

Hindus and Sikhs in Australia

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Australia has become a home for many educated Indian and Sri Lankan immigrants who have rejected religious orthodoxies and the caste system to pursue a 'modern lifestyle', according to a new report from the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research (BIMPR).

But many 'secularised Indians' later suffer from a loss of identity and pursue cultural and religious connections again, through festivals and concerts or in shrines and temples.

The Hindus and Sikhs in Australia, by Purushottama Bilimoria, is the sixth in a fascinating series of religious community profiles published by the BIMPR. The series uses data from the 1991 Census as well as other sources, and provides an opportunity to examine communities across ethnic lines.

The 1991 Census recorded 43,580 Hindus living in Australia. The report estimates that by 1995 there were close to 46,500 Hindus and by the end of the century may be close to 60,000. In 1991 there were 7719 Sikhs but the author of this book estimates that there are about 9300, since many do not declare their religion out of fear of prejudice.

Hindu beliefs and practices include the belief in karma and reincarnation, or rebirth, and the practices of yoga and meditation. The caste system is also strongly associated with Hinduism. As a rule, Hindus are strict believers in cosmology, giving the movements of sun, moon and planets religious significance.

Hinduism is a strictly personal religion which does not necessarily involve weekly meetings. In their homes, most Hindus have a small wooden shrine or alcove for prayer or meditation. The Bhagavadgita is the most celebrated of Hindu scriptural sources. Organisations familiar to Australians which are associated with Hinduism include the Hare Krishna movement and the Siddha Yoga syndicate.

Sikh practices are not very different from Hindu practices, according to the report. Sikhism grew out of a blending of Hinduism and Islam and its central focus of worship is the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib.

While most Hindus have Indian ancestry, they have come to Australia from a variety of places. In 1991, one in four were born in India and a similar number were born in Fiji. The next largest group were those born in Australia, which accounted for 17 per cent. Some of these (about 2000) had both parents born here: this would include Australian converts to Hinduism or followers of Hindu and Sikh sects, as well as others from families of Indian origin who have been in Australia for a long time. A further 13 per cent were born in Sri Lanka. Interestingly, Aboriginal people were also among those who identified themselves as Hindus. In the last census, 300 Aboriginal people identified Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism or Judaism as their religion.

Australia's Hindu population is highly educated. One in three has a bachelor degree or higher qualification. The level of education is not quite as high among Sikhs, but is much higher than the Australian average, with 27 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women having degrees and a substantial proportion having postgraduate qualifications, the report says.

The report reveals that many Hindus are

professionals in community services - working as medical personnel, surgeons, psychiatrists, social workers, counsellors, nursing sisters, teachers and science technicians. In total, 28 per cent are working in professional jobs. Managerial and semi-professional involvement in wholesale and retail trade, including management of restaurants and hotels, are the next most favoured occupations of Hindus, as for many other Indians.

But in 1991, unemployment levels were comparatively high among both Hindus and Sikhs, with about 13 per cent unemployed, compared with 7 per cent of the general population. This may be because many professional immigrants from South Asia are often given assurances about work opportunities at Overseas Australian consulates but in practice cannot find employment in their own area of qualification once here, the report says.

Despite high unemployment, income levels among Hindus are very high. One in four Hindus earns between \$50,000 and \$80,000 annually. Income among Sikhs was not quite as high but still higher than for the general Australian population, with just under half (49 per cent) earning more than \$40,000 annually.

More than one-third of Hindus speak the Hindi language at home. But most Hindus are bilingual, particularly those from post-Independence India and Fiji.

A further 22 per cent speak English only at home. Tamil-speaking Hindus number about 8300 or 20 per cent of the Hindu population.

According to 1991 Census data, just over half of all Hindus lived in New South Wales. Among Sikhs in Australia, the proportion living in NSW was also high: 43 per cent. The next most popular State for Hindus and Sikhs was Victoria, home to about one-quarter of the population. Hindus have tended to congregate in outer-city well-to-do suburbs such as Waverley and Templestowe in Melbourne and Blacktown, Canterbury, Vaucluse and Ryde in Sydney.