



### **Hal Gould's Corner/The South Asia Region in Global Perspective**

Since 1991, I have been a Visiting Professor of South Asian Studies in the Center for South Asian Studies at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Prior to this, from 1968 to 1991, I was Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana; and for a time Director of Asian Studies at this institution. My career in South Asian Studies began as a Fulbright Student to Lucknow University in 1954-55 where, under the tutelage of Professor D N. Majumdar, I conducted anthropological field work in village communities in Faizabad district, not far from the holy city of Ayodhya. Following completion of my doctorate, at Washington University of St. Louis, in 1959, my research and my life have taken me to every corner of India. After a while, the focus of my scholarship shifted to the study of grass-roots political behavior plus commentary and analysis (see my list of publications) on macro-political trends in the South Asian region; in these capacities over the years I have crossed paths with a wide spectrum of Indian politicians and scholars at every level of South Asian society, including four Indian prime ministers. My wife, Ketayun, is a native-born Indian of Parsi-Zoroastrian descent, a research scholar in her own right, who has published widely in the Social Work field and has over the years held numerous positions in academia.

Dr. Gould has also written six books, including *The Hindu Caste System Volumes I – III* (1988, 1988, and 1991), *Grass-Roots Politics in India: A Century of Political Evolution in Faizabad District* (1994), ***Sikhs, Swamis, Students and Spies: The India Lobby in the United States, 1900-1946*** (2006), and *The South Asia Story: The First Sixty Years of U.S. Relations with India and Pakistan* (2010).

## **It Takes a Massacre: The Sikhs are Really Americans Now**

**By Harold A. Gould**

When the news came out that an unidentified gunman had murdered five members of the Sikh faith within the confines of their temple in a Milwaukee suburb, most Americans, and even most members of the press, had no accurate idea of who and what the Sikhs are. Media reporters could not pronounce the community's name properly, calling them Siks rather than Sikhs (pronounced *seeks*). Because Sikh men traditionally wear turbans and beards, and their women traditionally wear *saris* or other native garments (like the *salwar kameez*), most ordinary Americans assumed that Sikhs are some kind of Muslims, which means they had not the slightest clue as to what their customs and religious beliefs actually are. At most they probably knew that Sikhs are originally from some part of India, who came to this country, God knows how and when, as immigrants of some kind. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney called them *Asheiks* (a Muslim term) instead of *Sikhs* (the name of their non-Muslim cultural community).

However, now that Sikhs have died at the hands of a psychopathic racist bigot displaying a Nazi Swastika and using a gun, which the NRA and the Gun Lobby are implicitly responsible for putting in his hand, the American press and general public now can finally pronounce their name correctly and are learning that Sikhs, like so many other immigrant communities, are in actuality a national treasure who are respectable, industrious, educated contributors to the American Dream, who practice a religion which, albeit originated in India, promotes peace, tolerance, integrity and love; and under normal circumstances there is not an ounce of fanaticism or extremism in their doctrinal bones.

Yes, it took a massacre to make it clear that the Sikhs are one of us. This is something that has happened repeatedly among the ethnic communities who have come to our shores and been gradually woven into the fabric of American life. Think of the violence that was inflicted upon African Americans, the Irish, the Italians, the Chinese, the Japanese, *etc., etc.*, before they took their place in the mainstream of society. Because in the end the cruelty and violence perpetrated by the ignorant bigots in our midst eventually produced a public backlash which resulted in the victims receiving the welcome, respect, understanding and social justice that our Constitution guarantees and inspires.

In short, it seems that ultimately it took a massacre or two to awaken the mainstream public to the fact that an injustice had been done here; that one more immigrant group had been knocking at our cultural door for a long time and deserved admission to the main event B access to the American Dream..

This has now happened in the case of the Sikh community who has languished in comparative anonymity for more than a century; quietly enduring the prejudice and indignities that go with ignorance-driven minority status.

**The longevity of their wait is actually being commemorated in Stockton, California, on September 22nd even as we speak. This is when the Sikh community gathers under the auspices of the *Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society* and the *University of the Pacific* to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this society and, of course, the migration and assimilation of Sikhs as well as other South Asians into North American society.**

This was a process which began at the turn of the century after a smattering of the Sikhs who were serving throughout East Asia in the British imperial armed forces discovered= Canada and the United. The smattering of demobilized soldiers who formed the vanguard came mainly from farming backgrounds in the region of India known as the Punjab; they saw the opportunities which the fertile land and the bustling economies of the Pacific coast offered, and soon their numbers grew; and with this, of course, came the racism, as resistance to their presence emanating from the already established White communities intensified. Confrontations mounted, such as the 1907 riots in Bellingham, Washington, the *Komagata Maru* incident= (the refusal to allow a shipload of Sikhs to disembark in Vancouver in 1913-14), the founding of the *Ghadr* Party in the U.S. in 1913, the San Francisco conspiracy trial in 1917 (which sent Taraknath Das to prison), until in the end the combined mobilization efforts of South Asian Indians in the U.S. led to immigration and citizenship rights by 1946.

But despite these achievements, Sikhs have never been recognized fully as equals in the the American civil community. That is why Wisconsin happened. Their lot has been compounded by the terrorism frenzies which have flowed from 9/11 and the backlash from the Afghan war and the myriad manifestation of Islamic extremism emanating from the Middle East. But the racist prejudice has always been there, as has been true of other ethnic communities. According to an article in the Palm Beach Post by Toni-Ann Miller, The New York-based Sikh Coalition has reported more than 700 hate crimes in the United States since Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>, plus thousands of complaints from Sikhs about workplace discrimination and racial profiling.

My point, however, is that the Wisconsin massacre will, indeed has already, injected a higher measure of public consciousness and contemplation into the presence and nature of the Sikh community in this country. The murder of innocents on a significant scale is different than an individual killing, much as the latter is in its fundamentals no less tragic and heartbreaking than the former. Put another way, it takes a massacre, i.e., collective suffering, to focus the mind and this is the case for the American Sikh community. **The public is now conscious of them as never before, aware of their majesty, their magnanimity, their civility, and their worthiness to be an accepted and honored part of mainstream American society. The public will know them more and better because they have suffered and sacrificed more.**

Indeed, sad to say, it takes a massacre! Henceforth, as one Sikh has put it, We want this opportunity to pretty much educate everyone around us... We are not al-Qaida or Taliban because some of us wear turbans... We are other Americans just like you.

I would welcome any comments. [halgould22554@gmail.com](mailto:halgould22554@gmail.com)

On Fri, Aug 17, 012 at 6:46 PM, Harold Gould <[halgould22554@gmail.com](mailto:halgould22554@gmail.com)> wrote:

Dear Dr. Singh.

I apologize for not being in closer touch with you, but given my circumstances I really have no choice, because my wife requires so much care. But I have not been idle and I have been thinking of you, especially in the context of the terrible events that occurred in Wisconsin. My heart is just broken to think of the suffering that this lunatic has caused. I am enclosing here an article I have just completed that I shall put out on my website, [haloldgouldscorner.com](http://haloldgouldscorner.com). It is entitled, as you will see, "It takes a massacre.." I would welcome any comments.

All the best,

Hal Gould

Sat, Aug 18, 2012 10:38 am

From Dr Amrik Singh [drsinghamrik@gmail.com](mailto:drsinghamrik@gmail.com)

To Harold Gould [halgould22554@gmail.com](mailto:halgould22554@gmail.com)

Professor Gould:

Your email has come like a salve on our festering wounds. Your every word is a precious and prized ovation to hundred years of Sikhs on American soil. Your article is a very truthful reading of Sikhs' value system which typically conforms to American dream. They are Americans, and will remain Americans. After a decade of 9/11, several hundreds of incidences of hatred have not broken their resolve to be Americans. As a turban wearing Sikh, I have not felt the need of reporting many instances of being targeted. It didn't arouse an iota of indignation in me because I always thought they were doing out of ignorance.

Three year ago, two young trainees in Sacramento Police department interviewed me in two sessions to familiarize themselves with the diversity of California. Recently, the police department has made such a project as part of their training.

Both the young men are Sacramento born, but they didn't know anything about Sikhs as a people in California. They interviewed a few more people in the community and visited Gurdwaras. During that time, two Punjabi festivals were scheduled for celebrating Ghadr movement and a cultural event. I invited them there. They were introduced to organizers and other community members.

Within a few weeks they collected a lot of information and wrote about it for their project. Their introductory paragraph sounded as if they had discovered a new world in the city of their birth of which they had no inkling earlier.

They asked me if I had faced any discrimination at the hands of California police. I told them there was absolutely no complaints against any member of the law enforcement, rather there is a lot of genuine regard for them. They were surprised to hear that most of the Sikh community appreciates the police for their hard work. They wanted me to elaborate on that aspect more. I told them most Sikhs had worse experience with the police in their home country, and that the comparison aroused their respect for American police.

It is not the hatred, out of ignorance, or even death that causes more pain than the deliberate attempt to portray them for what they are not. As we never can pick up a bigot like Wade Michael Page to disapprove white Americans, so a few Sikhs' dishonorable ways can not be thrust on the image of the whole community. The more I read Guru Granth Sahib, the more I feel connected to others, not as they should be, but as they are. The urge to be connected with the whole universe is through practical lifestyle rather than merely maintaining a facade. So far Sikhs remain centered in Guru Garanth Sahib, the Other for them is their own better Self.

Professor Gould, your essay is thought-provoking, an honest statement, and a bold venture in South Asian studies. We fully understand your circumstance due Madam Gould's health, but still we have not compromised with the fact you won't join with us on September 22, 2012. For us your very presence is

more than any research paper. I don't know whether it is right to say or not, but if you need any assistance right from the origin of your travel to Stockton, we can make arrangement. Or if you have any other suggestion, please let us know, so that you remain an integral part of the Centennial event.

Thank you so much for your kindness.

Best Regards,

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