

Long-Distance Nationalism: Constructing “Indian-ness” in American Kitchens

by
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“One of the effects of mass migration has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality. Having seen several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.”

*-Salman Rushdie*¹

Structured around a series of biographical narratives that investigate domestic kitchens in India and the U.S., this thesis project explores how Indians from disparate cultural backgrounds alter their ethnic identities when they immigrate to the U.S. By simultaneously adopting, adapting, and inventing new, “hybrid” practices because of the alien cultural and spatial environment of American suburban apartment kitchens, these immigrants construct a flexible behavior, which manifests itself in the formation of their transcultural identity. Through these transcultural practices, Indian immigrants end up performing roles that transcend the rigid boundaries of gender, class, caste, regional, and religious cultural identities that defined them in their home country. Being “different” in a new society actually erases previous differences among Indian immigrants, allowing them to create a singular national Indian community in the U.S. and to identify with the notion of “Indian-ness,” a concept that Indians living in India rarely experience, except on special occasions, and never in their everyday lives.

The following essay consists of excerpts from the introductory and concluding chapter, and one of the biographical narratives, which demonstrates how an Indian immigrant couple reinvents its class status and particular religious traditions in the process of adaptation to their American domestic kitchen.

In the 1960s, when mechanical appliances like the dishwasher became fixed and regular features in apartment-house kitchens in the U.S., they imposed on their users certain uniform rules of behavior. This design invention coincided with the historical moment in which the United States Immigration Act of 1965 encouraged a vast number of Indians to emigrate from India to America by eliminating immigration quotas. Today, approximately one million Indian immigrants of diverse religious and regional

backgrounds reside in urban and suburban apartment houses across the United States. Adaptation to the modern kitchen design of their domestic spaces has become one of the primary factors binding these immigrants together into an identifiable social group. For example, the majority of Indian families living in apartments in the U.S., especially in situations in which both men and women are working, modify and adapt their cooking styles to the microwave oven. This is a result of their fast-paced lives in the United States and the lack of domestic help for kitchen-related activities. In India, even if some families can afford the microwave—a luxury item—they rarely use it, except for warming food because they believe that Indian meals cooked in the microwave do not taste good. Besides, they can easily manage elaborate cooking with the assistance of domestic servants or family members.

This behavioral change, along with other efforts of Indian immigrants to adapt to the American domestic environment, illustrates a larger cultural phenomenon referred to by post-colonial theorists² as “transculturalism.” Kelly Chien Hui Kuo, in her article, “An Euphoria of Transcultural Hybridity” states that,

In this increasingly hybrid culture today, where the boundaries between cultures are ambiguous and cultural forms are rather transculturally syncretistic, neither globalism nor localism can justify the hybrid cultural phenomena or resolve the problems of cultural identity in a transnational locale like the United States.³

Since Indian immigrants’ adaptation to modern American kitchens happens alongside their desire to maintain their local Indian customs and behavior, the concept of transculturalism proves quite useful for this discussion. It helps to explain Indian immigrants’ transcultural desire to “transcend their initial culture, in order to examine and infiltrate foreign cultures,”⁴ and simultaneously to preserve their local native

distinctiveness. In such transcultural scenarios, neither globalism nor localism dominates; rather, a two-way situation of global localism exists.

When Indians immigrate to the United States, they encounter a condition that Homi K. Bhabha describes as “unhomeliness.” This condition should not be mistaken for being without a home. Rather, it represents a condition of displacement where “borders between home and world become confused, and private and public become a part of each other.”⁵ In this context, the domestic kitchen, a private area in the dwellings of these individuals in India, increases in significance because it becomes a social space in their residential apartments in the United States. The communal bonding that occurs everyday in this space is much more powerful than the bonding that normally happens in Indian homes only on special occasions and not necessarily in kitchens.

Enclosed by walls on four sides, kitchens in India are isolated from the rest of the



residential space. This closed planning serves to isolate the individuals working in these spaces from the other activities of the house. Visitors in other activity areas also normally do not enter the kitchen because the extensive heat, fumes, and odors causes extreme discomfort in these closed, non air-conditioned spaces.

Consequently, in India, the users prefer to spend a minimum amount of time in their domestic kitchens.

Figure 1 An apartment kitchen in New Delhi, India



Figure 2 A suburban apartment kitchen in Richmond, Virginia

The open plan of the suburban apartment kitchens in the U.S., on the other hand, provides easy accessibility and visual openness toward other activity areas (entrance foyer, living room, and dining room). For many Indian immigrants living in these new domestic environments, the kitchen acts as a focal point of domestic life. One of the major issues these immigrants have to deal with while living in the U.S. is the issue of what kind of food they should eat. They give considerable importance to home-cooked food, especially Indian, in order to create a feeling of being at 'home'.⁶ Despite their busy work schedules and fast-paced lives in the U.S., these immigrants spend a significant amount of time in their kitchens, cooking and socializing with their families and friends. Open planning (elimination of walls, low partitions) provides a dynamic view of cooking activities from a number of rooms, while placing the kitchen at the center of



Figure 3 An open planned American suburban apartment kitchen in Virginia

daily life. The kitchen not only becomes a part of other living spaces of the house in this scenario, but also serves as a potential spillover area during large gatherings.

The post-World War II period in the U.S. generated economic conditions in which land was cheap but labor and materials were expensive. Houses were small in size and multipurpose rooms became a common feature of cost-effective housing designs. The scarcity of interior space resulted in the elimination of walls in order to create a feeling of spaciousness. The white enamel finish of appliances, white or cream plastic laminated counter tops, and vinyl floor and wall coverings enhanced this feeling of openness and have become common features of contemporary suburban apartment kitchen designs. Commenting on this character of openness, Jean Baudrillard notes, “Everything has to communicate, everything has to be functional – no more secrets, no mystery, everything is organized, everything is clear.”⁷ The Indian users respond positively to this open design because it does not isolate them from the rest of the

activities of the house. They can watch television or interact with other family members or friends over the low counter wall. Liberated from the isolation of the Indian kitchen, Indian immigrants, especially women, develop a new interest in this open-planned cooking space and its related activities despite the few social disadvantages such as the absence of a private space where these women can hold personal conversations with their other female family members.

Inspired by the functionalist models of the 1920s and 1930s, the open design of the modern American kitchen features built-in cabinets and modern appliances flush with each other and the walls. This provides a uniform visual aesthetic characteristic of contemporary suburban apartment kitchens in the U.S. Mass-produced housing, with its standard interior design, became a cost-effective design solution during the post-war years. This led to the creation of communities with virtually identical kitchen designs throughout the United States.⁸ In the interiors of these spaces, turning in any direction, one encounters the same spatiality, with every activity area clearly



Figure 4 A modern suburban apartment kitchen in California



Figure 5 A customized storage cabinet in an apartment kitchen in India



Figure 6&7 Electric stove and wash sink in an apartment kitchen in India

demarcated and incorporating fixed modern machines. In India, apartment dwellers and homeowners purchase their own appliances, which are neither fixed nor flush with the cabinets, and customize their kitchens according to their personal needs. In America, the kitchen, of all the domestic spaces, is foreign in terms of both planning and design. Indian immigrants have to adapt, not only to the openness and centrality, but also to the high-tech appliances and the overall standardization of their apartment kitchen designs. In many suburban American apartments, electric stoves replace the direct gas stoves, dishwashers substitute for the sinks where people wash utensils by hand and electric exhausts replace the window-mounted exhausts of Indian kitchens. Confronted by such a profound cultural, aesthetic, and technological difference, Indian immigrants become more aware of their own differences from native-born Americans. The conflict that arises out of this awareness concerns alternative strategies of adaptation: should the

Indian families adapt American kitchens to their Indian style of living, or should they instead adapt their “Indian practices” to those spaces? By adopting American cultural practices, while simultaneously adapting their typically Indian practices to American kitchens, and inventing some new, “hybrid” practices, Indian immigrants redefine the use of these spaces and construct a flexible social behavior. The flexible behavior enables them to resolve the conflict of adaptation; it is a resolution that manifests itself in the formation of their transcultural identity.

This study examines the complex processes of adoption, adaptation, and invention—strategies that operate simultaneously in Indian immigrants’ constructions of transcultural identities. My work focuses on kitchens of Indian couples between the ages of 25-35, living in apartments in suburban areas in Virginia and California.⁹ A significant percentage of the Indian population in the U.S. lives in such apartments in suburban areas to save on the cost of living.¹⁰ Many Indian immigrants employed in skilled professional jobs desire to live close to their offices in apartment communities in suburban areas inhabited by other Asian Indians.¹¹ The apartment dwellings in suburban areas enable them to retain their mobile status, which is critical in their quest for better job opportunities throughout the United States.

The flexible, adaptive behavior of the Indian subjects living in such apartment houses in suburban areas is also formed and informed by the performance of roles that transcend the rigid boundaries of gender, class, caste, regional, and religious identities that exist in their home country. One distinguishing feature of Indian society as a whole is that it is a conglomeration of various units—religious, class, regional, and linguistic. Even though centuries of living side by side has resulted in some osmosis, it is not a melting pot. While there are pockets of fusion and syncretism, by and large the

individual groups keep their separate regional, religious, and other cultural identities. This makes the Indian society a mosaic of different languages, religious beliefs, and lifestyles. Moreover, neither Hindus nor Muslims represent one uniform culture; various subgroups exist within these communities based on language, regional, and caste or occupational differences. These sub-groups show great diversity in their social practices, attire, food habits, and attitudes toward one another. Many of these cultural differences manifest themselves in domestic spaces. For example, class differences are communicated through the types of furniture placed in the bedroom and the living room, while in the room housing the altar, the religious difference becomes evident. However, it is the kitchen in particular, where all of these differences – gender, class, caste, region, and religion – become apparent simultaneously.

To demonstrate how these differences operate among Indian immigrants in the U.S., I have concentrated in this study on couples from diverse cultural backgrounds. These differences (gender, region, caste, class, and religion) become the lenses through which I examine my Indian subjects. By constructing biographical narratives, I focus on the specificity of each couple's kitchen (personalization of spaces, storage use, technology, cooking styles, eating habits, and other social practices) in India and in the U.S., and reflect on how these contemporary Indian immigrants from different backgrounds alter their cultural identities when they immigrate to the United States. I further explicate how their specific regional, religious, and other cultural distinctions within India fuse into a singular Indian community in the United States. I have based the behavioral components of the biographies on the data gathered through fieldwork that involved interviewing and participant observation using visual and audio media. While I do not claim that the perspectives presented in this study stand for the Indian

immigrant population as a whole, I do believe they represent the experience of the majority of the Indian immigrant population living in apartment communities in suburban areas in the U.S.

The following section is one of the selected biographical narratives.

One Step In or Out of Modernity?

Reinventing Class Status and Religious Traditions

Sheetal and Vikram are an example of an Indian couple who had to reinvent both their class status and religious traditions in response to their move to America.¹² Sheetal moved to the U.S. after marrying Vikram, a family friend who emigrated from India in 2003 to work as a business manager in a cigarette company in Richmond, Virginia. Although Sheetal and Vikram are both Hindus from a high-class background, theirs was not an arranged marriage, as is typical throughout much of India, but one forged in love.¹³ Sheetal and Vikram have proudly displayed their favorite marriage photograph



Figure 8 Photographs on the meal counter of Sheetal's American kitchen

in which they both are sharing an intimate moment looking into each other's eyes amongst other family photographs on the kitchen counter of their American apartment. Vikram often teases Sheetal because of the easy chemistry between them; he has posted a reminder on the microwave door that reads, "Please Close Me." Vikram explains, "She is always in a hurry while working in the kitchen and often needs a reminder to close the microwave door."¹ Sheetal, who teaches in a primary school, counters by saying,

I have to rush up the kitchen chores in order to have some time to do my official work at home. Only after moving to the U.S., I have started thinking about how to balance my professional and domestic life. When I was working in India, I was never crunched on time because my mother used to manage the household with the assistance of three full-time servants.

Excited about living alone with her husband and decorating their new home in the U.S., Sheetal brought decorative objects with her from India on her very first visit to America. A wind chime suspended from the ceiling on top of the kitchen counter adds color to the light brown wooden cabinets, white floors, walls, and counter surfaces of Sheetal and Vikram's apartment kitchen. A bronze art object composed of Ganesha symbols and tinkling bells dangles down the narrow wall that defines the entrance of their open kitchen, expressing the couple's



Figure 9 Bronze art object in Sheetal's American kitchen

Indian heritage. None of these objects however, reflects the high-class background of

¹ Vikram Parekh, in an interview with the author, December 27, 2004, Richmond, Virginia. All interview quotes in this chapter are from the same date.

Sheetal and Vikram. In fact, one significant factor in Sheetal and Vikram's immigration to America is their shedding of the economic status conferred upon them by their families in India.

Sheetal's affluent upper-class family lives in Jaipur, in the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan. Several elements in the kitchen of Sheetal's three-story house in India signify the wealth and high class of the family. Living in the same home for the last 20 years, Sheetal's nuclear family of four hired an architect to redesign a modular kitchen for them.¹⁴ A kitchen island opposite the range contains a sink that facilitates faster cooking, and an exhaust built into the storage cabinets above the gas stove indicates that the kitchen has been remodeled according to the latest Indian kitchen design. Most of the construction materials and equipment, from red galaxy granite stone for flooring, polished Udaipur green marble counters, golden yellow glazed ceramic tiles used both above and below the counters, and solid teak wood storage cabinets, to the double door



Figure 10 Sheetal's Indian kitchen in Jaipur

refrigerator, are expensive choices affordable only by high-class families in India.

Although Sheetal's family members own a microwave, they never really use it except for warming food. Sheetal explains,

The upper class status in India demands levels of consumption and practices that are in tune with the times and maintain a higher standard of living. An important reason that household goods like the microwaves have become 'requirements,' even when many families hardly use them, is that status competition demands such possessions.¹⁵

Further expensive and stylish objects; for example, the silver trays hanging on the kitchen walls and the traditional brass equipment, are signifiers of the family's high status.¹⁶ Sheetal's family often invites people from high-class backgrounds to their home. In such scenarios, the prestige among equals is an issue, as well as that of the status of "big people"¹⁷ in relation to their social inferiors. In formal gatherings, the family honors its guests by serving their meals in brass kitchenware, which is unavailable in local markets. Many Indian restaurants in five-star hotels in India use similar brassware for serving meals.¹⁸ According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, such status symbols (objects that are rare and expensive) are "a global measure of the owner's standing in the community,"¹⁹ and become an integral part of self [the person one feels oneself to be in relation to one's community] as well as the means by which people derive their identities. In Sheetal's Indian household, the expensive material possessions in the kitchen become one of the means of self-expression and self-realization through which the family exhibits its affluent status and derives a part of its identity.

In contrast, when Sheetal and Vikram moved to the U.S., they brought no antiques from India, nor did they buy expensive household goods and decorative items once they were here.²⁰ Instead, like other Indians in the U.S., Vikram and Sheetal buy

bargain goods or shop from outlets such as IKEA, which markets mass-produced household goods at comparatively reasonable prices. Many Indians like Vikram and Sheetal, who are in their mid-twenties, immigrate to the U.S. soon after finishing school with the intention of earning their own money rather than surviving on the wealth of their families in India. In India, while living with their rich parents, even if they are not earning enough, these young immigrants maintain their high-class stature in the society. Once in America, they lose their high-class status and have to work hard for years to earn it back.²¹

This shift in status is clear when looking at Sheetal and Vikram's American kitchen. Even though Sheetal and Vikram belong to a high-class background, their American apartment kitchen is not very different in terms of its planning, design materials, and basic equipment from the apartment kitchens of several other Indian transplants in the U.S. who belong to different economic classes in India. Sheetal has no choice but to adapt to the materials in her modern American kitchen. The white plastic laminated counter surfaces contrast sharply with the easy-to-clean dark green marble counters in her Indian kitchen. While chopping vegetables in her American kitchen, she places



Figure 11 Sheetal's adaptation to her American apartment kitchen

newspapers on the counter, which expedites her clean-up process and prevents scratches. In Sheetal's Indian kitchen, the domestic help cleans the red granite floor twice a day. In her American kitchen, Sheetal has placed a rug on the white vinyl floor in order to keep it clean longer. Sheetal comments,

Out here, it does not matter which class background you belonged to, how rich you were or whether you had two or ten servants in India. Everyone including people like me, who did not even clean the kitchen counters in India are now down on our knees cleaning up our domestic spaces.

Sheetal, who is accustomed to working barefoot in the kitchen because of her Indian religious beliefs, explains that the rug also protects her feet from dirt and the cold. To maintain hygiene in their Indian kitchen, Sheetal and her Hindu Marwari²² family forbid anyone, including one another, to enter their kitchen wearing shoes. During winters, when the kitchen floor becomes very cold because of the extreme Jaipur climate, the family wears socks or special home slippers (which are not allowed to be worn outside). Many Hindu Marwari families do not allow shoes in the kitchen because they consider the kitchen to be a holy place. In accordance with their traditional Hindu religious beliefs, Hindus do not wear shoes (which are considered dirty) in holy places. In addition, Sheetal and Vikram's family associates food with God. Everyday, before eating their meal or when they cook traditional sweets on some special festivals, the family offers their bounty first to God, before serving it to others or eating it on their own. The couple explains that, "Similar to many upper-class families in India, our families are modern in outlook; however, they still conform to their particular Hindu Marwari religious practices everyday."²³

Religion is another arena in which the move to America has forced Sheetal and Vikram to substantially tailor their traditional practices. For example, in India, Sheetal

used to sit and pray in the traditional Hindu style in front of her altar on a regular basis. Like many Hindu families who position their altars in private rooms or in semi-private spaces, Sheetal's family have set up their altar in a special furniture cabinet in one corner of the lobby, isolated from the other living spaces of the house.²⁴ In contrast, in their American apartment, Sheetal and Vikram pray in a public space, standing in front of a built-in kitchen cabinet that they use to hold a religious shrine. Living in the constricted space of a one-bedroom modern American suburban apartment has inspired these immigrants to invent a new use for their kitchen cabinet, and to invent a new place and



Figure 12 Altar in Sheetal's American kitchen cabinet

new style of worship. They have become flexible not only in relation to American kitchen design by using a kitchen cabinet to meet their cultural needs (as Indians) to worship, but also in relation to their religious cultural traditions by worshipping a shrine embedded in a kitchen cabinet. The couple explains, “We have already moved twice in the past one-year. Buying a separate piece of furniture for the altar is not a practical decision, especially when we have the option of using the kitchen cabinet. We have kept minimal furniture even in our living room so that shifting is not a hassle.”

Despite the presence of an altar in their kitchen, Vikram and Sheetal, who are extremely fond of buying shoes, have mounted their big shoe rack behind the door of the laundry space attached to their American kitchen. They comment, “We could not find any other place for this shoe rack in our apartment and do not like the idea of seeing shoes when we are spending private moments with each other in our bedroom.”²⁵ The storage closet next to the entrance is full of empty packing boxes they have saved to transport their electronic devices on their next move. Sheetal defends her choice: “I always keep the door to the laundry closed because I do not need to enter the laundry space on a regular basis.” Unlike other Indians who use the laundry space in their kitchen to store dry goods, she has consciously



Figure 13 Shoe rack in Sheetal's American kitchen

stored all her food items in the built-in cabinets in her kitchen. However, the presence of a dustpan, some kitchenware on top of the dryer in the laundry room and the basic ingredients of Indian meals—like onions, which Sheetal uses regularly—negate her defense.

By inventing a new use for the laundry space attached to their kitchen, the couple has defied two of their traditional Hindu religious beliefs—first, of bringing shoes into a sacred space, and second, of storing them in a space where food is stored and cooked. In addition, they have violated their specific Marwari tradition of not wearing shoes in the kitchen. Although Sheetal is habituated to working barefoot in the kitchen, it does not imply that she conforms to her religious belief. She and Vikram often put on their shoes in the kitchen itself when they have to go out.

In fact, since moving to the U.S., the couple does not abide by many of the religious customs or traditions observed by their Hindu Marwari family in India. For example, according to Marwari customs, the family does not sit down to eat until they have ladled food onto the plate of each guest. In their American apartment, Sheetal and Vikram do not even set the table formally—instead, their guests help themselves to food directly from the kitchen. Living alone with her husband, Sheetal no longer pursues the tradition of not entering the kitchen during menstruation, a religious taboo strictly followed in Marwari and some other Hindu families in India. Hindu mythology associates the menstruation cycle of a female with the act of purification. Many Hindu Marwari households do not allow menstruating females to enter the kitchen because they believe their impure bodies would destroy the sanctity of their kitchen.²⁶

Living away from their families and the cultural and traditional environment of their home country gives Sheetal and Vikram relative freedom to live life on their own

terms. Vikram comments, “Most of our Indian neighbors here are not even aware of our Marwari customs. Out here practicality rules. We did not think twice before storing our shoes in the kitchen.”

Nevertheless, all these transformations do not necessarily result in a decrease in religious observance and practice. Praying in a standing position in front of their kitchen cabinet does not make Sheetal and Vikram less religious than other Hindus living in India, who sit and pray in a separate altar room, in front of exclusive furniture. In fact, Sheetal took special pains to bring heavy accessories (lamps, idols) from India for her altar space in America. She strategically placed her altar in a storage cabinet next to a power switch to light up the space with electric bulbs embedded in an ethnic lamp.²⁷

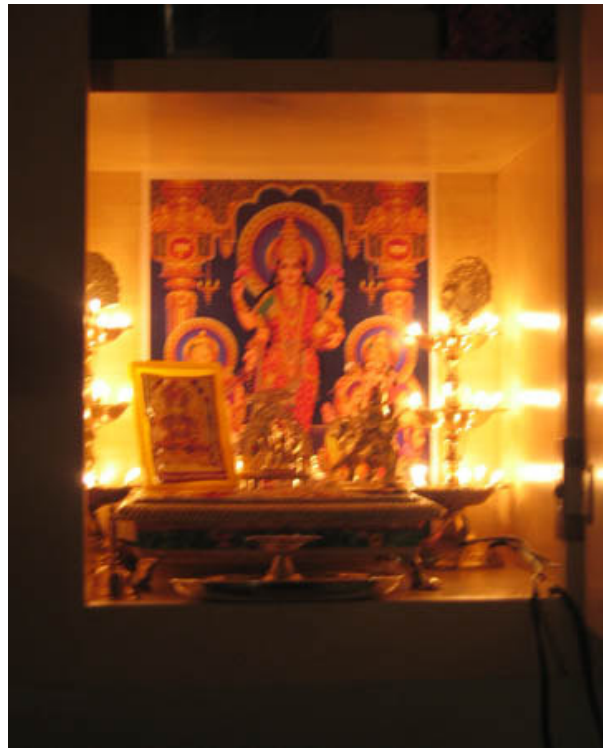


Figure 14 Lighted altar space in Sheetal’s American kitchen cabinet

Similarly, many Indian immigrants living in America pray regularly in their homes or visit temples (or other religious places) but do not tend to consider their religion as a set of strict dogmas and proscriptions. By becoming flexible in their specific religious traditions in the U.S., Sheetal and Vikram identify themselves as Indians rather than as Hindu Marwaris.

Raymond Williams, in describing the universalizing trends that are underway among Indian immigrants in America, notes,

The strength and growth of sectarian and regional forms of Hinduism and the secularization of the Asian-Indian community are threats from opposite sides...What results from the tension will be a redefinition of what 'Hindu' means in the United States and the redefinition of boundaries through the manipulation of symbols [for example, the altar] and the expansion of their cultural contextualization so as to include as many Asian Indians as possible under a single religious identity.²⁸

Hinduism, a religion practiced by the majority in India, is just one minority faith amongst others in America. This awareness of "religious pluralism" has affected the way Indians from diverse religious backgrounds practice their religious beliefs in the U.S. Instead of conforming to the everyday practices associated with their particular religious faith in their domestic spaces, many immigrants pursue their specific religious traditions only during festivals or at births, marriages, and deaths. In India, Sheetal and Vikram would not allow people to enter their Indian kitchen wearing shoes, a fact that makes them easily identifiable as Hindu Marwaris. In the U.S., they are identified as Hindu Marwaris only if they perform their particular religious ceremonies at the temple.

This identification with Indian-ness rather than with a specific caste/branch of Hinduism differentiates what it means to be an Indian in the United States from what it means in India. In India, Indian-ness does not exist. It is inseparable from the religious and other cultural sects that define its population. Practicing one's particular religious, social, and other cultural customs is an integral part of daily life in India. Indians living in India negotiate their identity through a volatile mix of influences hinging on region, religion, gender, language, class, and caste. The same individual has a number of different ethnic allegiances and any one of these might become more important than the others, depending upon the context. For example, in one context, Hindus and Muslims from South India might unite to defend themselves against North Indian domination. In

another context, Hindus from both North and South India might regard Muslims as aliens among them. Under such circumstances, Indians identify themselves more as a member of their particular subculture (be it class, caste, regional, or religious) rather than as an Indian in their daily lives. The notion of Indian-ness or a unified Indian culture emerges only at the time of national crisis when Indians living in different parts of India unite for a common cause, or on special occasions such as national holidays which Indians from different cultural backgrounds recognize and celebrate together as Indians and not as Hindus or Christians.

Paradoxically, it is only upon leaving their home country for a foreign nation like America, where Indian immigrants modify their specific caste, class, regional, religious, and gender-related beliefs and traditions in order to unite with Indians from different cultural backgrounds, that they begin to identify with the notion of “Indian-ness.” Constructing and performing “Indian-ness” every day in America has the potential to make these immigrants even more “Indian” because they suppress their cultural distinctions in order to form a singular national Indian community. Indian immigrants’ creation of a unique “ethnic”²⁹ Indian community in the U.S. that overrides their differences (such as gender, region, caste, class, and religion) helps to keep them from becoming further marginalized in the multicultural American community and is essential for these immigrants’ struggle to avoid being racialized as non-white Americans.³⁰

It is not enough to recognize that these religious and other cultural boundaries no longer exist between Indian immigrants. One must also examine the circumstances under which such boundaries are ignored. In contemporary Indian society, attempts by the government to diminish the gap between different cultural groups have resulted in

an increase of tension and conflict between them.³¹ On the contrary, in America, there has actually been a decrease in tension and conflict between Indian immigrants because their cultural differences have diminished in response to a new cultural and spatial environment.

Living as Indians in the United States, these immigrants construct their identity through the influence of both Indian and American culture. Despite Western influences, and even while these immigrants reinvent their Indian traditions, the sense of “Indian-ness” remains strong. It no longer exists at merely psychological levels or comes into existence only at the time of national crises or on national holidays. Rather, it is manifest in the practices that Indian immigrants construct every day in their domestic spaces. In his description of the process of identity construction, Slater notes, “The membership of a particular social order or identity as a member of a specific culture is produced and reproduced through culturally specific consumption.”³² The habits, customs, and social practices enacted in the American suburban apartment kitchens around cultural issues such as gender, class, caste, and religion are first redefined and then codified into “Indian-ness” or “Indian identity” in the U.S.

The creation of Indian-ness in America, however, suggests more than long-distance nationalism. It proposes that our ethnic identity need not be our totalizing identity; and that our identity could be situationally reconstructed. One of the respondents of my study comments, “I am an Indian here, but essentially I am a Hindu Brahmin because I was born into a Brahmin family.” Though many Indian immigrants anchor the creation of their identity to the subcontinent, their construction of a transcultural “Indian identity” in the United States has challenged this notion. In this sense, Indian-ness becomes transnational as it transcends the limits of nationalist

geography. Both Indian-born Indians who have created a version of “Indian-ness” upon moving to the U.S., and American-born Indians who witness this “Indian-ness” everyday in their domestic spaces, can perform this transnational identity, which is accomplished, not just by crossing national borders, but also by the will of the person performing the self.

Endnotes

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1992), p. 124.

² Some of the renowned postcolonial theorists who theorize this concept are Homi K. Bhabha, Sneja Gunew.

³ Kelly Chien hui Kuo, “An-other Nihilism: An Euphoria of Transcultural Hybridity.” http://www.international.ucla.edu/cira/paper/TW_Kuo.pdf.

⁴ Claude Grunitzky, ed. *Transculturalism: How the world is coming together* (New York: True Agency, Inc, 2004), p. 25.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 9.

⁶ Although many Indian restaurants have opened in the U.S., many Indian immigrants still prefer to eat at home because home-cooked food is considered more healthy and fresh and they cannot save much if they eat out on a regular basis.

⁷ June Freeman, *The Making of the Modern Kitchen: A Cultural History* (London and New York: Berg Publishers, 2002), p. 230.

⁸ Avi Friedman, “The Evolution of Design Characteristics during the Post-Second World War Housing Boom,” *Journal of Design History* 1995. Vol. 8 No. 2.

⁹ Indian immigrant communities in the U.S. are concentrated in California, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Texas, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Virginia. 67 percent of Indians living in the U.S. are married. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/censr-17.pdf>.

¹⁰ 53.1 percent of Indian immigrants in the U.S. live in rented apartments, *ibid*.

¹¹ Other considerations for living in suburban areas are security, better schools, less pollution, and less crime.

¹² Class status in India is determined solely by finances, not by birth or by the inheritance or ownership of land.

¹³ Love marriages in India, in which both the partners know each other well, often makes them frank and comfortable with each other right from the onset of their married life, as opposed to arranged marriages where it usually takes time to know one’s partner and become comfortable with each other.

¹⁴ Only affluent families in India hire architects for designing their homes because average middle-class families cannot bear the added expense of the architect's fees. Instead, they get their homes constructed by contractors and spend the saved amount on actual construction.

¹⁵ Sheetal Parekh, in an interview with the author, December 27, 2004, Richmond, Virginia. All interview quotes in this chapter are from the same date.

¹⁶ Commenting on this idea that real function of goods is to signify status, Jean Baudrillard notes "People no longer consume things but signs." In addition, Don Slater in his text *Consumer Culture and Modernity* argues that "People buy the most expensive version of a product not because it possesses more use-value than a cheaper version but because it signifies status and exclusivity." Don Slater, op. cit., p. 158.

¹⁷ Rich people in India are often identified as "big" people.

¹⁸ "Five-star hotel" or "five star culture" holds a popular image in India as an island of luxury. These terms are often used in Indian society to talk about consumer aspirations and to qualify the luxurious desires of consumers.

¹⁹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things- Domestic Symbols and the Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 31.

²⁰ A U.S. dollar is equivalent to 43 Indian rupees. You can buy five bottles of Pepsi (300 ml) for 43 rupees in India.

²¹ Many upper-class Indians immigrate to the U.S. either for achieving higher education (undergraduate or graduate level) from reputed American universities, for working in American firms, which have a better work environment than many Indian firms, or just to achieve liberation from the social norms of Indian society. They do not mind struggling to gain economic mobility in the U.S. as long as they are receiving satisfaction at such other fronts.

²² The four original castes of Hindu religion have been subdivided over many centuries into several different castes, each region having its own distinct groups, defined by craft and fixed by custom. Marwaris refer to the merchants and traders community originating from Marwar, an old state of Jodhpur in Rajasthan. Many "Marwari" families originally come from the districts of Jhunjhunu and Shekhawati in Rajasthan and are now settled in Calcutta and other cities in Eastern India.

²³ In India, most modern Hindu families also pursue their specific religious traditions and do not adopt or create homogenous practices. This fact negates the argument made by Steven Vertovec that "Modernization, in all of its variegated forms, has had far-reaching impact on the practices and social institutions-even basic belief structures of Hinduism in contemporary India and has given way to more homogenous ones." Steven Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 27.

²⁴ In India, lobby is an architectural term that refers to a semi-private common area ideally designed as a family meeting room.

²⁵ In urban Indian homes, shoes are considered unsightly because dirty. They are usually kept in closed cabinets, closets, or corners obscured by furniture.

²⁶ Females from most Hindu households do not pray in front of an altar or even go to the temple when they are menstruating.

²⁷ Lighting up the altar space is a tradition followed by both Hindus and some Christian sects in India.

²⁸ R.B. Williams, *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in American Tapestry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 54.

²⁹ H.S. Morris defines this notion of ethnic group – as one in which the members feel themselves or are thought to be bound together by common ties of race, nationality, or culture. H.S. Morris quoted in *Communal Identity in India: Its Construction and Articulation in the Twentieth Century*, Bidyut Chakrabarty, ed. (New Delhi:Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 139.

³⁰ They cannot be qualified as white unless they assimilate into mainstream American culture, which leaves them with the potential risk of being identified as non-whites. Creation of this unique racial identity – “Asian Indians” – is a protest against the racial politics of American society, which tends to racialize every single group of population in terms of two white supremacist inventions: Blackness and Whiteness. “The 1980 population census for the first time included a number of single elderly native American persons under ‘Asian Indian’ race category based on place of birth or ancestry.” <http://www.indnet.org/census/80-90/>.

³¹ For example, Harijans (often referred to as untouchables in Indian society) were discriminated against by all four Hindu caste groups and segregated from many areas of social life. In contemporary Indian society, these barriers have been legally abolished and Harijans are given opportunities to politically organize themselves. However, doing so has resulted in confrontations with members of the upper castes who still do not willingly accept them as equals.

³² Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), p. 132.