

September 22, 2010

One disturbing, continuing aftermath of 9/11 is discrimination against American Sikhs, who devoutly practice a religion most Americans know little about. Their faith requires men to wear beards and turbans, and as a result, they are often assumed to be adherents of Islam, an entirely different religion.

To expose and fight blatant discrimination against Sikhs -- and try to educate others -- **Public Justice has just sued M. M. Fowler, Inc., a North Carolina corporation that owns and operates the Family Fare Convenience Store chain, for refusing to hire a man because he is a Sikh and wears a turban and beard.**



Our client, is a U.S. citizen with a college degree in chemistry who worked in other convenience stores for eight years because he could not find white-collar work in the U.S. Mr. Saund applied for a store operator position with Fowler in early 2008. He was qualified for the position, but the company refused to hire him because of its alleged grooming policy, even after Mr. Saund explained that his turban and beard are required by his religion. The company told Mr. Saund that it would hire him, but only if he first removed his turban, cut his hair, and shaved his beard.

"I came from India to find a better life for me and my family in America, and I was looking for a better job." said Mr. Saund. "M. M. Fowler wanted me to choose between a job and my religion. What they did was not right, and is not allowed in America."

In accordance with Sikhism, Mr. Saund, 59, has not cut his hair since birth, and has covered his hair since he was a young boy. He is permitted to wear an under-turban, called a *patka*, at his current convenience store job.

Our complaint -- filed on September 21 with Public Justice Cooperating Counsel Laura J. Wetsch of Winslow Wetsch, PLLC, and John B. Missing of Debevoise & Plimpton LLP -- charges that Fowler violated Title VII and 42 U.S.C. § 1981 when it denied Mr. Saund a job. Title VII requires employers to make reasonable accommodations for applicants' sincerely held religious beliefs, and 42 U.S.C. § 1981 prohibits discrimination in the making of contracts.

To read our complaint, [click here](#).

Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world. It is a monotheistic religion with origins in

South Asia that teaches honesty, compassion, humility, piety, social commitment, and respect for other religions. Sikhs maintain uncut hair throughout their lives, and the turban as a head covering is a mandated article of their religious faith. Approximately 500,000 Sikhs live in the United States. About 1,000 Sikhs live in North Carolina.

Kavneet Singh, managing director of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the nation's oldest Sikh American civil rights and advocacy group, said his fellow adherents face ignorance and intolerance daily, especially since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, which unleashed a torrent of discrimination "Religious intolerance is un-American," said Mr. Singh.

Public Justice's legal team on this case includes Wetsch, Missing, Public Justice Senior Attorney Victoria Ni, and Budd-Kazan Fellow Matt Wessler.

Thanks to you for helping make this important civil rights work possible. With your help, we will keep fighting for justice for all.

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