

To be or not to be South Asian: contemporary
Indian American politics.

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To Be or Not to Be South Asian: Contemporary Indian American Politics

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Abstract

There are two major types of coalitional alliances that ethnic groups have developed in the U.S.: coalitions based on continent of origin and coalitions based on religious affiliation. What are the similarities and differences between the two types of mobilizations and how does each affect the ethnic community and the wider society? My article examines these debates by looking at two ways in which Indian Americans are entering the public sphere in the U.S.: around a "South Asian" platform and around a pan-Hindu or "Indic" identity.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE SOUTH ASIAN:

Contemporary Indian American Politics

prema kurien

INTRODUCTION

As ethnic groups have emerged in the public sphere to demand recognition and resources in Western multicultural societies, the process of "ethnogenesis,"¹ in this case the transformation of immigrants into "ethnics," has been a subject of much scholarly interest. The development of "new" ethnicities on the basis of coalitional alliances among immigrants from different backgrounds has received particular attention. These discussions usually have been framed by a variety of theoretical debates that tend to be cast in a binary fashion: is the ethnic formation due to the recognition of longstanding cultural similarities, or is it the outcome of cultural bonds that are forged in the diaspora;² is ethnic identity externally imposed, or is it voluntarily embraced;³ does ethnic mobilization emerge as a reaction to discrimination and marginalization, or as a strategic response to gain resources.⁴ Since most of these mobilizations are targeted at the host polity, the role of the state in shaping patterns of ethnic formation remains a central focus of most of these debates.⁵

There are two major bodies of literature in this regard: one focused on new ethnic identifications formed by pan-ethnic coalitions based broadly on continent of origin, such as "Asian," "Latino," "African" or "black," and "European" or "white,"⁶ and the other looking at the development of pan-ethnic coalitions based on religious affiliation.⁷ Both types

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