



2009

# Out of India: Immigrant Hindus and South Asian Hinduism in the United States

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## Recommended Citation

Bauman, Chad M. and Saunders, Jennifer, "Out of India: Immigrant Hindus and South Asian Hinduism in the United States" *Religion Compass* / (2009): 116-135.

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## **Out of India: Immigrant Hindus and South Asian Hinduism in the United States** **Chad Bauman and Jennifer Saunders**

Abstract: The article provides a survey of research on immigrant Hindus and South Asian Hinduism in the United States, focusing in particular on certain trends in the development of American Hinduism (e.g., Americanization, protestantization, ecumenization, congregationalization, homogenization, ritual adaptation) and prominent themes in more recent scholarship on the topic (e.g., race, transnational connections, and Hindu nationalism).

The study of immigrant Hinduism in the United States is a relatively young field, which is unsurprising given the fact that South Asian Hindus did not migrate to America in large numbers until after 1965, when changes in U.S. immigration law allowed—even encouraged—the professionally trained among them to do so. Yet even after this time, American Hindus still did not come to the attention of scholars until their increasing numbers allowed them to begin building temples and gathering publicly for worship.

Raymond Brady Williams's *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry* (1988) is arguably the first and most influential large-scale study of immigrant Hinduism, even though Hinduism was only one of the South Asian religions it covered. John Fenton's *Transplanting Religious Traditions: Asian Indians in America*, which appeared that same year, is another important early work on the topic. We have therefore decided to begin our review of the field with this date, and have further divided its remaining history into two eras: 1988-2000 and 2001-present.

The year 2000 may seem at first blush a rather arbitrary dividing date, and indeed any attempt to bind the rounded edges of history within the right angles and straight sides of an historical era will end up simplifying matters to some degree. Nevertheless, since 2000, contributions to the field have proliferated substantially, and scholars working on Hinduism in the United States (as elsewhere in the West) have approached the topic from new angles, bringing to it innovative theories, distinct terminology, and fresh insights. We therefore begin with the period between 1988 and 2000, before moving on to a discussion of scholarship between 2001 and the present day. In the final section, then, we will briefly offer some suggestions for further research.

### **1988-2000: The Early Years**

In the early literature on immigrant Hinduism in the United States, there were two basic preoccupations. The first was with the socio-historical factors that led to the formation of identifiable Hindu communities in the United States. There was an attempt, by early scholars in the field, to provide a chronicle of Hinduism in the U.S., to survey the landscape as it appeared to them, and to thereby establish a baseline for further study. The second preoccupation, which led naturally from the first, was with describing the ways in which Hinduism was (and Hindus were) changed as a result of the migrant experience. These two preoccupations, or foci of early work on immigrant Hinduism, are of course not mutually exclusive, and as the references below will indicate, many scholars dealt with both, often at the same time. We will deal with each of them in turn

below, under the headings, respectively, of “Chronicling Hinduism in the United States” and “Americanizing Hinduism.”

### Chronicling Hinduism in the United States

As indicated above, Williams’s *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan* laid the foundation for much of what followed. It is rare to find a general study of Hindus in America today which does not refer at some point to this work. One of the greatest contributions of the study was its survey of South Asian immigrant history. Williams notes in particular the importance of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which shifted immigration policy away from the quota-based immigration policies established in 1924 and 1952. The quotas established by these policies had been apportioned to reflect the ethnic demographics of those living in the United States in 1890, and therefore disproportionately favored northwestern European immigration (14 ff.). The 1965 law, however, dealt with qualifications rather than origins, and gave preference to those with needed skills, such as “members of the professions of exceptional ability and their spouses and children” (16).

This led to a sharp increase in the numbers of South Asian immigrants. Whereas between 1820 and 1960 there had been roughly 13,600 immigrants from India (some of whom undoubtedly returned), by 1980, the U.S. Census registered 387,223 Americans of Indian descent (15). By 2007 the number was closer to 1.7 million. These new immigrants were overwhelmingly well-educated and trained in high-paying professions. Williams rightfully points out that this fact shaped the South Asia immigrant community in important and unique ways, that their “routes,” as some have put it, were as important as their “roots” (Vertovec 2000, 19, quoting Gilroy 1987). Others have applied this kind of analysis to the South Asian immigrant experience more generally (Vertovec 2000, 19; Clark, Peach, and Vertovec 1990).

Due to their education and wealth, the experience of the South Asian doctors, nurses, engineers, and scientists who migrated to the U.S. after 1965 was vastly different than that of previous migrants, many of whom had arrived penniless and without professional skills, or—in the case of Black Americans—as the result of the slave trade (Williams 2000). Far from being despised, South Asian immigrants came to be seen as “model minorities,” their “success” being used to chide Black Americans for their perceived lack thereof (Prashad 2000). The professional nature of South Asians who migrated to the United States also differentiated them from South Asian migrants to Britain, who had initially come (or so they believed) as sojourning laborers (Ballard 1996; Hinnells 2000b). (The Canadian pattern was closer to that of the U.S.)

Today, a majority of South Asian immigrants arrive under family reunification provisions of the immigration law. These immigrants are, on average, far less educated and professionally trained than their predecessors (Williams 2000, 215). This too will no doubt affect the South Asian American immigrant experience in significant ways. For example, as Rodney Moag has argued, “It is far more difficult for less affluent South Asians to remain insulated from the racism of their new society” (Moag, 2001). That said, as discussed in the second section of this article, many scholars have argued that the earliest Indian immigrants may just have been turning a blind eye to the racism they themselves faced.

In addition to describing the Hindu immigrant experience, many scholars in the period from 1988 to 2000 investigated the nature and experience of *particular* Hindu communities in the U.S. Here again, Williams was at the forefront. *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan* (1988) included a chapter on Swaminarayan Hinduism in the United States and surveyed Hindu groups in Chicago and Houston. Other important studies include Vasudha Narayanan's chronicle of the construction of prominent Hindu temples in the U.S. (1992), John Fenton's analysis of college-age Indian-American Hindus and their reaction to the academic study of Hinduism (1992), Prema Kurien's theoretically provocative "Becoming American by Becoming Hindu," based on ethnographic work among two groups around Los Angeles (1998), and Padma Rangaswamy's *Namasté America* (2000) which devotes a chapter to South Asian Hindu (and other) religious institutions in Chicago.

### Americanizing Hinduism

The second preoccupation of early scholarship on Hinduism in the U.S. was with how immigration affected the articulation of Hinduism, with how American Hinduism differed from its Indian counterpart, and with the processes of change and adaptation. Fredrik Barth (1969), John Fenton (1988, viii) and others have argued that the immigrant experience increases the importance of religion in the lives of migrants. And Williams asserts that this is the case because:

Religion is a powerful scheme for sacralizing the elements of identity and preserving them through the identity crises that are endemic to emigration... Then, as a group is formed based on the similarity of remembered pasts, religious affiliation becomes the creation of and the affirmation of a peculiar, separate identity (1988, 278).

This is particularly true in the U.S., where, as Williams puts it, "Religion is a socially accepted idiom... by which individuals and groups establish their identity" (278; see also Coney 2000, 67; Warner and Wittner 1998). The evidence suggests that while Hindu immigrants have assimilated in many ways to American life, and while the nature of their Hinduism itself has changed remarkably, they have not, on the whole, changed their religious affiliation or ceased to participate in the life of Hinduism (Hinnells 2000a). As Fenton suggests, whereas second-generation European immigrants of an earlier era had attempted to Americanize as quickly as possible, South Asian Americans, "... appear to have a strong interest in maintaining their Indian identity and looking within their own communities for cultural support" (1992, 260; for comparable assertions in the British context, see Ballard 1996, 5). Especially since the 1960s and '70s, when melting pot theories of assimilation began to give way to notions of pluralism and multiculturalism, American immigrants have been *expected* to retain their religious particularity (Fishman 1985, 344; Waters 1990, 5; Williams 1992, 254). Therefore, becoming more religious, even if one's religion was *not* Christianity, could be seen as part of the Americanization process (Kurien 1998; Herberg 1960). In fact, Rajagopal suggests that early Hindu immigrants happily substituted religion for race as a marker of group identity so that they could "declare difference without confrontation, diverting the issue of race into one of congenial cultural variation" (1997, 45). But more on this below.

Williams postulates that Hindu immigrants report being more religious for two reasons: 1) because whereas many of them immigrated as students, they had since become householders interested in passing along their traditions to their children, and 2) because in the absence of trained specialists, lay Hindus have had to work to create and sustain their own religious institutions (1988, 47, 279). Nevertheless, whereas the surveys and interviews conducted by Williams indicate that Hindu immigrants in America consider themselves more religious than prior to their immigration, studies by Fenton and Clothey (Fenton 1988; Clothey 1983, 168-69) suggest that the difference may not be that pronounced. Moreover, even Williams himself acknowledges that “Immigration provides freedom to break religious ties as well as to reformulate them” (1988, 3). The varied results of work conducted on this topic, and the fact that much of the sociological research was conducted among people participating in religious activities (as opposed to those who don’t), suggest the need for more comprehensive sociological analysis.

In addition to speaking about the effects of migration on the religious commitment of Hindus generally, scholars in this early era of research on immigrant Hindu communities have also focused on various processes of change which have altered the nature of Hinduism in the U.S. As Vertovec has suggested, Hinduism “is an ever-malleable thing” (2000, 1). Hinduism has changed in many ways as a result of Americanization. For the purposes of this review, however, we will focus on three: ecumenization, congregationalization, and ritual adaptation.

#### Ecumenization

In the modern period, Hinduism in India has become increasingly dominated by the symbols and rituals of “all-India” Hinduism, a process not unrelated to Sanskritization. Already in the 1960s, Milton Singer spoke of an “ecumenical sort of Hinduism” developing in India (1966, 66). Yet at the same time, the practice of Hinduism in India remains significantly tinged by regional, linguistic, and sectarian particularities. In the U.S., however, the maintenance and perpetuation of those regional and linguistic particularities was more difficult, because in the early decades after 1965 there were generally, in any given American locale, insufficient numbers of Hindus with similar ethno-linguistic identities. More so even than in India, therefore, sociological pressures encouraged the development of an ecumenical type of Hinduism in the U.S. This ecumenical Hinduism tended towards the use of Sanskrit and English in ritual contexts (rather than regional languages) and united “deities, rituals, sacred texts, and people in temples and programs in ways that would not be found together in India” (Williams 1992, 239; see also Williams 1988, 40-41).

If socio-cultural factors in the U.S. contributed to the development of an ecumenical Hinduism tolerant of regional, linguistic and sectarian differences, they also provoked the formulation of a more homogenized articulation of Hindu “beliefs.” This homogenization is no doubt related to the process of ecumenization. But it is also related to the fact that in the U.S. (as opposed to in India), Hindus are frequently called upon to explain to others what “Hindus believe” (Narayanan 1992, 172). The answers they give are influenced in significant ways by the Protestantized American context, by how Americans define religion (e.g., as a set of beliefs, not ritual traditions), and by what Americans tend to deem respectable religion (e.g., monotheism not polytheism, rational

belief not “superstition,” moderation not “fanaticism”). They are also affected by the fact that the teaching of Hindu traditions to new generations growing up away from India involves, as Bauman has put it in the context of work on Britain, “the necessity of isolating elements, traits, and norms that stick out as distinctive and which are thought, in the wisest sense, proper to a cultural ‘us’” (Bauman 1996, 13).

According to Narayanan, Hindu yuppies are today fashioning a kind of “generic Hindu” (1992, 173) outlook, which involves, among other things, one or more of the following assertions: 1) Hinduism is a philosophy or way of life, not a religion, 2) Hinduism is a tolerant religion, 3) Ultimate reality, though one, manifests itself as a trinity (the *trimurti*, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva), and 4) Hindu rituals have an inner meaning which frequently has to do with “promoting good health and a safe environment” (174—more on this below). Diana Eck concurs, asserting that in the United States, “such principles as pluralism, tolerance, and nonviolence” have come to be central to Hindu self-understanding and promoted as universal to all Hindus, as has belief in a single (monotheistic) Supreme Being to which the soul evolves, karma, reincarnation, and the soteriological importance of gurus (2000, 234).

Such homogenizations often involve misleading simplifications—the notion that ultimate reality manifests itself in the *trimurti*, for example, obscures the great importance of goddess worship in Hinduism in India *and* abroad—yet they are voiced today with ever more frequency and confidence. They have also been encouraged and perpetuated by groups interested in promoting Hindu belief and its acceptance in the United States, such as the Hindu American Foundation, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) in America, and the Hindu Students Council.

These simplified articulations of Hinduism are generally careful to avoid including any beliefs or practices which might be deemed “superstitious.” Vertovec writes:

The trend toward generalized or ‘ecumenical’ Hinduism overseas—and, one might argue, in India itself—usually involves a conscious separation of ‘official’ and ‘popular’ elements, with many of the latter often being increasingly relegated (by advocates of the former) to a rather disdained or peripheral status. (2000, 28)

In such reformulations, elements of Hinduism such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and Gandhi, for example, come to the fore as purity laws and caste regulations fade into the background (Hinnells 2000a, 10; cf. Knott 2000, 98). It is important to emphasize, however, that the rationalization, ecumenization, and homogenization of Hindu belief has been ongoing for some time in India, and so these processes in the United States represent the acceleration of clearly established trends rather than the creation of new patterns.

### Congregationalization

The greater significance of temples in Hindu American life, however, does not, in the same way, have an Indian precedent. While some Hindus in the United States retain the more common Indian practice of visiting a temple only sporadically, many find themselves attending more frequently than they would have in India. Moreover, temple attendance in the United States is far more communal and concentrated on the weekends (and especially on Sundays) than in India.

Busy weekday work schedules may be a factor in these developments. The relative paucity of temples (and therefore the time required to travel to or visit one for most Hindus in the United States) may be another. Commuting to a distant temple is especially difficult during nine or ten-day festivals (Venkatachari 1992, 189). A third factor may be “Protestantization,” or the pressure to conform to dominant Christian ritual norms, which encourage entire religious communities to gather together regularly on the weekends (Hinnells 2000a, 7; Williams 2000, 278; cf. Knott 2000, 93; McDonough 2000). In our own research, for example, we have encountered Midwestern and Southern Hindus who take their children to the local temple nearly every Sunday morning simply so they will have an answer to non-Hindu classmates’ Monday morning questions about where they worshipped over the weekend. Whatever the explanatory factors, it is clear that more frequently than in India, Hindus in the United States gather together in large numbers for common worship experiences, usually on the weekends (even if the ritual calendar must be adjusted to do so—see below).

Moreover, while temples in India are often privately established and endowed (though many are also administered by the government), in the United States, temple development more frequently follows the Jewish and Christian pattern whereby groups of people incorporate, elect executive board members, solicit volunteer labor, and conduct fund-raisers (Eck 2000, 226). This voluntaristic model is in many ways distinctly American, and certainly not the norm in India.

Related to these changes in Hindu American life is the growing importance of the temple community itself. Whereas in India most rituals are conducted in the domestic setting, individually or in small groups, temples are slowly coming in the United States to rival homes as the focus of ritual activity. Even festivals which are largely observed in the home in India, such as Divali, are just as frequently now celebrated at the temple (ibid., 232). One important reason for this is that temples in the United States have become centers of cultural celebration and preservation, as well as places for Hindu Americans to find one another, network, and build friendships (Carmen 1992, 15). Generally speaking, temples need not perform these tasks in India. As a brochure in the important Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh puts it, “The temple is more than a religious institution...It is a cultural center, a place for dialogue, a place for Indian adults to reaffirm their heritage, for their children to discover who they are” (quoted in Eck 2000, 226).

### Ritual Adaptation

The pace of life and rhythms of work require some ritual adjustment from Hindus living in the U.S. (Carman 1992, 14-15; Williams 1988, 43; cf. Coward and Goa 1987, 79). As indicated above, one common adjustment is for the most important rituals to be scheduled on weekend mornings and evenings. However, astrological timing has traditionally been quite important in the perceived efficacy of Hindu rituals. Therefore, ritual adjustment requires a complex negotiation involving the traditional astrological calendar, the needs of worshippers, and the sentiments of ritual specialists, some more orthodox than others (Narayanan 1992, 158).

Some Hindus seek scriptural warrant for their ritual innovations, others simply acknowledge the necessity of the innovations, and judge the efficacy of a ritual according to the sincerity of the worshipper (Venkatachari 1992, 184). The Penn Hills (Sri

Venkateswara) temple in Pittsburgh is one of the most flexible of American temples, trying whenever “astrologically possible to plan big events around the holidays of the American secular calendar” (Narayanan 1992, 159).

Life-cycle rituals (*samskaras*), of which there are traditionally around sixteen, are also difficult to manage in the United States. Even in India, few people still perform all of the *samskaras*. In America, the list often gets pared down even farther; many U.S. Hindus observe only the four or five *samskaras* they deem most important (Williams 1988, 43).

One of the reasons that life-cycle rituals are difficult to maintain in the U.S. is that they depend, to some extent, on the sacred landscape of India. The sterile modern American crematorium, for example, does not have the same ritual resonances as the riverside funeral pyre (on Canadian Hindus and cremation, see Coward 2000, 159). American Hindus have had, therefore, to find ways to sacralize the American landscape. Narayanan discusses, for example, the ways in which the Penn Hills temple sacralizes its setting by describing it as as very much like its “mother” temple in Tirupati, India, and emphasizing the fact that it lies at the confluence of three rivers (the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monongahela) (1988, 160 ff.). And Williams mentions a Hindu priest who inserted the Mississippi into a ritual list of sacred rivers (1988, 39). Given the local focus of much Indian Hinduism (a counterweight to the process of Sanskritization mentioned earlier), it is in some ways surprising that no distinctly American Hindu gods or goddesses have yet emerged. This may reflect the fact that immigrant Hindus still look to India for authority and “tradition” (Parekh 1993; Vertovec 2000, 161).

The process of ritual adaptation is evident in other ways as well. For example, Hindus in the United States commonly give their rituals a symbolic interpretation. Such a trend is of course not unique to Hindus—liberal Christians and Jews do the same—nor is it uncommon in India. It is difficult to say, therefore, whether this process has more to do with immigration or modernization. Nevertheless, Hindus in the United States do more frequently than their Indian counterparts give their rituals a metaphorical meaning. This is true in particular with regard to the *murtis* (images of the gods and goddesses). According to Vaishnava theologies, consecrated images of gods and goddesses in temples truly contain the presence of the divine. Yet Hindus in the U.S., even those associated with Vaishnava communities, very often reinterpret the tradition, claiming merely that the *murtis* are “symbols” of the divine. Both Narayanan (1992, 165) and Carman (1992, 16) speculate that Jewish and Christian opposition to “idolatry” is one important factor in the American Hindu appreciation of esoteric and symbolic ritual meanings.

## **2001-present**

Because there has been an increase in scholarship on immigrant Hinduism in the United States in the past seven years, this section does not aim to provide a comprehensive survey of all of the literature that is available, but will note some important recent innovations. As mentioned above, nearly every author working in the field references Williams’ significant contributions (1988 and 1992) as well as other pioneering works from this early period such as Fenton (1988 and 1992) and Clarke, Peach, and Vertovec (1990) as significant starting points in exploring the developing



phenomenon of American Hinduism. However, many of the more recent works have recognized that this early scholarship was limited in its scope, and in its applicability to specific cases. Thus, a good portion of the work that has emerged recently addresses factors that either went unnoticed or were assumed insignificant in the research before 2001. Race, Hindu nationalism, and transnational connections between Hindus in the United States and in other nation-states have emerged as noteworthy new themes in the post-2000 scholarship in the field. While these issues overlap in much of the scholarship, we will address each of them separately below.

## Race

There are a number of reasons why race was largely ignored by some and dismissed as an insignificant factor by others during the early period of research on Hindus in the United States. First, first generation Indian immigrants rarely discuss issues of race publicly. As beneficiaries of the new immigration preferences signed into law in 1965, the upper middle class, well-educated Indian immigrants who came to the United States mostly accepted the “model minority” label placed on them and other minority groups whose educational and economic achievements outpaced those of the white, American-born majority. In our own research among this group, we have found that race is often only addressed in terms of ethnicity, national origin, or some generalized experience of “foreignness” or marginality. Thus, experiences that may otherwise appear to have involved racism are interpreted to be about “accents” and “pungent food” instead of the systematic oppression of racialized others prevalent in American society.

Second, many of the earliest scholars to study Hinduism among Indians in the United States were not specialists in American religions, but had been trained in other specialties. Those historians of religion who had been trained and done most of their work in India where Hindus were the majority of the population, and where the Hindu population itself was divided along regional and caste lines instead of along racial lines, saw in the United States a relatively homogenous (at least in respect to caste) population of upper caste Hindus. These scholars may have focused more on the internal problems of creating communities out of regional and sectarian differences within the population rather than the racial dynamics prevalent in American society.

Third, while Asian American studies scholars have analyzed race as an issue in the experience of Asian immigrants, they have tended to focus more on the experiences of East Asian Americans than on those of South Asian Americans, an historical predilection related no doubt to the fact that the field of Asian American studies itself was developed by scholars working among the more concentrated populations of East Asians living on the west coast. The more dispersed South Asian populations in the United States were largely ignored in the field until books such as Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth’s edited volume *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America* (1998), made public the marginalization of South Asians in the field of Asian American studies. This watershed volume, and the creation of a South Asian Caucus in the Association of Asian American Studies, helped highlight the work of scholars on ethnicity and race in South Asian America.

Additionally, the general reluctance of scholars who are not trained in religious studies to appreciate the impact of religion on society at large and on immigrant communities specifically meant that even though Asian American studies scholars were

beginning to recognize the issues specific to South Asian Americans, they were still largely ignoring the religious dimensions of their lives. Thus, in 1998 the Pacific School of Religion's Institute for Leadership Development and Study of Pacific and Asian North American Religion (PANA) initiated The Asian Pacific American Religions Research Initiative (APARRI) and has since planned several conferences addressing the intersections of race, ethnicity, and religion among this population. Several scholars who address Hinduism in America, both in and out of the specific field of religious studies, have participated in APARRI and have begun to bring to light the specific issues related to race among Hindu Americans of Indian origin. Their publications have begun to expose the problematic nature of the "model minority" myth for those who readily participate in it as well as for those who are excluded from it because of gender, caste, socio-economic, or sectarian marginalization. They have also begun to unmask the marginalization that Hindu Americans from India face in the United States and expose it for what it is – racism.

Historical work helps to contextualize contemporary processes of racialization by examining the shifting categories that shaped America's racist immigration and naturalization policies and the experiences of the earliest Indian Americans as they struggled to find their place within America's racialized social structure. Much has been written in Asian American and historical studies about the increasing restrictions on Asian immigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that eventually led to the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, passed by Congress in 1917, which prevented most immigrants of South and Southeast Asian origin from legally immigrating to the United States. Yet Asian Indians and other immigrants from Asia were not easily classified in the United States, and several laws and court cases from the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth demonstrate America's struggle with defining race when it came to people of Asian origin. This struggle, and the definitions which emerged from it, affected not only who was allowed into the country, but also what citizenship, ownership, voting, and other rights they would have once they arrived.

Jennifer Snow's "The Civilization of White Men: The Race of the Hindu in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*" (2004) reveals the ways that religion and race were often conflated in these public discourses. In this now famous 1923 U. S. Supreme Court decision, Bhagat Singh Thind, a Punjabi immigrant who settled in California and became a naturalized citizen, was stripped of his American citizenship because of an interpretation of the 1790 Naturalization Law that prohibited non-whites from becoming naturalized citizens. The majority opinion of the case stated that although Thind was considered to be of the Caucasian race, according to the racial theories of the time, he was clearly not white, which had been the category used in the 1790 law. This decision contradicted an earlier decision which denied citizenship to a Japanese American for not being Caucasian.

In the Thind case, the fact that the person in question was a Sikh did not matter to the court or the American public, who had been exposed to the Hindu religion through missionaries and British administrators and their sensationalized accounts of the putatively "Hindoo" practices of sati, child marriage, and the Jagganath festival. Americans were clearly suspicious of the people associated with this religion, conflated all Indians with Hindoos, and imagined the "Hindoo race" as unassimilable in American

society. The Court, Snow explains, made the argument that “Bhagat Singh Thind was completely inassimilable to American life, and hence neither white nor eligible for citizenship, by claiming that he represented, or rather embodied inescapably, the moral and racial life of a civilization antithetical to that of ‘white men’” (272).

As Khyati Joshi and others have demonstrated, even though we are living in a completely different, post-civil rights movement America nearly one hundred years later, the connections between race and religion continue to be salient for Hindu Americans whose origins lie in the Indian subcontinent. Because the immigrant generation in many cases bought into the model minority myth, interpreted racist experiences in alternative ways, or kept silent about the racism they experienced so as not to “rock the boat” or expose the model minority myth publicly as a falsehood, it has fallen to the second generation, or the third, to face racism squarely and name it for what it is. Joshi’s *New Roots in America’s Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America* (2006) provides groundbreaking evidence for the popular conflation of religion and race that affect second generation Indian Americans’ experiences. Although not specifically about Hindus, the book focuses on the “lived religions” of second generation Indian Americans including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and one Jain. The majority of Joshi’s research was conducted among Hindus, the religious group in the majority among Indian Americans, and her insights about examining the lived religion of the second generation “in the specific and unique context of ethnicity and race in the United States” are most definitely applicable to Hindu Americans of Indian origin (1). Joshi reminds those of us who are interested in American Hinduism that, despite the lack of racial baggage brought by immigrants from India (although caste baggage must certainly be recognized), race is socially constructed – and socially constructed in a very particular way in the United States. Thus, though those of the first generation may not always recognize or admit to recognizing racism in the American context, their children, who have very much grown up in an American society that reproduces racialized social structures, are better equipped to identify it when they see it, and are more likely to name it as racism when they experience it. Of course, the second generation still bears the weight of the “model minority” label and isn’t always ready to admit experiencing racism in the context of its religious experiences, but is certainly more likely to do so than the immigrant generation. The first generation, in contrast, either ignores experiences of racism or reacts to them, as described below, by embracing the ideas of Hindu nationalists.

### Hindu Nationalism

Interpreting their experiences of prejudice in America in light of a history of attacks on Hinduism by European colonizers and Christian missionaries, some American Hindus feel the need to defend their religion (and representations of their religion) in the public sphere. Their attempts to defend Hinduism often borrow from the rhetoric of Hindu nationalists, or proponents of *Hindutva*, an ideology characterized by the assertion that the unity of the Indian nation depends on a common “Hindu-ness” (the literal meaning of *Hindutva*). As Prema Kurien explains, “...the ‘Hinduism under siege’ Hindutva message, and its emphasis on the need for Hindu pride and assertiveness, is particularly attractive to Hindus in the United States who become a racial, religious and cultural minority upon immigration and have to deal with the largely negative perceptions of

Hinduism in the wider society” (2006, 725). Further, she argues, “coalescing to defend a beleaguered Hindu identity has become an important way for Indians from a Hindu background to counter their relative invisibility within American society (Kurien 2004; Lal 1999; Mathew and Prashad 2000). This is the reason that Hindu American mobilization for recognition and resources is frequently imbricated with the Hindutva movement” (2006, 725-6). Despite these ties to Hindu nationalism, many of the groups that are defending Hinduism, such as American Hindus against Defamation (AHAD), are making visible some of the vestiges of orientalism and colonialism that still plague popular American depictions of Hinduism (Luthra 2001). The irony, of course, is that many responses to these perceived misrepresentations emerge from a neo-Hindu worldview that was very much influenced by and constructed in response to Christian critiques of Hinduism. Moreover, the responses themselves are sometimes articulated in a way that borrows from conservative Christian apologetics. For example, Rashmi Luthra (2001) describes an AHAD campaign against an offensive portrayal of Krishna in a 1999 *Xena, Warrior Princess* television episode (“The Way”), which drew upon a literal, historical interpretation of Krishna’s reality reminiscent of Biblical literalists’ objections to biological evolutionary theory.

While the move to defend Hinduism in the American public square is often tied to chauvinistic forms of Hinduism in India and abroad, several scholars, including Kurien, have demonstrated that this public display does not accurately represent the positions of the majority of practicing Hindus in the American context. Similarly, Joshi cautions scholars, asserting that “the reflexive tendency to immediately invoke Hindutva when discussing second-generation Indian American Hindus” overgeneralizes and oversimplifies their varied views and experiences (2006, 88). Focusing on first generation immigrants, Prema Kurien’s *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (2007) provides perhaps the most extensive treatment of the relationship between Hindutva and Hindu Americans of Indian origin. Kurien adeptly demonstrates that the majority of Hindus of Indian origin participate in religious practices and are involved in religious communities that do not publicly accept the ideology of Hindutva. Although those with Hindutva leanings may be the most visible Hindus in America, she argues, they hardly represent the majority of Hindus, many of whom recognize the destructive potential of such positions. Likewise, many of the practicing Hindus in communities in which we have conducted research question the stances taken in public by prominent Hindu nationalists in the United States and do not accept the views of such people as representative of their own.

### Transnational Connections

Another trend in scholarship about Indian Hindus in the United States tracks their connections to Hindu communities around the globe. This trend corrects the problematic assumption that somehow Indian Hindu communities in the United States can be fully differentiated from Hindus in India and in other nation-states. In this age of economic globalization and instant communication, it is far more accurate to assume, methodologically speaking, that social, cultural, and religious connections cross national borders. Theories of transnationality have been helpfully developed by a number of social theorists, and even a few religious studies specialists (see, for example, Appadurai 1991; Ballard 2003; Casanova 1997; Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Gupta 1992; Hagan and

Ebaugh 2003; Kennedy and Roudometof 2002; Levitt 2003; Mahler 1998; Olwig 2003; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999; Rudolph 1997; Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Schiller 1999). These theories, however, have yet to be widely employed by those working on American Hindu communities.

Transnationalism provides a more grounded approach to understanding religious communities because, as Peggy Levitt argues, the term “transnational” recognizes that religious people, practices, and institutions are “rooted in particular places but also transcend their borders.” The term “globalization,” on the other hand, ignores local manifestations of worldwide phenomena (2007, 22 n. 45). The transnational paradigm allows researchers to understand more fully the ways that Indian Hindus living in the United States are intimately connected to communities and families in India and elsewhere (see, for example, Lamb 2002).

While many of the scholars who have recently turned to transnationalism as a useful paradigm do not directly focus their attention on Hinduism in North America, much of the latest work on American Hinduism is informed by theories of transnationalism. In arguing for this new model in understanding the lives of migrants, Levitt explains:

...many immigrants don't trade in their home country membership card for an American one but belong to several communities at once. They become part of the United States and stay part of their ancestral homes at the same time. They challenge the taken-for-granted dichotomy between either/or, United States or homeland, and assimilation versus multiculturalism by showing it is possible to be several things simultaneously, and in fact required in a global world. (2001, 2)

In her recent work on the religions of immigrants, Levitt compares a transnational Gujarati Hindu community with Pakistani, Brazilian, and Irish religious communities and concludes that American transmigrants' religions are “the ultimate boundary crosser[s]” (2007, 12).

While focusing more on global systems theory in her study of Tamil temple builders, Joanne Punzo Waghorne's *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World*, is attuned to the transnational connections between the United States, India, and England. She suggests that Tamil temples located outside of the Tamil heartland create “globalized localisms” in tension with the homogenizing influence of Hindu nationalist articulations of Hinduism that so often receive the most attention from scholars (2004). And while the Tamil-American temple builders in Waghorne's book look to Tamilian Hinduism for inspiration and materials, the channel of influence flows in both directions. For example, describing the Murugan temple at Arupadai Veedu in Chennai she writes, “the planning and building of this temple complex moved – almost vibrated – back and forth between New York City and Chennai,” as donations came from India and the United States in gratitude for earlier support from India when the New York City Hindu community was first establishing itself (2004). In the case of temples built by Tamils, Waghorne's work illustrates the importance and advantages of paying attention to connections between American temple communities and those in London and India.

Other scholars have similarly understood local temple building within a transnational context. For example, Corinne Dempsey's, *The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York: Breaking Convention and Making Home at a North American Hindu Temple*, examines a

Tamil goddess temple attending both to its local context (in Rush, New York) and to its location within the Srividya tradition in Sri Lanka and south India. Although she does not invoke the term “transnational,” the bidirectional interactions between participants at the Rush temple and devotees at temples such as the Kamaksi temple in Kancipuram, Tamil Nadu are clearly integral to the story Dempsey has to tell about this unique temple and its community (2006).

Much of the recent work applying theories of transnationalism to American Hinduism has focused on Tamil Hindu practices and temple building. The work of Waghorne and Dempsey, discussed above, are but two examples. The work of Fred W. Clothey is another. Clothey has written a monograph on Tamil ritual that transcends national borders: *Ritualizing on the Boundaries: Continuity and Innovation in the Tamil Diaspora*. The book places the Tamil community’s participation in Pittsburgh’s Sri Venkateshwara temple within a transnational context that includes the religious practices and orientations of the “Tamil diaspora” in places as diverse as Mumbai and Singapore.

## **Conclusion**

Research into North American immigrant Hinduism has clearly grown significantly since 2000. Nevertheless, there remains much work to be done, and a good number of potentially profitable methodological avenues to be explored. Much of the earliest work on North American Hinduism, for example, employed a comparative approach, and analyzed changes in American Hinduism with reference to Indian Hinduism. While no doubt a useful exercise, an overemphasis on the comparison of Indian and North American Hinduism risks perpetuating a reification of both (but especially the former), and constructs Indian Hinduism, in monolithic and essentialist terms, as the standard by which other Hinduisms should be judged. For this reason, we suspect that there is much yet to be gained from a method that analyzes American Hinduism in the context of other non-Hindu religious trends, tradition, and movements in America, as some of the most fruitful extant research has done.

On the other hand, many researchers will want to follow the connections that North American Hindus of Indian origin have to communities elsewhere. While it seems clear that research on transnational (South Indian) Tamils is leading the way, the prevalence of North Indian communities, and their often very different strategies for temple and community building, suggests that there remains much research to be done in this area. The advantages of such approaches are indicated by the profitable inquiries applying theories of transnationalism to North American Hindus’ religious lives (Lamb 2002), transnational guru movements (Forsthoefel and Humes 2005), and well-organized and well-funded religious sects such as the Swaminarayan movement and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Shankar and Srikanth 1998; Joshi 2006; Snow 2004).

It also seems worth examining the differences between diaspora, global, and transnational Hindus and Hindu movements as the distinctions between these groups could provide significant insights on the variety of Hinduisms outside of India. In making these distinctions, then, scholars could better understand any given community’s primary frame of reference—whether it be an imagined and distant homeland (Caribbean Hindus living in New York who are twice removed and many generations from India), jet setting global gurus who appeal to people of varied backgrounds, or a series of interconnected, transnational locations and communities, which are engaged in religious

activities intended to create and maintain translocal connections. If scholars were more reflective about the kinds of communities and people they were studying, they could better understand the ways that Hinduism is established in the United States and the impact it may have elsewhere. Additionally, this kind of discernment would help scholars better realize the different dynamics at play in the different kind of Hindu communities that now exist in the United States.

Finally, much of the published research on American Hinduism in general, and Hindutva in the US in particular, has been conducted by scholars in the fields of communication studies, sociology, and political science. While such scholars no doubt have much to add to the conversation, our understanding of these phenomena would benefit from the work of more scholars working from the perspective of religious studies who could look beyond mere numbers and examine, for example, how the politics of Hindu nationalism play out in the context of the United States, while shaping a certain kind of Hinduism in the public sphere. More humanities-based approaches to the variety of American Hinduisms would enable scholars to move beyond questions of assimilation, adaptation, and change, and begin to see the new contributions that American Hindus are making to Hinduism generally. Ultimately, this will allow researchers to know that Hinduism is lived in a variety of ways even within just one country. This understanding will lead to a much richer view of Hinduism in the US, in India, and beyond.

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