

## Chapter 5

# “So, Are You Hindi?”: Religion and Education in U.S. South Asian Narratives

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Immigrant children and adolescents living in the United States encounter significant stressors during the acculturation process, particularly in the schooling context. South Asian immigrants identify strongly with religious and geographic region background. This chapter investigates intersections between religion and education in U.S. South Asians' post-migration experiences in the American Midwest. Findings suggest South Asian children enrolled in U.S. schools are confronted daily by the duality between their parents' birth culture and mainstream values and traditions of the host culture. Participants and their families experience prejudice and racism in daily activities, including school. Prejudice ranges from judgments about English-speaking ability to doubts about the South Asian education system to prepare workers for U.S. jobs. Findings show religious affiliation, accent, skin color, and ethnic dress create barriers for South Asians trying to fit into everyday American society.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The U.S. immigrant population is increasing dramatically. The rapidly growing immigrant population also affects U.S. schools. According to a 2017 Migration Policy Report, twenty-three percent, or almost one in four students enrolled in U.S. public schools, comes from an immigrant family. These figures represent a more than 100 percent increase in immigrant students enrolled in U.S. public schools since 1990, when the percentage was 11 percent (2017).

South Asians are one of the fastest growing U.S. immigrant groups, with a population that more than doubled between 1990 and 2000. The term South Asian refers to persons from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan (Bhola, 1996). Arriving in the United States in large numbers only since the passage of The 1965 U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act, U.S. South Asians now represent the third most rapidly growing immigrant group, surpassed only by Hispanics and other Asians. Little information is available in the professional literature about the everyday lives of recently arrived U.S. immigrants and their children, and even less information is available about how their schooling experiences are affected by the intersections of religion and mainstream American culture (McNeely, Moreland, Doty, Meschke, Awad, Husain, & Nashwan, 2017). This study focuses on experiences and perspectives of first- and second-generation U.S. South Asians due to South Asians’ recent and rapid population growth. The chapter seeks to add new insights and information to the scholarly literature on post-1965 U.S. migration, especially in regard to the rapidly growing U.S. South Asian population.

## **Methodology**

Ninety South Asian immigrants living in a Midwestern state, and identified chiefly through snowball effect, were voluntary participants in an oral history project. Snowball sampling is used when researchers wish to identify “key informants” whose perspectives are germane to the issues being studied (M. L. Jones, 2004, p. 273). Forty-three percent of interviewees are female, and fifty-seven percent male. Ages range from 18 to 64 years (mean=38). Mean residence in the U.S. is 18 years. Seventy-three percent are first generation immigrants; 27% are second-generation immigrants. Most interviewees (69%) identify with the Hindu religion, though other major religions such as Sikh, Muslim, Jain, Parsi Zoroastrian, and Christian are represented. Most (74%) have obtained at least a bachelors degree. Eighty-seven percent are U.S. citizens. All major geographic areas of the Indiana subcontinent are represented.

Interviewees were interviewed in their own homes or offices in keeping with Minister’s (1991) feminist oral history frame: a conversational format was employed to interview immigrants in locations familiar to the interviewee and, when requested, in immigrants’ native language through the use of an interpreter (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Gluck & Patai, 1991). Minister’s framework is a feminist frame grounded in bringing women to the forefront of research and emphasizing differences in the ways males and females communicate. Moreover, use of Minister’s feminist framework is a means to disrupt conventional interviewer-narrator hierarchies. Application of Minister’s framework to interview analysis highlights the differences in perception between male and female interviewees’ experiences and memories related to acculturation.

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