

Constructing “Indianness” in the United States and India: The Role of Hindu and Muslim Indians Immigrants

Prema Kurien

University of Southern California
Department of Sociology
(213) 740-8361
kurien@mizar.usc.edu

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**Southern California Studies Center
University of Southern California**

Introduction

Most Americans tend to perceive Asian Indian immigrants as a homogenous group. This perception is even prevalent in a lot of the literature on Indian Americans where group differences are not adequately discussed (Agarwal 1991, Dasgupta 1989, Helweg 1990). In reality, Indian immigrant society is very diverse with linguistic, regional, caste, class and religious differences. My argument is that while many differences between Indian immigrants such as region, language and caste are in the process of weakening, religious differences and tensions have been exacerbated in the United States. This report focusses on Hindu and Muslim Indian American organizations in Southern California and examines why religion has become the basis of conflict among Indian immigrants. I critically examine the two dominant perspectives and develop a third one to account for this development. I also look at how regional factors in Southern California have intensified this conflict.

The dominant Hindu and Muslim Indian American organizations - both in Southern California and in the rest of the country, have developed opposing constructions of "Indianness" and attempt to influence American and Indian politics in line with their own interests. Hindu Indian organizations view India as a Hindu society whose true nature has been sullied by the invasion of Muslims, the British and the post-colonial domination of "pseudo-secular" Indians. Muslim Indian organizations on the other hand, view India's multi-religious history and society as evidence of India's inherent secularism. Corresponding to this difference in the conception of "Indianness" is a difference in the social and political goals of the two types of organizations. Most of the major Hindu Indian American organizations are working for the establishment of a Hindu rashtra (state) in India while most Muslim Indian American organizations are striving to safeguard India's secularism.

The study is based on an examination of the activities of two different organizations - the Federation of Hindu Associations (FHA) and the American Federation of Muslims from India (AFMI) which represent the two different positions very clearly. The FHA is based in Southern California. Although the AFMI is a national organization, its current President-elect is a Southern Californian resident and the local chapter is particularly active in attempting to construct an alternative to the Hindu nationalist perspective of the FHA.

Data on these organizations were collected over a period of a year through in depth interviews with leaders and members of the organizations, an examination of their own publications in newspapers, magazines, and newsletters, together with the accounts of their activities given in Indian American newspapers, and finally, through participation in some of the meetings and activities of each of these organizations. This research was supplemented by fieldwork in India over the summer of 1997, to examine the impact of these organizations on Indian society and politics.

Following a description of the organizations, their opposing constructions and strategies, I examine the two dominant perspectives on why religion becomes the basis of conflict among Indian Americans. The first perspective states that such conflicts are a reflection of the increased tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India. The second perspective argues that conditions in the United States have led religious organizations to become more salient for immigrants since religion in this country comes to sustain immigrant ethnicity.

Although both these perspectives are enlightening, both are partial. While homeland politics do play a significant role in shaping relationships between Indian immigrant groups in this country, the cleavages that develop among Indians of different background are not merely a result of pre-existing or reflected tensions. Instead, homeland history and politics are the raw materials that are reinterpreted and selectively used by Indian immigrants

to manufacture an ethnic identity and strategy suitable to their American context. The second perspective rightly views conditions in the United States as important, but sees religion as a cohesive force, binding together immigrants from a country into an "ethnic" group. However religious cohesion is unlikely when immigrants come from countries with religious cleavages. In such cases, the role of religion as the carrier of ethnicity generates conflict between groups belonging to different religious backgrounds.

My theoretical perspective draws on both perspectives given above but extends them further to demonstrate why tensions between religious groups from the same country can be exacerbated in the United States and why this leads to separate and competing constructions of national identity. My argument is that this is due to the contradiction between America's official policy which recognizes national origin as the criterion of ethnicity and the unofficial policy which views religion as the most legitimate mode of ethnic expression. As a consequence of the first policy, control over the definition of national identity becomes a valuable resource; as a consequence of the second, competition over such control develops along religious lines. Thus, Hindu and Muslim Indian Americans have separate, religion based organizations and develop different constructions of "Indian" identity. Due to the resources to be gained by ethnic recognition, they compete with each other to have their definition of national identity recognized.

Regional factors within the United States can also affect the development and politicization of intra and inter-ethnic conflicts. The final section of the report examines why Southern California has emerged as the center of an aggressive Hindu nationalist movement (which in turn has caused the Muslims in this region to react defensively). I argue that a combination of several different but reinforcing factors have contributed to the intensification of the economic, racial and social marginalization experienced by Indian immigrants in this region. This in turn has made religion and the need for ethnic recognition even more important for this group.

Establishment of the Federation of Hindu Associations and the American Federation of Muslims from India

Currently there are well over a million Indian immigrants in the United States (Lessinger 1995:2) and over 100,000 individuals of Asian Indian origin in the Southern Californian region.¹ In India, Hindus constitute over 80% of the population and Muslims over 11%. Christians and Sikhs each comprise around 2% of the population. There are no national or regional figures on the proportions of Indians in the United States belonging to various religions. However, indirect evidence indicates that Hindus are under-represented in relation to their proportion in India, indicating the presence of significant numbers of Indian religious minorities in this country.² Among religious minorities, Sikhs and Christians seem to be particularly over-represented. Sikhs form a significant proportion of the Indian population in Southern California and thus the proportion of Hindus in this region is probably even smaller than in other regions. According to Dr. Islam Abdullah, President-elect of AFMI, there are around 300 Muslim Indian families in Southern California with whom AFMI has direct or indirect contact. There are probably several more that the organization is not aware of.

The Hindutva (Hinduness) movement calling for a Hindu state has gained strength in India since the late 1980's and is currently a powerful force in Indian politics. A water-shed event in the movement that propelled the BJP (the party promoting Hindu nationalism) into the limelight, was the demolition of a sixteenth century mosque in North India on December 6, 1992 by Hindutva supporters, despite attempts by the government to prevent it.

According to members of the Hindutva movement, the Babri mosque had been built by a Muslim emperor over a temple which commemorated the spot where the Hindu god Ram was born. Communal riots followed the demolition and several thousands, mostly Muslims were killed. At the time of writing, the BJP, the party supporting this agenda has the largest number of seats in the Indian parliament (although not a sufficient majority to form a government on its own) and is currently in the opposition only because a coalition of left and centrist parties came together to form the government (largely united by their desire to prevent the BJP from taking over).

The seeds of the Hindutva movement in America were first sown by the international Hindu organization - the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, (World Hindu Council), VHP for short, founded in India in 1964. The VHP's American branch was established in the 1970's on the East coast. However, as a tax-exempt religio-cultural organization, the VHP in the United States cannot pursue a political agenda and thus at least officially it has remained devoted to promoting Hinduism and pursuing cultural and social activities.

Investigations in India and the United States have established that much of the financial resources and support for the Hindutva movement come from Indian Americans³. While support for the Hindutva project can now be found among sections of the Hindu Indian community all over the United States, there is a particularly strong and aggressive movement in Southern California, currently spear-headed by the FHA. The region has been described as being "a goldmine of funds for the BJP" (Jha 1993:56g).

The Federation of Hindu Associations, (FHA)

The Southern Californian region has been the center of the explicitly political Hindu nationalist movement for several years, even before the formation of the FHA (Jha 1993). The FHA was formed in Artesia, Orange county in 1993 in the wake of the demolition of the mosque (which the activists claim inspired and energized them). Since the VHP cannot support an overt political platform, the goal of the FHA was to unify Hindu Americans to "specifically pursue Hindu political interests"⁴. The organization launched its major activities in 1995 and in the short period of a few years, FHA activists have emerged as a powerful force within the Indian community - locally and nationally as well as in India, and the organization has been very successful in recruiting supporters and influencing community affairs. The activists are mostly wealthy, middle aged, upper caste, North Indian business men with established businesses, often in the care of wives or relatives. Their economic security gives them the leisure and the resources to pursue their Hindu nationalist activities.

The FHA sponsors visits of Hindutva leaders from India to Southern California and now has a lot of influence over such leaders and the Indian politicians who support Hindu nationalism. Each year one or two such individuals are given the "Hindu of the Year" award by the organization. In addition, the FHA leadership propagates their ideas by organizing and speaking at religious celebrations at which the message of Hindutva is given and through their copious writings in Indian American newspapers like the India Post. They have also been assiduously wooing politicians in an attempt to communicate their ideas regarding Indian society and politics as well as Indian American identity and thus influence American foreign and domestic policy.

The American Federation of Muslims from India, (AFMI)

The American Federation of Muslims from India, a national organization, was formed in Washington in 1989 as a social service organization dedicated to the upliftment of Muslims in India (who, for a variety of reasons, remain well behind the Hindu community in terms of education, income and employment). The activists are

mainly established professional men several of whom are medical doctors. Their programs focus particularly on improving the educational status of Indian Muslims. However, subsequent to the demolition of the Babri mosque, the opposition to Hindutva and the promotion of secularism and communal harmony in India has become an important goal. Since 1994, AFMI has formed a coalition with Dalit (lower caste) groups to support the advance of all the underprivileged groups in India.

The Southern California branch of AFMI has been very active particularly in the wake of the Babri mosque demolition. In 1993 they organized a big function and fund raiser to help victims of the riots which was attended by 600 people. According to the current President-elect, Dr. Aslam Abdullah, AFMI collected \$ 25,000 for the cause (from all over the country) and sent the money to India. The annual convention in the following year with the theme of "Pluralism and Secularism - Issues and Challenges for India" was organized in Los Angeles. AFMI has become very successful at fund raising in the United States and sponsors a range of social activities in India targeted at Muslims and Dalits. Like the Hindu organizations, AFMI also sponsors the visits of prominent Indian politicians and public personalities who support their platform. Besides their yearly conference in the United States, they also hold an annual conference in India. AFMI works with other organizations like the Indian Muslim Relief Council (IMRC) and national Muslim organizations such as the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), to stay in regular contact with legislators and has become a significant political lobby group in Washington. In 1995, several AFMI members were invited to the White House to meet with State Department officials and attend a reception hosted by Mrs. Clinton (AFMI 1995:3).

Despite their names, neither the FHA or AFMI represent all Hindu or Muslim Indian Americans. Although a dominant force in this region, many Hindus in Southern California are not interested in or are opposed to the political agenda of the FHA. I am aware that this is the case even with some organizations which are officially members of the FHA. FHA activists themselves have mentioned that they have faced opposition from some temples and individuals. In a letter to India West, an Indian American weekly, several faculty and graduate students mostly of Southern Californian Universities protesting FHA's conferring of the "Hindu of the Year" awards to two individuals in India whose statements are believed to have incited violence against Muslims had this to say: "Most of us are Hindus; nor are all of us "secularists" and we most emphatically repudiate the attempt of the FHA to speak for us and to speak for "Hindus". It is curious that self-styled Hindus here appear to know better the meaning of "Hinduism" than do most Hindus in India." (Lal et al 1995: A5).

Similarly AFMI does not represent all Indian Muslim Americans. AFMI is described as an organization of "professionals and activists who are dedicated to the cause of peace and justice for all" (AFMI 1996: n.p.). As such, the organization is both progressive and social service oriented and thus does not represent conservative Indian Muslims or those groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat (which have a significant presence in Southern California) whose focus is exclusively on the moral and religious character of the individual (Ahmed 1991: 517).

Opposing Constructions of FHA and AFMI

In this section, I present the constructions of Indian history of FHA and AFMI as well as their very different visions of the ideal Indian state and their political strategies. I will also demonstrate the ways in which both Hinduism and Islam are reformulated by both groups to fit their respective political agendas.

Interpretations of History: The Muslim Period

The construction of "Indianness" of both Hindu and Muslim organizations are grounded in a very different interpretation of Indian history. History becomes central in defining the "essence" of Indian culture. For *Hindutva* proponents, the Vedic age (around 1500-1000 B.C.) represents the essence of the Indian culture. However, Muslim Indians argue that the Indian culture is an amalgamation of several influences with the Islamic culture being a very important component (since the Islamic period of around nine centuries constitutes the longest single era in Indian history). The interpretation of the Muslim period is central to the different historical constructions of Hindu and Muslim organizations.

In an advertisement for a Hindu center that the FHA wants to build in Southern California, they declare that they view the Muslim period as, "a prolonged national struggle [by Hindu kings] against foreign Islamic imperialism and not the conquest of India" (FHA 1997a: B III). Thus the FHA makes it clear that in their perspective, Islamic control over India was attempted but never really accomplished and that therefore the Islamic rulers played no role in creating modern Indian society or culture. A memorandum the FHA presented to the Indian Ambassador states their position on the nature of the Islamic period even more explicitly. They state: "The FHA feels that the government of India fails in her duties to teach the factual history of the past invaders, by not telling our generations that invaders from Islamic blocs destroyed our culture, people and their temples. Instead, these ruthless barbarians are depicted and praised as kings of cultural achievements" (FHA 1997b: C20).

Muslim Indian organizations contest the claim of Islamic brutality and forced conversions arguing that except for one or two exceptions, most of the Muslim rulers practiced a policy of religious tolerance with many even sponsoring Hindu temples and celebrations. In an advertisement published in Indian American newspapers, AFMI argues, "if force had been used [in conversions] ... Muslims would not be a minority given the length of Muslim rule" and concludes that, "[p]resent India is the result of a long interaction between Hinduism and Islam" (AFMI 1993: 18).

In summary, while the FHA sees India as a Hindu country whose true "essence" has been besmirched by successive foreign invasions and which needs to be restored by a Hindu state, AFMI sees India as "a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious country which in the past has never been a single political entity and never a nation politically". Thus AFMI argues that in such a country, "any attempt to impose lingual, religious, or cultural uniformity and homogeneity or superiority of any race will lead to division, destruction and segmentation. To keep such a variegated people and country together, ... India must of necessity ... remain secular and culturally plural" (Qureshi 1994: 14).

What is of interest is that while most historians of India now argue that it was under the British rule that Hindu-Muslim cleavages were created, neither Hindu or Muslim projects discuss the role of the British or the British period except very cursorily at best.

The Partition and the Post-Independent Period

A big grievance of the FHA is that while India was partitioned on the basis of religion to create Pakistan, an Islamic state, no Hindu state was given to the Hindus. What further aggrieves the FHA is that after demanding an Islamic state, most of the Muslims stayed in India and are now demanding a secular state and special concessions from the government. AFMI and other progressive Muslims however argue that the partition was the handiwork of the British and a few Islamic leaders who by no means represented the viewpoints of the majority of Muslims in

India.

While the FHA views the post-independent period as being one dominated by "pseudo-seculars" who have been "pampering" minorities and engaging in "Hindu bashing", AFMI points out that in the period when Muslims were supposedly being pampered, their position has deteriorated so much that now, "their plight is worse" than that of the Dalits (AFMI 1993: 18).

The Babri Mosque Demolition

The demolition of the Babri mosque on December 6, 1992 is seen as a watershed event by both groups. However what the demolition of the mosque represents is perceived in opposite ways. For FHA, it symbolizes the fact that the Hindus who had suffered injustices for so long had finally decided to assert themselves. Thus it marks the beginning of a new era, one where Hindus were going to be in power. An FHA publication summarizes their feelings: "[O]n December 6th of 1992 when the Babri structure was demolished in Ayodhya to restore the history and rebuild the Ram mandir, an awakening of [the] Hindu soul took place to turn the direction of glorious Hinduism and make all of us so proud" (FHA 1995a: 76).

For AFMI on the other hand, December 6, 1992 was "a day of national shame" (Abdullah 1993: 23) and a day "which showed them that, "[w]hat is gazing into their [Indian Muslim] faces is either annihilation and extinction, or a dark tunnel with no light at the other end" (Afzal 1993: 57).

Social and political interests: Their Vision of the ideal Indian State

FHA's vision of what a Hindu rashtra will look like was presented in an article written by Prithvi Raj Singh, President of FHA in the India Post entitled, "Can 'Hindutva' Be Indian Nationalism" (1996: A28-29). While Hindu groups are to be given full "freedom of thought and action" in a Hindutva state, Singh states that "Hindutva culture will enforce restriction[s] on some portions of other religions like Islam or Christianity" such as the right to preach that their deity is the only God. The Hindutva state will also "not allow anyone to convert any child to any faith, until the child becomes a[n]...adult". Another restriction is that, "outside resources of money and power cannot be used to erect ...Mosques or Missionary churches". (Note that he does not say anything about outside resources for Hindu temples).

While Singh states that "local people and local population of Muslims will be exempt from any mistreatment for atrocities committed by their invading forefathers in the past" his caveat that, "injustices committed by those invaders, like destruction of Hindu temples or forceful conversions shall be corrected" is ominous. Singh adds that marriage and divorce procedures will be standardized (currently these are governed by the "Personal Laws" of each religion) and that the Islamic call to prayer from minarets of mosques will not be allowed "as it disturbs the basic rights of non-believers of Islam". Here again, he does not say anything about prayers and music broadcasted from temple loud-speakers.

Singh concludes, "[t]hus Hindutva culture will be a blessing to the soul-less society of Western style governments. Without imposing religious teachings and directions, the culture will bring religious values into public life" (Singh 1996:A29). AFMI's viewpoint and vision of the future, not surprisingly is very different. They speak about a pluralistic, secular society committed to social justice and democracy with special social and economic provisions to help minorities and disadvantaged groups and religious protections such as the "Personal Law" and the right to establish minority educational institutions to preserve and promote their religious ideas (religious minori-

ties in India currently have such rights).

Affirmative Action or the Reservation System

Besides these fundamental differences in their vision of an ideal Indian state, the two organizations also differ in many other respects. One big difference is their position on reservations (affirmative action) for lower castes. The FHA is strongly opposed to the Indian reservation system which they view as being discriminatory toward "Hindus" since upper castes bear the brunt of the system. AFMI on the other hand supports reservations and has been demanding its extension to Muslims and to the lower castes of other religious groups (currently the reservation is only for lower caste Hindus in most North Indian states).

Critics of Hindutva such as AFMI argue that the movement, while claiming to represent all Hindus, is actually an upper caste project since it is supported primarily by the upper castes and since proponents of Hindutva are opposed to reservations for the lower castes. Hindutva groups have become acutely conscious of the need to gain the support of the lower castes (who constitute the majority of the population) and while not yielding on the reservation issue, they now speak out against caste discrimination and have been wooing lower castes through special programs.

In the battle between Hindutva and anti-Hindutva forces, the lower castes have become the pivotal swing factor. Anti-Hindutva parties, realizing that they can gain political power only by uniting the lower castes and minorities together have also been targeting these groups. It is not accidental that AFMI decided to form an alliance with the Dalits in the wake of the Babri mosque demolition and the gains made by the BJP. Besides emphasizing that Hindutva is really an upper caste movement, against the interests of lower castes, groups like AFMI also challenge the upper caste assertion that Dalits are really "Hindu" since in traditional Hinduism, "untouchables" were regarded as falling outside caste Hindu society. Recently, several prominent Dalit leaders in India have endorsed this position by coming out publicly to state that they did not see themselves as Hindus. This is a very significant challenge to Hindutva because the idea of India being a Hindu majority country (the basis of the Hindu nationalist movement) can only be sustained if the lower castes are counted as Hindu. Lower castes in India have become increasingly mobilized and militant and there have been caste clashes between lower and upper castes throughout the country in the last year. What implications this will have for the Hindutva movement remain to be seen.

Reinterpretation and politicization of religion

Perhaps not surprisingly, both the FHA and the AFMI offer interpretations of their respective religions consonant with their political goals. Thus, the FHA argues that, "being a compassionate and tolerant religion, Hinduism has been discriminated [against] and invaded" (FHA 1995: 80) and that therefore it is time to construct a more assertive Hinduism. AFMI, proclaiming that "Islam demands full participation of its followers in activities that help humanity achieve peace and justice" asserts that their fight against injustice and inequality (and their common platform with Dalits) is a response to this Islamic obligation (AFMI 1996: n.p.). To counter the threat of lower caste members being drawn to secularist, anti-Hindutva parties, FHA and other Hindu nationalist groups also emphasize that the caste system "was never integrally connected with the inner spirit of Hindu religion" and that "[t]here is no religious sanction to the practice of caste system of any kind in the primary Hindu scriptures" (India Post 1995: A6).

The position of women

In the struggle between Hindutva and Islamic groups, the respective position of women in Hinduism and Islam has become a contentious and politicized issue. Hindutva supporters argue that it is only in Hinduism that women are respected and revered and men and women are given equal rights. According to a FHA "From religious, cultural, social and individual aspects, a woman has the same rights as a man in Hindu society. "Where women are honored, gods are pleased, declare Hindu scriptures. Hindus have elevated women to the level of Divinity. Only Hindus worship God in the form of Divine Mother" (India Post 1995: A6). Thus they claim that a Hindu rastra is necessary to rescue Indian Muslim women from the oppression they now have to experience under the Muslim Personal Law. Not surprisingly, AFMI and other modernist Muslim organizations disagree. Najma Sultana a former President of AFMI argues that, "Islam the religion got hijacked by men whereas true Islam has the most equitable system for genders of any world religion" (Sultana 1996: n.p. citing a statement by Karen Armstrong).

The Importance of Pluralism

Interestingly, both FHA and AFMI seem to subscribe to the view that a pluralistic religion is essential in the contemporary period. Prithvi Raj Singh, the President of the FHA writes, "Modernism . . . requires all religions to affirm [the] truth of other traditions to ensure tranquility" (Singh 1997:A26). According to the FHA, Islam is anti-modernist by this criteria. They argue that it is only Hinduism which is truly pluralistic and therefore that it is the most suitable religion for the twenty first century world. Again, they contend that only a Hindu rastra will be genuinely secular (here secularism means that the state will treat all religions equally). Members of AFMI however dispute the characterization of Islam and quote verses from the Quran emphasizing tolerance and respect to all religions to make the case that Islam is indeed a pluralistic religion (Siddiqui 1994:3; Akhtar 1994:16-17).

What they say about each other

In 1995 the President of FHA and some other Hindu activists released a statement condemning AFMI's activities in the wake of the latter group's announcement of a coalition with Dalits and Buddhists. In the statement, FHA said that AFMI's actions, "speak of their agenda of pseudo-secularism and deplorable partnership for political gains, by creating unnatural and artificial alliances of Dalits and Buddhists with Muslims, thereby nurturing wedges between them and the Hindus". They go on to exhort them to "shun such divisive and anti-national policies" and to "mingle and melt with the mainstream of Indian culture and civilization" (FHA 1995b: A4). AFMI members have refrained from making any public statements about FHA since they want to steer clear of getting involved in inter-group politics among Indian Americans. However, privately, they strongly condemn the activities of the FHA describing them as upper caste ideologues and religious fundamentalists.

This section is a clear illustration of the fundamental conflict between Hindu and Muslim organizations and their competition to define homeland culture and political concerns in their own interests. It also demonstrates how homeland resources can be used to support a variety of positions. A lot of the terminology and ideas that both groups present, such as the emphasis on pluralism, and gender equality and the exhortation by the FHA to AFMI to "mingle and melt with the mainstream Indian culture" are more in tune with the American context than the Indian, indicating that these ideas are "made in the U.S.A." in Raymond William's words (Williams 1992:230). As mentioned, both groups are working hard to convince politicians and the public at large (in both the United States and India) about the "truth" of their respective interpretations.

Explaining Religious Cleavages and Competition among Indian Americans

1) A Reflection of Homeland Politics

This perspective, used widely by journalists and Indian Americans, argues that the religious cleavages that exist among Indian immigrants in the United States are a result of the conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India. To support their perspective, they point to the fact the increase in tensions between the groups in the United States took place at the same time that tensions between Hindus and Muslims escalated in India and that the formation of the FHA and the change in the orientation of AFMI are all a direct result of Indian political developments.

Although homeland politics are an important contributor to Hindu and Muslim Indian American problems, my critique of this perspective is that Indian politics do not dictate the types of political mobilizations manifested by Indian Americans. Indian culture, religion, history and current events are used by immigrants and their children as resources in their attempts to establish themselves in this country. These resources are selectively appropriated and are often reinterpreted and used for very different ends than in India. The literature on long established overseas Indian settlements in various parts of the world shows that in each case, Indian traditions, cultures and religions have been considerably reformulated and modified in the attempt to build an ethnic identity that is appropriate to the local situation (Bachu 1985, Dusenbery 1995, Khan 1995, Vertovec 1992) . For instance, Hindu ideology and practices are very different in the Caribbean and in Britain (Vertovec 1995) . In the American case, Raymond Williams describes Indian American traditions and practices as being, "made in the U.S.A. . . . assembled, . . . by relatively unskilled labor (at least unskilled by traditional standards) and adapted to fit new designs to reach a new and growing market" (1992:230) .

A good example is the reformulated version of the Aryan theory which has recently been resuscitated in the United States by a few Indian American computer scientists. The conventional view of early Indian history (first developed during the colonial period) is that the Aryans, believed to be of European origin, invaded India around 1500 B.C. , colonized the indigenous people and established their religion and civilization. The Vedas, a set of religious books passed down for centuries through oral tradition and now considered to be the backbone of Hinduism are believed to be Aryan texts. In the early twentieth century this Aryan invasion theory was challenged by members of the newly formed Hindu nationalist movement in India. These individuals reversed the theory, arguing that the Aryans were indigenous to India (since they wanted to show that Hindus were the original inhabitants of India) and that the migratory movement had been from India to the West rather than vice versa (Thapar 1996:9) . This idea has been recently picked up by Navratna S. Rajaram and Subhash Kak in the United States. In a series of books published in the United States and India, Rajaram and Kak propound the same idea arguing that "a critical mass of scholars in the West" have irrefutable "scientific" evidence to support the idea of the Aryan movement outward from India (Rajaram 1993, 1995a, 1995b, Feuerstein 1995) . Although this theory has been dismissed by most historians⁵ (Ratnagar 1996) , it has generated considerable interest and excitement among Indian Americans. Several symposia on this topic have been sponsored in various parts of the United States over the past few years. The theory has also become part of the arsenal of the contemporary Indian *Hindutva* movement as well.

While this example shows that Indian Americans are not just passive recipients of homeland politics, it also shows how homeland resources are used by Indians in the United States to obtain status and respect from the wider

society. In the early decades of this century, some Indian immigrants on the West coast had gone to the courts to obtain citizenship by making the case that they were of Aryan stock and were therefore "Caucasians". While some of the lower courts had accepted the argument, in 1923 in *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh*, the Supreme Court ruled that while Indians might be "Caucasians", they were not "white" and that citizenship was restricted to "white persons" only (Takaki 1989:299). The current resuscitation of the "revised" Aryan theory by the new wave of Indian immigrants is no coincidence. The theory enables Indian Americans to argue that the Indian region and Hindu culture were the cradle of European civilization and that Indians are white or are at least racially closer to Euro-Americans than other American minorities.

2) *The Increasing Importance of Religion for Immigrants*

The second perspective, dominant in the literature on immigrant religion in the United States, emphasizes the importance of the American context in molding immigrant organization and behavior. Thus, Stephen Warner and Raymond Williams for instance, argue that religion and religious identity take on a significance in the American immigrant context that they do not in the home country (Warner 1993, Williams 1988: 29). According to Warner there are two primary reasons for religious associations becoming more salient for immigrants. Firstly, Americans view religious associations as the repository of "inner" cultural values and see religious associations as the most acceptable and non-threatening basis for community formation and ethnic expression (1993:1058). Secondly, the disruptions and existential questions raised by resettlement in a new environment result in migration frequently being a "theologizing experience" (Smith 1978:1175 cited in Warner 1993:1062).

These two perspectives are supported by my research. Mr. Kanti Patel of the FHA in the course of a discussion about the goals and activities of the FHA had this to say: "We have a certain notion... that if we follow our religion other people will be offended. That is wrong. In this country other people actually appreciate it if you preserve your religion and culture" (Interview 2/9/97). This is a clear articulation of the point that Warner makes with respect to the way religion is perceived in America. Many of the Indian immigrants I have spoken to also mentioned that they have become more religious after coming to this country where for the first time they had to think about the meaning of their religion and religious identity.

These factors, together with the need for community experienced by Indian immigrants who are residentially dispersed, and parents concerns about the inculcation of Indian values in their children, leads to the formation of religio-ethnic organizations. Such organizations have proliferated all over the United States among the immigrant Indian community. In another piece focussing on two such Hindu Indian organizations in Southern California, I argue that the members were using the religious organizations as means to forge ethnic communities and to formulate and articulate their identities as Indian Americans (Kurien Forthcoming). Rajagopal adds that the choice of religion to represent ethnic identity is also a means for the predominantly upper caste immigrants to avoid their problematic racial location in this country (1995). For all these reasons, religious organizations become proxy ethnic organizations and religion becomes the axis around which community, ethnic pride and individual identity revolve.

This development has several implications. Firstly, while the local level religious associations do not necessarily support religious fundamentalism directly, they may do so indirectly by making members susceptible to the appeals of religious pride and unity put forth by such groups. Thus, my research and that of others shows that the *Hindutva* movement has much more acceptability and support among the mass of Hindus in the United States than among Hindus in India (Rajagopal 1995). Furthermore, since religion provides the basis for community and action

at the local level, regional and national organizations based on a religious platform tend to be more cohesive and effective than organizations that organize on the basis of national origin or linguistic background, thus reinforcing the above tendency. For this reason, secularist movements and groups which are wide-spread in India are far fewer and weaker here. Again, studies have shown that both Hinduism and Islam have been modified by Indian immigrants in the American context. (Williams 1988, Kurien Forthcoming). As in the example of the Aryan theory, many of the reformulations of religion, history and culture that have been developed in the United States are now being exported back to India.

3) *Contradiction between unofficial and official policies*

Both the above perspectives provide important information to understand why Hindu and Muslim Indian Americans are in conflict. However there are gaps in both. The first perspective does not explain why religious conflicts have been intensified in the United States or why this conflict results in the different use of Indian history and politics by Hindus and Muslims. The second perspective does not explain why religion forms the basis for intra-group conflict and why it is that Hindus and Muslims adopt very different strategies in this conflict with Hindus taking a conservative, fundamentalist position and Muslims a liberal, secularist one. To address the problem at hand, we must combine and extend both perspectives.

My argument is that tensions between religious groups from the same country can be exacerbated and politicized in the United States (and other multi-cultural states) due to the contradiction between societal norms that view religion as the most legitimate mode of ethnic expression and the official policy which recognizes national origin as the criterion of ethnicity. Due to this official policy, census classifications categorize people with the same national origin into an ethnic group. The recognition of ethnic groups by the host state and society is determined by the visibility of their home countries and such recognition can bring social, political and economic resources. Thus, ethnic groups work to make their homelands visible to the public. Basch et al. describe the case of West Indians in New York city who call public attention to a West Indian cultural identity to create a presence distinct from African Americans in order to make "claims to political space in the ethnicized structure of New York politics" (Basch et al 1994:74-75).

Official policies also assume that people who share national origins share cultural values and political concerns (Dusenbery 1995:33). Since this is not often the case, control over the definition of national identity becomes a valuable resource for immigrants, giving rise to competition between groups to define homeland cultural and political concerns in their own interest. Due to the societal norm that religion should be the repository of cultural identity, religion becomes the basis of ethnicity, leading to differences in the construction of national identity along religious lines and therefore to competition between religious groups over the control of the definition of national or ethnic identity.

Dominant and minority religious groups generally have very different political interests and definitions of the relationship between religion and nationality. The dominant group would usually like their religion to be viewed as the basis of national culture and cohesion. This however is threatening to religious minorities and can lead to different responses depending on the size and distribution of the particular religious minorities in the homeland. Religious minorities like the Sikhs of India who are largely concentrated in one region of the home country may try to initiate a movement for a separate state. Some Sikh groups, particularly in Canada and England have done so. To make the case that the Khalista movement⁶ of Canadian Sikhs a response to the official ethnic policies of Canada,

Dusenbery argues that the motivation of those Canadian Sikhs who supported the was not to return to the Punjab, but the need to be recognized as a separate ethnic group in Canada. Canadian Sikhs felt they did not share the same culture and interests as most Indians and therefore did not want to be classified along with them. Realizing that they would not be acknowledged as a distinct ethnic group unless they made claims to an independent territory, they supported the Khalistan movement (Dusenbery 1995). Minorities like the Muslims of India who are dispersed through the homeland have little choice but to contest the claim of the dominant group by asserting that the home country is multi-religious and multi-cultural. This explains why it is that although the dominant Muslim voice in India has been conservative and fundamentalist (largely as a reaction to the Hindutva movement), Muslim Indian Americans have adopted a liberal, secularist position.

To summarize: Since religion becomes the basis of group formation in the United States, Hindu and Muslim Indian Americans have separate organizations from the local to the national level. Such organizations also become proxy "ethnic" associations. As Hindu and Muslim Indians have very different histories, political interests and social concerns (as majority and minority religious groups), they have systematic differences in the way they construct the meaning and content of an "Indian" identity. Due to the importance of ethnic recognition and visibility in obtaining state resources, Hindus and Muslims compete to obtain such state recognition for their definition of national identity, leading to an exacerbation and politicization of religious cleavages.]

Regional Factors : The Southern California Context

The theoretical perspective I developed above provides a framework to understand the reasons for intra-ethnic conflict along religious lines. To explain why such religious cleavages and tensions are manifested strongly in some places and do not exist in others, we must look at regional factors that increase or diminish a) the importance of religion for immigrants and b) the need for groups to assert an ethnic identity.

Scholars attribute diasporic politics to be a response to the racial, economic and social marginalization experienced by immigrants. Such marginalization intensifies the desire of immigrants to create an idealized homeland where they can claim allegiance and belonging. According to Rajagopal (1995) the Hindu nationalism of Indian Americans is a response to the racial marginalization experienced by Indians in the United States. Basch et al (1994) discussing the case of Caribbean immigrants add that the economic insecurity that many immigrants experience is another factor leading to transnationalism.

As I have indicated, Southern California has emerged as one of the strongholds of the Hindutva movement. While the movement is strongly opposed by non-Hindus, in particular the Muslims (who are the chief target of the activists), a significant section of the Southern California Hindu Indian population seem to either passively or actively support the movement. In other areas of the country, many Hindus have mobilized against the movement (although by and large such counter-movements tend to be overshadowed by the Hindutva forces). My argument is that social, economic and racial factors largely unique to Southern California have reinforced each other in such a way that Indians in this area experience a greater degree of marginalization than in other areas of the country. This in turn has heightened the importance of religion and religious organizations and the need for ethnic affirmation giving Hindutva a much stronger appeal to Hindus here.

Social Factors - Immigration Patterns

The Los Angeles region has the third highest number of Indian immigrants of any region in the country (Portes and Rumbaut 1990: 38). In the nation as a whole, Indians are the most spatially dispersed immigrant group in the United States (Portes and Rumbaut 1990:39). Of the twelve major immigrant groups in the Los Angeles county, Asian Indians were least segregated from non-Hispanic Whites (Allen and Turner 1997: 152). Given the geography of Southern California, Indians in this region are even more dispersed than in other metropolitan areas. As mentioned earlier, in dispersed contexts, religious organizations and celebrations take on an added significance.

Southern California also has more recent Indian immigrants compared to the national average. It is common now to talk about "two waves" of post 1965 Indian migration to the United States. The "first wave" Indians came under the "special skills" provision of the 1965 Immigration Act and were thus highly educated and entered into professional and managerial careers. Once here, however, some of them sponsored the immigration of relatives under the "family reunification" provision and thus many of the "second wave" immigrants coming in since 1980 do not have the same educational or professional status as the first wave. In 1996 for instance, of the total 44, 859 Indians immigrants admitted, 11, 945 were admitted under the category of immediate relatives, 22, 346 under family sponsored preferences and only 9,919 in employment based preferences (Springer 1997: A22).

97.8% of Indians in Southern California over 25 years of age were foreign born in 1990 and 54.1% had immigrated between 1980-1990 (Allen and Turner 1997: 135). The corresponding national figures are 75.4% and 43.9% respectively (Shinagawa 1996: 101). California was the top ranked state of intended residence for Asian Indian immigrants between 1990-1993 with 19.3% of incoming immigrants stating that they intended to live there (Shinagawa 1996:90). In 1996 again, California was the top choice among Asian Indian immigrants (Springer 1997: A22) showing that the movement of recent immigrants to California has continued in the 1990's. Within the state of California, Southern California probably accounts for more Indian Americans than any other region.

There are several relevant characteristics of recent immigrants that can help explain why they would be more likely to be drawn toward transnational politics. It is likely that a smaller proportion of new immigrants are professionals (due to the increased numbers coming under the family reunification provision). This in turn could increase the economic and social difficulties they face. Recent immigrants are also more exposed to the Hindutva movement in India. New immigrants have to cope with the stress of immigration and settlement and are more likely to feel alienated and social marginalized. All of this makes it more likely that they will turn to religion, homeland involvements and the company of fellow Indian immigrants to give them a sense of security in their new environment.

Economic Factors

According to statistics from the 1990 census for the Los Angeles CMSA⁷ 42.5% of Asian Indians in this region were employed in managerial and professional occupations. The median household income of Asian Indians was \$ 47,000 (Allen and Turner 1997: 135), much above the median income of non-Hispanic Whites which was \$ 41,464 (Allen and Turner 1997: 53). However, a look at the mean household income of Asian Indians in California as a whole (I do not have mean household income figures for the Los Angeles region) seems to present a different picture. An article in India West, citing a study conducted by the University of California, Berkeley's Pacific Rim Program and presented in the Pacific Rim States Asian Demographic Data Book states that while the median income of Asian Indians in California as a whole is high, \$ 45,000, the mean household income of Asian Indians in

the state is only \$18, 472, significantly lower than the mean household income of non-Hispanic Whites which is \$ 21, 620 (Springer 1995: C-1). The difference between the mean and median figures indicates that there is a sizable number of Indians in the state who are in the lower classes. According to the study, 10.2% of the Asian Indian population in California were living below the poverty line. Furthermore, many professional Indians in the Southern region were engineers employed in the defense industry (Allen and Turner 1997: 152) and have therefore experienced lay-offs and down-ward mobility due to the cut-backs.

Racial Factors

Based on the information I have gained through interviews, Indians in Southern California have also experienced significant racial hostility due to the rise of the anti-immigrant movement in this region. Racial marginalization is probably also indirectly responsible for the relative absence of active, progressive University based Indian American groups in Southern California. As indicated, while a few campus based groups do exist, they are very small and largely marginal. The absence of a progressive presence is crucial since in other regions of the country, they have formed a counter-force to the Hindutva voice and prevented its hegemony.

The Hindu nationalist movement has received very little support among intellectual circles, a factor mentioned even by Hindutva groups themselves. They attribute it to the fact that "those who are opposed to Hindutva occupy positions of power in the scholarly field" (Home page of Hindu Vivek Kendra). Hindu nationalist activists have now formed an organization to monitor scholarly work on Hindutva, to support scholars who have a pro-Hindutva agenda and to enter into a discussion with those scholars who are opposed to it (Ibid). In other major American cities such as San Francisco, Chicago, Boston and New York, campus based Indian American groups have located themselves within larger Asian American structures and have been very active in liberal American politics (Leonard Forthcoming, Misir 1996). The Indian American discourse in these areas has therefore emerged as a contested terrain between such groups and the more conservative established Indian immigrant community. However, the hegemonic East Asian presence in Southern California has hampered Indian involvement in liberal Asian American politics and has also had the effect of rendering Indians invisible as an ethnic group in this region. Indian students at both the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles have complained about being excluded from or marginalized within Asian American programs and of racism by East Asian American students and faculty.

Thus, my argument is that Indians in Southern California have been drawn to Hindu nationalism because of their dispersed distribution, the higher proportion of recent immigrants and the social, economic, and racial marginalization they have experienced in this region.

Conclusion

Although the existence of sub-groups within ethnic categories have not been adequately recognized, this chapter shows how significant such cleavages can be. It also shows that under conditions of insecurity and marginality of the kind that are being experienced today by many immigrants, the conflicts are likely to be exacerbated and possibly even exported back to the home countries.

Since both FHA and AFMI have only been in existence for a few years, it is hard to predict how the tension

between the two will develop and whether either will be successful in imposing their agenda in the United States or India. However, undoubtedly, both organizations will have profound consequences for the development of Indian American ethnicity and for inter-religious relations in India.

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