

I Exploring Ethnicity

My original conception of the research project was simple: to study a community in southern California that had been fathered by Punjabi men in the early twentieth century. It was small, and has been superseded by new immigrant communities with families where both parents are Indian, but for at least a generation, the biethnic Punjabi-Mexican community was the model of family life for immigrants from India. I was curious about cultural transmission in these biethnic families. How were the children raised? Had the men taught Punjabi beliefs and behaviors to their descendants? What were the childhood experiences of children with names like Maria Jesusita Singh, Jose Akbar Khan, and Benjamin Chand, and what ethnic identity did members of the second generation espouse today?

Indians abroad have been noted for the tenacity with which they retain their culture and the importance they place on marriage alliances. I expected the Punjabi men in California to dominate their families, transmitting significant elements of Punjabi domestic culture to their children and trying to create a new endogamous group. All I knew about the women initially was that most of them were Mexican or Mexican American. The literature on the patriarchal Mexican family also helped shape my expectation that the women would be relatively passive, connected to one another only through the men and quite dependent on them.

When I did research in India, oral history was the only way to do family histories, but U.S. county records offer excellent information on vital statistics (births, deaths, marriages).¹ To get an idea of the shape and size of the community, I went to the office of the Imperial County Recorder. Family reconstitution through birth, death, and marriage certificates was my task, and I looked through the available index for the most common

surname of the early Punjabi immigrants, Singh. Some 85 percent of these immigrants were Sikhs, and Sikh men all use Singh as part of their name; in the United States, almost all used it as their surname. By the second day of the research, I knew that the “handful” of Punjabi-Mexican couples numbered well over one hundred. These “dry” statistics provided other surprises: A single death certificate led to a dramatic murder case, and the marriage and birth certificates, when aggregated, revealed that sets of Hispanic sisters had married Punjabi men.

I supplemented the vital statistics with other local records and historical materials. The county criminal and civil cases (including probates and divorces) and the federal bankruptcy records showed that the Punjabi men’s knowledge of U.S. laws and their access to agricultural credit were much greater than indicated in the contemporary literature about these immigrants. I turned to secondary literature on California agriculture and the history of the towns in the Imperial, San Joaquin, and Sacramento valleys. I also consulted contemporary newspapers and other primary sources for the towns, eager to learn about a society initially as unfamiliar to me as that of urban India had been when I began research there.

After I had some grasp of the rural California context and the structure of the Punjabi-Mexican families, I began attending local events and meeting people. The people I met in these California farming communities were diverse, ranging from Swiss farmers to a few old-timer Punjabis and many of the Punjabis’ wives and descendants. They had important things to say about local society, past and present, about ethnic and race relations and specific family histories.

At this time, the problem of exactly how to refer to the people whose lives I was studying came up. Outsiders called the men Hindus, the old American misnomer for all people from India, regardless of religion, and called the families Mexican-Hindus. Members of the community most often called themselves Hindus (until 1947, when Pakistan was created), although the children also answered to Mexican-Hindu or “half and half.” Most people, within and outside the biethnic community, called the Spanish-speaking wives Mexican, regardless of their birthplace; no one labeled them Latino, Chicano, or Hispanic, although the latter term conveniently includes all the Spanish-speaking wives (from Mexico, the United States, and Puerto Rico).² Of course, the confusion over name—multiple names, choices among names—is significant and is discussed in Chapter 8. Here I simply note the terms I use and my rationale for doing

so. When using social science discourse, I call the couples Punjabi-Mexican, the Spanish-speaking women Hispanic, and the men Sikh, Muslim, or Hindu, because these terms denote ancestry most accurately. I use Mexican, Hindu, and Mexican-Hindu when citing or paraphrasing historical sources or informants, when the stance is clearly historical or the perspective local.

One of the first events I attended, the funeral of an old Sikh farmer in the Imperial Valley, well illustrates the ethnic complexities of the community. The old man died in the home of a daughter, Lupe Ramirez. One of his grandsons, a Christian fundamentalist minister, conducted a funeral service in an El Centro funeral home; afterward, there was another service in the Sikh temple in El Centro.

In the funeral home, people of all skin and hair colors, dressed in clothing ranging from high heels and short dresses to full Punjabi dress with its flowing trousers and shirts, sat around me. The grandson opened the service by asking us to stand for a brief prayer led by the Sikh *granthi* (temple priest). The *granthi*, a recent immigrant in full Punjabi dress with beard and turban, immediately ordered us in broken English to sit down and then disconcerted us by delivering a twenty-five-minute oration in Punjabi, replete with Urdu poetry. Finally, the grandson rose again and spoke impressively about his grandfather, who had stressed work ethic. "Where you go?" the old man once asked him, in the broken English characteristic of these early Punjabi immigrants. Hearing that his grandson was going golfing, he rebuked him: "No, go work!" After the minister exhorted his predominantly Catholic and Sikh audience to be saved by Jesus, we proceeded to the Sikh temple for a brief service in Punjabi. Behind me, Punjabi-Mexican women giggled like girls about how little one of the Sikh elders, a crusty old pioneer from the 1920s, had changed since they had been youngsters coming to eat at the temple. After the service, I met descendants of early Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim Punjabi pioneers, some of whom had traveled from as far away as Sacramento for this funeral of one of the last survivors of the immigrant generation.

The people I met at this funeral, and at the Sikh temple in El Centro on Sunday afternoons, provided my initial research contacts. The surviving Punjabi old-timers in the Imperial Valley meet every Sunday at the Sikh temple for a brief service and long Punjabi conversations under the trees outside. The women who come with them do not all speak Punjabi; for

that reason, and because of Indian custom, they usually sit separately and converse in English. I was placed with the women on my first visit and awkwardly expressed my interest in the historical experiences of the immigrants and their families. These women, two daughters of old-timers who were themselves married to older men from India and an Indian wife who had arrived in the 1950s, queried me about my family and my experiences in India. They gently parried my eager questions about the Punjabi-Mexican families formed in the 1920s; they wondered why I should be interested in them when most of them had proved to be “not really Indian.” Slowly I recognized a conflict here: “Real Indians” did not acknowledge full kinship with the Punjabi-Mexican families and invariably claimed that they were few in number. I realized that my research would provoke ambivalent reactions from more recent immigrants from South Asia and that the recent immigrants might play a role in Punjabi-Mexican formulations of their ethnic identity.

Ambivalent reactions came from members of the Punjabi-Mexican community as well. Early in the research, I tried a mail survey, addressed to names taken from phone books, names like Joe Singh, Lucia Singh, John Mohammed, Ricardo Khan, and Jaime Chand. I received a few scattered responses to the questionnaire, and one request that I come and help fill it out, but the results were disappointing. Later, a very important problem with this survey became apparent. While the questionnaire was well designed in many respects, I had placed first the one question descendants were least able to answer accurately: From which village and district in the Punjab did your father come? Embarrassed that they did not know or did not know how to spell the village names, most recipients quickly put the questionnaire aside.

Other mistakes made in interview attempts proved helpful in correcting my initially romantic view of these marriages. After several productive visits with Hispanic widows of immigrant Punjabi farmers in the Imperial Valley, I became confident and stopped at a rural farmhouse without prior notice. But its occupant insisted that her *vida privada* was not my business, and later I learned that her marriage to a Punjabi had been long but difficult. Another prospective interview was to be arranged by an ebullient young woman whose godmother was the widow of a Singh. This Mrs. Singh, who lived in a small house in downtown El Centro, not only refused to talk to me or anyone else about the Hindus, she feared that if they even knew she had been approached to talk about

them, they would come and burn down her house! In partial explanation, she told her goddaughter what had happened after her husband's death. She and he had lived in the town, away from the Punjabi-Mexican farming households, and they had run a restaurant together. When the husband died, a group of Sikh men came and forcibly removed his body from her house in order to cremate him according to Sikh religious practice. She was unable to recover his body and bury it as she has wished to do, in the Mexican section of the local cemetery. Clearly, the Punjabis had been powerful men, and not all experiences with them had been happy ones.

Other interviews, however, went well. As I traveled around California meeting descendants of the Punjabi pioneers, I found keen memories of childhood friends and a still-existing communication network. News of deaths and misfortunes traveled fastest, by telephone. Other news was passed on at the annual Mexican-Hindu dance in Yuba City or more randomly by casual visits or chance meetings (and by me, after a year or so of research, as people realized I often had recent news of their old classmates and friends). The shared experience of being Mexican-Hindu in the Imperial Valley produced bonds that have lasted a lifetime and across many miles, creating networks based on class, religion, childhood locale, school, and Hispanic kinship and *compadrazgo* ties. For those brought up in the Imperial Valley, being Mexican-Hindu has a special and lasting meaning.

All these research endeavors contributed to an understanding of the historical experiences of the Punjabi-Mexican families. They led me far from my original hypotheses about male dominance and cultural transmission. I soon found that the proud Punjabi male had more than met his match. Any facile assumption that ethnicity is determined by one's father proved spectacularly inadequate for an understanding of this biethnic experience. Not only were the Hispanic women individually strong, they had kinship networks of their own. The children of these marriages are also strong and independent minded. Toughened by prejudice expressed against them in their childhood, they are survivors, able to explain and use elements of three different cultures in their adult lives. With growing interest and respect, I listened to the life stories of the widows and children. That the women's role was central in structuring concepts of ethnicity became even clearer as I interviewed descendants of black and Anglo wives of Punjabis. Fewer in number and more frequently found in

northern California, these descendants offered some striking contrasts to the Mexican-Hindus as they spoke about their lives.

Methods and Sources

Some social historians and sociologists have undertaken family reconstitution, the labor-intensive compilation of genealogies through record linkage and oral interviews, as a valuable alternative to the use of macro-level census data for the investigation of patterns of fertility and mortality, marriage and divorce, geographic and intergenerational mobility, and so on.³ I used both official record searches and interviews to reconstitute the Punjabi-Mexican families. South Asian surnames from the centralized state death records, alphabetized and printed for 1905 through 1939, showed the pattern of settlement by counties for families and bachelors alike. California marriage certificates, consolidated statewide since 1949, provided alphabetized lists (indexed separately for brides and grooms for 1949 through 1959 and for brides and grooms combined from 1960 to 1969) that could be searched for South Asian surnames. Together, the statewide death and marriage records indicated which county record offices deserved a visit for more intensive research. Because California birth records have not been centralized for the pre-1956 period, it was necessary to go to the county record offices and use local surname indexes to locate birth certificates.

Interviewing was a crucial complement to official records. For the interviews, I contacted people through other people and through telephone directories and county and state records. Constructing genealogies from interviews showed that sometimes, especially in the early years, people may not have obtained official certificates for births and deaths. Some couples never did legally marry, while large numbers of others moved to California after marrying elsewhere. The interviews picked up many of these unrecorded people, but collecting genealogies from informants was also insufficient. County records were essential, particularly for the reconstitution of collateral lines.⁴

The community I have reconstituted undoubtedly includes a higher proportion of couples with children, and of couples with many children, than was the case. Couples who cohabited but had no children were less likely to marry and leave records; conversely, the more children an indi-

vidual had, the more possible informants there are to record or report his or her existence.⁵ Couples without children also had fewer links to the other families through either *compadrazgo* relationships or their children's friendships and marriages, so informants had fewer ways of recalling them.

Having family data from official records proved useful for the interviews. People in this community at first were highly suspicious of gossip; they preferred to hear that I had learned about them from county records. I compiled a list of "original couples" that I took around with me to show that I had done some advance homework. Far from discouraging informants from contributing information, the names stimulated memories. People looked carefully at this list, corrected it, added to it, and told me of relationships that were not evident from the records. In this way, I discovered many sets of stepsisters and sisters married to Punjabis, some of them living elsewhere in the southwestern United States.

I also found that I was performing a service for my informants. Some were not sure how to locate their own birth certificates or how to check on death dates or causes of death for deceased family members. In a few cases, there was uncertainty about birth order (e.g., of siblings who had died as infants) or about previous and subsequent marriages, so I was able to help people compile their own family histories.

Working with the county records often involved challenges, caused by the mistaken age estimates and misspellings recorded by county clerks. For example, after some time I realized that the Guillermo Singh and Rosa Bhagt Singh named on one birth certificate were the Bhagat Singh and Rosa Romero who appeared on several others. Table I illustrates the difficulties of reconstituting Punjabi and Hispanic families from these records; it follows family events recorded for one couple, with the variant ages and spellings of their names.

The death certificate of one Mohammed Abdulla likewise furnishes a good example of the uses and limits of county records. This man died in 1943 in Sacramento's County Hospital, and another Punjabi Muslim from the dead man's boardinghouse on K Street gave the coroner the minimal information that appeared on the original death certificate.⁶ His race or religion was given as "Mohammed," his age "about 70," his occupation "laborer," and his birthplace "Punjab, India." The informant could not give the parents' names or birthplaces, and he gave Abdulla's length of residence as fourteen years in the United States and California and three

Table 1. County Records for One Couple

| His Name and Age | Her Name and Age | Date and Event |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| Amer Singh, 35 | Mercedes Paiz, 20 | 1930, marriage |
| Ambro Singh, 40 | Mercedes Paiz, 22 | 1931, birth of a child |
| Ambru Singh, 39 | Mercedes Paiz, 24 | 1932, birth of a child |
| Ambon Singh, 47 | Mercedez Paez, 24 | 1934, birth of a child |
| Ambrosio Singh, 40 | Mercedes Pais, 28 | 1935, birth of a child |
| Ambrose Singh | Merced Paiz | 1935, death of a child |
| Ambra Singh, 50 | Mercedes Paez, 27 | 1941, birth of a child |
| Amber Singh, 53 | Mercedes Bias, 25 | 1943, birth of a child |

Sources: Birth, Death, and Marriage Certificates, Recorder's Office, El Centro, Imperial County, California.

years in Sacramento County. Later, another Punjabi Muslim, Rokn Din, came from Gridley and filled out an affidavit for correction of the death certificate, identifying himself as Mohammed Abdulla's cousin (Badar Din from Broderick also signed the affidavit). Din changed Mohammed Abdulla's race or religion to "Aryan," filled in his marital status as "widowed" and gave the wife's name, Rujjie (a Punjabi name). He gave the parents' names and specified Mohammed Abdulla's birthplace as the village of Nunglekhurd in the district of Ludhiana, Punjab, the same as the father's (he left the mother's birthplace blank). Finally, he corrected the length of residence in the United States and California to thirty years. With this further information, we know Abdulla's village origin, his correct arrival time in the United States (1913), and that he left an Indian wife behind and did not marry again. We know also that Mohammed Abdulla's death brought his cousin down from Gridley and that he thought it important to correct the inaccurate and incomplete death certificate. Clearly, official records could only reflect the knowledge of those filling them out, whether Anglo or Punjabi.

A final example of county record vagaries pertains to entries for race. A second-generation daughter gave birth in Yuba City in three consecutive years. In 1958 she was labeled "Hindu," in 1959 "Mexican-Hindu," and in 1960 "white." Although I did not make a count (I saw and copied some 1,800 to 2,000 marriage, birth, and death certificates), it is my impression that the most common term used for race was "brown."

Several little-known sources for this research should be noted. First is the Gadar Collection at the South and Southeast Asian Library at the University of California, Berkeley.⁷ This collection includes miscellaneous early documents produced chiefly by the Punjabis in California and some valuable taped interviews with early immigrants. Second, and perhaps even more valuable at present, is the archival collection housed in the Hoover Archives, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, at Stanford University,⁸ consisting of raw data from a "Survey of Race Relations" conducted by sociologists in the mid 1920s on the Pacific Coast. Only two volumes were ever published, but the typed interviews offer rich details.⁹ Third, I found early telephone books, high school year-books, water district records, and many other useful research materials in the Pioneers Museum in the Imperial Valley.¹⁰ This museum was established by the local Pioneers Society, originally an invitational group confined to early Anglo settler families that has now renamed itself the Imperial Valley Historical Society and broadened its membership significantly.

Theoretical Concerns

As a leading proponent of oral history put it, "Historians are not methodological purists, but jackdaws; given a problem, they will seize on any evidence they can discover, and make the best of it."¹¹ Having assembled a variety of evidence, I eventually turned to methods and theoretical perspectives from three different disciplines to "make the best" of the Mexican-Hindu experience. The "new social history"¹² led me to reconstitute families from local records, construct a statewide data set of marriages involving Punjabis and Punjabi descendants and do an endogamy analysis of it, and subject court cases and many other records to computer analysis. I looked at household composition, at individual life cycles, and at the way they fit with the family life course. All these analyses highlighted the crucial role of the women in domestic life and the socialization of children.

As I began active field work, concepts from sociologists interested in life stories suggested ways to analyze the interaction between individuals and the social system over time. I collected many life stories or life histories (the latter term is better because almost always these involved supplementary material from other individuals, public record offices, and

various archival and secondary sources). To understand the life histories, it was important to understand their immediate social context—the social system in which the Punjabi-Mexicans lived. The small groups¹³ to which they belonged—households, farming partnerships, neighborhoods, and even clusters of lawyers and bankers who worked closely with Punjabi farmers—were important mediating agents between society and individual. Beyond compiling the “collective biographies” of localized groups, the mapping of wider political and economic networks proved crucial to the analysis of the Mexican-Hindu experience. For both endeavors, written records failed to tell enough about relationships within the Punjabi-Mexican families or about relationships with others in society; oral history was thus essential.¹⁴

Field work also led me to the anthropological literature on ethnicity. I began to think in terms of ethnic groups and boundaries, trait lists, self-identification, and the perceptions of outsiders. That ethnicity is not genetically determined but is produced and changed through social relations is now widely accepted.¹⁵ The notion that ethnic identity can be manipulated flexibly over the life course was particularly useful in clarifying the intersections between individual experience and the larger social system. Because of California’s discriminatory laws, which constrained the participation of Asians in political and economic activities for many decades, the role of ethnicity in the distribution of economic, political, and social resources was an important one.¹⁶ Comparative reading on other Asian immigrants who worked in California agriculture proved useful also. Both folk and scholarly categorizations include the Punjabis with the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos to create an “Asian” group in rural California.

While the lack of historical work on ethnicity and the persistence of ethnic groups has been noted,¹⁷ recent work on the historical construction of ethnicity and the “invention of tradition”¹⁸ put the final theoretical underpinnings in place. An understanding of the Mexican-Hindu experience confirmed that ethnicity is both persistent and flexible, that ethnic identities are continually constructed and reconstructed by individuals and society. As Comaroff puts it, ethnicity is something to be explained, rather than something that can be used to explain other phenomena. Likewise, Clifford says that one’s identity “must always be mixed, relational, and inventive.” Clifford also speaks of the bias in studies of culture “towards rooting not travel.”¹⁹ One way to find out what people

know and value about their place, their culture, and their identity is to follow them to a new place. In this study, not only the Punjabi men but many of the Hispanic women were immigrants in California, constructing their sense of self and community in a new context.

The new context played an important role in this process of construction. Following Comaroff, I believe that the marking of ethnic identities in relation to others, not the substance of ethnic identities, is primordial. He argues that this marking is noted in "the asymmetric incorporation of structurally dissimilar groupings into a unitary political economy."²⁰ How the regional economic context and public policies helped determine the formation of ethnic identity is one of the major themes of this book. Power relationships in the California countryside, the placement of the Punjabis in the hierarchy of groups working in California agriculture, and federal and state laws governing immigration, citizenship, and access to resources all affected the Punjabis' identity. Delineating the variations within the Punjabi-Mexican biethnic community by regional context helped capture its full range.

A second theme in the differential construction and reconstruction of ethnic identity by individuals according to generation, gender, stage of life, and social class. As socioeconomic and political circumstances changed over time, the perception and use of ethnicity by the Punjabi men and the Hispanic women, and by members of the successive generations, changed as well. The same individual, over his or her life course, could choose to understand and use ethnic identity in several different ways. The children of these marriages, in particular, given their very incomplete inheritance of Punjabi culture, showed remarkable inventiveness and resilience as they continued to identify themselves as "Hindus" and as Americans.

A third theme is the articulation of gender power relationships and the problematic of ethnic identity within as well as outside the family. Certain stages of the family life cycle brought these gender conflicts into sharp focus; also, forces outside the family sometimes produced rifts along gender lines. We think of the family as a natural unit, a basically harmonious entity that responds to or influences larger social forces. Within this systematically biethnic community, however, ethnic markers and boundaries were contested and negotiated within marriages, within families, throughout the history of this social group.²¹ I became particularly interested in the way adult children talked about their parents, often using

ironic discourse that expressed both distance and closeness to their dual ethnic heritages. Anthropologists working on ethnicity in the United States have largely overlooked the world-building aspects of ordinary talk;²² such talk was a valuable part of my research.

All three themes emphasize the interaction of individual and family life processes, that is, micro-level processes, with the political economy. Here was a community so small and idiosyncratic that the state took no official notice of it—a community that lasted only one, possibly two generations in any structural sense. Yet its history can tell us a great deal about the historical construction of ethnicity and its meaning to people across time, space, and context. In particular, its history offers insights into the nature of ethnic pluralism in the United States.