

Elements of Racial Crime and Prejudice:

Religion or Jealousy

prepared for

The Pluralism Project

by

Lauren-Ann Williams

Yasmin Malhotra

Sachit Kohli

Anuva Kalawar

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### **Overview of the Project**

This research project represents the second phase of a pilot project, which is part of a larger plan to document the experiences of Asian Indian immigrants in the United States. There are feelings of marginalization among immigrants and hires from India, which have been bred from both perceived and actual instances of discrimination and prejudice. This study seeks to give voice to the voiceless, and to highlight the social and political impact of racial and religious marginalization on the immigrant Indian community in America. In addition, the conflation of race and religion as in the case of the ‘Dotbusters’ in Jersey City New Jersey, highlights a common sentiment held by many Americans who do not understand the Indian belief system and culture. This too is examined in the form of a play written by a young Indian American who has faced her share of discrimination.

In conducting this research over the summer, the following specific questions were considered in developing a questionnaire to be administered to Indian Americans in New Jersey and New York:

- How the Indian American immigrant community feels about being in mainstream America?
- How people who don't belong to congregational faith communities react to mainstream culture because they are perceived as being invisible?
- Whether Indian Americans blame the general American community for not being able to practice their religion because of lack of understanding?
- Whether American society is impacting Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and other non-Abrahamic religions negatively?

In a bid to answer these questions, a team of four researchers, Sachit Kohli, a senior at Hofstra University, New York, Yasmin Malhotra, a senior at Princeton Day School in Princeton, New Jersey, Anuva Kalawar, a junior at Princeton Day School , and myself, a current graduate student at Montclair State University, New Jersey, working with Dr. Vivodh Anand, professor of Religion at Hofstra University, set out to interview an initial sample of 50 Indian Americans. We specifically targeted Jersey City and Iselin in New Jersey, and Long Island, New York, because of the high concentration of Indian Americans in these areas, and because of the documented experiences of prejudice Indians in these areas have encountered.

In conducting the interviews, we had to be mindful of the fact that the Indian American community is very close-knit. As such, being the only ‘outsider’, I relied on immediate connections and introductions made by Dr. Anand in order to obtain successful interviews. The other researchers, all Indian Americans, were able to make substantial inroads in getting their fellow Indians to talk.

Yasmin and Anuva, both high school students, focused on their peers and other teenagers. However, they also interviewed quite a few adult members of the communities. Sachit, a member of the Sikh community in Long Island, New York focused his interviews on the Sikh experience. He spoke with many adult Sikhs, as well as college students and non-Sikh Indian Americans.

We were successful in obtaining about 50 interviews using a questionnaire vetted by Hofstra University’s IRB Board, and containing questions on past and present experiences in the United States, as well as future expectations in terms of prejudice, religious practice, and

particular issues facing Indian Americans as a group. Some specific questions were:

- Do you think there is prejudice against Indian Americans in the United States?
- Have you personally experienced racial or religious hostility?
- What do you think motivated prejudice against you?
- Have community attitudes and relations changed over the past 10-15 years?
- What are the prospects for Indians living in the United States?
- Do you intend to continue living in the United States?

Once conducted, the responses to the questionnaire were compiled, sorted and coded, and will be used to develop an extensive questionnaire that, depending on statistical requirements, will be given to three thousand or more Indian Americans across the country. We anticipate including about 70 or 80 questions, which will seek to address additional issues that came out of this pilot project.

We recognize that our initial questionnaire was limited in scope, and constrained by time, and hope to delve into specific religio-cultural issues, including why some Indian Americans are hesitant to publicly affirm their religious beliefs. We will also attempt to explain the common and surprising sentiment among interviewees, that complete assimilation into American culture is the only successful route for Indian Americans. Additional questions will also deal with issues of preserved, confused and merged identity, which is to be expected given the meeting of different cultures and lifestyles.

In this paper, Yasmin Malhotra gives a general interpretation of the results of the research, Sachit Kohli explains his findings from the Sikh community standpoint, and Anuva

Kalawar expresses her view, and by extension the Indian American view, in the form of a play she has written.

## Research Findings

New Jersey's Indian Diaspora appears self contented on the surface and likes to publicly project its success in America. However, by doing these interviews we helped uncover that beneath this superficial confidence, there are anxieties, doubts and fears. Over 75% of those interviewed said that at one time or another there was serious prejudice against Indians in America. Out of our interviews, we encountered some who had themselves faced personal prejudice as well as those who knew a victim of verbal or physical abuse.

Many of our community's youth mentioned "racial remarks and verbal assaults in college," "prejudice in schools," "fights and verbal abuses in grade and middle school," and "attacks by kids who are ignorant." Adults mentioned "racial crimes," "prejudice on the job," and "intimidation caused by jealousy." But even more seriously, we heard first-hand accounts from multiple individuals whose homes had been attacked including two cases where the person's house was shot at.

While many Indian-Americans appreciated the help from law enforcement authorities, others felt that these authorities only pretended to help, but were insincere. The reasons cited for the prejudice varied. One man, for example, felt that any concentration of Indians in a local area triggers a negative reaction, because Indians are different from the norm. Others felt that these attacks were "politically motivated" because Indians were doing well and this threatened the local establishment economically.

This economic source of prejudice makes one wonder if the recent outsourcing of jobs to

India might cause further antagonism, because those impacted by the economic problems might associate Indian Americans with people who they assume have taken away their jobs.

It is interesting that many Indians blamed themselves, and apologized for their cultural differences from the American mainstream. A common view was that Indians must assimilate and become “like Americans,” a term which implicitly meant “white.” But I wonder if ‘American equals White’ is necessarily a good definition of the future Americans. For instance, Blacks and Hispanics have opted to create distinct American identities. Our country as a whole consists of a number of diverse groups of people and because of that the term “American” should not be associated with “white”.

When considering their future well being in this country, many Indians felt that success would come to those who adapted to western culture. Some of our subjects believed in a balanced approach. One Jersey City store owner for example, said that “Indians need to incorporate both Indian and American cultures.” Others however, believed one must completely leave behind Indian culture in order to achieve the best value of life in America.

If assimilation is required to become an American, it means that difference from being white is seen as a problem to be cured. This approach causes anxieties for Indian immigrants, pressures their kids into becoming “Americanized” and dislocates the kids from their heritage. Most importantly, this may lead young Indian-Americans to question their own identities.

Another important observation is that most Hindus interviewed preferred to be silent about their religion. Privately, they are practicing Hindus, but publicly many downplay this aspect of their lives. By contrast, Christians and Jews are very confident and public about their

religions.

Many Indians are doing well in business and/or professions where cultural difference is not relevant, and they do not wish to rock the boat of success. The fear of rejection of their cultural identity, especially Hinduism, is too big a risk against their material success. The difference from “American” status that is caused by Hinduism is easily “cured” by being silent about their religion. This erasing of Hindu identity in public reduces the burden of difference that they have to carry.

But what starts as mere public denial eventually becomes an internal denial as well. One must wonder if lack of public pride also has the side effect of children growing up confused about Hinduism, because the learning within families that takes place in India is not always available in the busy lives in a Hindu American household. This however, is simply a hypothesis. Aside from a yes/no question: are you religious?, our questionnaire did not include topics specifically directed to religion. Though the interviewees could have discussed their own religion in response to any of our questions, this is one subject we must explore in a further study.

Our school’s U.S. History class discussed that the Irish Catholics and Jewish immigrants were classified as non-whites and considered un-American. After years of struggle which included violence, they were eventually considered as full-fledged Americans without having to convert to Protestantism from their respective religions. On the other hand, Chinese immigrants faced the double prejudice of being non whites by race as well as being non Christians. Under pressure, they converted into Christianity in order to be accepted as Americans. So we have two

different kinds of assimilation into America: In the former cases, the original religions were retained, while in the latter case it had to be rejected in favor of Christianity.

This raises the question: Will Hindus give up Hinduism or dilute it publicly (and eventually privately) in order to become full-fledged Americans? Or will Hinduism become an accepted American religion just as the Irish and the Jews made Catholicism and Judaism, respectively, into American religions?

The first alternative, in which Hindus dilute their public identity for acceptance, will lead America towards religious homogenization around the Abrahamic religions. In the latter case, in which Hindus publicly project their faith as full-fledged Americans, America will become more pluralistic and challenge the Religious Right that rules in the White House today. One trajectory results in difference being comfortable and respected. The other trajectory leads to never ending tensions, because there will always be problems over who gets to be the “normal American” against whom all others are to be judged based on their difference. Assimilation is not necessarily a good choice for America’s future.

Aside from assimilating, some Indian-Americans felt that success can be achieved by becoming more politically active and educating non-Indians about the Indian lifestyle. We must note that since our results did vary to a large extent, it is crucial to conduct a more detailed study of Indian-Americans across the country.

## **A Battle to be won: Sikhism in America**

A progressive religion well ahead of its time when it was founded over 500 years ago, The Sikh religion today has a following of over 20 million people worldwide and is ranked as the worlds 5th largest religion. Sikhism preaches a message of devotion and remembrance of God at all times, truthful living, equality of mankind and denounces superstitions and blind rituals. Sikhism is open to all through the teachings of its 10 Gurus enshrined in the Sikh Holy Book and Living Guru, Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Hofstra University, one of two universities in the country, has a Sikh study chair, enabling people to understand and emulate Sikh religion and culture.

My research project at Harvard with the Pluralism project has lead to me to fill in the gaps between Sikhs and their ongoing battle with racial prejudice and discrimination. Most of my interviews were taken in New Jersey and parts of Long Island, contrasting two separate aspects of Sikh culture. I divided the results into three major categories and developed a scenario of Sikh's facing racial crimes and prejudice in America. Sikhism as a religion has prospered into a democratic, secular and non-biased religion where simple lessons from everyday life are entrusted into a book and is read by Sikh followers to understand their creation and life. With the unfortunate incident of 9/11, Sikhs have come under much scrutiny and prejudice eye. With these interviews, I have been able to create a comparison between pre 9/11, 9/11 and post 9/11 Sikh ordeals, changes, crimes and most importantly changes within their own generations, community and Sikh followings.

Sikhs have always found it hard to accustom them selves to the American culture and as a

result faced turbulence in practicing their rites and rituals. Prejudice has always been an integral part of Sikh existence where they have continuously faced racial discrimination. As in the case of a Personal Banker at Astoria Federal Savings on Long Island, she indicated that at her previous job she was a victim of continuous racial discrimination. She was forced to work more hours than everyone else without a break during the day, and her colleagues celebrated their birthdays and never bothered to celebrate hers. In the case of an MD/Ph.D. candidate at Stony Brook University he states, “there are varying degrees of prejudice against Indians in different segments of American society. Most of this ill-feeling is a product of a mix of jealousy and admiration of the rapid success of Indian Americans. Additionally, their different appearance, clothing, accented English, food, and widespread involvement in retail businesses with large public exposure make them very easy to identify and target.” One of the major reasons why I feel prejudice occurs, for example in the Dotbuster cases is the lack of education and constant instigation of fear that eventually breeds into violence.

Sikhs have prospered and created a name for themselves in the American Society with the making of Gurudwaras (a place of Sikh worship), owning businesses, getting respectable jobs etc. Even though they have gradually made a name for their community, after 9/11 many Sikh families became victims of misunderstanding and unprecedented racial crimes, mainly due to the fact that Sikhs wear turbans. The turban in the Sikh culture is a symbol of respect towards their worship and also a symbol of Sikhism. Lack of knowledge, ignorance, immaturity, arrogance and many other contributing factors have led to racial crimes against Sikhs. A Sikh gas station owner was shot in Arizona. Several other similar incidents with less deadly consequences

occurred in the aftermath of 9/11. Similarly Harkirat Singh, a Sikh residing in Stony Brook experienced life threatening racial crime where two white American nationals opened fire on his house suspecting him of being a terrorist. I believe the motivation in these attacks was probably a mix of uncontrolled patriotic fervor, and frustration with one's life, and holding a "different" person responsible for one's own failures.

During my interview with two Seven-Eleven Food Store owners on Long Island, I came across jealousy related racial discrimination. Their Seven-Eleven was robbed twice following the aftermath of 9/11, one owner stated in his interview “ I feel that the American community is biased to Americans and just pretend to help the foreigners.” In these particular cases he believes the cops in his area have so far pretended to have an investigation going, but it’s been close to three years and he still hasn’t received any word on the case. Though he believes a current wave of knowledge is making the situation better for a Sikh to survive.

Though many racial crimes have been committed against Sikhs after 9/11, it has also brought in a diverse group of people to better understand the Sikh religion and culture. In this case due to the Sikh ownership of the local Seven-Eleven, more people have now come to understand his religion and his role in the community. The local chamber of commerce has come to his help in the past year for anything that he has required from the town of Long Beach. People and residents have become friendly to his staff and family working there, but he feels there is still a long way to go before everyone can live in harmony. At the same time many Sikhs feel absolutely secure since they have immigrated to America. One respondent’s older brother feels racial discrimination against Sikhs is blown out of proportion. He believes Sikhs are not

the only ones that face racial crimes and that 9/11 has brought the Sikh community and religion even closer into the American culture and society. In his interview he states, “there is no racial or biased crimes against Indians from the American Community except for the crimes done by Indian and Muslim individuals on their own respective communities.”

Within all this prospering, racial crimes and jealousy, all my interviews have dealt with another major topic. The generational gap caused between 1<sup>st</sup> generation immigrants and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants. 9/11 has influenced the thinking for both generations, though the 1<sup>st</sup> generation immigrants are more wiser than before, and scared for the upcoming future, whereas 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants or Indo – Americans feel more confident and powerful in upcoming endeavors.

I think different issues are of special concern to different segments of the Indian American population - those that have immigrated in the last five years versus those that have been here for longer. For instance, for recent immigrants, the issue of legalization and naturalization are of grave importance. For the more Americanized Indian Americans, becoming involved in the political decision-making process is an important objective. Though one respondent in his interview states, “however, there are certain issues that pertain to the Indian-American community as a whole. Issues pertaining to racial identity, stereotyping, racial perception and association, are relevant to all Indian Americans because American society tends to stereotype racial groups with a very large brush. Examples of this are clearly evident in the mass media today.” As comparison, in my interview with an International Student at Stony Brook University, I achieved a different view where the present generation of Indo – Americans

is confused with what religion to practice, and where to look for answers concerning the intermingling of cultures.

Myself being a 1<sup>st</sup> generation immigrant it is constantly becoming hard to understand the over mapping of the Indian culture with the American Culture, where the 1<sup>st</sup> generation immigrants emphasize Indian religion and society and education. I believe to achieve progress, and to put a stop to racial discrimination, a balance needs to be achieved between the two cultures with emphasis on educating everyone about different cultures and their respective religion. This is an ongoing battle that is presently going through it's toughest round, though it seems that upcoming generations will more easily adapt to the American culture than their predecessors, though leaving a gap between generations and as result losing their own culture and religion. The battle with racial discrimination and crime will always stay within society until people educate themselves about different religions, and understand that today the American Culture in the United States is being joined and adapted by many immigrant religions and cultures. This intermingling of religions and cultures will ultimately lead to a harmonious society and put an end to racial prejudice and crime.

**'Invisible' - Dotbusters of Jersey City**

My first ever experience with prejudice came when I was 5 years old, in kindergarten. It was perhaps one of the most defining experiences of my life and I remember it quite clearly. It was a fall day, and two friends of mine and I were playing outside after school had ended with a box of Barbie's, as some girls tend to do, as frivolous as it may seem. My two friends, both of whom were white, began assigning to themselves which Barbie's they would be. When I reached for the one in the blue dress, with the long brown locks, one of the girls literally snatched it out of my hands and told me I could not have it. Extremely curious, I asked her why. What she said came easily to her; I could not play with that particular Barbie or anyone in that bunch because I simply did not "match" and because of my "brown skin".

At the time, everything hadn't settled in as yet, and I just intuitively knew that I didn't want to be playing with these people, so I walked over to another group of children on the swings and had a good time. When I reached home later that day, I began to comprehend what happened and who exactly I was. The soft aroma of my mom cooking *daal* and rice for a quick dinner, the affectionate lilts of Konkani and Hindi tucked among the corners of my house, and simply the color of my skin and my hair told it all—I was—and am—different.

In the spring of 2004 during sophomore year, I was assigned to write a One Act Play for my English class at Princeton Day School, in Princeton, New Jersey. I was at liberty to choose any topic and setting for the play, the only limit being the fact that it was One Act. Recently, I wrote a paper on prejudice and racism in American society, during the hearings for Frank Silva Roque, who murdered Balbir Singh Sodhi 4 days after September 11<sup>th</sup> at his gas station because

he was different—Sodhi wore a turban and had facial features similar to those of which the average ignorant man could confuse with a “9/11 terrorist”.

It was a story literally none of my peers knew about, including some of the Indian ones. I have always been interested in community activism and civil rights in our culture and the Indian-American subculture. It was at that instance that I decided that I wanted to write a play about the people and the experiences the American public knows close to nothing about, because it has never been documented before—The Invisible Man and Woman in America. When I was younger, my parents told me about the Dotbusters, an anti-Indian hate group in Jersey City that terrorized Indian immigrants. I researched the story of Navroze Mody, who was beaten to death by the Dotbusters in Hoboken because he was “Hindu”, and other stories as well.

Reaching from experiences I had observing the people who my family talks to at the local Indian store and gas station, and even my own parents and family, I decided to just sit down and write and see what came out of it. What came out was this: a one act play about In-Vijay Bal and his wife Gulli Bal, who run a convenience store in Jersey City, during the prominence of the Dotbusters. They are being terrorized with threatening phone calls to their business, and they are getting increasingly scared for their life and their children’s welfare and security. I wanted to, in an affectionate way, detail the battles that an immigrant family, or any family in this case, face in a scary situation such as this one. I tried very hard to capture the fear, vulnerability, courage and love all combined that makes up this scene I envisioned. It was all very personal and essentially, as cliché as it may sound, heartfelt. I titled the play “Invisible”, and it is a tribute to the invisible Indian immigrants who own the local gas station, run the Kwik-E Mart, and the local Indian store

and help keep our lives in pace.

That same Spring I wrote this play, my father and Dr. Vivodh Anand were at a gathering focusing mainly on prejudice against the Indian community, namely the Dotbusters. My father mentioned to Dr. Anand my interest in community activism and the research on prejudice against the Indian community in the United States. He also happened to mention my play. Dr. Anand was interested, so I emailed it to him as soon as I could. After he read it, he offered me a research internship to interview the local Indian-American community in New Jersey on prejudice and the experiences they had when the Dotbusters were at their prominence. I was extremely excited when he offered me a chance to do this, as it is something I am very interested in and passionate about.

It was very interesting to talk to people who had experienced what it was like to live in places like Edison, Iselin, and Jersey City, during the 1980's when the Indian community was fairly new to New Jersey. I wanted to know about the troubles that the elders in the community had faced. It was tough to sift for, because many were very private about it, mentioning it only in brief or adding that it was all "in the past" and also repeatedly adding that the Indian community is thriving in those areas, which is a fact. It was so captivating to take in the smells and feels of Newark Avenue, and imagining my characters living there or some place similar to it. Although I did not make any significant changes to the play, the entire experience as a whole—taking in the unique community, the familiar smells and unfamiliar locations--did help bring the characters to life by actually seeing and speaking to members of the vibrant community there. It was one of the most eye-opening experiences of my life, and I thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it.

## **Conclusion**

In analyzing the responses to the questionnaire, we quickly recognized the need to focus any further research in three specific directions. Issues of social and cultural identity, religious prejudice, and assimilation, are of primary concern to the Indian American population in the United States.

If a group of people brought here for their skills and expertise, experience feelings of marginalization from the incumbent population, one must examine what factors are responsible. You might expect that differences and idiosyncracies would be welcomed, as they contribute to the melting pot of American pluralism. However, what the Indian immigrant population has had to endure is years of continued and escalating racial and religious discrimination, growing to the point of physical violence and, sadly, death.

Our research seeks to accomplish two primary goals, to give voice to Indian Americans working diligently to contribute to the American society, and to formally document their experiences and feelings, both negative and positive. It is hoped that by creating this forum, the general American society will respond by embracing Indian uniqueness, and recognize that like every other ethnic group, Indians just want a better future for themselves.