Sikhs in America

Through The Lens

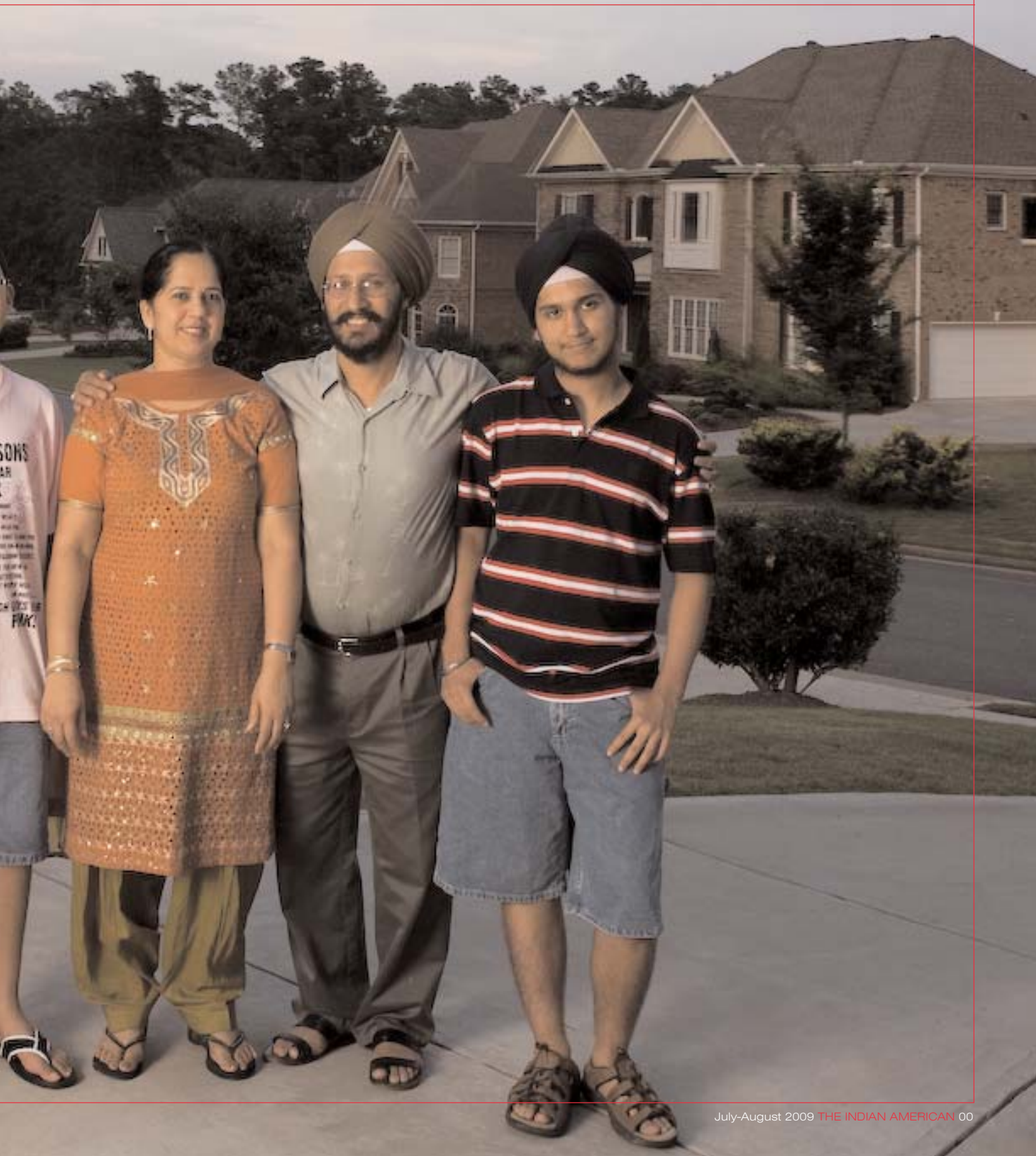
In April 2006, photographer Fiona Aboud made her way to Midtown Manhattan to capture portraits of participants in the annual Sikh Day parade. In its second decade, the parade was a chance for Sikh Americans to march in the city, proudly displaying their cultural identifiers, celebrating traditional dress, dance and food.

Aboud, an acclaimed photographer who has been published in The New York Times, Time magazine and Sports Illustrated, has always been drawn to capturing individuals in the midst of "life-changing events," seeking an emotional authenticity that is difficult to recreate in a formal studio setting. Aboud brought the portable photo studio she had been using for her "Street Portraits" series to the Sikh Day parade and found herself falling into what would become a two-year-long, nationwide project.

"I tried to always study things I felt were misunderstood," the Brazilian-born photographer says, "and were also on the periphery.

Her interest in understanding this often-misunderstood group coupled with the Sikh parade participants' eagerness to dispel

Seeking to dispel the notion that "turban means terrorist," photographer **Fiona Aboud** has spent the past two years traveling throughout the United States, capturing everyday images of Sikhs in America, **Shilpi Paul** reports



misconceptions about their culture led to the eventual creation a book of Aboud's photos, "Sikhs in America."

Aboud is still awed by the warm reception she received from her first moments at the parade. "During the parade, I had people giving me food, inviting me to the gudwara," she

These invitations extended into the future and into private family homes. One invitation led to another, and soon Aboud was traveling throughout the United States photographing Sikh Americans in their homes and workplaces. She was soon able to realistically visualize embarking on a massive project. "There's never been a comprehensive photographic documentation of Sikhs in America," she says. "No one's really tackled the project as a whole."

Aboud hopes to explore "the challenge of maintaining your identity and still being an American," with her collection. She wants to investigate "how Sikhs are a part of our country, and how they reconcile their traditions within it." She photographed both first- and second-generation Sikhs, as well some as Caucasians who have converted to Sikhism. Aboud sought to capture "people

who are contributing in different ways, business or social."

Her collection focuses on portraying Sikhs living typical American lives and contributing to the mainstream society. Showing intentionally stark contrasts of Sikhs in traditional dress and unshorn hair in classically American settings, often on suburban landscapes and inside of familiar-looking American homes, Aboud represents this juxtaposition as just one more American story in the teeming mass.

"This photo could be any family, any city, any place in this country," she reiterates Aboud. "The context of the pictures helps people relate, to see that this is their life." The images drive home the idea that the individuals are one of the many faces of America.

Sikh Americans are not well understood by the mainstream American public, and are often erroneously associated with a vaguely defined image of "terrorist." After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, U.S. media outlets filled the airwaves and newspapers with images of turbaned terrorists seeking to destroy Americans. The image of Osama bin Laden, turban clad, immediately conjures up the fear and anger of the

9/11 attacks. The Sikhs, in an ironic coincidence of culture, wear turbans to represent their devotion to their religious path.

Sikh Americans found themselves under attack almost immediately. Despite several campaigns to dispel the connection and to correctly identify different types of head coverings, Sikh Americans fell victim to bizarre and horrific acts of violence and discrimination.

On Sept. 15, 2001, days after the terror attacks, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a gas station owner living in Mesa, Ariz., was shot to death by a man seeking tragically misguided revenge for the 9/11 attacks. Sodhi was the first of many such hate crimes, and the Sikh community has been forced to deal with the misconceptions ever since then.

"People just stereotype 'turban means terrorist,' " Aboud says. "Because you see some images on the news, that's what people come away with."

Aboud hopes her project will help to break the mistaken connection. "When I first did this project," she remembers, "some of the reactions I got were 'Oh, wow, how did you get in? How did you infiltrate them?' " In stark opposition to the image of secrecy and isolation, Aboud says getting to

know the community "was the easiest thing ever."

"As I learned in the gudwara," she says, "it's the complete opposite. Generosity and welcoming like I've never ever experienced with anybody. It's ridiculous to think that people have that in their mind, that they're somehow closed off."

Aboud relates tales of utter trust and welcome, doors being left unlocked for her to freely enter and invitations to stay the night at countless homes. "At every house I go to, I never leave hungry," Aboud says with a grin. "I joke that that's why I'm doing the project, so I can eat amazing Indian food."

Her upbringing no doubt has contributed to Abourd's uniquely compassionate take on the "outsider" experience in America. Raised in the U.S. by Brazilian-Lebanese and Russian Jewish parents, Aboud has had a lifetime to contemplate how exactly the immigrant experience plays into identity formation and self-definition. "I feel like, in general, my upbringing was very worldly," she says. "I would go to Brazil and see the poverty, and see how people live and that understanding people is so crucial."


WELCOME TO
COUNTY LINE
BOTTLE SHOP
PLUS
TAX
Bluebird
Pineapple Juice
Bluebird
Pineapple Juice
Bluebird
Pineapple Juice
Ocean Spray