

HINDU DIASPORA

When compared to migrants of other religious denominations, Hindus have had a varied past with respect to dispersion from India. The British Empire and their subjugation of India allowed Hindus to migrate to Britain, the Caribbean, Europe, and eventually North America. Waves of Hindu immigrants arrived in various countries throughout the nineteenth century creating a global Hindu Diaspora. Today, there are Hindu communities in over 150 countries (Shepherd, 2) with a significant concentration in India.

Utilized as slave labour, Indians (including Hindus) were originally shipped to numerous regions under British rule (e.g. Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, and Malaysia). Hindus in these regions would later fuel a “secondary Hindu diaspora” in places such as Western Canada (Rukmani, xiii). During the colonial period, lack of formal immigration policies slowed the arrival of Hindus into Britain. The small numbers that did arrive were sailors, or those considered to be high-caste Hindus, such as students and professionals. Systematic exploitation of India continued for several decades until the voices of independence gained momentum. India regained its independence in 1947, and a subsequent labour shortage in post-WWII Britain opened the gates for mass immigration from India. Members of the Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu faiths migrated to Britain in large waves during the 1950s and early 1960s, with the Hindus being the “last to open proper places of worship” (Rukmani, 61).

The Netherlands and Portugal also have Hindu populations which resulted from colonial implications. Surinam, previously Dutch-Guyana, gained its independence from the Dutch in 1974 and “80,000 to 100,000” Surinam Hindus subsequently migrated to and settled in the Netherlands (Rukmani, 62). Hindus from Sri Lanka (Tamil) and various Indian states also have a presence in Netherlands, but their populations are paltry when compared to the Surinam Hindus whose Caribbean style of Hinduism dominates the Netherlands. Portugal, a country which had direct connections in India via Goa, saw large populations of Indian Christians (approximately 20,000) arrive after the Portuguese mandate ended in 1961. However, the earlier presence of Hindus in Portugal can be linked to Mozambique, which was a colony of Portugal from 1507-1974 (Rukmani, 65). Mozambique gained its independence in 1974 and the “Africanization

Policy” which followed brought approximately 5,000 Hindus to Portuguese shores (Rukmani, 65). Other significant Hindu populations in Europe can be found in Germany and France. Hindus in Germany and France are mainly Tamil Hindus who had fled from Sri Lanka due to the civil war from the mid-1980s and 1990s.

The presence of a Hindu Diaspora in North America has been somewhat slow-coming due to heavy immigration restrictions. Between 1907 and 1922, approximately seventy Hindus had been granted citizenship to the United States (Chandrasekhar, 30). In Canada, East Indians had been arriving at the rate of “2,000 per year,” but these immigrants were mainly farmer Sikhs from the state of Punjab who had been brought to Canada by companies who had advertised the positions overseas (Chandrasekhar, 30). Among these Sikh immigrants were small populations of South Asian Hindus who settled mainly in California after encountering racial antagonism. In 1909, the Canadian government aimed to limit Indian immigration through a multi-pronged strategy which involved the implementation of a “continuous voyage clause,” reprimanding Canadian companies for advertising positions overseas, and charging immigrants exorbitant taxes to remain in Canada (Chandrasekhar, 29).

Similar movements in the United States arose around this same time and a handful of cases with significant importance were presented to the U.S. Justice Department. Two specific cases were the *U.S. v. Balsara* (1910) and *U.S. v. Mazumdar* (1913). Balsara and Mazumdar argued that they were Caucasians and were therefore allowed citizenship under the Naturalization Legislation of 1875 (Chandrasekhar, 33). The Naturalization Legislation allowed “those to be considered white persons eligible for citizenship to the United States.” A major centre of argument was the interchangeable definitions of “Caucasian” and “white person.” The Supreme Court allowed for Balsara and Mazumdar to be considered “white persons,” and subsequently opened the gates for immigration. However, in the infamous case of *U.S. v. Thind* (1923), the Supreme Court upheld the “understanding of the common man” in the belief that the East Indians could not be associated with Caucasians (Chandrasekhar, 31). Several thousand Hindus and Sikhs returned to India in the period following the Supreme Court decision regarding the Thind case (from 1920-1940). Chinese immigrants in this period were also subject to similar discrimination due to the military efforts of China, but were granted naturalization privileges in

1943 which set quotas for Chinese immigrants allowing them to enter the United States. After Pearl Harbour, Indian assistance in the military operations against Japan provoked similar arguments in favour of easing regulations on East Indian immigrants. Under Harry Truman in 1946, a “modest quota” of 100 immigrants per year was allowed, and further American liberalization of immigration policies were to follow. In the period 1947-1965, approximately 6,000 East Indian immigrants (a small proportion being Hindus) entered the United States under the quota system (Chandrasekhar, 33). However, mass immigration into the United States did not begin until 1965 when immigration laws were sharply revised.

Over 1.8 million immigrants entered Canada in the 1990's, 7% of whom were Hindus (Statistics Canada 2001). A majority of these immigrants settled in Ontario, where 73% of Canada's Hindu population resides. In total, there are 292,200 Hindus in Canada (growth of 89%, 1991-2001), and somewhere between one and 1.3 million Hindus in the United States (growth of 105.87%, 1990-2000) (Anand, 12). With the anticipated retirement of the Baby Boomers in North America, Hindus are in a unique position. In comparison with the median ages of other religious denominations in Canada, Hindus are one of the youngest and most educated religious groups in the country. While the median age of Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Jewish, and Greek Orthodox populations are well above 40 years of age, the median age of Hindus in Canada is 31.9 years (Statistics Canada 2001). The median age of the total population in Canada is 37.3 years of age. In the United States, high-school and post-secondary completion indicators show that Hindus show a focus towards education. Over 87% of Hindus have completed high-school and 62% have attained post-secondary education compared to 20% for the total U.S population (Anand, 11). Young and educated Hindu professionals are found all over Canada and the United States, and their buying power is increasing. The average household income in Hindu communities is 54.5% higher than the average U.S. household income. Hindu households earn an average of \$US 60,093 compared to the average U.S. household income of \$US 38,885, a difference of well over twenty-thousand dollars (Anand, 11).

As the Hindu population continues to grow, a major source of concern is the preservation of Hindu culture. To combat the dilution of Hindu traditions, many temples have been constructed as a result of Hindu-community lead initiatives. Many reasons exist for the construction of

temples. These include the religious needs of a growing Hindu population, the availability of capital within the Hindu community, and a concern for the first generation of American born Hindus. The first Hindu temple in the United States was constructed in San Francisco in 1906 by the Vedanta Society (Anand, 13). As of 2003, there were 1,000 temples in the planning or construction stage of development, with approximately 200 operational temples throughout the United States (Anand, 14). Architectural designs of the temples being constructed mimic the designs of temples in India. The Hindu Jain Temple in Monroeville, PA and the Sri Venkatesvara Temple in Penn Hills, PA respectively demonstrate the architectural differences between northern and southern Indian temple structures. Furthermore, Hindu temples function as a link between Hindu communities in North America and India. Activities such as fundraising for social development and welfare projects allow American Hindus to remain central to the development of India. Total foreign contributions to India in 2001 totalled \$955 million, with \$315 million coming from Hindu donors in the United States. It is predicted that the global Hindu Diaspora has contributed over \$97 billion through “social and economic non-profit organizations” (over 25 years, 1975-2000) (Anand, 5).

Several theories have been developed with respect to the “process of transplanting” Hindu traditions. In the wake of a growing Hindu Diaspora, a three step process has been theorized by T.S. Rukmani, Hindu Studies Chair (Concordia University). Rukmani identifies the process of religious and social modification that Hindus undertake when living outside of India. The first step in the process is a heightened awareness of religious belonging. Many non-resident Indian Hindus who comprise minority populations in Europe and America report a greater awareness of their religion. Step two is institutionalisation, or the building of temples. Temples create a “collective solidarity and common identity” for Hindus and appease concerns regarding the loss of Hindu traditions. The final step in the process is religious and social modification. India is a very different world than those of developed Western countries and may be more conducive to the practise of certain rituals and beliefs. For example, external factors in Canada such as weather may postpone the celebration of an astrologically important day, and local belief systems in Canada do not frown on women working outside the home. As a result, religious beliefs and social structures are modified to reflect the environmental stressors, but overall traditional beliefs tend to be upheld (Rukmani, 67-70).

As world events create downward pressures on immigration regulators, the global Hindu Diaspora is expected to continue its growth. India is gaining a reputation for its strong professional English-speaking workers. Furthermore, a growing concern about the state of Islam has highlighted the relatively non-abrasive beliefs of Hinduism which some believe is much more cohesive with American traditions.

References & Further Readings

- Anand, Priya (2003) *Hindu Diaspora and Religious Philanthropy in the United States* New York: Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society.
- Brown, Richard H. (1987) *Migration and modernization : the Indian diaspora in comparative perspective*. Williamsburg, VA: College of William and Mary.
- Chandrasekhar, S. (1982) *From India to America : a brief history of immigration, problems of discrimination, admission, and assimilation*. California: Population Review Publications.
- Jensen, Joan M. (1988) *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Rukmani, T.S. (2001) *Hindu Diaspora*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Sheth, Pravin (2001) *Indians in America: One Stream, Two Waves, Three Generations*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Shepherd, Harvey (1997) "Focus on Hindu diaspora :Conference at Concordia will discuss expatriate communities aroundthe world" The Gazette [Montreal, Que.] 26 Jul 1997
<<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=13189573&Fmt=3&clientId=12304&RQT=309&VName=PQD>>
- Statistics Canada (2001) *Religions in Canada: Growth in Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism*. Accessed March 2nd, 2006.
<www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/Products/Analytic/companion/rel/canada.cfm>
- Vertovec, Steven (2000) *The Hindu diaspora : comparative patterns*. New York, NY : Routledge

Further Research Topics

“Africanization Policy”
Asian Exclusion League (AEL)
California Alien Land Law
Caribbean Hinduism
Chinese Exclusion Act (1887)
Hindu American Foundation
IACFPA (Indian-American Center for Political Action)
Immigration and Nationality Act (1952)
Indo-Canadian Society
Komagatu Maru (name of ship)
Luce-Cellar Bill (1946)
Non-Resident Indian (NRI)
Ramakrishna
Tarakanath Das
Vedanta Society
World Hindu Congress

Notable Websites

Consulate General of India (Vancouver)

<http://www.cgivancouver.com/>

Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind- “Teacher of Purest Spirituality”

<http://www.bhagatsinghthind.com>

Hindu Business Line

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/>

Hinduism in the United States

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism_in_the_United_States

Hindu Jain Temple (Monroeville, PA)

<http://www.hindujaintemple.org/>

Non-Resident Indian (NRI) Worldwide

<http://www.nri-worldwide.com>

Vedanta Society Network

<http://www.vedantasociety.net/>

Article written by Ricky Nariani (Spring 2006) who is solely responsible for its content.