

Fresnans ponder how to reduce hate crimes after elderly Sikh man attacked

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After an elderly Sikh man was attacked last week in what police consider a hate crime, community members and elected officials brainstormed how to prevent such tragedies in the future.

Amrik Singh Bal, 68, was walking in a neighborhood west of Highway 99 just before 7 a.m. Saturday to meet his ride to work as a farmhand when he was attacked. He wore a blue turban and has a long, white beard.

Police consider the attack, which left Bal with a broken collar bone and several stitches, [a hate crime](#). The suspects, white men in their mid-20s, reportedly noticed Bal while driving on North Brunswick Avenue near West Shields Avenue.

The suspects

- White
- 5 feet 10 or 11 inches tall
- 20 to 25 years old
- One is skinny with no facial hair, a dark, waist-length jacket and dark jeans
- The other has a slightly heavier build and possibly some type of facial hair or a light beard, with a dark, hooded sweatshirt and dark jeans

[Jakara Movement](#), a youth leadership and activism nonprofit, hosted the town hall Tuesday night at Paaras Youth Center in northwest Fresno. Around 100 people packed into the room, including elected officials, Sikhs and other community members.

Participants considered how to prevent future hate crimes, including encouraging teachers to talk about different cultures more than just on designated awareness days, using social media to reach out to the larger community and speaking at schools and places of worship.

Iqbal “Ike” Grewal said Fresno Sikhs have tried to educate the larger community about their religion for years. Sikhism, the world’s fifth-largest religion, was started in the Punjab region of northern India and eastern Pakistan. More than 30,000 Sikhs live in the central San Joaquin Valley.

“We thought education would be enough,” he said. But Grewal also warned against only explaining how Sikhism is different from other religions.

“We tend to only say we’re being mistaken for other faiths,” he said. “We should not point to the other person.”

Sudarshan Kapoor, longtime civic peace activist and former Fresno State social work professor, suggested [prejudice-reduction training](#), which Fresno State administers. He said all cultural groups in Fresno have experienced hate in different forms.

“There is a history of prejudice, which is really hard to fight,” he said. “This is what I’ve been doing all my life.”

Police said that during the attack the men parked their car across the street and got out, yelling at Bal and punching him repeatedly in the face. Then they got back in their car and struck him before speeding away.

Gurdeep Shergill, a teacher at Central Unified School District who hosts a show on the Punjabi radio station [AM 900](#), said his family lives in the same neighborhood as Bal and his own father walks the street Bal was attacked on.

“When he was laying on that bed, to me it felt like my dad was laying on that bed,” he said.

Fresno police spokesman Jaime Rios said investigators found out about a relatively similar attack that caused police to serve a search warrant, but the cases proved unrelated. Police have not received more tips.

Sukhchain Singh, Bal’s brother’s father-in-law, attended the town hall though he does not understand English. Through an interpreter, he said he was shocked when he learned what had happened to his relative, who remains at home with a sling on his arm. He said Bal has lived in the United States since 2008.

“We are helpless,” he said. “I pray that nothing like this would happen to anybody, regardless of whether it’s a Sikh or any other religious group.”

Naindeep Singh, executive director of Jakara Movement, said Sikhs have been discriminated against since they first arrived in the Central Valley more than 100 years ago. Their history includes being ineligible for citizenship and being prevented from owning agricultural land under the California Alien Land Act of 1913, which was invalidated in 1952. More recently, he said, Sikhs have been taunted by people who call them Saddam Hussein (former dictator of Iraq) or Osama Bin Laden (founder of al-Qaida).

Along with education, Singh said it’s important to increase the number of Sikhs in city institutions and for Sikhs to vote. Several Indian elected officials were present at the town hall, including Central Unified trustee Rama Dawar, Kerman City Councilman Bill Nijjer and San Joaquin Mayor Pro Tem Amarpreet Dhaliwal.

Police don’t know whether Bal’s attackers thought he was Muslim. However, Sikhs have been mistaken targets of hate crimes and harassment since 9/11 by people who identify them as Muslim. And Sikh leaders say the anti-Islamic statements made by politicians such as Donald Trump, who called for a ban on Muslims entering the United States, have made things worse.

In May 2013, 82-year-old Piara Singh was attacked outside the Nanaksar Sikh Temple in south Fresno by a man who later allegedly made inflammatory comments about Muslims. The assailant, Gilbert Garcia Jr., pleaded no contest to a hate crime and was sentenced to 13 years in state prison.

Many followers of Sikhism cover their heads with turbans. But according to [a 2013 report](#), published by the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund and Stanford University, turbans are misunderstood by most Americans.

The report includes multiple surveys totaling roughly 4,000 responses, half of which associated the turban with Islam and suggest respondents think Sikhism is a sect of the religion. Seven of 10 respondents couldn’t identify a Sikh man in a photo as Sikh.

[In a statement after the attack](#), the Islamic Cultural Center of Fresno echoed what Grewal said about suggesting Sikhs are the wrong targets.

“No one should have to fear assault due to the perception of hateful people,” the statement says. “We have to remain united against all terror and fanaticism because when one of us is attacked, we are all victims.”

Preeti Dhaliwal, an attorney with the [Sikh Coalition](#), said the organization has been retained by Bal and his family. Sikh Coalition was formed after 9/11 as a national Sikh civil rights organization and provides free legal assistance for hate crime victims. Bal has Medi-Cal, which covers all of his medical expenses.

“There has been an uptick in hate crimes just in the past month alone since the San Bernardino tragedy,” she said, in which 14 people at a holiday party were killed by a married couple who supported the Islamic State terror group.

“We’ve seen our requests for legal assistance triple compared to the years before.”

The men could be charged with elder abuse, assault with a deadly weapon or battery causing serious bodily injury, said Fresno County deputy district attorney Steve Wright. The charges could result in up to nine years in prison if the attack is proven to be a hate crime.

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