

Model Minority Imaging in New York: The Situation with Second Generation Asian Indian Learners in Middle and Secondary Schools

Rupam Saran

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a framework that problematizes two issues that are relevant to minorities in the United States of America (USA) viz. how complexities of the model minority phenomena affect educational experiences of Asian Indian students in school settings. And how the close family structure, guided by parental, professional and educational attainment, influences children's academic achievements. One of the main purposes of this study is to explore different dimensions of the second generation Asian Indian students' perception of themselves, of their school, and their schools' perception of them as high achievers. In the USA, the model minority discourse tends to paint Asians from different countries as good minorities. Asians are perceived as non-threatening, good, quiet, and silent people because they are reluctant to express their anger and frustrations. Asian Indians also fit this model minority mold and try to maintain their "good minority" image in the dominant culture. Although Asian Indians are known as a "successful minority," not much is known about their children's educational experiences in urban schools or their capacity to overcome barriers. Positive stereotyping challenges them with high expectations, compliance, peer envy, and prejudice, thus creating stress for them. In addition, the positive stereotyping and model minority phenomenon masks the disparity in education and rising educational problems among second-generation Asian Indian students. According to Delpit (1995) positive stereotyping of Asian students is often counterproductive. Often quiet, and well-behaved Asian students fail to get proper attention of their teachers on the assumption that they are smart and are capable of doing well without teachers' direction. And in many cases because of positive stereotyping Asian children who are less demanding and less assertive than their classmates are neglected in their classrooms at the expense of their personal development.

Deterministic assumptions predict that because they are "model minorities", all Asian Indian students have smoother educational experiences and most of them are excelling. I hypothesize that positive stereotyping has problematic connotations and it creates feeling of marginalization, conflicts, and stress for model minority students. I argue that while middle-class and upper-middle class Asian Indians relate to the collective definition of "model minority" and push their children to upward mobility, the increasing population of newer working-class Asian Indian immigrants might refute their ascribed model minority image.

While it is true that generally Asian Indian students attain a higher level of achievement in mathematics, science, and technology, there are many Asian Indian students who are low achievers and need more support and assistance from their schools. However, their needs are overlooked on the assumption that as a member of "model minority" group they should be hard working and successful. The increasing variability in educational performance of Asian Indian students is an issue of concern. The variability in educational performance among urban Asian Indian students is growing because of the cultural gap among teachers and students, peer influence, and the pressure to "fit-in" and to be "Americanized" in the process of upward mobility.

Asian Indians migrate with higher level of human capital¹ and are the most successful among all Asian Americans. According to the 2000 census Asian Indian families had the highest median income and 64% of Asian Indians had earned a bachelor degree. The Asian Indians success is credited to the fact that majority of the post-1965 Asian Indian immigrants were skilled professionals, most of them had good command of the English language, and they secured high paying jobs in the United States. However, many new Asian Indian immigrants are not highly educated, have working class backgrounds, are not proficient in English, and struggle more in

mainstream society than earlier Asian Indian immigrants. In general, children of newer immigrants experience more educational barriers, social, and psychological problems than children of middle class professionals. In the initial stage the newcomers of Indian origin settle in urban neighborhoods and their children attend urban schools and experience similar economic, educational, psychological, and social problems that children of other minority groups.

During the 2000-2001 academic school years, a very disturbing incident took place in an elite suburban district in New York. Indian students were mocked for their names and threatened with physical violence. The police were called and 19 Indian (all American-born) students were arrested. School officials did try to investigate the causes and determine the truth, and they blamed the Indian students. The irony was that these children were in honors classes, had no history of misconduct in school, and had won many competitions that added prestige to their school. Parents intervened and used their political contacts until all charges were finally dropped, forcing the administration to apologize (India Abroad, 2000). As the Indian population increased the school's ratings experienced a concomitant increase, bringing this district to compete with best schools in nation. The following conversation is an indication of the status the school presently enjoys:

Karen (White learner): Mr. Bloomfield I am not going to share a room with that Indian girl. I want another room.

Simran (Indian learner): I know why Betty does not like me. Mr. Bloomfield I did not ask you to select me. It is not my fault that I won the debate contest. I did not ask them to send me to represent New York. Everybody has an equal chance. Go and get the highest grade in class. If I am school president, I get scholarships, why does it bother others? Every body has a chance to get 100s on tests. I work hard. I do not complain. I know why you are blaming me.

This and many other such incidents have motivated me to explore the educational experiences of Asian Indian students in urban schools. Specifically, my goal is to identify contradictions and to understand how the complexities of the "model minority" phenomenon have been impacting on their lives and how urban Asian Indian children negotiate their experiences in the school context.

In the New York City area a few students from urban schools confided to an Indian teacher that they were harassed by their fellow students and were discriminated by teachers but their parents chose to be quiet about these disturbing incidences because they are intimidated by power of school over their children's lives. Neel confided, "I was an 'A' student and now I am failing... I act bad and hang around with bad kids. Nobody bothers me anymore... when I was good I was punished for things I never did. You know these teachers and principal are scared of white, black and Porto Rican parents because these parents fight for their children but our parents do not complain, they do not know how to defend their children in school... they want us to behave right and keep quiet... I have learned to be tough and mean. Nobody tries to understand my problems." Raj declared that he did not want to be beaten up every day and his grades were not important to him anymore. He refused to be a timid helpless individual. He acted in self-defense, and traded his identity of high achiever for low achiever. Neel and Raj represent those students who stray from "patterns of cultural enactment" and norms and apply their agency to create "asynchronous interactions in different fields" (Tobin, 2002). Neel and Raj's expression of resistance deviates from "Asian Indian behavior norm" that conditions Asian Indian youths to follow "silence and staying-away strategies." I assert that Raj, Neel and many other students like them exerted their agency in another direction; they adapted a "non-model-minority" survival strategy. Instead of "keeping silent," and adapting to a "nonconfrontational behavior" they opted for a self-defense strategy and other survival strategies that were not achievement oriented. There are many students who might be refuting their model minority image because of their non-Asian survival strategies.

Asian Indian parents teach their children to stay out of trouble and keep quiet and try not to challenge the system. In order to avoid bad reputations and to deal with discrimination, prejudice, fights, and many other contradictions in school, Asian Indian parents often teach their children to self-discipline themselves. Asian Indian parents feel the need to protect their children by teaching them self-discipline and "staying away strategies." They instruct their children to maintain their positive stereotyped image and to maintain academic success despite prejudice and racism

(Gibson, 1989). The “staying away” tactic support Ogbu’s framework of immigrant and voluntary minorities’ adaptation strategies. According to Ogbu (1991) voluntary minorities tend to overlook prejudice as a temporary obstacle to be overcome, and they place a higher value on academic achievement. Asian Indian parents instruct their children to ignore prejudice and abusive conditions, focus on academic performance, and acquiesce to authority. All my respondents informed me that their parents advise them to stay away from troubles and keep a social distance from “them.” The development of the collective identities of “we-ness” and “they-ness” defines categories of a social world where “them” or “they” are elements that can be road blocks to Asian Indian students’ achievement.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This critical ethnographic study that was conducted during 2005-2006, follows a phenomenological hermeneutic framework which allows me to gain insights into second generation Asian Indian youths’ lives by learning through their experiences. Using a *cross-generational design*, this study examines the impact of parents’ human and cultural capital, and achievement ideology on students’ academic performance. According to Bourdieu (1979) habitus is a “structured structure” that is made of individuals’ values, practices, and schemas of the social class to which they belong. This structured structure systematically conditions individuals to internalize salient properties, values, schemas, rules, and practices of the particular habitus of that social class. Individuals transform their experiences and the internalized values of their habitus, and generate dispositions that enable their agency to learn practices of another habitus. Habitus is a system of practices and schemas, and these practices and schemas are transformable to another habitus. Practices are an individual’s or a group’s actions/interactions, relationships, and rituals within a field of a structure (Sewell, 1992). I define schema as values, beliefs, ideas, rules, and procedures that are assigned to an action. In the context of Asian Indian students’ scholastic performance, I assert that the practices of their home habitus condition them to internalize their parents’ schemas of achievement and generate dispositions that are transferable in different habitus. My respondents’

perceptions and interpretations of their families’ achievement schemas are translated to their school performance. Because habitus, the “structuring structure,” generates a mass of cultural, symbolic, and social capital, all the practices of one field are translated into different fields. A student with a high volume of cultural, educational, and symbolic capital translates his or her capitals in different fields of a structure naturally. By field, I refer to physical and psychological space. A structure can have different physical and psychological fields. For example, in a science classroom structure, a teacher’s homework rules, her expectations or students’ adherence to lab procedures are different psychological fields.

Bourdieu (1979) asserts that individuals “soak up” values, beliefs, and schemas of their habitus, and their actions are guided by their habitus. Habitus is constituted of different structures and fields and individuals enact their agency in all structures. Production of an action transforms into habitus and individuals cultivate their cultural capital from their habitus. Thus habitus is structured and at the same time it is structuring cultural, social, and symbolic capital. One’s practices and schemas constitute culture, and cultural enactment is cultural capital. As individuals’ habitus expand, their agency expands. Students bring their cultural capital to school and it guides them.

Family interviews provided me insights into parents’ attitude towards their children’s education, their experiences with schools, and their own views on migration, American culture, their socioeconomic status, and educational experiences.

Respondents of this study are from two elite urban high schools, and one high performing middle school. I was in a middle school everyday for four months and that allowed me enough time to observe student’s social interactions and communication, their attitudes towards their peers, peers’ attitude towards them, and the environment of school. I worked with a group of 11 Asian Indian students who were placed in special placement class (top class). I observed them in their science and math classes, in playground, and in lunchroom everyday. The elite high schools do not allow researchers to work with their students. I had to approach India Club of elite schools. Asian Indian students of these elite schools were very cooperative and I interviewed them during the summer of 2005.

The middle school is a zone school and this school is open to all students of that neighborhood. However, the school admits student from other neighborhoods if their grade point average is above 95%. This school is located in a middle class neighborhood with dense Asian Indian population. The Asian Indian population in this school is 53% of the total student population. The elite urban high schools have tough entrance requirements. Students have to take competitive entrance exam for these schools. Thousands of students take these tests and only 15-20 percent students are selected.

In the process of gathering qualitative data, I took field notes, listened to participants' narratives, and audio-taped interviews. I informally interviewed student participants to obtain in-depth accounts of their experiences regarding their academic achievements and goals, their personal and ethnic identity, their perception of their peers, teachers, school administrators, and the conflicts and problems they encounter in school.

Asian Indian Students in New York City

New York City has the highest immigrant population in the United States. In New York City the Asian population has increased by 71% since 1990 to the present. Among Asian immigrants, the Indian immigrant population is the fastest-growing segment of the nation's population. In the United States the Asian population is 1,678,000 in other words, less than 1% of the total population. In the New York metropolitan area, there are currently more than 100,000 Indians living in Queens County. In New York City, 3,260 Indian children are enrolled in elementary, middle, high schools (United States Census, 2000).

Looking at the Report Card

The test scores of Asian Indian students report comparatively high academic achievements. The Coalition for Asian American children and Families (CACF) 2004, report that during 2002, in New York City, Asian American high school students graduated at a rate of 66.9 %, second only to white students at 70.5 % and significantly higher than black (44.4 %) and Hispanic (41.1%)” (p.14). Although there are differences between scores of native born and foreign born Asian American students the number of failing students is very low compared to other ethnic groups. In the

context of standardized tests and academic achievement, Louie (2004) reports “Asian Indians have highest attainment rates”, (p.106) and “Asian Indians and Japanese students perform the best, followed by Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Southeast Asians” (p. xxvii). The New York City Department of Standardized Test Scores reported that in 2003, Asian American students performed extremely well in mathematics tests. According to the national report on standardized tests and performance by race and ethnicity, the total number of Asians scoring at high levels on the math SAT has increased dramatically. Asian American students have had a 46% increase in the number of students scoring above 600 on the mathematics Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) since 1987.

Model Minority Discourse in the United States: Its Ideological Connotations

The model minority stereotype is an ideological yet highly problematic phenomenon. The increased academic success of Asian Americans from China, Japan, the Philippines, India, and South East Asia attracted public awareness, and as the result of positive stereotyping model minority status was ascribed to all Asians. According to 2000 census Asians are 3.6 percent of the U.S. population “but have made up 10 percent of the nation's scientists and engineers and during the time period of 1989 to 1996 nearly half of the bachelor degree in science and engineering was received by Asian students” (National Science Foundation, 2000).

In American society the model minority discourse idealizes Asian Americans and defines them collectively as hard-working, smart, high-achieving people of good cultures (Lee, 1996; Winnick, 1990). Though this term implies prestige and recognition of accomplishment it originated as a hegemonic mechanism to reduce racial and the ethnic tension of the civil rights movement of 1960s. Instead of crediting Asian Americans for their contributions to American society, the media propagated the model minority term to ignore the demands of African-Americans and other minority groups for equal rights. The dominant socio-political establishment used Asian American success as an example to other minority groups to seek educational and economic success without governmental assistance (Lee, 2005; Osajima, 1988)). The model minority discourse assumes that if Asian Americans can succeed on

their own, all minority groups should achieve economic success without governmental support. Thus, the model minority term was used for “delegitimizing” the issue of racial inequality and improvements in educational and social systems of the United States (Lee, 2005). The Model minority discourse marginalizes Asian experiences in mainstream society and magnifies their success to mask racial inequality and to blame other minorities for their economic failure.

For Asian Indians, the model minority status has created identity issues. The mainstream population perceives them as a population that does not belong to European, African-American, Latino, or Oriental races. In mainstream society the term Asian refers most often to the oriental population not to Indians from India. Therefore, they are a separate category of people who have succeeded only relatively, especially since they still have to construct their space in the mainstream society. Asian Indians have internalized their subjugated and marginalized social status in mainstream American society. But they are beginning to pay the price for their academic successes, and economic prosperity. A study by California State University released in 1991 reported that “While Asian-Americans are often viewed as successful overachievers, they have unrecognized needs and overlooked needs and experience discomfort and harassment on campus.” Like their counterpart Asian students, Indian students are expected to achieve high educational attainments despite the resentment and harassment of their peers, and without much support from school.

Model Minority: Discourse of Stereotyping and Labeling

Like all Asian Americans in the United States Asian Indian immigrants have been positively stereotyped on the basis of their academic and economic success. Although positive stereotyping has positive connotations and it is viewed by some as a source of respect, stereotyping whether negative or positive has potentially deleterious consequences. Though positive stereotype may be favorable to Asian Indians it does not always serve them well because stereotyping is always attached to inaccurate and questionable generalization, labeling, categorization, and it is a fixed idea based on perception and judgment (Allport, 1954). Allport regards stereotyping as a “justificatory device for

categorical acceptance or rejection of a group” (1954: 192) that justifies and rationalizes an individual’s love-prejudice or hate-prejudice. Stereotyping is a continuous process of “selected perception” and “selective forgetting” that celebrates a group for its success but forgets their contribution if the group fails to achieve success. Asian Indians are categorized and stereotyped as “model minority” by the dominant society on the belief and a generalized collective judgment that all Asian Indians are submissive, hard working, and intelligent.

Asian Indians have dual status in the American society. They are not Whites or a part of the dominant group thus they are *ascribed* a marginalized status in American society. However, the paradox is that they have *achieved* a higher status of “Honorary White” (Tuan, 1998), like other Asian immigrants in American society through higher education and economic success. Because of duality of their unique position their success is often perceived negatively and they are discriminated by prejudice in disguise. Although Asian Indians and all other Asian minority groups are acclaimed for their success by dominant group the undeniable truth is that implicit and explicit prejudice is always present in positive stereotyping.

Model Minority Perpetuates Ethnic Rivalry and Racism

By ascribing model minority status to Asian Americans for their educational and economic success, political machinery has perpetuated ethnic rivalry and antagonistic discourses among various ethnic groups. Paradoxically, the model minority stereotyping has been unsuccessful in protecting Asians from racism and ethnic antagonism instead it has created a racial divide that continually surfaces in hate crimes. McLaren (1997) explains that discourses of labeling and stereotyping cultural groups have negative consequences because it creates conditions of “inner-ethnic rivalry” that lead to a “culture of victimization,” and negative competitive trends within people of color. The model minority myth labels Asians as better minority and implies that other minorities are inferior. In the United States education policy-makers and politicians use the educational and economic accomplishments of Asian Indians to justify the notion of meritocracy and the slogan of equal opportunities for all.

Laurie Olson (1997) observes the prejudice of mainstream students towards Asian American students in school and writes, “many expressed anxiety or resentment at the increasing number of immigrants and Asians they perceive as pushing them out of their place in the academic hierarchy” (Olsen, p.68). Unfortunately, the resentment against Asians students’ achievement and success is producing negative feelings in the white population as well as in other minority groups. The superiority of whiteness is manifested by white students in schools as hate and rejection towards Asian students. The Asian success is interpreted as an act of pushing out white students. The term “taking over” implies that white students no longer hold dominance in academic classes. Asians are blamed for displacing white privilege (Olson, 1997). The language “pushing out,” “take over,” “willing to break their back” expresses intense anger and hate for immigrant students who are competing with white students in school.

One of my respondent teachers whispered to me:

“They do not like immigrants. You know who are they? I mean whites.

These Asian Indian students are doing so well, they are our top students but a lot of white teacher do not like this. They do not like you either because an Indian women doing Ph. D. they would like you to be a paraprofessional. You have to believe me I am a white women but I am telling you the truth...”

Model Minority Status: A Hegemonic Condition and Power Game

The model minority discourse is a political and racial discourse that treats all Asians as one “hoard” without distinguishing their cultural differences. The acceptance and continuance of the model minority stereotype is a political act to mask oppression and marginalization of minorities. According to Goodwin (2003) the model minority discourse has accomplished four political aims without aggravating Asian Americans. First, by providing a distinguished status, externally it made Asians feel obliged and appreciative of white policymakers. It makes Asian Americans to accept hegemonic conditions, and stay within parameters of conformity, and compliance. It instills in Asian Americans the fear that they might lose their “prized status” if they demand something.

Therefore, out of insecurity they behave as if they are powerless. Second, the model minority phenomenon overlooks the needs of Asian Americans. They are constantly reminded that they do not need or deserve help or assistance because they are successful academically and economically. Third, the model minority phenomenon has created separation among minorities. Other minorities perceive Asian Americans as rivals not to be trusted. The model minority status is defined by others thus it instills a notion of disempowerment in the Asian immigrant community and it manipulates individuals to form their identity within a hegemonic framework (Lee, 1996). It assumes that all Asian Americans are obedient, submissive, they believe in conformity, and respect authority. Students who show these characteristics are awarded by teachers and school authorities (Lee, 2002) but students who are vocal are reprimanded by schools.

Model Minority Stereotype is a Myth

Asian American students are stereotyped as super achievers and are highly concentrated in science, technology, medicine, and economics. The model minority myth portrays Asian Indian students as the top strata of American academia and a minority to be modeled and respected. However, positive stereotyping has its downsides. Cocchira (2004) argues that while negative stereotype adversely influence performance of racial groups positive performance stereotype may also have adverse effects. Asian students are expected to perform to the stereotyped high standards, and they live under stereotype-threat that expects them to excel and reprimands them for failing to live up to high expectations. The study by Ho et al. (1998) reported that on a mathematics test Asian-American students had to pay heavier price for failing the test. The graders of the test penalized Asian-American students with fewer points compared to white students who performed identically on that math test. Asian Americans have to live up to the high expectations of model minority and they are overly concerned about their grades. Results of Cheryan and Bodenhausen’s study (2000) supported findings of previous study conducted by Ho et al. According to Cheryan and Bodenhausen “positive stereotypes (at least when they form the basis for salient public expectations) can place a considerable burden on members of the

stereotyped group, adversely affecting their performance in the stereotyped domain” (2000: 401). Although positive stereotype is often instrumental in motivating students and boosting their esteem it can be conducive in producing stereotype-threats.

Asian Indians have attained comparatively higher socioeconomic and educational gains in American society they face discrimination and are not rewarded for their accomplishments when compared to Whites with the same educational and professional background. The study by Barringer and Kassenbaum found that though there is an unusual concentration of Asian Indians in professional and managerial occupations and similarly there is an unusually high percent of both men and women with higher college degree yet they get lower returns for their expertise compared to whites who have either the same or lesser qualifications (Barringer and Kassenbaum, 1989). Their research indicates the glass ceiling effect Asian Indians experience despite their academic achievements.

Asian Indian Students: Negotiation of Model Minority Status

First-generation Asian Indians and second-generation Asian Indian youths are perceived as economically and academically successful in the United States, and have achieved the reputation of a model minority. Their racial and ethnic image in mainstream society is of a minority group that values education and believes in hard work. Although there is diversity among the Asian Indian population, my respondents were first-generation Asian Indians (parents), second-generation Indians (students), and their teachers, and all (33 individuals) confirmed the collective ascribed stereotype of a model minority image. The second-generation Asian Indian students, their parents, and teachers believed that the model minority image was an accurate collective image of Asian Indians. One of the participant students declared:

All Indian students are good students. We do not get in trouble. In this school all Indians are doing well. I do not know about other schools... my cousins, my friends' brothers and sisters all are in good colleges....All Indian people try to work hard, live well, and make sacrifices for their children. (Faiz, 8th grade)

The science teacher's perception:

Asian Indian students are good kids...they are smart. Most of them work hard. They are well behaved and respect their teachers. Their parents make sure they do their homework on time and they do well in class. Our Special Placement classes are full of Indian students.

An Indian parent's perspective:

Our children are doing very well in school. They get awards, scholarships. I tell my children to work hard and have a good education because only education will bring success to them.

Although the model minority stereotype is based on a myth, my participants in this study believed that the image described them accurately. Faiz referred to all Asian Indian students as “we,” and many of my other respondents used collective terms like “we” and “us” for all Asian Indians. This term implied a collective identity, common characteristics, a sense of generalization, and togetherness. The majority of Asian Indian families believe that overall their children's performance is exemplary, and they are proud of their achievements. In general, teachers positively stereotype Asian Indian students because they are generally well behaved, follow classroom rules, show respect to authorities, work hard, and their parents cooperate with teachers.

Identity Construction: Achievement, Agency, and Self-Perception

Learners were generally confident and uninhibited in articulating their personal situations in their school performances. The three statements below illustrate some of the sentiments that were expressed by most of the learner respondents:

I am a good student. I do not want to do anything that will interfere with my study. All Indian students are doing well in this school and many are on the honor roll. I am always on the honor roll and I always want to be on it. My parents never pressure me to get good grades but when I get 95 my mom says, what happened to the other 5? I do not mind this. You know this is good for me. She keeps me on track. If she is happy with 85, I guess I will not work hard to get more than 80 or 85, that is not a good grade for me. (Anil, 8th grade)

I was always a model student. I learned content faster than anybody in my class. In my elementary and middle schools my teachers adored me because I was their top student. I was a well-behaved student. I went to a magnet

middle school, and I was lucky to be accepted in a top ranking specialized high school.... You know specialized high schools are ranked according to their performance. I was the valedictorian in my elementary and middle schools. And I hope to be valedictorian in high school. In my high school everybody is smart... here I am not special... I am an average student...that is scary. I feel my grades speak for me. Nobody can take my grades away from me. (Trihita, 12th grade)

I knew at a very early age that if I got good grades I would have an easy time in school. All Indian girls in my elementary and middle schools tried to do well on standardized tests because we knew that those grades were very important for us and no mean teacher could change those grades. There were mean teachers who did not like us and would do things like that. I am in this school because of my grades... and I have a good score on the SAT test ... I like to write poetries. I won a New York City poetry contest when I was in 5th grade. My father collected all my poetries and published them as a book when I was in 5th grade. (Rehana, 12th grade)

My respondents are “A” students and they are using the social structure of school to reproduce for themselves the identity of “high achievers.” Roth (2006) explains, “Social structure provides resources to action, and therefore resources to the re/production of identity (p. 147).” Many of my respondents expressed that they like school tests, standardized tests, and other ongoing evaluations in different fields. They view tests as resources to reproduce their identities of good students. They exercise their agency to study hard and to get high scores on tests. Within the school structure, tests are resources for them to gain entry into magnet middle schools, specialized high schools, and competitive colleges. All these participants are constructing their identities in different fields of their school. Their agency is employed to meet the model minority standards in different fields of school structure.

In general, Asian Indian students are stereotyped as high achievers in math, science, and technology. Rehana reported that in her specialized high school Asian Indian students are labeled as math and science “nerds.” Most of the Indian parents push their children to excel in math and science because those subjects open doors for medical and engineering schools.

Rehana said she always got good grades in mathematics and science but she felt that her writing skills enshrined within her mind a proclivity towards writing rather than science. By enacting their agency at the macro level through “participation in more than one field, including schools, where fields are nested within one another and intersect to create complex organization” (Tobin, 2000, p. 25), these second-generation Indian youths confirm their stereotyped reputations in different fields nested within the school structure, meeting academic standards set by the dominant culture. They define their racial and ethnic identities through the lens of the model minority phenomenon.

In the context of re/production of identity, Roth (2006: 150) explains that “identity and emotions are not stable or personal features of human existence but are continuously re/produced individually and collectively”. My high-achieving respondents are continuously re/producing their identities individually as high achievers and collectively as members of a model minority. Defining her identity as a high achiever Rehana described herself as a person who is “compelled to excel.” She impressed upon me: “I put pressure on myself. My parents do not put pressure on me to study. They know that I do not like to be told to study and I am doing pretty well so they leave me alone.” She defined herself “as an overachiever” and viewed standardized tests as a field in which she could expand her agency, about which her scores are amply reflected. Speaking of Indian students she always used the collective identity “we.” The individual and collective identity of motivated Asian Indian students is reproduced in the school context through the internalization of their parents’ achievement schemes, their desire to work hard and get ahead.

My in-depth interviews with them revealed that they constructed their identities as high achievers, and their racial and ethnic identities were intertwined with their academic identities. All of my correspondents indicated that their parents and teachers expected them to excel in school, get admitted to good colleges, and to have professional jobs. They mentioned that they tried to overcome discrimination or prejudice through good grades and hard work.

The second-generation Asian Indian respondents of my study who are living up to model minority standards did not limit their ethnic or

racial identities to “Indian-ness” but instead stressed that they were smart students and high achievers. Many Asian Indian students expressed indirectly that being Indian means they are supposed to work hard in school, respect their teachers and other school authorities, and stay away from problems. To a certain extent, they expressed their identities as high-achieving Indian youths. Anil said “I am an Indian, but for my family and me it is very important to be a good student because if I do well in middle school I will get into a specialized high school and a good college and will have a good job. It is very important to have a good job.” Students like Anil construct their identities internalizing parental and external expectations and pressures.

Trihita, Vandana, and Anil explained the natural translation of their capitals in the habitus of school. Their habitus have conditioned them to internalize their parents’ aspirations and to organize their learning practices to reach their goals. For Trihita being admitted to an elite college was natural because her educational capital meant it was expected of her. She said,

I got in Columbia University. You know it was sort of natural for me to end up in a college like Columbia College. My younger sister is smarter than me and she is planning to get into Harvard University. My parents expected me to do better than them. Mom has a M.B.A. from India and my dad competed one of the toughest civil service competitions and was a commissioner in his state. I dared not to end up in a community college.

For Vandana admission to law or med school is easy. She was admitted to medical school but she had not decided. She said:

I have not decided yet, but maybe I will be a doctor. My mom wants her daughters to be doctors. My older sister is in Med School. My father is a computer science professor at Baruch College. I am good in math and science so mom thinks I should be a doctor. I think being a doctor is easier than being a lawyer. My mom is an accountant. She wants her daughters to be better than her.

Anil wants to be an engineer like his father. He expressed:

I want to be a computer scientist or electronic engineer or something like that. My dad is an engineer and my mom also has a college degree in biology. She is a CAT SCAN technician in a good hospital.

Like many other model minority Asian students, these students come to school with habitus of rich cultural and educational capital. Cultural capital is comprised of an individual’s education, class location, values, beliefs, language patterns, moral character, image of success, sophistication of social relationships, and lifestyle. An Individual’s cultural capital determines and validates their position in different social structures and fields. Their social mobility, social interactions, and accumulation of social capital are guided by cultural capital. Although educational capital is an *element* of cultural capital, I argue that in the context of model minority it is also an *indicator* of an individual’s volume of cultural capital. Generally, individuals with a higher level of education capital have higher levels of human and economic capital and with this capital individuals construct a mass of cultural capital. Parents of Trihita, Vandana, and Anil migrated to the United States with high levels of education and human capital which they effectively used to accumulate higher levels of economic capital.

The cultural capital of my respondents provided them with a clear image of success and self-assurance and they were able to earn positive reputations in different fields in school. For example, with her high grade point average, Trihita had earned her teachers’ admiration and occupied the position of peer tutor, best debater, and valedictorian. Bourdieu (1979) explains that an individual’s self-assurance and their values, are “very closely linked” to their cultural capital. My respondents demonstrated high levels of self-assurance, confidence in their agency and their success images, and their social values are rooted in their habitus. None of my respondents desired to be a low wage earner. I argue that their habitus has conditioned them to internalize their social class values and motivate them to reproduce educational and cultural capital to higher levels.

The correspondence between my respondents’ scholastic performance and their parents’ educational and cultural capital reveals that children inherit and internalize their parents’ capital. An individual’s success is generally measured by his or her educational qualifications and their ability to gain economic capital. My respondent parents valued or devalued a profession or a job by its economic return and advised their children to get “secure jobs.” The process of reconversion of cultural and educational capital into economic

capital, and investment of economic capital to gain cultural capital and educational capital, is a strategy of “upclassing” (Bourdieu, 1979) and upward mobility. All my respondents reported that their parents enforced the idea of traditional, secure jobs; they wanted their children to invest their educational capital in order to ensure higher economic returns. For example, Rumi is accepted at Yale University and she wants to pursue her career in creative writing, but her father does not want to invest his economic capital in a direction that does not promise a secure job for his daughter. Rumi has inherited a higher mass of cultural, educational, economic, and social capital from her parents. Her father, with math and accounting degrees from India and the United States, is CEO of a fashion design company. Her mother earned her master’s in math from an American university. Rumi’s parents approve of her sister who graduated from Columbia University and earned her law degree from New York University. According to Rumi’s family, a degree in creative writing does not promise “upclassing.” In her father’s opinion one does not need to spend money to be a writer. He advises his daughter to invest capital for the reproduction of capital. Through the reconversion of his inherited cultural and educational capital, Rumi’s father has a higher mass of educational, cultural, and economic capital and has crafted his social status as upper middle class. Consequently, as a model minority Rumi is supposed to maintain her class position by conversion of her father’s economic capital into educational capital.

Model Minority Status: Stress and Tensions

Stress and tension, not just within the school environment but within households as well, are associated problems that inevitably accompany successful participation in any society that emphasizes upward mobility along the lines of individualism. It is probably manifested in greater degrees among minority groups. My respondents were equally victims of these twin problems, as their responses indicate:

...Sometimes I feel I need little more understanding from my parents. I always score above 90 in tests. I like math and science. In my last science test my score was 85 and my father and uncle were upset. I heard that I should pay more attention to my study...I need a break. (Shital, 8th grade)

Raj: I used to get good grades. I always got above a 90 in all subjects. I never bothered anybody. I tried to be nice to all of them. But these blacks would always beat me up. No teacher took my side. They always told me it was my fault. I was punished all the time. My parents do come to school and talked to the teachers. All these black and white parents run to school and fight with teachers and the principal. All of them are scared of parents. I have to defend myself. Now I am bad. I behave like them and now they are scared of me. I do not care for my grades now. It is better to be bad than beaten up and cursed at every day (Floral Park, Queens, New York, 1998).

Asian Indian students are compelled to “interpret and assert identity” in the light of expectations held by schools and their families. According to Asher (1999) the model minority stereotype challenges students with high academic expectations, thus creating stress for students. Asian Indian students are constantly constructing and reconstructing their identities in the shadow of stress, high expectations, and compliance. As hegemonic powers shape their thinking and behavior in school, Asian Indian students construct their own identity under the shadow of identity that is given to them by dominant culture. However, the fluidity of identity is a major concern for them and identity-threat is an integral part of their discourses in school. They are always under the pressure of losing their identity “if I do not excel I will be losing my identity of high achiever and I will be failing to live up to expectations of my parents and teachers.” I argue that while the model minority positive stereotype provides a symbolic structure for high achievement and motivates students to succeed in school it might create psychological threat for many Asian Indian students’ identity.

There are many Asian Indian students like Raj who are failing to live up to high expectations mainly due to peer pressure or ignorance of teachers and school officials. In the context of Asian Indian students’ learning and achievement there are contradictions and oppositional behaviors that also emerge due to cultural differences, peer envy, and in few cases due to linguistic barriers. According to MacLeod, members of a subculture or sub-habitus are often involved in oppositional behavior to protest unfair treatment of mainstream culture (MacLeod, 1995). Asian Indian students’ goal of academic attainment is often negated by contradictions and

resistances that appear because of their negative experiences in classroom and schools.

Rehana recalls her negative experiences in elementary school:

We were always silent about many things that happened in school. In my fifth grade a white teacher called an African boy "Vermin." The same teacher did not like Indian children; she treated us like we were vermin. She did not like when I got the highest score in my class, or when I won the New York Times Poetry Competition and got a \$12,000 award. She always shunned South Asian children in class and always ignored us. However, we never complained about this teacher. When my brother topped his class in fifth grade, his African American and Spanish classmates wrote a four-letter word in his yearbook. They wrote "you nerd we hate you"; "Stupid nerd I hope you die." We did not let our parents know about this because we knew they could not do anything to stop these things...and they would be worried. We did not report this to the school because we did not want to create more problems for us.

Rehana's story is typical of many Asian Indian model minority students who demonstrate nonconfrontational behavior and keep silent. In the Asian context, Lee (1996) describes the nonconfrontational behavior as a "strategy of silence," and a consequence of the feeling of powerless. In the context of her Asian respondents' silence strategy Lee explained: "They believed that the best way to deal with confrontation was to avoid it or to be silent" (p. 31). Rehana, her brother, and other Asian Indian friends felt an inability to stop prejudice and antagonism, and preferred to be silent. They have internalized their parents' schema of their marginalized position in the dominant culture and truncated their agency to confront prejudice. Rehana expressed that her elementary and middle school years were tough for her and those experiences always stay with her. She told me, "I was always conscious of my ethnicity. I always felt that I was a second-class citizen but I knew that it was better to keep quiet." Osajima (1988) argued that Asians use silence as a survival strategy.

CONCLUSION

The ethnographic data in this study speak for diversity in school experiences and demonstrate the complexities of Asian Indian

students' school experiences. The popular media and scholars project Asian Indian students as high achievers and a model minority. However, the data in this study point out that not all Asian Indian students are high achievers, and some face academic and behavior problems in school, but these stories stay hidden behind the shadow of the success stories. Many low-achieving Asian Indian students do not receive appropriate assistance and resources from the school as well as their families, causing them to under-perform. The common assumption that all Asian Indian students are well behaved and are high achievers works against low-achieving and needy students. They are judged by the model minority standard and are covertly castigated by schools (e.g. administrators, counselors, and teachers) for failing to meet high meritocratic standards. Thus, schools use the model minority standards to impede the agency of average to low-achieving Asian Indian students. They often tend to adopt an indifferent attitude towards those who do not perform well in mathematics, science, and technology.

I found out that high achievement generated peer envy and a few high-achieving Asian Indian students surrendered to peer pressure, and failed to use physical and symbolic resources to accomplish their goal. For example, Raj was a high achiever but his agency was impeded by peer pressure, and he deviated from his goal for high achievement. Goal achievement is a collective act in which rules, resources, and division of labor mediate individuals' goal attainment (Engestrom, 1991). Individuals' cultural and social capitals are resources that they use to access further resources in order to accomplish their goal. Often conflicts and contradictions in the negotiation of rules, tools, resources and division of labor (participation) mediate failure and low achievement. Raj lost his identity of high-achiever and became a low-achiever because his peers were jealous of his academic achievement and pressured him to act like them. His teachers neither intervened nor helped him to fight against an almost pathological form of peer pressure. As a result Raj could not use the rules, tools and resources of the classroom to maintain his status of high achiever.

Stories of my high-achieving respondents revealed that their school experiences were not very smooth either. They experienced covert and overt prejudice from their peers and teachers. They felt pressured constantly by the high

expectations of their schools and families. They lived with identity insecurity: fearful of losing their identities as high achievers. Although most of my respondents had internalized their parents' and teachers' high expectations, a few complained of high pressure from parents and teachers. However, they have a sense of obligation to their families and expressed that their parents have sacrificed for them and it is their duty to repay them by achieving success in school.

As a result of their academic achievements, my high-achieving respondents earned prestige and teachers' appreciation, and created positive social relationships in school. Their exemplary academic achievements and behavior provided them prized status and privileges in school. However, they dealt silently with contradictions and barriers that arose from their positive stereotyping in order to shield themselves from trouble. They expressed that overt and covert racial and ethnic prejudices were part of immigrant life, and they tried to negotiate these prejudices with silence.

Specialized high school respondents expressed that they liked their high schools because all the students gained entry through a competitive admission exam and there was no partiality in acceptance to these schools. Rehana said, "I am happy to be in this school because I competed with everybody and passed the entrance exam with a high score." My respondents expressed that the meritocratic norms and tracking system were fair because these standards did not differentiate on the basis of race or ethnicity. One of my respondents said that in the classroom situation "teachers can discriminate against you, and you can get a lower score on a test, but on standardized tests nobody could change your score on the basis of personal biases." They realized that their good grades are their assets against racism and prejudice and a key to privileged positions in mainstream society. My high-achiever respondents were aware of their ethnicity and of the racial prejudice that exists in American society. Messages from their families regarding education, ethnicity, and racial prejudice guided them in their educational pursuits.

NOTES

- The concept is described in greater detail below.
1. Human capital is comprised of ones skills, education, job experience, and language knowledge. Portes and Rumbaut (2000) define human capital as "The skills

that immigrants bring along in the form of education, job experience, and language knowledge are referred to as their *human capital* and plays a decisive role in the economic adaptation" (p.46).

2. In the United States the term Magnet School refers to public schools that provide specialized challenging curriculum. Magnet schools are established to focus on gifted, math and science, and other special programs in the area of Arts and humanity. Although magnet schools are created to maintain racial segregation in "better performing schools" these schools require high scores for admission. In general, magnet schools have competitive entrance process, an application process to enter lottery system, and screening system. Research findings demonstrate that achievement score of magnet school students are higher than students of traditional schools.

REFERENCES

- Alarcon, R.: Skilled Immigrants and Cerebreros: Foreign-born Engineers and Scientists in the High-Technology Industry of Silicon Valley. pp.301-321, In: *Immigration Research for a New Century: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Nancy Foner, Ruben G. Rumbaut and Steven J. Gold (Eds.). Russell Sage Foundation, New York (2004).
- Allport, G.: *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Cambridge, MA (1954).
- Asher, N.: *Margins, Center, and the Space in-Between: Indian American High School Students' Lives at Home and School*. Ph. D. Dissertation. Teachers College, Columbia University, New York (1999).
- Barringer, H., Kassenbaum, G.: Asian Indians as A Minority in the United States: The Effect of Education, Occupation and Gender on Income. *Sociological Perspective*, **32(4)**: 501-520 (1989).
- Bourdieu, P.: *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgment of Taste*. Rutledge, New York (1979).
- Cherian, S. and Bodenhausen, V.: When positive stereotypes threaten intellectual performance: The psychological hazards of "Model Minority" status. *American Psychological Society*, **11(5)**: 399-402 (2000).
- The Coalition for Asian American Children and Families: *Hidden in plain view: An Overview of the Needs of Asian American Students in the Public School System*. New York, (2006).
- Cocchira, F.K.: The negative effects of positive stereotype: Ethnicity-related stressor and implications on organizational health. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, **25(6)**: 781-785 (2004).
- Delpit, Lisa.: *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. The New Press, New York (1995).
- Engstrom, Y.: Activity theory and individual and social transformation. *Multidisciplinary Newsletter for Activity Theory*, **7(8)**: 1-45 (1991).
- Gibson, A. M.: *Accommodation Without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in An American High School*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY (1988).
- Goodwin, L.: Growing Up Asian in America. pp. 3-23, In: *Asian American Identities, Families, and Schooling*. C. Park, L. Goodwin and S.J. Lee (Eds.). Information Age Publishing, Greenwich, CT (2003).
- Ho, C.P., Driscoll, D.M., and Loosbrock, D.L.: Great

- expectations: The negative consequences of falling short. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **28**: 1743-1759, (1998).
- Lee, J. S.: *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youths*. Teachers College Press, New York (1996).
- Lee, J. S.: *Up Against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youths*. Teachers College Press, New York (2005).
- Louie, V.: *Compelled to Excel*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA (2004).
- McLaren, P.: Multiculturalism and the post-modern critique: Toward a pedagogy of resistance and transformation. pp.192-222, In: *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*. H. A. Giroux and P. McLaren (Eds.). Routledge, New York (1994).
- MacLeod, J.: *Ain't No Making It: Aspirations and Attainment in A Low-Income Neighborhood*. Westview Press, Bouldre, CO (1995).
- National Science Foundation.: Women, minorities, and persons with disabilities in science and engineering. (Retrieved November 2004) Site closed.
- Ogbu, J. U.: Immigrant and involuntary minorities in comparative perspective. pp. 3-33. In: *Minority Status and schooling: A Comparative Study of Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities*. M. Gibson, and J. U. Ogbu, (Eds.). Garland, New York (1991).
- Olsen, Laurie.: *Made in America: Immigrant Students in Our Public Schools*. The New Press, New York (1997).
- Osajima, K.: Asian American as the model minority: An analysis of the popular press image in the 1960s and 1980s. pp.165-174, In: *Reflection on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects of Asian American Studies*. G.Y.Okihiro, S. Hune, A.A. Hansen and J.M. Liu (Eds.). Pullman, Washington State University Press, WA (1988).
- Portes, A. and Rumbaut, R.G.: *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. University of California Press. California, (2001).
- Roth, W.-M.: Identity as dialectic: Re/Making self in urban schooling. pp. 143-153, In: *The Praeger Handbook of Urban Education*. J.L. Kincheloe, K. Hayes, K. Rose and P.M. Anderson (Eds.). Greenwood Press, Westport, CT (2006).
- Sewell, W.H.: The theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*. **98**: 1-29 (1992).
- Tobin, K.: Becoming an Urban science educator. *Research in Science Education*, **30**: 89-106 (2000).
- Tuan, Mia: *Forever Foreigner or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ (1998).
- United Status Bureau of the Census (2000). Census Information Center. March 2003 (2003).
- Winnick, L.: America's Model Minorities. *Commentary*, **90**: 22-29 (1990).

KEYWORDS Asian Indians. Ethnic Minority. New York. Model Minority Imaging. Education

ABSTRACT This minority-performance dissertation examines the effect of positive stereotyping on patterns of educational achievements and key educational issues of Asian Indian students in New York City schools. Asian Indians migrated from India to the United States in search of a better life. Their economic and professional successes have earned them the status of a "model minority." This positive stereotyping of Indian immigrants, although celebratory, has been instrumental in promoting hegemony, masking their needs and educational issues, promoting rivalry among other ethnic minorities and Indian community, and instigating antagonistic social relationships. Using the cross generational design this study explores the catalytic role of cultural capital, social capital and the achievement ideology of first generation Asian Indians in their children's school performance. Contextualized within the constructivist paradigm and the phenomenological hermeneutic framework, this study examines the enactment of Asian Indian students' agency and cultural capital in earning social capital, educational attainments, and coping with contradictions that appear in goal attainment. Implications of this study will serve schools students, parents and the Indian community by helping them recognize the academic, emotional, and social needs of Indian students

Author's Address: Rupam Saran, Manhattanville College, New York, USA

E-mail: p.saran@verizon.net

© Kamla-Raj 2007
Anthropologist Special Issue No. 2: 67-79 (2007)

*Indian Diaspora-The 21st Century-
 Migration, Change and Adaptation*
 Anand Singh, Guest Editor