



VIGIL EYE

Valarie Kaur at a protest aimed at shutting down the adult section (which featured minors in sex ads) of a website owned by Village Voice Media

CHANGE

Minority report



Sikh-American activist and film-maker
VALARIE KAUR is moving America with her passionate fight for a misunderstood community.
By AARTI VIRANI

WHO'S THAT GIRL?

Over the weeks that followed the gut-wrenching massacre at a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin last August—a tragedy that left seven (including the gunman) dead—a brave, young voice filled American airwaves. Even as she spoke for the rights of Sikh-Americans on a dizzying array of media platforms, Valarie Kaur propelled members of her grieving community to organise vigils, write op-eds and join forces with law enforcement, broadcasting their stories to the American public.

WHY SHOULD YOU LISTEN?

"For the first time in 100 years of history, we [had] the nation's attention," said the 31-year-old film-maker, civil rights advocate and Yale Law School fellow. "Tens of thousands of people stood with us to say that an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us."

WHAT'S HER STORY?

An impassioned storyteller, the third-generation Sikh-American (her paternal grandfather sailed by steamship from Punjab to California a century ago) was raised in California's Central Valley. "When I came home from school in tears because friends tried, earnestly, to convert me to Christianity, my grandfather handed me books on Sikh philosophy," she explains, revealing that she spent high school narrating Sikh and Indian history to American audiences, tackling topics like Partition and the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Delhi. "As I grew older, I realised the stories passed down to me were nearly absent from my history books at school—few

people knew of Punjabi immigrants settling on the western American shores at the turn of the century."

WHAT WAS THE SPARK?

Kaur captured such struggles in *Divided We Fall*, an award-winning documentary (produced with her husband, writer-director Sharat Raju), chronicling the many hate crimes against Sikh, Muslim and Arab Americans following 9/11. "On September 11, I was crumpled on the floor of my parents' bedroom, watching the towers fall over and over again between images of Osama Bin Laden with a beard and turban. It wasn't long before I realised that the image of America's new enemy looked like my grandfathers, cousins and uncles," she recalls. "In one instant, my community became automatically suspect, perpetually foreign and potentially terrorist."

... AND WHAT DID SHE DO?

Kaur criss-crossed the country, camera in hand, capturing accounts that remained untold on the evening news. She was startled by the support. "A gay man in New York told me, 'I must fight for the rights of Sikhs to wear their turbans just as I fight for the right for the gay community to come out of the closet.'" She adds, "Our community's struggle is bound to all Americans seeking to live, work and worship without fear." It's a fear she's experienced first-hand, she confesses, recounting a nightmarish arrest while acting as a legal observer documenting a protest in New York City about nine years ago. "When I found myself behind bars in a detention centre nicknamed 'Guantanamo on the Hudson', I came to understand that storytelling is not enough," Kaur says. "I realised we need to wield our stories strategically to challenge the structures of power, and I asked myself: how do we fight well?"

HOW DOES SHE FIGHT?

Currently, Kaur and Raju are working on a project surrounding the Oak Creek tragedy while releasing *The Worst Of The Worst*, a documentary that zones in on solitary confinement and super-maximum-security prisons in America. "I've learnt to make stories legible in halls of power and have come up with my own formula for social justice work," declares Kaur. "Storytelling plus advocacy equals social change." ■