

**Indian Identity in the U.S. and the Diaspora**  
History M175B and Asian-American Studies M172  
Spring 2013: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 11-12:15  
Dodd 167

**Vinay Lal**

Departments of History & Asian American Studies  
T: 310.825.8276; Dept. T (for messages): 310.825.4601  
E: [vlal@history.ucla.edu](mailto:vlal@history.ucla.edu)  
Office: Bunche 5240

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 1-3:30 & by appointment

Instructor's academic website: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia>

Instructor's Web pages on Diaspora: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Diaspora/diaspora.html>

Course site: <https://classes.sscnet.ucla.edu/course/view.php?name=13S-HISTM175B-1>

Instructor's blog: [vinaylal.wordpress.com](http://vinaylal.wordpress.com)

**TENTATIVE SYLLABUS – FINAL SYLLABUS WILL BE  
POSTED AROUND MARCH 30**

*Introduction:* The Indian diaspora today constitutes an important, and in some respects unique, force in world culture. In the United States alone, Indians number in excess of 3 million according to the latest census results, amounting to just a fraction less than 1% of the US population. The origins of the modern Indian diaspora lie, in the first instance, in the subjugation of India by the British and its incorporation into the British empire. Indians were taken over as indentured labor to far-flung parts of the empire in the nineteenth-century, a circumstance to which the modern Indian populations of Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Malaysia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and other places attest in their own peculiar ways. There were, of course, other circumstances that led to the dispersal of Indians over the globe. Over two million Indian men fought on behalf of the empire in numerous wars, including the Boer War and the two World Wars, and some remained behind to claim the land on which they had fought as their own. As if in emulation of their ancestors, many Gujarati traders once again left for East Africa in large numbers in the early part of the twentieth century. Finally, in the post-World War II period, the dispersal of Indian labor and professionals has been a nearly world-wide phenomenon. Indians, and other South Asians, provided the labor that helped in the reconstruction of war-torn Europe, particularly the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, and in more recent years unskilled and skilled labor from South Asia has been the main force in the transformation of the physical landscape of much of what is called the Middle East, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States. Meanwhile, in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, Indians from the 1960s onwards began to make their presence visibly felt in the professions, though there had been earlier, and rather different, strands of migrations to these countries.

The Indian community in the United States will serve as the pivot for the second half of the course, but we will commence with some general questions about diasporas and narratives about the global Indian diaspora. We will engage with Indian communities world-wide as a way to pose various critical questions about identity, race, gender, production of knowledge, and cultural change. Who and what is an Indian? How we are to characterize the Indian diasporic community as 'Indian' given that it is constituted of such diverse elements as South Asian Hong Kong Muslims, Canadian Sikhs (or shall we say Sikh Canadians?), Punjabi Mexican Californians, twice or even thrice-emigrated English Gujarati East Africans, South African Hindus, and so forth? In the United States, at least, the Indian community has occupied a place of considerable privilege, and many Indians could deflect the moment of recognition that 'Indianness' and being 'American' do not always happily coincide. In

the 1980s, as the American economy went into a decline, and Indians began to cluster in sufficiently large numbers to constitute somewhat distinct communities, Indians for the first time in the modern period became the targets of racial attacks. Some people argue that there is still a glass ceiling for Indians as other Asians, even though the Indian community is highly educated and unusually affluent if not uniformly so. By the 1980s, certainly, a number of developments had come to the fore in the US, UK, and elsewhere. In Britain, for example, the ‘corner shop’, a hallowed symbol (if we could recall our Dickens) of English life, had passed largely into the hands of Indians and other South Asians. What might the British have thought of such a development? And if the English landscape had been so radically altered, what remained English about England? Similarly, turning to the US, we can ask what happens when the motel, a quintessential American institution, falls largely into the hands of Indians? Gujarati ownership of motels in the US is so ubiquitous that the words “motel” and “Patel” have even begun to be viewed as synonyms. The narrative of the Indian diaspora, thus, is not only about Indian identity, but about how immigrants such as Indians alter the very meaning of what it means to be an American.

However unlike Indian communities across the world might be, they all maintain some sort of tenuous link with the motherland. Or do they? Bharat Natyam has everywhere truly become the “dance of India” -- much more so in the diaspora than in India. However, the most likely candidate for a force of bonding would be, of all things, the Hindi feature film. The Hindi film is a phenomenon unique to the Indian diaspora: what Hollywood was to Western Europe, the Bombay Hollywood (“Bollywood”) has been to the Middle East, East Africa, the Caribbean, and such Pacific nations as Fiji. There are by now, of course, some indications that Bollywood is even making inroads into the United States, and not only with respect to recent Hindi films that are gaining some attention (eg, “Lagaan”), but even with reference to the Bollywoodization of Hollywood itself. The modesty, not to mention puritanism, of the Hindi film is often said to explain its appeal to the Islamic world. We will consider whether the Indian ‘arranged marriage’ furnishes another such facet of a ‘common culture’. Like much else, matrimonial ads have moved from the print media to the internet. How are we to decipher these ads? Though these very ads help Indians to ‘locate’ one another, they pose difficult questions about ‘otherness’, both the ‘otherness’ of Indians in relation to ‘Americans’, and the internal ‘otherness’ of certain Indians in relation to other Indians.

In a similar vein, we will also consider the religious practices of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in the U.S. and other overseas communities, and consider how these practices might be assisting in transforming the nature of religious faiths in India itself. Hindus all over the world are showing alarming signs of susceptibility to a resurgent and militant Hinduism; indeed, it is even arguable that they seem to know the meaning of Hinduism better than do Hindus in the ‘motherland’. Why do overseas Hindus, particularly in the North American diaspora, appear always to out-Hindu the Hindu? Other questions we will consider include: relations between parents and children; race relations between Indians, blacks, and whites; the place of Indian food and music in the preservation of Indian communities; the responsibility, if any, of the Indian Government to overseas Indians; the use of the internet among diasporic Indian communities; history and memory in the diaspora; the future prospects of the Indian community in the U.S. and around the world; and, most significantly, whether it is desirable and politically emancipatory to think of identity through such given categories as race, gender, nationality, and ethnicity.

Course materials: Most readings for this course will be posted online. You can access these readings if you are a registered student. The only exception is two books which you are expected to purchase, as follows:

Vinay Lal, *The Other Indians: A Cultural and Political History of South Asians in America* (UCLA, AASC Press, 2008; available from Asian American Studies Center Press, Campbell Hall); and

Biju Mathew, *Taxi! Cabs and Capitalism in New York City* (Free Press, 2006; paperback ed., 2008 – available at Ackerman Bookstore).

**Requirements:** You will write one paper for this course, 5-7 pages in length, due at the beginning of the sixth week, i.e., Tuesday, May 7th. This paper will be on one of the following films: “Bhaji on the Beach” (dir., Gurinder Chadha), “Mississippi Masala” (dir. Mira Nair); “My Son the Fanatic” (dir. Udayan Prasad, 1997); “East is East” (dir. Damien O’Donnell, 2000); “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid” (dir. Stephen Frears, 1987); “Bend It Like Beckham” (dir. Gurinder Chadha, 2003); “The Namesake” (dir. Mira Nair, 2007); and “Brick Lane” (dir. Sarah Gavron, 2008). As we will be discussing and viewing parts of “My Beautiful Laundrette” (dir. Stephen Frears, 1986) in class, you may not write your paper on this film.

In addition, there will be a final, take-home exam, which will cover everything on the syllabus. You will have five days, including one week-end, to write the exam; it will be handed out on the last day of classes, Thursday, June 6th, and will be due by email as a Word attachment not later than 5 PM on Tuesday, June 11th. You will be given six questions and have to answer four; expect each answer to be about 2-3 pages, double-spaced, using Times New Roman 12.

The grade will be apportioned on the following basis: paper, 35%; exam, 55%. The remaining 10% is at the instructor’s discretion and is based on class attendance, participation, and so on. Active class participation and regular attendance will determine the difference in borderline cases: for example, if your grade hovers between a B+ and A-, you will receive the latter grade if your participation and attendance warrant that consideration.

You are also required to attend ALL the film screenings for this class and have watched the films that will be digitized for your use (see syllabus).

### **Calendar of Meetings and Readings:**

**Week 1 (April 2, 4):** Introduction to the class; Thinking about Diasporas: Migration, Displacement, and the Modern World System

We may be viewing brief excerpts from a couple of documentary films.

Amitav Ghosh, “The Diaspora in Indian Culture”, *Public Culture* 2, 1 (Fall 1989):73-78.

Vinay Lal, “Diaspora Purana: The Indic Presence”, *The International Indian* 10, no. 6 (February 2003):29-31.

Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec, “Introduction: themes in the study of the South Asian diaspora”, in *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity*, ed. Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), pp. 1-37.

**Week 2 (April 9, 11):** The Origins of the Modern Indian Diaspora: Indentured Labor

Brij V. Lal, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, in association with National University of Singapore, 2006), pp. 44-57.

Madhavi Kale, “Projecting Identities: Empire and Indentured Labor Migration from India to Trinidad and British Guiana, 1836-1885”, in Peter van der Veer, ed., *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 73-92.

Khal Torabully and Marina Carter, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), pp. 17-61.

Selections of very short articles (less than ten pages) from the *Modern Review* (Calcutta), 1932-34.

*OPTIONAL READING:* I. M. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories 1834-1854* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), ch. 1.

**Week 3 (April 16, 18: ):** Indians in the United Kingdom: The Periphery comes to the Center.

**NB: Screening on April 18:** “My Beautiful Launderette”, director Stephen Frears. 100 mins. Excerpts and discussion.

Neil Berry, “Britain’s Asians”, *Toronto South Asian Review* 6, 2 (Fall 1987-Winter 1988):28-35.

Shinder S. Thandi, "Migrating to the 'Mother Country', 1948-1980", in *A South-Asian History of Britain: Four Centuries of People from the Indian Sub-Continent*, eds. Michael H. Fisher, Shompa Lahiri, and Shinder S. Thandi (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), pp. 159-82.

**Week 4 (April 23, 25):** The Indian Diaspora in the United States:

Vinay Lal, *The Other Indians: A Cultural and Political History of South Asians in America* (Asian American Studies Center Press, UCLA, 2008), complete.

Sucheta Mazumdar, “Racist Responses to Racism: The Aryan Myth and South Asians in the United States.” *South Asia Bulletin* 9, 1 (1989):47-55.

**Week 5 (April 30, May 2):** The Indian Diaspora in the U.S.: The Cultural/Religious Life of a Community

Raymond Brady Williams, ed., *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmissions of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (1989; New York: Columbia U. Press, 1996), articles by Vasudha Narayanan, “Creating the South Indian ‘Hindu’ Experience in the United States”, pp. 147-176, and Raymond Williams, “Sacred Threads of Several Textures”, pp. 228-257.

Susan Slyomovics, “New York City’s Muslim World Day Parade”, in Peter van der Veer, ed., *Nation and Migration*, pp. 157-77.

Vinay Lal, “North American Hindus, the Sense of History, and the Politics of Internet Diasporism”, in *Asian-America.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*, eds. Rachel C. Lee and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (London & NY: Routledge, 2003):98-138.

**Week 6 (May 7, 9):** The Indian Diaspora in the U.S.: Race, Culture, Identity

Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 1-93 (notes: pp. 233-55).

Nazli Kibria, “Not Asian, Black or White: Reflections on South Asian American Racial Identity”, *AmerAsia Journal* 22, no. 2 (1996), pp. 77-88.

Pawan Dhingra, *Life Behind the Lobby: Indian American Motel Owners and the American Dream* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 24-122 (notes: 215-22).

Possible film screening in class: “The New Puritans: The Sikhs of Yuba City”, produced by Rita Saran and Tenzing Sonam (1997, VHS, 27 mins.).

**Week 7 (May 14, 16): Music and Cinema in the Diaspora**

**N.B.:** You are expected to have seen *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), which is a feature film that is 3 hours in length, before coming to class. This film will be digitized and can be accessed on any campus/dormitory computer to students registered in the course.

Patricia Uberoi, "The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in DDLJ", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32, no. 2 (1998):305-36.

*Desi Rap: Hip-Hop and South Asian America*, eds. Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji (Rowman & Littlefield/Lexington Books, 2008), pp. 41-77, 127-54, and 171-76.

Thomas Blom Hansen, "In Search of the Diasporic Self: Bollywood in South Africa"; Brian Larkin, "Bandirri Music, Globalization and Urban Experience"; and Raminder Kaur, "Cruising on the Vilayeti Bandwagon: Diasporic Representations and Reception of Popular Indian Movies", all in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, eds. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), pp. 239-60, 284-308, 309-29, respectively.

Optional: Purnima Mankekar, "Brides who Travel: Gender, Nationalism, and Transnationalism in Hindi Film", *positions* 7, no. 3 (2000):731-762.

**Week 8 (May 21, 23): Women of the Diaspora**

Sayantani Dasgupta and Shamita Das Dasgupta, "Women in Exile: Gender Relations in the Asian Indian Community in the U.S.", in *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America*, eds. Sunaina Maira and Rajini Srikanth (New York: The Asian American Writers' Workshop, 1996), pp. 381-400.

The Women of South Asian Descent Collective, eds., *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993), pp. 23-24, 73-76, 120-122, 226-245, 257-273, 301-312, 351-358.

Sallie Westwood, "Gendering Diaspora: Space, Politics, and South Asian Masculinities in Britain", in van der Veer, ed., *Nation and Migration*, pp. 197-244.

OPTIONAL: Brij V. Lal, "Kunti's cry: indentured women on Fiji plantations", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 22 (1985):55-71.

**Week 9 (May 28, 30): The Struggle for Rights in the Diaspora**

**N.B.:** If time permits, we will watch in class a documentary by Anand Patwardhan, "A Time to Rise". If we run short on time, the film will be digitized and can be seen from any campus or documentary computer.

Vinay Lal, "Living in the Shadows: Injustice, Racism and Poverty in the Indian Diaspora", in *Global Civil Society 2009: Poverty and Activism*, eds. Ashwani Kumar, Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier et al (London: Sage Publications, 2009).

Biju Mathew, *Taxi! Cabs and Capitalism in New York City* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pages TBA.

Vinay Lal, "Sikh Kirpans in California Schools: Legal Pluralism, the Social Construction of Symbols, and the Politics of Diversity." *Amer.Asia Journal*, 22 no. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 57-89.

**Week 10 (June 5, 7): Rethinking Race, Identity, and Culture: Future of South Asians Abroad**

Arjun Appadurai, "Patriotism and Its Futures", *Public Culture* 5, 1 (Spring 1993):411-430.

Satendra Nandan, "Return Flights to Paradise: Three Easy Pieces", ed. and introduced by Vinay Lal, *Emergences* 10, no. 2 (November 2000), pp. 345-73.

Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 65-90.

Vinay Lal, "A Bloated Hinduism: North American Hindus and the Imagination of a Vanguard", in *Accommodating Diversity: Ideas and Institutional Practices*, ed. Gurpreet Mahajan (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 265-288.