

## Preface

**THIS BOOK IS A STUDY** of Gujarati Indian immigrants in New York and London. Gujaratis are part of a long history of migration from a region that has been shaped by early modern and modern economic relations in trade and production, labor, colonialism, educational and professional exchange, and other globalized relations. As shown in this book, those relations demonstrate the historical integration and interaction of individuals, communities, institutions, and states across specific regions of the world where Gujaratis have migrated. Gujarati migrations do not simply represent traditional people moving from a developing country to a developed one, motivated by potential economic gain, as is so often assumed about immigrants from many parts of the developing world. To show how we can see these historical social ties and integration, which cause migration flows and social change, this study argues for a relational approach, which has for the most part been overlooked in migration studies. The relational approach to understanding social life emphasizes dynamic relations over static categories by focusing attention on the kinds of networks and valued goods, such as information, money, resources, and influence, that are exchanged within social ties producing even large-scale processes such as migration. The historical formation of these ties is visible in the social networks that immigrants use to migrate and in the ways in which their economic opportunities are structured by those networks.

Many people might wonder how Gujarati Indians, a seemingly small and insignificant population from the westernmost state of India, can tell us something important about migration processes, in particular, and modernity, in general. Indeed, many of my colleagues shrugged their shoulders

when I first decided to study Indian immigrants, and Gujaratis, in particular. Indian immigrants (among whom there were many Gujaratis) did not seem like an important group relative to others, such as Latinos or other Asians, whose numbers had been growing rapidly in the United States throughout the 1990s. In fact, I was once told by a prominent migration researcher and sociologist, someone I admire very much, that “Indians are not a problem.” This statement had a double meaning. First, Indians were not a problem in the popular sense in that, as a group, they were not poor, segregated, unemployed, exploited, illegal, criminal, or even culturally different enough to be perceived as one of the more “problematic” immigrant groups in American society. Their presence in the United States neither appealed to any need for social justice nor seemed to spark much anti-immigrant sentiment. Second, they were not a problem in the sociological sense. In other words, their presence in American society, or even the processes by which they migrated to the United States, did not constitute a social problem in that it did not challenge some of the fundamental ways in which we think about the social order. Indians seemed to fit in. Even when they were perceived as culturally different, they still spoke English well, worked hard in professional and entrepreneurial jobs, valued education and American civic practices, and behaved, generally, as good citizens.

These characteristics of Indian immigration were generally true in London as well. By the 1990s, Indians there (among whom there were also many Gujaratis) were known to be stratified more widely along working- and middle-class lines than in the United States. They had also been subject to much racial discrimination, especially during the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, they tended to rank high, often higher than their white British counterparts, on basic measures such as median household income, education, and housing quality. They were also not perceived to be as “problematic” as other South Asian groups, such as Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, or as the large West Indian population in the United Kingdom. In other words, most Indians seemed to assimilate rather quickly, so what could possibly be the problem requiring study?

I shrugged off the indifference of some of my colleagues to the study of Indian immigrants because I thought that they were interesting and important in a number of ways. I had become familiar with Indian scientists and engineers as friends and co-workers of my parents during the 1970s. My parents had migrated from Greece and, with Indians, they were part of the same gen-

eration of foreign students and professionals working in the burgeoning scientific fields of computer science, aerospace, and other applied sciences. These fields were at the heart of the post-World War II and Cold War-era race for American hegemony that relied so fundamentally on scientific work. However, these kinds of foreign workers, referred to as high-skill or professional and, nowadays, as high-tech or knowledge workers, were of little concern to most migration researchers in sociology. I thought that they were interesting in their own right because they raised certain questions about how and why international migration occurs. For instance, why did so many of these kinds of Indian workers migrate to the United States but not the United Kingdom? If economic globalization was producing segmented labor markets in which immigrants tended to fill the bottom rungs of the new service industries, where did these professionals fit in? What could we gain by comparing one immigrant group that was well represented in two quite different global cities, New York and London?

In addition to being familiar with these early Indian professionals as colleagues of my parents, we socialized with these immigrant families that, like mine, were spread out in middle-class, suburban neighborhoods where looking and acting foreign was not yet a common sight. Through the common foreignness of our families I became interested in Indian culture, and later, as an adult, in Indian history, philosophy, and religions. Thus, when I first “entered the field,” as sociologists and anthropologists like to say about the start of ethnographic research, I was an “outsider.” I did not belong to the group that I was studying. But I was also an “insider” with a distinctly personal kind of background knowledge and familiarity with Indian immigrants and culture. Of course, I was never going to be an ethnic insider as are so many migration researchers who study “their own group.” Yet, my outsider status and insider perspective turned out to be one of the distinct advantages of this research because it allowed me to enter many different Indian and Gujarati worlds without having constantly to negotiate my identity. And it allowed me to understand more easily where some of the participants came from in cultural terms. In fact, it only helped me when participants learned that I am Greek because they saw me as sharing their roots in one of the world’s ancient civilizations. Some participants even knew of the Indo-Greek civilization that existed in northern India during the first few centuries before the Christian era, and they took pride in commenting about it to me. Most importantly, my outsider position encouraged participants to tell me their life stories without

fear of repercussion from within their Indian communities. This is not to say that their narratives were somehow more truthful or accurate or that any of us can produce objective narratives about our own lives but only that I quickly gained the trust of participants. All narratives must be understood and interpreted in the particular context of time and space in which they are told, including in relation to the interviewer. The life history interviews I did with these immigrants are no different in that sense.

Indians, perhaps more than other national populations, have significant intragroup differences. They are worthy of study for this reason alone. As a population, they could be sliced up almost endlessly according to region of origin, caste, subcaste, religion, linguistic group, class status, and so on. Thus, even when I decided to focus on Gujarati Hindus and Jains, I discovered not one monolithic group but rather many smaller communities that only sometimes unified and acted collectively under labels such as Gujarati or Gujarati Hindu. This would become a central lesson of my study and lead me to argue for a relational approach in order to examine the historical formation of different social, economic, and political ties that set migration flows in motion and facilitate or constrain the socioeconomic mobility of immigrants in their host societies. The everyday intragroup differences of Gujaratis meant that all those sliced-up static categories, which we so often employ in sociological analysis to understand the social world, made little sense. They were not static at all, and they did not exist as some sort of external, causal characteristic of the relations that actually made up the everyday lives of immigrants and, for that matter, everyone. Class, caste, religion, language, and ethnicity were inherently dynamic phenomena that had meaning only in the context of real human relations, which one could see in these migrants' social networks. Those negotiated relations made the difference in whether to migrate, open a business, move out of an ethnic enclave economy, or pursue further education. These relational phenomena, which became apparent in a qualitative analysis of the migrants' social networks, were an important reminder of the origins of sociology in the work of Georg Simmel, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and so many others. This study represents a small part of this emphasis on the relational approach to social life, which is being renewed today by a new generation of scholars.

Given the multitude of cultures in South Asia, Gujarat may still seem like an unusual place to begin a study of immigrants. Why not Bengalis, I was once asked by a Sikh friend who admired the Bengali reputation for excellence in

art, literature, music, and intellectual life but not the lowly reputation of Gujaratis as shrewd businesspeople and traders. However, Gujarat has an extraordinarily important history of foreign trade that brings to light the question of modernity. Its long history of migration has been linked to trade for centuries, indeed millennia. In fact, we now know that Marx and Weber got it wrong when they claimed that Asian societies and economies, in particular India and China, could not have become modern capitalist economies as happened later in the West. The historiography on India, and most intensively about Gujarat, shows that India was indeed on its way to becoming capitalist and modern, especially between the 1500s and 1800s when it surpassed Europe in trade, industry, and exports. Furthermore, during this period, Indian traders employed modern (rational) organizational and financial practices in their firms.

The links to some of that past persist even today in contemporary migrations of Gujaratis to New York and London and other places around the world. It is not simply the higher education and class status of many Indians and Gujaratis that make their migration different and less “problematic” than some immigrant groups. Those static, categorical ways of describing them, and indeed reducing them to one or two simple characteristics, conceal much deeper and more specific historical ties between India and the United States and between India and the United Kingdom. Those historical ties were created from trade, colonial relations, conflict, religious movements, and, of course, labor. They do not exist because Indians are simply poorer, traditional people looking to migrate to richer countries for economic opportunities.

New York and London, furthermore, pose an interesting comparison. On the one hand, they contain many similarities as global cities that draw immigrants from all over the world, in part as a result of their concentration of new service industries. Foreign-born Indians rank third among the entire foreign-born population in the United States and the United Kingdom, and New York and London are the top cities of settlement for Indians in both countries. Gujaratis also represent one of the largest regional groups within the Indian population in each city since the 1960s. On the other hand, London is the center of the U.K. legacy of colonialism, in which India was its “crown jewel,” whereas the United States has never had a colonial relationship with India. The United Kingdom has also maintained very different immigration policies from the United States, particularly from the 1960s to the late 1990s. During that time, the United Kingdom proclaimed a “zero immigration” policy, with the exception of some asylum. In contrast, the United States

has maintained an “open door” policy of immigration since 1965. Therefore, even though New York and London are both “global cities,” we might expect Indian migration flows to and their integration in each city to be very different because of immigration policy and the former colonial relationship between India and the United Kingdom. However, as I will discuss later in this book, the similarities and the differences between the United Kingdom and the United States and between London and New York were not very significant compared to the kinds of network ties that Gujaratis used to migrate to each place and the sorts of relations of exchange that facilitated or constrained their mobility in both cities. Gujarati immigrants with similar kinds of ties looked similar in both cities. They migrated and found employment in much the same ways according to the different composition of their networks. The relational approach illustrates that Gujaratis’ network ties rather than their social origins demonstrate variation in the way that Gujaratis are able to migrate to each place and the way in which their economic opportunities are structured. Equally significant, this book historicizes that approach by demonstrating how relational mechanisms link up historically with much larger forces, such as modernity. By looking back in time with a relational lens, we are able to see how, and with what consequences, various historical social ties formed to produce future migration flows to the United States and the United Kingdom.