroughly alone. In their aftermath, while finishing my PhD, I struggled with depression, but also found solace in practicing my Sikh faith. Doing so deepened my feeling of pain and compassion, then on August 5, 2012 a neo-Nazi gunman walked into a gurdwara (Sikh house of worship) in Oak Creek, Wisconsin and murdered six worshippers. Harpreet Singh Saini, who lost his mom at the Gurdwara that day, delivered powerful testimony before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee shortly thereafter, and I urge all of you to watch it again.⁵

Anti-Sikh Violence in Context

While it is clear that Sikh Americans are not alone in experiencing a rise in hate crimes, the experience of our community is important to understand how dangerous this current era of inflammatory rhetoric promises to be if action is not taken.

Sikhs began migrating to the United States at the turn of the 20th century but were immediately confronted with xenophobia. In September 1907, Sikh laborers were driven out of the town of

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/24/opinion/do-american-sikhs-count.html>

⁵ <https://youtu.be/epqfRimgQ5Q>

Bellingham, Washington by a violent mob at the height of the nativist movement in what history remembers as the Bellingham Race Riot. Sikhs also became casualties of xenophobic laws that explicitly barred Asians from immigrating to the United States.

More recently, Sikh Americans have been subjected to an avalanche of hatred and discrimination since the 9/11 attacks. These challenges have not abated in the last 16 years.

Although the overwhelming majority of Americans who wear turbans are Sikhs -- and although the Sikh turban is a declaration of Sikh identity, signaling our religious pledge to uphold equality, dignity, and justice for all -- some of our fellow Americans call us “ragheads and towelheads,” or “ISIS and Al Qaeda.” The Sikh scripture -- Guru Granth Sahib -- declares, “I see no stranger, I see no enemy. I look upon all with goodwill.” And yet, tragically, many Americans fail to recognize our common humanity and regard Sikhs as the embodiment of otherness.

Bigotry of this nature has deadly consequences.

On September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi -- an entrepreneur in Mesa, Arizona -- was gunned down in front of his gas station by a man seeking to avenge the 9/11 attacks.⁶

On March 4, 2011, two elderly Sikhs -- Surinder Singh and Gurmej Singh Atwal -- were shot in Elk Grove, California in a suspected hate crime. Mr. Singh died at the scene. Mr. Atwal succumbed to his injuries a few weeks later.⁷

The August 5, 2012 massacre at the Oak Creek Gurdwara took the lives of Satwant Singh Kaleka, Paramjit Kaur, Prakash Singh, Ranjit Singh, Sita Singh, and Suvegh Singh. Several others, including Punjab Singh, received permanent, life-altering injuries.⁸

How pervasive is hate violence against Sikh Americans?

According to Sikh Coalition surveys published between 2008 and 2010, approximately 10 percent of Sikh respondents in New York City⁹ and the San Francisco Bay Area¹⁰ reported that they had experienced assaults or property damage because of their religion. Ominously, the Sikh Coalition has consistently found that a majority of Sikh students in our nation’s public schools experience bias-based bullying and harassment.¹¹ Some of our children are accused of being “terrorists.” Others have had their turbans ripped off.

Given the consistency of violence and discrimination against Sikh Americans over the last

⁶ <http://www.abc15.com/news/region-southeast-valley/mesa/memorial-remembers-mesa-man-balbir-singh-sodhi-killed-in-post-911-hate-crime>

⁷ <http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/crime/article130262474.html>

⁸ <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/9-19-12SainiTestimony.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/pdf/RaisingOurVoicesReport.pdf>

¹⁰ http://www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/pdf/Bay_Area_Civil_Rights_Agenda.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/pdf/go-home-terrorist.pdf>

century. Sikh Americans are as vulnerable as ever to hate crimes. I am particularly concerned about the staggering rise in anti-Muslim hate violence and anti-immigrant rhetoric, which increasingly appears to be tolerated -- even celebrated -- in our political discourse. We seem to be backsliding into a new nativist era. This endangers us all.

The attacks I endured have made me more aware of the broader context of hate in America. It has become a breathtaking and frightening landscape that has surged into view over the past months as Muslims and Jews, Sikhs and Hindus, and African Americans and LGBTQ communities have been subjected to threats, arson, assault, and murder. As a physician, I treat patients with disabilities. I was particularly offended by a hate-motivated attack on a white disabled man in Chicago, who was viciously assailed while in a wheelchair.

Why are these acts of hate growing?

I was horrified to hear our President last weekend telling thousands of people at a rally that immigrants are snakes waiting to bite America.¹² Words matter, and when political leaders divide and dehumanize us, this lays the groundwork for hate to infect our society.

Senators, I urge you to carefully review the written testimony of the Sikh Coalition and other organizations who work on these issues. I also wish to share some recommendations of my own, based upon my personal experience:

Recommendations

(1) Hate crime reporting should be mandatory, not voluntary. We cannot address what we do not know. As a physician, I can attest that mandatory data reporting is crucial when the scope of a challenge is unknown and solutions are urgently needed.

(2) Words matter. Politicians must hold each other accountable for putting their constituents in danger. It seems fashionable these days for politicians to scapegoat immigrants and Muslims, but this endangers all of us. My personal experience with hate violence is a case in point. Please hold each other accountable and make it stop.

Conclusion

Senators, I have two young sons, one year old Vir Singh, and four year old Hukam Singh, who will be quick to say that he is actually four and three quarters old. You see my eldest, Hukam Singh, here today, with his grandfather. I worry about both of them.

My father, who brought us to Michigan from Kenya, currently lives in Indiana and works for DOW Agrosience. My mother is living her life dream of running a successful preschool, a small business that employs a dozen people. You may be surprised to hear that there is a large population of Sikhs in Indiana, which include farmers and long-distance truckers who have

¹² <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/29/trump-rally-pennsylvania-whcd-237794>

moved from California and made their home in the state. They have recently asked for help in managing the rising drumbeat of vandalism to their businesses and violent encounters where they are asked to leave the country.¹³ I fear they won't be heard until something tragic happens.

My son, Hukam Singh, is about to start Kindergarten in the fall. He loves soccer, trains and Dora the Explorer, a show on TV. Like most Sikh boys that keep their hair uncut according to our faith, he will wear a patka, a small piece of cloth on his head. No one on our block treats him differently for it, and they watch over him like he was theirs. But according to the Sikh Coalition, most kids like him will be harassed in school, and as someone who was in his shoes 30 years ago, I know firsthand that I didn't want to talk about verbal or physical assaults with my parents.

These young years are formative, and how children are treated tells us so much about who we are as a nation, and who we aspire to be. One day, I want to talk to him about this hearing, and tell him that on this day, a group of senators looked me in the eye, and said that hate is a problem in America, and that they thought about you as they committed to addressing it openly and honestly.

Senators, I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to share my story with you.

Thank you.

¹³<http://www.theindychannel.com/news/local-news/concerns-over-growing-intimidation-threats-against-members-of-the-sikh-community-in-indiana>