

San Jose Mercury News

November 7, 2009

ADS SEEK JUSTICE FOR SIKH VICTIMS

A nonprofit Sikh organization launched a BART poster campaign this month in hopes that a photograph of an elderly crying woman will spur mainstream riders to learn more about the massacre of people in India 25 years ago.

The 20-poster, \$10,000-campaign on BART stations in San Francisco and Oakland is spearheaded by the Fremont-based Ensaaf group, said co-director Jaskaran Kaur. Ads appeared Nov. 2, and will last a month. The campaign is in honor of the 25th anniversary of pogroms against Sikhs in India. Kaur acknowledged that the campaign refers to a seemingly obscure period of history for most BART riders.

"I think that's why people will be interested," Kaur said. "Our goal is for someone to read the ad, do a double take and visit our Web site to get more information to learn about abuses against Sikhs and other minorities." Her group strives to achieve justice for mass state crimes in India with a focus on Punjab. The Consulate General of India in San Francisco did not return phone calls and e-mails seeking comment about the campaign.

Though the BART poster campaign is subtle, the ads refer to the biggest flash point of modern-day tensions between Sikhs and the Indian government. In the 1980s, Sikh separatists attacked Hindu minorities in northern India. In retaliation, the Indian army moved into the holiest of Sikh shrines, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, on a holiday in June 1984, removing the Sikh militants, killing hundreds and damaging the temple.

On Oct. 31, 1984, two Sikh bodyguards assassinated Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. And the next day, members of an Indian political party began a campaign in which thousands of Sikhs were killed, wounded, raped, burned and tortured.

There are about 35,000 Sikhs living in the Bay Area.

The BART ad campaign was partially the brainstorm of Nirvair Singh, 44, a Cupertino software engineer who was a college student in Punjab at the time of the violence. "I was profoundly touched and shaken up," he said. Singh added that the ad campaign is not aimed to smear any particular group, simply to keep an issue alive for victims and survivors who are still waiting for justice. He said the real culprits of the violence have still not been punished in India. "My fellow Americans get outraged when someone tries to trivialize or deny the gravity of the Holocaust or tries to discount Rwandan genocide," he said. "Then why should they ignore the anti-Sikh pogroms that left nearly 4,000 dead and tens of thousands maimed and scarred? ... I just want to keep this issue alive so that we don't forget."