

The City

Politics, Spoken in Punjabi

BY NEHA SINGH GOHIL

TAKE the A train to the end of the line, walk down two blocks of broken sidewalk, and climb a flight of nearly carpeted stairs. There, in a small office above the local greengrocer on 101st Avenue in Richmond Hill, you'll find Queens County's newest elected official.

Mohinder Singh, wearing a royal blue turban and long white beard, sits behind a desk piled high with colorful Punjabi-language newspapers. Along with four other Sikhs, Mr. Singh, 57, was elected to the Queens County Democratic Committee in last month's primary. The victory represented the first time Sikhs have been elected to public office anywhere in the city.

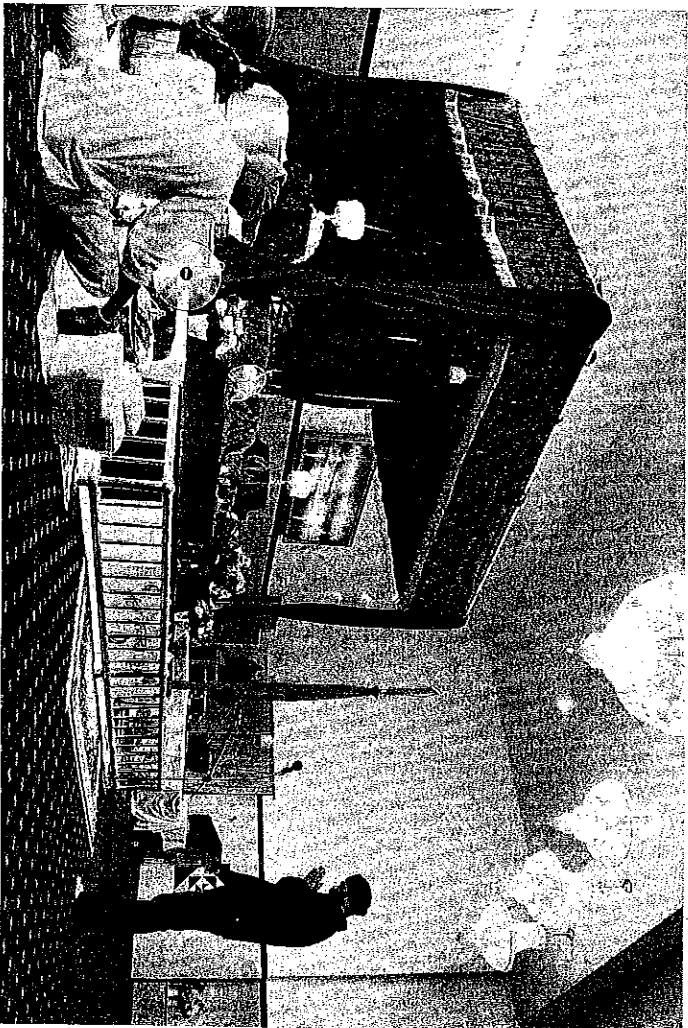
The five have joined almost 3,000 other party committee members statewide; an executive committee of 77 makes most of the party's nominating decisions and develops the party's platform. In this bureaucracy, the power of the new recruits seems fairly muted. Still, the election of these five men signifies the increasing engagement of the Sikh community in American politics.

"These are humble beginnings," said Amardeep Singh Bhalla, legal director of the Sikh Coalition, a civil rights group based in Lower Manhattan. "But we hope they'll make way for Sikhs to be involved in the community going forward."

Mr. Bhalla's organization hopes to encourage more Sikhs to run for other local offices, especially in Queens. The borough is home to most of the city's estimated 55,000 Sikhs, largely in the neighborhoods of Richmond Hill and Ozore Park.

By global standards, Sikhism is a young religion — it turned 300 in 1999 — and its tenets reflect the eclectic makeup of the Indian society and era into which it was born. Sikhism's holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, contains verses by Muslim poets, lines from Hindu scriptures and the Christian word for God.

But the only thing many Americans know about Sikhs, if they have heard of them at all, is that they look different. With their long beards and distinctive turbans, the men often resemble the images of Osama bin Laden that flash on television screens. Though Sikhs have no relation to funda-



Above and below, Amin Thakur for The New York Times; Above right, Saran Tew

mentalists Islam, their turbans and beards set off alarm bells about terrorism in the minds of many of their fellow Americans.

Some voters made that feeling clear when Mr. Singh and his fellow candidates came knocking on their doors to campaign over the summer. Although Mr. Singh, an insurance broker, has lived in Richmond Hill for 12 years, he is wary of people's reaction to his appearance. So when he went door to door to nearly 200 homes, he took along his wife, his son and his two grown daughters. He also took along a staff member from the Grassroots Initiative, an advocacy organization that worked with the Sikh candidates on their campaigns. Even so, Mr. Singh said, some constituents greeted his appearance with the words, "Go back to your country!"

But their unusual appearance is one of the things that encourage Sikhs to get involved in politics. Instances of bias reported to the Sikh Coalition range from stabbings that occur outside the victims' homes to the refusal by vendors to print T-shirts emblazoned with images of gurus and martyrs from Sikh history.

"Because we stand out, we're targeted," Mr. Bhalla said, "and because we're targeted, we need a voice on the inside." There are other reasons Sikhs gravitate to local electoral politics. In New York, the Sikh temples, known as gurdwaras, are run democratically elected committees



Richmond Hill, Queens, is home to Sikh institutions like the Gurdwara Sahib center, left and below, and to Mohinder Singh, above, a newly elected county committeeman.



than conservatives in the 1980's and 90's. "They've now got a majority in 18 different state committees," Mr. Merritt said. "That allows them to recruit and endorse like-minded candidates."

Mr. Singh is a familiar face on the gurdwara committees. He has twice been elected president — "once unanimously," he said proudly — of the Sikh Cultural Society, the oldest gurdwara on the East Coast. Experience on these committees is not the only reason Mr. Singh has taken to local politics easily; beating his opponent with 90 percent of the votes cast. He got an early taste of union politics when he worked as a high school teacher in his village back in India. But the main thing that reached him for American politics, he said, is his faith's emphasis on diversity. Because of Sikhism, he explained, "I see no stranger."

For years, he added, Sikhs have been trying to effect changes from the outside. "Now," he said, "we want to sit among them with our turbans and make the change ourselves."