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# Conflict and Compatibility in Punjabi-Mexican Immigrant Families in Rural California, 1915–1965

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*Combining historical and interview data from northern and southern California, the authors examine the interethnic families formed after 1915 in rural California by immigrant men from India and their spouses of Hispanic background. The authors describe the patterns of childrearing and family life and analyze the male and female networks linking these families to each other and to the wider society. By 1965 the transitory nature of this unique "Mexican-Hindu" community and the regional divergences within it have become clear. To explain these developments, the analysis focuses on compatibility and conflict in family life over the life cycle, as well as changing conditions external to the family.*

The authors have both researched a most unusual population, the Mexican-Hindus of California.<sup>1</sup> This population is composed of immigrant men from India, their spouses of Hispanic background, and their children. In this article we combine our materials to describe these interethnic

families and to analyze the networks linking these families to each other and to the wider society. We discuss compatibility and conflict in family life, looking at developments over the life cycle and at changing conditions outside the family to explain the transitory nature of this unique community.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FAMILIES

LaBrack's research, primarily on the social and economic adjustment of the many new Sikh immigrants to California's Yuba City/Marysville area following the 1965 relaxation of U.S. immigration laws, was aided by grants from the National Science Foundation; a Maxwell Fellowship and South Asia Program funds from Syracuse University; and Faculty Grants from the University of the Pacific and the Asian-American Program at the University of California, Davis. Leonard's historical project on Indian immigrants and ethnicity in rural California was funded by Faculty Grants and Ethnic Studies Funds from the University of California, Irvine. This article has benefited from John G. Leonard's critical evaluation.

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The history of the Mexican-Hindu families is tied to the development of both Punjabi and California agriculture. Under British rule from the mid-19th century, the Punjab province in northwestern India prospered as irrigation systems improved agricultural yields and, with improved health conditions, produced a decline in mortality. Employment of some family members overseas was a strategy that helped Punjabi farmers adapt to the rising population density and prevent detrimental subdivision of land among the greater numbers of surviving sons. One son was sent out to earn money, as a policeman in Shanghai or Hong Kong or as a farm worker in the Philippines, Australia, Africa, Canada, or California. The money sent home helped support his patrilineage, the landholding and work unit among farming castes in the Punjab.

As California's economic base shifted from gold mining to intensive agriculture, immigrant farm workers from China, Japan, Korea, and India found successive employment in California's fields. Lumber mills, railroads, and agriculture provided jobs for the first Punjabi sojourners in America's Pacific Northwest. Whatever the original catalyst may have been, once a few enthusiastic reports went back to India, relatives and fellow villagers also traveled from the Punjab to California.

The men from India shared certain characteristics. They were almost all members of farming castes from the Punjab province; by religion they were Sikh, Muslim and Hindu.<sup>2</sup> They came without their wives, although half of the men who came probably were married (U.S. Senate, 1911: 338); they intended to return to India after earning and saving money abroad. United States immigration and citizenship laws tightened after their arrival, however, making it impossible to bring over family members and preventing the men from visiting India and returning to California (Jacoby, 1958; Melendy, 1981:192-201). Some men went back to India; others remained abroad throughout their lives, sending money back to relatives in the Punjab. In certain parts of rural California, these "Hindus," as they were called, constituted a sizable and distinctive group in the farming population. Many remained bachelors in the United States, but some of the men eventually married and had families.

Previous research work has treated these men from India as members of a bachelor society, underestimating the number who married (Bradfield, 1971; Chakravorti, 1968; Miller, 1950; Wenzel, 1966). However, Yusuf Dadabhai (1954) noted that of the 26 marriages he found the majority were with Mexican women, and he proposed a theory of "circuitous assimilation" into Anglo culture via the Mexican subculture. Harold Jacoby, also working in the 1950s, noted the higher proportion of Mexican spouses in southern California (ca. 1978, cited in LaBrack, 1980:160).

Family reconstitution from county records shows many more marriages than previously thought. The Table shows that most of these Mexican-Hindu families originated and settled in the Imperial Valley, in southern California. Quantitatively, this may seem a small community. However, if we consider that only 1,873 men from India resided in California in 1930 and 1,476 in 1940 (Melendy, 1981:255), the Mexican-Hindu families were clearly a significant part of the Asian Indian community. In any case we are interested in the qualitative aspects of these marriages. Most marriages were with Hispanic

TABLE. SPOUSES OF ASIAN INDIANS IN CALIFORNIA, 1913-1946

Counties	Types of Spouses											
	Hispanic		Anglo		Black		Asian Indian		American Indian		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yuba	37	46.8	22	27.8	10	12.7	8	10.1	2	2.5	79	21.4
Sutter												
Sacramento	40	75.5	12	22.6	0	0	1	1.9	0	0	53	14.3
San Joaquin												
Fresno	220	92	13	5.5	6	2.5	0	0	0	0	239	64.3
Tulare												
Kings	297	80	47	12.7	16	4.3	9	2.4	2	.5	371	100
Imperial												
Los Angeles												
San Diego												
Totals												

Source: Karen Leonard, family reconstitution from county records (vital statistics, civil and criminal records).

women, and this pattern is the one we focus on in our description of male and female networks and family life. Early data comes from the Imperial Valley; but several Mexican-Hindu families had settled near Fresno by the late 1920s, and many moved north in the 1930s as a result of economic pressures.<sup>3</sup>

The men who worked and settled together, although seldom related by blood, were frequently from the same village in the Punjab, had served together in the British army or police, or had been shipmates on the way to America. They formed partnerships to pool their capital and labor, leasing land in groups of two to five men. These men did not marry until years after arriving in America, until the immigration laws made it impossible to bring their families from India. Thus, they were in their 30s and 40s when they married (or, in some cases, remarried), and their wives were usually much younger. In the Imperial Valley, partners lived together on the land they were farming and, when one married, his wife moved into that joint household.

The Punjabis tended to marry sisters or sets of related women, and the men were often linked as partners, too. Three of the first four Punjabi/Hispanic marriages in the Imperial Valley illustrate this: three Alvarez sisters married Sikhs in 1916 and 1917, and two of the three husbands were partners. Kinship and economic ties reinforced each other here and in many other instances in the Imperial Valley and Fresno.

For the Indian men, marriages with these Hispanic women offered little in the way of economic resources. Very few Mexicans leased or owned land in the Imperial Valley then (or now). The decision to marry in the U.S. probably rested on a realistic assessment of the anti-Asian immigration laws, the cost of voyages to and from India coupled with the dangers of illegal re-entry, and the relative success achieved by many Indian farmers in the second decade of the century. Many were settling down; leasing, buying land; and entering into stable relationships with bankers, shippers and processors, and local merchants. In southern California Spanish-speaking women were available (Loosley, 1927). Frequently, eligible women were picking cotton in the fields farmed by the men and legal barriers to marriage were not raised.<sup>4</sup> The women offered domesticity, a housekeeper and cook for the husband and his partners.

Most of the women marrying Punjabis came from female-centered, lower class Mexican families. Many of these women from Mexico and the American Southwest were migrant laborers, moving with their families as part of the flood of Mex-

ican labor entering California's agricultural industry in the second decade of this century. Others came from families displaced by the Mexican Revolution and the chaos along the border from Texas to California, (McWilliams, 1968:111, 163; Taylor, 1928). Often the sets of sisters, or mother and daughters, who married Asian Indians lacked male relatives (Leonard, interviews). The women were young, sometimes 20 years younger than their husbands; and if they were past their teens, they usually had been married before and brought young children into the marriage.

#### HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION AND PHYSICAL CULTURE

The first Hispanic brides in the Imperial Valley moved into wholly male households consisting of their husbands and their partners. The houses were usually flimsy shacks, erected on the acreage the partners were farming that year. Very few farms had running water or indoor toilets in the 1920s, and the household belongings were meager. Stories of the men's singleminded concentration upon putting all resources into farming stress the privations and hard work of the wives in those early years.

The difficult physical conditions often were matched by emotional ones, as the Punjabi men's expectations included cooking and cleaning for all in the household. One wife complained that her husband had married her to be the group's housekeeper, not his wife (LaBrack, interview). While Mexican and Indian food have certain similarities, most men insisted upon their wives learning how to prepare *roti* (a bread similar to tortillas), chicken curry, and curried vegetables for their daily fare; the men had cooked these foods themselves and taught their wives.

Because of the tendency for sisters to marry partners, households frequently included related women. There are a very few instances where the wife's mother or parents also lived in the household for some years. As children were born, couples tended to establish their own households, away from partners and sisters. Breakup of the joint households also was caused by economic changes, as families moved with the crops from labor camp to labor camp in California's San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys or as the men took on-site jobs as irrigators or foremen for bigger farmers. Some bachelor "uncles," however, remained in married partners' households for years, helping with the cooking and telling the children stories about the Punjab.<sup>5</sup>

The physical settings and household functioning showed interethnic accommodations by the

Mexican-Hindu families. Because of the sojourner nature of the initial immigrations and the fact that fewer than five Indian families migrated as a unit to California (Leonard, family reconstitution data), the physical objects in a Mexican-Hindu home reflected their immediate economic status and the tastes of both husband and wife. There were few items from India, although some brass tumblers, religious texts, and clothing were found in these early homes. Few Muslims had brought Qurans and prayer rugs, nor had many Sikhs brought a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib or pictures of the Sikh gurus. (Successful Punjabi farmers acquired some of these items later.)

The language of the home was English or Spanish but never the father's language, Punjabi. The mother spoke to the children in Spanish. Spanish was also the dominant language of church and school activities (Mexican-Hindu children customarily were assigned to segregated "Mexican" schools), of the agricultural laborers, and often of the surrounding community. The names given to children were almost invariably Hispanic, save for a few sons with Indian names. Even these boys were better known by a Hispanic name or nickname: "Gurbachen? Oh, you mean Bacho" and "Kishen? That's Domingo," were typical responses (Leonard, interviews).

Some fathers made a conscious decision not to teach their children Punjabi. Often this was a result of their own near-illiteracy in the language, but for many it was both a positive and practical decision. Because they were in the United States and their children born here were automatically U.S. citizens, they felt that there was no use for Punjabi. One daughter remembers vividly her shock and disappointment when her father announced he was stopping their daily evening "school" sessions, that special time when he told his children about his village and tutored them in Punjabi (Leonard, interview). Few children of the Punjabis ever learned Punjabi. The small number who did were the boys who worked in field crews with their fathers, learning only enough Punjabi to talk to other Punjabis about farm work.

The wives tried to "Americanize" or "modernize" their husbands by making sure they had acceptable clothing, cleaning and changing it often enough. They talked among themselves about the evident differences among Punjabi villages: husbands from "X" village were cleaner in their habits, ones from "Y" were better cooks, and so on. They also tried to keep their children supplied with clothes, shoes, and books for school, asking for money from "stingy" husbands who wanted to put all their resources into farming equipment or the purchase of land.

The décor of the homes depended on a family's economic status and degree of mobility. When the family was relatively settled, the furniture and home furnishings tended towards heavy, substantial sofas and drapes, bedroom "suites," and dinette sets. There was an eclectic blending of decorations, with the Virgin Mary, Christ, and various saints displayed alongside paper poster or calendar art of the Gurus (Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh were the most popular) (LaBrack, interview observations). The religious syncretism that this suggests was not realized, and the pictures remained iconic for both groups, signifying the two separate religious traditions.

The living-room/reception area was an important indicator of status for both the Mexican wives and their husbands. Some of the women complained that the men did not seem to care as much as they did about their surroundings, but the same women usually added that the home was better than they had had before (LaBrack, interviews). High value was not placed on home owning as much as on land owning, and some of the rural homes appeared relatively neglected. Most households had a garden to provide fresh produce, but landscaping was a very low priority. One Sikh man commented that a "pretty lawn is worth nothing" (i.e., not productive of income or food) (LaBrack, interview). Anglo and Mexican neighbors sometimes commented that "Hindu" farms were unkempt, with abandoned items left by the house or a refuse heap behind the main buildings. For security and ease of maintenance, farm equipment was often kept close to the house, adding to the general impression of disorder.

There were retentions of Punjabi practices by the men. Some kept a cot or *charpoi*-like string bed in the home and moved it outside to sleep on at night, a common practice in the hot Punjabi summers. They brushed their teeth, descendants recall, with twigs. Moreover, Indian toilet practices persisted, as many men—even those who had running water and indoor facilities—preferred to use an outside site. Mexican women remarked on the use of water to wash oneself after defecation, and many homes had a small bowl or even a coke bottle to be taken along for this purpose (LaBrack, interviews). The men often rigged up outside showers, and neighbors sometimes saw them oiling their hair after bathing (Leonard, interviews).

#### FAMILY AND SOCIETAL NETWORKS

Children were born to these Punjabi-Mexican couples usually after the first year of marriage and almost annually thereafter. If a mother or divorced older sister was persuaded to marry

another partner, she brought children from her previous marriage into the household as well. With the coming of children, the cultural balance within the households shifted decisively. The men kept the ultimate economic power, but their young wives bore chief responsibility for the socialization of the children. If the "assimilation into the Mexican subculture" prophesied by Yusuf Dadabhay was beginning, its chief agents assuredly were the women, through their relatives and ritual kin (the *compadrazgo* system).

Relationships with Hispanic relatives varied according to the proximity and sex of the relatives. Many of the women who married Punjabis were without male supporters; they were young girls dependent on one parent, orphaned girls dependent on an uncle, or older widows and deserted women with dependent children. Sometimes a young girl's father opposed her marriage to a Punjabi—in one case instigating the bride's abduction to Mexico by Mexican men, in another case seeking court annulment of a marriage. However, there are also cases in which Hispanic parents found the Punjabi suitor acceptable for their daughter or in which they may have received money for the bride. For example, one uncle, burdened with an orphaned niece, allegedly sold her to a Punjabi bridegroom (Leonard, interview).

When the bride's parents lived nearby, relationships were usually friendly, although somewhat limited in the case of the men. We found two instances in which a wife's parents lived with and were supported by her husband. Neither of us found instances of close friendships between a Punjabi and his Hispanic brother-in-law. The language barrier was one problem; also, back in the Punjab, the brother-in-law relationship was the most unequal of affinal relationships, with the wife-taking men ranked above the wife-giving ones (Hershman, 1981:197). We found only one case in which a wife's brother was called upon to be godparent to the child of another Mexican-Hindu couple. Only one farming partnership between a Mexican and a Punjabi was noted, and it (like many partnerships) ended in a protracted lawsuit. Again, we found only one instance in which a Hispanic brother-in-law held property for his sister's Punjabi husband during the years of legal barriers to alien property-owning in California. However, there are many instances of wives, or other men's wives, or even mothers-in-law, holding property for Punjabis. A woman's ties to her family were usually close, especially if she had family nearby. According to divorce petitions, her parents' or mother's home often served as a refuge for the Hispanic wife, and husbands charged their wives with too-frequent visits and diversion

of funds to their parental homes (Imperial County Civil Case records).

Nonetheless, the Mexican family system was useful to the Punjabi men, particularly when there was a need related to the children. If a wife died or deserted, her young children or infants could be left with a Mexican grandmother or aunt. Usually girl children were so placed, since a man could use his sons to help him in various capacities in the fields or orchards (Leonard, interviews).

The Mexican-Hindu families were linked in several other ways. Undoubtedly, the *compadrazgo* system was the most important network. In its Spanish and Spanish-American forms, the *compadrazgo* (coparents) system was closely linked to the Roman Catholic Church and was meant to ensure the welfare and religious education of the children. After the birth of a child, the parents would approach a man and a woman (usually husband and wife) and ask them to participate in the baptism ceremony as official godparents. The negotiations usually were somewhat formal, and the selection of a set of godparents was important because henceforth it would link the families through the child. Although close friends could be (and were) asked to act in this guardian role, judicious selection could raise the status of the family if the godparents were wealthier or more prominent. In Latin America, most studies have shown emphasis placed on the horizontal tie between coparents (*compadre* and *comadre*), rather than on the vertical tie between child and godparents (*padrino* and *madrina*) (Nutini, 1976:223; Foster, 1953:7-8).

Among the Mexican-Hindus, the system operated on a modified basis. In a minority of the cases, both godparents were Hispanic friends of the Mexican-Hindu couple; but the godparents were usually a Punjabi man and a Spanish-speaking woman. Religious distinctions important in India were ignored. There were instances of Muslim men acting as godfathers to the children of Sikh men (Leonard, interviews). Such a relationship has no direct parallel in Punjabi culture, where it would be inappropriate to draw upon "outsiders" or non-kin to play an important socioreligious role with respect to childrearing.

The functions the *compadrazgo* system served varied, depending on whose perspective one uses to examine it. The Hispanic wives of Punjabi men may have seen the system as a way of ensuring their children's religious education, since the godparents were supposed to instruct their godchild with regard to faith and morality. However, it was above all a social tie—women who lived nearby and were friends served as godmothers to each

others' children. These maternal bonds almost always joined families of similar Punjabi-Hispanic make-up. The men went willingly to the Catholic churches for their own children's baptisms and to serve as godfathers for other children. Although they were accepted by the Catholic priests, their names often Hispanicized on the baptismal certificates, we found no instance of unequivocal conversion to Catholicism among the Punjabi men.

For the men the *compadrazgo* system served to extend or strengthen Punjabi kin networks and to exert some influence on the new generation of mixed offspring. Many of the men from India took their godfather role rather seriously and did provide advice and material items to their godchildren. Several daughters mentioned that the first bicycles they owned were gifts from their *padrinos*, and in one case a confirmation dress was provided by the Sikh godfather (LaBrack, interviews). Such relationships forged or reinforced artificial kinship links, as can be seen in the terms of address that godchildren used for their godparents. Along with the Spanish *padrino* and *madrina*, the English term "uncle" was used, which was understood in California Mexican-Hindu circles to mean "any man from my father's village" (LaBrack, interviews). This is a reciprocal extension of the Punjabi idea of "daughters of the village," in which all females from a natal village were somehow nieces of the older men of the village. Whether the godfather was actually from the same village as the child's father, or was from a wider area (*pindi* or "related village"), or was simply another Punjabi, was immaterial (LaBrack, interviews). The idea clearly was to set up a classificatory kin status for all Punjabi men and their offspring by Hispanic wives.

All over California married Punjabis and their wives and children went to the Punjabi-owned stores in towns like Marysville on Saturdays or Sundays and mingled with unmarried Punjabis. The Mexican-Hindu children remember with fondness the treatment they received, not only from their godparents but from Punjabi men in general. The men gave them money for movies, ice cream, or some other treat they might not otherwise obtain (LaBrack, interviews). The overall role of the men in the system seems to have been one of generous benefactor and special friend of the family.

Thus, the godparent system linked representatives of two very different cultures for the ultimate benefit of the children. Later, these godparental relationships became strained as the children reached puberty. The Punjabi godfather

took a more conservative view of his monitoring role and found himself in conflict with the godmother over the propriety of dating, dancing, and general conduct. The *comadres* tended to side together against the "Hindu" interpretation of correct behavior for young people in general and females in particular. For example, it was not unusual for a godmother and mother to lie to a girl's father about where she was going (LaBrack, interviews). Such friction sometimes led to a break between the godparents, each trying to advise and persuade according to different perceptions. In any case the role of godparents seemed to become attenuated after childhood; the system did not serve the lifelong function that, at least theoretically, it did in the Hispanic cultural context.

The men's partnerships were the other important basis of networks among these Mexican-Hindu families; and as we have seen, they often coincided, at least initially, with the Hispanic kinship networks. However, these partnerships could be in competition with the female-based kin ties and were probably the weaker of the two links. Partnership agreements could be made annually or for two or more years. A man could have two agreements at the same time—for example, one with two men on 120 acres for cotton and another with three different men on another 120 acres to raise alfalfa. Formed to pool capital and labor, disagreements and disputes characterized many of the partnerships.<sup>6</sup> The partnerships that had characterized the early years tended to break up in the 1930s, as children grew up and worked with their fathers and as those who could afford it secured their own homes and land. There are some cases, too, in which a wife ended the partnership by running away with her husband's partner or by fighting with his partner's wife (Leonard, interviews).

Another possible basis for networks among the men was common village or regional origin. While there is no doubt that the men considered village brotherhood a primary bond, it seems to have influenced family residential and marriage patterns very little. In the three cases where all the men who came from particular villages were traced, they had highly divergent careers in the U.S., without any tendencies for the men to marry related women or settle near each other (Leonard, interviews). The regional divisions significant in the Punjab—Malwa, Doaba, Mazhabi—played roles in the composition of work groups and in political activities; but they did not shape family life strongly. Stories of daughters marrying a man from the "wrong" region abound; here, as in attempts to arrange marriages more generally, the father's wishes could not prevail.

LaBrack, whose information focuses on the initial marriages and households established by the immigrants, tends to emphasize the reasons for Asian Indian-Hispanic compatibility. He notes the following commonalities: physical characteristics, diet, initial economic level in the U.S., and similar patriarchal cultures.

Physically, both Mexicans and Asian Indians are Caucasian; yet both characteristically have black hair, dark eyes, and skin coloring darker than that of Caucasians of European origin. These characteristics led to the 1923 Thind Decision, which denied Asian Indians access to U.S. citizenship; in that case the judge declared that, although undeniably Caucasian, Indians were not "white" in the popular notion of that term (Jacoby, 1958). Similar perceptions of persons of Mexican ancestry caused the U.S. Census to classify Mexicans as whites in 1920, a separate race in 1930, and whites again from 1940 on. Thus, members of these two groups looked somewhat alike, and they were perceived as similar—as "brown" or "colored" people—by other Caucasians in American society. Punjabis were frequently mistaken for Mexicans. This happened even to the Sikh men, distinguished in India by their full beards and uncut hair tucked under their turbans. These Sikh practices aroused prejudice in the U.S., however, and most Sikhs abandoned them.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the physiognomic similarities, the most striking compatibility in Mexican-Hindu households was culinary. The traditional Mexican food was heavy, spicy; relied upon breads, vegetables, and meats (chicken, goat, lamb); and was often fried or broiled. All this was similar to Punjabi cuisine. Women learned to cook "Hindu" food; the Punjabi men found Mexican-style cooking acceptable as an alternative.

Punjabi men were not averse to cooking, since they had cooked regularly before marriage, some for work groups. Sikh men also cooked ceremonial meals at the Stockton *gurdwara* and on certain birthdays or martyrdom days of the Gurus. They sometimes prepared a Punjabi meal for their family or friends, although in the Mexican-Hindu households the woman bore the larger burden of food preparation. The use of freshly purchased foodstuffs and of freshly ground spices was common in both Punjabi and Mexican cultures. Some of the men made lemon pickles and other special foods like *kheer*, a sweet dessert; and *lassi*, a buttermilk drink. Their children recall these treats and the men's readiness to make them. Punjabi men would cook for each

other during sickness, preparing foods that were "healing" or "curative" (according to the Ayurvedic hot/cold theory of disease causation). The heavy reliance on dairy products (except cheese) was common in such households. The greater use of corn products in family meals was the major change for the Punjabis. Some mentioned controversy over the cooking and serving of pork in Muslim homes and beef products in Sikh homes, since the former was prohibited by religious injunction (Islamic law) and the latter by tradition (few Punjabis ate beef in any form at this time).

LaBrack points to the similar economic status of Asian Indian and Mexican men, both entering the agricultural arena primarily as laborers in the early 20th century, and to the patriarchal cultures that produced strong sex-role differentiation within Asian Indian and Hispanic families. Because of these shared structural positions in the economy and in the cultural assumptions about sex roles and male superiority, the Punjabi men and Hispanic women in these marriages were in theory compatible.

Leonard gathered historical information relating to the family life cycle; her data and interpretation more strongly emphasize conflict. The Hispanic wives introduced problems: a female-centered kinship network; Spanish, not Punjabi or English, as a home language; a significant age difference between husbands and wives; and an orientation towards a subculture in California that was identified with the migrant laborer class, not the farmer class.

In contrast to the common stereotype of the patriarchal Mexican family, these Hispanic female-centered kinship groups presented challenges to the Punjabi men. These marriages were conflict-ridden, and divorces were frequent. The number of divorces—some 40 petitions in the Imperial County alone from 1919 to 1946, or at least a fifth of all Mexican-Hindu couples residing there—seems high for the time, particularly since general trends show a lower ratio of divorces for rural, foreign-born, and Catholic persons (Jacobson, 1959:101-103). Potentially most unsettling, the women could threaten income and property by divorce. It must have shocked the Punjabi farmers when their wives successfully petitioned for division of community property, child support, and alimony.<sup>8</sup>

The men and women filed in almost equal proportions for divorce, the men usually charging desertion and the women cruelty. The petitions were overstated to meet the requirements of the day, no doubt; but they clearly indicate areas of conflict. According to the men's petitions, the

women refused to carry out the duties of marriage. They argued with their husbands and refused to clean and cook for their husbands' friends. They insisted upon visiting their mothers and sisters at will; went to town to shop; used make-up; and enjoyed dancing with male, usually Mexican, friends. They also demanded medical care, particularly for confinements. According to the women's petitions, their Punjabi husbands drank, beat them, committed adultery, and demanded domestic services beyond reason. Verbal abuse, including racial slurs, and physical violence, drinking and adultery were reported by many petitioners of both sexes.

Significant differences between Punjabi society in India and that of the Punjabis in California help explain these marital conflicts. The structures of resource control and of marriage networks were quite different. Punjabi society was patriarchal, and the patrilineal joint family was the agricultural landholding and work unit. Arranged marriages were characterized by village exogamy and patrilocal residence, so that daughters left their homes and relatives at marriage while sons stayed in the parental home and continued to work the family land. In contrast, the marriage networks of Punjabis in California linked men through a Hispanic, lower class, female-centered system, where a wife's mother and/or sisters were nearby (if not part of the household). This situation was coupled to a legal system barring Asians from direct control of land and providing for community property. The men's partnerships not only were based on ties more fragile than blood (village, regiment, ship to America, wives); they could not be based on secure leasing or landholding. In addition, the wives were typically many years younger than their husbands, and the husbands regularly sent a good portion of their earnings back to relatives in India. Given all these factors, the fact that many of these marriages did survive and flourish becomes remarkable.

As the Mexican-Hindu children were born and grew up, other areas of conflict developed. The naming of children sometimes was an issue. In one divorce case, the mother requested custody of a set of children with Hispanic names, while the father insisted that the same children, of whom he wanted custody, had Indian names. Moreover, some fathers filed affidavits to correct birth certificates (for example, from Jesus to Baldev), while mothers or grown-up children in later years corrected them the other way (from Harbhajan to Harry).

Religion and language were not issues of parental disagreement. Few of the men were well educated and none were trained priests. Far from

the Punjab and working long hours seven days a week, the men accepted their inability to transmit Punjabi culture to their children. Many spoke Spanish themselves and approved of Catholicism for their families. However, the secular socialization with respect to coeducational activities and dating proved less acceptable. Furthermore, the women and children did not understand or accept Punjabi marriage regulations and prohibitions, despite admonitions from the fathers. The first daughters to grow up were married to older Punjabi men, undoubtedly with their father's aid or encouragement; but most of those marriages soon ended in divorce.<sup>9</sup> Often a father successfully influenced the eldest child's marriage along Indian-derived caste or regional lines but then failed to influence his younger children's marriage choices. The great majority of the Mexican-Hindu children married Anglo or Mexican-American spouses.<sup>10</sup>

There were other conflicts as the men aged. Their younger wives not only sided with the children; they sometimes wanted a more active social life themselves. Also, the sons grew up expecting to share in the profits from the family farming enterprise, but most fathers stubbornly retained total control of all resources and decision making (Leonard, interviews).

The final blow to many intergenerational family relationships came when the 1946 Luce-Cellar bill enabled Asian Indians to become U.S. citizens (Hess, 1982:33). The men now could own land, secure passports, travel to India, and bring over relatives from India, itself newly independent in 1947. This access to citizenship rights and a resurgence of pride in India coincided with the difficult transition to adulthood of most Mexican-Hindu children. In effect, the fathers could choose relatives in India over their Mexican-Hindu families in the U.S., and some did. For both internal and external reasons, then, the potential for conflict increased as these families moved through the life cycle.

#### REGIONAL DIVERGENCE AFTER 1946

Existing regional differences in the extent to which the men from India married, and married Hispanic spouses, increased after 1946. Under the provisions of the Luce-Cellar bill, an annual quota of 100 Indian immigrants came to the U.S., some of them distant relatives of the old-timers. Close relatives came as nonquota immigrants (wives and children of newly naturalized Asian Indians). Only a few relatives were brought to Imperial County, where the Mexican-Hindu families were strongly established; but in the north the new immigrants began to outnumber the old-timers

and their American families. The Yuba City/Marysville area, in particular, became a center for Asian Indian immigrants.

The real surge in immigration came after 1965, when the Immigration and Nationality Act abolished the quota system and raised the limit from any one country to 20,000 per year. LaBrack has discussed elsewhere (1982) the dramatic growth and revitalization of the Punjabi Sikh population in the northern Sacramento Valley. According to LaBrack's estimates, the population there of some 400 aging old-timers in 1950 increased to over 6,200 Punjabis by 1981 (1982:64). Marriage arrangements between residents of that area and the Punjab in India led to the immigration of entirely new families from India; the one wife from India surviving into the 1950s suddenly found Indian women her age arriving, as the parents of immigrant brides and grooms were brought to northern California.

By 1965 the trend in the north was quite clear, and the relatively small number of Mexican-Hindu families there was put on the defensive. By and large they were not well accepted by the new immigrants, who were able to continue endogamous marriages and were critical of those who married non-Punjabis. The Mexican-Hindus generally did not accept the newcomers well either and, thus, began to differentiate themselves sharply from the large numbers of non-English-speaking Sikh villagers settling in the area. These new immigrants, sponsored by very successful Sikh farmers, found an economic base in certain crops, particularly peaches. The prejudice stimulated locally by the rapid growth of this rural Asian Indian group led some Mexican-Hindus to identify more strongly as Mexicans, to change their names, or at least to talk about the superiority of the "old Hindus" to the new immigrants.

In the Imperial Valley, however, fewer newcomers were sponsored, and those who came were not so easily established in the large-scale agriculture practiced there. In the south only a few aging men returned to India in the 1950s for their first wife or for a young Indian wife, while others continued to marry Hispanic women. Several unfortunate experiences emphasized the threats to property and reputation that immigrant relatives from India could present. Chakravorti's research in the mid-1960s depicts an uncomfortable gulf between most Mexican-Hindus and the newcomers. When the 1965 change in the immigration laws occurred, no great surge of Indian immigrants went to the south. Indeed, some newcomers left there for the northern centers of revitalized Indian culture.

The Mexican-Hindu community in California

was a transitory one. Marriages between Punjabi men and Hispanic women produced Mexican-Hindu children, several hundred of them. The households in which these children grew up were interethnic, but the female-centered networks exercised the stronger influence in child socialization. Areas of compatibility and conflict varied over the family life cycle, with increased potential for conflict as the children grew up and the men aged. Despite attempts by many fathers to arrange "proper" marriages for them, the descendants of these couples did not constitute a continuing community, a new endogamous group termed "Mexican-Hindu." The Mexican-Hindu descendants of Punjabi-Mexican couples constituted not a new ethnic group but a transitional community, a cohort of peers whose shared experiences link them even today throughout the state. Their position differs, however, according to their regional context.

Differences within California in the demographic concentration of the Mexican-Hindu families combined with external events—changes in U.S. citizenship and immigration law, the independence of India—to produce strong regional divergences between northern California and the Imperial Valley communities. Mexican-Hindu descendants in the Imperial Valley claim the title "Hindu" proudly, although they may not be quite sure whether their father was Sikh, Muslim, or Hindu. Emphasis of their Hispanic heritage would not be advantageous to them, given the Mexican concentration in agricultural labor positions there. Furthermore, they lack a sizable new reference group from India to cause ambivalence or to challenge their claim to be "Hindus." In the north there is real bitterness about the refusal of new immigrants to acknowledge the descendants of the Asian Indian pioneers, and the Mexican-Hindus there are ambivalent about their Indian ancestry.

The family patterns characteristic of the first generation of Mexican-Hindus, in which all the women were Hispanic and all the men Punjabi, were unique and transitory phenomena. The children brought up in those interethnic households did not marry preferentially among themselves, with other Mexican-Hindu descendants; their spouses came from the Mexican-American or Anglo-American communities. Regional divergences have increased, and there are now fourth- and fifth-generation descendants of the pioneer couples. The Mexican-Hindus of California, once a distinctive and cohesive community, provide a colorful chapter in America's family and ethnic history.

## FOOTNOTES

1. This was the term used for the children of the men from India and their Hispanic wives, a term also used as an adjective for the marriages, the families, and the group. The authors recognize two problems with retaining this usage. First, it obscures the religious differences between Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu men. Second, it suggests that the women all came from Mexico, while many were Mexican-American and a few were Spanish, Puerto-Rican, or Californio. But since descendants of these couples continue to use the term, we have retained it.
2. Sikhism, developed by a series of gurus beginning in the 15th century in the Punjab, combined elements of Hinduism and Islam to create the powerful Sikh community in that province.
3. Agricultural technology and the scale of operations and capital in the Imperial Valley forced marginal farmers out in the 1930s; families who needed income from their children's labor, in particular, moved to the orchard crop areas (Leonard, interviews, 1982).
4. Miscegenation laws (on California's books until 1951) were invoked occasionally to prevent marriages to Anglo women, although country clerks habitually described the Indian men and the women they were marrying in the same way, either "brown," "white," or "colored."
5. Other aging bachelors went back to India in their declining years, roomed together in California's rural towns, or retired to the Stockton Sikh *gurdwara* (temple, built in 1915) where a dormitory was built to house them. Particularly in northern California, some of the male partnerships persisted throughout the men's lives and even took precedence over their families back in India.
6. Litigation between Punjabi men was frequent. Analysis of Imperial County Civil Cases shows that most often they were filing against each other (Leonard).
7. In 1949-1950, when Allen Miller did field work in Yuba and Sutter Counties, a turbaned Sikh was rare and taken to be religiously orthodox (Miller, 1950: 153-154).
8. At that time in India (1919 was the first case filed in the Imperial County), legal provisions for divorce and compensation were not available to women. Even today few avail themselves of the laws providing for divorce.
9. These girls were married at 14 to 18 years of age, and their husbands were older, repeating the pattern of the first generation couples. Of the first ten or so to marry (from 1935 on), the majority divorced (Leonard, family reconstitution and interviews).

10. Leonard's data for marriages made by the children of these interethnic couples show that others of the same background were the least preferred spouses. An analysis of the 220 California marriage certificates found for them (from 1935 to 1969) documented only 11 marriages between Mexican-Hindus, with Hispanic and then Anglo partners predominating for the 100 sons and 131 daughters.

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