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Educator's Guide  
*for the film by Erika Surat Andersen*

**TURBANS**

*written by*  
Ellen Bari



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**CENTER FOR  
ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA**

145 Ninth Street, Suite 350, San Francisco, CA 94103  
t: 415.863.0814 f: 415.863.7428  
[www.asianamericanmedia.org](http://www.asianamericanmedia.org)

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**GRADE LEVEL:** 6-8th

**SUBJECT AREAS:** Social Studies, U.S. History, World History

**ESTIMATED DURATION:** Each individual lesson plan, approximately 1 hour

## FILM OVERVIEW

*Turbans* is a short dramatic film (30 minutes) which explores the inner struggles of an Asian Indian immigrant family torn between their cultural traditions and the desire for social acceptance in America. Although born in the United States, the Singh boys are attacked for being different. The turbans they wear, a tradition sacred to their Sikh ancestors, serve only to identify them as outsiders to the prejudiced landscape of Astoria, Oregon, 1918. The film offers a moving examination about the tough choices made for the sake of cultural and religious assimilation. Based on the memoirs of the filmmaker's grandmother, the film sheds light on pertinent issues of our time.

The guide consists of eight lessons. The first lesson includes a pre-viewing warm up and activity to personalize the experience and contextualize cultural differences. The second lesson includes the viewing and post-viewing activity. The third lesson brings the film's issues into focus today, in a post 9/11 world. The last five lessons provide teachers with learning extension possibilities and research ideas beyond the film.

This guide is designed to help you enhance the viewing experience and build upon important themes that are introduced in the videotape. The lessons include questions that stimulate critical thinking and class discussion as well as creative class activities. Please view these activities as guidelines only, and feel free to adapt them to your personal teaching style and to your students' needs.

## MATERIALS

1. A copy of the film, *Turbans* by Erika Surat Andersen. To purchase a copy of the film please contact the Center of Asian American Media (CAAM) at [distribution@asianamericanmedia.org](mailto:distribution@asianamericanmedia.org). You can also visit the web site at <http://catalog.asianamericanmedia.org>

**Websites:** Access needed to internet for student research.

2. <http://www.dnsi.org>  
Harvard discrimination and National Security Initiative: Examining the Mistreatment of Communities Minority During times of military action or national crisis  
[http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=962779](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=962779)  
Social Science Research Network

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<http://hrw.org/reports/2002/usahate/>  
Human Rights Watch

<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/index.php?sty=74116-documentary>  
Post 9/11 Violence:

<http://www.asianamericanfilmfestival.org/2007/films-events/film-detail/?i=31>  
A Dream in Doubt (a documentary film)

3. <http://www.densho.org/causes/default.asp?path=3leadership/3leadershipinhawaii.asp>

4. <http://www.faithresource.com/showcase/Sikhism/sikhismoverview.htm>  
Sikhism

<http://www.bartleby.com/65/si/Sikhism.html>  
The Columbia Encyclopedia

<http://www.sikhnextdoor.org>

<http://www.sikhnet.com/s/SikhIntro>

5. [www.upperstall.com/turbans.html](http://www.upperstall.com/turbans.html)  
Filmmaker's comments

### **Activity 1 – Pre-Viewing Activity: Personalizing the Story**

To personalize the experience, before viewing the film, lead the students through a preliminary discussion (warm-up activity) about their experiences of being different.

Have the students describe situations in which they felt different from the majority. Ask the students:

- How did it make you feel?
- Describe the reactions of your surroundings?
- How did their responses make you feel?
- What were some of the concrete ways you responded? (You can prompt students to give examples such as changing their actions, trying to adapt, becoming more extreme, etc.)
- How do you think the experience could have been different?

After completing the warm-up activity, move the conversation to a discussion on the types of customs that often differentiate world cultures and religions. Invite a volunteer to come up to the board and record the list solicited from the students. The list should include the following types of items: head covering, dress, food, prayer houses, education, “holy” language, etc.

Instruct the students to watch the film carefully, to see if they can identify the turning points in the film, i.e. the moments when different characters make decisions that will change the story, and in this case, change their lives.

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## **Activity 2 – Post-Viewing Discussion/Perspective Journal Entries**

Begin by leading a full-class discussion by asking the following questions:

- Were you surprised by the family's decision to cut the boys' hair and remove their turbans? Why or why not?
- What do you think was the turning point in the story? Why?
- Why do you think the father decided to go ahead with cutting the boys' hair and removing their turbans?
- Why do you think the mother was against it?
- How do you think the boys felt? How about the sister?
- Do you think it could have been different? If so, how?
- Do you think the teacher or principal could have reacted differently?

Encourage the students to see the pros and the cons of each character's experience, for example the father was upset about giving up a piece of his tradition but optimistic about helping his children become real Americans and building a brighter future for them. Have each student write a perspective journal entry, taking the point of view of one of the characters in the film, describing how they felt about abandoning an important custom in their culture. The student can choose to write from the perspective of the father, mother, sons, daughter, non-Sikh family friend, teacher, principal, etc.

Have a few volunteers share their journal entries with the class.

## **Activity 3 – Post-Viewing Activity: History Repeats Itself, Post 9/11**

Ask your students:

- Do you think the family would experience the same type of prejudice today?
- Why or why not?

You can remind the students that unfortunately, prejudice is still very much with us. Feel free to reference any newsworthy item that deals with blatant prejudice in our society today. (At the time of the writing of this guide, Don Imus, the 40-year veteran radio talk show host, has overstepped all boundaries of decency by defaming a women's basketball team, and lost his job as a result.)

Fast forward almost 100 years from Astoria, Oregon, 1918. After 9/11, all Americans were angered and saddened by the terror attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. However, even in our country, some decided to take the law into their own hands. There were many incidents of extreme violence against anyone who looked Arab and this included Sikhs. Your students probably do not know that the first person lawlessly killed in the United States right after 9/11 was a Sikh who was wearing a turban while at work at his gas station in Mesa, Arizona. The killer thought all turban-wearers were alike, in his mind, all terrorists who deserved to die. The documentary film, *A Dream in Doubt* follows Rana Sodhi, the brother of the murdered Arizona man, as he

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seeks to reconcile his brother's death with the success that the family has enjoyed since immigrating to the United States prior to 9/11. *Please refer to website reference #2.*

(You may also want to share the following with the class: During World War II, the Japanese Americans experienced similar misunderstanding and racism after the Japanese government bombed Pearl Harbor. This became an excuse for the U.S. government to incarcerate 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry living on the west coast, half of whom were children, for up to four years. (There was a smaller number of Japanese Americans incarcerated in Hawaii, about 1,200, but due to the support of General Delos Emmons, the size of their community – over 35 percent of the population of Hawaii – and their integration into the local economy, there was no mass incarceration. *See website reference #3.*) Many Japanese Americans tried to prove their patriotism and loyalty to the U.S. by giving up language and traditions. Many were ashamed of their internment experiences and refused to discuss this with their own children who were born after the war. For decades, the general public had misconceptions about Japanese Americans. Sixty years later, when Arab Americans were targeted by the American media after 9/11, Japanese American organizations were among the first to speak out in defense of Arab Americans.)

A number of articles have been included here in the web references that point to hate crimes today, especially against Sikhs. You can print out a part of one of these reports or have the students do this research on their own in smaller groups. *Refer to website reference #2.*

Bring the class back together as a group to discuss their reactions to the articles.

- Why were the Sikhs singled out?
- Were you surprised? Why or why not?
- What do you think that says about people's knowledge of Arabs, Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs and others?
- What do you think would help avoid this kind of situation?

(You can explain that learning about others and knowing about different cultures and customs is the first step on the road towards peace and understanding.)

#### **Activity 4 – Extension Activity: World Cultures and Religions**

Reiterate that prejudice is often the result of ignorance, and that in many cases, simply understanding different peoples' customs goes a long way to remove the fears and bigotry born out of a lack of knowledge. Re-visit the list of customs that the students helped generate during the first lesson (head covering, dress, food, prayer houses, education, "holy" language, etc.) Divide the class into groups of three or four students and have each research customs of the one of the world religions. (Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, Vodun (Voodoo)) Bring the class back together for a discussion, emphasizing the numerous similarities amidst the many differences. You can also create a wall chart listing all of the various findings that will allow students to review the similarities and differences long after the classroom discussion has ended.

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### **Activity 5 – Extension Activity: Family Stories**

Many of your students may themselves be new immigrants, and no doubt have parents or grandparents who came to this country as immigrants. Explain to the students how assimilation (changing something in one's heritage in order to fit in) has always played a role in the life of new immigrants. Have the students interview a family member who has a new immigrant story, one that perhaps involved a choice or decision they made in order to better fit in with the new American culture.

Once the students have written up the results of these interviews have volunteers share those stories with the class. Lead a discussion about how assimilation continues to play a role in many of our lives. See if the students can come up with some ideas for how to make the assimilation process a little easier for new immigrants in your community.

### **Activity 6 – Extension Activity: Hear from the Filmmaker – Creative Writing Exercise**

The story of the film is based on the filmmaker's grandmother's account of life in Oregon in 1918. Her comments are available online and might give the students some additional insight. After reading the filmmaker's account, ask the students if the father were alive today, do they think he would have been happy with his decision. Why or why not?

How about the other family members?

As a creative writing assignment, have the students imagine some alternative scenarios to what actually happened in the film. Encourage the students to follow any of the characters beyond Oregon, 1918. If the boys had not cut the hair at that young age, perhaps they would have decided to do that later on their own, perhaps they would return to their roots as adults or college students, perhaps the sister opened a school for Sikhs, maybe the youngest returns to India to live freely as a Sikh, etc.

*Please refer to website reference #5*

### **Activity 7 – Extension Activity: Film Studies – When is a film “airing one's dirty laundry”?**

This film sparked some controversy within the South Asian community itself. Some first generation Indians (i.e., older folks from India) were outraged that the filmmaker had portrayed this incident at all, and wanted the film "banned." They thought that by showing the hair cut, the film was promoting this option. On the other hand, many second-generation Indians (born in the U.S.) tended to relate to the film because they felt this social tension themselves when they wore a turban or dressed in Indian clothing.

(This is such a pressing issue, even today, that during this controversy a South Indian-born journalist from Canada wrote to the film maker and told her that Sikh teenagers in Canada were getting so much pressure from their parents to continue wearing their turbans, when they didn't want to, that the suicide rate among these teenagers was seriously increasing.) The varied reactions to the film raise many relevant questions. Whether it be the wearing of turbans, the hair coverings worn by Muslim women or the *yarmulka* worn by observant Jews, practices that are outside the American mainstream present a myriad of complex issues for all involved.

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Ask the students:

- Do you think that dealing with hard family or community issues in a film is a good idea. Why or why not?
- Do you see it as “going public” with something that should remain private?
- Do you think this kind of film “puts ideas into young people’s heads”?
- Do the students see the film as promoting the cutting of the hair, or is the film trying to portray the difficult choices, while not advocating a particular path?

When a filmmaker from a minority population (Indian, black, gay, lesbian, female, handicapped, etc.) makes a film and shows something negative about that discriminated-against group, is that OK, or not?

### **Activity 8 – Extension Activity: Turbans Around the World**

Turbans themselves may be an interesting subject to research. Divide the class into small groups and have each group research different kinds of turbans. Turbans are worn in many different countries, and they are tied differently and used in different ways. Several different kinds of turbans are even worn within India and Pakistan.