

## INTERSECTIONS RADIO

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### TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You are listening to KXRY Portland on 107.1 FM, 91.1 FM, and streaming online at XRAY.fm. I'm Sarika Mehta. Welcome to Intersections Radio, a new independent podcast which also airs on XRAY. Intersections Radio is the show where we geek out on all things intersectionality.

Over the past two weeks, I've been doing a series on South Asian comic and graphic artists who use their art for the purpose of social justice. Today is the last installment of the series, and a gem of a feature: Vishavjit Singh, whose alter ego you may know as Sikh Captain America.

His origin story began as a dual identity of engineer and cartoonist. He drew clever images of Sikh Americans in a post-911 era, living everyday lives. He became a sensation with his poster of Captain America donning a turban and a beard. This led to a costumed photoshoot throughout Manhattan, and eventually teaching workshops on identity based cartooning as a means of empowerment for students. For this election year, he's also started a new campaign called "Send A Sikh Note To Trump." Using his own artwork on postcards, he writes compassionate and witty messages to Donald Trump, to fight racism without using hateful language.

Vishavjit Singh joined me on Skype to chat about using his art as social justice. This is Intersections Radio. Vishavjit Singh, thank you for joining me on Intersections Radio, and thank you for taking time out of your crime-fighting schedule.

VISHAVJIT SINGH: Thanks for having me.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, why don't we start with talking a little bit about yourself -- selves a little bit.

VISHAVJIT SINGH: I'm primarily a cartoonist, writer, and as of last three years, a performance artist. You can see me at times either online or sometimes on the streets of New York and other cities dressed up as Captain America, in my turban and beard. It was kind of an accident that led me to dress up as Captain America, but really, the focus of my work as an artist is to confront our stereotypes and, you know, kind of get people to think a little bit outside the box, and get beyond the snap judgments, which I have my own, as well, but I try, you know, in my work, to expand my horizons and hopefully others as well.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, let's start with your most famous persona, as you were just talking about. Sikh Captain America. I came to learn about this a couple of years, or a few years ago. How and why did you decide to dress up as Captain America, with the turban, and as you say, kick some intolerant ass?

VISHAVJIT SINGH: It started as an illustration which I created, a digital illustration I created for the New York City ComicCon, where I went for the first time four years ago. And, in preparation for my visit, and I actually went in there as an exhibitor, so I had a table that I rented. I was going to show kids some of my work, sell some of my art, prints, and postcards, and stuff like that. And so, it's a really big event, I mean, it has over 100,000 people who come in through a period of three to four days. You have anywhere from Sony and bigtime animation studios, to artists like myself, who are, you know, trying to

expand their audience and test their products and work.

So, the event happens in October, usually, and I was -- this was summertime, I'm thinking, okeh, how do I, what do I do to grab attention beyond the fact that I wear a turban and a beard? So, that year, the first Captain America movie had come out, and I, you know, I'm always, I mean a lot of my art is sort of representing my own experience on the streets of New York and other cities in the US, and a lot of stereotyping that I have to face, have been facing all my life. And the Captain America, somehow I made this connection that we need a new Captain America, who is going to fight intolerance. I mean, it's not a strange concept. I mean, to me, it didn't seem strange. Captain America and a lot of superheroes fight bad guys, you know, they fight for justice, usually, some form of justice, so I'm like, well, okeh, so Captain America, super patriotic, superhero in America, is going to fight intolerance.

So what I did is I created an illustration of Captain America, turban, beard, had this catchy caption on it, which kind of ended with saying, Okeh, let's kick some intolerant ass. Created a poster, went to the comic con, and the poster was really not for sale, it was really just for display purposes, to get attention to my work, and it did work, I mean, over the course of three, three and a half days I was there, it attracted a lot of attention. People taking photos, coming over, asking me questions, so, you know, it did what it was supposed to do.

There was a photographer, Fiona Aboud, who is based in New York City. She's a Brazilian-American photographer, and she was at the time working for five or six years on a project where she was capturing Sikh Americans, people serving in the army to families to businessmen to the first victim of post-911 hate crime, Balbir Singh Sodhi, which was a Sikh gas station owner in Arizona. So, she was trying to capture me, she didn't know any other cartoonists. She saw my work, she saw the poster, and just in passing mentioned, hey, Vishavjit, maybe you should come back next year, dressed up as Captain America. And shut her down right away, I said, no, I, you know, I don't wear costumes, I've never worn a costume, I'm not going to do this. That was it, you know. She forgot about it, I forgot it, and my reasons for saying no, really, you know, were, really had to also do with my own body image issues. I'm a skinny guy, always have been skinny, have been teased all my life for being skinny. So, I mean, for me, you know, I could not even imagine donning his skin-tight -- the uniform. So, that was really my reason why I said no.

But she, you know, she was so polite and nice, and she didn't even ask why. And then what happened is, fast forward ten months, there was a massacre at a Sikh gurdwara in Milwaukee. That hit me really hard, I mean, I really felt, you know, hey, this could be me. I mean, I could be in a space where somebody who has massive problems with somebody who looks like me could come and, you know, physically assault me or, you know, gun me down. So I penned an op-ed piece for the Seattle Times, basically making the case, we need a new American superhero who's going to fight intolerance, and that superhero could be Asian, could be Sikh, could be Jewish, could be black, could be Hispanic. Anything but the majority demographic that has been, for the longest time, in comic books, which is white men, mostly, not even white women, it's mostly men, who are white. So I'm like, well, you know, let's talk about a little bit of diversity.

So Fiona read that, which reconsidered the situation. And, I wanted to say no, but I ended up saying yes, because I just felt the circumstances had changed, and I needed to get out of my own way and just, you know, get out of my own sort of body image issues and just give it a shot. So I agreed, and it took a few months for her to get a costume my size from a Hong Kong-based vendor. Then, finding a warm day, summer, 2013, we -- I stepped out, very close to Central Park in Manhattan. We hit the biggest cultural sort of parade in New York City, the Puerto Rican Day Parade was happening, which we did

not know at the time. So we walked through it, go to Central Park, and basically, that's kind of the backdrop of why and how I did it.

Fiona's reasons were, she wanted to see how people would respond to this image of a turban and bearded Captain America.

SARIKA MEHTA: That's actually my next question is, yeah, talk about how people did respond to what is seemingly the most patriotic superhero wearing a turban and beard, and in New York.

VISHAVJIT SINGH: Yeah. I mean, I was super nervous, I was very scared, I had sweaty palms, by nature I'm a guy who's shy, who doesn't seek necessarily a lot of, you know, attention. So I wasn't sure how people were going to respond, and what happened is, as we started walking into this, by this parade -- so, I ended up spending about seven, eight hours walking the streets of New York.

And it was like somebody had flipped a switch, and we were like in a parallel universe where suddenly now, everybody -- almost everybody, except two young men, who called me a terrorist, except that, and that's an exception to the rule, I mean, I had hundreds, and perhaps thousands of people who took photos with me, of me, I had police officers who tapped on my shoulder saying, hey, can I take a photo of you for my son? We had the fire department officials, who were manning and managing the parade, they allowed me to use their command center truck to go in, jump in and out, sit on the driver's seat, do whatever I had to do to pose for Fiona and her camera. Strangers coming up, giving me hugs. I got pulled into weddings. I got pulled into professional shoots. I mean, it was surreal, right? I mean, people that asked me at times, hey, what's going on, or why are you doing this, or, you know, this is wonderful, this is great.

It worked in a sense that it did create this sort of parallel sort of universe where people now did not -- just saw me with a different set of eyes. They did not see me as, okeh, this guy has a turban and a beard, he's a foreigner, which is what I usually get, even when people ask me where I'm from and I respond by saying, well, I'm from here, I'm, you know, I'm a New Yorker, but then, you know, they keep asking me, no where are you from before that, before that, before that, before that. And eventually we get to the fact that my parents are from India, and they're like, okeh, all right, you know, now we know where you're from.

So, yeah, it kind of shattered that sort of snap judgments and the status quo perceptions that people have. So yeah, I mean, for me, it turned into this, sort of one of the most amazing days of my life, which I was so moved that a few -- about three months later, I wrote an op-ed piece in Salon magazine this time, and Fiona released six of the photographs she felt were the best photographs from the photoshoot, of the hundred she took that day. You know, to this day, I mean, there are blogs and sites that, you know, keep recycling those images that she took in New York City that day. And it really kind of started like a whole sort of, I wouldn't say career, but really a path, a new sort of fork in my life's journey, where I've been traveling across the US from schools, universities, museums, libraries, community centers, where people, you know, have me come in, ask me, hey, talk about what you're doing, why are you doing it, and would you mind dressing up as Captain America? So yeah, it's been a wild journey.

SARIKA MEHTA: That's a fantastic story. I love that, basically 99 percent of the people you came in contact with were responding positively. I mean, to the point where they want to have their pictures taken with you, firefighters and weddings, and things like that. That's really positive. There's always going to be a couple of, you know, someone has to represent the minority of hate, but for the most part,

everybody seemed really positive. And I appreciate you being honest about the number of reasons that you felt really hesitant about doing this, about putting on a skintight Captain America costume, and then afterwards, it seems like it was well worth the effort, and the cause. And what I didn't realize, you've been traveling across the country and bringing Sikh Captain America to all of us non-New Yorkers. So, tell me about how that's been going.

VISHAVJIT SINGH: Well, the first call I got was from a late night comedy show on FX, which is not anymore, I mean, it was a great show that ran for a couple of seasons, Totally Biased with Kamau Bell. And it was like one of those really amazing shows that had a very diverse cast of Americans who were doing comedy, so you had South Asian men and women, you had LGBTQ representation, you had native Americans, you had blacks and whites, I mean, it was a really wonderful show that, I guess, was a little bit ahead of its time and maybe on the wrong channel.

So, Hari Kondabolu, who was one of the guys, you know, who was doing comedy who I had known about a little bit because he had done a couple of pieces on the predicament that a lot of Sikh Americans find themselves in post-911. So he reached out to me through a friend. You know, I mean, I had a great experience. I mean, I still had this sort of hesitation, because I'm like, okeh, I've done it once, and I would probably never do it again. That's it, it's part of a photoshoot. But I just felt, you know, let's do it. I mean, I've had a great experience, and who knows? I mean, here's going to be a little comedy segment, it can reach a broader audience, so yeah, I stepped out again. This was a few months after I redid -- I did the Salon piece.

So this was now in lower east side, Union Square part of Manhattan, so slightly different geography, still very busy, a lot of tourists. That again lasted like a seven, eight hour journey where Hari and a crew approached people, saying hey, you know, would you like to talk to a Sikh Captain America or a Captain America in a turban beard? That piece, you know, was wonderfully done. I was quite amazed how they had edited just the whole piece down into a six minute segment. That then, you know, started calls from the universities, then museums from Los Angeles to Kansas, upstate New York. I went to, last year, to Mississippi. It's been great. I mean, I've had a chance to go to many different geographies, small liberal arts colleges to big universities.

What I also do really as part of these presentations and walkabouts, after I showcase my story through cartoons, I do interactive cartoon sessions where I basically get young high schoolers or middle schoolers, or elementary kids, or even adults, to create cartoons or illustrations, or some image that is inspired by their life story, or their imagination, has never been done before. So, it could be a, you know, a character that exists, but they kind of tweak it to make it their own.

To me, that is really fun, because, I mean, I have a collection of art pieces from different places, and it's amazing how people's imaginations work, because a lot of times, what happens is, they start creating art without my instruction, art that incorporates turbans. So, you know, you have animated characters, like Snoopy, or an alien, or a president, or a sports person, who now has a turban on. So you have, you know, people who have almost never interacted with somebody in a turban, now creating cartoon characters where they feel like hey, this is a cool thing that, you know, I can put a turban on in my art. And so, you know, for them now it's not something that's foreign, it's something that's part of their creation, their story. To me, that's really powerful and really empowering. You know, it tells me, hey, you know what, this is great. Keep doing what you're doing.

SARIKA MEHTA: So, it's kind of like they're putting their own identities in their comics and in their stories?

VISHAVJIT SINGH: Yeah, and for them, now, if a turban, before they met me and heard about my story was something that was very foreign and perhaps not even American, now they feel, hey, you know what? I'm going to create a character who has a turban on. And usually when I run these workshops, they really are no rules. I mean, I just tell them, you know, here, you've seen my story through cartoons. Let's create something that is from your imagination. And don't worry if you have good drawing skills or bad, it's the concept that matters. And that's all the instructions that I give, and I tell them, look, just do whatever you have to do, and try to break some rules, try to break stereotypes. And, you know, I encourage women, girls, because a lot of times, then, what will happen is, they'll see my art, they know that I have this sort of superhero alter ego, and then what happens is a lot of times, I've seen girls who draw characters who are men, or male characters, and there's nothing wrong with that, but I want them to kind of shatter some of the prevailing stereotypes that superheroes have to be men.

So sometimes, you know, I nudge them, but usually I don't even say that, and it's been amazing now, I do get to see a lot of young women who are sketching art that pertains to women, or you know, issues they're facing. That's my hope, that, you know, you can have young people creating art that deals with whatever fancies their imagination, or whatever bothers them. So I've seen art that is about body image issues, or identity issues, and then, some kids are, you know, they're creating stuff that they're saying, hey, even I don't know what it is, but I'm just sketching whatever comes to mind. And a lot of the creative process, it's like that.

SARIKA MEHTA: That is very powerful, the idea of a young person recognizing that, whatever they're reading, whatever catches their interest, does not seem to represent themselves, and so they do something about it. Actually, this was a good segue to the next thing I wanted to talk about, which was, Sikhtoons, your cartoon series that you've been working at for a while, and before we started recording you had mentioned, you know, you have this dual life going, as an IT professional and also as a cartoonist, and now you're finding yourself full time as a cartoonist. So talk about that part of your life.

VISHAVJIT SINGH: When I started -- I mean, cartooning for me is not something that I trained in, I did not go to school, and I really didn't -- I didn't even do art beyond, I mean, I kind of had a propensity when I was a little kid to do art, but in sixth, seventh grade -- I grew up in a South Asian household, a very typical South Asian household, where I was told you need to focus on the sciences. Arts are not going to get you anywhere professionally. So I literally dropped the pen in sixth, seventh grade, I just did not do art until 911 happened, and life became really hard. I was living a few miles north of the city, I was a software engineer at the time. Did not step out of my house for a couple weeks. And then, with so much happening at the time, everybody was glued to the news, you try to find out what's going on, you know, listening to analysis, seeing people's analysis.

And, for whatever reason, I started noticing a lot of editorial cartoonists' response to 911. And there was one that really sort of struck a chord with me, was a cartoon called Find The Terrorist. It was an animated cartoon by Mark Fiore, who's based out of San Francisco. And he was basically responding to a lot of the hate crimes that were happening post-911, where Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Hispanics, anybody who was perceived, who was brown was perceived to be sort of the new ultimate other, was getting targeted. He was basically, Mark was making the point in his animated cartoon that, you know, these are Americans, these are immigrants, who are here to make a good life for themselves, make a living. And then you have sometimes people who, inspired by hate, commit hate crimes. Right? They -- physical assaults, urban assaults happened, so he was trying to make the point, that's terror, that's terrorism as well.

And to me, that really struck a chord, because he had this Sikh character, he sketched him beautifully, and, I mean, I connected with right away, but it took a few weeks for me to realize, hey, you know what, Mark's not going to probably create another cartoon featuring somebody who looks like me. And maybe I should start doing it. So these were the early kind of days of the internet, and I started cartooning, searching for news items that would inspire me, or piss me off. And started actually observing how other editorial cartoonists, including Mark, how are they creating cartoons? Started creating cartoons in the year 2002, and Sikhtoons was born, Sikhtoons.com was born then. But it took me a few years to learn from other cartoonists' work, that although it's a visual art form where you see these lines that are sketched into cartoons, but what's even more important is the concept behind it, the story, the contradictions that you are trying to conjoin to your lines. That's really the key.

So there's a way to think as a cartoonist. That took me a while, I just sort of become a student of these cartoonists whose books sort of became my mentors. And I learned the art of sarcasm, and catching contradictions, and inspirations as well, that can be used as a motivation, too. So, yeah, that was kind of like my schooling, and now, you know, I've sort of reached a point where, over the years, I've kind of used my own sort of life experiences to project them onto my artwork.

So I am -- I'm doing this all part-time. Where I was pretty much, you know, day time as an engineer, and then I have this passion to do cartooning. Well, it worked really well, I was blessed with having a really nice boss who was supportive of just me getting my work done, and doing what I needed to do at work. He was actually not aware that I was cartooning for a long time. I just kind of kept those parts of my life really separate, and made sure they did not kind of impede each other. That worked really well, and then late last year, I decided, you know, I was at a point where I wanted to make my passion my vocation.

So now, I'm sort of in this transition period, where I'm traveling a bit more, running workshops on stereotypes, I'm sort of showcasing my work and doing the Captain America thing, running sessions where I share my story of not only me getting stereotyped, but, you know, we all stereotype. I grew up in a household where we had these intense color lines, where black people were put in a box and not a good box, basically, and then you had so many other lines that were drawn based on caste and religion. So I knew, you know, I grew up in stereotypes, and I had my own, I still do, and I battled with my stereotypes, and at the same time, you know, as I share my story and stereotypes that I engage with, my hope is, you know, to really get people to start talking about it. It's like a meditation on stereotypes.

You know, we're not going to change something if you don't recognize, you know, that we engage in it. And I think the problem with, a lot of time, with stereotypes, it's like an autopilot. Right? We just don't even realize we have them. And, my hope is through my work I can at least kind of bring them out and we can start having honest conversations, that hey, we all stereotype, and what can we do, what strategies can we bring about to counter at least the negative stereotypes.

SARIKA MEHTA: The last thing I wanted to talk about kind of brings all of your artistic modes together, and that is that you're using your art and you're using your performance, well, as a means of social justice but very specifically this, the new project with the Sikh Notes. I wanted to talk about your effort to bring down a certain presidential candidate who, using his own vitriol. I'm always hesitant because I wanted to be like, the one media person who doesn't talk about Donald Trump, but I will go with it. So talk about the Sikh Notes, and the daily correspondence that you're mailing off to Donald Trump.

VISHAVJIT SINGH: The Send Sikh Note To Trump, that's the campaign name, it's a postcard campaign, and I'm actually in the same boat as you. I, for the longest time, as a cartoonist, I resisted the urge to create any art piece that had to do with Donald Trump, because I just felt he was getting a lot of coverage from media at large. It just kind of had been a weird cycle where, you know, he's kind of this master sort of craftsman who knows how to get free news on him. So, for the longest time, for many months, I did what John Oliver was doing, like, I'm not going to create art based on Donald Trump. He's, probably will wither away, he's going to go away. But that didn't happen. And we now know, you know, he's going to be with us at least through the nomination process, through the convention in July in Cleveland, and more and more likely it seems he's going to be the nominee. So, it was, at some point I realized, look, I mean, whether we like it or not, we're going to have to figure out ways of engaging with him, as Americans.

So for me, the idea for this postcard campaign, where I'm sending him messages on a daily basis, the idea to me came on a plane ride from New York City to San Francisco, where I was headed to run some workshops at a school. One of the things that I've really seen is, through this whole campaigning season, is, it's just, it's become so angry, it's become abusive. Mostly coming from his side, but then even the other side, people who oppose him. It's just become very sort of aggressive, calling names. As a cartoonist and a writer, my approach is not to use, it's to basically process my anger and figure out ways of connecting to even those who disagree with me, or I disagree with. And see if we make a connection. They might not agree with me, but maybe, you know, maybe they'll be like, wow, okeh, this is interesting, or maybe it's funny, or, you know, it's interesting, I see what you're trying to do Vishavjit, but, you know, whatever.

So this idea came, hey, you know, I have these postcards that I created five years ago, actually, for the comic con, which I had thought I had run out of, I didn't have any, and it just so happens I accidentally discovered a few a few months ago, and my wife is saying, hey, you should start using these postcards, these four postcards that I created with artwork that basically has turban characters, and their experience in the US, basically, of being stereotyped. So, you look at this artwork on the front, and you don't know whether these are Sikhs. I know they're Sikhs, Sarika might know they're Sikhs, a few Americans might relate to it and say, okeh, I know who these are, but most Americans are going to look at this art and go, okeh, why am I looking at these turbaned, bearded characters, and why are they in an American context?

So that's one. So I knew these images actually have a powerful point. And the only rule I came up with is, I'm going to create messages, but it has to be messages devoid of anger. And somehow we have to instill humor and compassion. Now I know, you know, compassion is not something we think about when we think about Donald Trump, but, you know, that's the challenge. It's an open campaign, so vast, you know, people have been submitting messages.

SARIKA MEHTA: So it's not just you, it's your postcards, but anybody can send a message using your postcards.

VISHAVJIT SINGH: Absolutely. So, you know, they can go to the Tumblr site, they can submit a message, and sometimes, you know what I mean, I know for a lot of people it might be a challenge to write something funny and compassionate to Donald Trump. You know, I'll work with them on it, I'll serve as an editor, and you know, we do back and forth, and I've done that with a few people who submitted, some messages come in and they're really spot on, and you know, all I do is I write them down and sometimes I'll create a sketch if I feel like, hey, this message can use a little, nice little sketch. Then I put a sketch on it. So it's a combination of words, sketches, sometimes just words and

sometimes predominantly illustrations.

And people have asked me at times, well, Vishavjit, do you really think he's going to see them? What's going to come out of it? And I'm like, look, he has inspired, he's motivated a lot of people on both sides of the spectrum to get engaged. And I do have a feeling that we're going to see a pretty serious, pretty big turnout in this election season, if not the biggest turnout, we're going to have a pretty sizable turnout. And, so in a sense, you know, I'm trying to engage fellow Americans who are opposed to Trump and his message, to kind of, you know, express, channel their anger and frustration into humor, and a little bit of compassion.

And you know, go out and vote, make sure we, you know, in November time, that we're going to, we're all going to go, we're going to make sure we're registered, we're going to make sure we vote, we're going to make sure our friends and family are going to vote, and at the same time, you know, as we engage these stories, you're getting really frustrated. Well, find different outlets. If you have to go to a protest, that's fine. If you have to write, you know, something, do that. But, you know, we have to find outlets that are not anger-filled. Right? It's not something where you're saying, I'm just going to call him names. That's easy, right? Calling him names is easy. Calling a racist a racist is easy.

But then, also, and I know this is art, but you know, I push myself, that even people who are racist have a side of them, have a potential to be a good human being. And maybe they are a good human being in a certain context, to their family members maybe they're good people. Right? So, and that's what makes us human. We can be awful human beings, at times, but then, you know, there is a persona of ourselves where we are good people. I mean, I'm sure his, Donald Trump's family thinks he's a wonderful guy. Of course, I'm going to make a judgment politically, because he's having a tremendous impact on us, well beyond after he's gone from this campaign.

SARIKA MEHTA: You know, it takes a lot of compassion to be able to see the 3-D sides of a person, and it, like you said, it's very easy to call a racist a racist, even though this person may be very beloved in their family, or in their community, or whatever the case is. Thank you for sharing that, and thank you, Vishavjit Singh, for taking the time to chat on Intersections Radio.

VISHAVJIT SINGH: Thank you very much, thanks for having me. It was a wonderful chat. And thanks for your beautiful questions.

SARIKA MEHTA: Oh, it's my pleasure. And you can now resume your intolerant ass-kicking duties.

VISHAVJIT SINGH: Thank you, yes.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was Vishavjit Singh. And you can learn more about his work, including sending the Sikh Notes, at [SikhToons.com](http://SikhToons.com). To listen to the podcast of this interview, check out [IntersectionsRadio.Wordpress.com](http://IntersectionsRadio.Wordpress.com). Visit the same website for previous episodes of this podcast. And, join the facebook community at [facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio](https://facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio). I'm Sarika Mehta, and this is Intersections Radio. Thanks for listening.