

August 1, 2004

Come September, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will make his first visit to the United States after he assumed the high office. If the protocol folks get it right, there will not be a repeat of the George Fernandes fiasco. He will be received in New York by the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security and whisked through immigration. A security detail, sirens and lights ablaze, will cut his way through traffic and deposit him at a midtown Manhattan hotel. He will be ensconced here for a week, meeting other world leaders on the sidelines of the annual UN General Assembly. During his stay here, he will not be stopped or "wanded" because he wears a turban.

Meanwhile, thousands of his fellow countrymen and co-religionists are living a troubled life in the United States. In recent weeks there has been a sharp spike in incidents of racial and religious profiling, especially involving Sikhs. Always a standout because of their colorful turbans and uncut hair, there are not good times for the proud community, one of whose members, Dalip Singh Saund, who was a clean cut Sikh, remains the only person of Indian origin elected (in 1956) to the US Congress.

Two of the most recent incidents have occurred in Boston, which is one of the two flanks of liberal America (the other is Seattle). Some weeks back, Deeptej Singh, a medical student at Boston University, was denied access to a dance club because of his turban. Last week, Sundeep Sahni, a Sikh student of Boston College, was detained for seven hours by Secret Service agents – on high alert because of the Democratic convention -- because he was taking photographs of the campus with two friends. Sahni, 21, a double major in computer science and finance, says at one point an agent told him, "I don't want you pulling an Uzi from your turban."

The Sahni case tells us something about the American security establishment's methods. It turns out that of the two friends who were with him, Siddharth Khotkar is an Indian from Australia, and Ali Shawaf is a

Saudi. Both were clean cut and wore western clothes. Neither was interrogated. Now step back three years and recall the 9/11 hijackers. All of them were clean cut, and wore casual American-style clothing. What are the chances that a hijacker or terrorist stalking America will walk around wearing a turban or a kaffiyeh, a thoub or dishdasha?

But that's not the argument that will resonate with the Washington establishment right now. So Dr Singh should not even waste his time taking this up with Bush or Powell. Instead, he should urge the community itself to expand efforts to counter such profiling. Organisations such as the Sikh Coalition have done a splendid job getting redressal for victims (the New York Police Department and a Manhattan limousine company are among those who backed down from introducing dress code following collective action). But there is more they can do.

For a start, lobby for better representation in movies and TV (say in serials such as NYPD Blues and Law and Order), just as the larger Indian community should do for Indian physicians (poorly represented in ER). There is no better way to reach or educate Americans than through entertainment. The other suggestion is something only someone of Dr Singh's eminence can (tactfully) make for those in India still smitten by America: Why go to a country whose economy, what to speak of its freedoms, is tightening? It's a wide, wide, wide world.

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