

Mapping South Asian Religious Communities in North-Central

North Carolina

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Straddled by a series of interstates and major research universities, North Carolina's Triangle region is a high tech success story of the new American South. The region derives its name from the three communities of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill that delineate it, but the Triangle's cornerstone is Research Triangle Park (RTP), nestled in Southern Durham between Chapel Hill and Raleigh, North Carolina. These three municipalities, in addition to Cary, Morrisville, Apex, and Hillsborough, are home to about a million people, making the Triangle the second largest metropolitan area in the Carolinas, behind Charlotte.

South Asian religious communities have been part of the Triangle since the late 1960s. Following the passage of landmark 1965 federal immigration reforms, small numbers of Jains, Sikhs, and Hindus immigrated to north-central North Carolina. Yet a slow economy based primarily on the textile and furniture industries limited both population growth and South Asian immigration.¹ The 1980 census recorded only a thousand South Asians living in the three county region of Durham (Durham, RTP), Wake (Raleigh, Cary, Apex), and Orange (Chapel Hill, Hillsborough). Nevertheless, a small but critical number of Jains, Sikhs, and Hindus formed regional groups in the two decades that followed 1965. The Atlantic Coast Sikh Society (Durham, 1969), Hindu Society of North Carolina (Raleigh, 1976), and Jain Study Center (Cary, 1979) served as loose religious affiliations for the slowly increasing number of immigrants from South Asia. Yet with no more than a dozen or so active people in each of the religious communities, the construction of worship halls or purchase of property was never an option.

The three religious communities shared several similarities. First, all self-defined as regional affiliations: the Jain and Hindu communities served constituents living anywhere between North Carolina's Appalachian Mountains and the Outer Banks of the

¹ For the purposes of this research, I define South Asia to include India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.

Atlantic Ocean. As its name implies, the Atlantic Coast Sikh Society's territory was even broader, stretching from Washington, D.C. to Georgia. Second, all three groups met in members' homes rather than rented property or space borrowed from a church or community center. Similarly, none employed fulltime personnel, either in the form of administrators or clergy. In the parlance of American Christianity, the three South Asian religious communities were "house churches." Finally, the three groups fused ethnic, cultural, and religious concerns, attempting to sooth over possible religious disputes in order to emphasize ethnic commonality. The Hindu Society of North Carolina emblemizes this effort, actively incorporating religious practices from throughout the subcontinent in its house programs.

The exception to this pattern is New Goloka temple (Hillsborough, 1982), a branch of the sectarian International Society for Krishna Consciousness, popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement. Founded as a rural ashram for the mostly Anglo-American members of this covert Hindu movement, New Goloka drew support from the local lower-middle class Gujarati Indian community as well as ISKCON members who had joined as countercultural youth in the late 1960s and early 70s. (Additional details on New Goloka are available on the Pluralism Project website, see Benjamin Zeller, "From Ashram to Congregation: An ISKCON Temple in Transition," 2003.)

All this changed during the period of Research Triangle Park's (RTP) most substantial growth, between 1980 and 2000. Although founded in 1950s, RTP experienced its most intense expansion during this latter period, with over 50 companies or institutes opening research or corporate centers in the Park.² As its designers had intended, RTP's success led to the creation of thousands of new professional and white-collar jobs both in the Park itself and in the neighboring communities, especially the nearby towns of Cary and Morrisville. Even by the most conservative uncorrected census measurements, the region's total population nearly doubled between 1980 and 2000, from five hundred thirty thousand people to almost a million.³ As major biotechnology, health

² Research Triangle Foundation of North Carolina, "About Us: Park History," (http://www.rtp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&filename=about_us_history.html; Research Triangle Foundation of North Carolina, 2004).

³ Population figures are for the counties of Wake (including Raleigh and Cary), Durham (city of Durham, including Research Triangle Park), and Orange (which includes Chapel Hill and Hillsborough), based on the census figures for 1980, 1990, and 2000. North Carolina State Demographer, "April 2000 County

care, and information technology corporations opened R&D centers in RTP, a wave of educated middle class Indians arrived to take jobs as engineers, scientists, technicians, and researchers. The Triangle's South Asian population grew by at least a factor of ten during this time, reaching just over ten thousand people according to the 2000 census.⁴ Conversations with local South Asian religious leaders indicate that the uncorrected census numbers are extremely conservative, that perhaps eleven or twelve thousand is a more likely estimate.

Religious changes were not long in coming, owing to two forces: an increased number of community members, and higher income levels among the white-collar immigrants. By the mid-1980s, the burgeoning communities could no longer fit into homes or backyards, and given the prevailing middle class nature of the new immigrants, all three South Asian religious groups established permanent physical buildings. For example, in 1980 the Hindu Society of North Carolina purchased a building from a Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Raleigh and opened it as a temple, calling it the Hindu Bhavan. Yet six years later the converted Kingdom Hall was already too small for both the community members and the increased number of deities that the diverse community wished to install. With the financial support of its membership, the HSNC purchased land in Morrisville and built a larger temple facility. Five years later in 2001 the Hindu Society completed construction of an even larger "Cultural Hall."

A second major change was increased factionalization among both the Hindu and Sikh communities. By the mid-1980s, the Atlantic Coast Sikh Association (ACSA) had increased in size from dozens to hundreds of people. Efforts to smooth over potential controversies became both more difficult and less essential given the larger size of the group. In 1985 two factions emerged within the ACSA in response to the death of a divisive Sikh figure in the Punjab, resulting in a formation of a splinter community, the

Census Populations," (Raleigh: NC State Data Center, 2000); North Carolina State Demographer, "N.C. Population Growth 1980 - 1990," (Raleigh: NC State Data Center, 1990).

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *1980 Census: General Population Characteristics: North Carolina* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1982); U.S. Census Bureau, *1990 Census: General Population Characteristics: North Carolina* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992); U.S. Census Bureau, "Census 2000 Summary File 2 (Sf2) 100 Percent Data," (<http://factfinder.census.gov>: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002).

Sikh Gurudwara of North Carolina.⁵ And so 1985 witnessed the construction of two Durham Sikh gurdwaras less than five miles apart. These two neighboring Sikh communities are the only two gurdwaras within hundreds of miles, including Southern Virginia and most of North Carolina.

As scholars are well aware, the world religion of Hinduism is a construction of British colonial administrators, patched together from dozens of diverse religious movements sharing a few rudimentary texts and traditions. It should come as no surprise therefore that the Hindu Society of North Carolina (HSNC) was unable to hold the entire Hindu community together, given the natural diversity among Indian Hindus. By the late 1990s, the Hindu community in the Triangle had more-or-less harmoniously fissured into three ethnic religious communities. Many West Indians, including the majority of Triangle Hindus hailing from the Indian states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, established the Sri Swaminarayan temple just a mile down the road from the HSNC. Part of an international religious movement called BAPS, the Sri Swaminarayan Temple unites its members in a bond with other BAPS Hindus in India, Europe, South America, and the Pacific Rim. Ironically, the Hindus who attend the Sri Swaminarayan Temple may feel more in common with their coreligionists in Singapore than those down the street in Morrisville's other temple, the HSNC's Hindu Bhavan. In the late 1990s, the South Indian population similarly began the process of temple building, purchasing land in Cary with the intent of building an elaborate temple designed according to the traditional South Indian religious forms and the Vedic art of architecture, *vastu*. Their temple is scheduled to open in 2006, though given the current economic downturn, this plan may be delayed. The Hindu Bhavan with its dozen-plus *murtis* (images of deities) still defines itself as pan-Indian and pan-Hindu, but given the defection of West and South Indians, has become primarily a North Indian temple. Meanwhile ISKCON's New Goloka transformed in only a decade from a convert ashram to an "ethnic" temple, becoming the religious home of many West Indian Gujaratis and East Indian Bengalis.

What larger story does the history of the South Asian religious community in the Triangle reveal? The narrative is a traditional one that has been replayed in immigrant

⁵ The death of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale at Indian military hands resulted in violent retaliation by Sikhs against Hindus, counter-retaliation by Hindus, and a general fissure between moderate and radical Sikh

communities in America throughout the past three centuries. A combination of internal growth and increased immigration propels small struggling religious communities up the social and economic ladder while simultaneously increasing numbers to the point that internal divisions effect the creation of splinter communities. While some may consider the increase of factionalism to be a sad development, it is actually a sign of a healthy religious economy.⁶ If current growth patterns in the Triangle continue, future researchers may expect to find a dozen Hindu, Sikh, and Jain religious communities by the second decade in the 21st century.

Major South Asian Religious Communities in the Triangle

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Membership / Community Size</u> | <u>Ethnicity</u> | <u>Location</u> | <u>Founded / Facility Opened</u> |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| Atlantic Coast Sikh Association | 300 / ??? | Punjabi | Durham | 1969/1985 |
| Hindu Society of NC | 900 / ??? | Primarily North Indian | Morrisville | 1976/1980 |
| Jain Study Center | 45 / 60 | Gujarati | Cary | 1979/none |
| New Goloka (ISKCON) | 250 / 2000 | Anglo, Bengali, Gujarati | Hillsborough | 1982/1985 |
| Sikh Gurudwara of NC | 400 / ??? | Punjabi | Durham | 1985/1985 |
| Sri Venkateswara Temple of NC | 230 / 1200 | South Indian | Cary | 1998/2006 |
| Sri Swaminarayan Temple (BAPS) | 250 / 1500 | West Indian | Morrisville | 1990/2004 |

Membership Size: number of paid members.

Community Size: number of attendees at major events. Information not available or unreliable for some groups.

Ethnicity: major ethnicities only.

Founded: date organization legally incorporated or created.

Facility Opened: date organization opened its first physical structure, either rented or owned.

groups throughout the world.

⁶ See for example the discussion of (mostly Christian) religious economies in Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churched of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).