Asian Indian Celebrations of Ethnicity: Perspectives from the Mid-western United States

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ABSTRACT

Asian Indians are among the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States today. Eighty-two percent of Asian Indian immigrants now living in the U.S. arrived between 1980 and 2000, and their population more than doubled in the 1990s. Currently, the U.S. Asian Indian population totals more than 3.2 million (U.S. Census 2010, March 2011 Update). The majority of Asian Indians residing in the United States are English language proficient, have a high socio-economic status, are better educated than the general populace, and are well represented among professional career groups (Chandras, 1997; Mogelonsky, 1995; Helweg and Helweg, 1990; Takaki, 1989). In spite of their strong presence in U.S. institutions and economy, little research has focused on the everyday experiences of Asian Indian families in the United States (Mehra, 1997; Bhola, 1996). Voices of Asian Indian women in particular, have been absent from the literature. This paper explores U.S. Asian Indian women's efforts to retain ethnic culture during their transition into American society, with particular emphasis on public and private celebrations.

Keywords

Asian Indian, migration, diaspora, traditions, gender, oral history, qualitative research, Mid-western United States, immigrant, acculturation, cultural maintenance, feminist

Asian Indian celebrations of ethnicity: perspectives from the Mid-western United States

Asian Indians[1] are among the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States today, totalling more than 3.2 million. Also one of the most recent U.S. immigrant groups, Asian Indians continue to demonstrate an intense interest in maintaining a sense of ethnic

identity (Helweg: p.1). Migration, however, *is a long-term if not life-long process of negotiating identity, difference, and the right to fully exist and flourish in the new context* (Benmayor p.8). The social and psychological dynamics of immigration are not well understood. Research that explores processes of migrant acculturation through attention to birth and to the receiving countries' social structures is needed (Bierbrauer and Pedersen: p.418). This study explores experiences and perceptions of U.S. Asian Indian women toward the maintenance of their ethnic cultural practices in the receiving society.

Asian Indians began to arrive in the United States in large numbers only during the past forty-five years. This situation is largely due to the 1965 U.S. Immigration and Naturalisation Act, which raised restrictive immigration quotas for non-European nations and initiated a large influx of Asian and Latin American immigrants. In 1980, the U.S. government began differentiating between Asian sub-groups, making it possible for the first time for researchers to track Asian Indian immigration. Eighty-two percent of Asian Indian immigrants now living in the U.S. arrived between 1980 and 2000, and their population more than doubled in the 1990s. Currently, the U.S. Asian Indian population totals more than 3.2 million; and while most reside in the coastal states of California, New York, and New Jersey, seventeen percent make their homes in the Midwest (U.S. Census Bureau (March 2011 Update)).

The U.S. Asian Indian immigrant population is a highly educated group. Sixty-one percent hold a college degree. Sixty percent of all employed Asian Indians in the U.S. work in professional or managerial fields (U.S. Census Bureau). Modern U.S. Asian Indian immigrants originate from across the Indian nation rather than from a single region. They are less likely than their predecessors to settle in ethnic enclaves, choosing instead to take up residence throughout urban and suburban areas. Geographic dispersal stems largely from the generally high socio-economic status of immigrants arriving in the 1960s and 1970s, many of whom came to the United States to pursue post-graduate education and/or professional opportunities in the fields of medicine, engineering, and science. Most of these immigrants chose to live alongside upwardly mobile colleagues in suburban areas, rather than in ethnic neighbourhoods (Helweg: p.6). There are, however, concentrated populations of Asian Indians in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Houston (Khandelwal: p.10).

Theoretical frameworks

Women immigrants

Women immigrants have been treated as if they were insignificant actors in history and socialisation (Kelson and Delaet: p.4). Feminist scholarship has challenged this portrait of women as insignificant actors, arguing against gender-biased perspectives on the immigration experience. Peterson & Runyan, for example, support the use of a gender-sensitive lens to provide a more comprehensive view of world politics (p.9). Tickner reveals that scholarship in trans-national relations neglects women's lived experiences and perspectives, resulting in a masculine bias and providing an inaccurate and incomplete representation of global politics (p.21). A review of recorded immigrant history reveals that *women's vecu - their ways of living, feeling, and thinking... their praxis - has been profoundly distinct from that of men* (da Rocha Lima: p.82). Women immigrants have been studied by researchers with a variety of agendas, from government workers to social researchers to feminists. Despite the variation in perspectives, until recently research on immigrant women has been approached in much the same way: by reducing of their position to a set of stereotypes, including the role of the immigrant woman, her background and her motives in migration (Barber: p.70).

Little information is available about the *real life problems* of women immigrants. A portrait of the immigrant woman as a personality in her own right *with specific needs, expectations and aspirations is* needed (van den Berg-Eldering n.p.). This study adds to the available literature on the everyday lives of women immigrants in the United States by providing primary sources depicting the *real life problems* Asian Indian women immigrants face in the American mid-west.

Women serve as cultural guardians, or gatekeepers, of traditional values and belief structures (Lessinger: p.71). South Asian immigrants [2] frequently describe their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts as the *primary carriers of culture and tradition* (Gillespie: p.80). Asian Indian immigrants confirm cultural power is assigned to and assumed by adult women, who accept primary responsibility for the maintenance and transmission of moral values and religious traditions within the family and local ethnic organisations (Dasgupta: p.119). The recent rapid influx of these immigrants to the United

States, then, places an undue burden upon Asian Indian women to perpetuate an 'authentic' ethnic culture for their families within the individualistic and democratic mainstream American culture (Inman et al: p.19). In their birth culture, Asian Indian women receive something of a respite from the burden of perpetuating ethnic culture: the presence of extended family networks, a lessening of children's exposure to perceived negative western influences such as recreational drug use or divorce, and a mutually beneficial arrangement between family and society permit children and adolescents in India to *breathe in the values* of eastern philosophies and social duty and learn ethnic culture through everyday existence (Fenton: p.127). Women in Asian Indian immigrant families in the U.S., however, find they transmit cultural traditions and religious mores to family members in a more explicit fashion (Kurien: p.38). This process of explicit ethnic culture transmission is one of the many facets of acculturation.

Acculturation

From an anthropological perspective, acculturation, or cultural change, is defined as:

... those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original pattern of either or both groups (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits: p.149).

From a psychological perspective, cultural change refers to the changes in behavior of individuals from such groups, with the understanding that individual members of the group *may differ with respect to the extent and type of their acculturation* (Birman: p.261). Use of Birman's perspective to explore instances and issues of cultural change described in U.S. Asian Indian women immigrants' narratives about ethnic celebrations, then, should result in a greater understanding of how individuals approach and grapple with differences between the cultural beliefs and traditions represented by their birth culture and those encountered in the host society (p.260). Use of the feminist oral history frame to explore these narratives will add the voices of Asian Indian women to the sparse literature on everyday experiences in the lives of Asian Indian immigrants in the United States.

Feminist oral history

Why use a feminist oral history frame to interview women immigrants? Psychologist Carol Gilligan's research found men and women perceive and experience similar phenomena differently: women tend to operate from a social context, while men tend to operate autonomously (p.3). For women, Gilligan found, the most significant social context is the family. Gilligan's research on women who work outside the home, as well as women who do not, revealed family remains women's most significant social context (p.67). Corinne Krause's oral histories with multi-generational ethnic women show women's issues extend beyond the expected life cycle events to work/family conflicts, relationships, food, holidays, and work in the context of family ties (p.112).

This study combines Birman's model of acculturation with an alternative oral history frame to explore instances and examples of ethnic celebrations among Asian Indian immigrants in the mid-western United States during the final decade of the 20th century. This study also makes available to researchers primary source documents depicting first-hand examples of Asian Indian immigrants' celebrations of their South Asian ethnicity in the mid-western United States.

Methodology

Twenty women immigrants from the Indian subcontinent residing in a mid-western state in the United States participated in audio-taped oral history interviews between 1994 and 2000. Because immigrant research historically has focused on men, there is a dearth of feminine perspectives in the literature. Qualitative studies that use oral history methodology to record the living memories and experiences of contemporary women immigrants can provide researchers and policy makers with valuable information about the experiences and perspectives of this under-represented group. As a research methodology, oral history offers insights into people's interpretation of their personal and historical experiences (Portelli: p.2). Semi-structured oral history interviews can be an effective primary source of data in qualitative studies (Dagenais: p. 4; LeCompte et al: p.16). Klassen and Burnaby have argued the need for qualitative studies in the area of research on immigrant families, pointing out that data generated from studies involving statistical sources provides information about general trends, while failing

to offer insight into the immigrant families' daily lives (p.378). Studying contemporary immigrant women's narratives of ethnically-inspired celebrations, special occasions in their own lives and those of family members, and if/how the nature or priority of these celebrations changes as a result of cultural adaptation, can bring fresh perspectives to researchers' understanding of the Asian Indian immigrant sub-group. This qualitative study paper draws upon both the feminist framework and oral history research methodology to record and analyse immigrant women's experiences with, and memories of, cultural celebrations, commemorations and related issues.

Potential oral history informants were identified using Ogbu's definition of 'immigrant'. In this definition, 'immigrant' refers not only to those who are actual immigrants, but also to those whose parents were immigrants and who continue to maintain a separate group identity (p.4). Leaders of local South Asian organisations were asked to announce that a university professor was interested in interviewing members about their migration experience; additional participants were identified through a snowball effect.

Interviewees ranged in age from eighteen to sixty-six, and represented women professionals, office workers, department store employees, housewives and students. Slightly more than fifty percent of interviewees were first-generation immigrants, and slightly less than fifty percent were second-generation. All the first-generation interviewees were married; most of the second-generation interviewees were unmarried at the time of their interviews. Nearly all the first-generation interviewees had received some post-secondary education in their natal culture and had married prior to emigrating. Major Asian Indian religious groups were represented in the sample, including Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, and Parsi Zoroastrian. All the major geographic regions of the Indian subcontinent were represented, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh as well as India itself. Two interviewees retained their Indian citizenship; all the others had either acquired U.S. citizenship or were in the process of doing so at the time of the study. Data sources included transcribed oral history interviews, brief informational forms completed by the participants, field notes, newspaper articles, census reports, and research literature on migration and South Asian acculturation.

The author and a research assistant conducted interviews with individual participants, employing a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire to lend consistency to the interview process. Drawing upon Minister's feminist frame for oral history interviewing (p.30), the researchers used a conversational format to interview immigrants in the interviewees' own homes and, when requested, in their native language through the use of interpreters (Gluck and Patai: p.6; Anderson and Jack: p.24). Interviews were transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English. The interviewees each checked their own interview transcript for accuracy and clarity.

Researchers analysed transcripts for emergent patterns, coding transcripts as recommended by the constant comparative method (Creswell: p.186). In the constant comparative method, theory is grounded in the data itself, although the literature on South Asian socialisation and migrant studies can provide hypotheses about possible patterns. As often happens in oral history research, interviewees' responses to open-ended interview questions suggested some of the coding categories. Four patterns emerged from an analysis of the data: public celebration of ethnic holidays, participation in Indian community organisations, wearing ethnic dress outside the home and adherence to ethnic dietary preferences. As often happens with oral history interviews, the four patterns were not always discrete singular entities - many interviewees connect both ethnic dress and diet with public celebrations of ethnic holidays and/or participation in Indian community organisations. In this paper, excerpts from the interviews are interspersed with references to relevant professional literature, resulting in an informed narrative approach. The four emergent patterns are discussed in the next section.

Discussion and conclusions

(1) Public celebration of ethnic holidays

Festivals such as *Diwali* [3] celebrate events in India's history or its religious traditions, but these celebrations also have multiple meanings for Asian Indian interviewees. In India, traditional public celebrations often were *occasions for solidarity across the lines of class and religion* that define the larger Indian subcontinent (Lessinger: p.56). The American forms of traditional Indian festivals attract Asian Indian immigrant

families who represent a wide variety of geographic regions, languages, economic classes, and even religions - yet at the same time, these festivals engender a momentary sense of community in the adopted society. As one interviewee explains, 'We [have] a *Diwali* party, we have [a] Festival of Light party. *We celebrate* over here. We have an Indian association, so we celebrate *Holi* [4] and *Diwali*.'

P. talks about the Indic Society in her community, and how the individual family celebration of Diwali has changed as a result of their being in the U.S.:

'[It's] Pan-Indian. Anyone can join. And it's a multi-regional [group] - we have here Bengalis in it. We have Gujaratis, we have Punjabis, we have south Indians. We have [people] from every part of India.

When my children were growing up, the Indian Student Association would always have a big *Diwali* celebration.... We all went as a family to that. And every other [Asian Indian] family came, too.... In India [for *Diwali*] you light small clay lamps all around the house, you decorate, you have sweets, you have people visiting. You have firecrackers, also, and displays of fireworks. It's very joyful. You wear new clothes.... But over here, it's usually a dinner of lights and some kind of a programme that the Indian students would put together.'

I. participates in Bengali cultural festivities and belongs to the local Indic Society. She says:

'We do some fundraising once a year. And we cook. We cook and sell tickets and there's a grand dinner there, and whatever money we raise, we send it back to India for mostly women's education.

Since they started this India Studies Programme [at the university], we go to a lot of lecture series and movies and cultural events. So, that is another time that we get together and celebrate something.

There is a bigger Indian community in [the state capital]. And there is an Indian Association Community Centre, where they celebrate a lot of festivals. We go there also. Then there is another [association], called Tri-State Bengalis Association. They celebrate one religious festival a year, called *Durga Puja* [5], which is in October.

At *Durga Puja*, we have one [religious] image, and we offer prayers and some food to God, then just get together and do some cultural events and eat.'



Plate 1
Holi in the meadow. Photo: Indian Student Association, Indiana University, Bloomington.



Plate 2
Children's *Diwali* dance, 2008. Photo: Indian Student Association, Indiana University, Bloomington.

M.A. and her family also participate in *Diwali* and *Durga Puja* festivities. She explains the diversity inherent in Asian Indian celebrations in the U.S.:

'When we came [to the U.S.] in 1978, there were less than a hundred Indian families in [this city]. Today, there are fourteen hundred families. We used to [celebrate] *Diwali* at the Holiday Inn and barely fill the hall which takes about three hundred people. Now, we have to [celebrate *Diwali*] in the convention centre. Last year, we had a thousand families [there].

[The] India Association is still one group, one big association. The main [cultural] function - *Diwali* - is when everybody likes to come. The [local Asian Indian] community used to be very close. Now, people are [settling here] more and more, and smaller groups are breaking away. South India and Bombay [have] a group, and northern [Indian] people have their group. People become a member for the [region] they belong to. Like the eastern part of India, people like to meet [others] like themselves [because] they can communicate with them and have festivals with them. The eastern part of India has its own big function, called *Maharasthra,* and *Durga Puja*. Yes, the Bengalis [from Calcutta], the holiest day for them is *Durga Puja*. There's a goddess called *Durga*, and on [the holiday] Bengalis come from three states in this area and stay for two days. They bring their statue of the *Durga*. They are reunited - it's like Christmas for them - it is the holiest day. We worship *Durga*, too, but it's not like that. For us, she is one of [several] goddesses.'

T.M. has adapted the *Diwali* festival in her cultural celebrations with American school children since she arrived in the U.S. - 'I [celebrate *Diwali*] in the classroom with the kids,' she says. 'and since I don't have young kids myself - if I have grandchildren [someday], I may take the effort to do that with them.'

T.H. is a second-generation Asian Indian immigrant who continues to participate in *Diwali* and *Holi* festivals. T.H.'s father was once president of the local India cultural organisation. Here, she reflects on how her father's encouraging her to actively participate in cultural celebrations affected her sense of self as an Asian Indian in the U.S.:

'When we were kids, we just went [to *Diwali* and *Holi* festivals]. This is how I remember it, we would go and I would more or less run around with my other little Indian friends that I wouldn't actually hang out within my normal [every] day life. I would just see them just at the Indian functions and spend time with them. It was more like kids did their thing and the adults did their thing. So,

in the aspect of being at the functions, I know I didn't really get involved in the way that I should have.

I don't think we ever took any ownership for it. It was my dad's thing. We went because, you know, he wanted us to go. When we were little, it was just a party; there was food and all that. It wasn't that we didn't want to go, but as we got older and into high school.... They weren't really our friends, the kids who were there so it wasn't something we wanted to do — but we would do it because [our parents] wanted us to.

I just got back from Africa. And while I was in Africa, my dad was e-mailing me and was like, "T.H., I want you to be in the India Association executive committee for this year." And I was like, "Oh, I don't know dad. What do I have to do?" Since I have come back, he's talked me into being the — I am the joint secretary for the India Association. So, I can't say that it was on my behalf, that I voluntarily went out and decided I am going to be involved in the India community organisation. Realising just how much he pushed it, that he really did – I think on two different aspects – he wanted his family to be involved with it. It's important to him. He wants me to be involved with it. He wants it to be a strong organisation, and does honestly believe that the second generation needs to get involved for it to be stronger.

I think [it's] what you identify with. There are second-generation Indian kids ... a lot more of their friends are Indian and they perhaps feel more Indian than American. But I definitely have always - throughout my life - known that I want [my Indian heritage] to be a part of my life, and be a part of my children's life. That's how you think about it ... how much of a role I want that to play in my children's life. I definitely want [my children some day] to have at least as much exposure as we had. I want them to go to India. I want them to feel like ... like I do when I get off the plane in India and the smell of India hits me. It's a very familiar and comfortable smell. You know, it's second home in a sense. I do want my kids to have at least some of that same feeling, that [India] is a part of them and there are things about India that are familiar and comfortable for them.'

(2) Participation in Indian community organisations

Asian Indian parents are especially concerned about maintaining an Indian identity and bringing up their children in the *Indian way* (Mehra: p.60). T.H. illustrates this parental concern vividly in her interview (above). First and second generation Asian Indians in the U.S. regularly maintain connections with the extended family in India through letters, telephone calls, visits and, more recently, e-mail. Throughout their immigration history in the United States, Asian Indians have also maintained their cultural identity by establishing and supporting Indian cultural organisations within the larger metropolitan areas (Helweg: p.47).

Experts claim Asian Indians feel they receive more than just psychological gratification from maintaining their Indian identity, yet the sense of community engendered through participation in Indian organisations does provide a much-needed psychological boost (Bhola: p.49). Indian organisations and the cultural and/or religious events sponsored by these organisations serve as vital cultural conduits for immigrant families in the United States, often taking the place of the extended family as well as the language/religious group left behind on the India subcontinent. B.N. describes the importance Indian cultural organisations hold for her family and for the local Asian Indian population:

'We have an Indian Association over here, and everybody's a member of that association. That association does some events, like twelve events a year, so everybody, they go there. We have our own community centre here, so we go there. And then every weekend one or the other Indian [family], they have the party, so they invite like forty, fifty families.'

S. speaks of the time she and her husband lived in a state without a large Indian population, and emphasises how their need for community was fulfilled through the local Indian organisation:

'We had only ten or fifteen Indian families there, but we had an Indian association and we got very much involved in that association. My husband even became the secretary.'

As a child, S. internalised many facets of Asian Indian culture from her family's involvement in a large Asian Indian association:

'All the [Indian] girls... when we were growing up we were expected to learn some kind of Rabindranath Tagore songs, or dancing. We will participate in dramas

and all sorts of things. We used to read literature. Our parents put a lot of emphasis that you have to be well versed and knowledgeable... that way... culturally, I guess.'

(3) Wearing ethnic dress outside the home

Dress is another visible way Asian Indian women celebrate their ethnic and cultural identities in the U.S.. Sudershan a nurse who was born in India, talks about how her ethnic appearance is perceived in the U.S., and why wearing Indian dress is a type of celebration of her heritage (Faung et al.: p.44):

We wear our Indian dress because of our culture, and because we are proud of it. But there are people who say, "This is like a curtain." They embarrass us. "You are wrapping around a curtain?" They don't even know the value. They don't know the culture. They don't know that we want to cover up our bodies, that we don't show our bodies to people, to have them look at us, to give us remarks. In India, we don't use the clothes people in this country use, like bikinis or shorts or clothes that show the body. We cover it up. Pants suits and long skirts aren't bad because you can't see the legs. But if anyone sits and shows her legs, that is not good. It is not right to show a man my legs. We don't like it because we were raised like that. The whole country is like that, not just myself. That's why these people shout their remarks but we don't care. We don't say anything about their dress. My dress is mine, yours is yours. I don't care.

Mehta and Belk assert *the appearance of being Indian may be more critical to maintaining a visible identity* than the maintenance of caste identity and extended family structure (p.409). A strong desire for conformity within the local Indian community may be a primary determining factor in the wearing of ethnic dress. The example of Vimla is a case in point (Helweg and Helweg: p.128):

Vimla dresses according to what her friends think is becoming, not according to American style. Even though she owns pants and dresses to look Western, she does not wear them regularly because her attire has an Indian flavour and is acceptable to her friends.... She, like her other friends, is sensitive to group opinion and behaves accordingly.

Compartmentalisation of western versus eastern identity markers is also associated with U.S. Asian Indian women's dress preferences. Bharati, for example, wanted to give her son an American-style birthday party and invite her friends' children to participate. As hostess, however, Bharati intended to celebrate her ethnic identity by wearing Indian-style dress (Helweg and Helweg: p.126):

I do not mind wearing dresses but when I am in the company of Indians, especially Indian men, I feel very uncomfortable with my legs being bare. Thus, when I am at work or associating with Westerners, I feel free to wear a dress and allow my legs to be bare. However, when an Indian male is going to be present, I choose my clothes to ensure that my legs will be covered.

When M.E. attended primary school in India, she wore western-style skirts and blouses because that was the school uniform. In the U.S., M.E. wears western clothing for everyday purposes. Her traditional Indian dresses are reserved for special events, such as social and/or religious functions with other Asian Indian immigrants:

'I will wear traditional Indian clothes for occasions, for festivities and all that. I still have a lot of those but regularly I don't use any of the Indian traditional clothing. But then, I would be doing the same thing if I was in India.... To tell you honestly, I have never gone to the supermarket in a sari.'

M.E.'s comments echo those of several of the other Asian Indian women interviewed. Most interviewees feel that wearing Indian rather than western style clothing when participating in Indian cultural events is a way of celebrating their ethnic heritage as well as their gender identity. On the other hand, many are unlikely to wear ethnic clothing at work or at school, as is seen in this excerpt:

'Whenever we go to Indian parties, which is almost every weekend, we always dress in Indian saris.... All the ladies are decked up in Indian attire, like the saris and the *bindis*. Even yesterday also, we went for a party and I just make sure that I wear Indian saris. My daughter wears - all the time [to parties] - *shalwar kameez*. She does not wear it to school, no.'

Other interviewees agreed that ethnic clothing should be worn on special occasions as a way of celebrating one's identity and heritage. Less than one-third of the

participants in this study, however, wear ethnic dress on the job. B. wears Indian style clothing at work as well as for special occasions. She believes she is unusual in this respect, because Indian women in the U.S. workplace have been discouraged from wearing ethnic dress:

'I know a lot of working places don't like... the sari. I don't know a lot of professional Indian females who wear [*shalwar kameez*] like I do at work.'

P. agrees that, when Asian Indian women in the U.S. enter the working world, their employers usually expect them to wear western-style clothing. When she was employed as a school-teacher, however, P. continued to wear her saris to work as a way of celebrating her ethnic identity and heritage. 'I always wore my saris. I never gave that up,' she says.

Adherence to ethnic dress for Asian Indian women immigrants also can be coloured by religious affiliation. Women immigrants of various religious persuasions may have similar preferences for ethnic dress to those described here, but the specific type of dress will vary. Second-generation Muslim women adopt what Dwyer has referred to as *an explicitly Islamic dress code* (p.151). That is, in contrast to the saris or *shalwar kameez* and loose scarf often preferred by non-Islamic Asian Indian women, Muslim women's ethnic dress usually takes the form of a long skirt or trousers accompanied by a *hijab*, or long scarf covering the head, neck, and shoulders. This form of ethnic dress, Dwyer notes, expressly challenges *the idea of 'Asian' clothes as boundary markers for cultural and religious identity, while also making a firm statement about an explicitly religious identity* (p.150).

Two interviewees in this study admitted they prefer the comfort of Indian style clothing, as opposed to more restrictive western dresses or skirts. P. and K. think the *shalwar kameez* (loose top with snug pants) is much more comfortable than Western dresses. To P. however, the decision to wear ethnic clothing goes much deeper than mere comfort:

'I enjoy it as ... not only as clothing, but as a work of art, also, in terms of tradition of India.'

While all the Asian Indian woman interviewed felt that wearing ethnic dress on special occasions outside the home is a way of celebrating their identity and heritage, at least one second-generation interviewee was humiliated when her parents wore ethnic dress at home.



Plate 3
Diwali, 2008. Photo: Indian Student Association, Indiana University, Bloomington.

T.H. explains:

'[As children of Asian Indian parents], I think we always realised we were different. One thing that always embarrassed me was that my dad would wear a *dhoti* (which is like a long skirt). I would be embarrassed about that when my friends came over.'

(4) Adherence to ethnic dietary preferences

Yet another way in which U.S. Asian Indian women celebrate their ethnic heritage involves adherence to ethnic diet. Mehra's interviews with Asian Indians in Chicago document the fact that, despite decades of residence in the U.S., Asian Indians' commitment to home-based cultural values, such as *belief in marriage as life-long commitment, religious affiliation, preservation of native dress, maintenance of native language and food habits, remains unchanged* (p.11). The interviewees in this study support Mehra's finding, and reveal specific strategies used by Asian Indian parents to celebrate Asian Indian culture and ensure its continuity in successive generations.

Interviewees indicated that they and their family members prefer to eat Indian food, and usually do so at home. D.'s comments are typical of many heard during these interviews. 'I make Indian food every day,' she says. '[when] we eat out [we eat] 'American food'. M.J., a graduate student who lives at home, appreciates eating Indian food at home with her family on a regular basis while also understanding that traditional Indian cooking is very time- and work-intensive. 'My mother,' M.J. reports, 'always cooks Indian food, and meals take a while to make. When I get home, she's exhausted!'

U.S. Asian Indians celebrate their ethnicity through diet chiefly within the nuclear family home environment, and during Indian cultural celebrations. Authentic Indian-style restaurants and vegetarian restaurants are rarely found in smaller mid-western cities, and school and college cafeterias tend not to serve Indian food. Therefore many Asian Indian families living in the U.S. no longer follow a strict Indian diet outside the home. One interviewee describes this phenomenon, and explains how her family manages to find vegetarian options at local restaurants:

'We follow totally Indian food [at home]. Once in a while, we go out and eat Chinese, Japanese ...'

K. a graduate student, perceives her ethnicity as a study in diversity and celebrates that diversity through language, dance and food:

'I see India as a very diverse country and I see the culture as being a very diverse culture.... The languages are diverse. The dances are diverse. The culture is diverse. The food is diverse. I mean, if there was one word I would describe it with, I would say that it's definitely diverse, and what makes me a unique person is because I've, you know, cherished all these diversities.'

The diversity of which K. speaks applies to intersections between religion and diet as well as to the flavour of food and preparation preferences. Whereas most Jain and many Hindu communities follow vegetarian diets, for example, some Hindus from coastal regions of India are more likely to eat chicken and fish. Followers of the Sikh tradition are typically meat eaters and do not follow the same restrictions as the Hindus. Then there are those who will occasionally eat beef, especially after arriving in the U.S. where beef is often served and vegetarian menus are not often found in restaurants. B. explains:

'Most of the time... I cook Indian food. We enjoy it; that doesn't mean that we don't enjoy the other. I cook some pasta and steaks and that kind of stuff too, but we enjoy the Indian spices and the Indian cooking.'

Like B., M.E. occasionally consumes beef:

'By religion, [in my family] we are Hindus. We don't eat beef so that's one thing. But we have adapted to that also, so [eating beef is] fine, but not on a regular basis. If it's served once in a while, I might eat it. But I am not too strict, and that's why I do that.'

Another interviewee explains her family's ethnic diet preferences:

'I cook Indian food at almost every meal. We're non-vegetarian because in Calcutta [our birthplace], Bengalis are non-vegetarian. We are fish and meat eaters.'

T.M. is a strict vegetarian, but her husband and son - who must eat outside the home nearly every day - are not:

'I cook all the time Indian food. And vegetarian. I'm a vegetarian [but] my son is not. And my husband is a vegetarian - when he's home.'

S.H.'s husband and son also do not maintain a strict vegetarian diet. S.H.'s case is similar to T.M.'s in that she does not hold family members to the same dietary restrictions she herself follows. Her situation is different from T.M.'s, however, because S.H. has a professional career outside the home. She says:

'I'm the only one who is a vegetarian. And I never believed that [our son] should be vegetarian. I didn't believe he should eat a *lot* of meat — it should be balanced nutrition. And I believe in [his] being able to enjoy all kinds of food, so no problems there.'

One reason S.H. does not insist her family maintain a strict vegetarian diet is because she has found vegetarian food choices available in the Midwest to be somewhat lacking:

'I, we, couldn't find any Indian groceries. There were not too many Indian functions [where home-cooked vegetarian food might be served]. New York was different. Now you go there, Indian eateries [are] everywhere, and there are so many Indian functions, huge [Indian] population, all sorts of [ethnic] stores.'

Summary

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of U.S. Asian Indian women towards the maintenance of ethnic cultural practices in the host society. Findings demonstrate U.S. Asian Indian women employ various means to sustain their ethnic culture within the home and community, including public celebrations of religious and/or ethnic holidays, participation in Indian cultural organisations, ethnic dress and ethnic dietary practices.

Asian Indian women, as do women in many cultures worldwide, take on the role of transmission and maintenance of traditional cultural or ethnic values. In the case of Asian Indian women in the U.S., however, these women attempt on the one hand to maintain traditional values while on the other hand simultaneously facilitating the family and its members' transition into the American western value system. Participants and/or their immediate family members, for example, substitute social networks gained through local Indian cultural organisations for the extended family networks they enjoyed in India, and exchange saris for western business attire while in the workplace.

These findings document specific ethnic celebration strategies employed by Asian Indian families residing in the mid-western United States. The findings also serve to illuminate the processes of acculturation and identity negotiation for recent Asian Indian immigrants. The developing identities of migrants in a new land, Rushdie suggests, are established in memories and defined by a sense of 'otherness' (p.124). Immigrants experience *unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves* (Rushdie: p.124). Such blending of the past and present, together with the reality of the cultural in-between, has a significant effect on Asian Indian women residing in the United States (Hegde: p.34).

In general, U.S. Asian Indian women immigrants in this study emphasise that their core ethnic values are essential to their identities and sense of self. While Asian Indian immigrants may integrate quickly into the American social milieu through their facility with English, high levels of education, professional or technical careers, and middle- to upper-middle class suburban dwellings, at home they continue to stress traditional Indian values and customs and transmit these ethnic traditions to the next generation. As P. explains, 'We kept our Indian identity.... We are a professional middle class [American] family, but very much *Indian*.'

NOTES

1. The Indian subcontinent has been described as *the cultural India* (Bhola, 1996, in Taylor & McBirney (eds.), pp. 38-53). Therefore, where the term 'Asian Indian' is used in this paper, it is intended to represent the people or culture of the Indian subcontinent.

2. Throughout the professional literature, 'South Asia' refers to the Indian subcontinent and includes the countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka as well as present day political India.

3. *Diwali* is the festival of lights and is of special importance to Hindus. People celebrate by performing traditional activities, particularly at home and with family, by lighting their houses, buying new clothes and sharing sweets and snacks. Fire crackers are set off to scare off evil spirits. This festival takes place at some point between mid-October and mid-December.

4. *Holi* is a spring festival and celebrates the end of winter as well as various achievements by Hindu gods and goddesses. People throw coloured scented powder over each other and spray each other with coloured water.

5. *Durga Puja* is a celebration of the goddess *Durga* who is both the mother goddess and a warrior who was victorious over the evil buffalo spirit, *Mahishara*. It takes place in late September/early October.

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