

## Discrimination: The “Ragheads”

*Summary: Since Anti-Asian sentiment was rampant in the American West, Sikhs were the victims of systematic discrimination. They were also targets of defamation and physical violence throughout the early 20th century.*

Sikh immigration to the U.S. began during a period when anti-Asian sentiment was already growing among the European-American pioneers and settlers of the West. At first, Sikhs were welcomed by employers in Washington state, for example, to work on railroads and in lumber mills. However, immigrant Asians were often a threat to organized labor because they would work for low wages. White workers, many of whom were recent immigrants themselves, were struggling to improve their working conditions and wages and resented Asian labor.

In 1907 a mob of 600 white lumberjacks in Bellingham, Washington attacked the homes of some 250 Sikh millworkers, beating them, throwing their belongings into the street, and herding them through town to the city jail. The *Bellingham Herald* headlines reported on September 6, 1907: “Terrorized Indians Fly Before Lawless Crowd. Brown Men Beaten While Police are Paralyzed. Lodging Houses are Raided and Inmates are Dragged Forth and Ordered to Leave Town.” One of the articles described the “Hindus” as “dusky aliens” with “turbans of every color of the rainbow.”

The newspapers of the day generally deplored the violence of the mob, but sympathized with the laborers’ desire to rid the country of Asians. The *Tacoma News*, for example, wrote: “No one possessing the least humanitarian instinct would treat a dog after the fashion the Bellingham mob treated the ‘poor, benighted Hindu’. It may be just as well to drive him out, but it might have been done kindly, even if firmly.” Less publicized riots also occurred in Seattle and Everett, while real estate brokers in Port Angeles publicly pledged not to sell property to “Hindoos and Negroes.”

While the first wave of anti-Asian sentiment was aimed at Chinese and Japanese immigrants, Indians were now also targeted. All down the Pacific Coast, the turban-wearing Sikhs were referred to in popular slang as “ragheads.” By 1907, an anti-immigrant group called the Japanese and Korean

Exclusion League, changed its name to the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) in order to widen its exclusion agitation to include all “Asiatics—Indians” as well. Many AEL members were also involved in the organized labor movement and helped to spread the view that “Asiatic” immigrants were a menace to American workers.

With the violence and harassment came legislation that dimmed prospects for Sikhs in America. In 1913, the state of California passed the Alien Land Act of 1913, which barred “aliens” ineligible for citizenship from owning land. In 1917, the U.S. Congress passed the “Barred Zone Act,” which established areas, including India, from which immigration would be halted. The act specifically prohibited the immigration of the wives of workers already settled in the U.S. Given these circumstances, it was not an easy choice to remain and try to put down American roots, but many of the early Sikhs did just that.