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INDIANS ABROAD

Mixing it up

Karen Leonard

How should one conceptualize Indian-descended collectivities abroad, especially when focusing on those that are hybrid? This collection is entitled South Asian diasporas, and my topic is hybridity. 'South Asian' can include people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldivian Islands, Afghanistan and even those of Indian origin from places like Fiji and the West Indies, but since most of my material concerns those who migrated before 1947, I will usually refer to Indians in what follows. Diaspora has become the term used loosely for sets of immigrants abroad and their descendants, and I too will use it in that way. Yet the original meaning of diaspora, and the meaning still implicit for many scholars, suggests that those abroad retain active connections and an ideological allegiance to the homeland, share a desire to return to it and display strong cultural continuities in belief and behaviour. Scholars typically have 'compared South Asian diasporas with conditions "back home" on the Indian subcontinent and sought to determine processes of cultural retention and attenuation' and, more recently, they have looked at interactions in the new environments, stressing the effects of new political contexts and focusing less on objective documentation of diasporas than on their production through the labour of memory (Eisenlohr 2007: 773–4). This means that diasporas can emerge, be invented if you will, over time, an insight that nicely complements Arjun Appadurai's discussion (1996) of the unstable nature of transnational ethnic identities, of concepts shifting and no longer bound by territory, history, or cultural homogeneity. My point is that definitions and policies concerning 'Indians' are often at the mercy of both old and new states and their changing policies over time, and immigrants can become diasporic if they were not so at first.

Hybridity is another term in need of careful definition and application when discussing Indians abroad. Many scholars of Indian diasporas limit their research and their reviews of secondary work to 'real Indians', those whom they see as remaining more or less true to their traditions and homeland communities. These works celebrate the transmission and maintenance of Indian culture abroad, excluding discussions of men and women who marry outside their religion, caste or community, those who produce hybridity in the primary sense of breeding across races or species. A good example is the essay by Vinay Lal in an *Indian Diaspora* volume, where discussion of the Punjabis who migrated to the US before 1965 is cursory and dismissive. Lal states (2006: 319): 'Indians showed considerable, if not always successful, ability to innovate in their social life. Punjabi men took Mexican women as wives, adapted to differences in language,

cuisine, dress and religion, and together they created an unusual biethnic community.' Other authors give more space and respect to that so-called Mexican Hindu or Punjabi Mexican community but just as clearly view this hybrid community as not the 'real subject of research' on Indian immigrants abroad.

Evidence abounds, however, that hybrid or intermarried Indian diasporic families and communities developed in many places.¹ The indentured labourers in the West Indies, the Fiji Islands, South Africa and Australia clearly constituted new families and communities, ones that have been more readily accepted as 'Indian' because the marital boundaries crossed were between Indians rather than between Indians and others. Some authors celebrate hybridity. Karthiyaini Devarajoo, based in Malaysia, mentions a ChinIndian community, a whole group of mixed Chinese and Indian parentage, and she says (2009: 139): 'Hybridity is the catalytic element that supports the transformation of an individual or community from being a diaspora to being the citizen of the host country and to finally being a world citizen.' In some cases, the hybridity is deliberate and intended to deny membership in a diaspora. For example, many of the Indian Muslim *muhajirs* (refugees, exiles) who went to Pakistan 'married out', Hyderabad Muslims marrying Kashmiris, Punjabis and Sindhis, deliberately becoming hybrid to claim membership in a new nation. In fact, one Hyderabad Muslim going to Pakistan rejected the term *muhajir*: 'How could we be refugees, coming to our homeland?' (Leonard 2007: 57). India's Jews who migrated to Israel might fit this model as well.

Some diasporic communities are not only racially or ethnically hybrid but hybrid in other ways, because hybridity can mean other sorts of mixed origins, like languages, religions or ancestral homes. The Zoroastrians or Parsis who left India (or Pakistan or East Africa) have become part of new communities in North America as they meet Zoroastrian immigrants from Iran. Indian Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians are worshipping together and are working to constitute a new 'Zarthusti' community. The Zarthusti community relies upon priests trained in India, and the priests in North America, unlike those in India, are beginning to consecrate mixed marriages and recognize the children of mixed marriages as Parsi, changing the rules in the diaspora governing religious and marital boundaries (Leonard 2006). John Hinnells's work (1994) on Parsi migrants in Australia, Britain and North America shows that diasporic patterns differ by destination, with intermarriage and community membership issues being crucial everywhere. Another example would be South Asian Muslims in the US, working to constitute an American Muslim community and sometimes marrying Arab or African American Muslims. And what about those who cross gender boundaries? Freddy Mercury, born in Zanzibar of Parsi parentage and brought up in India, became the spectacularly successful frontman of the British rock band Queen. Like most South Asian Indian gay men abroad, he formed partnerships beyond the boundaries traditional to his parental community. Gay and lesbian South Asians have become visible in the diaspora but have yet to be studied.

Indian immigrants abroad have also become hybrid by mixing and changing ancestral homelands, languages and religions. Some have written that there is no diasporic second generation, the children always becoming culturally hybrid and no longer 'really Indian' (Bhatia and Ram 2007; Leonard 2009). Leaving aside the argument that the diaspora is always only one generation deep, linguistic and religious hybridity prevails throughout the old and new Indian diasporas. Much depends on the context and the timing of arrival, but everywhere communities with new identities have been formed. Indian and Sri Lankan Christians abroad have mixed their religious beliefs and practices with those in Europe and North America in fascinating ways (Jacobsen and Raj 2008). Those indentured laborers going to the West Indies, to Surinam, Trinidad, Jamaica and Guyana, travelled together on ships and lived on plantations in conditions that erased distinctions of caste, leading to intermarriage and commingling of musical and

religious traditions. In Trinidad, where Hindus are second to Roman Catholics in number, Divali is second to Carnival as the largest national festival. Hosay/Muharram (the Shia Muslim commemoration of the death of the Prophet's grandsons) is one of the largest national events in Jamaica, one that involves many Hindus and Africans as well. The smaller Caribbean Islands, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Belize, Grenada, Guadeloupe and Martinique, display a variety of cultural interactions. Although the Indians tend to form separate and identifiable groups in most of these countries, few vestiges of Indian culture are actually retained. In Cuba, where most of the Indians came from Jamaica rather than India, everyday cultural practices including cuisine reflect widely shared Cuban patterns. Christian traditions, Cuban traditions, black traditions, are said to characterize many of these West Indian groups (Mahabir 2009). In some places, 'revivals' of Indian traditions are underway. When I visited Trinidad for a conference in 2000, I had read up on hybrid musical developments among Trinidadian Indians, noting that an Indian music concert in a village was on the programme. However, when we arrived at a small rural temple, the musicians had performed in North America the previous week and played classical Hindustani music for us.

Mauritius offers a fascinating case of the 'emergence' (Eisenlohr 2007: 774) of Indian diasporas, of hybridities transformed (Hookoomsing 2009; Eisenlohr 2007). The indentured Indian laborers of diverse but chiefly North Indian origins ended up speaking Bhojpuri or Creole-Bhojpuri. According to the linguistic anthropologist Patrick Eisenlohr, nearly all Mauritians actually speak French-lexicon Mauritian Creole, with Bhojpuri being the second language of almost a quarter of the population, the language of Hindus and Muslims from both northern and southern India. Yet the Mauritian state has decided to support teaching, propagation and celebration of 'ancestral languages', thus instigating notions of diasporas. The state-designated ancestral languages are not diasporic languages in the sense that they were actually spoken by the indentured laborers, and these 'ancestral languages' cut across intermarriage patterns long-standing among Indo-Mauritians. Eisenlohr traces the disintegration of the earlier hybrid Creole-Bhojpuri-speaking Indo-Mauritian community: by the 1940s a Hindu-Muslim split had been produced by religious nationalism and missionaries from the subcontinent and by the 1970s the state had subdivided the Hindus into separate Hindi-, Tamil-, Telugu- and Marathi-speaking groups, while Muslims, reaching for languages they had never spoken, reported not only Urdu but Arabic as ancestral languages! Interestingly, 'Indian' in Mauritius now means Hindus and never Muslims. In contrast, 'Hindu' in the US before the 1970s meant all Indians, including Muslims and Sikhs, as discussed below.

Another striking illustration of diasporic identities subject to shifting political contexts comes from Nasreen Ali (2007), who analyzes Kashmiris in Britain. She points to four somewhat overlapping but sometimes competing discourses that identify them differently: as a nation, a people with a right to a state of their own; as an oppressed people, victims undertaking a liberation struggle; as a distinct non-Pakistani ethnicity within the context of Britain; and, as Muslims, part of a global Islamic community. Ali sees the first, the nationalist discourse, as based upon the territorialization of Kashmiriyat, a shared political culture; the second discourse demonizes India; and the third attempts to separate Kashmiris from Pakistanis within Britain. The fourth discourse is most problematic, directly conflicting with the nationalist discourse by excluding non-Muslim Kashmiris. Finally, she notes that the Kashmiri diasporic identity in Britain is distinct from the Kashmiri identity expressed in Kashmir, and one might speculate that it would be different again in the US, given the very different constellation of Muslim and South Asian identities there.

These considerations, of Indians in Mauritius and Kashmiris abroad, point to the role of the state in shaping diasporic discourses of linguistic, cultural and religious hybridities and bring me

to the so-called Mexican Hindu or Punjabi Mexican community in early twentieth-century California. Given the discussions above, I submit that this was not a diasporic community, nor has it emerged as one. However, it is a fine example of hybridity, of Indians abroad who constituted a new and thoroughly hybrid community in a new social and political context. The remainder of this essay speaks to the limits of the diaspora concept, a theme also addressed in Oonk (2007: 10); I delineate the ways in which the lives of the earliest Indian immigrants to the US diverged from that concept in interesting ways.

Making Ethnic Choices was the title of my 1992 book about the Punjabi pioneers (Leonard 1992), but it was an ironic title, because the early immigrants from India could not choose freely when it came to many aspects of their lives in early twentieth-century America. Constrained by laws based on national origin and race that prevented them from bringing their wives and families from India and that limited their choice of spouses in the US, the men who wanted a family life married predominantly Spanish-speaking women, producing families known in southern California as 'Mexican Hindus'. The demographic patterns of marriage and childbearing testify to the difficult conditions the men and their families experienced in rural California, and their testimonies of conflict and accommodation speak vividly about the social world in which the Punjabi pioneers lived. Their children, the second generation, grew up valuing their 'Hindu' heritage highly, but they were also proud to be American and, when they met with disbelief and disapproval from the post-1965 immigrants from India and Pakistan, they affirmed the new homeland rather than the old.

The Punjabi Mexican story began in California's Imperial Valley, a desert along the Mexican border east of San Diego that was transformed into a major center of irrigation agriculture in the early twentieth century by diversion of the Colorado River. Native-born whites controlled the developing political economy, but men from many nations came to work in the valley. Cocopah Indians were among the first laborers. With the 1910 Revolution in Mexico, Mexicans began moving across the border, and blacks were recruited from the south to pick cotton. Japanese and Punjabis showed up as farmers and farm labourers in the 1910 Census, where 18 unmistakably Punjabi names appeared (US National Archives 1910). In 1920, Indians were not counted separately in the census, but an educated Indian estimated there were 268 Punjabis in the valley in 1924 (Hoover Institution 1924). In other parts of California, Punjabi men stayed in labour camps or rooming houses, but, in the Imperial Valley, they began to settle down. They sent foreign money orders from the local post offices, were listed as 'ranchers' in local directories and were early telephone subscribers. They lived in wooden shacks on the land they were farming, typically in households of two to four persons. Better housing usually was not available to them or even desired, since many leased different acreage from year to year. Many became successful farmers. Leases recorded in the county courthouse show many Punjabi partnerships; court cases, with Hindoo or Hindu as a category in the records, show disputes over property and finances (Leonard 1992: 48–52). But in 1923 the US Supreme Court's decision that, while persons from India were Caucasian they were not 'white persons', meant that they were subjected to California's Alien Land Laws. Access to American citizenship at the time depended on race – one had to be white or black (this was true until the 1940s when, group by group, access was extended to Asians). The Alien Land Laws, dating from 1910 and aimed at the increasingly successful Japanese immigrant farmers, prevented 'aliens ineligible for citizenship' from leasing or owning agricultural land. After the 1923 decision, these laws were applied to the Punjabi farmers too.

Yet many Punjabis persevered and settled down. People called them 'Hindus', meaning immigrants from Hindustan or India, and the Punjabis (85 percent of them Sikhs by religion) accepted the name and used it for themselves. When post-1965 immigrants from South Asia

began arriving much later, people called the Punjabi pioneers the 'old Hindus'. The pioneers worked hard to cultivate local relationships with white farmers, lawyers and judges to gain access to land and resources. They had a very good reputation in the Imperial Valley and elsewhere in the American southwest, noted for their hard work, dependability and honesty.

The Punjabi farmers looked for women to marry. Women were scarce in the Imperial Valley in those early years, with a sex ratio in the 1910 Census of almost 2 to 1 (8,900 males to 4,691 females). By 1920 the population was 40 percent female, but there were greater imbalances among the Asian immigrants and there were no women from India.² Men returned to their homelands for brides or sent for them: the Swiss got 'mail-order brides' and the Japanese got 'picture brides'. California's anti-miscegenation laws (repealed only in 1948) prohibited marriages between people of different races, and Punjabis were generally classified as non-white. The first few Punjabi marriages in the valley were front-page news. Sher Singh, a wealthy Holtville cotton farmer, secured a licence for a Mexican bride in March of 1916, and his partner Gopal Singh married the sister of Sher Singh's wife in 1917. These sisters, Antonia and Anna Anita Alvarez, had moved from Mexico with their mother to El Paso and then the Imperial Valley, where they had got jobs picking cotton for Punjabi farmers. (Cotton brought together Punjabis and many of the women they married, and cotton picking was the only outdoor work done by Jat Sikh women in the central Punjab in India.) By 1919, two more Alvarez sisters and a niece of theirs had also married Punjabis. These civil ceremonies and others with Hispanic women were often witnessed by leading Anglo farmers. But when another well-to-do Holtville cotton farmer married the young daughter of one of his white tenants in 1918, he had to go to Arizona because Imperial County would not issue a marriage licence, attracting headlines such as 'Hindu Weds White Girl by Stealing Away to Arizona'. While Punjabis secured marriage licences for Hispanic women without problems, the growing Mexican American community in the valley objected to their women being taken away by Punjabi men, and there were conflicts. A Punjabi's marriage to a Mexican woman caused a 'race riot' in a cotton field near Heber in 1918, and four years later two Mexican men abducted two Mexican sisters who had married Punjabis (Leonard 1992: 62-5).

The Punjabi-Mexican marriage networks extended from El Paso, Texas, to Las Cruces, New Mexico, Phoenix, Arizona and the Imperial Valley. The men not only married across ethnic lines but related to each other across religious lines that were hardening back in India. Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were partners and brothers-in-law and godparents to each others' children, and their families constituted a new ethnic group called the Mexican Hindus or Mexidus. One marriage led to another as the women arranged matches with relatives and friends, the women usually being much younger than the men. Partners often married sisters, and couples shared households with each other and with bachelors who became 'uncles' to the many children born of the marriages. Based in the Imperial Valley, where 93 percent of the wives were Spanish-speakers, marriages elsewhere reflected the prevailing demographic patterns. Thus in northern California 40 percent of the wives were white and black English-speakers and a very few wives from India had managed to migrate there (see the table in Leonard 1992: 67).

Post-1965 Indian immigrants frequently state that these marriages outside traditional community boundaries took place because they helped the men secure land, either through wives who were American citizens or the children who were citizens by birth. But this is not true, because the men only lost access to land in 1923 when the Supreme Court declared them ineligible to citizenship, and the biethnic marriage pattern was well established before that. Also, the wives acquired the status of their husbands upon marriage, not the reverse (the Cable Act, in effect from 1922 through 1931, provided that female citizens marrying

aliens ineligible for citizenship lost their citizenship). The Punjabi fathers did not begin putting land in the names of their children (with themselves as guardians) until 1934, well after many, many children had been born. Before 1934, only three Imperial Valley farmers had registered as guardians, but many more did after the 1933 Imperial County indictment of some Punjabis and Anglos for conspiring to evade the Alien Land Law by forming corporations (Leonard 1992: 7–19).

The biethnic community was a very visible one in many of California's farm towns. Patterns of childbearing, fertility and mortality show large families: 80 percent of the children born to the 69 women for whom I have good information in the Imperial Valley had four or more siblings and 42 percent had eight or more siblings. Infant, child and maternal mortality rates were relatively high, with the county records showing most births occurring in homes with midwives in attendance rather than in hospitals with doctors. Often, the names of children and parents were misspelled and the ages of the parents were inaccurate on the birth certificates (Leonard 1992: 74–8). But the naming pattern was clear: Hispanic first names followed by Sikh, Muslim and Hindu surnames. Thus, children with names like Angelita Singh, Jesusita Mohammed or Fernando Chand, along with stepchildren brought into the marriages by their Hispanic mothers from previous relationships, helped give the growing community the local name 'Mexican Hindu' or 'Mexidu'.

The hybridity of family life was also reflected in food, religion and languages. The men taught the women how to cook Punjabi dishes, like 'chicken *murgh*' (literally chicken chicken) or chicken curry, *roti* or bread, vegetables and pickles. However, they found Mexican food similar to Indian and mixed the cuisines in homes and at public events. Some of the women, cut off from their families, proclaimed themselves 'Hindu', and others called them that too, as they were the wives of the Hindus. The women's kinship networks organized affiliations to the Catholic Church through *compadrazgo* or godparent relationships sanctioned by that church, and almost all the godparents were drawn from within the Punjabi Mexican community. The Sikh, Muslim and Hindu men did not convert to Catholicism, but they were recorded, sometimes with Hispanic first names (Miguel Singh for Maghyar Singh), as godparents to each others' children. The men, themselves often illiterate and without religious texts of their own, entrusted the children's religious upbringing to their wives, saying that all religions were to be respected, that all were ways to the one God. A Sikh temple was established in 1912 in northern California in Stockton, and Punjabis of all backgrounds met there with their wives and children for social as well as religious purposes. Languages within the families tended to be Spanish and English. Since the men not only married Hispanic women but worked with or employed Mexicans, they learned Spanish and did not try to teach their wives or children Punjabi. Coming from British India, most of the men spoke some English and many of the wives spoke it as well, and the children were schooled in English.

Did these early Indian migrants constitute a diaspora? Most of the Punjabi pioneers were Sikhs, and Sikh scholars and laymen alike have proudly claimed this early migration of Punjabis as a Sikh diaspora. This is a misnomer, since the men's networks were based on their shared Punjabi language and regional origin: if anything, this was a Punjabi diaspora. Further, I would argue that it was not really a diaspora at all. The Punjabi men did not intend to return to India, although many did send remittances to their families in India and some sent money for schools or other improvements in their home villages. Given the chance to go back after access to citizenship was obtained in 1946, very few did. Relatives in India were far more eager to resume contact with the Punjabis in America than vice versa, on the whole (Leonard 1992: 212). The women, many from Mexico, also had no intentions of returning there, although some retained connections to relatives there and occasionally visited them.

Moreover, the men's political allegiances and efforts shifted over time from India to America. The men were immensely proud of their Indian origin and many retained a keen interest in Indian politics and some degree of connection to relatives in India. Much has been made of the militant anti-British Ghadar party that these Punjabi men formed in California in 1913, but it was very short lived. Internal conflicts based on regional origins in the Punjab and US government persecution led to its decline; in actuality, it contributed little to the nationalist movement in India. Instead, Punjabi farmers focused their strongest and most sustained political efforts on gaining access to American citizenship, working with other Indians across the US in a lobbying campaign that succeeded in 1946 with the passage of the Luce Celler Bill. Many old-timers became citizens then, claiming the new homeland in large numbers and, significantly, claiming farmland for their own since the Alien Land Law no longer applied to them (Leonard 1992: 211, 164). Despite their support of Indian nationalist leaders who visited California to raise money for the Congress party in the 1940s, most Punjabis in California were taken by surprise by the partition of British India in 1947 into India and Pakistan. Networks formed in America were somewhat disrupted after that event, and a new name was invented, Spanish Pakistani, for the families whose Punjabi founders' villages ended up in Pakistan (Leonard 1992: 173).

The men made little effort to transmit Indian cultural traditions to their wives and children, in some cases telling them it would be useless as they were all American now. They did pass on some food preferences and they continued habits of work and play brought from India: a strong work ethic, a propensity to drink and talk together after work and a keen interest in politics. Later, when the children matured and began dating, the fathers attempted to apply regional and religious preferences and avoidances brought from India (saying, for example, that a young man's father was from Malwa not the Doab, a young woman's father was an untouchable Sikh and not a Jat, or a young person's father was Sikh and not Muslim), but both the wives and the children resisted these unfamiliar notions. When members of the second generation began marrying, the biethnic community proved to be transitional, as most Mexican Hindu youth married whites or Hispanics rather than each other. This new pattern of outmarriages was partly a result of fatherly pressure against marriages within the Mexican Hindu community but across Punjabi religious, caste and regional lines (above). Such lines seem to have been resurrected in the minds of the fathers when the Luce Celler Bill of 1946 gave them access to American citizenship and consequently to their relatives in India once again. Whether or not the fathers might be seen as trying at that point to reverse the hybridity they had themselves created, trying to reinvent themselves as diasporic, is a moot point because they did not succeed in arranging marriages for their children with potential immigrants from the homeland.

As the children grew up, the young people took great pride in their 'Hindu' heritage, but they knew virtually nothing of Punjabi or Indian culture. They did represent India (and Pakistan, after 1947) in county fairs, beauty pageants and the like. But the arrival of the post-1965 immigrants from India and Pakistan jolted and challenged them, as the new immigrants from all over India questioned their Indianness. An example is when Joe Mallobox, son of an 'old Hindu' in the Imperial Valley, introduced himself at Disneyland to a family he took to be from India because the woman was wearing a sari. Saying, 'I'm a Hindu too', he offered to show them around, but they clearly failed to acknowledge him as Indian and rebuffed his offer. To some extent this reaction was understandable: 'members of the second generation often could not give a recognizable name for their fathers' villages or sometimes not even for their [own] fathers (Bleth Heather? Ali Singh?). And it is hard to forget the third-generation youngster in the Imperial Valley who had Singh as her last name but asked me, "I know I'm a Hindu and I'm proud of that, but was my grandfather a Muslim, Sikh, or Hindu?"'

The new immigrants were critical of the descendants of the old ones, but those descendants were also critical of the new immigrants. In their view, the newcomers were not becoming American fast enough and were retaining old-fashioned or superstitious practices from India. Even worse, the newcomers failed to recognize the considerable achievements of the Punjabi pioneers despite the legal and social constraints they had faced. As I concluded in my 1992 book, most of the descendants of the 'old Hindus' saw themselves at the end of the twentieth century as part of a larger unhyphenated white or American category (Leonard 1992: 218). The Punjabi pioneers and their descendants seem to exemplify Devaroo's predicted movement to citizenship in the host country, without having been diasporic in the ways commonly accepted by scholarly definitions, but having been hybrid in multiple and compelling ways.

Notes

- 1 Instances of boundary-crossing appear also in non-academic writings: in Samarasan's compelling novel (2008), the chief male Tamil immigrant in Malaysia has children with a Chinese Malaysian woman; and Hajratwala's fine family history (2009) of diasporic Gujaratis (a notoriously insular group) documents numerous instances of outmarriages among her kin in North America.
- 2 US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the year of 1910; Abstract of the Census with Supplement for California* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913), 601 for the 1910 ratio; for 1920, US Department of Commerce, *Fourteenth Census: Population, 1920*, III: 113, 131.

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