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State Lawyer to Aid Sikh Suing Police in Bias Case

By **SUSAN SAULNY**

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A Sikh who was dismissed by the Police Department after he refused demands that he shave his beard and not wear his turban on the job will be aided in his lawsuit against the department by the New York State attorney general's office.

The Sikh, Amric Singh Rathour, is suing on the grounds of religious discrimination, and his lawyers, Ravinder Singh Bhalla and Avi Schick, the deputy counsel to Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, confirmed yesterday that they had met on Thursday to discuss Mr. Rathour's case and that they would be working together.

"We've learned enough about the facts so far to be disturbed," Mr. Schick said. "We will take steps here to protect the law and the rights of workers. Our involvement will be defined by what our own investigation reveals in addition to the city's response."

Mr. Schick said the office's actions could take the form of a letter to the court, a brief or a meeting with police officials, among other things.

A spokesman for the Police Department, Inspector Michael Coan, said he would not comment on the pending case. He did say, speaking more broadly, that "uniforms create standardized appearances for members of the New York Police Department."

Mr. Rathour, 28, of Ozone Park, Queens, took an oath in June 2001 upon graduating from the Police Academy and was to join the department as a traffic enforcement agent. He was dismissed

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that August when, after being denied an exemption, he refused to shave his beard and stop wearing the turban.

For Sikh men, the wearing of a turban and beard are central tenets of faith.

Amardeep Singh, the legal director for the Sikh Coalition, a civil and human rights organization, said Mr. Schick's and Mr. Spitzer's involvement "is very welcome news."

"We've basically felt we had New York government against us on this issue," Mr. Singh said. "The community is thrilled to have the state with us as a sympathetic voice in government."

Two months ago, in an unrelated case, an administrative law judge found that the Police Department had violated the civil rights of another Sikh traffic enforcement agent, Jasjit Singh Jaggi, 36, when it threatened to fire him if he did not cut his hair and remove his turban. Mr. Jaggi, who resigned, had filed a complaint with the city's Human Rights Commission.

"The real detrimental effect here of the city fighting so hard to keep out someone who looks different is that it encourages private employers to similarly refuse to employ those whose practices or beliefs deviate from the mainstream," Mr. Schick said. It begs the question, he added, "If the city doesn't have to hire a guy with a turban, why should I?"

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