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## Sikhs want their faith taught in schools

BY DIANA PICHARDO

The turban-wearing members of the Sikh religion deal with the name-calling, general confusion from their peers and stereotyping stemming from ignorance regarding their faith, the fifth-largest organized religion in the world, according to the Christian Science Monitor.

After Sept. 11, the targeting increased, as some people associated them with Muslim terrorists for wearing turbans, Pennington resident Mandeep Singh said.

An odd comparison when some of the chief values of Sikhism are loyalty and dedication to whatever land or country they choose to call home, and their desire to live peacefully and share with the community, he said.

But things may start to change in New Jersey, with the Board

of Education's recent decision to include Sikhism in the study of world religions at the middle school level for all public schools.

It is the hope of local Sikhs like Singh that the decision will help shed light on what Sikhism is and what their true beliefs are.

"It's a very big deal for us," he said. "We're just like everyone, we just look a little different."

Singh is the treasurer for the Sikh Sabha of New Jersey, which is the local temple, or *gurdwara*, in Lawrence. He is also the vice president of Arora and Associates, P.C., a civil engineering consulting firm owned by his father, also located in Lawrence.

The BOE's decision will allow students to learn about the tenets of Sikhism. Teachers will be given documents containing information on the religion to be used at all

public schools by 2012.

Sikh Sabha president Manjeet Ahluwalia, a former Lawrence resident, is confident the decision will only help in spreading awareness.

"I think it's fantastic," he said. "I think it's a step in the right direction."

"For Sikh kids in school, hopefully they won't have to worry about being called names."

Lawrence resident Raj Bansal hopes the decision will help the Sikh community feel more welcome and accepted.

"I think Sikhism should be included in the curriculum," she said. "I think people should know something about the religion so we don't feel like strangers."

The work to have Sikhism included began with an initiative by The Sikh Coalition in 2003. The **See SIKHISM, Page 6**

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coalition, with the help of many local Sikh communities, including the Lawrence group, put together a civil rights agenda to address some of the discrimination conflicts. It was officially presented at a conference held in Trenton that year.

Mabeena Kaur, the coalition's education director, said the project began as a campaign to end bullying, specifically in the schools.

"Our intent was to end discrimination by educating people on who Sikhs are," she said. "It is my hope that there will be a new appreciation for the religion in our communities, locally and globally."

Previously, many Sikh parents and even some of the older children hold special presentations at the schools about their religion in an effort to educate the community. In Lawrence, the Sikh community has been involved with local activities such as diversity day at the Senior Center. They have also held meetings with the police department.

While the change may be something new for many schools across the state, here in Lawrence, Sikhism was already a part of the study of world religions at the middle school level.

While Christianity and Judaism may be the most familiar religions for many of the students, the school makes sure to include various world religions including Sikhism, Buddhism, Taoism and more, said Barbara Beers, supervisor of humanities at Lawrence High School.

"Sikhism has always been a part of the

curriculum," she said. "It would be doing a disservice not to include it."

The goal behind studying world religions is to not only provide students with valuable information, but to create understanding and tolerance, she said.

Sikhism dates back to the 15th century and is a religion based on a code of conduct and a spiritual book.

Among the primary beliefs are that there is one universal and gender-free God, that the goal of life is to find divinity within and that the path to merging with God is marked by service to the community, by earning an honest living and by avoiding common temptations.

Sikhism follows the teaching of 10 Gurus, with the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book, serving as the 11th and final guru.

The religion originated in India and was created by Guru Nanak. The word Sikh is derived from Sanskrit and means disciple or student.

Sikhs feel that hair is sacred so they do not cut it. Men are often seen wearing turbans and beards. It is also a tradition for baptized Sikhs to carry certain items with them at all times including a steel bracelet, which represents a commitment to their faith.

It's one of the earliest progressive religions, with men and women being seen as complete equals, as well as the rich and poor.

The meeting place for the Sikh community is the *gurdwara*, which means house. The Sikh Sabha *gurdwara* is located on Bakers Basin Road in Lawrence. It is open to all people of any faith as well. Worship

services take place on Friday and Sunday, with *Langar*, a special community meal, taking place on the second of the two days.

Sikhs believe in the importance of sharing, a principle that can be seen in the tradition of *Langar*. The meal is prepared by patrons present during the worship service and consists of all vegetarian foods so that any faith can participate. All present, break bread together and sit on the floor, to represent equality.

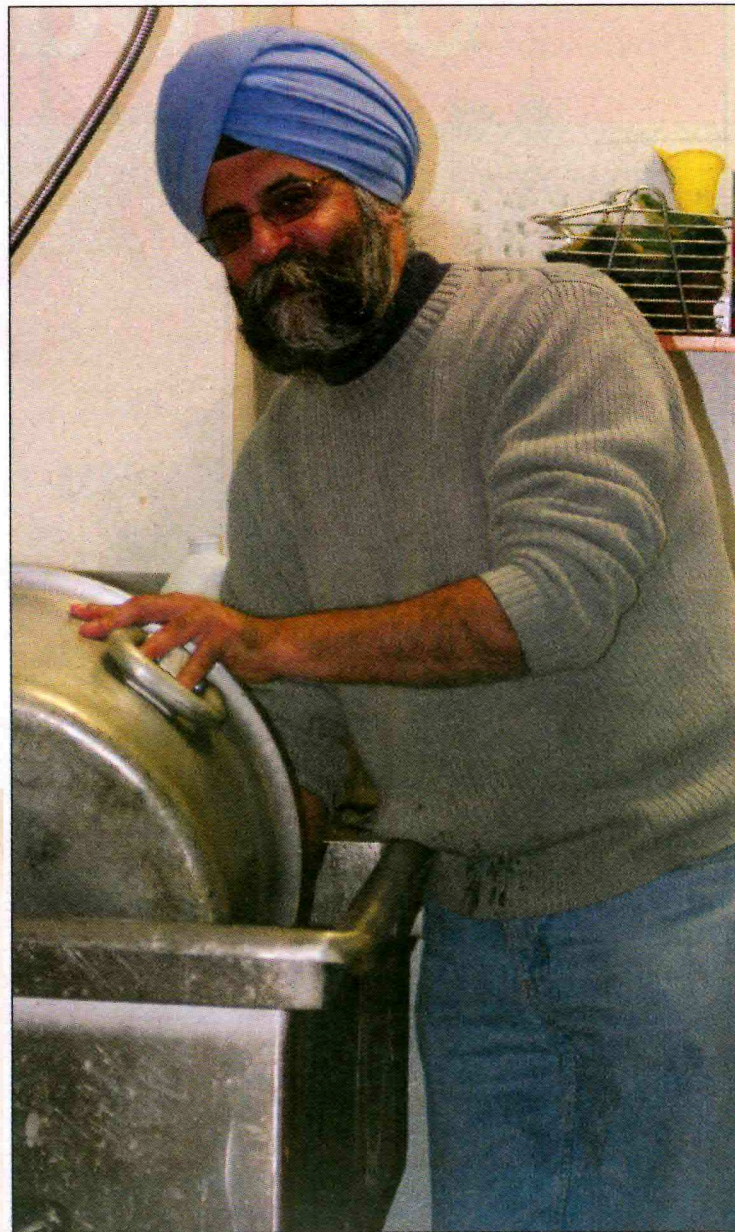
Members like Sharon Saluja, of East Windsor, and Gurmit Chatrath, of Ewing, have been regular faces in the community kitchen at the *gurdwara* since the venue was created in 1999. They are used to cooking up to 400 rotis, a type of Indian flat bread, each week. It's a joint effort.

"Everyone contributes moneywise," Chatrath said.

"And anyone can join us," Saluja said.

The weekly gatherings are refreshing for many members.

"We do social activities with the same



Manjeet Ahluwalia, president of the Sikh Sabha congregation, washes dishes after Sikh Sabha's weekly *Langar* meal. The congregation offers the meal to anyone of any faith after their Sunday worship service. (Staff photo by Myles Ma.)

group," Chatrath said. "It's like a family. If any one of us is in trouble we are there to help."

There are also a number of holidays celebrated. The group most recently celebrated the birthday of the founder, Guru Nanak. In January, they will celebrate the birthday of the 10th founder Guru Gobind.

In the community, the group has also done a lot of work with the Red Cross to organize blood drives.

For many members of the Sikh Sabha, the future seems bright for the next generations and the country as a whole.

"I hope that this will have people look at the bigger picture," Mandeep Singh, Sikh Sabha treasurer, said. "I think this is a good thing, not just for the Sikh community, but for everyone."

For the Sikh Coalition, the next step is attaining a similar curriculum standard in Texas, a project currently taking place, and then spreading it across the country.

For more information, go online to [sikhcoalition.org](http://sikhcoalition.org) or [sikhssabha.org](http://sikhssabha.org).