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## **The Paradox of Religion: The (re)Construction of Hindu and Muslim Identities amongst South Asian Diasporas in the United States<sup>1</sup>**

Aminah Mohammad-Arif

**Abstract.** In the process of (re)constructing their identities in an alien society, South Asians have tended to give to religion a significant importance. This salience of religion owes as much to the dislocation and the stigmatization engendered by the migration experience as to the local context, the United States, who, while promoting a policy of multiculturalism, sees religion as an 'acceptable' identity marker. Drawing on this process, this article examines the implications on the inter-ethnic relationships, in particular between Hindus and Muslims (both Indian and Pakistani), as two opposite and competing trends are underway: on the one hand, separate, if not confrontational, Hindu and Muslim identities are arising, while on the other hand, a South Asian identity, ignoring the borders of Partition, is shaping up.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Jackie Assayag and Christophe Jaffrelot for their highly useful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

[1] This paper explores issues of identity reconstruction and community formation among South Asians in a given diasporic context, the United States. It focuses more specifically on the relationships between Hindus and Muslims, as this issue is of particular interest for several reasons. First, their numbers have dramatically increased over the years ever since they first migrated in the wake of the liberalization of American immigration policies in the 1960s: according to the 2000 census, Indians are estimated to be around 1.7 million in the US, of which about 65% were Hindus, hence a lower proportion than that in India<sup>2</sup>, and 10% to 15% were Muslims. For Pakistanis, the figures vary between 400, 000 to 600, 000. South Asian migrants in the United States thus consist of a population which may not be as visible as that of Great-Britain, but which indeed represents a sizable minority.

[2] Second, at the socio-economic level, Indians and Pakistanis have so far been known for being highly educated, successful and prosperous, as a result of the American policy of the 1960s and 1970s, which promoted the immigration of educated and qualified populations<sup>3</sup>. They are hence counted amongst the most educated and affluent migrants in comparison both with other ethnic minorities in the United States, and with other South Asian diasporas.

[3] Third, the South Asian population is characterized by a remarkable overlapping of identities; yet, there are perceptible trends of homogenization along religious lines, Hindus vs Muslims, generating a polarization within the group caught by the tension and contradictions between its internal diversity and the appeals made by respective leaderships in favour of greater homogeneity amongst the Hindus on the one hand, and the Muslims on the other.

[4] Last but not least, the case of the United States is also particularly interesting given its specific definition of multiculturalism and the implications this has on inter-ethnic relationships. It should be first borne in mind that as compared to France where the migrant is expected to

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<sup>2</sup> It seems that Sikhs and Christians are over-represented as compared to their proportion in India. Sikhs are estimated to include 10% of the total Indian population (as against hardly 2% in India) and Christians 5% (as against slightly more than 2% in India) (Fenton 1988: 28).

<sup>3</sup> The following figures illustrate the degree of success of Indians in the US: according to the 1990 census, Indian-Americans had an average household income of \$60,903 as against the national median income of \$38,885. More than 87% of Indians had completed high school and 58% had at least a bachelor degree. Over 5,000 Indians work as faculty members in universities. There are no such figures available for Pakistanis. This is because, as opposed to Indians they do not have a separate classification in the US census (they are listed as 'others' in the larger Asian subgroup) but they also have been successful in different fields, in particular medicine, business, and information and technology, albeit less noticeably than Indians. It should however be kept in mind that the number of less privileged Indians and Pakistanis has been growing steadily since the 1980s.

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individually assimilate into the host-society, the United States is a country which has been promoting a policy of so-called multiculturalism (Lacorne 1997, Sabbagh 2004, Taylor 1992) since the early 1990s. This policy is officially meant to celebrate ethnic diversity, of those, in particular, who had been so far marginalized. But the insistence on ethno-cultural differences, instead of building bridges between 'people of colour', has had the effect of exacerbating ethnic differences, as the policy of multiculturalism incites individuals to organize into groups on the basis of cultural similarity and encourages ethnic leaders to speak for the entire community; it has primarily brought about a reinforcing of group boundaries not only between migrant groups but between migrant groups and non-migrant minority groups as well, like African-Americans. Besides, multiculturalism is to be understood in the general framework of American ethnic policy based on racial identification. Hence, this policy is such that individual members of ethnic groups are encouraged to identify themselves as part of 'pre-defined' communities by the official classifications already in place. This is best illustrated by the way the census categories have been set up: along racial lines.

[5] The strengthening and deepening of boundaries, which tend to create cleavages between ethnic groups, occasionally lead to violence as in the case of the infamous Los Angeles riots of 1992, which primarily opposed African-Americans to Korean shopkeepers<sup>4</sup>. As far as South Asians are concerned, they had been targeted as a community in 1993 in New Jersey by Hispanic gangs known as the Dotbusters (in reference to the red *bindi* worn by Hindu women on their foreheads). Most of these tensions and violence take place in a context of economic and political competition but tend in many cases, like in Great-Britain, to oppose 'communities' rather than 'individuals'. As rightfully underlined by Denis Lacorne: 'the basic unit of the democratic nation is not the individual but the ethnic community' (Lacorne 1997).

[6] Another significant related feature governing relationships between communities in the US is discrimination. A salient characteristic of the American ethnic landscape, discrimination plays a major role in the formation of group-boundaries. Apart from occasional incidents (usually opposing them to other 'communities of colour' rather than to whites) as in the examples seen

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to the immediate trigger of the Rodney King verdict (on April 29, 1992, a mostly white jury acquitted four police officers accused in the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King), there were many other factors cited as reasons for the unrest, including: the extremely high unemployment among residents of South Los Angeles, which had been hit very hard by the nation-wide recession; a long-standing perception that the Los Angeles police engaged in racial profiling and used excessive force, and specific anger over the light sentence given to a Korean shop-owner for the shooting of a young African-American woman.

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above, South Asians as an ethnic group have not been the major targets of racist attacks, especially if we compare the case to that of Britain. They nonetheless suffer from a feeling of discrimination as 'people of colour' (see below).

[7] But can this reinforcing of group boundaries caused by the rhetoric of multiculturalism and discrimination lead to a greater cohesion within a given ethnic group? Not necessarily as shown by the case of South Asians whose biggest internal dividing line, as we shall see, seems to be religion.

[8] Except for a very interesting article by Prema Kurien (2001) on the relationships between Hindu and Muslim Indians in Southern California (written before September 11<sup>th</sup>), this subject has been largely understudied. Moreover, Prema Kurien has restricted her study to the case of Indian migrants without addressing Pakistani migrant population here, at all.

[9] In this paper, I first examine how Hindus and Muslims (the latter including Indians as well as Pakistanis, even if distinctions between both groups will be made, whenever needed) have reconstructed their respective identities in the United States, in the New York region in particular, and during this process the importance they give to religion. Keeping in mind the specificity of the American context, I then study the implications of such a reformulation on their relationships, and finally the movements supporting the bridging of borders in favour of the emergence of a South Asian identity in the diaspora.

## **I. Religion, a salient factor in identity reconstruction**

[10] Several reasons can be cited to explain the salience of religion in the identity reconstruction of Hindus and Muslims in the United States. First of all, the diasporic experience to some extent creates the conditions for an exacerbation of the religious sentiment, such that many immigrants 'discover' themselves as Hindus or Muslims when living in the United States. An identity which was 'taken for granted' in the home-country is renegotiated, reconstructed, reinterpreted in a somewhat more self-conscious way in the United States. Immigrants are hence engaged in a complex process of 'rationalizing' their religious practices, this implying a shift in

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understanding fundamental beliefs as much more emphasis is put on individual initiatives and formal rules than has been the case for most people in the Subcontinent<sup>5</sup>.

[11] In an alien environment, religion can also be endorsed with a cathartic role: it may help individuals who have been socially and culturally marginalized and psychologically destabilized by the diasporic experience to exorcize their fears and frustrations and to find landmarks. In such a context, mosques and temples are no longer mere spaces of prayer; they become major spaces of socialization, in the same way as were churches and synagogues for earlier immigrants (and as they still are for recent ones) of other origins, and play a crucial role in community formation. Hence, it is estimated that there are more than one thousand mosques in the United States<sup>6</sup>, more than 200 Hindu temples already built and about one thousand new temples under construction. There is hence a 'frenetic' building of religious edifices, which, as a matter of fact, is also a way for immigrants to make their marks on the American ethnic landscape. This has resulted into a 'confessionnalization' of space. Most immigrant groups have gone through this process, regardless of their religious, national or ethnic affiliations. Hence, Irish, Greeks or Jews have all seen religion as a salient vector in the formation of communities and the reshaping of ethnic identities both at the individual and collective level<sup>7</sup>.

[12] The arrival of children and especially their maturation also plays a major role in the process. It causes serious anxiety amongst the parents who fear that their offspring will acculturate and hence call into question their authority. They worry about the fact that an 'excessive' Americanization might engender a rupture between the youths and their families and/or urge them to enter into exogamous marriages. As a palliative measure, parents devote all their energies to ensure that their cultural and religious heritage will be properly transmitted to their children. In the process, religion is perceived by many parents as the most efficient means to curb the effects of acculturation (Mohammad-Arif 2006).

[13] Last but not least, a number of transnational movements have taken advantage of these feelings of discrimination, disruption, and identity quest to exert on immigrants a certain

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<sup>5</sup> This is in line with movements of revitalization of the religion like the Deobandi movement (Metcalf 1982) on the Muslim side and the VHP on the Hindu side (Jaffrelot 1993).

<sup>6</sup> The figure includes mosques built by non-South Asians.

<sup>7</sup> I will define ethnic identity as a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts and amplifies historical memories, cultural attributes and pre-existing solidarities, in order to create an internal cohesion, and to mark out distinctive cultural territory. This definition is a synthesis of those offered by Brass (1991: 19) and Bodnar (1985: xvi).

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influence and to impose on them homogenous and exclusionist versions of Hinduism and Islam. On the Muslim side, one organization that has been particularly instrumental in this is the Jama'at-i Islami (JI), or Islamic Party. Founded by Abul Ala Maududi in 1941, it is a fundamentalist organization par excellence in the sense that it advocates the return to the 'original' Islamic doctrine, and promotes the idea that Islam should regulate every aspect of social life. The aim of the Party is to infiltrate the political and social spheres, the ultimate objective being the establishment of an Islamic State. The JI has indeed played a crucial role in the Islamization of the State in Pakistan. On the Hindu side, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), or the Universal Hindu Association, created in 1964 in India to promote Hindu religion, has been particularly active in promoting the *Hindutva* (Hinduness) agenda in the US. It views India as an exclusively Hindu society and militates in favour of a Hindu State. It propagates the idea of a Vedic Golden Age that ended with the presumed oppression of Muslim rule, followed by British colonization. Hence, a major dimension of its rhetoric is based on the hostility to the Other, Muslims but also (Indian) Christians seen as resident aliens.

[14] South Asian Muslims migrated to the United States at a time when Islamic 'revivalism' was on the rise throughout the world. Students in particular were under the influence of major fundamentalist thinkers like Maududi. Some of them migrated to the US from the 1960s onwards and played a significant role in setting up Islamic institutions in the United States. As early as 1963, they created the Muslim Student Association (MSA), which was to become the largest organization of Muslim students in the US. Established as a well organized network, the MSA spread its activities to all the major American campuses. In the continuation of the activities of the MSA, another organization was created, targeting not only students but migrants as well: the Islamic Circle of North America, which is the actual branch of the Jama'at-i Islami in the US. ICNA was formally established in 1971 by a group of Pakistani students who wanted to launch an Islamic movement in North America that would 'help' migrants to lead their lives as Muslims.

[15] In India, the RSS, the ideological matrix of the Hindu nationalist movement and its affiliates are, through the Vidhyarthi Parishad (the student wing), equally active in Indian universities, including in the most famous ones<sup>8</sup>. Several degree-holders of these universities

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<sup>8</sup> Indian universities lack facilities for extra-curricular activities and counselling services. This void has been efficiently fulfilled by the RSS, which in turn exerts an influence on students (Mazumdar 2003).

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migrated to the US during the last three decades<sup>9</sup>. The VHP(A) was created in 1970, one year before ICNA, and has established branches all over North America. It is part of a network which includes the Overseas Friends of BJP, the Hindu Swayam Sewak Sangh (HSS) which is the American equivalent of the RSS, and the Hindu Student Council (HSC) which is represented in several American universities.

[16] The BJP and VHP have established themselves in most countries where significant numbers of Indians have settled; however, as Hindus in the US enjoy a particularly high level of economic success, they have always been prime targets. The Sangh Parivar (network of nationalist Hindu organizations) has apparently reached its aim since it is now a well-known fact that Indian Americans extensively donate funds to Hindutva causes both in India and in the US (Prashad 2000: 146, Mathew & Prashad 2000), this goes well in the logic of long-distance nationalism as defined by Benedict Anderson (1998: 74). A report documented in much detail by South Asia Citizens Web based in France and Sabrang Communications based in India showed the close links between the India Development and Relief Fund and the Sangh Parivar, though IDRF had always pretended to be non-sectarian and independent. The report hence revealed that much of the IDRF's money was used to support Hindutva organizations and sectarian Hindu charities that may or may not have a direct connection with the Sangh Parivar.

[17] Interestingly, there are striking resemblances in the policies promoted by the JI and the VHP, though they do not seem to be influencing each other but rather have parallel trajectories. First, in addition to the initial role played by the students on both sides and the fact that both take advantage of the disruption caused by the diasporic experience, the VHP and the JI target more particularly the second generation, who as Americanized as they may be, often go through periods of identity quests; this 'search for roots' may make them even more vulnerable than their parents, all the more so as some of them have been exposed since their childhood to the discourses of the VHP and the JI without necessarily having the means for a critical distance. Hence, most of the summer camps, which can welcome very young children, are controlled by the VHP on the one side and (to a lesser extent, as we will see below) by the JI and its avatars on the other, while youth-oriented programmes (like essay competitions on the life of Vivekananda

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the first transnational Hindu institutions in the US were the Vedanta societies, established after Vivekananda participated in the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 (Mazumdar 2003).

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for young Hindus and the life of the Prophet for young Muslims) constitute a major part of the activities designed for children.

[18] Second, both the JI and the VHP use the language of minority rights, plurality and multiculturalism to plead for integration into the American mainstream. And interestingly, they both try in the process to show the similarities of Islam and Hinduism with Judaism and Christianity.

[19] The other major common point between these two movements is the respectable image that both have managed to project: the JI as well as the VHP have been successful in transforming their image of a fundamentalist movement into that of a respectable organization whose sole objective is supposedly to offer immigrants the means to keep their cultural and religious identity in non-Hindu and non-Muslim lands.

[20] There are however significant differences between both organizations. First, it is not the JI as such which has managed to portray itself as a 'decent' organization, but it is ICNA, since many immigrants are not aware of the fact that ICNA is a branch of the JI; the mention of the JI itself usually generates sentiments of rejection among immigrants. Yet ICNA's organization is almost exactly modelled on the lines of the JI<sup>10</sup>, and it continues to propagate the same ultra-conservative message (the kind of messages that Christian fundamentalists would easily identify with, like the denunciation of adultery, homosexuality, abortion, and so on). As for the VHP, it has simply become the VHP-A, and hence there is no room for doubt about its identity. However, it should be noted that many Hindu immigrants, and more particularly their children, are hardly aware of the true nature of the VHP and other affiliate organizations in India (Prashad 2000); they have hardly heard about their extremist drifts. This precisely is one of the major achievements of the VHP, as compared to the JI whose reputation as a fundamentalist organization is known by a larger number of people. This has been however less true since the Gujarat riots, as the direct role of the Hindu nationalists had been highly exposed on that occasion, including in the American media; but the infiltration of the VHP in major Indian organizations, including in secular ones (Mazumdar 2003), is such that its influence may remain strong for a while in the diaspora. Besides, we may wonder whether now that the Hindu nationalists have been relatively on the decline in India (at least at the national level), they may see expatriates as their ultimate source of

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<sup>10</sup> It should be however noted that whereas the JI in Pakistan strongly advocates the establishment of an Islamic State, ICNA has eliminated this major point from its agenda.

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large support. At any rate, as we will see later, their unabated activism in the United States has been recently illustrated by a controversy over textbooks in California.

[21] Another major distinction between the VHP and ICNA as such in the United States is that while the VHP has somewhat managed to exert a monopoly on the diasporic scene, ICNA is faced with a larger competition, as other organizations and movements (that may be or may not be influenced by the ideals of the JI) are equally if not more active (like ISNA, the Islamic Society of North America, which was partly founded by people influenced by the ideology of the JI, but which cannot be considered as a direct branch of Maududi's movement, or like AMC, the American Muslim Council, a religio-political organization, or even like CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, predominantly led by Arabs and devoted to fighting discrimination against Muslims in the United States). Besides, many South Asians see ICNA as primarily a Pakistani organization and not as a 'globally' Islamic one, or not even as a truly South Asian one, even though some Indians and Bangladeshis are counted amongst its most active members. ICNA's relative failure to effectively transcend national boundaries hampers to some extent its impact on immigrants (particularly on non-Pakistani ones) but even more so on the youths who, especially those who go through a process of re-Islamization, are particularly keen to transcend ethno-national barriers.

[22] Last but not least, let us bear in mind that since Hinduism is primarily an Indian religion this makes the monopoly exerted by the VHP on the diasporic scene easier, as religion and ethnicity more or less merge into one (even if not all Indians are Hindu, Hindus are usually Indian<sup>11</sup>). This conflation of religion and ethnicity can also be useful on the American public scene as, regardless of the salience of religion seen as an acceptable vector for community formation, the officially recognized category for (political) mobilization in the United States is the national one, hence the merging of 'Hindu' and 'Indian' into one will be all the more eagerly promoted by *Hindutva*-oriented leaders. Besides, in order to gain better visibility in the host-society, Hindus need to put forward a unified image of the community in the public sphere, and for this they need to overcome their regional diversity and homogenize their different traditions. Though Hindus remain highly divided along various fault-lines (see below), one of the major aims of the VHP's agenda is precisely to try to homogenize and unify the community. And they may have been more

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<sup>11</sup> This includes those who may not identify themselves as Indians, like migrants from the Caribbean and from East Africa, but they are nonetheless of Indian origin. At any rate, the VHP uses Hinduism as a bridge to link the immigrants from Britain, Africa, Guyana, Fiji and so on.

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successful in doing so in the diaspora than in India. The attempts at homogenizing are also observed among Muslims. Immigration to the United States and the contact with Muslims from different regions of the world has called into question the legitimacy of South Asian Islamic traditions, as other groups view their own customs as equally Islamic. Besides, the extreme diversity of the Muslim community is perceived as a handicap to the cohesion of the group, while unity is viewed as vital to gain representation and have access to resources in the American society. Hence, appeals of the leadership to the believers to abandon their cultural baggage and focus only on text-based rituals, as the Text is the ultimate reference that is likely to bind them beyond cultural particularities. However, as compared to Hinduism, Islam is a highly transnational religion, and as compared to UK where most Muslims are from the Indian Subcontinent, South Asians in the United States are far from representing the dominant group amongst Muslims<sup>12</sup>. Hence, a (quasi)-exclusive control by any single organization becomes much more difficult, even though, once again, the influence of the ideology of the JI and its avatars over Muslims from the Subcontinent cannot be neglected or denied. This is shown by the kind of religious revival (support in particular for a more scripturalist form of Islam,) many South Asians, irrespective of their national origin, experience after migrating to the US<sup>13</sup>. Interestingly, as underlined by Prema Kurien, at a strictly organizational level, Indian Muslims, as compared to Indian Hindus, prefer to be represented in secular organizations like AFMI, American Federation of Muslims from India: in support of this thesis, one of the main arguments given by Kurien is that emphasizing the fact that India is not exclusively Hindu but multireligious and hence should have a secular government is the only way to counter communally-oriented organizations for groups like the Muslims (Kurien 2001: 283).

[23] At any rate, it seems that in the United States the expression of a political Hinduism<sup>14</sup> is more developed than that of a political Islam (among South Asian immigrants at least<sup>15</sup>). Beside the more efficient strategies of mobilization of the Sangh Parivar and the arguments given

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<sup>12</sup> According to Carol Stone, immigrants from Asia make up 11.5% of the total number of Muslims living in the US as opposed to 30.2% of African-Americans and 28.4% of Arabs (Stone 1991: 28). However, according to the American Muslim Council, a political organization based in Washington, immigrants from South Asia alone make up 24.4% of the total Muslim population, as against 42% of African-Americans and only 12.4% of Arabs (Numan 1992: 16).

<sup>13</sup> For more details, see Mohammad-Arif (2002a).

<sup>14</sup> As a tax-exempt religio-cultural organization, the VHP-A is officially not supposed to pursue a political agenda; but it does so either indirectly, or through the medium of some officially political organizations, like the FHA for instance (Federation of Hindu Associations) (Kurien 2001).

<sup>15</sup> That is not true of African-Americans.

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above, the explanation probably lies also in the local context: political Islam is more likely to foster fear and hostility among Americans, and hence Muslim immigrants, who are first and foremost anxious to integrate and be well accepted by American society, will be more reluctant to claim their support to this particular expression of Islam (even before 9/11), whereas political Hinduism does not look as threatening to the Americans, and hence supporting it is not deemed as a potential hindrance to the process of integration of Hindu immigrants in the United States.

[24] In addition to the endogenous factors cited above, more exogenous reasons also explain why religion, rather than other ethnic markers, gets prominence: the local context plays indeed a major role in the process, as religion occupies a significant place in the United States. The First Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1791, guarantees religious freedom in a way which can remind one more of Indian secularism, since it implies that the State can show favour neither to the religious over the non-religious, nor to one particular religious tradition over another. This is different from French *laïcité*, defined as a strict separation between State and Church (though in both the American and French cases religion is relegated to the private sphere). At any rate, Americans have the highest rate of religious practice among industrialized countries, as shown by the high proportion of the population professing to a religion and being actively involved in it. Moreover, despite the fact that religion is officially relegated to the private sphere, the relationship between religion and State can be very ambiguous, as religion is seen as an 'element of the nationalist paradigm' (Marienstras 1997), and this relationship has essentially been defined in Christian and to some extent Jewish terms (Herberg 1960). The US has nonetheless been characterized by a tradition of relative religious freedom which has enabled 'new' religious minorities, like Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists to 'transplant' their faiths and establish organizations (that parallel those of other 'recognized' religions).

[25] At any rate, despite the freedom enjoyed by religious minorities, South Asians do suffer from discrimination as mentioned above. But it is worth noting that Muslims and Hindus experience it in different ways: many Muslims suffer from it at a two-fold level: as an ethnic *and* as a religious minority. Hence the paradox of the situation: on the one hand, American relative tolerance in religious matters enables Muslims to practise their religion more or less freely and openly (at least till September 11<sup>th</sup>). On the other hand, anti-Islamic prejudice in the American population, which is fed by the media and reinforced by international events, exacerbates the religious sentiment of some segments amongst the Muslims, and in reaction - 'reactive ethnicity' (Barth 1969) -, they show a stronger commitment to Islam. As for Hindus, even though some

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negative stereotypes can be associated with Hinduism (often seen as a strange and primitive religion) as well, they mostly experience discrimination as well as a sentiment of ostracism as an ethnic minority. Some find solace in reconstructing their identity not only along religious lines but also by stressing the superiority of Hinduism over other religions, this giving them a sentiment of pride and dignity. On university campuses, it can even look 'cool' for students to claim that they are Hindus (which is not the case for Muslims) because of a fairly romantic image associated with yoga, spirituality, 'oriental' religions, and so on (Mazumdar 2003). Interestingly, this insistence on the Hindu identity was observed as early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a handful of Indians who were then living in the US were fighting to obtain American citizenship: proving that one was white was the main condition required at that time to qualify for citizenship. Indians argued that as high-caste Hindus they belonged to the Aryan race, and by extension were Caucasians, and therefore Whites. As a matter of fact, Sikhs, Muslims and Parsis did the same, as they also tried to prove that they belonged to the Aryan race. At any rate, this shows how much the local context of a given period can influence the self-definition of individuals and groups. It should be also noted that in a country like Great-Britain the insistence on the Hindu identity has been a way of distinguishing oneself from Muslims and from Pakistanis in particular, especially after the Rushdie affair, and even more so since the July 7<sup>th</sup> bomb attacks in London<sup>16</sup>. But in the US, to put forward one's Hindu identity, by wearing the *bindi* for instance, is a way for some to differentiate themselves not only from Muslims (as, at any rate, Americans can hardly distinguish between South Asians along religious lines), but also from American Indians (because of a possible confusion over the common terminology 'Indian') and Hispanics (with whom South Asians are frequently confused because of physical resemblance) for questions not only pertaining to race but to social class as well. Similarly, in the 1910s and 1920s, Indians (across religious affiliations) would wear turbans so as not to be identified with African-Americans (Mazumdar 2003). Hence, beyond issues of religion, race and class can be equally important in the self-definition and the image people want to project of themselves in the host-society.

## **II. The implications on inter-ethnic relations: between separation and polarization**

[26] The consequence of the key role in community-building accorded to religion by a substantial number of immigrants has been, not so surprisingly, the separation and/or polarization

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<sup>16</sup> Hindus and their temples had been indeed targeted after the bomb attacks.

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between Hindus and Muslims. Given the importance taken by mosques and temples as major places of socialization, Hindus and (Indian) Muslims have much fewer opportunities to meet than in the Subcontinent. The lack of a common space of worship is therefore a primary reason for the relative lack of contact between both groups: there are no *dargahs* (shrines) 'not the kind where a South Asian Muslim and a South Asian Hindu would go together to obtain that special pleasure of communion or that equally special comfort of a personal intercession with God.' (Naim 1995: 4).

[27] As for 'cultural' organizations, their formation has also been growingly symptomatic of the separation and polarization between Indians and Pakistanis and especially between Hindu Indians and Muslim Indians (as at any rate Pakistanis tended to form separate organizations from the outset). In the 1960s and 1970s when the contemporary migration process started, Indians, regardless of their religious affiliation, were still few in numbers and tended to belong to the same associations. But from the 1980s onwards, as the South Asian population grew larger, religious minorities progressively left these original organizations, as they increasingly perceived them as too 'Hindu-dominated' and not truly pan-Indian, and set up their own organizations. While Sikhs primarily left for political reasons (in the wake of the 1984 riots and the *Khalistani* movement in favour of an independent Punjab), Muslims and Christians rather left for religious reasons, since Hinduism increasingly became an important feature in the lives of Indian cultural associations (where sessions and events would start with a *puja*, for instance). The impact of the VHP on Hindu expatriates reinforced this trend, urging non-Hindus to leave organizations labelled 'Indian'. While a minority joined with Pakistani cultural associations, most Indian Muslims decided to set up their own organizations, like the already mentioned AFMI created in 1990.

[28] Beyond mere separation, polarization as such has been triggered by particular events taking place in the Subcontinent. The first such event, which represents a watershed in the relationships between Hindus and South Asian, but more particularly Indian, Muslims is the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya. Hindu nationalists claim that Ayodhya, a town in Uttar Pradesh, is the birthplace of Ram, and that the mosque, built by the first Mughal Emperor, Babur (1526-30) was erected over the ruins of a temple dedicated to Ram. From 1989 onwards, the Hindu nationalists led a virulent campaign to reclaim the site, and on 6 December, 1992, they destroyed the mosque. It is a well-documented fact that the worldwide Hindu diaspora took part in this campaign from its inception. Some of the bricks that were carried as symbols in a procession in Ayodhya early in the movement, had been sent to India from the United States, Canada, the Caribbean and from South Africa. After the demolition of the Babri mosque, a segment of Hindu

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immigrants in the United States rejoiced over the event and indulged in the apology of the Hindu nationalists. The following letter sent by an immigrant from New York City to *India Today* is particularly enlightening:

Your issue on the Ayodhya aftermath ('Smelling blood' January 15) has upset me immensely. For the past 45 years, Hindus have been pushed to the wall by the deadly combination of Islamic fundamentalists, communists and pseudo-secularist Hindus whose proclivity to belittle their heritage and damage the Hindu cause is mind-boggling. Now Hindus are in no mood to take anything lying down? The penchant for absurd exaggeration, cynical disregard for truth, vituperative attacks on Hindu leaders, grossly libellous articles designed to vilify and discredit the BJP and entire Hindu samaj smack of yellow journalism (*India Today* 1993: 6).

[29] The founders of the Federation of Hindu Associations (FHA), one of the major Hindu umbrella organizations, even claimed that they were inspired by the event when they created their association in 1993 (Kurien 2001: 268).

[30] As for Indian Muslims, the event and the widening of the gap between the two communities caused them to be more pessimistic about the situation of their coreligionists in India. This pessimism often exaggerated well beyond reality is not only the direct result of the Ayodhya affair, but is also an aftermath of a reinforced ethno-religious sentiment exacerbated by the diasporic condition: those who have migrated do not necessarily experience a weakening of their feeling of belonging to India, but may become hypersensitive in their perception of the vulnerability of the minority community they left behind. This hypersensitivity could already be observed in the country of origin with a fairly marked propensity amongst Indian Muslims to victimization. Their status as a vulnerable minority in India, accused of being responsible for Partition and whose loyalties are often suspect (they are regularly accused, at times of crises in particular, of being a fifth column of Pakistan) are the two main reasons for the sentiment of alienation felt by many Muslims in India. But as said before, the diasporic condition may reinforce the hypersensitivity, this being another facet of the so-called long-distance nationalism. Muslims in India in the past have kept a low profile, but they no longer feel the need to do so after migrating. They are likely to become more vociferous in their denunciation of the violations of minority rights in India, regardless of the actual size of the problem on the ground.

[31] As for the reactions of Pakistanis to the Ayodhya affair and to the situation of Muslims in India, many feel vindicated in their belief in an age-old hostility between Hindus and

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Muslims, and as a corollary that Partition was more than justified. At any rate, the memory of Partition is still very alive among immigrant South Asians regardless of their religious affiliation, but in particular among the Punjabis. It is worth noting that in spite of their own very critical assessment of the condition of Muslims in India, Indian Muslims in the diaspora express sometimes feelings of embarrassment over what they perceive as the 'over-solicitude' of the Pakistanis in the way the latter react to events affecting Indian Muslims. Interestingly, Muslims in India express similar sentiments when the Pakistani government 'interferes' in their matters. The following comment was made in England, but could apply to the US as well:

While the sympathy expressed by the Pakistanis is genuine no doubt, it is hard to listen to such lamentations over and over again. The concern they have for their religious brethren makes them believe that anyone who is not a Muslim is a Muslim basher (Kalam circa 1993).

[32] The second very important event which has led to a polarization between communities (this time on national lines, *i.e.* Indians vs Pakistanis, regardless of religious affiliations) is the nuclear tests conducted by both India and Pakistan in 1998. Though they aroused mixed feelings in both communities at large, they were nonetheless hailed with an unrestrained jubilation by a segment amongst them: the tests became the occasion for an outburst of nationalist passions on the respective sides, of which the inevitable corollary was an exacerbation of ethnic tensions. This polarization reached its peak the following year during the Kargil war when Indian expatriates from the Silicon Valley sent a deluge of e-mails against Pakistan's infiltration into Indian territory, which literally flooded Congressional offices. Interestingly, most Indian Muslims reacted either by celebrating the Indian nuclear tests or by taking a pacifist stand and denouncing the tests conducted by both countries. This epitomizes the fact that no matter the mixed feelings they may nurture towards their home-country, in particular when they are in a diasporic situation, those feelings do not translate into any significant kind of support for Pakistan as a nation<sup>17</sup>. This is, in our view, a good illustration of the overlapping of belongings and the complex (re)negotiations of the different facets of identity Indian Muslim expatriates are engaged in: they can adopt a 'united' stand with non-Muslim Indians, when their own coreligionists are not adversely affected as witnessed in the case of the nuclear tests or the Kargil war, else express annoyance over Pakistanis' 'ostensible' concern as in the example of the Ayodhya crisis. In other instances however, Indian Muslims and Pakistanis, who usually go to the

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<sup>17</sup> Fieldwork conducted in May 1999 in New York.

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same mosques and hence share a major space of socialization and common identity formation, can mobilize for common political causes when 'neutral' grounds are involved (like the war in Bosnia for instance).

[33] At any rate, it is worth noting that the spaces of confrontation are different in the United States from what they were in the Subcontinent, or even from what they are in the UK: streets are no longer the preferential places where communal passions are unleashed; they have been replaced by other spheres. The importance of temples and mosques in (separate) community formation has been already mentioned; in addition, media, new technologies (the Internet in particular), as shown by the dramatic increase in communal newspapers and websites over the years and the extensive use of e-mails during the Kargil crisis for instance, as well as political lobbies<sup>18</sup> are invested in the United States with a new (and exclusive) importance, and have become the major arenas of confrontation. This corroborates Benedict Anderson's theory of long-distance nationalism, whereby the actors who indulge in transnational politics are not directly affected by the consequences, as inter-ethnic conflicts in the United States remain fairly relegated to the domain of the rhetoric and the discourse, while repercussions on the ground (leading in particular to direct confrontations between communities) can be felt in home countries, as in the Gujarat riots (see below).

[34] This is not to suggest however that streets in the US, as a public sphere where communal sentiments would be expressed, have lost any significance. Much to the contrary, streets can become 'confessionalized' spaces as shown not only by the frenetic construction of religious edifices, already mentioned, but also by the increasing number of ethnic parades, Indian, Pakistani, Sikh, Muslim (as if Sikhs and Muslims were forming an ethnic group), and processions during religious festivals, etc. But interestingly, in the few areas where there is a relative concentration of South Asians (as compared to UK, South Asians do not however live as much in ethnic enclaves), the relationships between South Asians are not particularly strained; besides, their frictions, when they do exist, do not usually degenerate into street-fights. In addition to the daily interaction that may dilute the conflictual logic, this situation can also be explained by the fact that these populations tend to be socially homogeneous: those who live in ethnic enclaves usually belong to underprivileged segments of the population. Such is the case for instance in Queens (New York), where a fairly high number of South Asians hailing from diverse

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<sup>18</sup> See Ingrid Therwath in this issue and Mohammad-Arif (2000).

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ethno-national backgrounds live but sharing usually similar social conditions (Khandelwal 2002). For those populations, class issues tend to be endorsed with a greater importance than ethno-national or ethno-religious considerations<sup>19</sup>. As mentioned previously, competition and conflicts, when they do take place, usually oppose South Asians to Hispanics or African-Americans. Hence, the situation is fairly different from the UK. This perhaps is explained by the fact that in the United States, South Asians form only a minority among other migrants while in the UK they are one of the dominant minorities and are much more involved than they are in the US, in competing to place demands and negotiate with the British authorities for obtaining subsidies and other types of material gains.

[35] The most vociferous promoters of the reassertion of an Indian identity, defined as necessarily and exclusively Hindu, usually live in residential suburbs that are mostly inhabited by White people, and their opportunities for daily interaction with other South Asians are fairly limited (Khandelwal 2002). Or, they can be petit-bourgeois who are in a process of or strongly willing to climb the social ladder, as are the newsstands' owners of Manhattan and motel owners. Interestingly, many of them are Gujaratis, who at any rate form the largest regional group of Indians in the United States. This may be significant to the extent to which the transformation of the State of Gujarat into a laboratory of the *Hindutva* (Hinduness) forces had repercussions far beyond India. With this backlash, these very Gujarati expatriates have contributed to the Hindutvaization of Gujarat by massively financing Hindu nationalists, as was revealed during the Gujarat riots (see below). Regarding the aggressive promoters of a Pakistani or of a Muslim identity (defined in opposition to the Other, and the Other still being for many Hindu), they also tend to live in areas where there is a low concentration of South Asians. Such is the case, for instance, of Pakistani lobbyists (whose main activities are focussed on anti-Indian discourses) living in the New York region<sup>20</sup>.

[36] But needless to say, Hindus as well as Muslims are far from forming two internally homogeneous communities, and are highly fragmented along different fault-lines: sectarian, regional, linguistic, socio-economic, and so on. Though there have been an increasing number of pan-Indian associations, many organizations have been formed on a regional basis: Gujarati, Punjabi, Hyderabad, Bengali (interestingly but not so surprisingly, Bangladeshis have formed

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<sup>19</sup> However, other studies point out that the *Hindutva* ideology also has its supporters among recent immigrants who experience economic, social and psychological difficulties (Kurien 2004, Mazumdar 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Fieldwork conducted in May 1999 in New York.

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separate organizations from the Bengalis and from other South Asian Muslims as well). Besides, the overlapping of identities and belongings is such that borders can be easily blurred. Some vectors that may usually be dividing among immigrant groups can at times play a significant bridging role, like language: if not at the organizational level, language can indeed be endorsed with this function at a more individual level: Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs (regardless of their religion but usually belonging to older generations) can share their love of Urdu and take part in the same *musha'ira* or *ghazal* sessions.

[37] Beyond this precise example, there are larger bridging vectors, like music, (*qawwali* is particularly popular in the first generation) and *bhangra*, or *neo-bhangra* (traditional *bhangra* mixed with reggae or rap, extremely popular across generations, and particularly appreciated by the youths). As for Bollywood, it still plays its role of bridging borders in the diaspora, as it already does in the Subcontinent<sup>21</sup>, regardless of age, sex, class, region, language, religion, caste and so on.

### III. Beyond religion: the actors of pacification

[38] In reaction to this polarization and growing confrontational attitude, there has been an increasing counter-activism enacted by a(nother) segment of South Asians, the 'self-conscious' actors of reconciliation in the diaspora. During the recent years, these actors have come to play a fairly significant role in the United States. Admittedly, their circle remains rather narrow: progressive activists are mostly found on university campuses (both students and faculty members) and are concentrated in a limited number of regions, namely New York, Boston, Chicago and San Francisco (Misir 1996), while supporters of communal politics are more widespread and either hail from conservative (fairly well) established immigrant communities (professionals and businessmen in particular), or from groups of recent immigrants who experience economic, social and psychological difficulties.

[39] It does remain however that the number of progressive organizations has dramatically increased in a span of few years; some of them explicitly militate in favour of harmony and rapprochement between the different South Asian communities and for peace in the

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<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that in the early 2000s, there had been a tendency to make Hindi films that were ostensibly hostile to Pakistan, like *Gadar* (2001) and *Maa Tujhe Salaam* (2001). With the current peace process between India and Pakistan, Indian film directors have stopped making this kind of movies.

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Subcontinent, in particular between India and Pakistan. In the 1990s, there were already a number of progressive organizations but for most their main objective was to defend the interests of South Asians in the United States itself, across religious, national or regional barriers. Some were focusing on particular segments of the population such as women (organizations against domestic violence like Sakhi, Manavi, Apna Ghar, and so on), Dalits (like [ambedkar.org](http://ambedkar.org), New Republic India, Dalit Freedom Network), homosexuals (like South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association), taxi drivers (like Licensed Drivers Coalition), and so on. Others, like the team of SAMAR magazine (South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection), had a wider scope and deal with issues across gender or professional lines. Gradually these organizations, while still being concerned with local issues, have extended their activities toward the Subcontinent, hence giving a more transnational dimension to their concerns. But what is even more noteworthy is that the sheer number of these organizations has significantly increased in a few years. Most or almost all of them mix local concerns with transnational ones. Among them, we can mention: FOSA (Friends of South Asia, created in 2001-2002 in the San Francisco Bay area), SALA (South Asian Literature and Art Archive created in 2001), SAPAC (South Asia Progressive Action Collective, based in Chicago), ASATA (Alliance of South Asians Taking Action) created in 2000 in the San Francisco Bay area, and so on. One of them deserves to be specially mentioned: APSA, Action of Physicians of South Asia, created in July 2003. The creation of this organization is indeed particularly interesting because Indian and Pakistani doctors had formed separate professional organizations (like AAPI, American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin, and APPNA, the Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America), and many members of these organizations have been actively involved in lobbying campaigns focused on the hostility to the Other (Mohammad-Arif 2000).

[40] There are several reasons for the rise of these alternative organizations, some take their roots in the change of the sociological profile of the diaspora, while others are more related to recent 'traumatic' events that have acted as 'moral shocks' (Jasper & Poulson 1995) for many diasporic South Asians. Regarding the change of sociological profile, between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the following decade, there has been a maturation of the second generation, which has come along with a questioning by the youths but also by women, who had been so far marginalized, of the quasi-exclusive supremacy exerted by men of the first generation over Indian and Pakistani organizations. These men, who acted as self-proclaimed community leaders and had so far monopolized the whole community space, tended to (and still do) insist on

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a singular identity, that of a Hindu, or a Muslim, or that of an Indian (but understood as necessarily Hindu) or a Pakistani. Hence for the past few years, alternative community spaces have emerged under the impulsion of women and youths (even though a significant fraction of women and youths are also engaged in movements of hindutvaization and re-Islamization). These alternative spaces attract not only 'true' progressive militants who defend particular causes but also other South Asians who are not necessarily politicized but who are in search of spaces of entertainment (as remarkably described by Pnina Werbner (2002) in the UK context) or of forums for artists of South Asian descent like Voices of Resistance ('an annual exploration and affirmation of South Asian Diasporic identity through art<sup>22</sup>): these progressive South Asian organizations represent public forums of celebration (through music and cinema in particular) not only of communal harmony but of South Asian culture as well, beyond the narrow national or religious identity. Hence the whole *fun* and/or *art* dimension of the events, organized by these associations, plays a significant role in attracting South Asians onto common public forums regardless of their regional, religious and other affiliations.

[41] This calling into question of the hegemony of males of the first generation over South Asian communities has coincided with 'spectacular' events which took place both in the Subcontinent and in the United States: the nuclear tests and the threats of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan; September 11<sup>th</sup> and the subsequent and unparalleled discrimination against South Asians; finally the ghastly riots in Gujarat. Hence it is this conjunction between the rise of new actors on the diasporic public sphere and dramatic events in both home-societies and the host-society, which explains the more aggressive activism, as well as the growing legitimacy, of secular and progressive organizations over the recent years. Some of these movements, like FOSA, founded in the wake of the nuclear tests, were specifically created in reaction to these 'dramatic' events. Yet, this competition between different actors of conflictuality on the one hand, of actors of reconciliation on the other is nothing new: it echoes a situation already observed in the Subcontinent as well where radical Hindus and radical Muslims compete with feminists, modernists and secularists for a control of the public space.

[42] Two of the events mentioned above deserve special attention: September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath, and the riots in Gujarat. Before September 11<sup>th</sup>, as compared to the Arabs, the Pakistanis and Indian Muslims had the 'advantage' of being mistaken for Hindus, who overall

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<sup>22</sup> See [http://www.sapac.org/sapacwebpage\\_files/Page466.htm](http://www.sapac.org/sapacwebpage_files/Page466.htm)

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enjoy a positive image in the United States. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, the situation is such that all the people who hail from the Subcontinent, regardless of their actual religious background, including in highly cosmopolitan cities like New York, tend to be regarded with suspicion because they are mistaken for Muslims even when they are Hindu or Sikh. This situation has generated different kinds of reactions: the first one, which probably includes the majority of the population, has been to try as much as possible to differentiate oneself from Muslims: just after September 11<sup>th</sup>, some Sikhs for instance could be seen on TV showing photographs on CNN and explaining the difference between the turban of the Sikhs and the turban of bin Laden; more generally speaking, many have tried through various means to show that Hindus and Sikhs had nothing to do with Muslims. But other people on the contrary have seen this situation as an opportunity to build bridges beyond religious cleavages and to try to find common platforms to face a situation of crisis together. Hence leaders of Sikh, Hindu and Muslim organizations held several common meetings with American representatives in Washington DC, and expressed together their concerns over the growing discrimination against South Asians in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Besides these efforts at the political level, other people also tried to 'educate' their coreligionists about how to fight discrimination, with a rhetoric about the importance of not being themselves in return discriminatory. I thus attended a meeting in November 2001 organized by two Sikh lawyers who were explaining to the audience which was exclusively composed of Sikhs, how to defend themselves against racist attacks, profiling in airports and so on; they were strongly insisting on the importance of explaining 'positively' the Sikh religion to the 'attacker' ('I am a Sikh and this is what Sikhism is about') instead of just shouting 'I am not a Muslim' (this implying 'hence you are not targeting the right person'). More broadly speaking, September 11<sup>th</sup> has engendered an awareness amongst some people, generated by the perception of the Other, the 'Other' being here the host-society, of a common identity, that of 'South Asian'. The following statement of a young man just after 9/11 is thus revealing: 'We should be united among ourselves', said Malik (interestingly, 'Malik' is a name that can be given by Muslims, Hindu Punjabis and Sikh Punjabis alike). 'We all look the same to them, so let's unite as one.' It should be noted that if this (self)-definition of 'South Asian' or 'Asian' generated by the perception of the host-society has been existing in the UK for a long time, this phenomenon is much more recent in the United States, and seems to have been endorsed with significant importance since September 11<sup>th</sup>. And this goes well beyond the circle of progressive activists.

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[43] The other major event of the recent years is the riots in Gujarat in February 2002, which caused the death of 2000 people, mostly Muslims. The direct responsibility of the local State in the riots was soon established. This event, reminiscent of the horrors of Partition, engendered a fairly important mobilization in the United States, on the initiative of both progressive organizations and Indian Muslim associations. In 2005, these organizations achieved what has probably been one of their greatest successes. They were able to prevent the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, from coming to the United States. Modi, who has been accused of being involved in the Gujarat riots, had been invited in March 2005 at the annual convention of the Asian American Hotel Owners' Association. The AAHOA is largely dominated by the Gujaratis, and represents particularly small hotel and motel owners. This invitation triggered off an important mobilization of about thirty organizations who were backed by a dozen more based in the United States, and representing both Indian Muslims, civil rights groups, and intellectuals. They formed a coalition called Coalition Against Genocide. Following this mobilization, the US government refused to grant Modi both a diplomatic visa and a business visa. Regarding the diplomatic visa, it put forward the argument that Modi had been invited by an Indo-American organization and not by the American government. As for the business visa, the American authorities invoked a clause of the US Immigration and Nationality Act which 'prohibits any government official who was responsible for any directly carried out at any time, particularly severe violations of religious freedom'. The rejection of the visa was followed by a resolution on the initiative of a Democrat representative, asking the Congress to condemn 'the conduct of Chief Minister Narendra Modi for his actions to incite religious persecution and urging the United States to condemn all violations of religious freedom in India'. We can of course wonder about the real motivations of the US government and whether the latter would have adopted the same attitude had the BJP still been in power; yet, the whole affair represents as symbolic as it may be a nonetheless significant victory for progressive movements in America<sup>23</sup>.

[44] South Asian secular forces in the US have very recently achieved another victory. This regards a controversy over textbooks in California. The monitoring of the presentation of

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<sup>23</sup> There was an 'interesting' clash between two Indian American expatriates at the latest Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (January 2006), when a representative of the 'Coalition against Genocide', Satyanath Chowdary, protested against the presentation of the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman award to the President of the Federation of Indian Associations, Sudhir Parikh. Chowdary's contention was that the FIA had planned a procession in honour of Narendra Modi (a *Gujarat Gaurav rath yatra*) on the streets of New York City if Modi was granted a visa to the US, and hence, as a 'communally-oriented' person, Sudhir Parikh did not deserve the award.

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Hinduism and Indian history in American school textbooks is an important goal of the American *Hindutva* movement. In early 2005, two groups closely connected to the Sangh Parivar, the Vedic Foundation and the Hindu Educational Foundation, submitted recommendations to the California Curriculum Commission for revisions of textbooks and their treatment of ancient Indian history. In addition to removing stereotypes and factual errors, the groups also inserted highly contentious changes, like removing anything suggesting that caste still determines the status of people in Indian society, portraying Hinduism as very similar to Judaism and Christianity, making all non-Hindu Indians foreigners, and so on. Initially, the Curriculum Commission came under so much pressure from *Hindutva* forces who wrapped these changes in the vocabulary of minority rights and equality, that the Commission accepted many of those changes<sup>24</sup>. But those controversial changes stirred such an opposition by academics and secular groups from all over the US and other countries that the California State Board of Education overturned the changes<sup>25</sup>. This is an interesting case of both the unabated activism of *Hindutva* militants in the United States, even when the BJP has been on the decline in India, at the national level, and the increasingly successful counter-activism of South Asian secular forces.

[45] All this said, it does remain that in terms of mobilization, nationalists and fundamentalists of all kinds still overshadow progressive and secular groups. It would be sufficient to compare the number of people who came to the AAHOA meeting held in New York that Narendra Modi could not physically attend (but his speech was retransmitted by satellite), with the number of people who were demonstrating outside the building against this meeting: 4000 vs 250.

## Conclusion

[46] South Asians in the United States have witnessed a polarization and an exacerbation of their internal conflicts, particularly opposing Hindus to Muslims for a series of reasons explored in this article. First, so-called American multiculturalism tends to create or reinforce internal group-boundaries. Second, the very process of migration, across countries, calls into question

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<sup>24</sup> *Tehelka*, 4 Feb. 2006, in Harsh Kapoor (South Asia Citizen Web).

<sup>25</sup> More than a hundred of South Asian scholars from across the United States and more than fifty American and international Indologists, as well as secular community organizations and private individuals, wrote to the Board of California, protesting the changes proposed by the *Hindutva* groups, Harsh Kapoor, 9 March 2006 (South Asia Citizen Web).

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any type of identity that had been so far 'taken for granted', and in the process religious lives are re-constructed while religion plays a crucial role in ethnic formation. Migration also involves socio-economic and social mobility issues, and even though these populations are not in direct competition with each other the same way as they can be in the Subcontinent, they do share a common experience of marginalization and stigmatization generated by dislocation, whose outcome is for some immigrants a tendency to find solace in narrow and parochial identities. Equally important is the role played by the respective leaderships, who, involved as they are in power struggles, competition for resources and bids for (personal) recognition (both by the host-society and by the ethnic community), will not hesitate to only lay the stress on the respective differences and specificities and not on the common history that binds these communities. These ethnic entrepreneurs will do so all the more willingly because they are encouraged by the host-society to exhibit a homogenous culture. Neither is the role played by openly communal organizations negligible in increasing the gap between religious groups. Finally, the demonization of Muslims in the United States, since September 11<sup>th</sup>, by the American government and by the American media urges the non-Muslims to differentiate themselves from Muslims, and hence has not really contributed to improve the relationships between the two groups, less so since the anti-Muslim feelings prevalent in the United States fits the anti-Muslim agenda of the *Hindutva* supporters (see Ingrid Therwath in this issue).

[47] This does not prevent immigrants from being engaged in a complex web of identity (re)negotiations and labyrinthine alliances (along age, gender, professional, linguistic, religious ... lines). In spite of the tendencies towards homogenization in the two major religious groups in particular, the overlapping of identities, strongly observed in the Subcontinent is not lost in migration: while 'traditional' bridging factors like Bollywood, remain alive after migration, others like neo-*bhangra* are even created in the diaspora.

[48] Last but not least, a redefinition of the concept of South Asian seems to make its way in the United States, partly unwillingly as well as deliberately. This notion had been vague for a long time and still is for many people, including the directly involved ones, particularly the second generation. Interestingly, some of the latter 'discovered' that they were South Asian only after going through the American college application process (the category 'South Asian' approximately appeared in the middle of the 1990s); hence, it is the perception and the definition of host-society which can generate a sentiment and self-awareness of a common belonging. But this concept of 'South Asian' has also gradually taken on a more self-conscious, deliberate

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meaning, as shown by the increasing number of organizations which have named themselves 'South Asian'. These movements and actors explicitly strive to erase the borders inherited from Partition, both in the diaspora, as they exhort South Asian immigrants to bridge their differences (and for this they use in particular the entertainment and the 'art' arena), and in home-societies where their activities attempt at a reconciliation between India and Pakistan. But as said before, they are still overshadowed by the actors of conflictuality.

[49] At any rate, as this paper has attempted to show, the perpetuation, or even creation, of differences, generated by the American policy of multiculturalism, can not only affect 'broad' ethnic groups (like Koreans vs. African-Americans or Hispanics vs. South Asians) but, given the crucial role of religion in mainstream public space as well as in ethnic identity formation, it can also have an impact on the self-perception and self-definition of sub-groups within larger communities, and create internal group boundaries. The self-conscious blurring of these boundaries, as enacted by a (small) progressive segment of the South Asian population, which gives a new meaning to what is primarily a geographical concept in the Subcontinent, partakes of the same logic: identity construction along community lines and not along individual lines as is (still) strongly advocated in France, albeit with a reverse effect. This tells us of the importance of the local context, in (over)determining the processes of identity (re)construction of ethnic groups in a diasporic context.

[50] This study raises another issue, that of religious groups tending to function as ethnic groups, because despite the recognition of religion as an 'acceptable' identity marker in the United States (as opposed to France for instance), only ethnicity is officially considered as a valid group categorization (as seen in the census, in lobbying games, and so on). Hence, under the impulse of their respective leaderships, 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' have now come to operate almost like ethnic groups, hence endorsing in some ways, reshaping in others the categorizations put in place by the Americans.

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