by {ga=csalazar}
Tuesday, December 18, 2012 12:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, February 05, 2014 05:16 PM

BELLEROSE, QUEENS — Navraj Deep has wanted to become a police officer since he was 10 years old, but as a member of the Sikh religion, he knows that he would have to give up his right to wear a turban if he wants to join the New York Police Department.

It is a compromise he is unwilling to make. “I really look forward to serving my community and being one of New York’s finest,” said the now-13-year-old teenager, on a recent Sunday at his temple, the Sant Sagar Gurdwara in Bellerose, Queens. “But this country is supposed to be free, and if it’s not free, then what are we here for?”

For years, Sikh community advocates have been trying to get the NYPD to reform its dress code to allow officers to wear turbans and full beards, which they say would give an equal opportunity for more Sikhs to become members of the city's police force. And now they have found a potent ally in their cause — city Comptroller John C. Liu, who is expected to run for mayor and has been shoring up his visibility in the Asian American community.

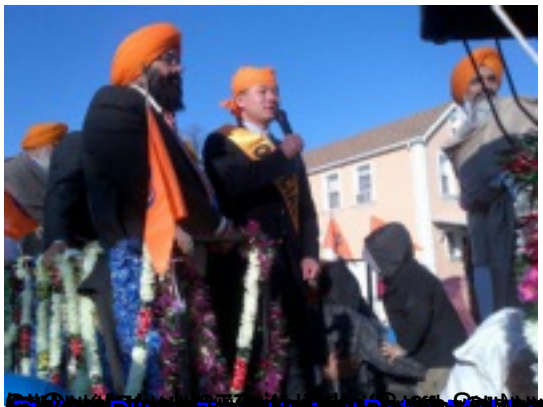
"We get discriminated against by the way we look but people would get to know Sikhs in the NYPD," said Gurdev Singh Kang, the president of the Sikh Cultural Society in Richmond Hill, Queens. Kang commented that the few Sikhs in the police force of such a diverse city are not recognized because they are clean-shaven. "Until they wear their turban and beard then they will know we are Sikhs."

The NYPD has defended their policy, saying they do allow certain Sikh articles of faith in their dress code.

"The NYPD makes reasonable accommodations for religious beliefs, and already allows Sikh members of the service to wear turbans that fit under department headgear," NYPD spokesman Paul Browne told The New York Post in an article published in August.

Browne also told the tabloid that officers are allowed to wear beards at a certain length, but added that in the case of an emergency officers may need to wear gas masks but "beards of a certain length will break the seal" allowing contaminated air to enter.

There are approximately 19 Sikhs in the city's police department, according to Mayor Michael Bloomberg.



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