

The First 9/11 ‘Backlash’ Fatality: The Murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi

Executive Summary

On September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi was shot and killed outside of his Mesa, Arizona, gas station by Frank Roque. Mr. Roque wanted to “kill a Muslim” in retaliation for the attacks on September 11.

Mr. Sodhi was the first murder victim due to post-9/11 backlash. Mr. Roque was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to life in prison for the hate crime.

As the tenth anniversary of his death and the attack on America approaches, Mr. Sodhi’s memory stands as a testament to the impact of the attacks on all Americans. However, as evidenced by the recent decision by the Arizona legislature to remove Mr. Sodhi’s name from the state 9/11 memorial, ten years later public awareness of this tragedy and the effect of post-9/11 backlash is very low.



Balbir Singh Sodhi
(courtesy sikhnet.com)

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The First 9/11 ‘Backlash’ Fatality: The Murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi

The events of September 11, 2001, affected each and every American in pointed and distinct ways. Many thousands perished during the attack, others lost loved ones. Many reacted with fervent patriotism for their country in order to overcome the devastation in progressive and constructive ways, while others lashed out with fear and hate towards the unknown and who they perceived to be ‘the enemy’. Despite the myriad reactions to that day, it is clear that the tragedy and loss of 9/11 did not end on that fateful Tuesday. It is still very real for the families of those that were lost in the attacks, for the families of those that were attacked in the backlash, and those that still fear for their safety in America.

Balbir Singh Sodhi was shot and killed on Saturday, September 15, 2001 in Arizona. It was the first fatal act of hate violence resulting from 9/11.¹ Mr. Sodhi was a 49 year old Sikh American man, who owned a Chevron gas station in Mesa, Arizona. He was shot while arranging American flags in front of his gas station. His assailant, Frank Roque, wanted to ‘kill a Muslim’ in retaliation for the terrorist attacks. He selected Mr. Sodhi simply because he had a beard and wore a turban in accordance with his Sikh faith. Mr. Roque shot at Mr. Sodhi three times, then shot at another service station owned by a Lebanese American, and finally shot at a home of a family of Afghan descent. Fortunately, no one else was injured.²

Just days before his death, Mr. Sodhi and members of the Phoenix Sikh American community were trying to organize a press conference to condemn the attacks and were trying to get in touch with Senator John McCain.³ Mr. Sodhi, along with other local Sikh Americans, was concerned about his community’s well-being, and was taking steps to potentially prevent exactly what happened to him.

The Mesa Police originally said the murder was not being considered a racist crime, and that the police did not have a motive.⁴ However, many members of the Sikh American and the Arizona interfaith community immediately identified and called for the murder to be classified as a hate crime. It was among the first of hundreds of hate crimes against Sikhs following 9/11.

¹“ Oral Statement of Assistant Attorney General Thomas E. Perez Before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights”, March 29, 2011,

<http://www.justice.gov/crt/opa/pr/testimony/2011/crt-testimony-110329.html>

²Tamar Lewin , “Sikh Owner Of Gas Station Is Fatally Shot In Rampage”, New York Times,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/17/us/sikh-owner-of-gas-station-is-fatally-shot-in-rampage.html>

³ CNN, “Hate crime reports up in wake of terrorist attacks”, Sept. 17, 2001.

<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/16/gen.hate.crimes/index.html>

⁴ <http://www.saldef.org/news/sikh-americans-condemn-hate-crimes-and-urge-nation-to-unite-demand-protection-from-police-and-public-officials/#more-329>

Biography of Mr. Sodhi

Balbir Singh Sodhi was the oldest of five brothers. Mr. Sodhi immigrated to the United States from India in 1988⁵ to realize the American dream. He joined his brother Harjit Sodhi in Los Angeles, CA, where he worked at a 7-Eleven for several years until he moved to Walnut Creek, CA to become a cab driver. He had moved to Mesa a year prior to his death, bought a house, and the gas station across the street.⁶ “He worked 12, 14 hours a day,” said his brother Harjit, “and he saved his pennies.”⁷ He regularly sent money to his family still in India. Jagjit Sodhi, his older brother, stated, “We depended on the money he sent us from time to time.” After hearing about his younger brother’s tragic death, he was shocked: “He could never have any enemy. He is innocent.”⁸

Mr. Sodhi was a husband and a father of two daughters. Mr. Sodhi was “known by friends and neighbors as a quiet, gentle man...Children have told reporters how Balbir Singh would let them buy candy from his store, even if they didn’t have enough money. The homeless shed tears as they recounted tales of his generosity to them.”⁹ Many Arizona state representatives and citizens of all backgrounds rallied around the Sodhi family and the Sikh American community in support, with over 3,000 people attending Mr. Sodhi’s memorial service.

A year later, Mr. Sodhi’s brother was shot and killed in a suspected hate crime. His family became activists against hate.¹⁰

Community Response & Impact

The day after the attack, Arizona Attorney General Janet Napolitano held the first of many press conferences. She said, “we will not tolerate acts of bigotry against our fellow Arizonans.”¹¹ “No individual should have to be afraid of their safety because of the color of their skin, the way they dress or the religion they choose to practice.”¹²

She encouraged the state to honor his memory.¹³ In 2006, the Arizona legislature unveiled a memorial to the victims of 9/11 which included the name of Balbir Singh Sodhi.¹⁴ As

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTcRk-XkCmI&feature=related>

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/17/us/sikh-owner-of-gas-station-is-fatally-shot-in-rampage.html>

⁷ September 18, 2001 Tuesday FINAL EDITION, Contra Costa Times (California) BALBIR SINGH SODHI FEARED U.S. REACTION;THE FORMER WALNUT CREEK RESIDENT HAD SEEN RISING SLURS AND THREATS FROM CUSTOMERS FOLLOWING THE ATTACKS LAST WEEK. TOM LOCHNER, TIMES STAFF WRITER

⁸ Victim of Mesa shooting left India for better life here - The Associated Press State & Local Wire. September 17, 2001, Monday, BC cycle

⁹ <http://fateh.sikhnet.com/s/balbirsodhi>

¹⁰ Tami Yeager, “A Dream in Doubt” (film), 2007, <http://www.adreamindoubt.org/>

¹¹ Foster Klug. The Associated Press State & Local Wire. September 16, 2001.

¹² Foster Klug The Associated Press State & Local Wire. September 20, 2001.

¹³ Scott Thomsen, Associated Press, September 22, 2001

¹⁴ <http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/opinions/articles/0912tue1-12.html>

Secretary of Homeland Security, she would later arrange for Mr. Sodhi's brother, Rana Singh Sodhi, to meet President Barack Obama and to honor the memory of his late brother.¹⁵

Mesa's Mayor, Keno Hawker, firmly stood against such hate-motivated attack, saying "senseless acts of violence will do nothing to help our nation heal or bring peace to the victims of the horrific tragedy that occurred this week...now is the time for all Mesa resident to display solidarity by taking a clear stand against violence. We are all Americans. We are all grieving. Let us unite in peace and determination that violence will never be the answer."¹⁶

At the memorial service, Maricopa County Attorney, Rick Romley, stated: "On September 11, America was attacked from abroad. However, with the murder of Mr. Sodhi, we have now been attacked from within."¹⁷

Nationally the Sikh American community condemned the attacks on the nation and Mr. Sodhi.¹⁸ There was international outrage over the backlash against Sikhs in America, including formal concerns expressed by Indian Prime Minister to President George W. Bush.¹⁹

For the Sikh American community, Mr. Sodhi's death was a warning: the racial slurs and menacing looks that Sikh Americans started receiving in the days after 9/11, and continue to receive to this day, could have potentially fatal consequences. As images of a turbaned Osama bin Laden were being disseminated in the media, Sikh Americans could not help but worry about their physical safety. Over 200 incidents had been reported to a Sikh American civil rights group in the days following the attack.²⁰ They continued to collect hundreds as part of a recurring theme of post-9/11 backlash against those perceived to be connected to the attacks.

Conviction of Frank Roque

Frank Roque boasted during his arrest: "I'm a patriot."²¹"I stand for America all the way."²²"Two years later, he learned the American way included a fair trial by jury. On September 30, 2003, an Arizona jury found Frank Roque guilty of first-degree murder for his hate crime murder of Mr. Sodhi, along with five other charges, including attempted murder and reckless endangerment related to drive-by shootings at other individuals he perceived to be

¹⁵ <http://www.azcentral.com/community/mesa/articles/2009/11/27/20091127statedinner1128.html>

¹⁶ Contra Costa Times (California), September 17, 2001 Monday FINAL EDITION, NEWS; Pg. A01, 951 words, TOM LOCHNER, TIMES STAFF WRITER. Hate Crimes; former walnut creek resident slain in arizona.

¹⁷ 2001, Birmingham Post & Mail Ltd

¹⁸ <http://www.saldef.org/news/sikh-americans-condemn-hate-crimes-and-urge-nation-to-unite-demand-protection-from-police-and-public-officials/>

¹⁹ September 17, 2001 Monday. Agence France Presse -- English. Indian Sikhs protest against attacks on members in US.; CNN, "Hate crime reports up in wake of terrorist attacks", Sept. 17, 2001.

<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/16/gen.hate.crimes/index.html>

²⁰ Laurie Goodstein and Tamar Lewin, "A Nation Challenged", New York Times, Sept. 19, 2001.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/19/us/nation-challenged-violence-harassment-victims-mistaken-identity-sikhs-pay-price.html>

²¹ Goodstein and Lewin, "A Nation Challenged"

²² <http://www.wingluke.org/pages/sikhcommunitywebsite/lifeinthepnw/timelinePNW.html>

Middle Eastern that same day in 2001. On October 9, 2003, Frank Roque was sentenced to the death penalty. The sentence was later commuted to life in prison.²³

Arizona Legislature Votes to Remove Sodhi from 9/11 Memorial Because He was “Not a Victim”

Most recently, in April of this year, the state of Arizona proposed a bill to remove Balbir Singh Sodhi’s name from the state’s 9/11 Memorial. The bill’s original sponsor, Rep. John Kavanaugh (R), claimed that Sodhi was “not a victim of 9/11.” Adding insult to injury, along with stripping the late Mr. Sodhi’s name from the memorial, the legislation even enumerated that the removed plaque to be sold to a scrap metal dealer. Ten years after 9/11, Rep. Kavanaugh stated, “It’s part of a myth that, following 9/11, Americans went into a xenophobic rage against foreigners. That’s not true. America’s reaction towards foreigners was commendable.”²⁴

Following over 7,500 letters to the Governor, the support of former Maricopa Attorney Rick Romley, the Arizona chapter of the Anti-Defamation League, and others, Governor Jan Brewer vetoed the bill on April 29, 2011.²⁵ The bill, which passed both Houses on party lines, would have automatically gone into effect on May 2, 2011. Rep. Kavanaugh apologized for not understanding Mr. Sodhi’s death was connected to 9/11.²⁶

Key Figures

Janet Napolitano – Attorney General of Arizona during Mr. Sodhi’s murder

Rick Romley – Maricopa County Attorney during Mr. Sodhi’s murder

Frank Roque – murderer of Mr. Sodhi

Balbir Singh Sodhi – first fatal victim of post-9/11 backlash

Rana Singh Sodhi – Mr. Sodhi’s brother and community leader

Keno Walker – Mayor of Mesa, Arizona, during Mr. Sodhi’s murder

²³Michael Kieffer and Jim Walsh, “9/11-tied slayer won’t be executed”, Arizona Republic, Aug. 15, 2006.<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/0815roque0815.html>

²⁴Alia Beard Rau, “Bill scrubs Phoenix 9/11 memorial phrases”, Arizona Republic, Apr. 24, 2011, <http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/2011/04/24/20110424september-11-memorial-offensive.html>

²⁵Jim Walsh, “Arizona Sept. 11 memorial legislation draws veto”, Arizona Republic, Apr. 29, 2011. <http://www.azcentral.com/news/election/azelections/articles/2011/04/29/20110429phoenix-sept-11-memorial-bill-veto.html>; <http://www.saldef.org/news/victory-arizona-governor-vetoes-anti-sodhi-memorial-bill/>

²⁶ Id.