

Asian Indians in Indiana

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Asian Indians are among the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States today. Eighty-two percent of Asian Indian immigrants now living in the U.S. arrived between 1980 and 2000, and their population more than doubled in the 1990s. Currently, the U.S. Asian Indian population totals nearly 2 million. In 2004 nearly 17,000 Asian Indians lived in Indiana—up more than 2,000 since 1999 and more than double the Asian Indian population recorded in the state ten years earlier.¹

In spite of this numerical presence, the American media often present the Asian Indian community and its individual members in stereotypic ways, portraying students as antisocial intellectuals, men as dependable employees who nevertheless lack initiative, and women as silent and subservient spouses. Unfortunately, research that might counter the stereotypes is extremely sparse, and few firsthand accounts document the everyday lives of Asian Indian immigrants in the Midwest.² The growing presence of Asian Indians here and elsewhere in

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¹U.S., Census Bureau, *We the People: Asians in the United States*, December 2004, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/censr-17.pdf>; U.S., Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, Fact Sheet for Asian Indian Alone or in Any Combination, <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

²Herbert R. Barringer, David T. Takeuchi, and Peter Xenos, "Education, Occupational Prestige, and Income of Asian Americans," *Sociology of Education*, 63 (January 1990), 27-43; H. S. Bhola,

the U.S., and the diversity of their experiences, calls for new study and interpretive techniques that can suitably capture their memories and preserve their experiences.

Traditionally, scholars studied immigration history through the use of ships' passenger lists, federal statistics and, where available, documents, diaries, letters, and other memoirs. During the lifetimes of contemporary immigrants, however, the ready availability of telephones, fax machines, and e-mail has made letter writing and the keeping of diaries almost a lost art. Fortunately, oral history provides a way to access contemporary immigrants' narratives about their experience. Such primary sources represent nothing less than history in the making—firsthand accounts captured at a distinct moment in the acculturation process—that may prove vital to historians and other researchers later attempting to understand the larger picture of American immigration and assimilation. Allesandro Portelli commends oral-history research for its firsthand insights into people's interpretations of their personal and historical experiences. Donald Ritchie says oral history may well be the modern substitute for the written memoir. Numerous scholars address oral history's capacity to document vital information about memory, culture, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and power. In brief, today's social research is tomorrow's historical documentation.³

"Asian Indians," in *Peopling Indiana: The Ethnic Experience*, ed. Robert M. Taylor Jr. and Connie A. McBirney (Indianapolis, 1996), 38-53; Margaret A. Gibson, *Accommodation Without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988); Arthur W. Helweg and Usha M. Helweg, *An Immigrant Success Story: East Indians in America* (Philadelphia, 1990); Beloo Mehra, "The Home-School Relations: An Exploration into the Perspectives of Parents and Schools on Asian Indian Cultural Model of Schooling," (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1998); Gargi R. Sodowsky and John C. Carey, "Asian Indian Immigrants in America: Factors Related to Adjustment," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 15 (July 1987), 129-41; Esther L. Yao, "Understanding Indian Immigrant Learners," *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling*, 23 (April 1989), 298-305.

³ Allesandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, N.Y., 1991), 1-28; Donald Ritchie, "Introduction," in Corrine A. Krause, *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters: Oral Histories of Three Generations of Ethnic American Women* (Boston, 1991), iii; Jack Dougherty, "From Anecdote to Analysis: Oral Interviews and New Scholarship in Educational History," *Journal of American History*, 86 (June 1999), 712-23; Antoinette Errante, "But Sometimes You're Not Part of the Story: Oral Histories and Ways of Remembering and Telling," *Educational Researcher*, 29 (March 2000), 16-27; Barbara Finkelstein, "Revealing Human Agency: The Uses of Biography in the Study of Educational History," in *Writing Educational Biography: Exploration in Qualitative Research*, ed. Craig Kridel (New York, 1998), 45-59; Michèle Foster, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (New York, 1997); Michael A. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, N.Y., 1990).

This article presents and analyzes a summary of oral-history interviews with ninety Asian Indian immigrants who reside in Indiana. Conducted between 1994 and 2002 among Asian Indians from northern, central, and southern Indiana, the interviews in this project provide information about immigrants' daily life in the U.S., marriage customs, family life, religious traditions, and methods for defining ethnic identity.⁴ Participants present some views clearly attributable to generational difference—first-generation adult immigrants shared certain obvious traits when compared to second-generation individuals who were born and/or raised in Indiana—but as a rule, their views of Indian and American cultural practices vary greatly from each other. Taken as a whole, the interviews demonstrate significant intergroup diversity among Asian Indians in Indiana. This article explores their accounts of cultural encounter, their conceptions of India, their lives in Indiana, and their reflections on the interaction of identity and tradition.

Not only do the data presented here challenge media stereotypes, they also demonstrate the inadequacy of past scholarly methods for exploring immigrant experience. Early models of assimilation, such as those put forth by historian Oscar Handlin or sociologist Milton M. Gordon, viewed acculturation as a sequential and unidirectional process that could not be resisted or changed.⁵ Later models, such as that offered by historian John Bodnar in *The Transplanted* (1985), provided a more nuanced view of immigration history by combining it with the precise

⁴Ninety persons from the Indian subcontinent voluntarily participated in this study designed to explore Asian Indians' experiences of immigration and cultural change. Time spent in the United States ranged from 2 to 42 years and, at the time of their interviews, all participants resided in a midwestern state. Ages of interviewees varied from 18 to 64 years; just over 60 percent were male. Participants in this project reflect the diverse regional, religious, and language makeup of the Indian subcontinent (more so than the general U.S. Indian population). When possible, husbands and wives were interviewed in their own homes simultaneously by a male/female research team. An open-ended questionnaire combined with a semi-structured interview design facilitated the collection of richly textured narratives. All interviews (from two to four hours in length) were tape recorded, transcribed, and checked by interviewees for accuracy and clarity. Contextualist paradigms provided a theoretical structure for data gathering and analysis. Lloyd H. Rogler, "International Migrations: A Framework for Directing Research," *American Psychologist*, 49 (August 1994), 701-708. In the text of this article, some names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁵Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (Boston, 1951); Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York, 1964).

quantifying tools and the social activism of the new social history. Yet, the diversity of Asian Indian experience requires a still broader and more flexible framework than those employed for the retrospective study of European immigration.⁶ I subscribe to psychologist Dina Birman's more open-ended view of acculturation as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original pattern of either or both groups."⁷ Such a view allows for the possibility of what some scholars have called bi-cultural competence, a theory which suggests that, given proper conditions, immigrants and their children will become highly functioning members of the adopted society while they selectively retain elements of the birth culture.⁸

This study is significant for what it can tell us about Indiana, a state not normally known for its high degree of ethnic diversity. The history of Indiana's early settlement, however, is linked to peoples of diverse origin.⁹ Since the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, the population of Indiana, like other states, has quietly changed to reflect once again the dynamism of global population movements. The oral history project summarized here documents a specific, understudied, contemporary immigrant group in Indiana as an initial step toward recasting Indiana history to better reflect the state's growing diversity. By 2000, the children of many first-generation Asian Indians were reaching young adulthood and beginning to raise families of their own. Capturing the experiences and perceptions of Indiana's Asian Indian population at this new and fast-changing stage can help future historians document the immigrants' arrival, their acculturation to American society, and their impact upon the culture of Indiana.

⁶Rita Chi-Ying Chung and Marjorie Kagawa-Singer, "Predictors of Psychological Distress among Southeast Asian Refugees," *Social Science and Medicine*, 36, 1 (1993), 631-39.

⁷Dina Birman, "Acculturation and Human Diversity in a Multicultural Society," in *Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context*, ed. Edison J. Trickett, Roderick J. Watts, and Dina Birman (San Francisco, 1994), 261-84.

⁸John W. Berry, Ype H. Poortinga, Marshall H. Segall, and Pierre R. Dasen, *Cross-Cultural Psychology: Research and Applications* (New York, 1992).

⁹Bhola, "Asian Indians," 38-53.

ASIAN INDIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

The experiences of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Asian Indians in Indiana contrast starkly with those of Asian Indian “pioneer” immigrants in early twentieth-century America. Sikh males from the western Indian state of Punjab, one of the earliest documented groups of Asian Indian immigrants, arrived in the United States between 1907 and 1914. Bringing considerable farming skills and patience for working long hours under a hot sun, they found employment as laborers and foremen on the West Coast. Eventually they married Mexican women—many of whom were themselves recent immigrants to the United States, having fled from the violence of the Mexican revolution.¹⁰

Following on the heels of the Sikhs came students from north and east India. Many sought refuge in the United States after having agitated for India’s independence. The students hoped to be able to vent their pro-independence (and often anti-British) sentiments in the U.S. without fear of repercussion. Unfortunately, the federal government proved unsympathetic to their political leanings and placed harsh restrictions upon Indian Asian immigrant communities.

The U.S. Immigration Act of 1917 had barred all Asian immigrants from gaining citizenship. The U.S. Supreme Court’s 1923 ruling that Asian Indians were Asians forced many previously naturalized Asian Indian citizens to give up their citizenship. With this ruling, legal immigration of Asian Indians to the United States came to an end. Not until the passage of the Atlantic Charter in 1941 did Asian Indians (along with other Asian immigrants such as Japanese and Koreans) receive the right to become American citizens. Even then, the number of Asian Indian immigrants to the United States was almost too small to count. Nearly fifty years would pass before large groups of Asian Indian immigrants would again arrive in the United States.¹¹

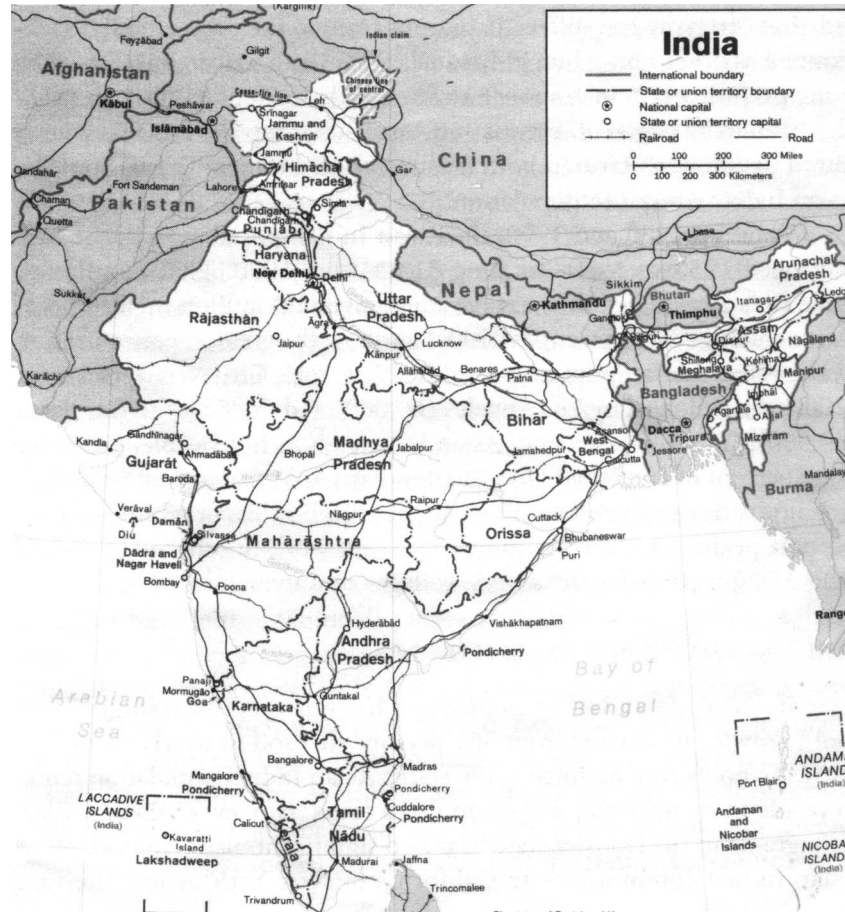
¹⁰Gibson, *Accommodation without Assimilation*, 41.

¹¹Surinder J. Bhardwaj and N. Madhusudana Rao, “Asian Indians in the United States: A Geographic Appraisal,” in *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity*, ed. Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach, and Steven Vertovec (New York, 1990), 197-217; Joan M. Jensen, “East Asians,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 296-301; Emily C. Brown, *Har Dayal: Hindu Revolutionary and Rationalist* (Tucson, Ariz., 1975).

The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act raised the restrictive immigration quotas for non-European nations and initiated a “third wave” of immigration composed largely of Asians and Latin Americans. The act allowed legal entry for 170,000 immigrants per year from the eastern hemisphere, with a limit of 20,000 from any one country, and gave preference to those with needed occupational skills and to family members of permanent residents. On one hand, this change in immigration policy represents an American sense of cultural pluralism emerging out of the civil rights movement’s challenge to racist legal codes and institutions. On the other hand, lawmakers also recognized that well-educated and skilled immigrants from the developing world could meet growing labor shortfalls in medicine, engineering, research science, and higher education. Thus, the 1965 immigration law opened the door to a select, but significant, number of Asian Indian immigrants.

Modern immigrants originate from across the Indian nation rather than from a single region. Although the largest numbers of immigrants come from the western state of Gujarat, significant numbers continue to come from more northerly Punjab, from the eastern state of West Bengal, and from southern states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu. They are less likely than their predecessors to settle in ethnic enclaves, choosing instead to take up residence throughout urban and suburban areas. Geographic dispersion stems largely from the generally high socioeconomic status of immigrants arriving in the 1960s and 1970s, many of whom came to the United States to pursue post-graduate education and/or professional opportunities in the fields of medicine, engineering, and science. Most of these immigrants chose to live alongside upwardly mobile colleagues in suburban areas rather than in ethnic neighborhoods.¹² There are, however, concentrated areas of Asian Indians in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Houston. Madhulika Khandelwal, an Asian Indian and professor at Queens College in New York, writes: “These neighborhoods are receiving areas and there’s a pattern of immi-

¹²Bhardwaj and Rao, “Asian Indians in the United States,” 197-217; Kan V. Chandras, “Training Multiculturally Competent Counselors to Work with Asian Indian Americans,” *Counselor Education & Supervision*, 37 (September 1997), 50-60; Helweg and Helweg, *An Immigrant Success Story*, 108-33; Marcia Mogelonsky, “Asian-Indian Americans,” *American Demographics*, 17 (August 1995), 32-39; Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston, 1989).



Indian states and cities

Modern Indian immigrants come from many regions of India, including Punjab, Kerala, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu

U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, courtesy Indiana University Geography and Map Library

grants first arriving here” where they “set up networks and resources” and then “later move to higher income, more suburban residences.”¹³

Until 1980, Indian immigrants in the United States lacked any “official” unique racial identity as they were stuck somewhere between black and white. In 1975, the Association of Indians in America submitted that “Indians are different in appearance; they are equally dark-skinned as other non-white individuals and are, therefore, subject to the same prejudices.”¹⁴ In response to such calls for recognition, the U.S. Census Bureau began differentiating Asian subgroups in 1980. The new-found distinctions created both frustration and esteem throughout the Asian Indian American population.

Between 1980 and 1990, the Asian Indian population in the U.S. increased 125.6 percent, totaling 815,219 by 1990. That population more than doubled in the next decade to over 1.9 million by the end of the twentieth century. Census 2000 data show the greatest concentration of the Asian Indian population in the New York City/New Jersey area (200,000), followed by Los Angeles (69,000) and the Chicago/Gary area (60,000). Sixty-one percent of Asian Indian adults hold a college degree. Sixty percent of employed U.S. Asian Indians hold managerial or professional positions; 30 percent work in technical, sales, or administrative support positions; the remaining 10 percent work in other fields. More than 5,000 serve as faculty at U.S. colleges or universities.¹⁵

ASIAN INDIANS IN INDIANA

Indiana’s Asian Indian population has mirrored the nation’s in its rapid growth, increasing from 361 persons in 1960 to nearly 17,000 in 2004. As holds true nationally, the state’s Asian Indian population tends to reside in or near major metropolitan areas. However, Asian Indian immigrants in the Hoosier state bear two significant distinctions. Unlike Asian Indian communities in California or New York, where the vast

¹³Madhulika S. Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian: An Immigrant Community in New York City* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2002), 89.

¹⁴Vinay Lal, “Establishing Roots, Engendering Awareness: A Political History of Asian Indians in the United States,” in *‘Live Like the Banyan Tree’: Images of the Indian American Experience*, ed. Leela Prasad (Philadelphia, 1999), 42-48.

¹⁵U.S., Department of Commerce and Census Bureau, *We the Americans: Asians*, September 1993, <http://www.census.gov/apcd/wepeople/we-3.pdf>; U.S., Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, Fact Sheet for Asian Indian Alone or in Any Combination and U.S., Census Bureau, Fact Finder, Data Set, 2004 American Community Survey, <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

majority of immigrants live in urban city centers, Asian Indians in Indiana and Illinois tend to settle in suburban areas near universities. Moreover, Indiana's Asian Indian population differs from those in other states (including Illinois) in that it has formed no Indian neighborhoods or ethnic enclaves.

In terms of income and educational attainment, Indiana's Asian Indians resemble their counterparts in other states. The median family income of Asian Indians residing in Indiana was \$56,630 in 1999, in a state where the \$41,567 overall median income fell short of the \$42,100 national average. This trend holds true in states with large Asian Indian populations, such as New York, California, and New Jersey (the nationwide median Asian Indian income was \$69,470). One explanation for these higher-than-average income figures may be found in the data on immigrants' educational attainment. Researchers have noted that Asian Indian immigrants as a group tend to have more years of education than the U.S. population as a whole.¹⁶ This trend holds true in Indiana: according to the 2000 census, 71 percent of the state's adult Asian Indian residents possessed at least the equivalent of a bachelor's degree, compared to 19.4 percent of the general adult population.¹⁷

Indiana's Asian Indians differ from their counterparts nationwide in other ways. An overwhelming majority of U.S. Asian Indian immigrants are Hindu, with only minor representation from the Islamic, Sikh, and Christian faiths. Nationally, there are high concentrations of Asian Indian immigrants from Gujarat and Punjab. Indiana's Asian Indian community represents all of India's major geographic regions, languages, and cultures. Furthermore, Hindu, Sikh, Christian, and Muslim immigrants are scattered throughout Indiana's various metropolitan and suburban areas. Thus, the Asian Indians who participated in this project reflect—more so than the general U.S. Indian population—the diverse regional, religious, and language makeup of the Indian subcontinent.

THE EXPERIENCE OF CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

Asian Indian immigrants' sense of self, as well as their sense of their place in the U.S. and in Indiana, appears to be characterized by an overarching sense of personal and social diversity. Some of this percep-

¹⁶Bhardwaj and Rao, "Asian Indians in the United States," 197-217.

¹⁷U.S., Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, Fact Sheet for Asian Indian Alone or in Any Combination and Fact Sheet for Indiana, <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

tion may grow out of India's dramatic internal differences as a nation that recognizes sixteen national languages (including English, which is taught in most schools) and four prominent religious communities: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh (other religious traditions in India include Jainism, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism). Hindus, who represent the largest religious group in India at almost 83 percent of the population, also make up the largest group of Asian Indian immigrants to the United States.¹⁸ Over several centuries, rules from Hindu scripture pertaining to diet, marriage, ritual, and all matters of social custom have permeated daily Indian culture and society. In spite of Hinduism's influence over Asian Indian traditions, considerable diversity can be found throughout India's geographic and cultural regions. The regional and religious diversity of Asian Indian immigrants in Indiana presents itself in a variety of ways through their own words.

Vellore, an engineer in Fort Wayne, describes how different regions in India reflect the diversity of the people: "I want to touch upon something about on the cultural side, to give you a flavor as to how multicultural [are] the religion, the language, the traditions, and the different variations of the Indian people who live in different states . . . [T]he cuisine, the food, the habits, what they eat, when they eat—it is so drastically different."¹⁹

Mahese, a university student in Fort Wayne, also discusses regional differences in dietary traditions: "I live in South India. Okay, so the contrasts between North Indian and South Indian are pretty different. We eat spicy foods. They eat more like, you know, sweet food."

Whereas most Jain and many Hindu communities follow vegetarian diets, some Hindus from coastal regions—such as West Bengal or Kerala—are more likely to eat chicken and fish. Followers of the Sikh tradition are typically meat eaters and do not follow the same restrictions as the Hindus. Today, one is likely to find vegetarian foods and Indian spices in most large American grocery stores, including those in

¹⁸Prema Kurien, "Gendered Ethnicity: Creating a Hindu Indian Identity in the United States," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42 (January 1999), 648-70; R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology*, 98 (March 1993), 1044-93.

¹⁹The tapes and transcripts of some of the interviews cited herein are from the Indian American Communities oral history collections, #065-#068, Center for the Study of Memory and History, Bloomington, Indiana. Additional materials for other interviews remain in the author's possession.

Indiana. However, immigrants who arrived before the 1970s and 1980s obtained nourishing vegetarian food or spices only with great difficulty. One interviewee who arrived in Indiana in the late 1960s comments: "When I came to Purdue, I mean, it was very difficult to cook and, because I was not a good cook. We didn't get any of the spices and things of that type to make the food good. We had no cars, you know, so it used to be a friend would take us to the grocery store. So it was a little bit difficult because of the food problem, you know?" Other interviewees recall getting together with fellow Asian Indians to make monthly trips to Chicago's Devon Street for food and spices. Several remember their first few months as vegetarian Hindus in the U.S. for the endless amounts of salad and cheese sandwiches on white bread.

As an alternative, many Asian Indian immigrants felt obligated to give up certain dietary habits that they had maintained strictly while in India out of religious or moral obligations. Says Meera: "By religion, [in my family] we are Hindus. We don't eat beef so that's one thing. But we have adapted to that also, so [eating beef is] fine, but not on a regular basis. If it's served once in a while, I might eat it. But I am not too strict, and that's why I do that." Divia's family in Fort Wayne is typical of most interviewees in that they tend to eat traditional Indian food at home and American food outside the home. "I make Indian food every day. We eat out 'American food,'" she says. Mehjabeen, a graduate student in Fort Wayne, appreciates having Indian food with her family on a regular basis while also understanding that traditional Indian cooking is very time- and work-intensive. Her mother, Mehjabeen reports, "always cooks Indian food, and meals take a while to make. By the time I get home, she's exhausted."

Vellore discusses his family's attempts to retain Asian Indian dietary traditions at home: "We still, for the most part, cook Indian food. That's what we eat. We of course enjoy 'American food,' too! But as you probably know, if you don't watch out 'American food' tends to be more fat laden, so we try to avoid that. So we still stick to the Indian cuisine as much as possible—vegetarian. When we do eat non-vegetarian, we generally don't eat beef. We eat chicken and fish, but predominantly our food consists of vegetables and fruit, and the Indian ingredients. It's generally low in fat and well balanced." Rajesh and his family also try to adhere to a vegetarian diet. Rajesh's family, however, is motivated by religious principles: "We eat rice, curries, bread, and vegetables. I'm a vegetarian. Like around, I'd say, 30 to 40 percent of Indian population are

vegetarian. It's part of true religion. It's kind of religious that you don't eat meat, and most of the population is not supposed to eat beef."

As with dietary practice, the Asian Indian religious experience in Indiana manifests great diversity. The majority of interviewees were Hindu, although Jains, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Sikhs also participated in the project. With a few exceptions, most interviewees identified themselves as religious or spiritual persons. The ways in which they practice their religions and communicate their devotion, however, are quite different.

Meera suggests that there are various levels of religiosity in the Asian Indian community: "There are some who are practicing every week. They get together every week. There are groups of Indians who are very religious. There are groups who are kind of medium and some of whom don't do anything. Probably, I would come in the medium. I go to the main festival groups, some religious functions or celebrations, but not on a regular basis."

Several interviewees describe religion as more of an abstract experience, and indicate that they do not practice their religion with any sort of regularity or custom. Referring to themselves as "cultural Hindus," they often consider the culture of the religion—as well as the native geography and language—to be of greater value than the actual theistic qualities or rituals. Anthropologists Helweg and Helweg note that for these immigrants Hindu values and belief systems provide "an overriding unity [of] ideological principles."²⁰ When asked about his religious affinity, Amitava responds that he is a Hindu but does not engage in daily ritual or practice. For such persons, the appeal of Hinduism is often located in its secular quality, and not in a doctrinaire quality that begs for regular or frequent adherence.

Interviewees are more likely to speak of their religion as a pervasive influence on their culture and belief systems than to speak of specific theological beliefs. The scarcity of Hindu temples in the U.S. provides one—but by no means the only—explanation of the fact that Asian Indian Hindus worship in their homes.²¹ Kavitha talks about the Hindu practice of puja, or worship. "If you go to our houses, we have a little room or a little corner where there is a little [religious symbol], and they have candles around, and little statues." Meera believes that "Hinduism

²⁰Helweg and Helweg, *An Immigrant Success Story*, 180-84.

²¹Bhola, "Asian Indians," 38-53.

is just the way you live. It is not an organized religion where you have to attend [regularly]. You can pray at home.”

Religion can play a central role in identity development as immigrants deal with elements of cultural change, and may serve as a vehicle for cultural transmission. Some scholars suggest that Asian Indian immigrants with children frequently renew their religious affiliations after arriving in the U.S., viewing participation in religious celebrations and traditions as a method of “raising Indian consciousness among their children.”²²

Closely linked to religion, family issues—such as socializing with the opposite sex and arranged marriages—are also part of the experience of cultural encounter. Many immigrants are hopeful that their sons and daughters will choose partners from within the Asian Indian community. According to several interviewees, Asian Indians consider religious affiliation a serious criterion for selecting a child’s marriage partner. Shahnaz, a Muslim in Fort Wayne, expects her daughter to marry a Muslim. “It doesn’t matter from where, as long as he is Muslim and he can pray and follow their religion together,” she says. “[If not], what will they teach their children?”

They also expect their children to trust their elders’ advice concerning potential mate selection. Mitoholi, a female student born and raised in India, spoke favorably of arranged marriage: “The way we view family in India and here, the way American students do, it’s very different. Indians, we just give a lot of respect [to our parents]. That’s just another reason why arranged marriages happen. Daughters respect their parents; they respect their choice. They are willing to do anything for their parents. If their parents want them to get married to this particular person, then they will get married.”

On the other hand, Puja, a student raised in the United States, says of the possibility of her parents arranging her marriage: “They know I won’t ever go for it. [If I were] to say maybe, ‘You look [for a mate for me],’ they would be more than happy to look. My mom likes fixing people up. She knows not to even think about it for me, like, because I have

²²Kurien, “Gendered Ethnicity,” 648-70; Warner, “Work in Progress,” 1044-93; Steven Vertovec, “Hindus in Trinidad and Britain: Ethnic Religion, Reification and the Politics of Public Space,” in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia, 1995), 132-56; Parmatma Saran, *The Asian Indian Experience in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985).

plenty of cousins who are older than me that are girls and need to get married [before I do]. So I am just like, 'You go worry about them.'"

Even though Puja rejects the idea of an arranged marriage for herself, she respects her parents' hope that she marry a person of Indian descent. But left to her own devices, Puja would prefer someone born in the United States because "There are a lot of things that I just don't understand, [things] that persons born in India do that I just don't get. There's a lot of stuff that American-born people do that, like, I do understand."

Jay said his immigrant parents "expected me to follow [traditional] Indian paths, but I almost couldn't because, I mean, I guess I could, but it was harder. I felt like it was harder for me to follow along the traditional paths because of what my friends were doing. That's what it seemed like everyone was doing, you know, and I didn't want to be different than anyone else."

Asian Indian immigrant experience in Indiana betrays a great variety of adaptation and acculturation. Kavitha, a graduate student in Bloomington, perceives such diversity as key: "I see India as a very diverse country and I see the culture as being a very diverse culture. I think that the one word to describe it would be diverse . . . [W]hat makes me a unique person is because I've, you know, cherished all these diversities."

CONCEPTIONS OF INDIA

Just as they do with their culture, Indiana's Asian Indian immigrants define and imagine India itself in many different ways. Each interviewee remembers and defines India according to personal experience. First-generation immigrants share some similar experiences in India and in the U.S. and, as a result, tend to remember India in similar ways. For example, they grew up in India, and many experienced firsthand what it was like to speak native languages, formally practice their religion, attend Indian schools, and follow local social and dietary customs. Unable to share such experiences, second-generation interviewees instead define and imagine India according to family traditions, religious events, and family trips to India. Extended family trips to India were mentioned by both first- and second-generation interviewees as important factors in their children's sense of identity development; most interviewees with children mentioned that they travel as a family to India at least every two to three years.

The India of today is, in many ways, quite different from the India remembered by older first-generation interviewees. Modern India presents two faces to the world: preindustrial and postmodern.²³ Some larger cities in India appear on the surface much like cities found in modern Western societies, with McDonald's restaurants and young people in jeans. Bangalore and Hyderabad have been referred to as the Silicon Valley of India. Yet much of the rural population continues to live in undeveloped villages where people earn their living through agriculture.

Despite these changes and, even after recent trips to India, most first-generation interviewees describe an India similar to the society of their own parents' generation. They remember, for example, an India in which the educational system was extremely rigid and the student/teacher and child/parent relationships were based on utmost respect. Often, these same persons indicated their belief that the second generation has not maintained this same level of respect for authority. One interviewee recalls his school days in Calcutta: "I had a very good time in school. I think that the school system was rigid, with respect to the American secondary education but also more pressure was placed on the students, for mathematics in general and other areas. I thought looking back, knowing the basic 'R's,' reading, writing, and arithmetic, I was better prepared there in Calcutta than my sons who get their educations here. The competition was more strenuous. The schools there maintained a much higher standard."

Jay, a second-generation interviewee, finds his first-generation "traditional Indian" parents stricter than those of his American classmates. He attributes this strictness to their imagined India: a place which has escaped Western influence, a society where one's family always comes first, a setting in which one always defers to one's elders. Jay reports that in comparing their imagined India to the U.S.—with its high divorce rate, gangs, alcohol and drug abuse—his parents find the latter to be less than a model society. His parents, he says, often advise him, "Oh, you know, it's not so great here. And the traditional Indian way is so, so much better than the American [way].'" At times, Jay feels this imagined India might be employed to discourage the younger generation from adopting undesirable American ways: "And they will, like, you

²³Vijay K. Raina and Harry Dhand, "Reflections on Teaching History in the Developing World: An Indian Experience," *The Social Studies*, 91 (March/April 2000), 84-88.

know, use examples of things that, you know, don't work very well in this society and try to compare them to things that work well in the old traditional Indian society."

LIVING IN INDIANA

Most interviewees conceptualize American society broadly in their narratives, rather than discussing Indiana or the Midwest specifically. Some exceptions occur, however. Nalin, an anesthesiologist in Indianapolis, recalls some negative first impressions of his new home: "Some of the shocking things coming to the United States for the first time, coming from India [in the 1970s], the women don't smoke in India. They still don't—probably 99 percent don't smoke. The guys do, but the women don't. It was almost like, if a woman has a cigarette in her hand, it's almost like exposing herself in public, you know, more or less, that sort of strong no-no for a woman to do that." Nalin liked the area he lived in and loved his work, but felt torn about raising his family so far away from India. Later these impressions were outweighed by shared family experiences. "I knew that if I live here and my brother lives in India, we won't see each other as often as we see each other now. So, I asked my brother if he would move to the United States." When Nalin's brother began a medical practice in Dayton, Ohio, "the best thing happened," Nalin says, "because while our kids were growing up and his kids were growing up, they saw each other so much, to the point that they don't even call each other cousins, you know, they were like brothers and sisters to each other. You know, they are very close to each other. And that's something that we feel that, like, eventually when we'll be gone, they will have kind of strong family ties with each other and, you know, that that will help them a lot."

Raja, a Bloomington physician, interviewed for positions across the country. Of his decision to live in Indiana, Raja says, "I liked the practice, I liked the town, especially the university setting, I thought it would be a nice place to raise kids, so that's how we kind of decided to come here." Nag, a chemist in Indianapolis, debated whether to return to India after completing his PhD in North America when, he reported, "I got an offer from Southwest Research Institute in San Antonio. I got another offer from Eli Lilly and Company in Indianapolis, and I got about three offers from India . . . I looked at all of them, and my main aim at that time was to go to a place where you could do good research in chemistry. So I joined Lilly in 1967."

Bob, an insurance agent in Indianapolis, moved from Punjab with his family when he was ten years old. Indiana work life has presented two sides to him: "The good things are the fact that I am my own boss . . . I have a lot of freedom, a lot of independence. [The] down side is the fact that being a minority in a state like Indiana limits me somewhat. You know, there's still a good old boy network here, but I've been able to overcome some of those things, and I don't make that an issue. . . . [W]e do have friends and relatives in other parts of the country, and they say seeing an Indian's not really a big deal in California and New York and Chicago even, but it definitely is more pronounced here."

Jai, who works in the Indianapolis area, reports experiences similar to Bob's. While he has enjoyed an improved standard of living since moving to Indiana, and acknowledges finding greater professional opportunities, not everything in his career experience has been positive. "I guess the discrimination would be that, if you're qualified for a certain opportunity and perhaps better than [the] rest of the crowd around you, and you're still not able to receive that [opportunity] If that is because of race, or something else, I don't know," Jai mused. "Lot of time, [the discrimination is] subtle. I have run into supervisors who had [that] attitude."

Kanwal, an architect in Indianapolis, reports that "things have shifted and changed for the better, and so [Asian Indian immigrants] can breathe a little bit easier. When I came to the city in '67, there were many incidents that would be uncomfortable." Kanwal notes how, as an orthodox Sikh who wore a turban, he was asked to leave a public place, which banned hats. He responded to an "Apartment for Rent" advertisement, only to be told the apartment was not available. "This was something that I had already witnessed to some degree in Detroit," Kanwal recalls, "so I wasn't quite totally unfamiliar with this—that this had nothing to do with the apartment being already rented out. They were uncomfortable with my ethnic background and with my headdress, and with my accent. Things are improving every single day in terms of people's acceptance of other people." Kanwal adds that this subtle shift in tolerance of others is responsible for his active involvement in the International Center at Indiana University. "Under one roof," Kanwal says of the Center, "[in] one place, [people can] share their culture with one another. And not only with one another, but with the community at large—show their food habits, their dances, their languages, their traditions, their customs, their arts, their crafts, their ideas, their ideals. And

introduce them in a constructive, positive way that these are all part of our community, and we [are able to] learn one from one another.”

Prema, formerly a teacher in India, worked with children to counteract prejudice toward Asian Indians after she and her husband Bill moved to Bloomington. “I had the wonderful experience of talking to children and telling them about India,” she says. Teachers in a nearby community invited Prema to visit their classes where, she reports, “I gave talks on Indian issues . . . I think I broadened their understanding of the world and the different cultures in many ways by being there, and showing and sharing with them.” Prema explains how important it is for young children to be exposed to cultures and ethnicities other than their own, saying: “There were children who wrote me and said, ‘I feel like visiting India after your talk,’ [or] ‘I would never think that way about India before.’ It’s like in their mind’s image, India is stuck where it was—God knows when—with just people in rags, and begging, and no food and so on. They have no idea of the long history and culture of India.”

IDENTITY AND TRADITION

The experience of cultural encounter, conceptions of India, and life in Indiana all influence the interviewees’ definition of identity. When asked if they identified themselves as Indian, Indian American, or simply American, several first-generation interviewees discuss their Indian and American identity traits. Vimal says: “I am an Indian American. I have more Indian character, and I still hang on to those things. Whereas [our second-generation children] are logical. They don’t hang onto it. They are Americans so they don’t have that distinction, or prejudice if you want to call it. They consider themselves American first, but you know, of Indian parents. We [of the first generation] are Indian first and Americans second.” Vimal’s words demonstrate first-generation Asian Indian immigrants’ tendency to become U.S. citizens and adopt many American customs, while simultaneously identifying themselves as “more Indian” than their second-generation children and younger Indian acquaintances.

Interviewee responses suggest that, just as earlier Irish or Italian immigrants embraced American characteristics and integrated them into their lives, so too do members of Asian Indian communities combine Indian and American traits in order better to assimilate into the American tapestry. Harbans tells his son, who was born in the U.S.: “[L]ook, culture is like air. Once you are in America, in Bloomington,

you are going breathe the air from, of this place, you can't bring air from India and so you are going to breathe the culture. But don't be in a hurry to belong. And don't discard things Indian just because you feel inferior. Feel good about yourself. Be proud of what you are, of your being, but then don't try to, necessarily, stop the process of becoming, but don't be in a hurry and don't feel inferior in any way. You're not."

Second-generation Asian Indians inhabit a world composed of two distinct cultures: American and Asian Indian. English is, for the most part, their first tongue, but they are likely to speak an Indian language at the dinner table, or while visiting family at home or abroad in India. Likewise, second-generation interviewees interact and socialize with fellow students in a typically American manner, but are likely also to maintain some sort of social connection with the local Indian community and participate in cultural events, religious programs, or extracurricular activities.

Some second-generation interviewees felt obliged to partake of religious and cultural programs and events within the Asian Indian community. In reference to her father's request that she and her siblings attend events sponsored by the India Association (a pan-Indian social and cultural organization) events, Thara says, "I don't think we ever took any ownership for it. It was my dad's thing. We went because, you know, he wanted us to go. When we were little, it was just a party, there was food and all that."

Young second-generation Asian Indians, particularly those with one Asian Indian and one non-Asian Indian parent, recall feeling unable to appreciate many of their parents' cultural and religious traditions, especially during their adolescent years. While most second-generation interviewees participated only reluctantly in community events during their formative years, these persons developed a closer appreciation for Asian Indian ethnic traditions as adults. Many second-generation interviewees indicated a connection between a growing appreciation for their Asian Indian heritage and the desire to promote such appreciation in their own young children. Thara's comments on her recent trip to India are a case in point: "When I get off the plane in India and the smell of India hits me, it's a very familiar and comfortable smell. You know, it's [a] second home in a sense. I do want my kids to have at least some of that same feeling that is a part of them, that there are things about India that are familiar and comfortable for them." Thara and other second-generation Asian Indians often found elements of Asian Indian heritage comforting as they established their own homes and began their families.



Transmitting Indian culture across generations.
Two participants in a night of traditional dance, Bloomington, 2004
Courtesy Indian Student Association, Indiana University

The extent to which second-generation Asian Indians weave together Asian Indian and American cultural fibers varies from one person to another. A few second-generation interviewees had traveled to India to gain a better understanding of the country, whereas others sought knowledge from the classroom, the kitchen, the local India Association, or temple. Regardless of the source, second-generation Asian Indians are choosing to learn more about their backgrounds, and making vital attempts to integrate them into their American lifestyles. Further, many second-generation interviewees suggest that they hope to pass down Indian values and traditions to their own children.

The transmission of traditions and values resonates strongly for many Americans whose families emigrated from countries such as Ireland, Poland, or Italy. The transmission of traditions and values within Asian Indian families in Indiana creates a equally strong bond between generations, and allows these relatively recent immigrants to maintain similar ties with the language, food, religion, and traditions of their birth culture. While some studies conducted with Asian Indians in large metropolitan areas have demonstrated that the behaviors of second-generation youth are strongly influenced by non-Indian peers, analysis of Indiana's Asian Indian narratives does not support this

finding.²⁴ For example, most second-generation interviewees do not date. Those who are married affirmed that they refrained from dating behaviors and co-educational socializing prior to marriage. Parents tended to prefer some form of arranged marriage for their children; young adults anticipated that they would, at the least, respect parental preferences regarding future mate selection. First-generation interviewees restricted their children's social activities to family outings or chaperoned visits with Asian Indian friends; second-generation interviewees involved their children or expect to involve them in Asian Indian cultural organizations and travel with their children to India as ways of encouraging ethnic identity maintenance.

CONCLUSION

The story of Indiana's Asian Indian population has been one of an attempt to forge an Indian ethnic identity that transcends the group's residential dispersion and embraces its religious and cultural diversity. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act provided opportunities for skilled Asian Indians to settle in the United States, and, over the next forty years, they did so in record numbers, expanding Indiana's Asian Indian population and adding to the state's ethnic diversity. The oral history project reported here contributes to a sparse but growing literature on the family lives and everyday events of Asian Indian immigrants in the U.S. It also serves to provide historians with firsthand accounts of the acculturative experiences of a specific immigrant group at a crucial point in the group's history in the state of Indiana.

Asian Indians living in Indiana tend to be well-educated professionals with above-average incomes who reside in suburban areas near large cities and speak English fluently. Within the home, family and education are valued highly, as are traditions and beliefs related to one's religion. The community defines itself more by membership and/or participation in Asian Indian cultural events than by residence in any type of ethnic enclave.

Indiana's diverse Asian Indian communities effectively weave their Indian traditions and values into the American tapestry. Like earlier immigrants to the United States, the interviewees in this project are

²⁴Johanna Lessinger, *From the Ganges to the Hudson: Indian Immigrants in New York City* (Boston, 1995).

proud of their heritage, but they also are eager to participate in the broader American experience. Most are American citizens, actively participate in local or statewide activities, and send their children to public schools. At the same time, most interviewees continue to honor Indian values and traditions, especially those related to family life and child-rearing.

Currently, Indian food products are widely available and, in most metropolitan areas, there is at least one India Association or religious center. In their continued support for the more traditional aspects of Indian culture, Asian Indian families in Indiana have more in common with their counterparts in England and Canada than with Asian Indian families in larger U.S. cities.²⁵ This finding supports the body of immigration research which suggests that Asian immigrant parents in particular may resist changing traditional family values. Researchers have found that length of residence in the adopted country is not positively correlated with changes in parental attitudes and behaviors. Many Asian immigrants, for example, continue to maintain traditional ideas about child rearing, including expectations, norms, rules, and beliefs.²⁶

This oral history project also illuminates Asian Indian immigrants' bi-cultural competence. Interviewees discuss selectively retained traditions of their birth culture, educational and occupational experience in both India and the U.S., and factors influencing adjustment to American society. They give special emphasis to their personal perspectives of India, and to their adjustment experiences. Values, traditions of social and familial behavior, and religious beliefs retained by Asian Indian immigrants and transmitted to the second generation have allowed members of the group to interact effectively within American society while continuing to identify themselves as Asian Indians. Second-gener-

²⁵Vanaja Dhruvarajan, "Ethnic Cultural Retention and Transmission among First Generation Hindu Asian Indians in a Canadian Prairie City," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 24 (Spring 1993), 63-79; Avtar Brah, "Women of South Asian Origin in Britain: Issues and Concerns," in *Racism and Antiracism: Inequalities, Opportunities and Policies*, ed. Peter Braham, Ali Rattansi, and Richard Skellington (London, 1992), 64-78.

²⁶Zha B. Xiong, Patricia A. Eliason, Daniel F. Detzner, and Michael J. Cleveland, "Southeast Asian Immigrants' Perceptions of Good Adolescents and Good Parents," *The Journal of Psychology*, 139, 2 (2005), 15-175; Robert A. LeVine, "Human Parental Care: Universal Goals, Cultural Strategies, Individual Behavior," in *Parental Behavior in Diverse Societies*, ed. LeVine, Patrice M. Miller, and Mary Maxwell West (San Francisco, 1988), 3-12; Nga Anh Nguyen and Harold L. Williams, "Transition from East to West: Vietnamese Adolescents and their Parents," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 28 (July 1989), 505-15.



Inauguration ceremony of the Hindu Temple of Central Indiana, Indianapolis,
February 4, 2006

Courtesy Hindu Temple of Central Indiana

ation interviewees' perceptions of India often differ from those of the first generation, and Asian Indian immigrants' strong sense of diversity emerges as an overarching theme. It is perhaps their home lives that most set Asian Indians in Indiana apart from their non-Indian neighbors. Interviewees consistently contrasted their sense of self as successfully functioning bi-cultural workers and students with their sense of self within the home and family environment.

One has only to look around Indiana's larger cities to find evidence of the Asian Indian presence. Several times a year, the IMAX Theater in Indianapolis shows Bollywood films produced in Mumbai (Bombay). Last year, the India newspaper *Economics Times* reported on Bollywood's growing popularity in Fort Wayne, as evidenced by the entertainment selections featured by local movie theater outlets.²⁷ In February 2006, the Hindu Temple of Central Indiana opened its doors on the (far) east

²⁷Chidanand Rajghatta, "From India to Indiana," *The Economic Times Online*, September 5, 2005, <http://economictimes.Indiatimes.com>.

side of Indianapolis. These changes point to the dynamic cultural landscape of the Hoosier state. The authors of *Sacred Circles, Public Squares* (2003) recently described Indianapolis in a manner that seems especially appropriate: "The picture of [Indianapolis] as kind of a white-bread, purely mainstream Protestant town hasn't been true for a century. But it is even less true now."²⁸



²⁸Arthur E. Farnsley II, N. J. Demerath III, Etan Diamond, Mary Mapes, and Elfriede Wedam, *Sacred Circles, Public Squares: The Multicentering of American Religion* (Bloomington, Ind., 2003), 8.