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"The Tide of Turbans"

Asian Indians in America

In 1865, the Hawaiian Board of Immigration sent labor agent William Hillebrand to China to recruit laborers, instructing him to proceed from China to the East Indies to investigate the possibility of India as a labor source. Hillebrand was not able to complete his mission, but Hawaiian planters continued to cultivate an interest in procuring laborers from India. "Where shall we look for the kind of immigrants we need to supply us with both a homogeneous population and labor?" asked the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* in 1874. "We answer, to the East Indies. From the teeming millions of Bengal and other provinces of Hindostan." Seven years later, planters appealed to the Hawaiian Minister of Foreign Affairs for his "assistance in removing the obstacles in the way of introducing East Indian Coolies into these islands." In 1884, when they learned that Japan had decided to permit emigration to the islands, the planters turned away from India for their labor needs.¹

Twenty years later, Asian Indians suddenly began appearing in the lumber towns of Washington and the agricultural fields of California. By 1920, some sixty-four hundred had entered the United States. Many of them had carried "extravagant" dreams to America, but all became "strangers," driven by a new "necessity" here. Like the Koreans, they did not develop a colony or distinct ethnic community with geographical boundaries. A small and somewhat dispersed group, they did not form an Indiatown. Theirs is an especially interesting and important story. Asian Indians represented a new diversity in the Asian migrations east to America. Though they were,

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like their Asian brethren, "strangers from a different shore," they were Caucasian.

Dark Caucasians: The "Hindoo Question"

The Asian Indians were, as one of them wrote in a description of his fellow newcomers, "picturesque":

All Hindoos who come to America have hair varying in hue from brownish-black to purplish or an intense raven-black. . . . The hide of the Hindoo varies from the dull, pale, sallow-brown of a Mexican to the extreme black of an African. The man who hails from the highlands of northwestern Hindustan is a shade darker than olive. A few coming from Kashmir have fair skins, light hair and blue eyes. Those who come from the low plains have darker complexions and an extremely sun-burnt appearance. . . . They have intelligent faces, keen eyes, compressed lips and determined chins. This type of countenance is distinctly Aryan, as all Hindoos who come to the land of the Stars and Stripes are descended from the same branch of the human family as the Anglo-Saxons.²

Called "Hindus" in America, only a small fraction of the Asian Indian immigrants were actually believers of Hinduism. One third were Muslim, and the majority were Sikhs. As believers of Sikhism, they were required to wear the "five k's" — *kes* (unshorn hair and beard), *kacch* (trousers to the knee), *kara* (iron bangle), *kirpan* (sword) or *khanda* (dagger), and *khanga* (hair comb).³

Wearing their traditional headress, the newcomers from India were described as "the tide of turbans." "Always the turban remains," a witness wrote, "the badge and symbol of their native land, their native customs and religion. Whether repairing tracks on the long stretches of the Northern Pacific railways, feeding logs into the screaming rotary saws of the lumber-mills, picking fruit in the luxuriant orchards or sunny hillsides of California, the twisted turban shows white or brilliant . . . an exotic thing in the western landscape." Their different dress and their dark skin provoked taunts and verbal abuse from whites. "I used to go to Marysville every Saturday," recounted a Sikh. "One day a drunk *ghora* (white man) came out of a bar and motioned to me saying, 'Come here, slave!' I said I was no slave man. He told me that his race ruled India and America, too. All we were slaves. He came close to me and I hit him and got away fast."⁴

While Asian-Indian immigrants found themselves called "niggers," they were more frequently associated with the Chinese and Japanese. "Sixty years' contact with the Chinese, and twenty-five years' experience with the Japanese and two or three years' acquaintance with Hindus," declared American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers in 1908, "should be sufficient to convince any ordinarily intelligent person that they have no standards . . . by which a Caucasian may judge them." The Asiatic Exclusion League agreed, blaming the Japanese and the Asian Indians for the violence directed against them: "In California the insolence and presumption of Japanese, and the immodest and filthy habits of the Hindoos are continually involving them in trouble, beatings. . . . In all these cases, we may say the Oriental is at fault." In 1910 *Collier's Weekly* claimed that the immigrants from India were "inferior workmen," differing from "the unobtrusive Chinaman by being sullen and uncompromising."⁵

In "The West and the Hindu Invasion" published in the *Overland Monthly* in 1908, Agnes Foster Buchanan described the waves of different Asian immigrants entering and threatening American society. First came the Chinese, but the exclusion laws barred the "coolies" from America. But while the Chinese "stood knocking at our outer doors," the Japanese, "not waiting for permission, crept stealthily past the suppliants, entered and took possession. When San Francisco awoke from her short sleep, she found herself face to face with the Japanese question, infinitely greater and more insidious in its influence than the Chinese problem had ever threatened to be. . . ." While white Americans wondered what should be done about the Japanese, they suddenly noticed another group of "strangers" — the "Hindus." "Tall of stature, straight of feature, swarthy of color," they were unlike the Chinese and Japanese in an important way: they were "brothers" of "our own race," "full-blooded Aryans," "men of like progenitors with us." But like the Chinese and Japanese, the "Hindus" were willing to work for "cheap" wages and able to "subsidize on incomes that would be prohibitive to the white man." Calling for legislation to exclude Asian Indians from America, Buchanan urged white Americans "to tell our brothers of the East" that while the earth was large enough for everyone, there was no one part of it that could "comfortably accommodate both branches of the Aryan family."⁶

Two years later, in *Forum* magazine, Herman Scheffauer conveyed a similar message in sterner, more hysterical language. Asian In-

Indians, he warned, represented the spectre of a new "Yellow Peril." "This time the chimera is not the saturnine, almond-eyed mask, the shaven head, the snaky pig-tail of the multitudinous Chinese, nor the close-cropped bullet-heads of the suave and smiling Japanese, but a face of finer features, rising, turbaned out of the Pacific and bringing a new and anxious question. . . ." Noting how the Chinese had been kept within the "circle of their lowly labors," and how the "brown, busy little men from Nippon" were "gradually ceasing to be the servants of the Americans" and becoming "dangerous rivals," Scheffauer warned that the "Hindoo invasion" of this "dark, mystic race" was "yet in its infancy," only the "head of the long procession" entering the Golden Gate.⁷

Asian Indians were especially feared as labor competitors by white workers and were often victimized by white working-class antagonism and violence. In September 1907, several hundred white workers invaded the Asian-Indian community in Bellingham, Washington, and drove seven hundred Asian Indians across the border into Canada. Two months later, white workers forcibly rounded up Asian Indians in Everett and expelled them from the town. In San Francisco, the Asiatic Exclusion League issued warnings of the new "menace" from India. Addressing the "Hindoo question," the league denounced the immigrants as competitors of white labor and as dirty, lustful, and diseased. "From every part of the Coast," the league claimed, "complaints are made of the undesirability of the Hindoos, their lack of cleanliness, disregard of sanitary laws, petty pilfering, especially of chickens, and insolence to women."⁸

In response to exclusionist pressures, immigration officials targeted Asian Indians seeking admission to the United States. Between 1908 and 1920, they denied entry to some 3,453 Asian Indians, most of them on the grounds they would likely become public charges. In an article on "The Hindu, the Newest Immigration Problem," *Survey* magazine editorialized in 1910: "The civic and social question concerns the ability of the nation to assimilate this class of Hindus and their probable effect on the communities where they settle. Their habits, their intense caste feeling, their lack of home life — no women being among them — and their effect upon standards of labor and wages, all combine to raise a serious question as to whether the doors should be kept open or closed against this strange, new stream." Seven years later, Congress enacted an immigration restriction law which designated India as one of the Asian countries in the "barred zone" and prohibited the entry of Asian-Indian laborers. Asian In-

dians were not welcome in America. Even Rabindranath Tagore, the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, unhappily discovered that his achievement did not mean greater acceptance. After lecturing in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1929, he decided to visit the United States. Tagore encountered bureaucratic problems when he applied to the American consul for entry, and then he experienced racial prejudice in Los Angeles. Canceling his tour and promptly returning to India, Tagore commented caustically: "Jesus could not get into America because, first of all, He would not have the necessary money, and secondly, He would be an Asiatic."⁹

After the enactment of the 1917 "barred zone" law, the question of the political status of Asian Indians already in the United States still remained. The federal law of 1790 had reserved naturalized citizenship to "whites" only, providing the basis for excluding Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants from citizenship. But Asian Indians were Caucasian. Would they be entitled to naturalized citizenship in the United States? Seeking to set forth a distinction between Asian Indians and white Americans, the Asiatic Exclusion League conceded in 1910 that students of ethnology all agreed "the Hindus" were "members of the same family" as Americans of European ancestry. But, "as a matter of fact," the league argued, the people of the United States were "cousins, far removed, of the Hindus of the northwest provinces." The "forefathers" of white Americans "pressed to the west, in the everlasting march of conquest, progress, and civilization," while the "forefathers of the Hindus went east and became enslaved, effeminate, caste-ridden and degraded." The Western Aryans became the "Lords of Creation," while the Eastern Aryans became the "slaves of Creation." "And now we the people of the United States are asked to receive these members of a degraded race on terms of equality," the league protested. What would be the condition in California if they were allowed to become citizens and if "this horde of fanatics should be received in our midst?"¹⁰

Asked about Asian-Indian eligibility for citizenship, the U.S. Attorney General Charles J. Bonaparte replied in 1907: "It seems to me clear that under no construction of the law can natives of British India be regarded as white persons." But the question had to be determined in the courts. In the 1910 *U.S. v. Balsara* and the 1913 *Ajkooy Kumar Mazumdar* decisions, the courts held that Asian Indians were Caucasians and hence entitled to be considered "white persons" eligible to citizenship under the 1790 law. In the 1922 *Ozawa* decision, the Supreme Court declared that "white person" was syn-

onymous with Caucasian and therefore that Japanese immigrants were not eligible to naturalized citizenship. Asian Indians thought that the *Ozawa* case had reinforced their status as Caucasians and their own claim for naturalized citizenship.¹¹

But in 1923, their expectations were shattered: in *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, the Supreme Court ruled that Asian Indians were ineligible to naturalization. Arguing that the definition of race had to be based on the "understanding of the common man," the Court held that the term "white person" meant an immigrant from northern or western Europe. For the "practical purposes" of the statute, the term "race" must be applied to "a group of living persons now possessing in common the requisite characteristics." "It may be true," the Court declared, "that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today." The law "does not employ the word 'Caucasian' but the words 'white persons,' " the Court explained, "and these are words of common speech and not of scientific origin. The word 'Caucasian' not only was not employed in the law but was probably wholly unfamiliar to the original framers of the statute in 1790." Thus Asian Indians, while they were "Caucasian," were not "white." The intention of the Founding Fathers was to "confer the privilege of citizenship upon that class of persons" they knew as "white."¹²

Shortly after the Supreme Court had issued its decision on the *Thind* case, an Asian-Indian immigrant wrote to Puna Singh, advising his friend to stay in India. Singh had emigrated to the United States in 1906. He became a naturalized citizen in 1920, and then returned to India and married Nand Kaur two years later. "My father's friend sent him a letter to tell him about the *Thind* decision and warn him not to try to return to America with his wife," Jane Singh said. "The decision meant my father was no longer a citizen and could not re-enter this country. But the letter did not arrive in time." As it turned out, Puna Singh managed to return with his bride. But shortly afterward, federal authorities canceled the citizenships of Singh and scores of other Asian Indians. Angrily Singh declared he had been forced to become "a citizen of no country." Fellow immigrant Vaisho Das Bagai protested the nullification of his citizenship. He had arrived here in 1915 with his family and had become a naturalized citizen. Distraught over the loss, Bagai took his life in 1928. In his suicide note, he wrote that he had tried to be "as American as possible."

"But now they come to me and say, I am no longer an American citizen. . . . What have I made of myself and my children? We cannot exercise our rights, we cannot leave this country. Humility and insults, who are responsible for all this? I do not choose to live a life of an interned person. . . . Is life worth living in a gilded cage? Obstacles this way, blockades that way, and the bridges burnt behind."¹³

A year after the *Thind* decision, Congress passed the 1924 Immigration Act, which denied immigration quotas to peoples ineligible for naturalization. The *Thind* decision also provided the basis for the application of anti-miscegenation laws to Asian-Indian men seeking to marry white women and the denial of landownership to Asian Indians under the restrictive terms of the California Alien Land Law. Within weeks after the decision, California Attorney General U. S. Webb began instituting proceedings to revoke Asian-Indian land purchases. In its editorial praising the *Thind* decision, the *Sacramento Bee* sternly supported the enforcement of the land law against Asian Indians: "The decree in a test case brings Hindu holders of land in this State, and likewise all descendants of Hindus, within the mandatory provisions of the California anti-alien land law. There must be no more leasing or sale of land to such immigrants from India."¹⁴

"Japanese and East Indians," an Asian Indian in California sadly observed, "either must take to day labor or get out of the country." Even before the *Thind* decision, Asian Indians had begun a return migration. Haji Muhammad Sharif Khan went back permanently in 1920. While serving in the British Police Force in Hong Kong, he had been told about opportunities in America and arrived in San Francisco in 1903. Khan first worked on a railroad near Sacramento, then became a farm laborer. In 1914, he leased land in Petaluma to raise poultry, and within a few years he had a flock of 14,000 chickens. Khan's entry into the poultry business was timely, for it became very profitable as World War I suddenly generated enormous demands for food. After the war, Khan purchased a one-way ticket for India. Between 1920 and 1940, some 3,000 Asian Indians returned to their homeland.¹⁵

Their exclusion from America and citizenship here underscored the importance of Indian independence from British rule. The independence movement, led by Asian-Indian students and expatriates, found support in Asian-Indian communities in the United States. In 1908, Taraknath Das, a student at the University of Washington, began publishing *Free Hindustan*; three years later, Asian-Indian in-

tellecuals in San Francisco organized the Ghadr (meaning "revolution" or "mutiny") party. They disseminated their revolutionary message through their weekly newspaper, *Ghadr*, and visited Asian-Indian communities in Sacramento, Fresno, and Stockton, urging their countrymen to support the nationalist cause. "Most of the Indian students," noted an immigration official in 1914, "are infected with seditious ideas. Even Sikhs of the laboring class have not escaped their influence." The Ghadr movement inspired nationalism among Asian Indians in America. In their protest songs, they denounced British imperial domination of their "mother country."

*Alas, dear country, to what condition hast thou been reduced!
Your whole shape has become deformed, your downfall is near.
Your whole house has been destroyed and the Goddess of Wealth looted.*

Dear Mother, you are continuously robbed by the British.

The message of Ghadr had a particular appeal to Asian Indians in the United States, for they saw a relationship between the degradation of their homeland and their ill treatment here. In another protest song, the nationalists asked:

*Some push us around, some curse us.
Where is your splendor and prestige today?
The whole world calls us black thieves,
The whole world calls us "coolie."
Why doesn't our flag fly anywhere?
Why do we feel low and humiliated?
Why is there no respect for us in the whole world?*

But an independent and great India would bring respect for them as Asian Indians in America. In the fall of 1914, after the outbreak of World War I, some four hundred Asian Indians left America to participate in Ghadr activities in India. The uprising failed, and the movement quickly collapsed. The Ghadr base in the United States was effectively destroyed in 1917 when the federal government, under British pressure, prosecuted and imprisoned several Asian Indians for conspiracy to violate the neutrality laws.¹⁶

A Community of "Uncles"

While Asian-Indian immigrants were interested in political developments in their homeland, most of them were mainly concerned about their condition in America. They had come with high hopes.

"The Indian journals have been full of stories of the splendid opportunities to make money by ordinary work," reported the Reverend E. M. Wherry. "Men, receiving from 5 to 8 cents a day in India, were told that by emigrating to America they might become suddenly rich. . . . There are now thousands of these Hindu peasants who have pushed their way into America." They had hoped they would soon make their fortunes by working in the fruit orchards and sawmills at from seventy-five cents to two dollars a day.¹⁷

Most of the Asian-Indian immigrants had been farmers or farm laborers in the Punjab. Eighty percent came from the *jat*, or farmer caste. Shortly after their arrival, however, many Asian Indians were first employed as railroad workers. Seven hundred were reportedly involved in the construction of the Three-Mile Spring Garden Tunnel of the Western Pacific Railroad. In Tacoma, Washington, Asian Indians were used as replacements for Italian railroad strikers. "For miles their turbaned figures may be seen wielding crow-bar or shovel along the tracks," the *Forum* reported in 1910. "Hundreds of them are encountered in the mighty lumber-mills buried in the thick fir forests along the Columbia River."¹⁸

Increasingly Asian Indians found themselves driven from employment in the railroad and lumber industries by violent white workers, and they moved south, riding the Southern Pacific Railroad into California, where they found employment in agriculture. "Every train that comes from the North and passes this city," commented the *Red Bluff News* in 1907 in a report on the movement of Asian Indians into the state, "has from one to twenty and often more of this new pest." Many California farmers, however, were eager to hire Asian Indians. The Chinese Exclusion Act had prohibited the entry of Chinese workers, and the Gentlemen's Agreement had cut off the supply of Japanese labor, so farmers turned to Asian Indians to reduce the labor shortage. "With the number of Japanese and Chinese laborers diminishing as a result of the restrictions placed upon the immigration of these classes," observed Immigration Commission Superintendent H. A. Millis in 1912, "the East Indians with freer immigration might fall heir to the kinds of work which have been done in part by these other Asiatics; for employers are inclined to follow the line of least resistance in finding a supply of labor, and competition between races engaged in unskilled work apparently depends more upon the rate of wages than upon efficiency." Indeed, farmers paid Asian-Indian workers from twenty-five to fifty cents less per day than Japanese laborers and used them to keep wages down.¹⁹

In northern California, five hundred Punjabis initially worked in the Newcastle fruit district east of Sacramento in 1908, and three hundred compatriots picked fruit in the nearby Vaca Valley. Asian-Indian farm laborers quickly spread throughout the Sacramento Valley, working on fruit farms and rice farms near Marysville, Tudor, Willows, and Chico. They moved into the San Joaquin Valley, where they worked in the grape and celery fields and where they cleared lands for new fields. Some six hundred of them were employed on the Tulare citrus farms. From the San Joaquin Valley, Asian Indians entered the Imperial Valley, gathering cantaloupes and picking cotton. A grower told an interviewer in 1930: "We are using Hindus for cleaning our ditches. The Japs won't do it and the Chinese have gotten too old. You can't get the younger generations of these peoples into any of this common work. But the Hindus are very efficient at this work."²⁰

Asian-Indian farm laborers were organized into gangs — three to fifty laborers in each group. The gang leader, usually the member most fluent in English, received a commission from the gang and was also paid a wage by the employer; in return, he found employment for the workers, negotiated the terms of labor, arranged board and shelter, and served as general supervisor.

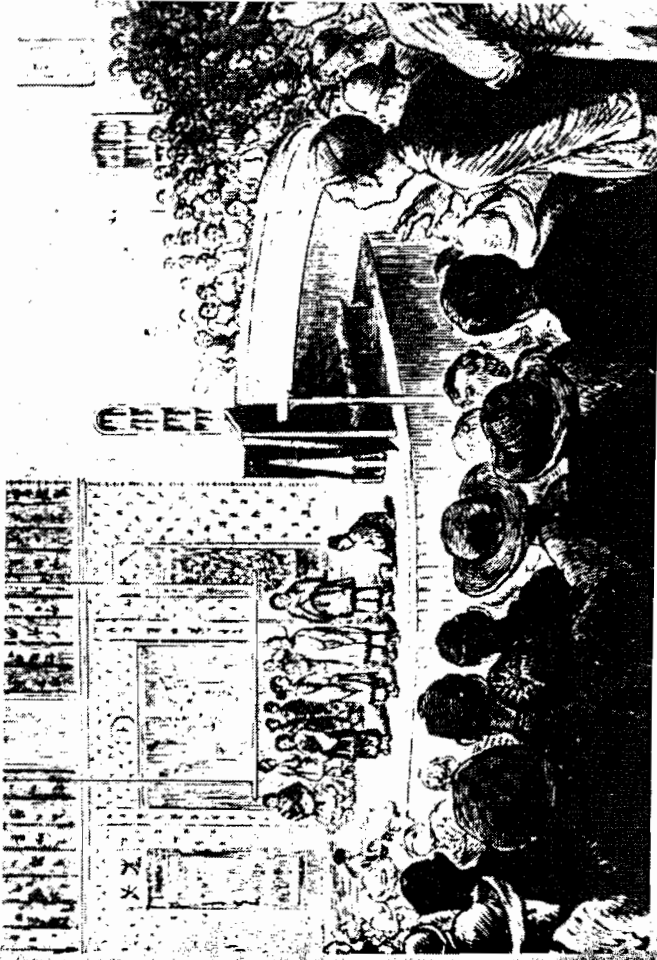
Punjabi farm laborers followed the harvesting of the different crops; they also performed various tasks, depending on the time of the year — pruning in December and January, irrigation work from March through May, and fruit picking from July through October. The "turbaned" workers "were continually on the wing," reported Annette Thackwell Johnson for the *Independent* in 1922, "coming from the melon and cotton fields in the Imperial Valley, en route to the fig orchards and vineyards of Fresno, or the rice fields near Sacramento." The Asian Indians moved around a great deal during the year because they contracted farm work for cultivating and pruning grapes or fruit trees, planting and harvesting rice, picking grapes and fruit. "During the grape picking season great numbers of them are in Fresno County," a Stockton lawyer said. "At the time of rice harvesting there will be about a thousand of them near Willows; during the cotton season in Imperial Valley (this being when the weather is very hot), they go to that place for work."²¹

Traveling in gangs from farm to farm, Punjabi laborers worked from ten to fourteen hours a day, depending on the season and the type of crop. "We got up at half past three," said one of them describing work in the asparagus fields, "and before the first faint

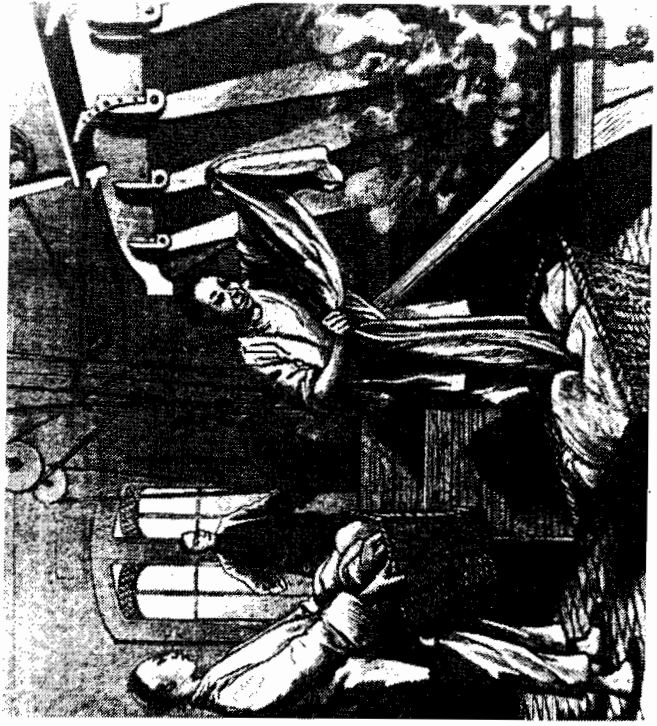
daylight was visible we were ready for work." The workers were given miles and miles of rows. Cutting asparagus was monotonous and repetitious. "As soon as I had knelt down with my knife and cut out one head and put it in the box, there would be another one sprouting before me. Then I would have to stoop again, and it was this continuous picking and stooping that made it a terrible form of exercise." All day long it was "walk and bend, bend and walk," from half past four in the morning until seven in the evening. Periodically the boss — "an American foreman" — would come into the asparagus fields and yell, "Hurry up! Hurry up!"²²

But the workers initiated ways to set their own pace. "We had an extraordinary boss," "an Italian constantly swearing and spitting," an Asian Indian recalled. The boss thought that he could discipline his workers by shouting at them, and so they devised "a very clever trick." "Whenever he shouted we worked hard and as he stopped shouting we relaxed our speed." After shouting continuously for a half hour or so, the boss would leave the fields; the workers would then slow down while vigilantly watching for his return. "We nearly always heard him before we saw him for he was noisily drunk half the day and the other half he fretted because he was not drunk." While picking fruit, workers would "disappear" into the trees and rest. "From our tree tops we would see the boss coming 'way off in the distance and when he reached us he found us working very hard." Sometimes the Asian Indians worked in the fields alongside Japanese farm laborers. Tensions developed as the two groups were pitted against each other. The Japanese taunted the Sikhs as "English slaves," remembered Tuly Singh Johl, and also called them "poles," referring to their tallness. But, working side by side, Japanese and Asian Indians also came to realize their shared brotherhood as workers. On one occasion, a Punjabi saw the boss in the distance approaching and said to the Japanese co-workers: "Boss is coming, hurry up." And one of the Japanese replied: "Hurry up-o, hurry up-o no good, work too much, all work finished; our job gone. Work slow, and job last, savvy?" The Asian-Indian worker understood. So between the two of them "the work that should have taken a week lasted a fortnight."²³

Another way to extract more wages for their work was to manipulate the account books. The gang leader would list in his book the names of sixty men instead of the fifty that actually worked, and he would ask the boss to pay for the work of sixty men. Or the Asian-Indian bookkeeper and gang leader would conspire to alter



A Chinese opera in San Francisco's Chinatown, circa 1880. In the dark, smoke-filled theater, sitting in a segregated section, could be seen Chinese women.



A Chinese laundryman in the late nineteenth century. "The Chinese laundryman does not learn his trade in China; there are no laundries in China." (Courtesy Library of Congress.)

the figures in the books. "Whenever the bookkeeper said thirty [men], the overseer translated thirty into forty," a worker revealed. "The bookkeeper would then make a profound bow as if the overseer's word were law, and there was no overseer on earth who could resist that bow. This form of cheating we later on called 'bonus' and we gave the name of 'bonus monger' to our bookkeeper."²⁴

Camping near the fields, Asian-Indian migrant workers often slept under the stars or in tents. They were also housed in bunkhouses, barns, and sheds; twelve men could be found crowded into a single room, sleeping on the floor with blankets. Their religion determined their diet. The Muslims were not allowed to eat pork, and as a rule they would not purchase meat that had been prepared by other hands, which usually limited their meat to poultry and lamb butchered by themselves. The Hindus were vegetarians and usually had their own cooks in the camps. The Sikhs subsisted chiefly upon vegetables, fruit, milk, and *roti* (tortilla-like cakes of bread). Individual workers sometimes drank from one to two quarts of milk a day. Coming from a section of India where neither vegetable oil nor lard was commonly used, they consumed large quantities of butter, or *ghi*, amounting to at least fifteen pounds per person monthly. "Ghi bunanda salna," "It's the butter that makes the food," they said. The daughter of a Korean farmer in California remembered how much the Sikh laborers enjoyed their butter: "They would sit around a large pot of melted butter and garlic, dipping tortillas made with flour and water into it." The Asian Indians liked their foods heavily spiced with curry (*basar*), coriander seed (*dhanial*), cumin seed (*zira*), cayenne (*lal mirch*), and black pepper (*kali mirch*). In one of the camps, an Asian Indian told a visiting lady: "We eat no meat, that is, no beef — the cow is sacred." "But you drink milk?" she snapped skeptically. "And your cow gives you the milk!" "Yes," he countered, "we drink our mother's milk also, but we do not eat her!"²⁵

The gangs were, according to Bruce La Brack, "democratic bodies whose members shared a common religion, language, social background, set of values, and sense of purpose. Traditional patterns of leadership and cooperation as well as social distinctions found in the rural Punjab were frequently recreated within these work groups." In California the gangs became substitutes for families. Asian-Indian men, without wives and families, came to depend on the gangs for companionship and security. As members of a gang, they worked together, traveled together, lived and ate together, shared expenses and sorrows. They felt close bonds to one another. In the event one



Hmong in Merced, California, 1988. "In America, we don't wear our traditional clothing . . . We only wear our traditional clothing on special days, and I will make my children only one set of clothes." Photo by Chuong Chung.



Naturalization ceremony for Asian immigrants. Elderly Issei, forced to be "strangers" in America, were eager to become citizens in their adopted country. Photo by Tovo Miyatake.

of them died, they collectively paid for the funeral and cremation costs, sent photographs of the body to India, and contributed money to the widow of the deceased.²⁶

By the 1920s, Asian-Indian farm workers were able to negotiate for wages equal to those paid Japanese and white workers. By then a few Asian Indians had also become tenant farmers and even farm owners. "My experience in the labor camp inspection," reported a sanitary engineer for the State Commission of Immigration and Housing, "shows that the Hindus are rapidly leaving the employed list and are becoming employers." But many were pushed as well as pulled into farming. Due to racial discrimination, explained farmer Dalip S. Saund of the Imperial Valley, "few opportunities existed for me or people of my nationality in the state at the time. I was not a citizen and could not become one. The only way Indians in California could make a living . . . was to join with others who had settled in various parts of the state as farmers."²⁷

Most of the Asian-Indian farmers probably had been gang bosses initially, and their education and ability to speak English as well as their higher income enabled them to enter agricultural enterprise. Partnership farming was very popular among the Punjabis: two to eight men would advance an equal amount of money for investment in a farm, becoming equal shareholders, and one partner would manage the business. Harnam Singh Sidhu, for example, formed a partnership with several other Sikhs to lease a thousand acres in Sutter County for rice farming. Their expenses were high, for they had to buy a thrasher, tractor, and other rice-harvesting machinery. But their first year's crop was very successful, enabling them to pay off their debts. The Punjabis were "excellent farmers, very industrious, willing to work under trying conditions," stated a white landlord. "In the heat of summer they got up at 4 o'clock, worked with their teams until about 10 A.M., then with the hoe until say 4 P.M. and then with their teams until 9 o'clock in the evening." In 1919, Asian Indians leased 86,315 acres and owned 2,077 acres in California. Their lands were located in the Sacramento Valley and the Imperial Valley, two areas accounting for nearly 90 percent of the total acreage farmed by Asian Indians. Many Punjabi farmers grew crops familiar to them in India, especially cotton and rice. In the Sacramento Valley, they devoted 45,000 out of the 59,000 acres under their cultivation to rice production. Other Asian-Indian farmers raised nuts, fruits, and potatoes; Jawala and Bisaka Singh became known as the "Potato Kings" of Holtville.²⁸

After the enactment of the 1920 Alien Land Law and the 1923 *Thind* decision, Asian Indians were denied the right to own land in California. Some farmers were forced to become laborers again. "Since the Alien Land Laws were put into effect," said former landowner Sucha Singh, "I have been working for others near Holtville." Other Asian Indians continued to hold land by registering it under the names of their children born in the United States and therefore American citizens. The American-born sons of one Punjabi family held land for fellow countrymen for a commission of a dollar an acre. Most Asian Indians utilized a "front man" strategy, buying or leasing land and working out verbal agreements to have the property placed under the names of Anglo farmers, bankers, and lawyers. When Munshi Singh Thiara purchased twenty acres in Sutter County in 1918, he took an American as a "silent partner" who served as the legal owner of the property. In 1925, Imam Bakhash, his son Kalu Khan, and his partner, Atta Muhammad, leased two thousand acres near Willows, but their attorney, Duard Gies, actually leased the land in his own name and received a share of the crop for serving as the "front man." Similarly in 1928, Babu Khan and his brother Naimat Khan leased two thousand acres near Butte City in the name of their attorney, Jerry Barcelox of Chico. Harnam Singh Sidhu purchased forty-five acres of land under the name of an American whom he trusted, calling the arrangement a "dummy partnership." "Many of our American friends bought land for us under their names," recalled Bagga Singh Sunga of El Centro, "and so we were able to carry on farming." The director of the Holtville National Bank held lands for many Punjabi clients, and his bank became known as the "Hindu Bank." Punjabis also formed corporations with Anglos, an arrangement that enabled them to skirt the law and farm their own lands.²⁹

Unlike Japanese farmers, Punjabi farmers developed a reliance on Anglos in their strategy to evade the Alien Land Law. Compared to the Japanese, few Punjabis had wives in the United States; hence they could not as easily as the Japanese register lands under the names of American-born children. Very few in number, Punjabis also were not able to form larger and more self-sufficient communities as were the Japanese. Consequently, they could not develop the vertical linkages that enabled the Japanese to produce, market, and distribute their crops within an ethnic organizational network. Unlike the Japanese, Punjabis had a low rate of literacy and needed assistance from Anglos to conduct their business.³⁰

Asian-Indian landownership indicated a shift from sojourner to settler. Virtually all of the Asian Indians had come here initially to work temporarily and then return to their homeland. But even as early as 1910, according to a U.S. Immigration Report, only 46 percent of the Asian Indians interviewed expressed an intention to return to India; the others were either uncertain or had decided to remain permanently in the United States. An Asian-Indian immigrant told an interviewer in 1922 that he had left the Punjab "so long ago," meaning ten or twelve years. "Are you homesick?" he was then asked. "Not any longer, memsahib. One adjusts oneself." "Are you going back to the Punjab?" The immigrant shrugged, smiled, and then replied: "I make more money here."³¹

But even as settlers, very few had families in America. These immigrants were virtually all men: the ratio of Asian Indian men to women, calculated Bruce La Brack, was seventy-five to one at "its most favorable." But actually the ratio was even higher. In 1914 women represented only 0.24 percent of the 5,000 Asian Indians in California. Initially the men thought they would be here temporarily; moreover, many of them had already mortgaged their farms in India to pay for their transportation expenses and were too deeply in debt to consider bringing their wives and children with them. At least a third to half of the immigrants had left families behind in India. An Immigration Commission survey of 474 Asian Indians in 1909 showed that thirty-one were widowed, 228 were single, and 215 were married and had wives in India. That same year immigrant Saint Nihal Singh observed in an essay published in *Out West*:

One of the chief points of difference between the emigrant from India and those hailing from Europe lies in the fact that the European brings along with him his family — his wife and children . . . — when he emigrates to America. Only one sex is represented among the Hindoo immigrants. Probably the greater percentage of them are married — for Hindoos marry young — but they leave their wives and children behind them and venture alone to find a fortune in the West. There is only one Hindoo woman on the North American continent. She lives with her husband, a doctor of Vedic medicine, in Vancouver, B.C.³²

As Asian Indians established themselves here, they hoped to send for their families or to bring women to America to marry. A handful of women came as wives. Mrs. Nand Kaur Singh recalled her first home in an isolated apple orchard in Utah: "When we got

there it was 11 at night. We went for a walk. . . . And then I started crying. I said, 'What's wrong with India?' And he said, 'You will like it here soon.' " But adjustment did not come easily. "I had come from a village where I was surrounded by family and friends, and here there was no one but my husband, who worked hard all day. . . . There were none of my countrywomen to speak with, and it was against our custom to talk with men who were not related."³³

Altogether only a very few Asian-Indian women emigrated, and after the enactment of the 1917 Immigration Law, men with wives in India could not bring them here. Moola Singh had left his wife in the Punjab in 1911 and had saved enough money to pay for her passage to America. But by the time he had sent the money to her, the law had already been enacted. "She worry," Singh told an interviewer many years later. "She good, nice looking, healthy, but she love. You know love, person no eat, worry, then maybe die. Mother wrote one time letter, 'she sick, you gotta come home.' Then I write her letter from Arizona, to her I say, 'I'm coming, don't worry, I be there.' " But she passed away in 1921 before Singh could return. "Lots of time I dream," Singh said sadly, "she come close to me, she's with me now you know. No, she don't want come close, she go round, round, no come close in my dream . . . that's a life gone." Many Punjabi men thought about returning to India and bringing their wives back. "I knew that if I went back to India to join her, we would never be allowed to come back to the United States," said Bagga Singh Sunga of El Centro. "If we had our women here," said a fellow countryman, "our whole life would be different."³⁴

Punjabi men were usually prohibited from marrying white women. County clerks in California often decided that the anti-miscegenation laws applied to Asian Indians and denied marriage licenses to Asian Indian—white couples. Consequently, Asian-Indian men seeking to marry Caucasian women had to travel to states like Arizona. One couple figured out an imaginative way to skirt the law: they were married at sea, outside of the three-mile limit of California. According to the *Sutter County Farmer* of May 29, 1923, "the groom was Sandar Din . . . and his bride, Berilla M. Nutter . . . both of Sutter County." After they had been refused a marriage license in Sutter County and then in Contra Costa County, the "Hindu took the prospective bride to San Francisco where he hired a launch . . . and when the boat reached the three-mile limit the captain performed the marriage ceremony and the party returned."³⁵

Asian-Indian men frequently married Mexican women. In

time want to leave me I would tell her, 'The road is wide; go ahead.' Many Asian Indian-Mexican marriages failed. In a study of 130 couples in the Imperial Valley, Karen Leonard found that thirty-five of the men had married more than once, a divorce ratio that was high for the time and that ran counter to general trends showing a lower ratio of divorces for people with rural, foreign-born, and Catholic backgrounds. As many men as women filed for divorce. In their petitions, the men claimed their wives had argued with them and cursed them, refused to cook and clean for their Punjabi friends, visited their mothers and sisters whenever they wished, and shopped in town where they purchased makeup. On the other hand, the women complained that their husbands drank heavily, physically abused them, committed adultery, and demanded domestic services beyond reason.³⁷

In these Asian Indian-Mexican families cultural traditions were often melded. Foods, for example, were interchanged — tortillas for *rotis* or *chapattis* and jalapeños for Punjabi chili peppers. Languages were also mixed together. The Mexican wives generally understood some Punjabi, but the children spoke English and Spanish in the home. Punjabi fathers learned to speak Spanish. The children were usually given Spanish first names like Armando, Jose, and Rudolfo. A few of the sons had Indian names, but they went by their Spanish names or nicknames. Mexican mothers told Leonard: "Gurbachen? Oh, you mean Bacho," and "Kishen? That's Domingo." Lohar and Teresa Bupara named their three children Sarjit, Oscar, and Anna Luisa. The oldest, Sarjit, spoke Spanish, English, and Punjabi. Asian Indian husbands and Mexican wives generally retained their respective religions. "There are several instances of a Sikh or Muslim husband going through a Catholic marriage ceremony so that the wife could continue to take communion in her church," reported Leonard. Moola Singh's wife, Susanna, said: "I'm a Catholic. . . . Well, God gives a lot of different languages . . . but I don't think so many Gods." The children were baptized Catholic, and were raised under the *compadrazgo* (godparents) system of the Spanish culture and the Catholic Church. In Asian Indian-Mexican families, the godparents were usually other Punjabi-Mexican couples. The godmother helped to give religious instruction, and the godfather provided advice and presents such as bicycles and confirmation dresses. In addition to godparents, the children also had many "uncles" — their fathers' Punjabi bachelor friends.³⁸

There must have been many "uncles," for most of the Asian-

northern California between 1913 and 1946, 47 percent of their wives were Mexican. In central California, 76 percent were Mexican. Meanwhile, in southern California, where most of the Asian Indians with families resided, 92 percent of their spouses were Mexican. "There have already been quite a few marriages between Mexican women and Hindustani men," noted Taraknath Das in 1923. Over 50 percent of the Mexican spouses were immigrants themselves. Most of the Mexican women were young, usually twelve to twenty years younger than their husbands; like the Punjabi men, they were farm laborers. They met each other while working and developed relations leading to marriage. Such marriages were signs of Sikh settlement. Lohar Bupara married Teresa, a Mexican immigrant, and purchased land for farming near Delano under her name. Inder Singh, a farmer in the Imperial Valley, told an interviewer in 1924: "Two years ago I married a Mexican woman and through her I am able to secure land for farming. Your land law can't get rid of me now; I am going to stay." Many Punjabi-Mexican marriages involved sisters: one sister would marry an Asian-Indian man and then introduce her sister to a friend of her husband. Mir Dad, for example, married Susana Lopez in 1924: he had met her while visiting his friend Mir Alam Khan, the husband of Susana's younger sister, Maria. Similarly, Moola Singh married Maria La Tocharia in 1932, then her sister Julia married Mota Singh and another sister, Hortencia, married Natha Singh. Their marriages to Mexican women were generally not approved by their families in India. "It used to be that our folks in India objected to such marriages," said Sucha Singh in 1924. He himself had not written to his family about his marriage to a Mexican. "I suppose others have told them about it, but I do not care even if they should be 'sour' about it."³⁶

Asian Indian-Mexican marriages had their share of cultural differences and conflicts. "My wife is inclined to be like the American women to a certain degree," explained Inder Singh. "The American woman is entirely too free; she is the boss. . . . My wife would like to boss me, but I am not disturbed by that and we get along very well." Apparently Singh had learned to make adjustments. At first he had been "really shocked by the freedom of the women" in America. "I have now grown accustomed to the practice of men and women going along the streets together. If I were to return to India, I believe I would carry out this practice over there." But Singh also complained that there was "entirely too much divorce here because the women were so free." Referring to his wife, Singh said: "Should she at any

Indian immigrants were confined to bachelorhood. The "uncles" were often partners of the married men, and lived in the same household. They told the children stories about the Punjab and made them lemon pickles and sweet desserts like *lassi*. On Sundays, they gave them money for movies and ice cream. Many of these uncles were not really bachelors, for they had wives and children in India. Sometimes the men tried to joke about their situation, their lonely separation from their wives. One of their stories was about "a man who went away from his home and two years later his wife wrote him that a child had been born to her." Feeling very proud, the man showed the letter to his comrades. "They asked him how could she have a child while he was away so long? But the man shook his head wisely and answered, 'But I write her letters.'"³⁹

The humor of this story highlighted the reality of a community of men cut off from women. Visits to prostitutes were "far from uncommon," historian Sucheta Mazumdar noted. Alcoholism was a pervasive problem, leading to brawls and even murders within the Asian-Indian community. Drinking was a "most common vice" among Asian Indians, observed Das, estimating that about a third to half of his countrymen drank. "Quite a few of them were in the habit of drinking strong liquors, such as whiskey and brandy, and very often got drunk." While working in the asparagus fields, Dhan Gopal Mukerji sadly witnessed his countrymen drinking themselves into "forgetfulness." They would buy liquor and hide in order to "indulge" their "appetites," "drinking up their wages in order to forget they were alive. All the old Indian bringing up was being swept away by a few months of inhumanly cruel work." The Yuba County death certificates show that syphilis and chronic alcoholism were leading causes of death among the immigrants in the early period.⁴⁰

There was little available for the Punjabis to do during their leisure hours. Comparing his fellow countrymen to the Japanese and Chinese in America, Das observed: "While the Japanese play [in pool halls and bowling alleys] and the Chinese gamble, the Hindustanees debate." They "indulged in unnecessary discussion and debate, which, however it might sharpen their wits, often led to arguments and quarrels."⁴¹

Their religion, on the other hand, helped to give coherence and solace to their lives. Important religious events reinforced their sense of ethnicity and created a feeling of Asian-Indian community in America. Muslim Asian Indians observed the fast of Muharram. "They fasted from moon to moon and ate little at certain appointed hours,"

Mukerji observed. "With the hop pickers there was a priest whose name was Hadji, since he had done a 'hadji,' that is, a pilgrimage to Mecca." He was the only one in the group who could read the Koran in Arabic. Since the workers thought it would be sacrilegious to have Hadji read the Koran from the floor, they piled up bales of hay about eight feet high and had Hadji recite from the top of this edifice. For hours and hours, Hadji prayed loudly, his shrill voice praising "O Allah, the Almighty Allah, the Compassionate." After the period of fasting was over, the workers made preparations for the feast. "The Mohammedans would not buy the American butcher's meat, for animals whose flesh they eat must be killed by having their throats cut and in no other way. So they bought three big rams and after a great deal of prayer and benediction, cut their throats." During their feast, they beat tin cans and sang all night. Their songs had a common refrain:

Your hair is like a panther's shadow.

*Your eye brows are like the curve of a hawk's wings.*⁴²

"Wherever there are 20 or 25 Sikhs," observed Das, "there is a temple also, which is sometimes nothing but a shack used for divine service." Each temple had a priest, usually one of the workers in the gang responsible on a part-time basis for the religious exercises and the care of the temple. Elected annually by vote, the priest received a salary as well as room and board. In Stockton, the Sikhs erected an elaborate temple. Two stories high, the building had a ground floor with a hall for meetings and rooms for the priest's residence. Upstairs was the prayer hall where the Granth, or sacred book of the Sikh Gurus, was kept on the altar. In this hall, decorated with rich carpets, a canopy, and pictures and texts on the walls, the priest would read the scriptures twice daily. Sikhs from throughout northern California visited the Stockton *Gurdwara* ("gateway of the guru") or temple four to six times annually, especially on the major festival days such as Baisakhi, Guru Arjun's Martyrdom Day, Guru Nanak's Birthday, and Guru Gobind Singh's Birthday. The temples functioned as important places where the immigrants could gather to worship and celebrate religious festivals; they were also community centers where the Asian Indians could socialize, settle quarrels, and assist newcomers.⁴³

But the temples served a dwindling Punjabi population, a community of forgotten immigrants. By 1940, according to the U.S. Census, the Asian-Indian population in the United States had dropped

to 2,405, most of them (60 percent) residing in California. The community was composed mostly of older people; 56 percent were over forty years of age and 32 percent over fifty. Occupationally, 65 percent were in agriculture — 15 percent as farmers and 50 percent as farm laborers. Only 4 percent were professionals. Of the sixteen hundred Asian Indians over twenty-five years of age, more than a third had not completed even a year of schooling. Their educational level was the lowest of all racial and ethnic groups reported in the census: the median number of school years completed by Asian Indians was only 3.7.

Five years later, in 1945, a lecturer of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania surveyed the Asian-Indian community in America. The community was "small and stable," observed Dr. S. Chandrasekhar. Men who had been on the move in search of jobs had settled down as heads of families. The improvement of their economic status was accompanied by the "Americanization" of their children. While the parents spoke Hindustani in the home, their children had begun to attend the local public schools and learned to speak English. For the American-born generation, India was "unreal and far away." But whether they were first- or second-generation Asian Indians, they felt isolated, not knowing for certain their place and future in America. In their identity, they seemed to be rooted neither here in America nor there in India. "Some would like to go to India, marry, and return to their adopted land; some would like relatives in India to come here and share the American way of life," explained Chandrasekhar. But their cultural ties to India had been "cut asunder," and "new blood" from the homeland could not be introduced.⁴⁴