

California's Punjabi- Mexican- Americans

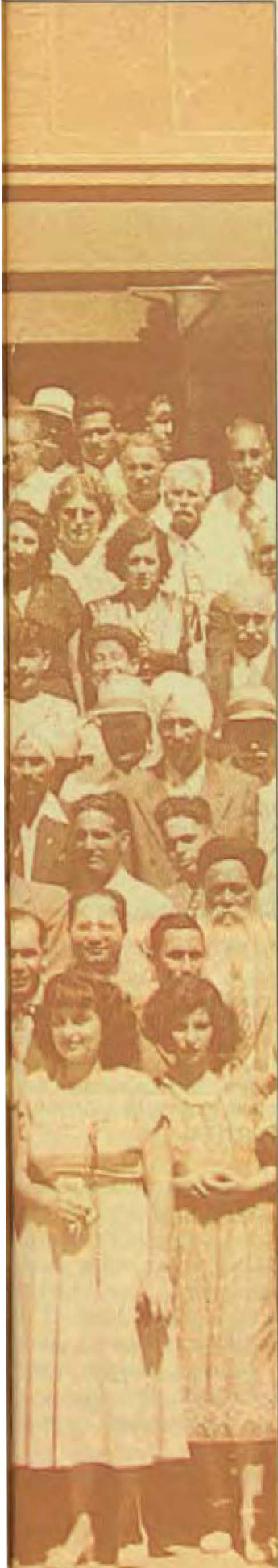
**Ethnic choices made by the
descendants of Punjabi pioneers
and their Mexican wives**

by Karen Leonard

The end of British colonial rule in India and the birth of two new nations—India and Pakistan—was celebrated in California in 1947 by immigrant men from India's Punjab province. Their wives and children celebrated with them. With few exceptions, these wives were of Mexican ancestry and their children were variously called "Mexican-Hindus," "half and halves," or simply, like their fathers, "Hindus," an American misnomer for people from India. In a photo taken during the 1947 celebrations in the northern California farm town of Yuba City, all the wives of the "Hindus" are of Mexican descent, save two Anglo women and one woman from India.

There were celebrations in Yuba City in 1988, too; the Sikh Parade (November 6) and the Old-Timers' Reunion Christmas Dance (November 12). Descendants of the Punjabi-Mexicans might attend either or

The congregation of the Sikh temple in Stockton, California, circa 1950.



both of these events—the Sikh Parade, because most of the Punjabi pioneers were Sikhs, and the annual Christmas dance, because it began as a reunion for descendants of the Punjabi pioneers. Men from India's Punjab province came to California chiefly between 1900 and 1917; after that, immigration practices and laws discriminated against Asians and legal entry was all but impossible. Some 85 percent of the men who came during those years were Sikhs, 13 percent were Muslims, and only 2 percent were really Hindus.

Marriages between Punjabis and Mexicans began in the second decade of the twentieth century. Most descendants of these Punjabi-Mexican couples continue to refer to themselves as Hindus, and they are very proud of their Punjabi background. Yet most descendants are Catholic, and while most are bilingual, they speak English and Spanish, not Punjabi. An understanding of the ethnic choices made by the Punjabi-Mexican descendants requires an excursion into the history of their community.

The Punjabi immigrants

For decades, farming families had been sending sons out of the Punjab to earn money. Punjabis constituted a disproportionate share of the British Indian military and police services throughout the British Empire, in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the China treaty ports. Many of those who ended up in California had served overseas in the British Indian army or police in China and crossed the Pacific for the better wages in railroad, lumbering, and agricultural work. On arrival in California, a few sold tamales from carts in San Francisco, but the majority began as migrant laborers, moving in groups around the state with a “boss man” who knew English and made contracts with employers.

Work and settlement patterns varied regionally in California, depending on the types of crops grown and the nature of the local population, both in terms of numbers and racial or ethnic composition. Intending to return to India, only a handful of men had brought their wives and families; soon it was not possible to bring them. In northern California's Sacramento Valley, Punjabis tended to work in gangs, and were called “Hindu crews.” Most of the



Punjabi men there remained bachelors, at least in part because there were no local women whom they could legally marry. California's miscegenation laws made marriage with women of other races difficult. In the southern Imperial Valley, however, the Punjabis met and married Mexican or Mexican-American women, whom Americans considered racially the same as the Punjabis.

Located along California's Mexican border inland from San Diego, the Imperial Valley was a desert until the first decade of the twentieth century, when engineers tamed the Colorado River and the Imperial Irrigation District was organized to ensure the systematic delivery of water to cultivators. The valley was a raw, rough place, where predominantly male immigrants developed capital-intensive, labor-intensive, predominantly large-scale agriculture. Native-born whites were the largest group, but the 1920 census shows many other groups represented. Especially numerous were Mexicans, Japanese, and Africans, followed by Canadians, Swiss, Germans, English, Greeks, Italians, Irish, and Portuguese. There were smaller numbers of Chinese and Punjabi immigrants.

Asian farm laborers had a hard time working their way up California's agricultural ladder. The Punjabis were largely illiterate and faced strong initial prejudice, partly due to the distinctive turbans and beards of the Sikhs. The 1920 State Board of Control termed them the "most undesirable" of Asians. Initially the men from India were not wanted in the Imperial Valley even as laborers—there were alarmed headlines when they were brought in to pick the cotton crop in 1910—and only a few years later their movement up from the labor category to become landowners aroused more apprehension. Contemporary sources express clearly the thinking of the time—that various national and ethnic groups filled different niches in the economic system. Writers constantly compared the "Hindus" to others involved in agricultural labor, and usually placed them, with the Mexicans, at or near the bottom in the rural stratification system.

Asians—Chinese, Japanese, and Punjabis—were among the pioneers in the Imperial Valley and some of them moved rapidly from labor to tenancy to ownership. Yet from the first they encountered prejudice, expressed first through "custom" and finally through law. The ranchers or growers, the ship-



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Above: Wedding photo of Moola Singh and Carmen Barrentos, 1919. After their wedding in Phoenix, the couple settled in California's Imperial Valley, eventually ending up in Selma, California. **Right:** Family portrait of the Poonian family of Yuba City, California. The daughter of a Punjabi man and his Mexican-American wife, Janie Poonian (top, second from left) married a Punjabi, Paritem (front, holding infant.)

ping agents, and the bankers—those who dominated the rural economy—were white and viewed the Japanese in particular as threats to their livelihood. In 1913, the first version of California's Alien Land Law decreed that those ineligible for U.S. citizenship could neither lease nor own agricultural land. (The law was strengthened in subsequent years.) Since only whites and people of African descent were eligible for citizenship, the Chinese and Japanese were effectively barred from leasing and owning agricultural land.

Initially, the Punjabis did have access to American



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citizenship, being of the Caucasian race, and nearly sixty men became citizens. But in 1923, the Punjabis were ruled ineligible for citizenship because of their race—the Supreme Court in that year pronounced them Caucasian, but not “white” in the popular meaning of the term. So, early on, perceived race or ethnicity was a factor determining access to resources for the Punjabi immigrants in California.

The Punjabi men were united by the Punjabi language and its regional culture as they moved into the California economy. Although the men came from three different religions, partnerships that formed to lease and farm agricultural land included Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus in the Imperial Valley; local associations did the same. The Sikh temple founded in 1912 in Stockton, California, included Muslim and Hindu men in its political and social activities. The men worked together and formed social, religious, and political institutions in California. They were self-identified and identified by others as “Hindus.”

Punjabi-Mexican marriages and family life

The kind of racial/ethnic perceptions and laws that impeded Punjabi access to agricultural land also helped determine their choice of spouses. Many of the men had been married in India and had families there, but those who decided to stay in California faced a difficult choice. U.S. immigration laws, increasingly hardened against Asians, prevented them from bringing their wives; the same laws prevented the men from visiting India and returning, since they could not be readmitted legally. Their choice was to live as bachelors or to marry local women.

Eighty-five percent of those who wanted women to live with them, cook and clean for them, and bear their children turned to Mexican and Mexican-American women. About one-third of the Punjabi men who settled in California married; the first recorded marriages occurred in 1916 and 1917 in the

Imperial Valley. Eventually, there were almost four hundred of these biethnic couples clustered in California's agricultural valleys. Some 250 couples lived in the Imperial Valley in the south, some ninety couples lived in the Sacramento Valley in the north, and some fifty couples lived in the Central Valley around Fresno.

The Punjabi men chose women of Mexican ancestry for many reasons. Mexican women were thought to resemble Punjabis physically, and many were beautiful. Perhaps most important, Mexican women were accessible in southern California (in the central and northern areas of the state most of the Punjabi men remained bachelors). Mexican families picked cotton in the fields farmed by the Punjabi men. Mexicans and Punjabis shared a rural way of life; with similar types of food, furniture, and so on, they had a similar material culture. Furthermore, Mexicans and Punjabis shared an initially lower-class status.

These marriages were more than a matter of individual choice, however, for the fact was that miscegenation laws prohibited marriages across racial lines in California until 1948. Most California county clerks saw the Punjabi men as colored, or "brown," the word they used most often on the marriage license to describe the men's race. Thus the women the Punjabis married also had to be perceived as "brown," and that generally meant women of Mexican ancestry.

Ethnic similarities between the men and women were most striking at the time these marriages began to occur. Like Mexicans, Punjabis were discriminated against by white society. At least half of the women, like the men, were pioneers in a new country and came from a group entering the agricultural economy as laborers. A wave of Mexican migration into the United States was just beginning in the decade of the 1910s, fueled by the Mexican Revolution and its attendant political and economic turmoil.

In Texas and California, where cotton was being cultivated by Punjabi men with the help of Mexican immigrant laborers, the growing number of biethnic couples began to constitute a biethnic community with certain characteristic features. The women were usually much younger than their husbands—the men were typically in their thirties and forties, and the women were in their teens and twenties. The women were almost all Catholic, but most marriage

ceremonies were civil. The signatures of brides and grooms alike testify to a low level of literacy. Husbands and wives spoke to each other in rudimentary English or Spanish. Punjabi men learned Spanish to deal with Mexican agricultural laborers and to speak to their wives. Some Punjabi men adopted Spanish names or nicknames: Miguel for Magyar, Andreas for Inder, Mondo for Mohamed.

The Punjabi-Mexican marriage pattern soon became well established. The first brides recruited other women, their relatives and friends, for marriages with Punjabi men. Sisters with small children who had been deserted or widowed were called from Mexico to marry Punjabis. The men traveled too. A Sikh from the Imperial Valley took the train to El Paso, Texas, looking for the nieces of a Mexican woman working for him. He knocked on the wrong door, and the mother and three daughters on the other side mistook him at first for a Turk because of his turban. But in a few days, he and his new bride, her mother, and sisters were on the train back to El Centro. The Sikh's partners married the other sisters and eventually the mother also married a Punjabi Sikh. This was a typical pattern—many sets of sisters or female relatives married business partners and formed joint households along the irrigation canals and country roads.

The birth of children brought a stronger sense of community and a shift of domestic power to the women. Almost without exception, the children were given Spanish names. (Rarely, a father filed an affidavit of correction later, giving a son a Punjabi name. Some divorce cases showed that names were a source of conflict: The fathers used Punjabi names for their children, the mothers, Spanish.) Another strengthening of the women's network came with the appropriation of the *compadrazgo* system of fictive kinship, which drew upon relatives and friends as religious sponsors in the Catholic church. Punjabi men stood as godfathers to each other's children in this basically Catholic system, but it was the women who were central to it.

How were children, given names like Maria Jesusita Singh, Jose Akbar Khan, and Armando Chand, socialized, and how did they think of themselves? Contrary to Yusuf Dadabhai's theory that the Punjabis assimilated to American culture by way of the Mexican-American subculture, the Punjabi-Mexican families did not participate in activities with

Mexican-Americans nor were they well received by members of that community. Mexican men opposed these marriages, and there were some early instances of violence between Punjabis and Mexicans over them. While some Punjabi men were close to their Mexican relatives by marriage, most were not.

These biethnic families formed communities of their own, and families visited across county and state lines (there were small numbers of Punjabi-Mexican families in Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, and Utah, too). The partnerships and friendships of the Punjabi men were the basis of these interactions, but there was a double structure; often the wives of given sets of business partners or friends were sisters or related to each other in some other way. So both male friendships and female kinship structured family life.

Yet it was clearly the mothers who socialized the children. The children spoke to their mothers in Spanish and to their fathers in English and/or Spanish. A few of the boys who worked in the fields with Hindu crews learned some Punjabi; sometimes these boys were Mexican stepsons. Most of them were raised as Catholics, and the fathers left this to the mothers and encouraged it. The fathers had neither the time nor the training to teach their

children about Sikhism, Islam, or Hinduism. The children had godparents who sponsored them at baptism, confirmation, and marriage in the Catholic Church—even though most godfathers were from the community and were Sikhs, Muslims, or Hindus. These children met with prejudice from both Anglos and from Mexicans—they were called “dirty Hindus” and “half and halves.” Their favorite day was Sunday, when Punjabi men and their families got together for talk, play, and a dinner of chicken curry and roti (bread). They liked going to the Stockton Sikh temple or working the migratory labor route, because they could meet others like themselves.

The fathers transmitted little of Punjabi culture to their wives and children, save in the domains of food and funeral practices. Cooking in the homes drew from both Mexican and Punjabi cuisine and the men taught their wives to cook chicken curry, roti, and various vegetable curries. Today, the Rasul family in

A photo taken of the “Hindu wives” during the 1947 celebrations of Indian independence in the northern California farm town of Yuba City. All the wives are of Mexican descent, save two Anglo women and one Punjabi.



COURTESY KAREN LEONARD

Yuba City runs the only Mexican restaurant in California that features chicken curry and roti. Another important retention of Punjabi culture was the disposition of the body upon death. Sikhs insisted upon cremation, then uncommon in North America, and Muslims carried out orthodox burial ceremonies for each other (though the plots in which they are buried in rural California are termed "Hindu plots"). The wives, however, were buried in the Mexican Catholic sections of local cemeteries, as were the children.

Constructions of ethnicity

Most of the Punjabi descendants refer to themselves as Hindu or East Indian today. When they talk about being Hindu, these descendants do not mean objective criteria that link them to India or the Punjab—attributes such as those an anthropologist might list. They are fundamentally ignorant of Punjabi and Indian culture. For example, while most of the men who founded these families were actually Sikhs, not Hindus, their descendants (and even the descendants of Muslim Punjabis) proudly claim to be Hindu. These descendants are almost all nonspeakers of Punjabi and have no sense of the Punjab's distinctive regional culture. They have a sense of place and history, however, and they possess a heritage that is distinctly Punjabi nonetheless.

One of the reasons descendants claim more strongly to be Hindu rather than Mexican is a negative one—to be Mexican in California's agricultural towns is to affiliate with the laborer, not the landowner, class—but there are other, positive reasons for claiming to be Hindu. There is some identification with place and locality in the spatial sense, a belief that California's agricultural valleys resemble the Punjabi homeland (certainly the fathers promulgated this view). There were other perceptions (or creations) of similarities that the men expressed about their new lives and that their descendants continue to voice. These other perceived similarities, the senses in which the descendants in California today feel themselves to be Punjabi, to be Hindu, include their place in the political system and their ideas about Punjabi and Mexican material culture, language, and religion.

The original Punjabi immigrants found the physi-

cal landscape of California similar to that of the Punjab; the political landscape and their place in it also struck them as similar to that in British India. The men's resentment at being colonial subjects as well as their resentment at being deprived of legal rights in the United States is strongly evident in all contemporary accounts. The Punjabi men organized the militantly nationalist Ghadar Party in California to fight against the British back in India; they contributed money, and some of them went back to participate in Ghadar party activities there. They fought hard for political rights here, too, organizing groups and supporting lobbyists to gain U.S. citizenship. They interpreted both their past and present as a struggle for one's rightful place in society, particularly a place on the land, a very important component of Punjabi identity.

This interpretation has continuing meaning to their children, most of whom still live and work in agricultural valleys in California. They too feel strong resentment for being looked down upon as "half and halves," for being pushed into the Mexican and black schools, and, most of all, for not having the land today that their fathers "really earned" but were unable to acquire easily because of the Alien Land Law. Passionate resistance to the political authority that subordinated them linked the fathers to each other in the past, and it links their descendants to their fathers and to each other today.

Central to the sense of continuing Punjabi identity is the question of how the marriages with Mexican women—women perceived today by new Indian immigrants as decidedly different from them—are viewed. Rather than emphasize (or even mention) the miscegenation laws that played a major role in determining their choice of spouses, the men and their descendants, when interviewed, talk about commonalities between the Punjabi men and Mexican women. They do not argue that they occupied the same space in the social landscape; that would go against the general Punjabi sense of superiority to Mexicans that carried over from their landowner status in the Punjab. They do argue that there were similarities of physical appearance and even of language ("Spanish is just like Punjabi, really"); they argue also that Mexicans and Punjabis shared the same material culture. As Moola Singh of Selma, California, who has thirteen children from three marriages with Mexican women, says:

Rasul's El Rancho restaurant in Yuba City is today the only Mexican restaurant in California that features chicken curry and roti.

I never have to explain anything India to my Mexican family. Cooking the same, only talk is different. I explain them, customs in India same as in Mexico. Everything same, only language different. They make roti over there, sit on the floor—all customs India the same Mexico, the way of living. I went to Mexico two, three times, you know, not too far; just like India, just like it. Adobe houses in Mexico, they sit on floor there, make tortillas (roti, you know). All kinds of food the same, eat from plates sometimes, some places tables and benches. India the same, used to eat on the floor, or cutting two boards, made benches.

The women came from a similar material culture, it seems, but what about the religious differences? The men and their descendants state repeatedly that all religions are the same, a view again in sharp contrast to that expressed by more recent immigrants from India. The statements take different forms: The Sikh religion is just like the Catholic one; Sikhism is a composite of Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity; the Granth Sahib is just like the Bible; all gods are the same, but they are called different names because languages are different; Sikhism has the ten cruz, or ten crosses which are the ten gurus; the founding Sikh guru preached just what is in the Old Testament; Sikhs have all the commandments Catholics have; one can be Muslim and Catholic or Sikh and Catholic at the same time.



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Ignoring religious differences now significant in India, these statements stress similarities between the Indian religions and Christianity, frequently using metaphors and analogies to erase distinctions. While there were many vigorously contested matters between pioneer Punjabi husbands and Mexican wives, the children's religious training was not one of them. The men wanted to inculcate respect for Sikhism, Hinduism, or Islam, while they encouraged their children to practice Catholicism (or whatever form of Christianity their wives practiced).

Even as the Punjabi men talk about the similarities between their homeland and California, upon which they base their continuing collective identity—geography and landscape, the struggle for one's rightful social and political place, wives from a background materially and culturally similar to their own—they also talk about things that are different, particularly social practices that were not appropriate to their new country. Most mention behaviors conditioned by caste and religion back in India, but they usually behave or advocate behaving differently in California. While they point out the Untouchables in their midst (most immigrants were Jat Sikhs, a landowning caste), the Untouchables

socialize with the others on a daily basis—chatting, for example, in Holtville Park during the midday rest. The Punjabi men also remark on prohibited Sikh-Muslim-Hindu interactions in India, but men from all three religions generally work, eat, and socialize together in California. When talking to their wives and children about religion, as we have seen, the husbands reconceptualize differences as similarities at a higher analytic level.

The original Punjabi immigrants refused to transmit elements of Punjabi culture that they judged inappropriate in the United States, according to their children. Many fathers felt that the immigration laws and other discriminatory policies against Asians had made it useless to teach the children Punjabi, or even to tell them about Punjabi society. Social practices from the Punjab, life cycle ceremonies, and caste and religious distinctions and observances, were consciously discarded; when interviewed, several children remarked on their father's

refusal to talk to them about the Punjab, refusals justified by the uselessness of such knowledge and by the need to become American. Of course, some fathers resurrected the ghosts of caste, sect, and region from their pasts as their children began to date and marry. But since they had not taught their wives and the children the importance of these distinctions earlier, their concerns came too late. As one indignant wife defended her daughter's right to date someone: "We're all Americans here—what is this caste thing?"

Ethnic choices

The children grew up, therefore, with a collective identity that drew upon two cultural traditions, and they drew upon both in making ethnic choices. There were occasions for choice, some posed by the individual life cycle. As



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they grew up and began dating (parents permitting), they could date and marry older Punjabi men, Anglos, Mexican-Americans, or others like themselves. Most married Anglos or Mexican-Americans. They could profess Christianity (most) or Islam (a few), or they could feel themselves to be both Christian and Sikh, Muslim, or Hindu at the same time (many).

As they left the Imperial Valley and other places where they were known, they were given new labels. One man had been called Mexican-Hindu all his life by everyone, including state authorities in the Imperial Valley. Working near Sacramento when the United States entered World War II, he enlisted in military service there, giving his race as "Hindu and Mexican." The clerk listed him as Caucasian despite his protests; this was a shock to him, an introduction to a wider world, and in some sense, a loss.

Other ethnic choices were posed by external circumstances, perhaps the most important being the independence of India and Pakistan in the late 1940s and the changed U.S. immigration law in 1965. The independence and partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 brought tremendous pride and pleasure to the old Punjabis in the United States, men long deprived of meaningful citizenship in any country. As we have seen, the wives and children of the Sikhs and Hindus celebrated Indian independence; further, the families of the Muslim Punjabi immigrants renamed themselves Spanish-Pakistanis. Again their choices emphasized the South Asian heritage. Yet it has become increasingly difficult for these descendants of the early Punjabis to claim Hindu status in the face of the new immigrant populations from South Asia.

The arrival of many new South Asian immigrants after the 1965 liberalization of U.S. immigration law has changed the context dramatically, and the descendants of the old-timers have had to sharpen and defend their ethnic choices. Thousands of the newcomers—most of them—are educated professionals coming from all over South Asia. Some, however, are Punjabi villagers much like the earlier immigrants, coming from the very same villages and settling in the same

A group of musicians at the Tierra Buena Sikh Gurdwara in Yuba City. As more recent Punjabi immigrants have tended to reimpose South Asian customs, tensions have increased steadily between them and the earlier immigrants and their descendants, who have adopted new ways appropriate to life in America.

rural areas of California where descendants of the pioneers reside. What are the descendants' perceptions of these recent immigrants, and have those perceptions affected their claim to Hindu ethnicity?

The problem is most acute in Yuba City, where aging bachelor Punjabis have sponsored many new immigrants and where chain migration has brought the new immigrant population up to about ten thousand. In the Imperial Valley, there are many more Punjabi-Mexicans, and very few new immigrants from South Asia. The Punjabi-Mexican descendants in the Yuba City area welcomed the first few newcomers and contributed to the building of the first Sikh *gurdwara* (temple) in Yuba City. One of two benches at the *gurdwara* entrance reads "In loving memory of our father Harnam Singh Sidhu, 1891-1974, from children Isabel S. Villasenor, Ray S. Sidhu, Frank S. Sidhu, Pete S. Sidhu, Beatrice S. Myers."

But by the mid-1970s, the two groups were diverging fast; the newcomers disapproved of and minimized the Punjabi-Mexican marriages that had occurred and would not acknowledge the descendants' claims to membership in the same community. One anthropologist reports that Punjabi wives objected to the other wives cooking in the *gurdwara*, suspecting that the food was being poisoned. Even if the story is untrue, it is significant that it is being told, and the fact is that few Punjabi-Mexican descendants visit the *gurdwara* for any reason today.

In both the Stockton Sikh temple and the Muslim mosque started in Sacramento in 1947, the old and new immigrant communities jostle uneasily. Spanish-Pakistani descendants do not like the practice of gender segregation instituted by the new immigrants from Pakistan, and the old Sikhs and their descendants find new practices in the Sikh temple similarly objectionable. Moola Singh gives a vivid description of the changes and his reaction to them:

About our churches here, everybody went to the Stockton one, at least if they lived close by there, you know. Hindu, Muslim, everybody went. Afterwards, these days now, I don't know what they're doing. . . . One thing I don't like, not for that new group, not everybody can go. Before, the Hindu men married women here. You know, everybody married white women, everybody married Mexican women, everybody



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Janie Poonian and her grandchildren, Larry and Reyna Wilkson. Typical of many Punjabi-Mexican-American families, more recent generations have married Americans of other ethnic backgrounds.

went to church. And our people, everybody went and sat on chairs. That was before, not now. Then, everybody could sit on a chair. And for food, they gave it on a plate, with a spoon, and paper to clean your hands. But after that, some Indian farmers and preachers have come. They want all the customs like India, and they've taken away the chairs, put people back on the floor again.

I went with my wife one time to Stockton, where they have lots of chairs in back. Me and my wife, we got a couple of chairs, we sat in the back.

"All right man, sit on the floor, all right man, sit on the floor," someone said to us.

I don't care, people like that, people from India, why not have a church like other churches in this country? These India people are damn fools. Why have a church like before, why sit on the floor, why have no chairs, why

have nothing? Today, it's different, twenty or fifty years have passed and today it's different.

As Moola Singh points out, the pioneer immigrants and their descendants have adopted new ways appropriate to their new country, and they view the reimposition of South Asian customs as unwelcome and backward-looking. As the new Punjabi immigrant population has increased, tension over such issues has increased as well.

In 1974, the Punjabi-Mexicans initiated their Old-Timers' Reunion Christmas Dance, billing it as a reunion for descendants of the Punjabi pioneers and publicizing it to bolster their claims of South Asian descent. Yet from the first, the dance betrayed the double ethnic identity of its sponsors, featuring mariachi bands and exuberant dancing, and including Mexican-American friends and relatives. In 1979, the new immigrant Sikh community began its annual Sikh Parade, a militant-looking march through Yuba City by hundreds (some say thousands) of Sikh men, women, and children in Punjabi dress led by bearded, turbaned men with drawn swords. This first parade aroused local apprehension and prejudice, feelings already present because of the very

successful Punjabi peach farmers and their acquisition of orchard land in the area. Increasing prejudice against the new immigrants from India made it somewhat less desirable to claim Hindu status, yet descendants persisted. One such woman, Isabel Singh Garcia, published a long letter entitled "They Are Too Hindus" in the local paper.

The descendants' strategy now is to claim not only to be real Hindus, but better Americans than the newcomers. They draw attention to the differences between their fathers and the new Punjabi immigrants. These differences begin with physical appearance and manner of self-presentation: They say their fathers were big men, commanding, proud, and light-skinned, while the newcomers are small, obsequious, deferential, and dark-skinned. (This may have some basis in reality: Many of the pioneers had served in the British military and police services, which had such physical requirements for enlistment.) Attitudinal and behavioral differences—ways in which the newcomers are *not* becoming American as the old-timers did—are stressed as well.

The descendants of the Punjabi pioneers now avoid the Sikh Parade. They still hold their annual Christmas dance, but its character has changed. The dance has broadened its constituency to include all who went to school with the founders of the dance in Yuba City; it is now called the Old-Timers' Dance and the organizing committee is primarily Mexican-American. In 1988 only two of the eight organizers and about one-tenth of those attending were descendants of Punjabis or related to them by marriage. The theme was Hawaiian, with "Aloha" written on a banner above the band platform. The invitation began, "Hello/Ohio/Buenos Días," emphasizing cultural pluralism and the claim to be American. Those who attended this rousing evening with its lively band and delicious Mexican dinner did tell stories about the pioneer couples, mimicking the broken English of the men from India, but the dance itself was a thoroughly American affair, albeit with a Mexican-American tinge.

The ethnic choices made by the Punjabi-Mexican-American pioneers remind us sharply that collective social identity entails some form of self-definition founded upon a marked opposition between "we" and "others." Changing contexts, changing local configurations of "we" and "others," stimulated the "old Hindus" and their descendants to make ethnic

choices to reconstruct their sense of place and society as they made this land their own. The contribution of the Punjabi-Mexican-American families of California, chicken curry and tamales aside, ultimately lies in their demonstration of the flexibility of ethnicity, both its grounding in a specific political economy and its responsiveness to situational factors that allow individuals and groups to make ethnic choices. □

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