

Religion, ethnicity and politics: Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrants in the United States

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Abstract

This article focuses on the political struggles between Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrant groups in the United States over the definition of “Indianness”. Hindu Indian American organizations define India as a Hindu society and are strong supporters of the Hindu nationalist movement in India. Muslim Indian American organizations, on the other hand, view India as a multi-religious and multicultural society. They are striving to safeguard India’s secularism and towards this end, have entered into coalitional relationships with lower caste groups. Both types of organizations are working to influence American and Indian politics in line with their respective interests, leading to an exacerbation of the conflict between the two immigrant groups. This article examines the reasons for this development and its implications, both for the development of an Indian American community in the United States and for religion and politics in India.

Keywords: Asian Indian Americans; Hindu immigrants; Muslim Indian immigrants; Hindu nationalism; ethnicity; immigrant politics.

Introduction

An earlier issue of this journal (April 1997) dealt with the relationship between ethnicity and religion and posed questions such as the following: ‘Under what circumstances do ethnic and religious cleavages coincide and under what circumstances do they cross-cut one another? . . . Where religious ideals reinforce ethnic allegiances, is this likely to arouse especially fervent expressions of commitment?’ (Jacobson, Ichijo and Smith 1997, p. 237). This article addresses these questions and seeks to further the debate by looking at the politicization and transnationalization of such cleavages in the immigrant context. The issue is important since transnational religious politics have become a powerful force,

in the era of 'fading states' (Rudolph and Piscatori 1997). As globalization proceeds, nationalism is no longer contained by the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, and nationalist movements are frequently initiated and orchestrated by immigrant communities living thousands of miles from the homeland. This article focuses on the political mobilization of Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrant groups in the United States based on their very different constructions of Indian identity. While many differences between Indian immigrants such as region, language and caste are in the process of weakening, religious differences and tensions seem to have been exacerbated in the immigrant context. I examine the reasons for this development and its implications, both for the development of an Indian American community in the United States and for religion and politics in India.

The dominant Hindu and Muslim Indian American organizations have developed opposing constructions of 'Indianness'. Hindu Indian American organizations view India as a Hindu society whose true nature has been sullied by the invasions of Muslims, the British, and the post-colonial domination of 'pseudo-secular' Indians. They are working for the establishment of a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) in India and are strong supporters of the *Hindutva* (Hinduness) movement, currently the dominant force in Indian politics. Muslim Indian American organizations have an opposing and more inclusive definition of Indianness, viewing India's multi-religious history and society as evidence that India is a multi-religious and multicultural society (Kurien, forthcoming a). They are striving to safeguard India's secularism and towards this end, some of them have entered into coalitional relationships with lower caste groups. Both types of organizations are working to influence American and Indian politics in line with their respective interests. This has led to an exacerbation of the conflict between the two immigrant groups.

My study is based on an examination of the activities of two umbrella organizations in Southern California: the Federation of Hindu Associations [FHA] and the American Federation of Muslims from India [AFMI] which represent the two different positions very clearly. The FHA is based in Southern California. Although the AFMI is a national organization, its current President is a Southern California resident and the local chapter is particularly active in attempting to construct an alternative to the Hindu nationalist perspective of the FHA. I focused on the FHA and the AFMI because they are fairly representative of the dominant Hindu and Muslim Indian American organizations. It is, however, important to emphasize that the composition, platform and goals of neither organization are representative of the average Hindu and Muslim immigrant in the United States. This seeming contradiction will be further discussed a little later in the article.

Data on these organizations were collected over a period of two years (1996–1998) through in-depth interviews with leaders and members of

the organizations, participation in some of the meetings and activities of each of these organizations (including attending the 1997 annual AFMI meeting in San Jose). This research was supplemented by fieldwork in India throughout the summer of 1997, to examine the impact of these organizations on Indian society and politics. In addition, I monitored their activities between 1995 and 1999 through an examination of their own publications in newspapers, magazines and newsletters, and the accounts of their activities given in Indian American newspapers.

After presenting some background on Indian immigrants in the United States and the two organizations, I examine the opposing constructions of the FHA and AFMI. To explain the differences in the constructions of 'Indianness' of the FHA and the AFMI and the reason for the exacerbation of tensions between Hindu and Muslim Indians in the United States, I draw on three approaches dealing with immigrant religion and politics. The first approach views diasporic politics as being an outcome of the marginalization experienced by immigrants. While marginalization is certainly an important contributing factor to the politicization of Indian immigrants, this perspective cannot explain why such politicization is largely on religious lines and why Hindu Indian organizations tend to promote reactionary causes and Muslim Indian organizations support liberal politics. The second approach, which deals with the reasons that religion and religious identity become more important for immigrants, explains some of the reasons for mobilization along religious lines. According to this perspective, religion and religious organizations increase in salience for immigrants because of the disruption and disorientation caused by the immigration experience and because religious organizations become the means to form ethnic communities and identities in the immigrant context. A third approach, argues that immigrants mobilize on ethnic lines since ethnicity is a resource that can bring material benefits to groups in host societies and provides further information on why immigrant groups become politicized around constructions of ethnicity. My theoretical perspective combines these three approaches and extends them to explain why tensions between religious groups from the same country can be exacerbated in the immigrant context and why this leads to separate and competing constructions of national identity. I also distinguish between factors motivating the leadership of such groups and those motivating the mass of supporters. Finally, I examine the consequences of the political struggles between Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrant groups on religion and politics in India and the United States.

Indian immigrants in the United States

Currently there are well over a million Indian immigrants in the United States (Lessinger 1995, p. 2). Immigration is a selective process and

therefore immigrant populations are rarely representative of the population of the home country. This is important to keep in mind as we discuss constructions of 'Indianness' by Indian Americans. Immigration from India to the United States occurred during two different historical periods. The first phase was between 1899 and 1914 when around 6,800 Indians arrived in California. Most of the Indians were peasants from Punjab province and they took up farming in rural California.

The second phase of immigration began after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. This immigration was largely family based and brought Indians from all over India and from a variety of religious backgrounds. It is now common to talk about 'two waves' of post 1965 Indian immigration to the United States. The 'first wave' Indians came under the 'special skills' provision of the Act and were thus mostly highly educated, fluent English speakers from urban backgrounds, who entered into professional and managerial careers. This explains why Indians are among the wealthiest and most educated foreign-born groups in the United States. According to the 1990 Census, the median family income of Indians in the United States was \$ 49, 309, well above that for non-Hispanic whites which was \$ 37, 630 (Waters and Eschbach 1999, p. 315); 43.6 per cent were employed either as professionals (mostly doctors and engineers) or managers; and 58.4 per cent had at least a Bachelor's degree (Shinagawa 1996, pp. 113, 119). The highly selective nature of the immigration can be seen by the fact that in the same year, the per capita income in India was \$ 350, and only 48 per cent of Indians were even literate (that is, could read and write their own names).¹

There are indications that the 'second wave' immigrants might bring down some of the high socio-economic measures reported above. Many of this group are relatives of the first-wave immigrants, sponsored under the 'family reunification' provision of the 1965 Act and do not have the same educational or professional status as the first wave. In 1996, for instance, of the total 44,859 Indian immigrants admitted, 34, 291 were admitted under family sponsorship and only 9, 919 in employment-based preferences (Springer 1997). Thus, states like California which have been the top destinations for this wave of immigrants report that 10.2 per cent of the Indian American population and 14 per cent of Indian American children (compared to the national average of 9 per cent) were living below the poverty line in 1995 (Springer 1995).

Supporters of the *Hindutva* movement characterize India as a Hindu country. Although Hindus constitute the overwhelming majority, over 80 per cent of the population,² religious minorities are a significant presence in India, particularly given their location (most religious minorities are concentrated in urban areas and in a few regions of the country) and absolute numbers. Muslims comprise over 12 per cent of the population and there are more Muslims in India than in neighbouring Pakistan, an

Islamic state. Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) and Sikhs each constitute around 2 per cent of the population.³ Indian religious minorities also have a very long history in India, going back over sixteen centuries in the case of Christians and eleven centuries in the case of Muslims.

There are no national or regional figures on the proportions of Indians in the United States belonging to various religions. However, indirect evidence indicates that Hindus are under-represented in the United States in relation to their proportion in India,⁴ indicating the presence of significant numbers of Indian religious minorities in the United States. Among religious minorities, Sikhs and Christians seem to be particularly over-represented. While upper castes form only around 25 per cent of the Indian population, given the élite nature of the immigration to the United States, most Indian Americans are of this background.

Indian immigrants in Southern California

There are over 100,000 individuals of Asian Indian origin in the Southern California region.⁵ The area in and around Los Angeles has the third highest number of Indian immigrants of any region in the country (Portes and Rumbaut 1990, p. 38). While support for the *Hindutva* project can now be found among sections of the Hindu Indian community all over the United States, there is a particularly strong and aggressive movement in Southern California. A significant section of the Southern California Hindu Indian population seem to either passively or actively support the movement.

In other areas of the country where there are large numbers of Indians such as New York, Chicago, Boston and San Francisco, many Hindus have mobilized against the movement (although for the most part, such counter-movements tend to be overshadowed by the *Hindutva* forces). In most of these areas, the counter-movements are often initiated by Indian American groups (both students and faculty) on college and university campuses (Misir 1996). The Indian American discourse in these areas has therefore emerged as a contested terrain between such groups and the more conservative established Indian immigrant community. However, this is not the case in Southern California. While there are groups such as the Coalition for a Secular and Egalitarian India (now renamed Coalition for an Egalitarian and Pluralistic India) founded by some members of AFMI and a few other Indians of various religious backgrounds, and the Indian Progressive Study Group at the University of California, Los Angeles who have been attempting to project an alternative voice, by and large they have not succeeded in making any appreciable dent in the support for *Hindutva* in the region. I shall return to some of the possible reasons for the strong *Hindutva* movement in Southern California later in the article.

The establishment of the two organizations

The *Hindutva* movement calling for a Hindu state has gained strength in India since the late 1980s and in 1998, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* [BJP], the party supporting Hindu nationalism, came to power, after winning the national elections. Since the BJP was not able to obtain an absolute majority in parliament, it formed a coalition government with its allies. New elections were called in 1999 and the BJP and its allies were returned to power. The watershed that first propelled the BJP into the limelight was the demolition of a sixteenth-century mosque in North India on 6 December 1992 by *Hindutva* supporters, despite attempts by the government to prevent it. According to members of the *Hindutva* movement, the Babri mosque had been built by a Muslim emperor over a temple which commemorated the spot where the Hindu god Ram was born. Communal riots followed the demolition and several thousands, mostly Muslims, were killed.

The seeds of the *Hindutva* movement in America were first sown by the international Hindu organization, the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* [VHP] (World Hindu Council), founded in India in 1964. The VHP's American branch was established in the 1970s on the east coast. However, as a tax-exempt religio-cultural organization, the VHP in the United States cannot pursue a political agenda and thus at least officially it has remained devoted to promoting Hinduism and pursuing cultural and social activities.

As the term *Hindutva* or Hinduness implies, the movement has several facets. Besides the explicitly political aspects, the movement also lays stress on the greatness of Hinduism and Hindu culture, on the importance of Hindu unity, and on the need to defend Hinduism and Hindus against discrimination, defamation and the pressure to convert to other religions. This is the source of its power and appeal, enabling the movement to recruit even apolitical supporters.

The Federation of Hindu Associations [FHA]

Southern California has been the centre of the explicitly political Hindu nationalist movement for several years, even before the formation of the FHA (Jha 1993). The FHA was formed in Artesia, Orange county in early 1993 in the wake of the demolition of the mosque (which the activists claim inspired and energized them). The FHA was one of the first Hindu umbrella organizations to be based in the United States (earlier Hindu American groups were branches of organizations based in India). The organization launched its major activities in 1995 and in the period of a few years, FHA activists have emerged as a powerful force within the Indian community, locally and nationally as well as in India, and the organization has been very successful in recruiting supporters and influencing community affairs.

Although the organization is based in Southern California, its leadership has close ties with like-minded individuals and organizations around the country. Since the VHP cannot support an overt political platform, the founding goal of the FHA was to unify Hindu Americans to 'specifically pursue Hindu political interests'.⁶ In its first few years of operation, the FHA refused to get themselves registered as a religious organization and thus obtain tax-exempt status since this would have meant that, like the VHP, they would not be able to promote an overt political agenda. But under pressure from donors, they registered themselves in 1997. However, their platform did not really change. The activists are mostly wealthy, middle-aged, upper-caste, North Indian business men with established businesses, often in the care of wives or relatives. Their economic security gives them the leisure and the resources to pursue their Hindu nationalist activities.

The FHA sponsors visits of *Hindutva* leaders from India to Southern California and now has a lot of influence over such leaders and the Indian politicians who support Hindu nationalism. In the first few years of its existence, one or two of the most extremist of such individuals were annually given the 'Hindu of the Year' award by the organization. They have also been trying to influence American foreign and domestic policy by assiduously wooing politicians in an attempt to communicate their ideas regarding Indian society and politics and an Indian American identity.

The FHA leadership propagates their ideas by organizing and speaking at religious celebrations at which the message of *Hindutva* is given and through their copious writings and frequent full-page advertisements in Indian American newspapers. Since 1996 they have been organizing an annual open-air celebration in Southern California for Diwali, a major Hindu festival, which reportedly draws several thousands of attendees every year.⁷ Over the past few years, they have been collecting funds to build an 'Ideal Hindu temple' which will be non-sectarian and where all major Hindu deities will be given equal status (FHA 1997a).

Claiming to represent Indian American Hindus, they act as the watchdogs and defenders of Hinduism in America and along with other American Hindu groups, they have been involved in campaigns against negative portrayals of Hindu deities, icons and music by the entertainment industry (Kurien, forthcoming b).

The American Federation of Muslims from India, [AFMI]

The American Federation of Muslims from India, a national organization, was formed in Washington in 1989 as a social service organization dedicated to the uplifting of Muslims in India (who, for a variety of reasons, remain well behind the Hindu community in terms of education, income and employment). The activists are mainly established professional men,

several of whom are medical doctors. Their programmes focus particularly on improving the educational status of Indian Muslims. However, subsequent to the demolition of the Babri mosque, the opposition to *Hindutva* and the promotion of secularism and communal harmony in India have become an important goal. Since 1994, AFMI has formed a coalition with *Dalit* (lower castes formerly considered 'untouchable') groups to support the advance of all the underprivileged groups in India.

According to Dr. Islam Abdullah, President of AFMI, there are around 300 Muslim Indian families in Southern California with whom the Southern California branch of the AFMI has direct or indirect contact. This branch of the AFMI has been very active, particularly in the wake of the Babri mosque demolition. In 1993 they organized a big fund-raising function to help victims of the riots which was attended by 600 people. According to Dr Aslam Abdullah, AFMI collected \$ 25,000 for the cause (from all over the country) and sent the money to India. The annual convention in the following year with the theme of 'Pluralism and Secularism – Issues and Challenges for India' was organized in Los Angeles.

AFMI has become extremely successful at fund raising in the United States and sponsors a range of social activities in India targeted at Muslims and *Dalits*. Like the Hindu organizations, AFMI also sponsors visits of prominent Indian politicians and public personalities who support their platform. In addition to their yearly conference in the United States, they hold an annual conference in India. AFMI works with other organizations like the Indian Muslim Relief Council [IMRC] and national Muslim organizations such as the Muslim Public Affairs Council [MPAC], to stay in regular contact with legislators and has become a significant political lobby group in Washington. In 1995 several AFMI members were invited to the White House to meet State Department officials and attend a reception hosted by Mrs Clinton (AFMI 1995, p. 3).

Despite their names, neither the FHA nor the AFMI represent all Hindu or Muslim Indian Americans. Although the FHA is a dominant force in this region, many Hindus in Southern California are not interested in or are opposed to their political agenda. I am aware that this is the case even with some organizations which are officially members of the FHA. FHA activists themselves have mentioned that they have faced opposition from some temples and individuals. In a letter to *India West*, an Indian American weekly, several faculty and graduate students mostly of Southern California Universities protested at FHA's conferment of the 'Hindu of the Year' awards to two individuals in India whose statements are believed to have incited violence against Muslims and had this to say: 'Most of us are Hindus; nor are all of us "secularists" and we most emphatically repudiate the attempt of the FHA to speak for us and to speak for "Hindus". It is curious that self-styled Hindus here appear

to know better the meaning of “Hinduism” than do most Hindus in India.’ (Lal *et al.* 1995, p. A5).

Similarly AFMI does not represent all Indian Muslim Americans. AFMI is described as an organization of ‘professionals and activists who are dedicated to the cause of peace and justice for all’ (AFMI 1996, n.p.). As such, the organization is both progressive and social service oriented and thus does not represent conservative Indian Muslims or those groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat (which have a significant presence in Southern California) who eschew politics completely and whose focus is exclusively on the moral and religious character of the individual (Ahmad 1991, p. 517).

The opposing constructions of FHA and AFMI

In this section, I present the constructions of Indian history of FHA and AFMI as well as their very different visions of the ideal Indian state and their political strategies (Kurien forthcoming (a)). I shall also demonstrate the ways in which both Hinduism and Islam are reformulated by both groups to fit their respective political agendas.

The FHA’s constructions of Indian history and the ideal Indian state

For *Hindutva* proponents, the Vedic age (around 1500–1000 B.C.) represents the essence of the Indian culture. According to the FHA, the true Vedic Hindu ‘essence’ was besmirched by successive foreign invasions and can only be restored by a Hindu state. Thus, the FHA sees Indian culture and civilization as Hindu, and true Indians as Hindus (which includes groups like the Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains whose religions originated in India out of the Hindu civilization). Groups like Muslims and Christians are viewed as resident aliens whose loyalties are suspect, since they owe allegiance to religions that originated outside India.

The interpretation of the Muslim period is central to the different historical constructions of Hindu and Muslim organizations. In an advertisement for a Hindu centre that the FHA wants to build in Southern California, they declare that they view the Muslim period as, ‘a prolonged national struggle [by Hindu kings] against foreign Islamic imperialism and not the conquest of India’ (FHA 1997c, p.B III). Thus, the FHA makes it clear that in their perspective, Islamic control over India was attempted but never really accomplished and that the Islamic rulers therefore played no role in creating modern Indian society or culture. A memorandum that the FHA presented to the Indian Ambassador states their position on the nature of the Islamic period even more explicitly.

The FHA feels that the government of India fails in her duties to teach the factual history of the past invaders, by not telling our generations

that invaders from Islamic blocs destroyed our culture, people and their temples. Instead, these ruthless barbarians are depicted and praised as kings of cultural achievements (FHA 1997b, p. C20).

A big grievance of the FHA is that while India was partitioned on the basis of religion to create Pakistan, an Islamic state, no Hindu state was given to the Hindus. What further aggrieves the FHA is that after demanding an Islamic state, most of the Muslims stayed in India and are now demanding a secular state and special concessions from the government (FHA 1995a, p. 117). The FHA views the post-independent period as being one dominated by 'pseudo-seculars' who have been 'pampering' minorities and engaging in 'Hindu bashing'.

The demolition of the Babri mosque on 6 December 1992 is seen as a watershed by both groups. However, what the demolition of the mosque represents is perceived in opposite ways. For FHA, it symbolized the fact that the Hindus who had suffered injustices for so long had finally decided to assert themselves. Thus, it marked the beginning of a new era, one where Hindus were going to be in power. An FHA publication summarizes their feelings:

[O]n December 6th of 1992 when the Babri structure was demolished in Ayodhya to restore the history and rebuild the Ram *mandir* [temple], an awakening of [the] Hindu soul took place to turn the direction of glorious Hinduism and make all of us so proud (FHA 1995a, p. 76).

FHA's vision of what a Hindu *rashtra* will look like was presented in an article written by Prithvi Raj Singh (1996b, pp. A28–9), President of FHA, in the *India Post* entitled, 'Can "*Hindutva*" Be Indian Nationalism?' While Hindu groups are to be given full 'freedom of thought and action' in a *Hindutva* state, Singh states that '*Hindutva* culture will enforce restriction[s] on some portions of other religions like Islam or Christianity', such as the right to preach that their deity is the only God. The *Hindutva* state will also 'not allow anyone to convert any child to any faith, until the child becomes a[n] . . . adult'. Another restriction is that, 'outside resources of money and power cannot be used to erect . . . Mosques or Missionary churches' (Singh 1996b, p. A29). (Note that he does not say anything about outside resources for Hindu temples.)

Although Singh states that 'local people and [the] local population of Muslims will be exempt from any mistreatment for atrocities committed by their invading forefathers in the past' his caveat that, 'injustices committed by those invaders, like destruction of Hindu temples or forceful conversions shall be corrected' is ominous. Singh adds that marriage and divorce procedures will be standardized (currently these are governed by the 'Personal Laws' of each religion) and that the Islamic call to

prayer from minarets of mosques will not be allowed 'as it disturbs the basic rights of non-believers of Islam'. (Here again, he does not say anything about prayers and music broadcast from temple loudspeakers). Singh concludes, '[t]hus *Hindutva* culture will be a blessing to the soulless society of Western style governments. Without imposing religious teachings and directions, the culture will bring religious values into public life' (Singh 1996b, p. A29).

The AFMI's constructions of Indian History and the ideal Indian state

AFMI contests FHA's claim that the Vedic age represents the essence of the Indian culture, arguing instead that Indian culture is an amalgamation of several influences with Islamic culture being a very important component (since the Islamic period of around nine centuries constitutes the longest single era in Indian history). AFMI also disagrees with FHA's claims of Islamic brutality and forced conversions by stating that but for one or two exceptions, most Muslim rulers practised a policy of religious tolerance with many even sponsoring Hindu temples and celebrations. In an advertisement published in Indian American newspapers, AFMI argues, (AFMI 1993, p. 18) 'if force had been used [in conversions] . . . Muslims would not be a minority given the length of Muslim rule' and concludes that, '[p]resent India is the result of a long interaction between Hinduism and Islam'.

In short, while FHA sees Indian culture as Hindu, for AFMI India is, 'a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious country which in the past has never been a single political entity and never a nation politically'. Thus, AFMI argues that in such a country,

any attempt to impose lingual, religious, or cultural uniformity and homogeneity or superiority of any race will lead to division, destruction and segmentation. To keep such a variegated people and country together, . . . India must of necessity . . . remain secular and culturally plural' (Qureshi 1994, p. 14).

What is of interest is that while most historians of India now argue that it was under British rule that Hindu-Muslim cleavages were created, neither Hindu nor Muslim projects discuss the role of the British or the British period except very cursorily at best. While the FHA blames partition on the Muslims, AFMI and other progressive Muslims argue that partition was the handiwork of the British and a few Islamic leaders who by no means represented the viewpoints of the majority of Muslims in India. AFMI also points out that in the period when Muslims were supposedly being pampered, their position has deteriorated so much that now, 'their plight is worse' than that of the *Dalits* (AFMI 1993, p. 18).

For AFMI, 6 December 1992, when the Babri mosque was demolished, was ‘a day of national shame’ (Abdullah 1993, p. 23) and a day ‘which showed . . . that, [w]hat is gazing into their [Indian Muslim] faces is either annihilation and extinction, or a dark tunnel with no light at the other end’ (Afzal 1993, p. 57).

AFMI’s viewpoint and vision of the future is not surprisingly very different from that of the FHA. They strongly oppose the creation of a Hindu state in India and instead would like to see a pluralistic, secular society committed to social justice and democracy with special social and economic provisions to help minorities and disadvantaged groups. They also want to safeguard the current religious protections for minorities such as the ‘Personal Law’ and the right to establish educational institutions to preserve and promote their religious ideas.

It comes as no surprise that the different constructions of ‘Indianness’ and the different visions of an ideal Indian state of Hindu and Muslim organizations are grounded in their very different interpretations of Indian history. Ethnic groups try to construct themselves as natural, ancient and unchanging socio-cultural units that individual members have an obligation to uphold. The invoking of an idealized and generally sacralized past has thus been central in the attempts to create a new or redefined ethnic identity (see, for instance, Marty and Appleby 1991, p. 835). History is the anchor grounding conceptions of a primordial peoplehood and an authentic culture. The resuscitation of ancient grievances also justifies the current negative treatment of other groups. History therefore becomes central in defining the ‘essence’ of Indian culture, in legitimizing current policies and in providing a blueprint for the future.

Affirmative action or the reservation system

Besides these fundamental differences in the interpretation of Indian history and in their vision of an ideal Indian state, the two groups also differ in their viewpoints on many other issues. One contentious point is their position on reservations (affirmative action) for lower castes. The FHA is strongly opposed to the Indian reservation system which they view as being discriminatory towards ‘Hindus’, since upper castes bear the brunt of the system. AFMI, on the other hand, supports the reservation system and has been demanding its extension to Muslims and to the lower castes of other religious groups (currently the reservation system is only for lower-caste Hindus in most North Indian states).

Critics of *Hindutva* such as AFMI argue that the movement, while claiming to represent all Hindus, is actually an upper-caste project, since it is supported primarily by the upper castes and since proponents of *Hindutva* are opposed to reservations for the lower castes. *Hindutva* groups have become acutely conscious of the need to gain the support

of the lower castes (who constitute the majority of the population) and while not yielding on the reservation issue, they now speak out against caste discrimination and have been wooing lower castes through special programmes.

In the battle between *Hindutva* and anti-*Hindutva* forces, the lower castes have become the pivotal swing factor. Anti-*Hindutva* parties, realizing that they can gain political power only by uniting the lower castes and minorities together have also been targeting these groups. It is not accidental that AFMI decided to form an alliance with the *Dalits* in the wake of the Babri mosque demolition and the gains made by the BJP. Besides emphasizing that *Hindutva* is really an upper-caste movement, against the interests of lower castes, groups like AFMI also challenge the upper-caste assertion that *Dalits* are really 'Hindu', since in traditional Hinduism 'untouchables' were regarded as falling outside caste Hindu society. Recently, several prominent *Dalit* leaders in India have endorsed this position by coming out publicly to state that they did not see themselves as Hindus (see, for instance, Iliah 1996). This is a most significant challenge to *Hindutva* because the idea of India being a Hindu majority country (the basis of the Hindu nationalist movement) can only be sustained if the lower castes are counted as Hindu. Lower castes in India have become increasingly mobilized and militant and there have been caste clashes between lower and upper castes throughout the country over the past few years. What implications this will have for the *Hindutva* movement remains to be seen.

The position of women

In the struggle between *Hindutva* and Islamic groups, the respective position of women in Hinduism and Islam has become a politicized issue. *Hindutva* supporters argue that it is only in Hinduism that women are respected and revered and men and women are given equal rights. According to the FHA

From religious, cultural, social and individual aspects, a woman has the same rights as a man in Hindu society. "Where women are honored, gods are pleased", declare Hindu scriptures. Hindus have elevated women to the level of Divinity. Only Hindus worship God in the form of Divine Mother' (*India Post* 1995, p. A6).

Thus, they claim that a Hindu *rashtra* is necessary to rescue Indian Muslim women from the oppression they now have to experience under the Muslim Personal Law (see also Kurien 1999, p. 666).

Not surprisingly, AFMI and other modernist Muslim organizations disagree that Islam is oppressive towards women. Najma Sultana, a former President of AFMI, argues that, 'Islam the religion got hijacked

by men whereas true Islam has the most equitable system for genders of any world religion' (Sultana 1996, n.p. citing a statement by Karen Armstrong).

Reinterpretation and politicization of religion

Both the FHA and the AFMI offer interpretations of their respective religions consonant with their political goals (Kurien, forthcoming (a)). Thus, the FHA argues that, 'being a compassionate and tolerant religion, Hinduism has been discriminated [against] and invaded' (FHA 1995a, p. 80) and that it is therefore time to construct a more assertive Hinduism. To counter the threat of lower-caste members being drawn to secularist, anti-*Hindutva* parties, FHA and other Hindu nationalist groups also emphasize that the caste system 'was never integrally connected with the inner spirit of Hindu religion' and that '[t]here is no religious sanction to the practice of [a] caste system of any kind in the primary Hindu scriptures' (*India Post* 1995, p. A6).

AFMI, in proclaiming that 'Islam demands full participation of its followers in activities that help humanity achieve peace and justice' asserts that their fight against injustice and inequality (and their common platform with *Dalits*) is a response to this Islamic obligation (AFMI 1996, n.p.). This is a significantly different interpretation of Islamic political obligation than conventionally offered by Muslims.

The importance of pluralism

Prithvi Raj Singh, President of the FHA, argues that a pluralistic religion is essential in the contemporary world. He writes, 'Modernism . . . requires all religions to affirm [the] truth of other traditions to ensure tranquility' (Singh 1997b, p. A26). According to the FHA, Islam is anti-modernist by this criterion. They argue that it is only Hinduism which is truly tolerant and pluralistic and that it is therefore the most suitable religion for the twenty-first-century world. Again, they contend that only a Hindu *rashtra* will be genuinely secular (here secularism means that the state will treat all religions equally).

Interestingly, AFMI seems to agree about the importance of pluralism. Thus, they dispute the characterization of Islam as fundamentalist and anti-modern and quote verses from the Quran emphasizing tolerance and respect to all religions to make the case that Islam is indeed a pluralistic religion (Akhtar 1994, pp. 16–7; Siddiqui 1994, p. 3).

What they say about each other

In 1995 the President of FHA and some other Hindu activists released a statement condemning AFMI's activities in the wake of the latter

group's announcement of a coalition with *Dalits* and Buddhists. In the statement, FHA said that AFMI's actions, 'speak of their agenda of pseudo-secularism and deplorable partnership for political gains, by creating unnatural and artificial alliances of *Dalits* and Buddhists with Muslims, thereby nurturing wedges between them and the Hindus'. They go on to exhort them to 'shun such divisive and anti-national policies' and to 'mingle and melt with the mainstream of Indian culture and civilization' (FHA 1995b, p. A4). AFMI members have refrained from making any public statements about FHA, since they want to steer clear of getting involved in inter-group politics among Indian Americans. However, privately, they strongly condemn the activities of the FHA describing them as upper-caste ideologues and religious fundamentalists.

Explaining the opposing constructions and positions

Since the constructions of both the FHA and the AFMI are typical of conservative Indian Hindu and liberal Muslim Indian positions in the United States, it would be a mistake to focus on the specifics of the two organizations or their leadership to explain the opposing stands. Also, a lot of the rhetoric is quite similar to the positions of like-minded groups in India so the constructions are not completely 'made in the U.S.A',⁸ there are differences in the terminology and some of the particular issues highlighted. Thus, the emphasis on pluralism, gender equality, and the exhortation by the FHA to AFMI to 'mingle and melt with the mainstream Indian culture' are more in tune with the American context than with the Indian. The question, then, is why such positions have become dominant in the United States and how such constructions are being used by Indian Americans.

Why is it that the support for *Hindutva* is so strong among Hindus in the United States, by many indications, stronger than the support for the movement among Hindus in India? Why is it that this highly educated, well placed, professional group is pursuing reactionary politics? Even more importantly, why are Hindu Americans demanding a religious state in India which would deny minority religions the very rights such as religious freedom, state secularity and affirmative action that they enjoy in the United States? By the same token, why is the Muslim Indian American voice more liberal than the Muslim voice in India? The answer to these questions is complex. In an attempt to provide an explanation, I will first turn to a brief review of three approaches dealing with immigrants and immigrant politics.

1. Response to immigrant marginalization

Scholars consider diasporic politics to be a response to the social, cultural and economic marginalization experienced by immigrants. According to

this perspective, participation in ethnic nationalism brings recognition and status from compatriots (both fellow immigrants and those at home) and compensates for the marginality and loss of social status experienced by immigrants in the host society (Juergensmeyer 1988; Helweg 1989; Rajagopal 1995).

Immigration is often a profoundly disruptive experience. Indian immigrants to the United States are uprooted from the social and cultural context with which they are familiar and thrust into a radically new and alien environment. Although quick to appreciate the economic and educational benefits they obtain through immigration, they also tend to be highly critical of many aspects of American culture and society which, according to them, is characterized by unstable and uncaring families, lack of close community ties, sexual promiscuity, violence, drug and alcohol abuse and teenage delinquency. Even after living in the United States for several decades, generally the immigrant generation has little social interaction with members of the wider American society. Among this generation, there is also a tendency to romanticize the India of their youth and therefore to cling to the culture and traditions of their past. For all these reasons, recreating an Indian community and maintaining ethnic traditions in the immigrant context become very important.

The constant jockeying for power, influence and status by leaders within the Indian American community is widely recognized by the community, since the common explanation given by Indian immigrants for the splitting up of groups and the formation of new ones is that it is due to the 'everyone wants to be president' syndrome.

It is therefore clear that immigrant marginality and the attempts to compensate for it are important reasons for the involvement of immigrants in ethnic communities and, possibly by extension, in diasporic politics. However, this perspective cannot explain why political mobilization is largely on religious lines and why marginalization affects immigrant groups differently; in other words, why there is variation in the type of politics supported by different immigrant groups.

2. The increasing salience of religion for immigrants

Although not dealing specifically with immigrant politics, scholars like Will Herberg reflecting on the patterns of European immigration to the United States at the turn of the century, and Stephen Warner and Raymond Williams discussing the contemporary immigration, argue that religion and religious identity take on a significance in the American context that they do not in the home country. As Raymond Williams puts it, 'Immigrants are religious – by all counts more religious than they were before they left home' (1988, p. 29). There are two main reasons for this development. Firstly, the disruptions and disorientation caused by settlement in a new environment means that migration frequently

becomes a 'theologizing experience' (Smith 1978 p. 1175 cited in Warner 1993, p. 1062), resulting in intensified religious commitment. Many of the Indian immigrants I have spoken to mentioned that they had become more religious after coming to the United States, where for the first time they had to think about the meaning of their religion and religious identity, something they could take for granted in India.

However, even more importantly, religion becomes more salient because in the immigrant context, religion creates and sustains immigrant ethnicity. Warner argues that this is particularly the case in the United States because Americans view religion as the most acceptable and non-threatening basis for community formation and ethnic expression (Warner 1993, p. 1058). Thus Herberg wrote of the European immigrants:

Of the immigrant who came to this country it was expected that, sooner or later, either in his own person or through his children, he would give up virtually everything he had brought with him from the "old country" – his language, his nationalist, his manner of life – and would adopt the ways of his new home. Within broad limits, however, his becoming an American did not involve his abandoning the old religion in favor of some native American substitute. Quite the contrary, not only was he expected to retain his old religion . . . but such was the shape of America that it was largely in and through his religion that he, or rather his children and grandchildren, found an identifiable place in American life (Herberg 1960, pp. 27–8, cited in Warner 1998, p. 16).

Raymond Williams writing about contemporary immigrants from India and Pakistan makes the same claim:

In the United States, religion is the social category with clearest meaning and acceptance in the host society, so the emphasis on religious affiliation and identity is one of the strategies that allows the immigrant to maintain self identity while simultaneously acquiring community acceptance (Williams 1988, p. 29).

According to Saran, Indian immigrants with children are particularly likely to turn to religion and religious practices 'since they see this as a way of raising Indian consciousness among their children' (Saran 1985, p. 42). Religious organizations become the means of maintaining and expressing ethnic identity not just for non-Christian groups like the Hindus but also for groups such as the Chinese Christians (Yang 1999), Korean Christians (Huh and Kim 1990; Min 1992) and Maya Catholics (Wellmeier 1998).

There is another factor, specific to the case of Indian immigrants. The

idea that the essence and superiority of Indian culture (over Western) lies in the spiritual or inner realm was first propagated as part of the anti-colonial movement (Chatterjee 1993). Indian immigrants who are acutely conscious of the negative stereotypes of India prevalent in the United States have taken over this characterization. Thus in the Indian case, the preconditions for religion being the carrier of ethnic identity and basis of political mobilization were already in place. Immigration only served to strengthen these tendencies.

3. Ethnicity as a resource in multi-ethnic societies

A third body of literature argues that immigrants mobilize on ethnic lines because ethnicity is a resource that can bring material benefits to groups in their host societies. In most multicultural states, national origin is officially recognized as the basis of ethnicity. Such recognition can secure for the group social, political and economic resources since such resources are generally distributed on the basis of ethnicity. Thus, ethnic groups work to make their homelands visible to the public (Dusenbery 1995). Dusenbery discussing the case of Canadian Sikhs argues that they supported the *Khalistan* movement calling for a separate homeland in the Indian state of Punjab, not because of any nostalgic desire to return to the homeland but because they realized that they would not be recognized as a distinct ethnic group in Canada (their 'real' homeland) unless they had their own country. This approach provides more information regarding why immigrant groups become politicized and also explains why groups might adopt different strategies depending on their size and location in the homeland.

Theoretical perspective

To explain the opposing constructions and strategies of groups like the FHA and the AFMI we need to synthesize the three perspectives, each of which provides one piece of the answer. It is also important to make a distinction between factors motivating the leadership of such groups and those motivating the mass of supporters.

Immigrant marginality heightens the need to interact with co-ethnics, to maintain close emotional and social ties with the homeland, and to obtain status and recognition within the community. In immigrant contexts, religion becomes the means of creating ethnic communities and identities and so the attachment to religion and religious institutions is intensified. Again, the bonds between co-religionists is strengthened and that between immigrants from different religious backgrounds is weakened. Since national origin is officially recognized as the criterion for ethnicity in the United States (and other multicultural states), the different religious groups also develop definitions of nationality from

their own perspective, resulting in differences in the construction of homeland culture and identity along religious lines. Official policies are based on the assumption that people who share national origins also share cultural values and political concerns. Since this is not often the case, control over the definition of national identity becomes a valuable resource for immigrants, giving rise to competition between the religious groups to define homeland cultural and political concerns in their own interest.

Dominant and minority religious groups generally have very different political interests and definitions of the relationship between religion and nationality. Dominant groups mostly view their religion as the basis of national culture and cohesion. This strategy of the dominant group is threatening to religious minorities and can lead to different responses depending on the size and distribution of the particular religious minorities in the homeland and the history of its relationship with the majority group. Religious minorities like the Sikhs of India who are largely concentrated in one region of the home country may try to initiate a movement for a separate state.⁹ However, minorities like the Muslims of India who are dispersed through the homeland have little choice but to contest the claim of the dominant group by asserting that the home country is multi-religious and multicultural. While these constructions take place in the home country too, they are often informal and not clearly articulated or publicized. Again, in the home country, members of both majority and minority groups manifest a diversity of responses.

Religio-politics takes on a new intensity in the immigrant context for the reasons already mentioned. Since constructions of ethnicity become the means of unifying the immigrant group and of gaining visibility and resources, ethnic constructions forged in diaspora are generally much more clearly formulated and articulated. The diversity characteristic of the home communities is not manifested for two inter-related reasons. Firstly, the immigrant community tends to be much smaller and more homogeneous. Secondly, as a minority community in a new and often hostile environment, there is more pressure to present a unified public face and therefore dissent is more strongly suppressed.¹⁰

It is important to reiterate that although both Hindu and Muslim Indian American organizations are homeland oriented, another goal is to obtain constituency and respect in the United States and that these two goals are interrelated. This interrelationship between the forging of transnational linkages and the development of an 'American identity' is still not adequately appreciated in the literature on immigrant groups and immigrant politics.¹¹ Those who focus on the process through which immigrant groups develop a subcultural identity in the United States, largely ignore the transnational linkages that immigrants forge in this process.¹² Transnational theorists (Basch, Schiller and Blanc 1994; Smith and Guarnizo 1998) on the other hand, do not often recognize that

homeland practices and connections are not merely maintained by immigrants as a means of resisting assimilation, but instead are reinterpreted and selectively used, precisely in order to manufacture an 'American' ethnic identity and strategy suitable to their new context. As Third World immigrants, and as practitioners of religions that are negatively perceived in the United States, both Hindu and Muslim American organizations stress that their members are professional and that their religions are sophisticated, pluralist and gender equal. I shall now turn to an explanation of the differences between the two types of organizations.

Hindu American organizations

Hindu Americans tend to be more supportive of the *Hindutva* ideology and politics for several reasons. Firstly, since Hindus are the dominant (and majority) group both in India and among Indian Americans, the conflation of a Hindu and Indian identity, already taking place in India, is only reinforced in diaspora since religion becomes the basis of ethnicity. As Dusenbery (1995) argues for the case of Sikhs in Canada, the need for a spiritual homeland as the legitimizer and anchor of ethnic identity becomes particularly pronounced in such contexts. Thus, the cry, 'Where is the country for the Hindus?' of the FHA (1995a, p. 117; n.d, p. 2) becomes the central plank of their platform.

Secondly, Hindu Indians who were the majority group in India become a racial, religious and cultural minority in the United States and have to deal with the largely negative perceptions of Hinduism of the wider society. It is therefore not surprising that the 'Hinduism under siege' *Hindutva* message, particularly its emphasis on the greatness of Hinduism and the need for Hindu pride resonates so much more in this embattled context. The large majority of Hindu Indian Americans are supporters of Hindu American organizations for these reasons and tend to be largely unaware or uninterested in the political agenda of such organizations (Kurien 1998).

Thirdly, the anti-Muslim platform of the *Hindutva* movement also fits in well with the anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States and groups like the FHA have been using this to strengthen their case in their discussions with American politicians and to build alliances with other groups in this society. (I will return to this later when I discuss the impact of the two organizations). In their interaction with American politicians and public officials, the FHA does not mention Hindu nationalism but instead emphasizes the tolerance and pluralism of Hinduism.

A final reason could have to do with the nature of its leadership. The leadership of Hindu American organizations tend to be largely dominated by men who are involved in business, either full time or part time (including professionals who have started businesses of their own). As is well known, the business community tends to be more conservative.

Muslim American organizations

I have argued that for groups like the Muslims, the only way to directly counter the constructions of the *Hindutva* oriented organizations is by emphasizing that India is not Hindu but multi-religious and should therefore have a secular government. Another important reason for the liberal Muslim Indian American political voice is the fact that the more conservative Muslim Indian American groups are either apolitical like the Tablighi Jamaat or are against involvement in secular politics. By default then, it is the more liberal Indian Muslim Americans who become involved in socio-economic and political activities *as Indians*. This probably explains why it is that, although the dominant Muslim voice in India has been conservative and fundamentalist (largely as a reaction to the *Hindutva* movement), Muslim Indian Americans have adopted a liberal, secularist position. It is also likely to be an attempt to counter the American perception of Muslims as fundamentalist. The leadership of the AFMI, as indicated, is dominated by professionals and academicians and this could be yet another reason for their progressive orientation.

In both the Hindu and Muslim cases, it appears that there is a fundamental difference in the reasons for the participation of the leadership and the members. The leaderships seem to be involved largely because of the resources (for example, political power, status and recognition) that they hope to obtain from ethno-politics. Many were involved in politics in the homeland or come from families who were politically active (although not always in the type of politics they are currently advocating¹³). Many of the supporters of such groups, however, participate in the activities of the religious organizations because they experience marginality and intensified religious and nationalistic commitment as a consequence of immigration.

Explaining Southern Californian exceptionalism

While it is difficult to say for sure, the reason that Southern California has emerged as one of the strongholds of the *Hindutva* movement may have to do with the social, economic and racial factors largely unique to the region that have reinforced each other in such a way that Indians in this area experience a greater degree of marginalization than in other areas of the country (Kurien, forthcoming (a)).

Firstly, Southern California has more recent Indian immigrants as compared to the national average.¹⁴ Recent immigrants generally experience social, economic and psychological difficulties. Recent Indian immigrants are also more exposed to the *Hindutva* movement in India. All this makes it more likely that they will turn to religion, homeland involvements and the company of fellow Indian immigrants to give them a sense of security in their new environment.

Secondly, as indicated, data show that there is a sizeable number of Indians in the state in the lower classes (due no doubt to the large numbers of recent immigrants) and that the community is economically polarized (Springer 1995). Finally, based on information gained through interviews and through community newspapers, it appears that Indians in Southern California have experienced significant racial hostility because of the rise of the anti-immigrant movement in this region. Many Indians spoke about being mistaken for Mexicans with very negative consequences (see also George 1997). Racial marginalization is probably also indirectly responsible for the relative absence of active, progressive University-based Indian American groups in Southern California. In other major American cities, the campus-based Indian American groups have located themselves within larger Asian American structures and have been very active in liberal politics. In discussions and interviews that I conducted, Indian American students at both the major campuses in the region, the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Southern California, complained about being excluded from or marginalized within Asian American programmes and of racism by East Asian American students and faculty. The hegemonic East Asian presence in Southern California has therefore hampered Indian involvement in liberal Asian American politics both on college campuses and outside and has also had the effect of rendering Indians invisible as an ethnic group in this region.

Consequences: the impact of the two types of organizations

As I go on to demonstrate, the two types of organizations have had important consequences both for India and the United States. The strong moral and financial support of Hindu Indian Americans has been crucial in bringing and keeping the BJP in power in India and to many of its central (and controversial) policies. The exacerbation of tensions between Hindu and Muslim Indian Americans as a result of the activities of Hindu and Muslim Indian American organizations will have a profound impact on the formation of Indian Americans as an ethnic group in the United States. These tensions could also spill over into the wider society as both sides are forging alliances with other groups. The politicization of Indian Americans (largely through the *Hindutva* movement) has brought about significant shifts in American foreign policy towards India and Pakistan.

Impact on India

While there is clear evidence of close ties between groups like the FHA and AFMI and their Indian counterparts, it is harder to assess the actual nature of the relationship and exactly what concrete impact such Indian

American organizations have on Indian politics and policies. I present below some of the scattered evidence that is available.

Investigations in India and the United States have established that much of the financial resources and support for the *Hindutva* movement come from Indian Americans. The government of India has even launched an official investigation into the influx of foreign money for movements like the *Hindutva*. Biju Mathew estimates that a minimum of \$ 350, 000 was sent by Indians in the United States to support the *Hindutva* movement in India between January 1992 and December 1993 (Prashad 1997, p. 3). Ajit Jha, a journalist, has described the Southern California region as being 'a goldmine of funds for the BJP' (Jha 1993, p. 56g).

The FHA was not only one of the first Hindu umbrella organizations to be based in the United States, but it also took the lead in being the first expatriate Hindu organization to reach out publicly to the Indian citizenry. In January 1993, describing themselves as 'Concerned NRI's [Non-Resident Indians] of Southern California', they issued a full page advertisement in all editions of the *Indian Express*, a widely read English language paper in India, urging their 'brothers and sisters in India' to work towards making India a Hindu country (personal interview and McKean 1996, p. 319). FHA leaders claim that they received hundreds of enthusiastic and supportive letters from Hindus in different regions and of different socio-economic backgrounds.

While there are no figures of the amounts involved, Muslim organizations like the AFMI are also funnelling large sums of money into India. According to Aslam Abdullah, the Indian Muslim Relief Council [IMRC] raises around two million dollars a year to help projects in India. AFMI and its progressive allies (like the Coalition for an Egalitarian and Pluralistic India) have also placed advertisements in Indian newspapers, but have targeted Indian language papers. It is likely that the efforts of both American *Hindutva* groups like the FHA and the anti-*Hindutva* groups like the AFMI influenced the election results of Spring 1998 – with the support of the *Hindutva* forces helping the BJP, and that of the anti-*Hindutva* organizations undermining the party's hegemony (making it necessary for it to seek the backing of other parties to form a government).

In a public acknowledgment of the support the BJP received from NRIs, particularly in the United States, the party presented a budget in June 1998 which had several special provisions for NRIs willing to invest dollars in the country, including a Person of Indian Origin [PIO] card entitling the holder to several benefits. Shortly after taking over the reins of leadership in the country, the BJP embarked on a nuclearization programme that culminated in the now historic explosions of May 1998. American *Hindutva* groups like the FHA had long been advocating nuclearization for India (Singh 1996a; Singh 1997b, p. A26). Although

the initial support for the nuclearization programme in India quickly evaporated in the wake of the explosions in Pakistan and the increasing prices consequent on the sanctions (both of which led to protests around the country), the BJP government's actions dramatically increased its popularity among Indian Americans. While groups like the FHA and its Hindu nationalist allies have not surprisingly been jubilant at the nuclear explosions, a survey of the Indian American papers and web-sites indicated that large sections of even those (largely) Hindu Indian Americans who had been relatively apolitical, came out strongly in support of the Indian government's actions with jingoistic assertions of nationalistic pride and fervour. At the same time, another group, in the Southern California region, spearheaded by the AFMI and its partners, condemned the action in no uncertain terms and have been trying to mobilize people to take a stand against nuclearizing the tensions between India and Pakistan.

The BJP wasted no time in harnessing the enthusiastic response to its nuclearization programme by Indian Americans. (In fact, the party's confidence in going ahead with its nuclearization programme despite the certainty of sanctions was based on its confidence that it could count on the support of the overseas Indian community to offset the effects of the sanctions.) The government launched a Resurgent India Bond to enable NRIs to help the Indian government tide over international sanctions. The response to the scheme from NRIs was so positive that the government was able to exceed its target of two billion dollars in just a few weeks. A State Bank of India Report dated 18 August 1998 indicated that the scheme was expected to procure the Indian government foreign exchange reserves worth four billion dollars by the time of its close on 24 August 1998. With its large pro-liberalization Hindu Indian American business constituency in the United States and India, BJP hastily abandoned its nativist 'swadeshi' (indigenous) platform and came out strongly in support of liberalization. The AFMI has been more cautious, however, urging the government to make a serious effort to ameliorate the effects of liberalization on lower classes and castes.¹⁵ Hindu Indian American organizations have also been pressing the BJP government to grant NRIs dual nationality and for representation in the Indian parliament. Under such pressure, the Prime Minister announced that a separate department would be created within the External Affairs Ministry to act as a link with NRIs (*India Journal* 1999a) and to deal with their concerns.

Impact on the United States

Organizations like the FHA have been using *Hindutva* to unite and mobilize the Hindu Indian Americans. Although a majority of Indian Americans do not subscribe to the extremist goals of the movement, the

Hindutva group has succeeded in taking over the political platform of the community. This is particularly the case in California where the movement has a strong base. At the current time, activists with *Hindutva* leanings have assumed leadership positions in almost all the local Indian American organizations (cultural, social and political) in Southern California, pushing out moderates and minorities (Kurien, forthcoming (b)). *Hindutva* leaders want to be the representatives and gate-keepers of the Indian American community: to define the groups that comprise it; the needs and concerns (both domestic and foreign policy) of the community; and the meaning and content of 'Indianness'. This development has major implications for intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic relations. *Hindutva* leaders in California have put forward a very restrictive and militant definition of Hinduism, one which marginalizes and alienates many Hindu Americans. The leaders also routinely and publicly launch vituperative diatribes against Indian minorities, particularly Muslims and more recently, Christians.

As part of their anti-Muslim agenda, the FHA has also allied itself with certain Jewish and Christian groups. In the summer of 1997 the FHA 'gladly took part' in a conference on the 'Impact of Islamization on International Relations and Human Rights' in Washington DC (Bhatia 1997, p. A5). Organized by what they described as a 'coalition against Islam' (Interview, 18 June 1997) the FHA, 'along with Jewish representatives and more than 100 delegates from around the world . . . discussed how the population of minorities gets reduced by Islamic beliefs and Hadith practices' (Bhatia 1997). FHA leaders also told me that they had explained to a local congress woman, Loretta Sanchez, that it was the Indian Muslims, 'with their four wives and ten children' who were responsible for the population problem in India (Interview, 18 June 1997). Not surprisingly, these activities of the FHA and the other *Hindutva* groups have led to the escalation of tensions between Hindu and Muslim Indian Americans. Muslim Indian Americans, in turn, are trying to challenge the constructions of the *Hindutva* brigade through a counter-offensive. Since Muslim immigrants in the United States are coalescing to develop a pan-Islamic identity, it is possible that these tensions could spill over into inter-ethnic problems.¹⁶

Both Hindu and Muslim groups are also trying to influence American foreign policy towards India and Pakistan by contributing heavily to the campaigns of politicians they believe to be sympathetic to their interests. The outcome of the Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan demonstrated the influence of Indian Americans. In 1999 India and Pakistan got into a conflict over the incursion of Pakistani troops into Kargil on the Indo-Pakistani border. The conflict was resolved only when former President Clinton intervened and urged the Pakistani President to withdraw his forces. According to a front page article in *The Washington Post* on 9 October 1999, it was the pressure that Indian immigrants

put on congress members that forced Clinton to intervene on behalf of India. The *Post* article went on to conclude that it was the generosity of Indian Americans in political campaigns that had been responsible for the growing support for India in the earlier pro-Pakistan American administration and that 'Indo-Americans [have become] a powerful and effective domestic lobby' (cited in *India Journal* 1999b, p. A3).

Conclusion

I have argued that since religion becomes the basis of group formation in the United States, Hindu and Muslim Indian Americans have separate organizations from the local to the national level. Such organizations also become proxy 'ethnic' associations. As Hindu and Muslim Indians have very different histories, political interests and social concerns (as majority and minority religious groups), they have systematic differences in the way they construct the meaning and content of an 'Indian' identity. Due to the importance of ethnic recognition and visibility in obtaining state resources, Hindus and Muslims compete to obtain such state recognition for their definition of national identity, leading to an exacerbation and politicization of religious cleavages.

Although the existence of sub-groups within ethnic categories have not been adequately recognized, this article shows how significant such cleavages can be. It also shows that under conditions of insecurity and marginality of the kind that are being experienced today by many immigrants, the conflicts are likely to be exacerbated and possibly even exported back to the home countries. Since FHA and AFMI and other similar organizations have only been in existence for a few years, it is hard to predict how the tension between them will develop and to what extent either side will be successful in imposing its agenda in the United States or India. However, undoubtedly, both types of organizations will have profound consequences for the development of Indian American ethnicity and for inter-religious relations in India.

Over time, as immigrant religions become more institutionalized and publicly recognized as the source of social identity, religion is likely to become a more important basis of identity than ethnicity based on national ancestry (see Jacobson 1997). I have mentioned that this is beginning to happen in the case of Muslim Americans. To some extent, we can even detect this shift in the case of Hindu Americans. In the past few years dozens of individuals and organizations claiming their mission to be the defence of Hinduism against defamation and commercialization have tried to garner publicity for themselves by finding a Hindu cause to champion. This seems to be becoming a more popular 'cause' among Hindu Americans than supporting Hindu nationalism in India.

Such a scenario is particularly likely among later generations who do not have the concrete ties to the homeland that immigrants have and in

the case of proselytizing religions like Islam and Christianity whose adherents are indigenous to countries around the world. Second- and third-generation immigrants in European countries like France and Britain provide good examples of the above. State policies in these countries are already trying to accommodate this development.

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Notes

1. World Bank figures, 1990.
2. This is only if the *Dalits* (lower castes, formerly considered 'untouchable') who constitute around a fifth of the population are considered Hindu. The controversy over who is considered Hindu is discussed later in the article.
3. 1990 Census figures.
4. Fenton (1988, p. 28) estimates that in 1985, around 65 per cent of the Indian immigrants in America came from a Hindu family background.
5. Rough estimate based on projections from the 1990 Census.
6. Statement made by Mr. Prithvi Raj Singh, President of FHA, at a banquet organized to raise money for the construction of a local temple (Sabarwal 1995, D SW6). Despite their professed goal, the FHA could not maintain internal unity and in late 1998, a section of the organization broke away to form a parallel organization: the American Hindu Federation [AHF].
7. They claim that around 20,000 people attended their Diwali-Dussera function in 1999 (FHA 1999).
8. This is Williams' (1992, p. 230) term regarding the development of what he characterizes as an 'American Hinduism' (Williams 1992, p. 239).
9. Thus the *Khalistan* movement was initiated by Sikh immigrants outside India (Mahmood 1996, p. 257).
10. Bhattacharjee (1992) and DasGupta and Dasgupta (1996) have made the same argument with respect to gender models among Indian Americans.
11. I thank Marie Friedmann Marquardt for bringing this to my attention.
12. For studies on how immigrant religion helps immigrants to develop an ethnic identity see Hurh and Kim (1990), Min (1992), Warner and Wittner (1998) and Yang (1999).
13. Some of the leaders of Hindu organizations come from families who were involved in the Indian freedom struggle as Gandhian followers.
14. 97.8 per cent of Indians in Southern California over twenty-five years of age were foreign born in 1990 and 54.1 per cent had immigrated between 1980 and 1990 (Allen and Turner 1997, p. 135). The corresponding national figures are 75.4 per cent and 43.9 per cent respectively (Shinagawa 1996, p. 101). California was the top ranked state of intended residence for Asian Indian immigrants between 1990 and 1993 with 19.3 per cent of incoming immigrants stating that they intended to live there (Shinagawa 1996, p. 90). In 1996 again, California was the top choice among Asian Indian immigrants (Springer 1997, p.A22) showing that the movement of recent immigrants to California has continued in the mid-1990s.

15. Presentations at the 1997 Annual AFMI meeting and discussions with some of its leaders.
16. Thus, Black Muslims organized a protest in New York, outside the United Nations, after the demolition of the Babri mosque in India in December of 1992 (McKean 1996, p. 319).

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