

Indo-American Youth In Gangs Defy Stereotype

By Lisa Fernandez

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In family photos, the young men pose politely in turbans and ties. But in secret snapshots confiscated by police, some of the men reveal a darker side. They stuff assault rifles down their pants, flex their tattooed muscles and flaunt their bare chests. Others point 9mm pistols at each others' temples and flash gang signs. Police say these 20-somethings belong to three small Indo-American gangs in Alameda and Santa Clara counties the Santa Clara Punjabi Boys, Aim to Kill and the All Indian Mob. Authorities describe their members perhaps as many as 500 mostly Sikh men in Northern California as some of the Bay Area's most violent offenders. "Their conflicts always result in a stabbing, shooting or beating," said Dave Lanier, a Fremont police sergeant who also is the region's foremost expert on Indo-American gangs. Investigators began focusing on the gangs after a series of violent incidents during the past two years. Young men in gangs are particularly troubling for a community that often finds itself portrayed as a "model minority" even though, members say, they wrestle with the same problems most families face. Many in the community downplay the actions of those police identify as gang members, or deny the gangs exist. Some question the motives of the criminal justice system. But others have begun to ask why some educated children from middle-class homes would turn to criminal activities. "The image has been that Indian kids are hardworking, studious types, doing very well," said Bob Dhillon, a Sikh religious leader in San Jose. "And so some people are shocked to see they're in gangs." Teens and young adults interviewed suggest that the pressures of reconciling their adopted culture with their traditional values can create friction. "In this generation, half the kids are Americanized and half are Indian traditional," said Gurbrinder Dhillon, 23, of San Jose, who was involved in what police describe as a gang fight but who says he is on his way to reform. "The more Americanized Indians don't mind if you show off your girlfriend, but the strict Indians say, 'Don't even look at our girls.' It's a culture clash." That discord plays itself out in a number of ways. In 1998, a handful of young Sikh men stormed a Sunnyvale temple wielding five-foot tree branches and crowbars. Shouting their gang name "SCP," for Santa Clara Punjabi Boys they attacked an elder who had banished them the night before for eyeing young girls.

Records check

Gun, drug incidents date back to 1993

Two of the young men pleaded guilty to assault with a deadly weapon charges after community members urged prosecutors to resolve the case quickly and quietly.

A review of court records indicates other gang-related activities as far back as 1993 for weapons violations, attempted murder and drug dealing. Records show:

- * At least 15 shootings were linked to the three gangs in 1998. The victims were mostly members of other Indo-American gangs.

- * Four key gang leaders of Aim to Kill and the Santa Clara Punjabi Boys -- convicted in 1999 -- are serving eight-to-14 year sentences in state prison. A handful of others are serving shorter sentences. Manjinder Singh Sohal, 25, identified by police as a key leader of Aim to Kill, was arrested last November after he fled to Canada. He is being held on \$5 million bail at Santa Clara County Jail on attempted murder charges.

- * Police say they have confiscated gang-related paraphernalia at suspected members' homes. Seized items include illegal drugs such as opium and met amphetamine weapons photos; and business cards that say AIM, for All Indian Mob. Authorities say the gangs fight mostly among themselves, though there have been few incidents in recent months following

the arrests and convictions. Police also note how amateurishly the gangs behave, frequently mixing up colors or wearing two at a time.

There are no firm explanations for why the gangs are predominantly Sikh. But unlike other South Asian immigrants who have flocked to the United States since the 1970s, Sikhs have lived in California as far back as the late 1800s. Community leaders and cultural experts say Sikhs have had far more time to establish roots here, bring over extended family members, and become familiar with American cultural influences good and bad. While the gangs are a relatively recent phenomenon in the Bay Area, other big cities including London and Vancouver B.C. have reported similar problems. Police in Yuba City also say an unknown number of high school-age Sikhs and other East Indians belong to gangs. About 2 percent of India's population is Sikh, with Hindus making up the vast majority. Of the Bay Area's estimated 100,000 Indo-Americans, roughly 25 percent are from the northern state of Punjab, and 25 percent are from the western state of Gujarat, according to the Indian Consulate in San Francisco. The rest are from different regions in India. For the vast majority of Indo-American young people, cultural tensions may exist but play out less dramatically. Community members, parents and young adults cite Silicon Valley's myriad temptations, long work hours and materialistic culture as key behavioral influences. "It's a total change of environment here. It's drastic," said Upinder Kaur Gupta, a Sikh mother in Fremont who has two young children. "Families are working day and night here, striving hard to buy a house and property. But all that money is no good if their kids are already into guns and drugs." One 18-year-old Fremont resident arrested in 1998 for being part of a gang fight at Mission San Jose High School describes the cultural differences this way "There's not that much stuff popping in India, like clubs, scenes and house parties.."

Sense of shame

Charges against youths trigger elders' denial

Despite stepped-up enforcement, police say they are somewhat at a disadvantage because they don't speak Punjabi a language spoken by Sikhs and know little about Indo-American culture. Authorities are further frustrated because some members of the community reject or downplay the idea that some of their young embrace a criminal lifestyle.

"We've done hundreds of meetings with elders from the Sikh and Hindu temples," said Lanier, the Fremont officer who also works with the Southern Alameda County Gang Suppression Task Force. "The older generation does not understand. The elders refuse to accept it."

Some parents whose children have gotten into trouble say their sons act independently and are not part of a gang. Their actions are simply a matter of "boys being boys" getting drunk at parties and starting fights. Other families accuse police and prosecutors of being biased against those of Indian descent.

That mistrust led two families to hide their sons from police. A Milpitas mother contacted by the Mercury News said her 22-year-old son was "traveling," although at the time he was a fugitive being sought for several alleged gang violations.

"There is such a sense of shame about this. They (community members) either go into complete denial or they don't know what to say," said Mayank Chhaya, editor of India Post, a weekly newspaper with headquarters in Union City. Experts say the behavior of some young men is tied to bravado and ego. Thrust into American culture, they mimic what they see.

Many shed their turbans, in some cases trading them for baseball caps and bandannas. The Punjabi boys like to wear Philadelphia Phillies caps for the letter "P."

What sets these Indo-American groups apart from other ethnic gangs, observers say, is that some have enough disposable income from their families and jobs for college educations, expensive cars, ski trips, even business cards. "It's a strange thing how people with resources fall to this," said Joe Angeles, the former principal of Union City's Logan High School, where it's believed about a dozen All Indian Mob members attended two years ago. "Gang members no longer have to be 'bad' students. These guys were getting B's and A's. But just like the Vietnamese, Afghani and Filipino communities, they're trying to find their own place."

Yet not everyone is so fortunate: Several convicted gang members come from single-parent families and could be considered low-income by Silicon Valley standards. And many Sikhs who have immigrated from Punjab have taken lower-paying jobs as farmers, gas-station attendants and taxi drivers. But even those from less affluent homes have been able to afford apparently with the help of friends and family -- some of the state's best legal talent. During a sentencing hearing in November, one gang member -- Ranjot "Yodha" Singh, 24 -- was represented in Santa Clara County Superior Court by Robert Shapiro, one of O.J. Simpson's attorneys. Singh, who comes from a single-parent home, had helped support his mother and two siblings. Experts and community members say young Indo-American men face pressures common to many immigrant groups, including fitting in at school. Sikhs endure added taunts because of their turbans.

Compounding the problem is that parents in many Indo-American families both work, not unusual by Bay Area standards but a change from their homeland. This is partly what leads to serious disciplinary problems, said Nirmal Singh, president of the Sikh gurdwara, or temple, in Fremont. "If there is any misbehavior (in India), the kids are hammered by the parents, their teachers, the cops," Singh said. "American laws are lax. They don't let anybody touch the kids, and the kids (in turn) don't listen to their parents."

Busy parents

Young man wishes he had been disciplined

Gurbrinder Dhillon, the 23-year-old who was involved in a gang fight in 1998, wishes he was disciplined more at home, but his single mother was always busy, holding down two jobs to support him and his brother. "I wish there was someone there to keep us in check. You look at traditional Indians and they're so polite because they had strict parents," he said. Several Indo-American mothers -- Sikh and Hindu -- agree it is more difficult raising children in the diaspora compared to India. Back home, extended-family members often keep an eye on the kids, and cable channels are less violent. In the United States, these mothers say, several Indo-American children have taken advantage of their parents, even tricking some into believing a spank can send them to jail. As a result, they say, discipline can be abandoned altogether. Mike Rustigan, a San Francisco State University criminology professor, sees similar discipline issues with other Asian immigrants, specifically Vietnamese and Taiwanese. Immigrant families also may have a more difficult time making sense of -- and curbing -- their children's behavior, said Usha Welaratna, a San Jose State anthropologist. Welaratna said first-generation parents often don't know what gang signs to look for, a new earring or a tattoo, which is how small problems can snowball. Welaratna studied Cambodian gangs in Los Angeles and sees several similarities between the two immigrant groups -- particularly in the relationships between parents and children. Some community leaders say it is time to confront the issue even though they admit it will be a

tough and sensitive task. Jeevan Zutshi, who founded the Indo-American Community Federation in Fremont, has been making a list of key leaders in both the Sikh and Hindu communities to discuss approaches to the problem. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "But we are not accustomed to having gangs among us. Thirty years ago, we came here as professionals. We were led to believe these groups were just friends who like to stick together because they're Indian. We didn't know they were involved with gangs and drugs and violence. But we were living in a fool's world."

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