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South Asians battle lingering stereotypes from 9/11

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THE RECORD

PAGES: 1 2 > DISPLAY ON ONE PAGE | PRINT | E-MAIL

JERSEY CITY — Nearly a decade has passed since terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center and severely damaged the Pentagon, but many South Asian immigrants say they're still living with the lingering effects of racism and anti-Islamic fervor unleashed by the attacks.

Although as a group they are richly diverse, the Sikh, Hindus and Muslims who gathered at St. Peter's College on Saturday all told stories about how America changed drastically after Sept. 11, 2001. And it wasn't for the better.

The three-hour conference, titled "An America for All of Us," was organized by South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), a non-profit that is holding a series of discussions around the country in preparation for the 10-year commemoration of 9/11. About 50 people attended Saturday's event, which was broken down into three panel discussions featuring community activists and political leaders.

Sitting on a panel of political leaders was Teaneck Mayor Mohammed Hameeduddin, who offered the simple advice that South Asians must get involved in government at every level.

Hameeduddin urged South Asian communities to link up with other minority groups to advance common interests.

"Justice is not about 'just us,' " he said. "It has to be about liberty and justice for all. Our job is not to be bitter. But to be better."

Children have also borne the brunt of racism in the post-9/11 world. With their distinctive dress and head scarves, South Asian children are often bullied at school, panelists said.

Salim Patel, a trustee on the Passaic Board of Education, spoke of the need for schools to seriously address bullying. He also called on parents to become more involved in their children's education.

"South Asians believe in education, but they don't come to the [school board] meetings," he said.

South Asian adults also complained of being bullied in a country where many came to find freedom and acceptance.

Rajinder Singh Khalsa, a Sikh, spoke about being assaulted on the street for wearing a turban. When he threatened to call the police, his assailant threatened to kill him.

"I'm a first-generation immigrant," Khalsa told the audience. "We felt we came to America and there

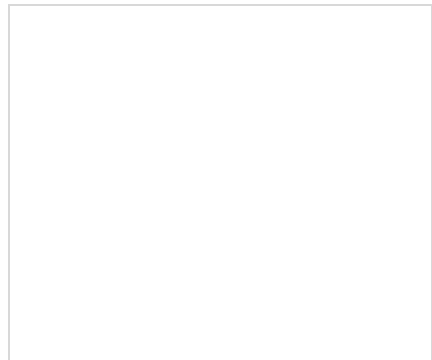


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Teaneck Mayor Mohammed Hameeduddin, left, and Passaic school board member Salim Patel during Saturday's conference at St. Peter's College.

At a glance

- To get involved with "An America for All of Us" [visit the website](#).
- If you believe you have been the victim of discrimination at an airport in the United States and wish to file a complaint, go to the Transportation Safety Administration website at www.tsa.gov. Click on "Civil Rights for Travelers."



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would be equal rights. But this is a very different America."

Aparna Hansdeep Singh complained bitterly about being singled out at airport security checkpoints because of his beard. He's often patted down in the "glass boxes" at airports, he said.

The glass boxes, Singh said, have no useful security purpose and only serve to reinforce stereotypes about Muslims being terrorists.

Vineeta Kophi told how South Asians were often the victims of domestic abuse. But they're afraid to call the police because they fear their husbands will be deported.

Despite his troubles in the post-9/11 world, Khalsa said he was grateful for the promise of America. "God Bless America," he said. "God Bless All."

Yet, despite America's promise of religious freedom, Muslims and Hindus have had to fight to establish houses of worship.

Yasser Abdelkader spoke about the ongoing battle in Bridgewater to build the Al Falah Center, a mosque. The Muslim community submitted plans to convert an old banquet hall into a mosque, a conforming use in the zone. But the Bridgewater zoning board first rejected the plan, then changed the zoning restrictions so the mosque wouldn't conform. That case is now in federal court.

"Not only did the town change the rules of the game, they changed the rules of the game after the ball had been thrown and was in midair," Abdelkader said.

Hansdip Bhindra of Long Valley told his own story of hard-fought justice. A software engineer from Morris County, he was flying from Newark to Dayton, Ohio, just before Thanksgiving in 2002 to see friends.

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