

News

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Valley feels like home for Sikhs

LIVINGSTON — Hardeep Rai's turban-wrapped head bobbed as the 40-year-old ambled along Peach Street beneath the shadows of the pointed golden bulbs of the Sikh Temple. With rich brown farm fields behind him and the garlic clove-shaped domes of the house of worship ahead, he almost could have been walking in his native India. God, as during many other moments in the day, was coursing through his thoughts as he strolled to one of the city's two gurdwaras to pray for his wife, three daughters and everyone else. Admittedly, with a house, a 30-acre ranch in Cressey and his own business, he enjoys a life he's thankful for. And he's carved it out with grit and will in a land that promises rewards for just such virtues. Rai is just one of the estimated 1,500 Sikhs who've settled in Livingston seeking opportunities for themselves and future generations. Their presence has been marked at once by a willingness to assimilate with their Latino and other neighbors and by a desire to preserve their distinct religious identity. Although Sikhs have been streaming into the Central Valley for more than a quarter-century, contributing measurably to the region's economy and culture, they remain an enigma to many residents. Whether they join other immigrant groups in America's vaunted melting pot or, like some émigrés, become separate ingredients in an ethnic mixed salad, Sikhs will continue to influence events and trends throughout the community. "By accepting people at the fringes and people that are different, you are accepting the notion of democracy," UC Merced sociology professor Simón Weffer said. "Each individual person has a say, and that can be shaped by whatever religion, ethnic or cultural background they have." Sikhs in America stand at a crossroads where there's a call to imprint their heritage on their children. They want the next generation to succeed as doctors, lawyers and politicians — all while retaining their religion. At the same time, Sikhs are trying to distinguish themselves from Muslims in a post-9-11 nation that's watchful and fearful of men with bushy beards and turbans. Though they've been a fixture in some areas of California for more than 100 years, many residents know little about Sikhs, their culture and their beliefs. Punjabis first fled their fertile agricultural state in India during the late 1860s, though it wasn't until a 1970s immigration boom that they began settling in Livingston. Most of the nation's 500,000 Sikhs hail from the state of Punjab, which borders Pakistan in northwest India. Stoked by the dreams shared by almost all immigrants, their journey to the Central Valley town was guided by the prospect of better-paying jobs they heard could be found by working in Foster Farms' chicken factory — a clear improvement over toiling in Punjab's torrid wheat and sugar cane

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a city with a population then of about 2,000. One Sunday, while worshipping in Stockton's temple, she told the other Sikhs about her new job. Fewer jobs were being found on the farms in Stockton and Yuba City, and the news shot across the Pacific Ocean. It may have been a steady paycheck for the woman, whose name has been lost over the decades, but she pinpointed the city as a prime destination for Punjabis seeking work in America. India, a 36-hour plane ride from California, has 1.2 billion residents and is one-third the size of the United States, which has about 300 million residents. Punjab is home to about 24 million and is considered the Indian equivalent of the Central Valley. It has a dry and hot summer climate, and its rich soil produces much of the country's food. For many Punjabis, surviving every day is a challenge, said Niringan Singh Khalsa, executive director of the California Sikh Council, which was formed to educate Americans about Sikh culture after the attacks on the World Trade Center. There are thousands of small farms where families grow enough to eat and just a little to sell. "Nothing goes to waste," Khalsa said. "It's a struggle just to get a little bit." In India, the Samras were growing wheat and sugar cane when, through their local temple, they learned of the jobs at Foster Farms. They're believed to be the first Punjabi family to abandon the agrarian life for Livingston, and they didn't see another Indian in the city for six months. The father, mother and two sons stepped off the plane on May 21, 1970, and weaved their way to what would become home. Sarwan Singh Samra was hired at Foster Farms, where he worked nights on the processing line to support his family, which lived in an apartment on Simpson Avenue. Though Samra retired after 30 years there, the 72-year-old still manages the apartments he bought in Merced and basks in his sons' successes. One produces movies in Southern California, while the eldest, Gurpal, serves as the city's second Sikh mayor. The family helped to forge a trend that continues today with about 20 Sikhs moving to the city every year; Foster Farms remains a magnet. "America has no boundaries," Samra said. "Where else can you come in and have so many opportunities?" Today, the company employs close to 600 Asian employees in its 2,300-person plant. The majority are Sikhs, though the category includes Chinese and Japanese workers, spokesman Tim Walsh said. The number of Asian employees has grown about 6 percent in the last decade, though no statistics about the company's work force date back to the 1970s. Foster Farms never made an effort to advertise to any nationalities, and hires the best-qualified candidates, he said. Workers often will refer family and friends to the plant. The West Coast poultry giant celebrates the differences among its employees with its annual Diversity Day event, Walsh said. "It's not a push against their heritage," he explained. "We embrace it."

Rai's journey From the street, Rai's two-story home in south Livingston blends with all the others in the middle-class neighborhood. His white work truck is parked in the driveway, and the blades of the lush lawn reach toward the sky. Inside, portraits of Sikh gurus and the local priest are arranged next to the flat-screen television playing an Indian soap opera about a woman being unable to decide which man to marry. All this was bought with \$20 and an iron-fisted work ethic. After an arranged marriage with his wife in 1990, the couple flew to the United States to live with her parents, leaving India behind. "It's very hard to find jobs over there," he lamented. "There's too much population." The early years were dismal. Work was hard to find, even though Rai could speak English, and when he did land a job driving a tractor at a Chowchilla farm, he only pocketed \$50 a day for 12 hours' work. After spending four years spinning his wheels, he got behind an 18-wheel truck and began hauling processed chicken and other foods across the West all night long. The job kept him away from home for two or three days at a time, yet he could save money. He soon bought a home and a ranch in Cressey. In 2005, he founded Central Valley Truck School in Turlock, which teaches hundreds of Latinos and Sikhs how to drive freight haulers. Within the next few years, he plans to open more driving schools in the Central Valley. His three daughters, ages 3, 9 and 11, are all learning English and Punjabi, and one already dreams of becoming a dentist. As the family's second generation in America, Rai wants to ensure that Sikhism burns bright within them, though it's contending against Western culture. Sikhs are tasked with maintaining their culture, which abhors drugs, alcohol and illicit sex in a country where those habits are almost second-nature. With children in school and parents at work, the temples should offer classes to embed the language and religion in the religion's youngest disciples, he believes. "If you forget your culture, you don't know where you came from," he explains, sitting barefoot and sipping spiced tea.

Created for equality Sikhism was founded 500 years ago, making it one of the youngest major religions in the world. An estimated 24 million follow it, making it the fifth-largest creed. Guru Nanak, a high-class Hindu, founded the religion during a moment of enlightenment — he realized that everyone was equal, regardless of their wealth. Sikhism rejected the caste system in India that kept families from progressing socially and economically, and also elevated the importance of women at a time when men owned them like property. Men's last name became Singh and women adopted Kaur as a way to eliminate their caste identities. Over the



everyone. Five articles comprise the faith — long hair, a small dagger, a steel bracelet, a comb and underwear. The uncut hair symbolizes obedience to God, while the the knife represents justice. The comb means cleanliness, and the boxer shorts lead to high moral character. The bracelet is a bond with God with no beginning or end. **Battling ignorance** While many families are trying to keep Sikhism alive, the religion’s advocacy groups in the United States are trying to chisel away American ignorance of their culture and beliefs. The stereotypes can be mostly harmless, but when heightened by fear of bearded and turban-wearing men, they have caused the murder of Sikhs thought to be Muslim terrorists. Americans unfamiliar with the religious tenets lump Middle Eastern and Asian religions together, ignoring their many fundamental differences. The 24 million Sikhs worldwide believe in one God, follow the teachings of 10 gurus and hold that there’s salvation for everyone — Christian, Jewish or Muslim. The 1 billion Muslims follow Islam, the world’s second-largest religion. They study the Quran, believe in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and call Allah their God. Hinduism is the world’s third-largest religion with 811 million followers who recognize many gods and believe that the soul is reincarnated in death. Buddhism has about 325 million adherents who believe that a soul will reach nirvana through thought and self-denial. With America’s attention focused on the Middle East, Sikh leaders are in a race against a ticking terrorist clock to differentiate themselves from fundamentalist Muslims before any events happen that could trigger attacks on their local communities. “There was always this fear of the turban and the beard,” said Rajbir Singh Datta, associate director of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund. “It’s the unknown and the differences.” Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Sikhs have felt compelled to make more of an effort to educate local governments, law enforcement and residents about their culture and beliefs. Locally, an annual Main Street parade brings residents out of their homes and showcases traditions that date back to colonial India. The Livingston Police Department has trained its officers to understand the cultural differences when they interact with the Sikh community. Chief Bill Eldridge said he knew nothing about Sikhism when he took the job 15 years ago and has channeled his own ignorance into bridging the gaps, though he concedes there’s always more that can be done. His officers know that men should be addressed before the women and that the small dagger is a religious symbol rather than a weapon. There have never been any racially motivated attacks reported on Sikh residents, both before and after 9/11, he said. Livingston’s 7,000 Latinos and 1,500 Sikhs have worked long and hard for a good life, and Eldridge thinks that’s why there haven’t been any tensions or fights. “There’s no reason for jealousy or animosity,” he said. “We don’t have the nose-in-the-air syndrome.” During his 15 years in Livingston, Rai said he’s never encountered prejudices either, adding that it’s because so much of the population has deep roots in other countries. Outside the temple, he munched one of the peaches that had been left in a basket there and spoke about how he will never retire or sell his business. Then Rai stripped the pit of all its sweet pulp. In a bountiful country that’s offered him so much, he won’t let its fruits go to waste. *Reporter Scott Jason can be reached at 209-285-2453 or sjason@mercedsun-star.com. <http://www.mercedsunstar.com> | Merced Sun-Star*

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