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978-0-521-35156-0 - Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The “new threads” in the subtitle of this book represent immigrants from India and Pakistan; new ethnics who have entered the United States since the landmark change of the immigration law in 1965. Prior to that few Asian Indians – the designation had not even been formed – or Pakistanis became permanent residents, but now they are present in large numbers in every city and visible in most small towns. Their languages, arts, cuisines, and religions are threads of many colors and different textures newly interwoven in our common life. Their religious organizations, in which they gather in large numbers, and sacred buildings, which dot the urban landscape, are part of the regrouping and reformation of religious traditions that are changing both the image and the texture of American religion. To the “Protestant, Catholic, Jew” of the earlier immigrants must be added the Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, St. Thomas Christian, and Indian Jew of these new immigrants.

“Tapestry” conjures up a nonconfrontational image. The emphasis is upon the preservation of distinctive colors and textures of various groups in the process of adaptation, not on the melting into a new “global theology” or “civil religion.” Indeed, the establishment of distinctiveness through the formation of ethnocentric groups provides a means of negotiating both personal and group identity in the new setting. Another area of emphasis is the integration of new, but distinct, elements in the evolving social fabric of religious life in the United States. Something could go frighteningly wrong, however; when new threads of colors and textures not used before are woven into a tapestry, the whole thing could become a travesty or be rent asunder. A more positive outcome, much to be desired, is the enrichment and strengthening of the whole. Knowledge of the various strands is essential if understanding and appreciation of the constantly changing tapestry is to result.

Although immigrants and refugees from many countries have entered

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the United States since 1965, the focus of this study is on immigrants, not refugees, from India and Pakistan admitted under the preference categories of the Immigration Law of 1965. The complex political and religious history of the Indian subcontinent and multiple emigrations from there to various parts of the world make it difficult to specify what is meant by “Asian Indian” and “Pakistani” in the United States. The ancestors of some of these immigrants had left the Indian subcontinent for East Africa, England, or Burma before the partition of India and Pakistan, certainly before the separation of Bangladesh. In this study, “Asian Indian” refers to those who designate themselves “of Indian origin” even though they may have emigrated from Uganda, Burma, or some other country. “Pakistani” is also used as a self-designation of origin and is not necessarily a designation of the nation-state from which a person entered the United States: It is the designation of a passport written on the heart.

Bangladeshis are not treated separately in this book because so few have emigrated and because they are generally hidden among Indian Muslims or Bengali Hindus; their national identity is not strong. Buddhists from Sri Lanka and Nepal are absent from this study for two reasons, even though South-Asian Buddhist groups exist in the United States: Their inclusion would require involvement with the large groups of recent refugees from Southeast-Asian Buddhist countries, an emigration pattern different from that of Asian Indians and Pakistanis<sup>1</sup>; it would also presuppose a treatment of the substantial Buddhist population among the earlier immigrants from East Asia.

Three propositions summarize the main conclusions reached in the research and presented in this study. These concern the creation of immigrant groups, the role of religion in personal and group formation, and variations in the function of religion among immigrants.

1. Immigrant groups are created by specific legal decisions, economic opportunities, and social forces that bring them into existence and shape them at a certain place and time. The point is obvious, but its implications are often overlooked. Hinduism, for example, functions differently in the United States than in India because the religion is being reformulated as a minority religion in the new setting. Sikhism functions differently in Canada than does Sikhism in the United States because the patterns of emigration are different and the resulting religious groups face different problems of adaptation.

Canada and the United States share similar immigrant religious groups – Sikhs, Swaminarayan Hindus, Nizari Ismailis, St. Thomas Christians, and so forth – albeit in different proportions, but only religious organizations in the United States are the subject of this work. Canada’s long

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association with the Indian subcontinent through the British Empire and in the Commonwealth provided a context for emigration, creating a unique immigrant community that has more in common with the Asian immigrants of Britain than with the Asian Indians of the United States. Britain and Canada share, for example, many Asian refugees from Uganda and persons from Kenya and Tanzania with Commonwealth travel papers. No one is an “Asian Indian” in Canada, Britain or India, only in the United States – and that is an important fact.

2. Religion is important for some immigrants in the formation and preservation of personal and group identity. Religious commitments and ties, including ties to families and religious leaders in India, provide for continuity with the past, which is essential to identity. A person without memory has no identity. Once in the United States, both group and personal identity is re-formed in a social process that involves concrete decisions on the part of the immigrants and members of the host society.<sup>2</sup> Religion is a powerful mechanism for establishing this identity because, in the United States, it is an accepted mode both of establishing distinct identity and of intercommunal negotiation; religion grounds personal and group identity in a transcendent sacred reality, and religion and religious groups thus provide a context for the socialization of children of immigrants and for complex negotiations between the generations. Strategies of adaptation and the role of religion in the formation of personal and group identity are central to the establishment of immigrant religious groups.

Many secular organizations also contribute to identity formation, and there are many Asian Indians and Pakistanis who do not participate in religious activities: Immigration provides freedom to break religious ties as well as to reformulate them. Few of the immigrants from India or Pakistan are vocally antireligion, however, even though some complain about the proliferation of religious organizations, ghettoization of the community by attempts to create “little Indias” in the United States, and the “waste” of money in costly construction of religious shrines when the community needs a financial base for building a secure future. In the 1981 census of India, only 24,086 persons identified themselves as atheists – over half of them in the state of Tamil Nadu – and it is difficult to identify those among the immigrants who could provide the counterpoint in a study of the role of religion. Thus this study covers only a part of the immigrant community: those who attend religious ceremonies, are members of religious organizations, and responded in the interviews and to the questionnaires used in this study.

3. The several religions covered here function differently for different immigrants because of individual variations in majority and minority status, social location, theological affirmations and commitments, history,

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and especially national, ethnic, sectarian, or ecumenical commitments. Permission to emigrate was granted to individuals from a fairly narrow range of educational and professional scales, but no selection was either possible or attempted by government officials on the basis of religious affiliation. The immigrants thus represent all the major religious traditions present in India – Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jain, Sikh, Parsi, and even Jewish. This study encompasses all of these in an attempt to illustrate the variations that have developed in adaptive strategies and how each religion functions differently in the formation and preservation of individual and group identity. The religious tapestry contains many colorful threads in different patterns contributed by these newcomers, and not all weavers work the same.

The goals of this study include providing clear and accurate information about the growth and development of the new religious organizations serving Asian-Indian and Pakistani immigrants across the United States and making a contribution to the study of the role of religion in identity formation and adaptation by immigrants in the United States.

Part One provides an overview of the people and their religions, showing that even though immigrants are selected from within a narrow range of the educated, professional elite, they nevertheless represent not only diverse religious traditions, but also various ethnic, regional, and linguistic groups. This great diversity existing alongside a basic class unity provides a good field for our study. Chapter One describes the immigrants from India and Pakistan through the analysis of demographic statistics and information from interviews to answer such questions as who they are, how they got to the United States, why they are so successful, and why the religious and cultural situation is so confused. Basically, the chapter reveals that what “Asian Indian” and “Pakistani” mean results from decisions made by the host society through immigration policy and decisions made by the immigrants as they shape new identities. The focus of the chapter is on the general role religion plays in the adaptation of the immigrants to the United States and on the relation of religious affiliation to ethnic identity.

Chapters Two and Three present an overview of each of the religions and religious organizations founded by and serving the new immigrants, first those that have their origin in the Indian subcontinent (Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism) and then those that migrated to the Indian subcontinent (Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism). Information about the development of these groups in every section of the country was provided by questionnaires and interviews with leaders. Attendance at meetings and visits to the homes of leaders in New York, Dallas, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Boston, and New Orleans provided primary

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material for these chapters, supplemented by the material on Chicago and Houston in Part Three.

Part Two focuses on case studies of adaptive strategies developed as immigrants relate to already established religious groups and as they develop their own national organizations with contrasting adaptive strategies. Although this study is of immigrant religion, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh immigrants discovered “American cousins” in the United States in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the American Muslim Mission, and the Sikh Dharma Brotherhood, and they formed several types of relationships with these American cousins. Chapter Four deals with these three groups, not exhaustively, but only as they relate to the immigrant community. Separate studies are needed to trace the development, impact, and future of the hundreds of religious organizations with some ties to India and Pakistan that have attracted both white and black Americans; these serve different functions of group and identity formation that are outside the scope of this work.

Pictures taken from different angles and scale expose new aspects of any living organism, and so it is in the study of immigrant religion. A complete picture requires a treatment not only of the forms of major religions, but of types of local organizations and groupings, the complexity of the metropolitan centers that house them, and the development of the various denominational or sectarian forms. Groups develop longitudinally across the country, with national administrative structures, personal and organizational lines of communication, and a sense of close identification. Chapters Five and Six trace the development of two small but well-organized and rapidly growing groups that have developed national identities, the Swaminarayan Hindus and the Nizari Ismaili Muslims. These were chosen because their national character illustrates the general ways in which religious groups develop and spread throughout the country, and also because they represent distinct strategies of adaptation. The basic doctrines of the groups and the ways these developed in the past are important in shaping the direction of adaptation in America. Swaminarayan Hinduism is a powerful agent in the preservation of Gujarati ethnic identity and also preserves linguistic and regional ties with Hinduism in Gujarat. Leaders of Nizari Ismailis say that they preserve a Muslim tradition that is ecumenical in scope, with followers from several ethnic groups and many countries. Their strategy is to maintain religious unity through allegiance to the *Imam* without attempting to preserve any particular ethnic identity, a strategy they hope will allow both assimilation into American society and preservation of religious identity. Thus these two national groups illustrate both longitudinal growth and contrasting strategies of adaptation.

Part Three develops religious profiles of Asian-Indian and Pakistani

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immigrants in two metropolitan areas – Chicago in Chapter Seven and Houston in Chapter Eight – and provides a different angle and scale for picturing the growth and function of religious organizations. These metropolitan areas are sufficiently compact that a study could include material from personal contact with every organization. Although materials from contacts in larger metropolitan areas are included in other chapters, New York and Los Angeles are so spread out and so ethnically complex that it is not possible in the scope of this study to have personal contacts with and detailed information from every religious group in those metropolitan areas. Chicago and Houston, however, provide a good test of continuities and discontinuities of development because Chicago experienced an early and steady growth of Asian-Indian and Pakistani immigrants of diverse professional backgrounds, whereas Houston had a delayed and rapid growth related to the oil and space industries, followed by a deep recession. Thus these two chapters demonstrate two perspectives on growth of religious organizations in metropolitan areas, structurally through the growth of the major religious traditions in Chicago in Chapter Seven, and diachronically in Chapter Eight, which follows the rapid growth of the immigrant community and then its decline during hard times in Houston. The Conclusion traces trajectories in the dynamic of adaptation by religious groups and summarizes problems and prospects shared by immigrant religious groups as they make new homes under the aegis of the Statue of Liberty. These trajectories move from the most inclusive to the exclusive – ecumenical, national, ethnic, and sectarian – and affect the modes of adaptation and identity formation. Asian-Indian and Pakistani immigrants and the religious traditions they bring with them and reshape in the United States will certainly have a significant impact on American religion and culture. The wish of this author is that those who read this book will be able to place their new neighbors and acquaintances in appropriate religious contexts and that the book will contribute to interreligious and intercultural understanding and harmony.

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## PART I

# The people and their religions

Immigrants from India and Pakistan have arrived in significant numbers since 1965 as part of the “new ethnics.” Each immigrant comes as a private individual, selected by impersonal preference categories in the immigration laws and impelled by individual initiative. Soon, however, these individuals become identified by the groups through which they express their ethnicity and negotiate their relations with the host society. That is the point at which the variegated patterns of these new threads become apparent and begin to reshape the image of the whole tapestry.

Religion is an important aspect of the formation and preservation of personal and group identity, and recent immigrants from India and Pakistan provide a good study of its role. They have a great deal in common as part of the relatively young, well-educated, professional elite of the “brain drain” from the developing countries, at the same time representing most of the major communal groups of the Indian subcontinent.

The first three chapters identify these new immigrants and show how the various types of religious organizations they have established function to reshape and preserve their communal identities in the United States. Chapter One provides a social and economic profile of the immigrants. Chapters Two and Three introduce the variety of religions and religious organizations that serve them.

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## CHAPTER 1

## A new pattern

## Made in the U.S.A.

This study deals with the ways in which religious organizations shape and are shaped by the life of Asian-Indian and Pakistani immigrant communities in the United States. Even that short statement of the topic points to an odd fact: Asian Indians are “made in the U.S.A.” This ethnic group does not exist as such in its country of origin and its members come to be transformed through a process of assimilation in American society. Rather, the category “Asian Indian” is a new creation in the United States, the shape and content of which is determined by members of the host society and by the new immigrants themselves. “Asian Indian” and “Pakistani” are official designations given by the census bureau, at the urging of the Association of Indians in America and some other groups, as special minority categories in the 1980 Census to take account of the rapidly growing population of immigrants with a heritage in the Indian subcontinent. Prior to the 1980 Census, immigrants from India were simply classified as Caucasian; now they are classified as an ethnic minority within the “Asian or Pacific Islander” classification. The designation as a minority group was a conscious decision of the U.S. government made possible, perhaps even necessary, by earlier governmental decisions. The determination of what the designation “Asian Indian” and “Pakistani” would mean required complex decisions by the immigrants and by other members of society. Religious organizations in the United States founded by and serving these immigrants have had a significant role in this decision-making process.

Emigrants from the Indian subcontinent have gone to other countries as temporary or permanent residents for well over a century, and in each place they have formed new minority groups, each with its own peculiar character due to the varying political and economic forces that led to that particular migration and social and cultural context. “Asian Indian” is now an accepted designation for immigrants to the United States from



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India, although it and other such designations are not very precise. The designation in East African countries is “Asian,” referring to a group with a different migratory pattern, longer residence in the area, different age distribution, and different occupational patterns. In Britain, the designations “Asian” or “Paki” refer to a social group created by migratory forces, immigration laws, and economic and professional opportunities quite different from those that have led to the presence of the Asian Indians of the United States. Michael Leonardo refers to the “metaphorical use of community,” which labels thousands of individuals, unknown to one another, living often hundreds of miles apart, with different ideologies, and speaks of them in a folksy manner as if they were “village women meeting at the village well.” He points out that labeling a collection of humans as a community or a social category confers upon it a hoped-for alliance of interest, solidarity, and tradition (Leonardo, 1984:134).

Minority communities of immigrants are of temporary character in the sense that the forces that call the community into existence and shape its character are transitory and specific to a particular locality and time. Immigrants and their descendants designated as an ethnic minority may persevere for decades and beyond, but the group originally came into existence through transitory decisions and forces, and thus the community is affected by revisions of these decisions. Variations among the communities of immigrants from India in East Africa, England, and the United States illustrate how quickly they change.

The major emigrations from India to East Africa took place in the first half of this century under the aegis of British colonial rule to provide laborers for the building of the railroad and other economic developments. Asians became well-established there until the trauma of independence of African nations and Africanization led to a great exodus. The emigration to Great Britain originating from East Africa and India began to be significant after World War II, when laborers entered a flourishing economy, and the number of Asian immigrants was greatly expanded by the flood of refugees in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Significant growth in the numbers of Indian immigrants to the United States took place in the 1970s and continues in the 1980s at an increased rate. More immigrants from India came in the single year of 1982 than came in all the years prior to 1960. Prior to 1965 a few Indian graduate students elected to remain in the United States, but they were a tiny and inconspicuous minority. The major immigration as part of what has been termed “the new ethnics” took place following the enactment of the immigration act of 1965. Because the communities in East Africa, Britain, and the United States result from different waves of migration, they differ significantly in size, age,

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length of residence, social standing, level of institutional organization, and manner of adaptation to the host society.

The immigrants in this study have established themselves in the United States within the short period of the past two decades. The social characteristics they share as occupants of a fairly narrow range of the social and economic class structure, regardless of ethnic group or religion, are balanced by the diversity of the group in regional–linguistic ethnicity and in religious affiliation. This diversity provides the material to study the effects of the various religious traditions on the process of adaptation to the new pluralistic cultural and religious situation.

### Religions and identity

Immigrants are religious – by all counts more religious than they were before they left home – because religion is one of the important identity markers that helps them preserve individual self-awareness and cohesion in a group. It is common for the young professional to remark that although he was not very religious while at university in India or Pakistan, he now takes his family to the temple or mosque regularly. All of the major religions present in the Indian subcontinent are in evidence among the immigrants as shown by letters to editors of Asian-Indian and Pakistani newspapers, which complain that too many organizations – ethnic, caste, professional, and religious – request financial support from new immigrants. It is true that religious organizations make regular requests for support; furthermore, they are successful in gaining allegiance and contributions to support many programs, activities, and building projects.

All of the major religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Christian, Parsi, Jewish, and many subsets and denominations – are in the process of adaptation to the new social setting. The context and relation of the religions vary in different parts of India, and change dramatically in the United States. Although adherents of various forms of Hinduism command a massive majority in parts of the Indian subcontinent and also among immigrants, they do not sustain that majority in other regions of the subcontinent; adherents of other religions, Christianity included, are dominant in some territories. Thus, the relation of religious affiliation to a particular ethnic tradition varies according to regions and undergoes changes in the new setting.

In the United States, religion is the social category with clearest meaning and acceptance in the host society, so the emphasis on religious affiliation and identity is one of the strategies that allows the immigrant to maintain self-identity while simultaneously acquiring community acceptance (Rutledge, 1982:96). That makes religion one of the most powerful of the