

Making Ethnic Choices



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This is a study of the flexibility of ethnic identity. In the early twentieth century, men from India's Punjab province came to California to work on the land. The new immigrants had few chances to marry. There were very few marriageable Indian women, and miscegenation laws and racial prejudice limited their ability to find white Americans. Discovering an unexpected compatibility, Punjabis married women of Mexican descent and these alliances inspired others as the men introduced their bachelor friends to the sisters and friends of their wives. These biethnic families developed an identity as "Hindus" but also as Americans. Karen Leonard has related theories linking state policies and ethnicity to those applied at the level of marriage and family life. Using written sources and numerous interviews, she invokes gender, generation, class, religion, language, and the dramatic political changes of the 1940s in South Asia and the United States to show how individual and group perceptions of ethnic identity have changed among Punjabi Mexican Americans in rural California. Karen Isaksen Leonard is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine.

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