

Anatomy of Second Generation “Indian” Cultural Events in the USA

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INTRODUCTION

Each year, in early summer, a university on the East Coast of the United States of America (USA) organizes a *bhangra* competition. Participants come from colleges around the nation having spent several months planning and practicing their performance and costumes. Regional competitions have sprung up as conduits to this event where ‘desi’ (from India) children of post 1965 immigrants from the Indian subcontinent assert their ethnicity. Such dance competitions are not the only enactments of ‘Indian-ness’ on college campuses; fashion shows, Diwali events and parties with Indian DJs are part of this social tapestry that has its roots in India. While many immigrant parents proudly point to such “Indian” events as a sign of a resurgent Indian culture among their children, any examination of the structural dimensions of such cultural events militate against such simple conclusions. A complex, intersecting series of factors that include the growth of post-industrial capitalistic economies where selling cultures fuels the economy, multicultural politics that appear to open up spaces for minorities to practice their cultures, and the efforts of diasporic groups to create pan ethnic cultures, contribute to a particular form of performance and consumption dominated ethnicity. This essay, which draws on the experiences of college students of Indian origin in the US, explores the facets of such contemporary ethnicity.¹

Discussions of ethnicity cannot be separated from discussion of culture, or to be more exact, aspects of culture that are marked as differences between the dominant group and ethnic groups. The conceptual frameworks such as assimilation (e.g. Gordon, 1964), symbolic ethnicity (e.g. Waters, 1990), and diaspora studies (Vertovec, 1999) are examinations of this relationship, though their focus and explanatory emphases vary significantly. The notions of culture as a set of practices which change after contact with a more modern group (the assimilation view), or culture as a series of voluntary, episodic assertions based

on convenience (the symbolic ethnicity view), or culture as a set of deeply held world views and practices that are used to resist total assimilation (the diasporic view) offer different perspectives, but they all emphasize ethnicity as an outcome of what groups do. A different set of literature examines why ethnic groups emphasize, recreate, change, or hold onto certain aspects of culture by examining the social conditions set by the dominant group and its effects on minority groups. For instance, Marxist theorists have pointed to inequalities created by capitalist economic systems (Wallerstein, 1984) and racism scholars (Kibria, 2004; Glenn, 2004) to the continuing significance of race and racism, indeed gendered forms of racism, as key explanations for ethnicity. This discussion draws on an understanding of the structures of opportunity and restrictions, as well as group efforts to negotiate the systems, through this analysis of what is being presented as “Indian culture” in contemporary America.

SHAPING OF THE STAGE

The road to the performance-based enactment of ethnicity in colleges has been shaped by shifts in the politics, social relations and economy of the US since the 1960s. The post Civil Rights years were marked by a scrutiny of overt race based laws in the UK. One area, where existing laws were altered was the structure of immigration laws. Asians, including Indians, had been formally banned from the US in the early 20th century. Although about a hundred Indians were allowed to come to the US from the 1950s, it was the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965 that allowed more Indians to migrate to the USA. While a proportion of the Indians who arrived actually moved from the UK (and later, the twice migrants from countries in Africa), the overwhelming majority arrived from the Indian subcontinent. The new laws, despite the dismantling of the overt racist clauses, did not allow unrestricted migration. Only the highly educated-understood primarily as those with skills in science,

engineering, medicine, and related arenas—that were needed in the US labor market were allowed to enter. In the 1960s and 1970s, this generated a stream of male migration (given the pattern of sex based concentration in these particular fields) while highly educated wives arrived as ‘dependents’ (Purkayastha, 2005b). The education profile of this group far exceeded the profile of whites (Barringer et al., 1995).

The arrival of these highly educated Indians in the US coincided with the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement when educational, occupational and residential barriers were being dismantled or lowered. While native minorities were battling their way through a variety of barriers, Indian immigrants, although they also faced significant glass ceilings and other forms of racism, were able to access white-collar professional jobs and settle down in mostly white suburbs. Their children, native born or naturalized Americans, consequently grew up as “the minority” in these locations. This group, the subject of this chapter, will be referred to, broadly, as the second generation.²

The post 1960s period is marked by two other shifts that have been important in structuring the experiences of the second generation. The experiments and discussions of how to make US a more inclusive society has, as in some other Euro-American countries, created a structure of multi-culturalism. In an attempt to get away from the phenotype-as-behavior-and-character-template argument that was the staple of racialization earlier, multiculturalism emphasizes that differences between groups are mostly differences of culture. Consequently the route to social equality is seen as ensuring *all cultures* have the freedom to express themselves. While the essentialist assumptions that are embedded in multicultural policies have led to another form of racialization, a hierarchy of those who ‘have culture’ and therefore need special accommodation vs. those who are “American” it is important to note that multiculturalism has also opened up some legitimate space for expressing cultures. The college-based events are part of this trend. Any student group, typically a group of eight, can seek college-based funds (along with outside funding) to engage in cultural activities. Such cultural activities would have been unthinkable prior to the 1960s when repressing cultures was the official policy of a great deal of government and missionary effort dedicated to the idea of a

melting pot. (Accounts of Christianizing the Native Americans, or the diatribes against the alien religions and cultures of ‘Orientals’, ‘hindoos,’ and “Mexicans” are now well documented).

The second half of the 20th century has also been marked by the development of a post-industrial knowledge based economy in the US and in different parts of the world. A part of this economy is focused on ‘selling cultures.’ This concept, described cogently by Sharon Zukin (1995), refers to creation of a new range of products that are sold because of their association with culture. Thus, creams are sold because of their association with indigenous customs of harvesting a certain kind of corn, or jewelry because they are made by a particular group in the Pacific Islands, or fabrics that have been dyed by an ‘age-old’ technique known to women in a particular country; everything from what we eat, read, listen to, decorate ourselves and our surroundings with is imbued with culture. The cost of the product is based on the cultural association rather than the costs of production. Marketing, an integral part of the knowledge based economy, has transformed ideas of accepting cultures to ideas about showing cultural openness through consumption. Eating “authentic” Mexican food for instance, signals ones openness to ‘cultures.’ Two related processes have created this transformation: the sheer volume of ‘cultural items’ for sale has heralded a transformation of what the average person knows about ‘other cultures.’ Relatedly, the dissemination of this knowledge is accompanied by the vigorous efforts to create new markets. Segments of consumers are targeted to create particular kinds of desires so that they grow into expressing aspects of their identity through their consumption (Bourdieu, 1984; Halter, 2000; Lury, 1996). Middle class and affluent consumers are the ideal targets, although the marketing filters down, in modified forms, to the less affluent.

The nexus of efforts to create segmented markets and the trend in developing ‘cultural’ items has led to a significant popularity of ethnic products. For instance, ethnic literature commands large market segments, as do ethnic music and fashions. Yet the popularity of these consumption items does not herald a deep transformation of society. Ethnic books in the US are a good example. Many of the books that Somdatta Mondal describes in her chapter in this issue, especially her argument about the symbolic

use of Kolkata in many books, reflects the underlying structural conditions in the US. These books have to reflect what publishers feel is most easily marketed in the US - making of consumers and marketing to them requires the use of cultural symbols without concomitant immersion in cultural practices. While there are vast differences in quality and literary standard in the books on 'Indians' that are published in the US, these books serve to erase the boundary of "Indians" and "Indian American", i.e. the dynamic historical, political, social, economic circumstances that are reflected in literatures, thereby sustaining the multiculturalist notion of essential, unchanging cultures of "other" groups. Selling of cultures promotes the illusion that being in touch with one segment of culture (through reading, watching performances, buying items etc.) provides a deep insight into the whole culture. Thus an economy of selling cultures promotes a sense of greater inclusiveness, irrespective of what happens on the ground.

ANATOMY OF COLLEGE BASED CULTURAL EVENTS

"ON a Saturday night this month at Constitution Hall, young women in long braids and shimmering, sequined outfits sashayed onto stage, carrying water jugs and swinging their hips to Punjabi folk songs. Young men with sky-high turbans, some with two-headed drums, whirled, leaping and heaving their shoulders in rhythm, their arms raised to the roof. Every now and then, dancers clasped their legs around a partner's torso and spun at breakneck speed. At other times, they built human pyramids atop one another's shoulders. Welcome to Bhangra Blowout, an intercollegiate dance competition in which teams from a dozen schools perform their renditions of traditional Punjabi dance in a bid for a \$1,000 prize. At the sold-out show, students from universities like Duke, Johns Hopkins and Massachusetts Institute of Technology filled the 3,700-seat auditorium. They came to cheer their teams and to party all weekend amid the roots-seeking crowd" (Sengupta, 1999).

The children of the highly educated Indian-origin immigrants began to arrive in college in large numbers from the late 1980s. The relative concentration of this population in the better known colleges created a new demographic

dynamic that was a new experience for most of the second generation. Growing up in mostly white suburbs meant that the "Indian" cultural spaces they were most familiar with were those based on their parents' regional culture-based social networks (cycles of invitations and visits on weekends in peoples houses), classes teaching 'Indian' culture, and religious spaces³. Colleges often represent the first time when many of this second generation encountered a sufficient number of students of Indian origin in American public spaces. The second generation discovered that while they had little to share through common languages or specific types of religious practice (two aspects of culture that are expressions of deep ties), they often shared a number of other similarities arising from their structural position as female or male Americans of Indian origin. Three of these similarities are especially relevant to this discussion. The first similarity is their overt and subtle racialization, especially the experience of being treated as native informants for all things Indian, including informants for over-generalized stereotypes about Indian women such as female feticide and burning of brides. Consequently, their peers and teachers, who often assumed cultural traits are inherent in individuals, assumed it was typical for these "Indian" females to be subordinated while males were invariably sexist and non progressive in their worldviews. Second, many of the stereotypes appear true to South Asian Americans who have grown up in households where immigrant parents attempt to enforce gendered restrictions such as prohibiting females from sleep-overs and dating, while following a don't-ask-don't-tell policy of freedoms for their male children, rationalizing these as "Indian cultural norms." Thus many of the second generation come to share a belief that "traditional" (i.e. hierarchically gendered) Indian culture impinges on their ability to be "modern" Americans. Third, the college group also shares the structural experience of being outsiders in India. Visits to extended families in India often make it apparent these young people are not automatically "Indian" as their nuclear families has socialized them to believe, except in matters of phenotype. In fact, the extended family members often emphasized their American-ness. Their deportment mark them as NRIs (Non Resident Indians) in public places, and their travels to different parts of multi-lingual India demonstrates the limits of their family based ideas

of 'Indian-ness.' These three strands of cumulative experiences position them in a liminal space from which they attempt to create an Indian culture for themselves.

The emphasis on multiculturalism in contemporary America means colleges in the US offer a great deal of freedom for groups to try-out and organize aspects of their interests and identities. For the Indian-origin students forming Indian Student Associations (or their variants Desi Student Associations or South Asian Student Associations) it is a logical step to get funding to do their "own" thing⁴. While the mainstream assumes these associations are 'natural' expressions of Indian culture, the groups have a far more difficult task to define the contours of Indian-ness. For instance, the students have to negotiate exactly what can be expressed in a public space. The transformation of Diwali offers a glimpse into the embedded restrictions students encounter. Diwali, one of the very few festivals which is celebrated by a large number of Indians, cannot be celebrated in culturally authentic ways, i.e. with firecrackers or candle-light decorations. Strict fire codes - the same rules that prohibit the burning of incense or candles in dorm rooms throughout the year - preclude any attempt to recreate this cultural event in an authentic way. Instead, what the students can do is to meet, dress up in "Indian" clothes, put on Indian performances, and celebrate with other Indians in a hall they reserve on campus. Thus Diwali gets transformed to a food, fashions, and performance-based event.

The Indian-ness that is enacted in events such as Diwali is also an outcome of how groups negotiate the ideas and expectations of their members, their parents and the colleges. Donning Indian clothes for Indian events is one of the easiest ways to express Indian-ness in a way that is less fraught with controversies. Most students turn to the latest "Indian" fashions - stitched clothing for females and males - that is advertised through various media, rather than clothes that reflect any specific regional Indian cultures. Wearing Indian clothes not only signals their difference from their peers on these event days, the current popularity of Indian motifs in the mainstream means the second generation can use these fashions to claim their cultural space in assertive and affirmative ways. Wearing Indian clothes for special occasions also provides an easy way of conforming to many immigrant

parents' hopes that their children will retain ties to Indian culture. Certainly the affluent sections of similar age groups in India are also ensconced in similar fashion statements. And affluent immigrant parents are frequently very happy to pay high prices for designer Indian clothes to enable their children to "do" Indian culture. Colleges are happy to support these events which foster time-delimited expressions of ethnicity, and appearance of a climate of greater social inclusion based on multiculturalism.

However there is another side of this emphasis on fashions that is less discussed in the scholarly literature. The choice of fashions also reflects the growing importance of industries that sell culture. The taste-makers for these clothes are the design houses with global reach such as Ritu Kumar or Khubsoorat, fashion magazines that feature Indian designers, and, most of all, Bollywood. The blurring of boundaries of the film industry with the fashion industry is most apparent through the annual extravaganza's fashion-entertainments organized in places like the Trump Casino featuring Bollywood stars. "Indian" fashion designers are not located in India alone, UK and US has their share of local designers all of whom successfully market the Indian-ness of their clothing. The showcasing of these products is often the work of Bollywood stars, and their role often emphasizes the Indian (as opposed to regional culture) character of the fashions. Thus the nexus of a particular kind of multiculturalism and the growing culture industry is reflected in the public expressions of the second generation.

Indian events present other issues that also have to be negotiated. Organizers have to compromise between what is "cultural," what is fun, and what individuals of diverse religious and linguistic family origins can participate in. The result of balancing these multiple needs is reflected in the wide use of bhangra, remixed music, and Bollywood numbers as "the" Indian music of choice in college events. Developed initially in England, the bhangra genre of music and dance has become widely popular in the US (e.g. Sharma et al., 1996; Sontag, 2005). Since the second generation do not all understand a common language, (not all understand Hindi), the challenge for the college groups is to find the kind of music where the lyrics become immaterial, but the beat remains appealing. Both bhangra and Bollywood music fit these requirements. Not

surprisingly, these genres get represented widely as "the Indian" music among the second generation. Equally important, this music can be recreated as fusion bhangra hip-hop providing a bridge between 'ethnic' and 'mainstream.'

This music, much like the fashions identified as "Indian," are marketed to target segments through emails, Indian-gathering websites, and select Indian stores. Once again Bollywood often features in the creation of the taste for this diasporic genre of music. Although Bollywood has been criticized by many scholars as featuring ahistorical, locale-transcending storylines, characters and music, for the diasporic post immigrant generation, such "Indian" themes offer a way to show their parents the continuing attraction for things Indian (Mukhi, 2000). And, like the fashions, such performative aspects of doing culture help them stay within the restrictions of multicultural America. In an ironic move from the transmission of culture from the second to the first generation, schools are springing up in major metropolitan areas where some first generation women have begun to teach the younger second generation Bollywood dancing.

Overall such performance driven enactments of ethnicity represent attempts by the post immigrant generation to balance the constraints and expectations that are salient to their social locations. The "typical Indian" event described here represents their attempt to find the balance between parental expectations, their own wish to assert a cultural nationalism that is affirmative and which exhibits their "modern" ways (i.e. dances, parties) to showcase for the mainstream, address racialization, and their conformity to the restrictions on the kinds of multiculturalism that can be enacted in the US (see also Bacchu, 1996). By focusing on events and performances, they are able to introduce a modicum of choice in when and how (and if at all) they wish to be publicly ethnic.

COLLEGE EVENTS AS A WINDOW TO POST-IMMIGRANT GENERATION INDIANS IN THE US DIASPORA

Discussions of diasporas often start with the assumption of groups that are committed to some 'deep' aspects of their culture. Yet studies of post immigrant generations in contemporary globalized diasporas indicate that we have to pay heed to the material and political relations that shape

diasporas and diasporic groups and track how weaker ties, through consumption, are shaping diasporic cultures. Despite the significant achievements in the US in breaking down a range of overt race-based barriers, the discussion here indicates more subtle, yet persistent barriers that the post immigrant generation has to navigate. These restrictions shape the choices the second generation can make. Intersecting with the socio-political restrictions is the rising preeminence of culture industries as the makers of culture; the shift to a consumption based emphasis on doing culture means that the diasporic groups no longer need to look further than the definitions and artifacts marketed by multinationals. While there have always been commercial aspects of doing culture, the rise of the culture industries are a new form of co-opting who owns and defines "cultures," and the items that can be marketed.

Even though Indian-origin college students see their events as a progressive form of doing culture, it is important to note the in-group hierarchies arising from this popular form of doing Indian culture. The emphasis on fashions marginalizes two groups: those second generation individuals who prefer not to conform to such consumption based enactment of ethnicity, and those who may be unable to conform to this form because they cannot afford it. The first group consists of those who are less enchanted with this form of Indian-ness either because they are deeply embedded in their regional cultural roots, or because they are disenchanted with the gendered and/or sexually explicit content of the music and dance genres, or because they are disenchanted with the consumption driven ways of enacting ethnicity. The second group consists of the children of the less affluent immigrants who do not have the money or resources to display and do ethnicity in these specific affluence-driven ways. In addition, the popular forms of music and dancing sustain ideologies of how Indian culture is understood. Much of the lyrics and moves of the dance sequences (especially the Bollywood musical extravaganzas) are gendered. Many second generation are quite willing to believe these are an accurate representation of "Indian" gender distinctions because they have internalized the stereotypical imagery about Indian women fostered by the Western mainstream media as well as the gender distinctions enforced by a section of the immigrant parents. Since they are rarely knowledgeable

about the varieties of women and men's experiences in India or the histories of women's movements, these second generation groups, by choosing the most gendered forms of cultural performances, contribute to sustaining the Westernized stereotypes about "Indian" gender hierarchies. Others, who do not understand the languages and are quite unaware of the meanings of the more raunchy lyrics of some of this Indian music, are content to think of the lyrics and music as simply background sounds—i.e. the lyrics have no relevance—because the ability of such dance and music to promote homogenized Indian-ness - an Indian-ness that is easily *possible*. When (and if) they learn about the lyrics and the histories of this music, they argue that as progressive Americans they are able to get beyond the Indianized gendered content. This feeling of being able to get beyond the gendered content is shared by those who understand the lyrics. By structuring their relationship to the music in this way, i.e., by thinking of the music as sounds and rhythms shorn of material, local cultural, and historical roots, both groups end up sustaining the racialized hierarchy which drives ideologies of clashing civilizations: the idea of progressive American cultures vs. traditional Indian cultures.

While the discussion here focused on the 'generic' Indian event, it is important to point out that there are other forms of "cultural" assertions present in the US diaspora. Other post-immigrant generation members are creating new networks that are beginning to challenge the structural forms of restrictions they face (e.g. Gandhi, 2001). Rejecting the consumption and Bollywood based versions of Indian-ness, these other groups are rereading social justice movements from all over the world to craft their form of "Indian" activism. These other groups are more apt to challenge contemporary forms of racialization that restricts the cultural expressions of Indians and other groups, create awareness of the rapid co-optation and patenting of cultural forms by groups in Western countries depriving groups in India of the profits from the new markets, and, most of all, the ideological structures that consistently relegate Indian forms to the realm of non-progressive tradition.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this essay offers a glimpse of the

opportunities and continuing restrictions on 'doing culture' in a more globalized world. On the one hand, the continuing racialization of groups through Westernized ideologies of clashing civilizations, interactions, and institutional arrangements continue to restrict which kind of Indian-ness can be practiced. On the other hand, since Western countries remain core powers in defining the shapes of multiple worlds, the diasporic groups in these locales, are poised by virtue of their location, to "offer alternatives" to other cultural forms and practices that reflect the material, historical, and social reality of Indians on the subcontinent. Multinational firms court these groups, colleges encourage them, and they have greater access to the resources (through their parents) to promote certain kinds of "Indian-ness." Their better access to financing and technology means their versions are quickly described and distributed over the web, their voices reach more dispersed audiences, and they become strong contenders for defining "Indian culture" for "the world." Whether they will be able to influence larger sections on the subcontinent may be dependent on what else happens in Western diasporas and the subcontinent. If progressive, activist groups in diasporas, the ones I have not described in this essay, are successful in changing the consumption-and-performance type enactment of Indian-culture, or if diaspora and subcontinental groups are able to forge global alliances to challenge the capitalistic and racial structures that are shaping very specific ways of doing cultures, then the form of culture described here may become less important in future.

NOTES

- 1 The insights of this essay are drawn from my earlier work on the children of Bangladeshi, Indian, Nepali and Pakistani origin highly educated middle class immigrants in the US. That larger detailed work has been published by Rutgers University Press in the form of a research monograph: *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World*.
- 2 This chapter is focussed on the experiences of the second generation that grew up in the mostly white suburbs. Since the original sample was stratified by class, the dimensions discussed here may not be true of all Indians or other South Asians. Nonetheless, the average demographic profile of Indians alone still reveals their middle class character (Narayan, 2004). The insights presented here are applicable to the second generation, with the caveat that there are likely to be variations based on class position.
- 3 Hindu and Sikh Indians were more likely to encounter such nation based spaces, since Muslim Indians and

Christian Indians either had to set up separate mosques or churches, or join in with other groups for their regular worship.

- 4 More often the new groups are labeling themselves as desi groups or South Asian groups to create a larger constituency and include students of Pakistani, Nepali and Bangladeshi origin. There are also attempts to work with and through pan ethnic Asian American organizations. However, as I have discussed elsewhere, such processes are full of conflicts and contradiction (Purkayastha, 2005).

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses how second generation students of Indian descent negotiate their ethnic identities in colleges. Their experiences are the outcome of a series of underlying structural processes. The arrival of highly educated Indians to the US from 1965 and their subsequent settlement in mostly-white, middle class to affluent suburbs, the growing openness toward a performance and consumption based multiculturalism in post Civil Rights American society, as well as the growth of a post industrial economy with its emphasis on the sale of lifestyle and culturally marked products are important influences on what these mostly middle-class young people negotiate as their cultural repertoire. The chapter describes the compromises, ambiguities and challenges that are characteristic of the ethnicity that these middle-class Indian-origin students construct and negotiate as they balance their own inclinations, parental hopes

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Indian Diaspora-The 21st Century-Migration, Change and Adaptation
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