

Indian-Americans: A Photographic History

by Jane Singh

Although Indian-Americans make up one of the more rapidly growing ethnic groups in the United States, little is generally known of their history in this country. The community is often seen as emerging after the liberalized immigration law of 1965 removed restrictions and quotas formerly applied to most countries of the Eastern Hemisphere. Indian-American origins, however, go back to the turn of the century, when the first immigrants from India began arriving in small numbers at ports along the Pacific coast of the United States and Canada. Mostly farmers from the Punjab region of then British India, they joined the largely Asian workforce building the railroads, manning the lumber mills and working in the fields of the developing American West. In addition to them but dispersed across the country were a few students, businessmen and political exiles from various regions of India.

The early Indian community faced anti-Asian prejudices and policies. As increasingly discriminatory legislation curtailed and by 1924 cut off immigration, Indians were declared ineligible for naturaliza-

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Immigrants from the Punjab region of India came to the Pacific Coast via East Asia, where many had served in the British colonial army and police force. They were generally farmers who had left their land under pressures of droughts and taxation.

Punjabi passengers disembarking at Vancouver, British Columbia, circa 1908. Photo courtesy of Vancouver Public Library





Of the early arrivals, approximately 80% were members of the Sikh religion, 16% were Muslims and 4% were Hindus. Sikh *gurdwaras*, or temples, were soon established and became meeting places for Indian immigrants of all religions.

Sikh Temple, Stockton, California, circa 1912. Photo courtesy of Pacific Center for Western Historical Studies, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California

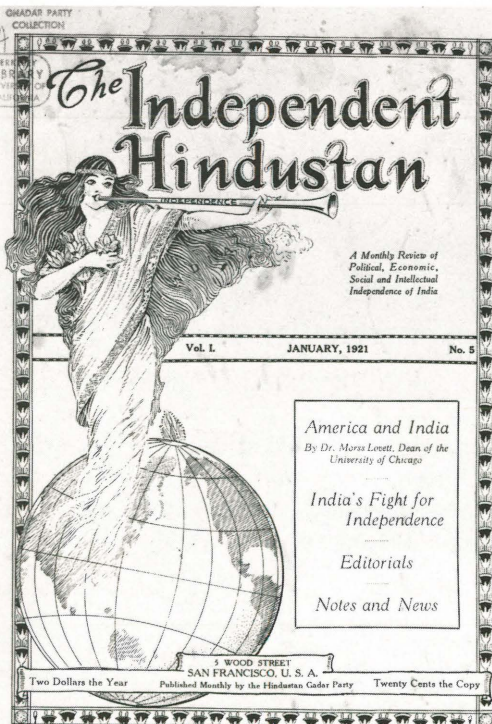
tion, and in many states alien land laws prohibited them from owning or leasing land. Indian-Americans responded to these hardships by drawing together through associations, publications and political activism. They fought for immigration and naturalization rights in the United States and campaigned against British colonial rule in India through such organizations as the militant Gadar Party, founded in San Francisco.

Until laws changed in 1946 the number of Indian immigrants declined from a total of nearly 10,000 in the first two decades of the century to only a few thousand. This small, almost invisible community made its impact in the United States in diverse ways. Among the first Indian immigrants were workers whose labor and skills helped build the West, farm proprietors who pioneered new methods of irrigation and cultivation in California and Arizona, and professionals who made distinguished contributions to science, technology and academia.

The 1946 Luce-Celler Bill marked a turning point for this community by permitting Indians to become American citizens and resume immigration in small numbers. Many families were reunited, and the community experienced its first growth in decades. More sweeping change came with the 1965 immigration reform, which was designed to promote equitable migration from all parts of the world. Indian immigration then increased dramatically; with greater numbers,



Kala Bagai arrived in San Francisco with her husband and three sons in 1915. At the time, she was one of only seven Indian women in the western United States since immigration restrictions did not allow men to send for their wives and children. Photo courtesy of Ram Bagai



In 1913 Indian immigrants founded the Gadar Party in San Francisco to bring about the overthrow of the British government in India. The organization published periodicals and pamphlets in several Indian and European languages for worldwide distribution. *The Independent Hindustan* informed the American public about conditions in India under British rule. Photo courtesy of Gadar Collection, University of California, Berkeley

Immigrants from the Punjab have farmed land in California's Sacramento Valley from 1912 to the present, where they helped develop rice cultivation by using special irrigation systems.

Fazal Mohammed Khan (center) inspects rice crop, circa 1955. Photo courtesy of Mohammed and Bashira Hussain



After completing his degree at Madras Medical College in India, Yellapragada Subba Row came to the United States in 1923 to further his study of tropical diseases. His work in nutrition at Lederle Laboratories, where he became Director of Research, led to important advances in the understanding of vitamin chemistry.

Dr. Subba Row (center) in his laboratory at Pearl River, New York, 1946. Photo courtesy of Lederle Laboratories



a more occupationally and demographically varied community emerged.

Indian-Americans now number nearly 400,000 and form the fourth largest Asian community in the United States. As they settle throughout the country and practice a wide variety of occupations, their history turns from the politics of survival to the challenges of contemporary life.



Young Indian Americans draw their identity from both cultures. The new generation, like those before it, strikes the balance between traditions in its own way.

Indian-American children learn a Bengali folk dance in preparation for a festival; Berkeley, California, 1982. Photo by Peter Menzel

In 1956 Dalip Singh Saund became the first Asian elected to the United States Congress to represent his southern California district in the House of Representatives. A native of the Punjab and previously a farmer, Saund completed a doctorate in mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1923.

Dr. Saund (right) with wife Marian and Senator John F. Kennedy, circa 1958. Photo courtesy of Marian Saund



Suggested readings

Chandrasekhar, S., ed. *From India to America: A Brief History of Immigration; Problems of Discrimination, Admission and Assimilation*. La Jolla: Population Review Publications, 1982.

Melendy, H. Brett. *Asians in America: Filipinos, Koreans and East Indians*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977.

Saran, Parmatma, ed. *The New Ethnics: Asian Indians in the United States*. New York: Praeger, 1980.