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Identity requires more than just citizenship

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Regional

Identity requires more than just citizenship

In the globalized world in which we live, the history of well established nations like the ones in Europe is not only written by the people who were born in those countries, but also by their immigrants. They provide a perspective that is oftentimes overlooked by historians.

□Rajbir Hazelwood is a historian trying to change that perception. Born in Isleworth, West Middlesex, United Kingdom, she obtained her bachelor's degree in history from the University of Warwick in England, and her master's and doctorate in history from Washington University in St. Louis. Today she is an assistant professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Although she did not desire to come to the United States earlier in life, she was somewhat forced to.

"Our education system works differently in England," she said. "You are forced to decide what you want to study in college before you get there. So it was a toss-up between history and economics and much to the shame of my high school teachers I decided on history." Although British by birth, Hazelwood is Punjabi by descent and has incorporated her own heritage into her research about ethnic identity.

"I study Punjabis in late 20th century Britain," she said. "Last year, the British government decided they were going to start a campaign to deal with illegal immigration, particularly from the Punjab region. And their policy on that was to create billboards that said 'Go Home' and to plaster them on vans and drive them around neighborhoods in the hopes that people would self deport.

"If they had spoken to a historian at any point in that policy making they would have learned more about that community and why there were there," she added.

But, who are the Punjabis? Punjab is a region in the North of India. When the British left India in 1947 there was a call from the Muslim community for their own state. Pakistan was the result. During the creation of Pakistan they had to decide where those borders were going to run, and



Dr. Rajbir Hazelwood (center) and family.

one of them ran through the region called Punjab. So East Punjab is given to India and West Punjab is given to Pakistan. "So it's a region that straddles two different nations," Hazelwood, whose parents both came from Punjab, explained.

"My mother came in the 1960s to England after her grandfather's older brother decided in the 1950s to try out his economic luck in Britain. So she came with her father and my dad came afterwards," she said. There are many things that differentiate

Punjabis from other Indian or Pakistani ethnic groups. "For one there is a language," she explained. "Punjabi is the primary language of the Punjab region. That is different from other languages like Hindu or Urdu. There are traditions around food, around rural culture. It's a very kind of rural agricultural identity in some sense. Punjab is often called the 'breadbasket' of India. It produces the majority of the food in India as part of the canal colonies of the British Empire. We just celebrated a few weeks ago

Vaisakhi, the harvest festival of Punjab. It is not a religious festival, but a Punjabi festival in terms of crossing religious boundaries."

Punj means five in Punjabi and ab is river, so Punjab means "five rivers."

One wonders if Punjabs born in England – even second or third generation – feel more British or more Punjabi? "Well I would be a case study because both of my parents are from Punjab and I was born in England," Hazelwood said. "And I would say both. You can feel both Punjabi and British. The

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context in which you form those identities or feel those identities is different. The idea that first or second generation children from Punjabi parents become British or lose Punjabi heritage is one I think is just erroneous, both in the Punjabi culture and among those in the diaspora."

"As historians we need to figure out how that is happening and why that is happening," she said. "But also it's erroneous in the sense that there is a tendency to think that the first immigrants never felt British, that they didn't assimilate but that their children did. But people from Punjabi in the 1950s make the claim that they are British and they are British culturally and they can be British socially and they can be British in terms of their passports and their national citizenship." Her answer points to a very difficult issue for even her to describe.

"So I think it's a difficult question to answer," she said. "If you were to go select first generation and second generation Punjabi children, I think they would give you a similar answer that they are both, they can be both. They can also be Asian. They are British, they are Asian, they are Punjabi, they are Londoners, they are West Londoners. They are all these things at the same time." Hazelwood is now looking at expanding her research into new areas.

"I am working on race and how race was thought about in late 20th century Britain. Because I work on the South Asian community and I work on the Punjabi community, it's a different type of history than those who have looked at the West Indies and Caribbean immigrant to Britain," she said. "I am very interested in how the question of race changed in late 20th century Britain."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Sciences@siue.edu.

Picture courtesy of Rajbir Hazelwood