

## Hindu Student Organizations

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“When we came in as freshmen in 1997, the university gave us a form to fill which asked about our religious background and Hinduism did not figure on that list. We thought this was very surprising given that there are a lot of students from a Hindu background on campus. We were also given a list of campus religious organizations and we saw that though there were organizations for all kinds of Christian denominations, and for Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Bahais and everyone else, there was nothing for Hindus. So we were upset and went to meet the Dean for Religious Life who encouraged us to start an organization of our own,” said Madhuri, the founder of a Hindu student club on a college campus.

Rajesh, who was trying to set up a chapter of the Hindu Student Council (HSC) at his school, told me that his motivation in establishing an organization that emphasized the importance of a Hindu identity was because as Indians, “You won’t be accepted into this culture, whatever you do.” So the club was to provide an alternate culture and identity for Hindu students. Another Hindu Student Council leader, Dheeraj Singhal, also brought up identity issues as an important reason for the formation of Hindu Student Council chapters. He said that Hindu American youth “are really desperate to know who they are, the meaning of their customs,” but their parents did not have the answers to their children’s questions. He continued, “Kids . . . look in the mirror and realize they are not white. Somehow they don’t exactly fit. Their names are not like Mark, David, Joe or Marianne. Their culture, customs, religious festivals are not exactly mainstream Americana. They ask, ‘Are we Indo-Americans? Are we Indians? Are we Hindu? These different labels, what exactly are they?’” According to him, the Hindu Student Council helped students discover the answers to these questions through discussions with other, similarly positioned youth (*Hinduism Today* 1997).

Ravi, one of the founders of a Hindu Student Council chapter that I studied,<sup>1</sup> talked about how hard it had been to set up the organization on campus. He attributed the difficulty in attracting Hindu students to the inferiority complex that many Hindu Americans had developed in this society. There were around eight hundred students of Indian ancestry on campus but only a hundred and fifty were even on the HSC mailing list. “People are ashamed to come out as Hindus. A few people faced racist comments from their white friends when they did. We can’t even have a

*puja* [Hindu worship service] here since people don't want to be associated with "idol worship." According to him, one of the main problems was that unlike other religious identities, a Hindu identity was a "vague" identity. "What does it really mean to be a Hindu? Most people haven't a clue." He and two other students decided to form the HSC club organized around a weekly discussion session so that Hindu students could talk about these issues.

These are some of the many complex reasons for the establishment of Hindu Student organizations, now prevalent in many of the universities and college campuses around the country. Faced with the multiculturalism on college campuses, students have to be able to articulate, "who we are and what we are about" and thus it is often in college that issues of identity become important, particularly for minority groups. Campus cultural organizations are formed to cater to this need and are generally based on ethnicity (ancestral region of origin) or religion. Larger college campuses usually have both ethnic and religious organizations. Typically, secular ethnic associations only organize social events and cultural programs a few times a year and are therefore less active than the religious organizations that meet much more frequently and are also more study and discussion oriented. Many Hindu student associations are campus specific, but there is also a national organization, the Hindu Student Council (HSC) founded in 1990 by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) of America (VHPA) which currently has over seventy five chapters nationwide.

Dominant models of immigrant incorporation ignore the role of religion in the identity construction process of immigrants. However religious institutions are often crucial in enabling immigrants and their children to develop ethnic communities and identities. Hindu American students of Indian origin comprise a small but significant segment on college campuses around the country. As a group, they have a complicated and contradictory social, economic, and racial position in this country. For some Hindu American youth, Hinduism becomes the axis around which community, ethnic pride and individual identity revolve and consequently, as I will show below, the attitude of such youth toward Hinduism is often an outcome and expression of the ambiguities of their social location.

The U.S. census does not collect data on religion, and so there are no official figures on how many Hindus there are in this country. National surveys conducted in the late 1990's estimated them to be a little over 1 million, most believed to be immigrants from India and their children. Since 1.7 million of the U.S. population identified themselves racially as "Asian Indians" in the 2000 census, Hindus probably constitute around 60 percent of Indian Americans, a smaller proportion of the population than in India where they are more than 80 percent. Despite their relatively small numbers in the United States, students from an Indian, and often Hindu background are often prominent in undergraduate and graduate science, engineering, medical, and business programs on college campuses. These students include those who have grown up in the United States (described by academics as "second generation Americans"), those who grew up in other countries around the world but have settled in the United States ("first generation Americans"), as well as increasing numbers of graduate and even undergraduate students directly from India on temporary student visas. Since there are often considerable differences in the social and religious outlook of these groups, this essay focuses on youth from Hindu Indian families who were brought

up in the United States.

Most Hindu American youth are children of Indian immigrants who arrived after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. The first wave of post 1965 Indian immigrants came under the “special skills” provision of the Act, and thus were mostly highly educated, fluent English speakers who entered into professional and managerial careers. The second wave was comprised of relatives of the first wave immigrants who came under the family reunification provision of the Act. Education in graduate schools has been another primary entry route for a significant proportion of Indian Americans. Beginning in the 1990’s, there has also been a large influx of computer data programmers and their families to meet the demands of the information technology boom in the United States. These patterns of immigration explain why Indians are among the wealthiest and most educated groups in this country. Not surprisingly, the professional backgrounds of many Indian immigrants and their wealth have resulted in their children doing well in schools and getting into competitive and highly selective programs in top universities.

Professional success notwithstanding, their racial and ethnic location in the United States has long been a problematic issue for Indian Americans. As a group, Indian Americans have an ambiguous racial and ethnic status. Despite being officially classified as Asian American since 1980 (earlier they were classified as Caucasian), due to the popular American identification of the term “Asian” with East Asians, in practice, Indian Americans are often excluded from the Asian American umbrella. As dark skinned individuals they are often mistaken for Hispanics or African Americans. The identification of the term “Indian” with Native Americans further adds to the problem of identity for this group of individuals. While first generation immigrants tend to avoid the issue of racialization by identifying with India or their religion, Indian Americans growing up in America are forced to define and come to terms with their racial and ethnic identity.

Hindu Indian Americans face the additional burden of being practitioners of a religion that is little understood and often negatively perceived by Americans. A nation-wide survey conducted in 2001 on behalf of a Hindu American group found that over 95 percent of Americans had little or no knowledge of Hinduism and that 71 percent had no contact with a Hindu of Indian origin. What was of even greater concern to the Hindu leaders who had commissioned the survey was that 59 percent of those surveyed indicated that they had no interest in learning more about the religion.

Unlike most other established religions, Hinduism does not have a founder, an ecclesiastical structure of authority, or a single canonical text or commentary. Consequently, Hinduism in India consists of an extraordinary array of practices, deities, texts, and schools of thought. Due to this diversity, the nature and character of Hinduism has varied greatly by region, caste, and historical period. It is also a religion that stresses orthopraxis over theological belief. For all these reasons, the average Hindu immigrant is often unable to explain the “meaning” of Hinduism and its “central tenets,” something that they are repeatedly asked to do in the American context.

Several non-sectarian, pan-Hindu American organizations have been formed, the leaders of which claim to represent and speak for all Hindus in the United States. Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA), the parent group of the Hindu Student Council, is one such organization.

Through web-sites, articles, Hindu heritage camps, and their presence at major Hindu and Indian festivals, such leaders define the distinctiveness and superiority of Hinduism with reference to other religions, defend the religion from misrepresentations and criticism, and attack other traditions for not being like Hinduism. I noticed that they seemed to promote two contradictory discourses: on the one hand, they embraced an inclusivist multiculturalism and emphasized the tolerance and pluralism of Hindu culture; on the other hand, they frequently espoused an militant religious nationalism, attacking Islam and Christianity and highlighting Hindu victimization at the hands of these two religions. It became clear to me that these opposing discourses grew out of the contradictions of being part of a professionally successful but racialized minority group in contemporary multicultural America. As successful ethnics, Hindu American leaders drew on a model minority discourse to celebrate the contributions of Hinduism, but their racial and cultural marginality led them to also embrace an oppressed minority discourse. As we will see, this contradictory location has also been crucial in affecting the religious outlook of Hindu American youth.

Second generation Hindu Americans face the difficult task of straddling their parents' culture and that of the wider society, confronting racism, and dealing with the opportunities and pressures of multiculturalism. Hinduism and "Indianness" seem to become particularly significant in their coming-of-age process, with many Hindu American youth either rejecting it strongly or embracing it passionately, and sometimes going from one attitude to the other. Many of the teenagers and college students that I spoke with described the pain they experienced growing up with "brown skins" in a predominantly white environment. They said that their eagerness to be accepted had initially led them to turn away from their Indianness and to try to be as much like their white friends as possible. This, however, only increased their identity crisis and feeling of alienation since it became obvious to them that no matter what they did, they were not going to be accepted as "just American." Confrontations with aggressive Christian evangelists who criticized and demeaned Hinduism added to their pain. The crisis was only resolved when they accepted their heritage and began to try and learn more about Hinduism and Indian culture. This was generally through the help of a Hindu religious organization. Over time, these youth told me that they came to see the beauty and value of their heritage and also finally started to feel comfortable with themselves as Hindus and as Indian Americans—Americans with Indian roots. In other words, a crisis revolving around racial identity was resolved by turning to religion and religious organizations.

An article by a law student at Yale, Aditi Banerjee, entitled "Hindu-American: Both Sides of the Hyphen" was posted on a number of Indian American web-sites and Internet groups and addresses some of these identity issues (it was the text of a talk she gave in 2003 at the "Hindu Ideological Empowerment Seminar" held in Chicago). Banerjee (2003) argues that second and later generation Indian Americans from a Hindu background should adopt a "Hindu-American" identity as opposed to an Indian American or Asian American identity because a religious identity is more deep-rooted than ethnicity or even culture. "For example," she argues, "while I may go for months without uttering a word of Bengali [her native language] or even without speaking to another Indian, not a day would pass by where I wouldn't pray to Krishna or recite the Gayatri mantra [a Hindu prayer]." Another reason she prefers to identify as Hindu-American is because it

is an identity that helps to surmount ethnicization and racialization since it “looks at the individual rather than broad categories of ethnicity or race; it’s an identity that is chosen rather than assigned.” She exhorts Hindu-American youth to become more educated in Hinduism so that they can come to understand its “faith and philosophy.” Becoming so educated will help to separate the essence of the religion from the “social customs and rituals that have come to plague it through the years” and thus enable them to become Hindu in a new American way, as distinct from the Indian way of the immigrant generation. According to Banerjee becoming Hindu-American, embracing both sides of the hyphen, will help the second generation to overcome the infamous ABCD (American Born Confused Desi<sup>2</sup>) syndrome and will ensure the survival of Hinduism (Banerjee 2003).

Embracing a Hindu-American identity frequently seemed to involve an idealization of India and Hinduism by the second generation, based on the nostalgic constructions of their parents or on their own limited experience of India. For instance, on Hindu student Internet forums I have seen Indian American youth making sweeping remarks like, “there is no caste system in India anymore. I just returned from a three week trip to Delhi and I did not see or hear about even one instance of caste discrimination.” Again, another person rejected the argument that poverty was a major problem in India saying that his own relatives were “fabulously wealthy.” Like other American youth, Hindu Americans also demand to have an intellectual understanding of their religion and tradition, and thus want to know the “meaning” of Hindu practices, chants, and beliefs. The cursory and frequently insulting treatment that India and Hinduism receive in many American school textbooks provides further motivation to learn about Indian history. A trip to India on their own (i.e., unaccompanied by parents), to visit relatives, participate in a religious or cultural summer camp, take courses at a university, or most recently, to do social service, has become almost a rite of passage for many second generation Indian Americans. During these trips they are amazed to find that many youth in India do not know and do not care about their religion or history. “We know more about Hinduism and Indian culture than our cousins in India” is a frequently voiced statement.

I focused my study of Hindu student organizations primarily on a HSC chapter at “Western” University and conducted a semester-long study of this organization by attending the weekly meetings and interviewing many of its regular members. I also distributed a survey to the members at the end of my research. This HSC chapter was extremely active and visible on campus. In addition to the weekly discussion meetings, a sub-group also met regularly on Friday evenings to play sports (generally basketball). The leadership brought in a few guest speakers every semester and regularly raised money to support the club and charitable causes in India and the U.S. Members of the club participated in campus festivals by setting up booths with literature and exhibits. Many of the members (mostly the women) also regularly performed dances for campus events as representatives of the HSC.

In the interviews and survey, most members indicated that their primary reason for attending the HSC meetings was because they liked learning about Hinduism and Indian culture, but it was clear that the social aspect of the club was also very important. In the survey, “build friendships,” “get-together with other Indians” was an important secondary (sometimes primary) reason that

members gave for being part of the HSC and all but one of the twenty two individuals who filled out the survey indicated that they socialized with HSC members outside the club on a regular basis. Most people described the club as a friendly, close group, which provided a sense of community, in some cases contrasting it to the secular Indian Subcontinental Association (ISA). For instance, Vijay described the ISA as a “superficial, party club” and Rashmi said that she liked the absence of formality and the welcoming nature of the HSC:

I didn't feel comfortable at the Indian club (ISC) meetings. People generally describe it as a “meat market.” But here, [at the HSC], people were a lot more down to earth. They are also much more genuinely interested in the club and the issues and in making a difference. So, for instance we always talk about how we can help, about going to India to work in a village.

However, being part of a Hindu student organization does not necessarily resolve all the issues of identity that Hindu American youth have to confront. I found that the same contradictory discourses promoted by Hindu American leaders at the national level were also present within the HSC that I studied. As Ravi mentioned, it is not clear to many Indian Americans from a Hindu background what it really means to be a Hindu. Within that HSC chapter for instance, there were differences of opinion between those who self identified as “pro-Hindu” (a vocal minority in the group), who saw a Hindu identity as a means to set themselves apart from Christians and Muslims, and the “moderates” (the majority of members), who felt that being Hindu meant that that they ought to stress pluralism and the commonalities that Hindus shared with other American groups. This outlook was rejected by the pro-Hindus who characterized the moderates disparagingly as those who were trying “to be white” or to “assimilate” into American culture.

Racially, what does it mean to be Americans with “brown skins?” This was another issue that members of the group had to deal with and here again, there was no clear answer. The pro-Hindu members argued that it meant that they had to identify with and form solidarities with other people of color but many of the moderates tried to cope with their racial marginality by emphasizing their religious and cultural identity. The pro-Hindu group frequently criticized the moderate members for avoiding the issue of racialization or pretending to be white.

These divergences in orientation influenced the positions the pro-Hindu and moderate factions adopted in the group discussions and on their Internet forum. The pro-Hindus stressed racial and social marginality and also frequently adopted militant, anti-Muslim, and anti-Christian positions, while the moderate members stressed that Hinduism meant a respect for all cultures and a common humanity.

The interviews that I conducted with group members revealed the reasons for the divergent viewpoints of the two factions. In the interviews, I asked the students to tell me about themselves and about growing up in the U.S., to get a sense of what had brought this group of individuals to the HSC club. It seemed as though patterned differences in the upbringing and the institutional and friendship networks of the two factions, and even more importantly, in the frameworks that the pro-Hindu members and the moderates used to make sense of their social location and their

teenage experiences were responsible for the adoption of their divergent frameworks toward a Hindu identity.

Most of the pro-Hindu members of that HSC came from families who stressed the importance of Hinduism and an Indian identity, taught their children about it and sent them to Hindu education classes. Each of these students had also done independent reading and was thus fairly “knowledgeable” on the subject. Most of the moderate members on the other hand came from families who had not emphasized Hinduism or Indianness and who could not adequately answer their children’s questions about these issues. None of the moderates had done any independent reading to learn about their religion or culture. In addition, there was a strong positive correlation between the experience or perception of social, racial, and religious marginality and the tendency to fall into the pro-Hindu faction. Turning to Hinduism and Indianness after an identity crisis was also a common theme in the narratives of the pro-Hindu members. Some members of the moderate group did mention racial difference but a distinctive feature was that none of these individuals emphasized racial or religious marginality, quite unlike the pro-Hindu members.

It appeared that the early exposure to Hinduism of the pro-Hindu students set the stage for the religion to become an important and emotional part of their personal identity. Subsequent experiences of social and racial marginalization and encounters where the religion was denigrated were interpreted by these individuals as attacks on this core personal identity and led the teenagers to turn to Hindu umbrella groups and their web-sites and literature (all of which are now plentiful in the U.S.) to seek answers to their identity crisis. These sources provided them with the emotional and intellectual ammunition for the ethnic pride/ethnic victimization outlook of the pro-Hindu group. A Hindu identity was less freighted with emotionality for those “moderates” whose upbringing had not included a strong emphasis on Hinduism or an Indian identity and who had not researched it on their own. Thus, it is likely that such youth did not have a clear framework or vocabulary to make meaning of their racial experiences, and turned to Hinduism in college when faced with a multiculturalism that demanded that they be aware of their heritage.

Interestingly, the pro-Hindu group consisted almost entirely of men, while a majority of the women in the group seemed to identify themselves as being part of the “moderate” group (there were many men in the moderate group too). There was also a clear polarization within the group between men and women when it came to gender issues, with the men usually arguing that men and women “were perfectly equal” in ancient Hindu India, and pointing out that there were several powerful female goddesses within Hinduism (to indicate that the Hindu tradition respected women), while the women would refer to the gender inequalities they saw in their homes and their extended families and would also cite other evidence to show that there was substantial gender inequality in contemporary India and within the Hindu American community.

Here again, my interviews revealed some of the reasons for these gender differences. Many of the men I talked to indicated that while growing up, they had to deal with the stereotypes of their white American peers who viewed them as “nerdy,” sexually unattractive, passive, and weak. They were thus drawn to the HSC since they felt it would be a comfort zone where they could discuss

these stereotypes and recover their wounded masculinity. So, it is not surprising that they felt doubly betrayed when many of the women within the group accused them [i.e., Indian men] of being sexist oppressors. Several of the men in the group told me that they were upset at the way many of the women seemed to accept Western stereotypes about Indian women and always brought up negative examples at the meetings. Indian American women are generally brought up to be repositories of Indian culture and many were therefore drawn to a club that gave them the opportunity to showcase their talents by participating in cultural activities. At the same time, they were aware of the constraints and limitations that their mothers, sisters, and female cousins faced as women, which accounted for the ambivalence that many of them manifested toward Hinduism and Indian culture.

Paradigms of second generation American identity formation have largely neglected religion, while the literature on religion does not pay adequate attention to how racial and ethnic identity shape religious orientation and expression. What I have showed in this essay is that we need to pay attention to the complex interplay between race, ethnicity, and religion to understand the religious commitments of second generation American youth. Since religion can be used to contest racial marginality (as in the case of the pro-Hindu faction) or to side-step it (as perhaps some of the moderate members were trying to do), it becomes important to examine how participation in religious groups affects the process of immigrant incorporation.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> This essay focuses primarily on Hindu college students and their organizations. It draws on a larger eight year project and a forthcoming book (Kurien 2007) on Hinduism and Hindu Americans based on a study of a variety of Hindu American organizations.

<sup>2</sup> Desi is a term that refers to a person of Indian or South Asian origin.

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