

# The history of asian indian immigrants history essay



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As immigration historians have established, the history of Asian Indian immigrants consisted of three major significant waves. The first wave began at about the middle of the nineteenth century when the first Asian Indians arrived in America. In fact, by the end of the nineteenth century, about 7300 Indian immigrants mostly settled in California and the Pacific Northwest of the United States (Leonard, 1992, p. 232). According to Bhatia and Takaki, the first wave immigrants were mostly farmers and laborers. Most of these immigrants were Sikhs from the Punjab region in India. However, after immigrating to the U. S., initially, many of these immigrants were employed as railroad workers on the Western Pacific Railroad and helped to construct the Three-Mile Spring Garden Tunnel. Sometimes they also replaced Italian railroad workers who were on strike in Tacoma, Washington (Bhatia, 2007, p. 82; Takaki, 1989, p. 302). Later these immigrants moved to California to work with the Southern Pacific Railroad where they found employment in agriculture. After a while these immigrants settled throughout the Sacramento Valley in northern California and found work on the fruit and rice farms of Marysville, Tudor, Willows, and Chico. These Punjabi immigrants also spread to the San Joaquin Valley, and joined the work in grape and celery fields.

Further, Asian Indians moved to the Imperial Valley, where they used to gather cantaloupes and picked cotton (Takaki, 1989, p. 302-303). These Punjabi farm laborers organized themselves into teams of workers ranging from three to fifty people. Each group had a leader who was more highly educated and could communicate in English and keep the group working efficiently. They used to grow crops that were familiar to them in India.

Skilled in cultivating and harvesting, most of these Punjabis were exceptional farmers, hard workers who were willing to work in any circumstance (Takaki, 1989, p. 306).

Despite working from ten to fourteen hours per day Indian immigrants were paid from twenty-five to fifty cents less per day than Japanese laborers (Takaki, 1989, p. 303). As the main objective of the first wave immigrants was to explore economic opportunity, the main identifying characteristic of these immigrants was their need to survive and have financial stability. Opportunities in the United States provided an economic solution to their problems. For example, salaries in India ranged from 5 to 8 cents per day, and in the United States from 75 cents to 2 dollars per day (Wherry, 1907, p. 918-919). Therefore emigration to the United States offered relief from poverty and hope for financial stability.

In the first wave, most of the immigrants were male. These immigrants were not allowed to bring their family with them. Most of them were habituated to live alone and lost most of the contacts with their family and home country. One immigrant named Saint Nihal Singh in his essay, which was published in the magazine *Out West*, argued that “ One of the chief points of difference between the immigrant from India and those hailing from Europe lies in the fact that the European brings along with him his family” (La Brack, 1982, p. 60).

The immigrants' economic status, lack of rapid inter-continental communication or travel, as well as restrictive immigration and citizenship laws made it difficult for them to visit India. At the same time, due to another

by-product of immigration laws, they were not allowed to bring their family which explains the shortage of Indian immigrant women. Along with the lack of Indian women, their exclusion from social interaction with American dominated society, which was reinforced by anti-miscegenation laws, led this immigrant cohort to marry Mexican American women (Leonard, 1992, p. 131-132; Takaki, 1989, p. 309-310). This fact becomes clear when comparing the percentage of Mexican wives among Indian immigrants in California between 1913 and 1947. In northern California, where there is a relatively small population of Indian immigrants, only 47 percent of wives are Mexican, but in southern California, where the immigrant population is much higher, almost 92 percent of wives came from Mexico. As a result, another identifying characteristic of the first wave Indian immigrants was their willingness to mix with other races in the absence of Indian women, further cutting ties with their Indian culture and heritage. This mixing led to a blend of the cultural traditions of Asian Indians and Mexicans and sometimes to a dominant Spanish culture in their home life. For example, their progeny spoke Spanish not Punjabi, celebrated Christian rather than Sikh holidays, they replaced some Indian foods with similar Mexican foods such as tortillas for rotis and Jalapeno peppers for Punjabi chili peppers. Also the Catholic religion was adopted and the first names of children were most often Spanish (Takaki, 1989, p. 311). Over time, the traces of Indian heritage became thinner and thinner which also brought cultural differences and conflicts and led to more divorces among these couples (Takaki, 1989, p. 310).

In the 1890s America attracted more Indian immigrants; however, as these immigrants were getting more in number than required, they became labor competitors with white workers and were often victimized by white working-class antagonism and violence. In response to exclusionist pressures, immigration officials targets Asian Indians seeking admission to the United States and denied many Indians between 1908 and 1920, on the grounds that they would likely become public charges (Takaki, 1989, p. 297). The growth of the Punjabi community was cut short by the 1917 Immigration Act, which prohibited further immigrants from India (Leonard, 1992, p. 32; Bankston, 2006, p. 68).

However, a few decades later Indian immigrants of this first wave had become a part of the society and some were actively involved in social affairs and gained higher positions. For example, Dalip Saund in 1957 became the first Asian Indian senator from California when he was elected to Congress after it had passed a bill allowing naturalization for Indians in July 1946. Like many early Indian immigrants, Saund had come to the United States from Punjab and had worked initially in the fields and farms of California. Then, he had earned a doctorate at the University of California, Berkeley (Dasgupta, 2006, p. 139).

## **2. 1. 2. Second Wave of Indian American Immigrants**

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed a bill that has dramatically changed the method by which immigrants are admitted to America (Kutler, 2003, p. 230; Bankston, 2006, p. 320). The significance of this bill was that future immigrants were to be welcomed because of their professional skills, but not based on their country of origin. After the passing of this bill, <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-asian-indian-immigrants-history-essay/>

significantly larger numbers of Asian Indian immigrants started migrating to the U. S. leading to the second wave. Between 1965 and 1974, Indian immigrants to the U. S. increased at a rate greater than those from any other country (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). This was mainly because of their fluency in English, high professional skills and level of education.

Bhatia has stated that the second wave of immigrants was very different from the first wave of Indian immigrants in terms of their economic, educational and social status (Bhatia, 2007, p. 14). Takaki also claims that the first and second waves of Indian immigrants were “ worlds apart”. In a published interview by Barkan, Dr. S. Patel who was a second wave immigrant, agreed with Takaki, describing the difference of the first and second waves: “ It is a class thing. They came from the farming, the lower class. We came from the educated middle class. We spoke English. We went to college. We were already assimilated in India, before we came here” (Barkan, 1983, p. 48).

The immigrants who emigrated after 1965 were overwhelmingly urban, professional, highly educated and quickly engaged in gainful employment in many U. S. cities. Many had prior exposure to Western society and education which led to a relatively smooth transition to the United States. In between 1966 and 1977, 83 percent of Indians who entered the U. S. under the occupational category of professional and technical workers; the entrants of this time included many scientists, doctors, and engineers (Prashad, 2000, p. 75). In addition, Bhatia states that most of this group of Asian Indians was trained as medical doctors, engineers, scientists, university professors, and doctoral and postdoctoral students in mostly science-related disciplines like <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-asian-indian-immigrants-history-essay/>

chemistry, biochemistry, mathematics, physics and biology (Bhatia, 2007, p. 14).

However, both waves of immigrants from India shared a desire for a better life in America with greater opportunities for economic growth and independence (Takaki, 1989, p. 445). The second wave of immigrants enjoyed greater success with the greater economic opportunities in America because of their education. They could possibly make their life in India, but they also saw more opportunity in America. Unlike the first wave of immigrants, the second wave of immigrants defined themselves differently in relation to the U. S. and their home country. They were more educated, professional, and socially stable as they were allowed to bring their families. Though the search for economic opportunities brought both waves to the United States, the second wave of immigrants was able to earn more money and have improved standard of living than first wave immigrants. Also they maintained their ties with their culture and heritage through their families.

Unlike the first wave immigrants, who were mainly male, the second wave immigrants were both male and female. Some Indian immigrant women used to work out of their home, contrary to traditional Indian American norms as well as to those in the first wave of Asian Indian immigrants. As a result, they participated in the mainstream of America and adapted to US culture faster and became more bicultural than those Indian immigrant women who adopted more traditional roles (Nandan, 2007, p. 395). Contrary to the first wave of immigrants from India, the second wave had the means to frequently visit their homeland to visit friends, attend important events and care for their parents.

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The second wave of immigrants had the means to own property such as houses which was not so easy for the first wave immigrants due to their low earnings and restrictions. Due to this reason some Indian immigrants in this wave moved to the suburbs which made them isolated from the many Indian families living in the city. Therefore, they often felt loneliness and did not feel comfortable in developing close bonds with the neighborhood too. This made them to maintain some of the Indian food and religious customs within their homes (Nandan, 2007, p. 396).

### **2. 1. 3. Third Wave of Indian American Immigrants**

The third wave of immigrants was marked by important shifts in the legal and sociopolitical environment, resulting in new patterns and dynamics in Indian American immigration. Due to Family Reunification Act which was passed in 1990, a large proportion of Indian Americans entered in to the US. This led to a third wave (from 1990 to the present time) of new arrivals of Indian American immigrants, which included both highly skilled professionals and a working and lower middle class population (Landale, 1997, p. 283).

As a part of the Reunification Act, some of the third wave of Indian immigrants came specifically to join their family. Most of them are either siblings (sometimes they are very poor or uneducated) or aged parents (who are old and/or retired) of the highly skilled professionals unlike the second wave (Ross-Sheriff, 2004, p. 150). Therefore, economic stability or opportunity meant very little to this group in comparison with the previous waves of immigrants and also the highly skilled professionals. However this group of people tried to find work or started small businesses or worked in small businesses such as motels, gift shops, grocery/convenience stores or <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-asian-indian-immigrants-history-essay/>



gas stations. In addition, many of these newcomers could not become financially independent, but rather stayed closely tied to their children or siblings (Bankston, 2006, p. 69; Ross-Sheriff, 2004, p. 150).

According to Prashad's statistics, 9, 910 Indians, 1, 694 Pakistanis, and 711 Bangladeshis came to the U. S. as highly skilled laborers in 1996. In comparison to the figures for those who came under the family reunification scheme are far higher, that is 34, 291 Indians, 9, 122 Pakistanis, and 8, 221 Bangladeshis (Prashad, 2000, p. 79). With this shift in mode of entry, the education and socioeconomic profile of Indian Americans has become more diverse, complex and heterogeneous than the previous wave of immigrants.

The second wave of immigrants who were already settled, invited their family members when the reunification act passed, allowing them to hold on more tightly to their culture. As a result, the third wave failed to assimilate into their new culture, choosing to live according to their own customs. Because of the arrival of the extended families, their culture and heritage could be maintained through the large number of Asian Indians living together in one area. As a result, small Indian communities were established allowing the third wave of immigrants to avoid the American culture. They could wear their own clothes; they could eat their food; they could speak their own language, and they could practice their own religion (Khandelwal, 2002, p. 164).

Following the 2001 terrorist attacks against the U. S. on 9/11, the legal and political context of South Asian immigration once again shifted in some important ways. Thus, South Asian immigrants, especially men from the

majority Muslim countries of Bangladesh and Pakistan, have been subject to a variety of surveillance measures instituted by the United States. It is not yet clear how these new measures will affect immigration from South Asia. As a result, there are some signs of decline in the rates of South Asian immigration, especially from Bangladesh and Pakistan. Reports in 2003 suggested those from Bangladesh and Pakistan are moving to more receptive countries like Canada (Sachs, 2003, p. A1).

## 2. 2. Development of Asian Indian Immigrants

This section describes briefly the facts and figures about Indian Americans in terms of population numbers, growth rate, education, language, etc. The growth of the population of Indian Americans has changed dramatically over the past few decades. According to the records the first wave consisted of 2000 immigrants. Between 1948 and 1965, 6, 474 Asian Indians entered the United States as immigrants (Bankston, 2006, p. 68). During the 1980s the number of immigrants increased exponentially. According to the 1990 US Census about 570, 000 Indians immigrated to America.

Table 1 shows that the growth rate of Indian American immigrants from 1980 to 1990 increased significantly by about 35%. This growth rate continued from the 1980s to the 1990s. The growth rate from 1990-2000 is 14. 42%. Even though the growth rate is lower compared to the previous growth rate, the population of Indian Americans in 2000 crossed the number of 1. 5 million.

The US Census 2000 shows that among all Asian ethnic groups the Indian Americans are the third largest ethnic group consisting of about 1, 678, 765  
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people (Table 2). Over 50 percent of foreign-born Asian Indians entered the U. S. between 1990 and 2000, compared with a rate of about 18% who entered before 1980. In 2007 over 2 million Indian Americans are listed in the data (U. S. Census Bureau). This is due to the land of opportunities with a good amount of perks and salary. In addition, globalization and multiculturalism is also playing a major role to attract immigrants.

Most of the Indian Americans settled in populated states such as New York, California, New Jersey, Maryland, Texas and Illinois as well as large cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. This is largely due to the availability of jobs in larger cities as well as the personal preference of being a part of an urban and ethnically diverse environment. Yet, there are sizeable Asian Indian communities in suburban areas also such as Silver Springs in Maryland, San Jose and Fremont in California, Queens in New York and etc. (Bankston, 2006, p. 69-72).

Education and career success are more highly valued among Indian immigrants as compared to other Asian groups. The 1990 US census report shows that 52 % of adult Asian Indians were college graduates which is considerably higher than the 35% rate among all adult Asian Americans. Their academic achievements were bolstered by their fluency in English. In addition, in 1990 over 80 percent of Indian male immigrants held a college degree and five percent of all Indian American doctors received their primary education in India. Due to the high educational status of Indian Americans, 65 percent of them worked as managers, or in the professional/technical industry (Helweg, 1990, p. 61).

Many graduates from elite engineering institutions like IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) came to America for higher education at various educational institutions. Most of such graduates after finishing their higher studies from US universities used their new degrees to obtain positions with lucrative salaries, which in turn led them to work and settle in the United States. Very few of them returned to India immediately after finishing their higher education.

In 2000, about 87% of Asian Indians had at least a High School Diploma and 70% had a Bachelors Degree or higher, and they were proficient in English. Of the general population, 33.6% were in management, professional, and related positions. Among the Asian Indian population, 59.9% were in those types of position, which was more than any other Asian group. This was mainly because Indian Americans in fact were well-educated, hard-working, and proficient in the English language. Indian Americans had the highest labor force participation rate of about 79% as compared to all Asian Americans, who participated in the labor force at a rate of about 71%. Besides this, male Indian immigrants had median yearly earnings of \$51,904, which was also more than any other Asian American group. As a result Asian Indians had a lower poverty rate than that of the total population (9.8% versus 12.4%). Moreover, statistics showed that Indians had a larger percentage (71.4) of the populace between the ages of 16 and 64 than any other Asian group, except immigrants from Thailand (82.2%) (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Accordingly, Indian Americans remain one of the most socio-economically successful groups of all immigrants or ethnicities in the U. S. and are often <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-asian-indian-immigrants-history-essay/>

presented as a model from which other ethnic/immigrant groups could learn.

As Wadhwa reports on Bloomberg Businessweek in 2006:

**Not only are they leaving their mark in the field of technology, but also in real estate, journalism, literature, and entertainment. They run some of the most successful small businesses and lead a few of the largest corporations. Valuable lessons can be learned from their various successes (Wadhwa, 2006, Bloomberg Business Week).**

This article also cites twelve main factors that account for the success of Indian Americans such as education, upbringing, hard work, entrepreneurial spirit, social networks, integration into the U. S. society, etc. These statistics show and prove that Indian immigrants tend to have high levels of education and English proficiency, which gives them an advantage over other Asian communities. However, along with the advantages, there are also issues such as assimilation, religious beliefs, traditions and race which are also challenging.

## 2. 3 Generational Change

After many years these immigrants over time settled and became permanent citizens, who are treated as first-generation of Asian Indian Americans. This led to multiple generations of Indian Americans. The children of the first-generation, unlike their parents, grew up with an Indian culture and an American culture. Due to this different background, historians distinguish between first, second, and third-generations of Asian Indian Americans who differ in terms of their values, customs and traditions.

First-generation Indian Americans from the Indian subcontinent are more familiar with the culture of India as well as the culture of America. They tend to be more traditional than later generations. Attempting to preserve their religious and cultural heritage, these first-generation Indian Americans built temples and formed local organizations representative of the subcultures (Sindi, Gujarati, Tamil, and Bengali) from which they came. Parents exposed their children to those subcultures through functions hosted by these organizations and within their home (Bankston, 2006, p. 73).

In the case of second-generation of the Indian Americans, most of their traditional and cultural values were slowly changed. They grow up in American culture and learn more about American culture and at the same time they used to face Indian traditions in their homes. Following this dual culture lead to understand and search their identity in the society. As cultural historians have suggested, they find themselves at a place 'in-between' the Indian and the American cultures due to the adoption of American culture as well as compromise of some Indian traditions.

Third-generation Asian Indian Americans, who strongly adhere to the U. S. cultural values, but do not endorse any traditional Asian Indian values, could be said to be highly acculturated but not enculturated (Tewari, 2009, p. 105). They are naturalized citizens of America and they do not fit India. However, physically they are always tied to India because of their appearance. Those immigrants who succeed in business can shed the label of immigrant, while those who are poor continue to be viewed as immigrants, even though their family has been in the U. S. for three generations.