
Sample Lesson 19: Indian Americans: Creating Community and Establishing an Identity in California

Theme: History and Movement

Disciplinary Area: Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 2, 5, 6

Standards Alignment:

CA HSS Analysis Skills (9–12): Chronological and Spatial Thinking 3; Historical Interpretation 1

CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy: RH.9–10.1, 4, 5, 9; WHST.9–10.1, 2, 4, 9

CA ELD Standards: ELD.PI.9–10.1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11a

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

Indian Americans are thought to be relatively new immigrants to the United States and California, but their story in California starts much further back in history. The contributions of Indian Americans in California to STEM fields and arts and culture are rich and diverse.

Students will be introduced to the history of Indian American migration and to the diversity of the Indian American community with respect to religion and geography.

Key Terms and Concepts: Immigration Act, model minority, Bollywood, media literacy, intercultural relations

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Understand the diversity inherent in the Indian American community with respect to language, religion, and geography
- Understand Indian American migration to Northern California
- Articulate the contributions of Indian Americans to the information technology and telecommunications lexicon and the fields of STEM, arts, and culture
- Further develop their oral presentation, public speaking, and analysis skills via the cultural analysis assignment

Essential Questions:

1. What is the history of Indian American migration to the United States and, in particular, to California?

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2. What role did opportunities for education and gender equality play in decisions to emigrate to California?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

Day 1

1. Introduce the first group of Indians who landed on Angel Island in the early 1900s and describe how they settled in Northern California and created a farming community. Also discuss how a second generation of Indians came to the United States in the later 1900s, mainly seeking education, career opportunities, and gender equality.
2. Following the introduction, show the video “Sikh Pioneers and their Contributions to California’s History.” Before starting the video, tell students that they are responsible for taking thorough notes (refer to a graphic organizer or notetaking tool) and will be expected to have a discussion around the following questions:
 - a. Why did the first Indian Americans settle in Northern California?
 - b. What crops did these Indian Americans specialize in growing?
 - c. What US laws negatively affected their liberty and freedom?
 - i. California Alien Land Law of 1913 – prohibited foreigners “ineligible for citizenship” under the law from owning agricultural land
 - ii. Immigration Act of 1917 – restricted the entry of Asians into the country, preventing immigrants from bringing their families
 - d. How did these laws affect social changes in these communities?
 - e. How have current immigration and naturalization laws changed since 1917?
3. Provide the following key terms for students to define using context clues from the film:
 - a. Punjabi
 - b. Sikh
 - c. Immigration Act
 - d. Naturalization
 - e. Indian–Mexican marriages

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4. Following the video, divide the students into groups of four to five. Each group is given 20 minutes to read the paragraph below, discuss the video, and respond to the questions from step 2.

The origins of the Punjabi–Mexican community lie in the Imperial Valley along California’s southern border. Men from India’s Punjab province stood out from the start among the pioneers who flocked there to work the newly arable land. Their fortunes, their legal status, and local opinion of them varied over the years. At first, South Asians could obtain American citizenship, but later they lost that right. Then not only the physical landscape but the political landscape and their place in it struck the Punjabi men as decidedly similar to their status in British India. They fought hard for their rightful place in society, and particularly for a place on the land, a very important component of Punjabi identity. The Imperial Valley was being transformed from a barren desert to a major center of agricultural production in California at the time the Punjabis arrived; the pioneer Anglo settlers there did not easily accept the Punjabis’ claims to membership in the community they were building. Legal constraints and social stereotypes based on race and national origin helped determine the opportunities and working conditions the Punjabis encountered as they worked alongside others to develop the valley.

5. While students are working in groups, write down the key terms on the whiteboard, leaving plenty of room between each. After the time has expired, signal to students that it is time to come back together. Facilitate a discussion where students are able to respond to each of the guiding questions aloud. Finally, ask one member from each group to go to the board. Each student is assigned a word and is expected to write their definition of the word with their group’s help. After completing the task, the class talks through each term. Provide additional information, examples, and support to better clarify and define the terms.
6. Close with student and community reflection.

Day 2

1. Show an excerpt from the PBS documentary “Asian Americans Episode 1: Breaking Ground” about Bhagat Singh Thind. Ask students to read an article on the PBS “Roots In the Sand” webpage that discusses the ruling of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link184>).
2. Ask students to pay special attention to why Bhagat Singh Thind was not considered to be an American citizen.

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3. After watching the film, split the class into smaller groups or stay as a complete class to discuss the following questions:
 - a. Community Builder/Cultural Energizer: Identifying Our Biases
 - i. Ask the questions: How do you (or your family members) answer the race question on a form? What are the options listed?
 - ii. How is the term “white” defined racially?
 - b. In *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, the court conceded that Indians were “Caucasians” and that anthropologists considered them to be of the same race as white Americans, but argued that “the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences.”
 - i. What do you think of the argument that courts made about people from Indian origin? What do you know about people from Indian origin today?
 4. Provide the following key terms and concepts for students to define using context clues from the film:
 - a. “Caucasian” versus “white”
 - b. Aryan

Additional Materials and Resources for Day 2

Pre-1800s

Beginning in the seventeenth century, the East India Company began bringing indentured Indian servants to the American colonies.

The Naturalization Act of 1790 made Asians ineligible for citizenship.

Nineteenth Century

The first significant wave of Indian immigrants entered the United States in the nineteenth century. Emigration from India was driven by difficulties facing Indian farmers, including the challenges posed by the British land tenure system for small landowners and by drought and food shortages, which worsened in the 1890s.

At the same time, Canadian steamship companies, acting on behalf of employers on the Pacific Coast, recruited Sikh farmers for economic opportunities in British Columbia.

Racist attacks in British Columbia, however, prompted Sikhs, including new Sikh immigrants, to move down the Pacific Coast to Washington and Oregon, where they worked in lumber mills and in the railroad industry.

Many Punjabi Sikhs who settled in California around the Yuba City area formed close ties with Mexican Americans.

The presence of Indian Americans helped develop interest in Eastern religions in the US and would result in its influence on American philosophies such as transcendentalism.

Swami Vivekananda arriving in Chicago at the World's Fair led to the establishment of the Vedanta Society.

Twentieth century

Between 1907 and 1908, Sikhs moved further south to warmer climates in California, where they were employed by various railroad companies. Some white Americans, resentful of economic competition and the arrival of people from different cultures, responded to Sikh immigration with racism and violent attacks.

The Bellingham riots in Bellingham, Washington on September 4, 1907 epitomized the low tolerance in the US for Indians and Sikhs, who were called “Hindoos” by locals.

In the early twentieth century, a range of state and federal laws restricted Indian immigration and the rights of Indian immigrants in the US. In the 1910s, American nativist organizations campaigned to end immigration from India, culminating in the passage of the Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Barred Zone Act.

Passed in 1913, the California Alien Land Act prevented Sikhs, in addition to Japanese and Chinese immigrants, from owning land.

Although interracial marriage was illegal in California in the early 1900s, it was legal for “brown races” to intermarry. Many Indian men, especially Punjabi men, married Hispanic women, and Punjabi–Mexican marriages became a norm in the West.

Bhica Ji Balsara became the first known Indian to gain naturalized US citizenship. As a Parsi, he was considered a “pure member of the Persian sect” and therefore a “free white person.” In 1910, the New York Circuit Court of Appeal agreed that Parsis are classified as white. Between 1913 and 1923, around 100 Indians were naturalized.

In 1923, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* that Indians were ineligible for citizenship because they were not “free white persons.” Between 1923 and 1927, over 50 Indian Americans had their US citizenship revoked after this decision. No further naturalization was permitted after the ruling, which led to about 3,000 Indians leaving the United States.

In *Sandhu v. Lockheed Missiles and Space Company*, Sandhu sued his employer, Lockheed, for discrimination based on race. Lockheed’s position was that they did not discriminate against Sandhu, a Punjabi Indian, because he was considered Caucasian. Lockheed argued that the “common popular understanding [was] that there are three major human races—Caucasoid, Mongoloid, and Negroid.” This comes from a nineteenth century classification of races. In 1993, the court ruled in favor of Lockheed. In 1994, the California Sixth District Court of Appeals overturned that decision and ruled in favor of Sandhu, stating that Indians were a distinct ethnic group of their own.

(Source for sections above: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link185>)

Bhicaji Framji Balsara court case:

Michael W. Hughey, ed. 2016. *New Tribalisms: The Resurgence of Race and Ethnicity*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

1923 *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*:

History Matters. The US Survey Course on the Web.
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link186>

History Matters. The US Survey Course on the Web. “Not All Caucasians Are White: The Supreme Court Rejects Citizenship for Asian Indians.”
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link187>

PBS. “Asian Americans Episode 1: Breaking Ground.”
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link188>

Sandhu v. Lockheed Missiles and Space Company (1994):
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link189>