

# Punjabi Indians in the New York Metro Area

QUICK FACTS:

Place of Origin: India (Punjab State)

Significant Subgroups: Sikh, primarily Chamar and Jat (70%); Hindu (28-29%); Christian (1-2%)

**Location in Metro New** 

Queens (Richmond Hill)

**Population in Metro New** York: 110,000 (Community

Estimate) **Primary Religion:** 

Sikhism

**Secondary Religions:** Hinduism, Christianity

Status of Christian

Less than 2% evangelical. Initial (localized) church planting within the past two years.

**Primary Language:** Punjabi

Secondary Languages: Hindi, English

**Significant Notes:** 

The five K's, or articles of faith that baptized Sikhs are required to wear: Kesh: uncut hair (men wrap theirs in a turban), Kanga: a wooden comb to hold the hair, Kara: an iron bracelet to remind them to do good, Kachera: a long cotton undergarment that promotes modesty and selfcontrol, Kirpan: a small sword kept at the waist, to be used only in selfdefense or protecting

Upon baptism, Sikhs take a religious name. Men are called Singh ("lion") while women are Kaur ("princess"). This explains why Singh is the most common Punjabi surname.

The first Asian American to serve in the US Congress was a Sikh from California named Dalip Singh Saund, elected in 1956

"We just want people to know who we are. We are Sikhs, and we are Americans!" This comment characterizes the collective frustration of Punjabi Sikhs, whose ethnic and religious identity has been a mystery to many Americans. Sikhs are the majority ethnoreligious group among Indians from the state of Punjab in northern India. In 1947, the Punjab region was divided along religious lines between India and Pakistan, forcing Mus-

lims into Pakistan and Sikhs and Hindus into India. Although Hindus and Sikhs have traditionally lived in relative harmony for generations, demands that Punjab be a Sikh-ruled state sparked a decade of violence. Between 1984 and 1993, clashes between extrem-

ists on both sides as well as between Sikhs and the Indian government killed more than 25 thousand people.1 There are 27 million Sikhs, most of whom live in Punjab, making it the world's fifth-largest religion.2 Because the Sikh faith requires men to wear turbans and have long beards, they are often mistaken for Muslim fundamentalists. Consequently, Sikhs have been victims of more than two hundred hate crimes nationally since the 9/11 attacks.<sup>3</sup> Punjabis, who number approximately 110 thousand people, are one of the top three Indian ethnic groups in Metro New York along with Gujaratis and Keralites.4 A majority of the Punjabis in Metro New York are Sikhs.



Medical students and professionals were the first Punjabis to come to Metro New York in the 1960s and '70s. However, it was the aftermath of the 1984 assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi that drove Sikhs to come in large numbers. The Prime Minister was killed in retaliation for ordering an attack on extremists who were hiding in a Sikh temple, which in turn led to anti-Sikh riots that resulted in three thousand deaths. Fearing for their lives, thousands of Sikhs sought a new home in the small Sikh community in Metro New York. Punjabi immigration has been steady since the mid-1980s, with no signs of stopping.



Photo by John Pringle

### Where Do They Live?

"I know half the Punjabis in Richmond Hill," joked Inder, a waiter in Manhattan. Because Sikh life revolves around the gurdwara, their places of worship, Sikhs live in close proximity to them. Richmond Hill, Queens—home to the first gurdwara in Metro New York remains the epicenter of the Sikh community. While the largest concentration of Sikhs is in the area surrounding the Sikh Cultural Center at 118th Street and 97th Avenue in Richmond Hill, gurdwaras can be found throughout Metro New York, from Glen Cove, Long Island, to Glen Rock, New Jersey, reflecting a growing affluence among Sikhs and a desire to live in the suburbs.

# What Do They Believe?

"A person who leaves the Sikh faith is considered a traitor to their nation," explained Pastor Gill, who leads a Punjabi church in Richmond Hill. While Sikhs are open to learning about other faiths—the word "Sikh" means "one who seeks truth"—those who embrace other religions are typically cut off from family and community. Sikhism has many parallels to Christianity, such as belief in one creator God, named Waheguru, who is revealed in a sacred scripture called Guru Granth. Sikhism has three primary principles: continual meditation and prayer, making an honest living, and sharing with others. Sikhs are encouraged to be baptized, and after baptism they are required to wear the "five K's" (see Significant Notes). The four Sikh commandments prohibit tobacco and alcohol usage, cutting hair, eating meat that has been sacrificed, and committing adultery. Besides at Pastor Gill's church, Bethlehem Punjabi Church in Richmond Hill, Punjabi Christians worship at many Indian and Pakistani churches in Metro New York. Punjabi Hindus worship alongside Hindus from all over India in temples across the Metro area.

#### What Are Their Lives Like?

"When I need advice, I go to my parents," Inder stated. Family is the core of Punjabi life, with several generations typically living under one roof. Being involved in a gurdwara is essential for Sikhs, and it serves as their main social network. While most firstgeneration Punjabis own or work at small businesses, such as gas stations, taxi services, or construction, they want their children to be professionals. The medical field is the number one choice for the second generation.

## How Can I Pray?

 $\underline{\mathscr{D}}$  Sikhs are very open to learning about Christianity. Pastor Gill has seen several come to know Christ, only to return to Sikhism because they could not handle the rejection by family. Pray for these seekers and that the Punjabi church will be a source of strength and community for them.

"Sikh," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikh (accessed October 19, 2009).
"Sikh American Leaders Meet with White House Officials," SikhNet, Septem-ber 29, 2008, http://fateh.sikhnet.com/s/SikhsMeetWhiteHouse (accessed October 18, 2009).
Estimate derived from interview with Mohinder Singh, President of the Baba Makhan Shah Lobana Sikh Center in Richmond Hill, and 2008 American Com-munity Survey data indicating there are 547,539 Asian Indians in Metro New York.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sikhism," Encarta, http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia 761566784 2/sikh-ism.html (accessed October 21, 2009).