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The Myth of Meritocracy: The Indian Caste System's Effect on Indian Immigration and Naturalization in Early 20th Century United States

Introduction

At over 3,000 years old, caste hierarchy is one of the oldest forms of social stratification in the world: the community one is born into in places like India, Pakistan, and Nepal designates where they can work, who they can marry, and their social position in society. Even today in South Asia, caste conflict and discrimination remain a potent force in everyday life. In the United States, though, caste tends to be a relatively muted topic despite its consistent and entrenched influence in many aspects of South Asian diasporic life.

Immigration and naturalization were one element of the South Asian immigrant experience that was altered by a deep reliance on the Indian caste system. Caste justified the limited stratum of those who successfully traveled to the U.S. for better economic opportunities. Although the West vehemently rejects Eastern and culturally-based mechanisms of class distinction for its barbarism,¹ America's own sustainment of class prejudice based on economic status proves that their practices and policies are capable of harboring these traditional prejudicial attitudes.

This paper will explore the impact of the Indian caste system on immigration and naturalization in the United States from the 1910s to 1940s. It will examine how the caste system was perceived by the U.S. government and society at large, and how this perception influenced Indian immigrants' experiences seeking naturalization. The paper will also analyze the discriminatory and exclusionary policies aimed at all Asian immigrants, as well as the racist attitudes and xenophobic sentiments that contributed to their marginalization. Finally, the paper

¹ Lockley, Fred. 1907. "The Hindu Invasion: A New Immigration Problem." Pacific Monthly Magazine, May, 1907.

will explore the lasting legacy of the caste system's impact on Indian-American identity in the United States today. By examining the intersection of the caste system and immigration in the early 20th century, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and struggles faced by Indian immigrants seeking acceptance in the United States.

Understanding the Caste System

The caste system is a fourfold closed categorical hierarchy extracted from Hinduism, and the primary dimension by which people in India are socially differentiated according to their class, occupation, and access to wealth, power, or prestige. Its pervasiveness impacts not only Hindus but essentially any ethnic or religious group residing within India.

The origins of the Indian caste system are mainly rooted in Hindu mythology. According to the ancient Hindu text Rigveda (or "The Knowledge of Verses" in Sanskrit), the division of Indian society into four categories comes from the omnipotent four-headed, four-legged Hindu deity Brahma's interpretation of needs in Indian society.² Also known as the Purana Purush, denoting the most ancient supreme being, Brahma deconstructed his body to create four different varnas (connoting caste but literally meaning color) plus one added distinction: the Brahmins came from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet.³ The last caste known as Dalits—also derogatorily referred to as the Untouchables—is a designation reserved for those deemed irrelevant to the upper and external workings of Indian society but still kept around to complete odd jobs.⁴ "These individuals are not

² Basham, A.L. 1954. *The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-Continent before the Coming of the Muslims*. N.p.: Grove Press. 161-162.

³ Dirks, Nicholas B. 2001. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. N.p.: Princeton University Press. 31-52; Srinivas, M.N. 1952. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. N.p.: Oxford University Press. 14-17.

⁴ Doniger, Wendy. 2010. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. N.p.: Penguin. 5.

allowed to drink from the same wells, attend the same temples, wear shoes in the presence of an upper caste, or even drink from the same cups in tea stalls as members of the upper castes."⁵

The varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which they were created⁶: Brahmins, derived from the head of the Purush, are often educators or religious leaders who possess high levels of wisdom and education as a representation of the brain. Ksatriyas, the warrior caste, often became political rulers or soldiers, deriving their fighting strength and capacity to rule from the Purush's arms. The Vaishyas consist of merchants, farmers, and businessmen, building the economic foundation holding up society. And finally, the Shudras tend to do labor-intensive tasks; they are often highly transient in search of reliable employment.⁷

Historically, however, there are conflicting accounts of how the Indian caste system came to be recognized in the region. Despite the insistence of many claiming its religious value and due to inconsistencies in the literary records of the early societies living in the Sindu region (ancient moniker of India), the Aryan invaders are most credited for the introduction of caste. The Aryans, a migratory group hailing from Central Asia, first made contact with the Dravidian and indigenous people of India in 1500 B.C. following the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization.⁸ The Dravidians were a relatively advanced agricultural society with a rich culture that centered values of totemism and matrilineality. A social epithet rather than a racial one, the Aryan designation mainly affirmed cultural, religious, and linguistic differences as opposed to highlighting a racial difference as it is understood today,⁹ but Indo-Aryan literature reveals a

⁵ Narula, Smita. 1999. "Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's 'Untouchables.'" Human Rights Watch.

⁶ Bouglé, Célestin. 1971. *Essays on the Caste System*. N.p.: London: Cambridge UP.

⁷ Fuller, Christopher J. 2004. *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. N.p.: Princeton University Press. 90-102.

⁸ Iyer, V. Venkatachallam. 1920. "Mythological Investigation and the Aryan Hypothesis." *The Modern Review* 28. 588.

⁹ Iyer, "Aryan Hypothesis," 589.

recognition of skin color that often juxtaposed light-skinned Aryans to darker-skinned Dravidians.

Upon reaching the Sindu region, the Aryans conquered nearly every region in northern India, relegating the indigenous people to the southern regions of India as the Aryan people employed their own principles of social ordering. Also a four-tier hierarchy, it would assign individuals to religious and educational functions, military and political functions, economic functions, and menial functions.¹⁰ Reflecting their ideas of linguistic and cultural propriety, the Aryans bestowed a higher caste status unto themselves while preserving the economic and menial functions for the indigenous people they had conquered. The clear likeness between Aryan practice and contemporary expressions of caste support this logic of Aryan-origin.

While the parallels between today's and ancient systems of caste differentiation imply a certain endurance, caste and cultural boundaries were actually relatively fluid throughout India's history until the arrival of the Mughals and the British.¹¹ Within the Mughal state, there was a rise of powerful leaders and priests that affirmed the regal and martial elements of the "ideal" higher castes and reintroduced strict divisions to casteless groups in an effort to systemize their control. With the arrival of the British colonizers, caste organization as well as religion were further cemented as critical parameters for social stratification to dictate job assignments and methodize their censuses like reserving high-paying administrative job for Christians of certain castes and classifying the population according to territory, occupation, age, gender, tribe.¹²

¹⁰ Velassery, Sebastian. 2005. *Casteism and Human Rights: toward an Ontology of the Social Order*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic. 2.

¹¹ DeZwart, Frank. 2000. "The Logic of Affirmative Action: Caste, Class and Quotas in India." *Acta Sociologica* 43, no. 3 (July). 10.1177/000169930004300304; Bayly, Susan. 2001. *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. N.p.: Cambridge University Press. 392.

¹² Marten, J.T. "Female Infanticide." *Census of India - 1921*. 1924. xviii; Hutton, J.H. "Subsidiary Table I: Caste, Tribe, and Race." *Census of India - 1931*. 1933. 462-465; Yeatts, M.W.M. "Appendix V: Towns Arranged Territorially with Population by Communities." *Census of India - 1941*. 1943. 85-94.

The strict adherence to caste-based organization in their census practices developed into a systematic effort to uphold caste stratifications in courts and legislatures in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For example, in 1873, the Bombay High Court shut down the Satya Shodhak Samaj, a social reform movement in Maharashtra that challenged caste discrimination and sought to uplift the lower castes, for disseminating ideas that were against Hindu religion and custom.¹³ The Ilbert Bill Controversy of 1883 arose over a proposed law that would have allowed Indian judges to preside over trials involving European defendants, but European colonists in India vehemently opposed the bill, arguing that it threatened their social status and privileges.¹⁴ In 1908, the Privy Council denied Tamil Nadar women the right to cover their breasts.¹⁵ That same year the Madras Presidency Ryotwari Villages Act of 1908 was passed by the British colonial government, allowing landlords to evict tenant farmers who failed to pay rent, disproportionately affecting lower-caste tenant farmers, who often lacked legal protection and faced extreme exploitation and abuse from their landlords.¹⁶ In a 1911 case, the Punjab High Court upheld the practice of endogamy, or the practice of marrying within one's own sub-caste, declaring that it was an essential feature of the Hindu religion and that any attempt to challenge it was a violation of religious freedom.¹⁷ In 1924, members of the Mahar community, the largest 'untouchables' community in the state of Maharashtra, were found guilty of trying to enter a temple complex by a Nagpur court.¹⁸ All of these examples serve to demonstrate how British

¹³ Teltumbde, Anand. 2010. *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid*. N.p.: Zed Books.

¹⁴ Pandey, Gyanendra. 2000. "Colonialism, Law and the Formation of Modern Identities in India: A Comparative Study." *Modern Asian Studies* 34 (1): 47-76.

¹⁵ Mohanty, Satya P. 1997. "Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature: A View from India." Edited by Mary E. John and Janaki Nair. In *Women, Writing, and Resistance: Situating Pandita Ramabai's The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, 13-36. N.p.: Duke University Press.

¹⁶ Sharafi, Mitra. 2014. *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772-1947*. N.p.: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ Chaube, S.K. 2004. "The Indian Caste System: Historical, Social and Psychological Issues." *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 19 (2): 219-233.

¹⁸ Bandyopadhyay, Sekhaw. 2005. "Gandhi, Ambedkar, and the Poona Pact, 1932." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 28 (2): 195-209.

colonial courts not only upheld but reinforced the caste system in India, often citing Hindu religion and custom as justifications for their decisions. They highlight how caste-based identities and political mobilization were beginning to emerge as important social and political issues in early 20th century India, setting the stage for later struggles for social justice and equality, even outside of India.

U.S. Sentiments towards Asian Migrants

Many twentieth-century immigration laws in the United States, like the Immigration Act of 1917 and the 1924 National Origins Quota Act, specifically targeted South and East Asian immigrants who were traveling to the Western states in large numbers, seeking better economic opportunities.¹⁹ Attitudes among White individuals in the early 1900s emphasized the perceived backwardness of Indian immigrants, particularly in comparison to other Asian immigrant groups, as evidenced by the 1920 California State Board of Control report which identified 'Hindu' immigrants as "the most undesirable immigrant in the state [because] his lack of personal cleanliness, his low morals, and his blind adherence to theories and teachings [make him] entirely repugnant to American principles [and] unfit for association with American people."²⁰ Nearly one-third of immigrants applying for admission to America and British Columbia were rejected after being assigned to one of three categories: L.P.C., or "liable to becoming a public charge"; D.C.D., or "carrier of a dangerous contagious disease;" or having been proven as violating the alien contract-labor law, once again assuming South Asian immigrants to be immensely crude and primitive.²¹ Fueled by these prejudices, the "invasion" of South Asian immigrants was met with race-based limitations in immigration legislation like the 1924 Asian

¹⁹ United States Bureau of Immigration. n.d. Immigration laws. Act of February 5, 1917; and acts approved ; October 19, 1918; May 10, 1920; June 5, 1920; December 26, 1920, and May 19, 1921, as amended, and Act May 26, 1922. Rules of May 1, 1917. Washington, Govt. print. off, 1922, Retrieved from Library of Congress. www.loc.gov/item/22019016/.

²⁰ California State Board of Control. n.d. "California and Oriental (Sacramental, 1920)." 101-102.

²¹ Lockley, "The Hindu Invasion."

Exclusion Act, excluding people of Asian lineage from naturalizing in America and effectively choking off large-scale immigration for decades.²²

The first wave of South Asian immigrants to America between 1897 and 1924 consisted of mainly Sikh agricultural workers and farmers from Punjab. These men, often belonging to the lower and middle working classes with low levels of education and compelled to work jobs for cheaper rates than Western workers, initially arrived in the American West with the intention to save and send money to their families and wives back in Punjab and eventually return home.

Since recruitment for jobs in the States was based on labor needs rather than caste or religion, caste did not necessarily affect who immigrated from India to the US in this early period. However, many Punjabi Sikhs belonged to specific castes, and their caste identity influenced their experiences in the U.S. For example, Jatts and Khattris, who were traditionally land-owning castes, were often more economically successful than Dalits—considered to be the lowest caste and subject to discrimination in both India and the U.S.²³ Although the caste system had minimal influence on the treatment of Punjabi migrants, it did not protect them from discrimination based on their looks and cultural practices. For instance, many faced bigotry due to their beards and turbans, which were integral parts of their identity. As a result, early influential Punjabi politicians and businessmen felt compelled to stop wearing them to avoid persecution.²⁴

Seeking Naturalization

As South Asian immigrants faced discrimination and marginalization in the United States in the early 1900s, many sought naturalization as a means of securing legal rights and protection. The

²² Lockley, "The Hindu Invasion."

²³ Chakravarti, Uma. 1999. "The Social Context of Indian Emigration to the United States." *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 8 (2). 196, 203.

²⁴ Netervala, Amelia S. 2015. Oral History Interview -- Part 2, Conducted by Randa Cardwell.

main benefit of naturalization was to gain the rights and privileges of citizenship, such as the right to vote and the ability to bring over family members from their home country. While America imposed a ban on family-based immigration for many groups, these early South Asian immigrants were especially harmed as their only alternative was to leave their wives and children behind in a British-occupied India where they would be victim to extreme levels of exploitation. These bans were specifically aimed at preventing the formation of permanent South Asian communities in the country, reflecting the widespread xenophobia and racism that characterized American society at the time, as well as the government's desire to maintain social and cultural homogeneity. Furthermore, the ban was seen as a way to limit the economic competition posed by South Asian immigrants, who were often willing to work for lower wages than native-born Americans. This belief decidedly led to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924.

Naturalization would also allow South Asian immigrants to better integrate into American society and, in turn, gain greater social and economic mobility. But, discriminatory immigration policies played a significant role in limiting the naturalization efforts of South Asian immigrants in the early 1900s by creating strong associations between race and eligibility. Most notably, the Naturalization Act of 1906 had established the conditions required to become a naturalized citizen in the U.S. to include "free white persons" and "aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent."²⁵

Another approach was to obtain citizenship through marriage to a U.S. citizen. Many South Asian men who had come to the U.S. as laborers or students sought to marry American women in order to gain citizenship. However, this tactic was also met with resistance due to the continuation of anti-miscegenation laws in many states prohibiting interracial marriage. As

²⁵ "The Naturalization Act of 1906," Pub.L. 59-338, 34 Stat. 596. 1906.

immigration laws like the 1924 immigration bill were passed and laws catered to Anglo fears of demographic change came to be, Punjabi and other South Asian men were forced to choose between keeping their status and economic progress in the United States or returning to British-occupied India with little to no prospects to fall back on, often choosing to stay in the States. Barred from bringing their wives and children to America with them, many Punjabi men increasingly sought companionship with new marriages, but anti-miscegenation laws dedicated to protecting the sanctity of white women and negative attitudes about 'brown' men seeking white female partners prohibited these relations. For example, in 1918, when a Punjabi cotton farmer B.K. Singh married a 16-year-old white girl, California regional newspaper *El Centro Progress* published an article speculating the lawfulness of the Arizona marriage license and provoked a county investigation into their marriage.²⁶ In the 1960s, a white man had his Punjabi neighbor Mola Singh arrested when he revealed a past affair with a white woman in the 1920s, after which Singh ended up losing his property.²⁷ These attitudes coupled with stringent legislation mandating the legality of interracial marriage forced non-white newcomers to seek partners from other racially marginalized communities. Anti-miscegenation laws also impacted other areas of South Asian immigrant life—unable to keep their land, unable to hire white house workers, unable to form relationships with white women, and unable to advance in American society because they were deemed unfavorable owners, bosses, partners, and neighbors.

In spite of these racial requirements to naturalization rights, many sought to circumvent these limitations by arguing that South Asians essentially belonged to the Caucasian race due to their Aryan ancestry. South Asian migrants claimed whiteness for themselves, accepting

²⁶ *El Centro Progress*. 1918. "Hindu Weds White Girl by Stealing Away to Arizona." April 5, 1918.

²⁷ Singh, Mola. 1982-1983. "Interview with Mola Singh, Selma, CA," Conducted by Karen Leonard. In *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*.

racialized logics for exclusion to somehow accommodate them as opposed to challenging the racist implications of such an argument.

In 1923, Punjabi Sikh immigrant Bhagat Singh Thind argued to the U.S. Supreme Court that he and other South Asian immigrants had a basis for American naturalization privileges as they were of Aryan ancestry and, therefore, qualified as white. This court case came after Singh filed a petition for naturalization in Oregon in 1919 under the Naturalization Act of 1906. Although his petition was initially granted, U.S. government attorneys initiated proceedings to cancel Thind's naturalization upon the argument of a flawed or false claim to whiteness.²⁸ The subsequent Supreme Court case *Thind v. United States* centered on the issue of whether South Asian immigrants were eligible for American naturalization. At the time, U.S. naturalization privileges were only extended to "free white persons" and "persons of African nativity or descent."²⁹ Thind, who had arrived in the U.S. in 1913, argued that based on the contemporary understanding of Aryanism, which held that the Aryan race was a superior race of blue-eyed, white skinned individuals³⁰ that had once inhabited ancient India and modern-day Indians were descendants of that race, he was also white and, thus, eligible to become an American citizen.

Thind did not challenge the constitutionality of racial restrictions, but instead embraced racial distinctions, attempting to establish a legal precedent that classified "high-caste Hindus" as "free white persons" for they were a "conquering people" with linguistic ties to Europeans with cultural similarities to white Americans. Just one year prior, *Ozawa v. United States* had decided that the meaning of white people for the Court was people who were members of the

²⁸ "United States v. Bhagat Thind, 261 U.S. 204." 1923.

²⁹ Ngai, Mae M. 1999. "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924." *The Journal of American History* 86 (1). www.jstor.org/stable/2567197. 78.

³⁰ Arvidsson, Stefan. 2006. *Aryan Idols : Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*. N.p.: University of Chicago Press. 43.

Caucasian race.³¹ In turn, Thind also argued that he was a white person by arguing that he was a member of the Caucasian race using a three-pronged justification.

First, according to Thind, his people, the Aryans, were the conquerors of the indigenous people of India, claiming a similarity to the history of European and American colonization. Second, he argued that Indo-Aryan languages and European languages found their roots in the same language family, suggesting that they had racial or genetic similarities that granted Indians the same claim to whiteness as it did for Europeans. This linguistic theory melded with beliefs in Nordic racial superiority would later become the premise of Nazi racial ideology.³² Last, Thind's lawyers argued that he had an aversion to the idea of intercaste marriage: "The high-caste Hindu regards the aboriginal Indian Mongoloid in the same manner as the American regards the Negro, speaking from a matrimonial standpoint."³³ Thind argued that his disinclination to marry a woman of a lower caste made him sympathetic to anti-miscegenation laws in the United States, linking him to Americans by way of similar convictions and beliefs about social status.

The crux of Thind's argument is based on anthropological texts that asserted that people from Punjab and other Northwestern Indian states were part of the Aryan race, referring to Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's scientific classification of Aryans as belonging to the Caucasian race.³⁴ Thind contended that although some racial mixing did occur between Indian castes, the caste system was mostly effective in preventing widespread race mixing, and maintained that

³¹ Haney Lopez, Ian F. 1996. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York, London: New York University Press. 149.

³² Hitler, Adolf. 1925. *Mein Kampf*. The appropriation of the term "Aryan" and the swastika symbol by the Nazi regime is a well-documented example of cultural co-optation for ideological purposes. Originally used in ancient India to describe a group of people who shared linguistic and cultural characteristics, the term "Aryan" was later misappropriated by the Nazis to support their ideology of racial purity and supremacy. By falsely claiming that the Aryan race was of Nordic descent and superior to all other races, the Nazis sought to legitimize their extremist views and link it to something of historical legitimacy. This religious/cultural appropriation has blighted the symbols in the West.

³³ *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923).

³⁴ Blumenbach, Johann Friedrich, and Thomas Bendyshe. 1865. *The Anthropological Treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach*. N.p.: Anthropological Society.

being a "high-caste Hindu of full Indian blood" made him a "Caucasian" under the anthropological definitions of his time.³⁵

Ultimately, the Supreme Court denied his claim to naturalization and held that the words "free white persons" were words of common speech, to interpret "Caucasian" only as it was popularly understood. The Court also concluded that "the term 'Aryan' has to do with linguistic, and not at all with physical, characteristics, and it would seem reasonably clear that mere resemblance in language, indicating a common linguistic root buried in remotely ancient soil, is altogether inadequate to prove common racial origin."³⁶ Furthermore, the Court argued that the exclusion of non-whites is not to "suggest the slightest question of racial superiority or inferiority...[but] merely racial difference," and as the physical and cultural differences between Indians and whites were so plentiful, the "great body of [American] people" would reject assimilation with Indians.³⁷ In this manner, the Thind case would become significant in challenging the racial definitions that determined citizenship in the U.S. and had a profound impact on Indian-American identity and belonging in America.

Between 1910 and 1930, there would be tens more local court cases in which Indian immigrants would use their purported Aryan ancestry as the basis of their claim to American naturalization privileges, challenging the limitations of whiteness and embracing the logics of exclusion that defined both racial distinctions in America and caste distinctions in India.

One such case was in Yuba City in October 1913, where Gee Lak Singh argued that as a former subject of Great Britain, he had a legal claim to whiteness and should be recognized as eligible for naturalization in America.³⁸ Singh's argument was that he was a British citizen,

³⁵ Haney. *White by Law*. 149; Warnke, Georgia. 2007. *After Identity: Rethinking Race, Sex, and Gender*. N.p.: Cambridge University Press.

³⁶ United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923).

³⁷ United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923).

³⁸ The Sacramento Bee. 1913. "HINDU IS REFUSED NATURALIZATION PAPERS." October 18, 1913, 19.

claiming synonymy between legal belonging and whiteness. Singh's argument was rooted in the idea that whiteness was not just a physical characteristic but also a legal status that conferred certain rights and privileges. In the end, he was refused his naturalization papers.

Despite the deep failure of this line of arguing in U.S. courts, British officials actually questioned the legitimacy of such a rejection of rights, especially, following the 1923 *U.S. v. Thind* decision. The Supreme Court's decision in that case not only declared the "Hindus" as not part of the white race, but also relegated them to the same alien-status as Japanese under the alien land laws of California. The *Thind* decision had serious consequences for Indian immigrants in the United States, as it not only denied them the right to naturalization but also subjected them to various forms of discrimination and exclusion. However, the decision also had implications for the British government, which had previously encouraged Indian immigration to the United States and had invested significant resources in promoting the idea of a shared Aryan heritage between Indians and Europeans.³⁹ Under the 1899 Tripartite Convention, "in all that concerns the right of disposing of property, real or personal, citizens or subjects of each of the high contracting parties shall in the dominions of the other enjoy the rights which are or may be accorded to the citizens...of the most favored nation."⁴⁰ The British government argued that the U.S. was violating the terms of the convention by denying Indian immigrants the same rights and privileges as other citizens. This argument highlighted the complex international implications of the *Thind* decision and demonstrated how the legal status of immigrants in the United States could have far-reaching consequences beyond its borders.

³⁹ Amrith, Sunil. 2013. "Empire, Migration, and Identity in the British World." *The American Historical Review* 118 (4): 1340-1363.

⁴⁰ McClatchy, Leo A. 1923. "SUPREME COURT DECISION MAY AFFECT HINDUS: England Reported Anxious Over Matter. Treaty May Hold." *The Fresno Bee*, November 21, 1923, 1.

In addition to Thind, Jahnde Khan⁴¹ and filmmaker A.K. Mozumdar⁴² argued in 1922 and 1923, respectively, that their naturalization cases were being held back without justification because Hindus were members of the Aryan/white race, thus, making them eligible for American citizenship under the 1906 naturalization statute.

By using the concept of Aryan ancestry, these immigrants sought to broaden the definition of whiteness to include themselves, based on their ancestral ties to the Aryan race, which was considered the progenitor to contemporary Indo-European peoples. However, in doing so, these immigrants also reinforced the caste distinctions that existed in India, where the concept of Aryan identity was closely tied to notions of purity and hierarchy. By claiming Aryan ancestry, these immigrants were also reinforcing the idea that there was a hierarchy of races, with some races being superior to others, which was a central tenet of the caste system in India.

Immigration after 1965

In 1965, the U.S. made sweeping changes to immigration law. As the Cold War pressed America to increase their racial equity for an edge over the Communist movement, an opening of immigration laws allowed many individuals from Asia and Africa to enter the U.S. The new legislation removed preferences for European immigrants, prioritizing instead family reunification and professional skills, elements leveraged heavily by the incoming Asian immigrants.

Due to a deep reliance on a caste-based system to demonstrate where education and job resources were most concentrated, many immigrants from India often belonged to the "upper caste, upper class, privileged, and [were] well suited with their qualifications and skills to meet

⁴¹ The Sacramento Bee. 1992. "HINDU ASKS NATURALIZATION." November 1, 1992, 2.

⁴² Los Angeles Record. 1923. "HINDU NATURALIZATION CASE HEARING TODAY." October 15, 1923, 16.

the needs of the American economy of professionals and technology."⁴³ The unspoken social preferences for a more educated and more "prepared" migrant population discouraged those from lower castes to seek work outside of India. Between 1966 and 1977, "nearly twenty thousand scientists,...forty thousand engineers, and twenty-five thousand physicians [left India for the United States],"⁴⁴ the majority of whom spoke English and came from the upper caste communities. While the widening of immigration eligibility allowed for thousands of South Asians to seek employment and improved lifestyles in America, this make-up of the South Asian diaspora was representative of only a small portion of India's population—specifically those with the social and economic capital to make the journey and succeed far from home, granting them the capability to build a space of luxury and comfort in American society not afforded to other POC groups.

In the aftermath of the Cold War and the continuous migration of middle-class⁴⁵ South Asians to the United States came the emergence of a new phenomenon in the South Asian diasporic community: "brown flight." A conceptualization of systematic South Asian immigrant mobilization in the 1970's and 80's in Houston, historian Uzma Quraishi uses brown flight to describe the mass migration of Indian immigrants out of central urban areas and into more affluent suburbs shadowing the movement of white communities. White flight, the foundational theory for brown flight, is the mass exodus of white people from areas becoming increasingly racially diverse or ethnocultural. Similarly, brown flight is a "pattern of well-educated,

⁴³ Bhandari, Shreya. 2020. "History of South Asians in America." *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: (D) History, Archaeology & Anthropology* 20 (3): 16.

⁴⁴ Prasad, Vijay. 2013. *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South*. N.p.: Verso. 91.

⁴⁵ While it might be expected that upper caste Indians would automatically become part of the upper socioeconomic class in the United States, the reality is much more complex. While upper caste Indians may enjoy a higher social status in India, it does not necessarily translate to automatic membership in the upper class in the U.S. for several reasons including the high level of economic immobility in the U.S., the differences in social structures between both countries, and the pressure on immigrants to integrate into American society. Additionally, caste and socioeconomic status are fundamentally different measures of one's position in a society. In the U.S., class is primarily determined by economic factors like wealth, income, and occupation rather than social value or the family one is born into like in the caste system, rendering this comparison fallacious.

high-earning South Asians settling in affluent suburban areas"⁴⁶ to provide better educational opportunities for their children and maintain communal connections with other Indians. But in moving away from predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods to settle in predominantly white areas for their better schools, resources, and higher levels of funding,⁴⁷ South Asian immigrants became more insular and limited their interactions with people outside of their communities. In this way, they inadvertently stiffened conceptions of the model minority myth, which portrays them as a highly successful, hardworking, and "obedient" group that has overcome racial barriers via their own merit—viewed as comparatively self-sufficient, contrasting with other racial and ethnic groups who are seen as struggling or dysfunctional. The myth has been used to justify discrimination against other racial and ethnic groups and to deny the existence of racism and systemic barriers faced by Asian Americans and other minority groups, reifying antiblackness.

Discrimination and racial tensions in urban areas played a significant role in driving brown flight. South Asian Americans, like other minority groups, faced discrimination and prejudice in urban areas from White individuals as well as other minorities in the form of harassment, violence, and limited opportunities for employment and education.⁴⁸ Brown flight was a response to this discrimination and a desire to find a safer and more welcoming environment for South Asian families. Socioeconomic factors also played a role in brown flight. Many South Asian Americans are highly educated and highly skilled, and like other immigrant groups, often prioritize family, education, and upward mobility. Suburban areas with good

⁴⁶ Desai, Manali, and Maria I. Rendón. 2015. "Racial and Ethnic Identity of Second-Generation Indian Americans." *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 16 (4): 1225-1244.

⁴⁷ American Council on Education. 2020. "Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: 2020 Supplement." 9th ed. American Council on Education. 11-16; National Center for Education Statistics. 2019. "Fast Facts: Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools." <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=14>.

⁴⁸ JJoshi, Yoku. 2011. "Brown Flight: Racial and Class Geographies of Indians in the US." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34 (8): 1351-1373.

schools, high property values, and a strong job market were, therefore, seen as attractive destinations for affluent families.⁴⁹

South Asians' rejection of cultural displacement via brown flight was a response to growing dangers for Asian Americans and acted as a safeguard to their own racialization in America. Whereas white flight was characterized by white intolerance of communities of color.

Implications & Consequences/A Bifurcated Identity

Today, there are approximately 4.9 million people of Indian origin in the United States, representing about 1.5 percent of the total U.S. population.⁵⁰ 78% of Indian Americans aged 25 years and older hold at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 54% for all Asian Americans and 33% for the U.S. population as a whole.⁵¹ Indian Americans' educational performance also reflects on their median family incomes and careers. The median household income for Indian Americans was \$138,418 in 2021, double the median household income for all U.S. households across all races and ethnicities at \$69,717.⁵² Indian Americans also continue to be overrepresented in several highly skilled professions with 28% working in science, engineering, or technology fields, compared to 6% of the overall U.S. workforce. Additionally, they make up 77% of H1-B visas,⁵³ U.S. work permits reserved for various specialty occupations that require a high level of theoretical or technical expertise. Data from the U.S. Department of Labor shows

⁴⁹ Chakravorty, Sanjoy, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh. 2017. *The Other One Percent: Indians in America*. N.p.: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. 2020. "Asian Alone or in Combination with One or More Other Races, and with One or More Asian Categories for Selected Groups. American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates." <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Indian&tid=ACSDT1Y2019.B02018&hidePreview=false>.

⁵¹ U.S. Census Bureau. 2020. "Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over, by Selected Characteristics: 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates." <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Indian%20american%20education&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S1501&hidePreview=true>.

⁵² American Community Survey. 2021. "S0201: Selected Population Profile in the United States." United States Census Bureau.

⁵³ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. 2021. *Characteristics of H-1B Specialty Occupation Workers, Fiscal Year 2021*. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/21_1217_iscb-characteristics-h-1b-specialty-occupation-workers-fy2021_508.pdf.

that the top industries for Indians applying for H1-B visas include IT services, consulting, education, computer and software engineering, science, architecture⁵⁴—a continuing reflection of the skill demands for Indian American immigration. The majority of Indian Americans are concentrated in the New York-New Jersey-Pennsylvania tri-state region and San Francisco Bay Area,⁵⁵ two areas again characterized by their affluence and high education levels.

These tight-knit enclaves of South Asian Americans that came about with brown flight reflect the privileges of coming from historically advantaged communities, granting them the ability to isolate themselves within the ultra privileged white communities in America. The unique position that Indians, specifically, occupy in American society demonstrates the safeguards associated with educational and economic attainment as well as the obscurity that many Indians practice today to protect against growing anti-immigrant, anti-Asian, and anti-Muslim sentiment⁵⁶ in the post 9/11 era and particularly in the last six years, with the rise of Trump-led right-wing populism⁵⁷:

"The more noise we make, these racists will be awakened, who may never have heard of Hindus and their customs...Fighting them alone may get us under six feet.' The only thing to do...was lie low. Despite all [our] success, and nearly 50 years of living in the U.S., [for many Indians]...[our] Americanness remains tentative and conditional."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Labor. 2022. Selected Statistics on the H-1B Nonimmigrant Visa Program. N.p.: Foreign Labor Certification Data Center. www.flcdatcenter.com/CaseH1B.aspx; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. 2022. "H-1B Employer Data Hub: 2022 H-1B Employer Data Hub." U.S. Department of Homeland Security. www.uscis.gov/h-1b-data-hub/2022-h-1b-employer-data-hub.

⁵⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. 2020. "American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates: Selected Population Profile in United States." <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=indian%20american&tid=ACSDP1Y2020.DP05&hidePreview=false>.

⁵⁶ Khandelwal, Rupal. 2018. "Brownness as a Site of Anti-Muslim Racism in the United States." Edited by J. Shukla. In *Islamophobia in the United States: Placing the Experiences of Communities of Color*, 58-76. N.p.: ABC-CLIO; Anti-Muslim sentiment comes to affect many South Asian and Middle Eastern communities regardless of whether or not they are actually Muslim based on the tendency to conflate any South Asian/brown individual with being Muslim based on cues related to spoken language, religious clothing, etc.

⁵⁷ Mudde, Cas. 2017. "The Study of Populist Radical Right Movements in the Social Sciences: The State of the Art." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 55 (2): 116-118, 121-123.

⁵⁸ Venugopal, Arun. 2020. "Indian Americans Weren't Always Seen as a Model Minority." *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/01/the-making-of-a-model-minority/617258/>.

Reliance on this model for success and survival in America has led to the creation of two competing perspectives on the significance of race in their identity. One viewpoint, held primarily by foreign-born South Asian Americans, focuses on the exceptional status of South Asians among other minority groups and advocates for a meritocratic system that ignores racial distinctions, or a "color-blind" approach. The emphasis on education and economic achievement that characterizes the South Asian American community has led many foreign-born individuals to believe that they have achieved success through their own efforts and merit, regardless of their race or ethnicity. This perspective upholds the model minority myth, viewing themselves as a group that has overcome discrimination and prejudice to achieve success through hard work and intelligence.

The other perspective, more common among first and second generation South Asian Americans born in the U.S., is characterized by a rejection of color-blindness and an acknowledgment of the role that race and caste plays in their experiences as these individuals are more likely to have been exposed to racial and ethnic diversity growing up and have a greater understanding of the complexities of race and racism in American society. They view color consciousness among South Asians as a means of reclaiming their identity, challenging the model minority myth and, ultimately, "[criticizing] the immigrant community for denying its own 'blackness.'"⁵⁹ However, both perspectives are flawed in that they tend to view racial identity as a personal choice, which reinforces American beliefs in self-making and possibility despite its inapplicability in a discussion about caste privilege. In fact, the caste system, which is deeply ingrained in South Asian culture, is often overlooked in discussions of South Asian American identity. This reflects the discomfort that many individuals feel in discussing the topic and the

⁵⁹ Koshy, Susan. 1998. "Category Crisis: South Asian Americans and Questions of Race and Ethnicity." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 7 (3). 10.1353/dsp.1998.0013. 285.

tendency to prioritize other aspects of their identity, such as their educational and economic achievements.

The experiences of South Asian Americans in the United States are complex and multifaceted, with a range of factors contributing to the development of their identity and sense of belonging. Brown flight and the subsequent creation of tight-knit enclaves reflect the privileges associated with historical advantages and economic and educational attainment, but also highlight the discrimination and prejudice faced by South Asian Americans in urban areas. The resulting bifurcated identity and competing perspectives on the significance of race in their identity demonstrate the ongoing impact of racism and color consciousness in American society and the need for continued efforts to promote equality and understanding across racial and cultural lines.

Conclusion

The use of caste distinctions as a determinant of eligibility for immigration, education, employment, and naturalization privileges has had a profound and enduring impact on the experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States. Throughout the twentieth century, Indian immigrants and their descendants have been forced to navigate complex and often contradictory legal and social frameworks that have reinforced or challenged caste-based distinctions in a variety of ways. From the early court cases in which South Asian immigrants used their Aryan ancestry to challenge exclusion from American citizenship to the post-Cold War period when Indian immigration and naturalization policies were shaped by geopolitical considerations and led to the creation of the model minority myth, the history of Indian immigration to the United States is one marked by both resilience and struggle.

On the one hand, the use of caste as a weapon in naturalization cases and as a factor in education and employment opportunities has undoubtedly had negative consequences for many Indian immigrants and their descendants, perpetuating discrimination and exclusion in various forms. On the other hand, the persistence and adaptability of Indian immigrant communities in the face of these challenges has led to the creation of vibrant, dynamic, and diverse South Asian American identities, with some embracing and celebrating their cultural heritage, while others seek to distance themselves from it.

The history of Indian immigration to the United States is one marked by both triumphs and tragedies, adaptations and resistances, and a continual struggle to define and redefine what it means to be South Asian American. Despite the numerous obstacles they have encountered, South Asian immigrants have consistently found ways to survive and flourish by creating new paths and identities in the face of adversity. In light of ongoing debates surrounding immigration,

race, and identity in American society, the experiences of South Asian and Indian immigrants offer valuable insights into the intricate nuances of these issues and the ongoing quest for justice, inclusion, and equality.

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