9/11 and the Indian Diaspora: Narratives of Race, Place and Immigrant Identity
Sunil Bhatia

In this paper, I use narratives from the Indian diaspora to provide a counterargument to models of acculturation that claim that all immigrants undergo a universal psychological process of acculturation and adaptation. More specifically, I show how members from the Indian diaspora re-examined their ethnic and racial identity after the events of 9/11. Given the conceptual nature of this paper, my goal is to present an argument, supported by select autobiographical accounts and cases, to explain why the universal model of acculturation should be re-examined within the context of postcolonial, diaspora cultures. First, I undertake a brief review of the concept of acculturation in cross-cultural psychology. Next, I examine three autobiographical narratives of first-generation Indians living in south-eastern Connecticut in the USA to demonstrate how their discourses about 9/11 contests universal models of assimilation. Finally, I conclude with implications for understanding the construction of racialised identities within diaspora communities.

Keywords: 9/11; Assimilation; Identity; Immigrant; Indian Diaspora; Race

Universal Models of Acculturation in Psychology

Traditionally, much of mainstream psychology has been occupied with developing universal, linear models and theories of immigrant identity, acculturation and adaptation. For instance, cross-cultural psychologists have studied topics such as...
acculturation and acculturative stress (Berry “Acculturative Stress”), socialisation and enculturation (Camilleri and Malewska-Peyre), and bicultural identity (LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton). Prominent in acculturation research is the model of acculturation strategies proposed by Berry and his colleagues (see “Acculturation as Varieties”; “Psychological Adaptation”; “Cultural Variations”; “Immigration, Acculturation”; Berry and Sam; Berry et al. “Comparative Studies”; “Acculturation Attitudes”). Their prolific output and the fact that several major introductory books on psychology (for example, see Halonen and Santrock; Tavris and Wade; Westen) cite them extensively, indicate that their model of acculturation strategies is one of the most influential on the subject of acculturation as developed in cross-cultural psychology.

Acculturation strategies refer to the plan or the method that individuals use in responding to stress-inducing new cultural contexts. A fourfold classification is proposed which includes “assimilation”, “integration”, “separation” and “marginalisation”. Berry and his colleagues suggest that assimilation strategy occurs when the individual decides not to maintain his or her cultural identity by seeking contact in his/her daily interaction with the dominant group. When the individuals from the non-dominant group “place a value on holding on to their original culture” (Berry and Sam 297), and seek no contact with the dominant group then these individuals are pursuing a separation strategy. When individuals express an interest in maintaining strong ties in their everyday life both with their ethnic group as well as with the dominant group, the integration strategy is defined. The fourth strategy is marginalisation, in which individuals “lose cultural and psychological contact with both their traditional culture and the larger society” (Berry “Acculturative Stress” 119). The optimal acculturation strategy for immigrants is integration that “appears to be a consistent predictor of more positive outcomes than the three alternatives” (Berry and Sam 318). Integration implies both the preservation of the home culture and an active involvement with the host culture. Central to the theory of integration strategy is the assumption of universality. Berry and his colleagues take up the position that although there are “substantial variations in the life circumstances of the cultural groups that experience acculturation, the psychological processes that operate during acculturation are essentially same for all the groups; that is we adopt a universalist perspective on acculturation” (Berry and Sam 296). In other words, immigrants’ acculturation strategies reveal the underlying psychological processes that unfold during their adaptation to new cultural contexts. Such a position has dominated current research on acculturation and also provided an important theoretical basis for much research carried under the larger rubric of cross-cultural psychology (Segall, Lonner and Berry). Drawing and developing upon previous research, Berry and his colleagues maintain that other psychological processes such as “behavioural shifts”, “culture shedding”, “culture shock” and “acculturative stress” are also experienced in varying degrees by an individual undergoing acculturation (“Acculturative Stress”; Berry and Sam). So what are these universal psychological processes? What does it mean to say that all groups manifest the same kind of
“psychological” thinking during the acculturation process? What is the basis for analytically separating the psychological from the cultural? Are the “psychological processes” similar for individuals who migrate to the USA from Western European countries such as England and Germany, as opposed to, say, individuals who migrate from previously colonised countries such as India and Kenya?

**Diaspora Theory and Culture**

I use narratives from the Indian diaspora to reconsider the theoretical assumptions embedded in the universalistic model of acculturation. Diasporas distinctly attempt to maintain (real and/or imagined) connections and commitments to their homeland and recognise themselves and act as a collective community. In other words, people who simply live outside their ancestral homeland cannot automatically be considered diasporas (Tolólyan). Examples of diasporic immigrants in the USA are Armenian-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Asian-Indians, Latino/a and Chicano/a communities and so on. These non-European/non-white diasporic communities bring into sharp relief the sense of constantly negotiating between here and there, past and present, homeland and hostland, self and other. Such negotiations have not been adequately recognised or understood in many of the acculturation models and the existing literature on immigrant experiences in the field of psychology.

In contrast to this traditional view of acculturation, Hermans and Kempen have made a call for alternative ways of thinking about immigrant identity in the field of psychology. They argue that in a period of increasing globalisation, the rapid creation of multinationals, the formation of diasporic communities, massive flows of transmigration and border crossings, acculturation becomes increasingly complicated. Rather than thinking of immigrants as moving in a linear trajectory from culture A to culture B, Hermans and Kempen suggest that we should think of acculturation and identity issues as contested, mixing and moving. Research on diaspora cultures undertaken under the larger rubric of postcolonial studies have emphasised this mixing and moving ongoing process through which many non-Western/European immigrants reconstitute and negotiate their identity (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin). Postcolonial scholarship has had a significant impact on migration research conducted both in the humanities and social studies. Diaspora studies, in general, have shown how various “Third World” immigrants construct their cultural identities as citizens of “First World” countries (e.g. USA or Europe) while simultaneously retaining strong affiliations, identifications and loyalties to the culture of their home country (Bhabha). However, psychology as a discipline has only recently started paying attention to the advancements in postcolonial and diaspora studies (for an exception, see Hermans and Kempen). Thus, diaspora studies with its emphasis on understanding the construction of self and identity in terms of colonial histories and present day transnational migration and formations of diaspora, has relevance for understanding issues related to acculturation and immigrant identities in the field of psychology (Bhatia and Ram “Rethinking ‘Acculturation’”).
There are approximately 1.7 million Indians who live in various diasporic communities across the USA. According to the 2000 US census, the Indian-American community is one of the fastest growing immigrant communities in the USA. From 1990 to 2000, there was a 106 per cent increase in the growth rate of Indian-Americans, compared to the average 7 per cent growth rate in the general population. This shift marks the largest growth in the Asian-American community. Questions about the construction of 'Indian identity' in the Indian diaspora are inevitably tied to questions about how India is incorporated in the imagination of the diasporic community. Diverse notions of “Indianness” are imagined and stitched together in the migrant community. These multiple and shifting notions of “India” and “Indianness” are shaped by the migrant’s class positions back home, nostalgia, memory, emotion and a longing for the original desi nation and culture of the homeland.2

By all accounts, the immigration reform of 1965 is considered as being most significant and profoundly influential for the history of Indian immigration. The 1965 Immigrant Act fundamentally changed the background of Indian migrants in the USA. Within a very short span of time, the Indian migrants in the USA made the transition from being “pariahs to elite” (Rangaswamy 40). Unlike the first wave of the Punjabi Sikh diaspora, the second wave of Indian migrants is highly skilled professionals. They are trained as medical doctors, engineers, scientists, university professors, doctoral and postdoctoral students in mostly science-related disciplines, such as chemistry, biochemistry, math, physics, biology and medicine. Prashad writes that between 1966 and 1977, 83 per cent of Indians who migrated to the USA were highly skilled professionals and comprised about “20,000 scientists with PhDs, 40,000 engineers, and 25,000 doctors” (75). These professional Indians have made their “home” in suburban diasporas in towns and cities all across America.

One such Indian diaspora resides in the suburbs of south-eastern Connecticut and is the subject of this ethnographic study (Bhatia American Karma). With the passing of the immigration and nationality act in 1965, the class and socio-economic backgrounds of the second wave of Indian migrant changed significantly. The post-1965 Indian migrants who participated in my study come from middle-class families who use their economic success and wealth to skip the hardships that are often associated with low-skilled, migrant labour. Their membership in competitive, exclusive professions such as medicine and engineering has put them in the company of some of the most elite members of society. Their economic success, educational accomplishments and membership in professional societies have propelled them straight into the middle-class suburbs of Connecticut.

The interviews that are analysed here are part of a larger study that looks at how the first-generation Indian diaspora respond to varying levels of racism and discrimination that they experience in their communities and workplaces (Bhatia American Karma). For this paper, I use a small subset of interviews that are drawn from a larger ethnographic data-set. The interviews used here specifically show how the events of 9/11 made many Indians rethink their assimilation process and their
place in the American culture. I conducted fieldwork in this Indian diaspora for 16 months between February 2000 and June 2001. From August 2001 to January 2002, I conducted in-depth interviews with 38 first-generation Indian migrants. Most of my participants worked for the local ABC computer company and lived in the mostly white suburbs of East Lyme and Old Lyme, Connecticut. Since the 1960s, these migrants have lived in small cities and suburbs of southern Connecticut, such as Groton, Ledyard, East Lyme, Norwich, Noank, New London, Old Lyme and Waterford.

9/11 and Narratives of Race, Place and Immigrant Identity

Most of my interviews for this qualitative study were conducted in the immediate aftermath of the events of 9/11. I asked all my participants to define “Indianness” or what it means to be an Indian in the USA. Several participants talked about their Indianness within the context of the events of 9/11 and used this particular event to reconstruct and re-examine their cultural and racial identity.

My first interview occurred about three weeks after 9/11 with Raju, a 43-year-old biology professor. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, a Sikh man was killed in Arizona because he was mistakenly identified as an Arab. Another Sikh man travelling on a commuter train in New England was handcuffed and interrogated by the police because he was suspected of being a terrorist. In the wake of numerous attacks on Sikh families, many Sikh religious groups in New York and around the USA waged an expensive public relations campaign to educate the public about how Sikhism is different to Islam. Many Sikh leaders made attempts to emphasise that Sikhism is a peaceful religion that was founded in opposition to Islam. This public relations campaign also focused on the symbolic significance of the turban in Sikhism and other religions. The reputed weekly magazine, Newsweek, also carried a news item entitled “Turban 101” to distinguish the various kinds of turbans that are worn by religious groups across Asia. Raju was aware of all the recent attacks on several Sikh people:

R: It’s a concern; it’s a concern that you know, we will be stereotyped. Uh, I would be stereotyped as an Arab, but um, you know, I’m kind of prepared for that, and I always place mirrors in my mind if someone were to come and tell me certain things, how I would react. The preparation is always to be, first to be very, very calm and not [...] and to really try to – so what I’ve done actually, I just realized – um is, I try to make that extra effort to connect with people. Give everyone and myself a sense that this is, you know all, we’re all one, that what you feel is very similar to what I feel regardless of what I look like.

I: And in terms of how it plays out?

R: [...] At the same time I will tell you one thing, I would not hesitate if I find that my life was in danger for any reason, I would not hesitate to (cut my hair), because of, you know because of having – I believe responsibility and making sure that I, you know, (my children)

I: But you would, there would be a sense of loss if you had to do that?
During this interview, Raju acknowledged that if his life were in "danger" because of 9/11, he would cut his hair and not wear the *pagadi* (turban). His decision to not wear his *pagadi* would be primarily influenced by the fact that he has family responsibilities. Raju believed that he was a citizen of the world and was well integrated into American society, but after 9/11, he was forced to reconcile two conflicting views. On the one hand, Raju believed that he was assimilated in American society and, on the other hand, 9/11 had recast Raju's cultural identity as suspicious and dangerous by the media and the larger public. Raju was raised in Britain and Canada and had considered himself as well adjusted within the mainstream American culture. He played squash with his American friends and had never doubted his place in American society. After the events of 9/11, media outlets, magazines and newspapers had repeatedly splashed pictures of Osama bin-Laden with his beard and turban. Raju was afraid that his beard and *pagadi* would become the object of scrutiny from his friends and neighbours – especially from strangers in public places. Immediately after the events of 9/11, he was cautious about not being seen in public places such as the grocery store or the mall.

My interviews with Neelam and her husband, Ranjit, echoed many views articulated by Raju. She observed, “But if this incident, which happened recently, is any indication, a lot of people in our neighbourhood didn’t even realise that we are any different.” The interesting part of this narrative is that their sense of difference suddenly emerged after 9/11, when Ranjit told his neighbour that they were being cautious about going out in public places. Neelam recalled:

N: And when Ranjit told them “we are being careful not to go to other places, just to be on the safe side”, they all were very embarrassed because they all, said, “oh, we never thought that you could be considered …” And then they looked at him. “Yes, you could be, couldn’t you? (Laughing).” So, that was in fact, that was a very hard […] to us, because it did not, so many of them, they all kept, came and said, “we are so sorry, but we just, it never occurred to us”.

I: That’s right.

N: And that was, I think probably to me, that was much more of an acceptance …

I: Um hmm, uh hmm

N: You know, we know, you are not terrorists (laughing).

The most important part of the conversation occurs when the neighbours look at Neelam and Ranjit and say, “Yes, you *could* be, couldn’t you?” The question is what did the neighbours mean when they said, “Yes, you could be, couldn’t you?” What do Neelam and Ranjit represent in this context? It suddenly dawns on their neighbours that both Neelam and Ranjit could possibly be mistaken for being Arabs and that mistaken association could invite harm to them. The neighbours apologised to Ranjit and Neelam because they did not go out in public because of the possible threat of being identified as a terrorist. Why did the neighbours apologise? On whose behalf were they apologising? Ranjit and Neelam’s cultural identity suddenly moves in the zone of being different even though they were always “different”. What is this new
sense of difference that emerges from their “old” sense of being different? How is it that prior to 9/11, Ranjit and Neelam’s “Indianness” was not considered as being foreign by their neighbours? Why did Ranjit and Neelam’s neighbours apologise to them and then assure them that, “you know, we know, that you are not terrorists”.

The answers to these questions can be found in the next excerpt of the interview.

R: And I would say for the first time since I joined, came to this country, 16 years, not even during the Gulf War, after these attacks was the first time that I felt I was not white. For the first time. And it’s a very bad feeling.
I: Why did you feel bad?
R: You know it’s hard to explain, I honestly don’t know. It’s not that anybody even noticed. And in fact people are surprised I even told them, so it’s really more of a fear inside me than anything else. And it’s not even a fear, it’s just that I felt different, a discomfort. And I felt if I go to the candlelight vigils and things which I felt very strongly for that people will look at me and I didn’t go. So for the first time . . .
I: Now that’s interesting because you so identify with this unity but . . .
R: For the first time EVER that came to me, and it wasn’t because anybody said anything or looked anything or did anything. I felt I was different for the first time, it’s a very bad feeling. Yes it is, it’s a very bad feeling.
A: Did you feel like that sense of belongingness was shaken?
I: It was definitely shaken, and hopefully not shattered but definitely shaken. And it’s nothing we did . . .

In this excerpt, Ranjit makes it clear that during his 16 years in the USA, he had always considered himself as white. Now, in the light of the events of 9/11, his racial self-identification as a “white American” was under interrogation. He was interested in participating in the 9/11 candlelight vigils that were being held in his suburban town, but he could not go to these vigils because he feared that people might “look at him” differently. Ranjit assumed that his neighbours would consider him as a non-white person, a foreigner, an Arab, a Muslim or someone who might be a terrorist. He was afraid that his identity as a non-white person would suddenly become more visible and that would shatter his sense of belonging in his community.

The events of 9/11 had played an important role in several other members of my study on the Indian diaspora. Priya, a 46-year-old woman, is an infectious disease specialist at a local university. During my interview, I asked Priya to recall one moment that made her feel different in the past 20 years of her life in the USA. Priya replied:

[. . .] You know and some of these were subtle and some of these were not subtle, but the most scary thing that comes mind happened very recently actually after 9/11 – umm I think it was the beginning of October and I had gone to drop my son who’s at B.C. to the railway station . . . You know, he’s going to Boston by Amtrak. And, umm, you know he’s got long hair that he ties at the back a little bit of a beard and stuff – and suddenly I saw and we were waiting – his train was a little late and I saw two “American young men” who were about the same age as my son – he was sort of standing with his back towards him and I was facing these kids – or young
men – and you know one of these young folks was draped in the American flag or so it seemed to me and, you know, sort of very nationalist in attitude. And, you know, the whole fervor was against anybody who looked different – was sort of at a peak. And I just remember being very uncomfortable and I stared right back at those kids because I – these are kind of kids my sons had played with – gee! They come to my house – they play hockey, you know, and in a way I – I knew who these boys were, but for that one moment I felt very different.

This excerpt reveals how 9/11 produced “scary moments” for some members of the Indian diaspora. At the railway station, Priya felt extremely threatened and uncomfortable in front of the two men who had visited her house on several occasions. Priya recognised these two young men immediately as they were her son’s school friends and she feared that these men might mistake her son for a Muslim and may harm him:

And I felt very concerned for my son’s safety. You know, so I told him – when he got off the train to take a cab and go back to college and you know not to wander around and I’ve been trying to tell him since then to take his beard off – it looks very Muslim and stuff, so I would say that was one of the more overt memories I have – but at subtler level I’m sure there are things that have happened that probably somebody like V. S. Naipaul can probably articulate a lot better than I can but at an overt level – no.

Priya was afraid that her son might be mistaken for a Muslim so she had repeatedly asked him to shave his beard. Priya explained to me that, her son’s face “looks very Muslim”. Thus, Raju, Ranjit, Neelam and Priya’s narratives provide a contrasting view to the universal acculturation model that is proposed by Berry and his colleagues. How do these narratives from the Indian diaspora make us rethink the process of acculturation? The above-mentioned three narratives of race, place and belonging makes us rethink how we should conceptualise the development of migrant identity from the viewpoint of diaspora cultures.

**Structural Understanding of Acculturation/Assimilation**

These post-9/11 narratives from the Indian diaspora spell out the contradictions, tensions and the cultural specificities involved in the experiences of a diasporic immigrant living with multiple cultures and histories that seem incompatible with each other. Additionally, these narratives show how various structural and sociological forces influence the psychological positions of feeling *simultaneously* assimilated, separated and marginalised. Recall that Raju was afraid that he might be mistaken for a Muslim because of his *pagadi* and beard. Ranjit feared that after 9/11, he may be mistaken for an Arab and his sense of being white in the community would come under question.

Several prominent scholars working in the area of Asian-American Studies and Sociology have shown that after 9/11 many South Asian American citizens who resembled the enemy were racialised and constructed as non-American (Maira
“Imperial Feelings”; Purkayastha). In particular these scholars have shown that the post-9/11 period has created a new category of identity in the USA that perceives Arabs, Muslims and Middle Eastern men as disloyal and non-patriotic citizens or as individuals who are part of terrorist networks (Maira “Imperial Feelings”). The recent work of sociologist, Bandana Purkayastha, provides revealing insights about how post-9/11 moments produced a heightened state of racialisation for many South Asian citizens in the USA. I find her research useful because it provides the analytical framework to understand the larger structural forces that shaped my participants’ responses to the events of 9/11.

After 9/11, there has been a conflation of South Asian Muslims and Arabs with terrorism and “Islamic Fundamentalism” and regardless of their nationality or religion many South Asians are being categorised as suspicious and having links to terrorists. Purkayastha notes that those who are perceived to have non-American traits during a sustained period of conflict and political crisis can face extremely dangerous consequences. US foreign policy toward the Middle East has often provided the framework and justification for the direct and indirect racial profiling of South Asian Muslim youth and adults in the USA. She writes:

When other countries are seen as “threatening” to the Untied States, politically or economically, racialized individuals who look like “the enemy” to a section of majority group are subjected to higher levels discrimination and hate. Those caught in the spotlight remember their vulnerability at being under a significant level of public scrutiny, while those who turn on the light do not hold the impression beyond that moment. (42)

The various responses of my participants – Raju, Ranjit and Priya – reveal the vulnerabilities they experienced when they suddenly became visible under the spotlight of the media and the attacks from the majority.

In her research, Purkayastha cites several examples of how this vulnerability was experienced by several other South Asians in the post-9/11 period. The Sikh males in the South Asian community became hyper visible because of their beards and turbans and were victims of several hate crimes across the nation. The hate crimes were further legitimised when some radio stations described Sikh men as wearing “towels”, “diaper heads” and “cloth heads”. Many South Asians expressed a sense of dread or an impending fear as they travelled in public places, such as taking the subway or doing groceries. Several South Asian American women were reminded by their friends and family members to stop wearing saris or salwar kameezes (traditional clothing) and were also asked to “lay low” so that they don’t make themselves visible during the post-9/11 times. Purkayastha illustrates the consequences of “looking like the enemy” during heightened political conflict via an exchange between an Indian woman, Mallika, and a young white male. She writes:

Mallika described an incident that occurred in October 2001. She was working out in a gym with a friend when a young white male came up to her friend and said threateningly “you look like you could be Osama bin Laden’s sister”. Her friend
tried to explain that she was an Indian, not Saudi Arabian. Mallika realized, even though she and her friend were Americans, this was no longer relevant to the conversation. She felt she could not say they were American or South Asian American. Emphasizing their Indianess, with its association of a mainly Hindu identity seemed to be the only way of proving their non-threatening character. She later reflected that their responses denied Pakistani and Bangladeshi South Asian the rights to use their parents’ country of origin as a safety shield in a similar situation. (45)

It is interesting to note here that Mallika’s place of birth or American citizenship was not a relevant factor in this conversation. What mattered to the young male was that she looked like she could be “the enemy’s” sister and this projection of Mallika belonging in the enemy’s camp is another clear example of how the process of racialisation works in everyday life in the USA.

Mallika was reflexive about the fact that she could strategically position herself as a Hindu Indian but none of my three participants, however, articulated the level of hostility, threat and intimidation that other South Asian Muslims and Arab-Americans experience on an everyday basis. Their narratives were about the sense of otherness and un-belonging that they had experienced, but evidently these narratives were also about indirectly distancing themselves from a Muslim cultural identity.

Racial Identity and Acculturation as “Model Minorities”

The participants in my study were subjected to racial discrimination yet they were reluctant to see themselves as having a racial identity or a racial subjectivity. Recall Ranjit’s interview where he expressed his discomfort with being non-white. The interview revealed that Ranjit and Neelam lived in an upper-class suburb of Connecticut. Both the husband and wife were successful professionals who had many friends in the mainstream, white community. They went to summer vacations with their white friends and had regular social interactions with their neighbourhood friends. Ranjit and Neelam’s daughter had regular sleepovers at their neighbour’s house. In short, Ranjit and Neelam had worked hard at integrating in their community as white Americans. In the wake of 9/11, Ranjit’s sense of identity was shaken and his place in the community was in doubt. It is important to mention here that none of Ranjit’s friends or neighbours had made any comments about his cultural identity or his sense of belonging in the community.

On the contrary, Ranjit and Neelam’s friends were being “extra-friendly” to them and were aware there could be a public backlash against Ranjit and Neelam because they looked “Middle Eastern”. Ranjit acknowledged that 9/11 has made him realise that he was actually different from his neighbours and that he was not a white American. Ranjit and Neelam were Indians living in a white suburban neighbourhood and were sure that they had assimilated in American society, but now 9/11 had made them realise that they did not fully belong to the mainstream, white America.
Ranjit had remarked that prior to 9/11 he had never considered himself as a “foreigner” or an “outsider” in the USA, but the events of 9/11 had ruptured his self-perception as a white person and his perceived proximity to whiteness was now under interrogation. The crucial question here is: Why did Ranjit feel that he was white when he is actually racially identified as brown?

One reason that Ranjit felt that he was white was because he had achieved what Purkayastha describes as “structural integration”: a type of integration that can be defined by one’s level of access to economic and educational opportunities. Many Indians living in the USA earn high salaries, own large homes, live in middle-class suburbs, and have access to the same kind of economic and educational opportunities as that of many white Americans. However, their status as racial minorities prevents them from adopting a “racially-neutral” language that is often used by their white peers and friends. Their racial status marginalises them and marks them as culturally and ethnically different. Living in affluent suburbs with most white Americans, many Indian migrants believe that the American dream can be acquired by working hard and on the basis of personal merit. They often operate on the unconscious assumption that their middle-class standing makes their racial identity irrelevant and protects them from discriminatory incidents.

Ranjit had defined himself as a white American primarily because of his structural or economic assimilation in the middle-class white suburbs. The post-9/11 months had made his racial position much more visible and his phenotypic similarities to “Arab” terrorists had prompted his neighbours to remark, “Yes, you could be, couldn’t you?” The post-9/11 spotlight on people who looked like Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern had made Ranjit realise that he could be perceived as being in the enemy camp and his structural integration or assimilation in American society was being challenged from multiple directions.

The same kind of analytical framework can be used to explain why Priya, immediately after 9/11, felt threatened at the railway station by the young men who were her son’s childhood friends.

At the railway station, Priya identified these men as “American young men” rather than just “young men”. She called them “American young men” to clearly demarcate the cultural identity of her son and herself from these American patriotic youth. What is omitted in this excerpt is that Priya’s son is born and raised in the USA, but at that moment his “Americanness” or his “American citizenship” seemed to have been erased and his “Indianness” stood out with his black hair and beard.

Priya’s emphasis on her son’s “black hair” and “beard” essentially points to the fact that she focused on her son’s “Indian” and “brown” attributes rather than his American citizenship. She feared that his external racial similarities to Arab men would put him under the spotlight and make him vulnerable to attacks from the public. In particular, Priya, Raju and Ranjit’s interviews reveal that all three of them had acculturated in America as “model minorities” in white middle-class suburbs and prior to 9/11 they believed in the idea that their status as middle-class professionals would make their racial identities irrelevant. These individuals had perceived of
themselves as having a strong “cultural identity” but not a “racial identity”. The events of 9/11 had elevated the otherness of these three individuals and had revealed a sense of ambiguity that they had experienced with their racial identity. Their difference, which was previously neutralised, hidden or erased, was now suddenly recast as a non-mainstream, marginal cultural identity that was perceived to pose a threat to the larger culture. The external and internal reconstructions of identity that occurred in the Indian diaspora after 9/11 had ruptured the participants’ sense of race, place and acculturation in the American culture.

The acculturation process of middle-class Indians in the USA reveals that they have ambivalence towards their racial identity and this point has been well documented by several scholars (George; Maira Desis in the House; Prashad). By employing and constantly reproducing the model minority discourse, many professional, post-1965 immigrants make attempts to reposition their difference as being the same or equal to the dominant majority. This attempt to establish sameness by using a model minority discourse also means that many participants are reluctant to see themselves as a racially distinct community that is different from white America. Other scholars have also pointed out that since the model minority stereotype focuses on the achievements of Asians, their success also invites resentment and hostility from mainstream America (Kibria). With respect to the Chinese-American diaspora, the model minority stereotype represents the opposite meaning of the image of yellow peril. Kibria notes that “in both the model minority image and that of yellow peril, Asian achievements takes on inhuman, even species-different character” (133).

Indian-Americans are comfortable with the idea that they differ from mainstream America in terms of culture and ethnicity, but not in terms of their racial identity (George). In reference to Proposition 187 and Proposition 209 in California, George writes that most South Asians were reluctant to cast their identities in racial terms. She explains:

What is refused by nearly all upper and middle class South Asians is not so much a specific racial identity but the very idea of being raced. The only identity that is acknowledged is the cultural and ethnic one of being no more and no less than “Indian-American . . .” (29)

George states that many South Asians living in the USA want to make themselves racially invisible. Constructing one’s personhood in terms of class and cultural formations makes the move toward invisibility. For example, there is a tendency among many Indian-Americans to represent themselves to Americans as being from the glorious ancient Indian civilisation, the spiritual and cultural east, or from the pure Aryan race. Mazumdar’s pioneering article, “Racist Responses to Racism: The Aryan Myth and South Asians in the United States”, analyses the ways in which South Asians insisted on seeing themselves as “Aryans of pure stock”, even though the dominant majority perceives them to be black or people of colour. Within the context of the Indian migration to the USA, she cites the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, who was a Hindu born in Punjab and came to the USA in 1913. Under the 1906
naturalisation law, Thind argued in the Supreme Court that he was Caucasian, therefore white, and thus entitled to US citizenship. Prashad’s insights on the reasons for desi ambivalence towards race help us understand the participants’ responses in my study. He notes:

Desis realize they are not “white”, but there is certainly a strong sense amongst desis that they are not “black.” In a racist society, it is hard to expect people to opt for the most despised category. Desis came to the United States and denied their “blackness” at least partly out of a desire for class mobility (something, in the main, denied to blacks) and a sense that solidarity with blacks was tantamount to ending one’s dream of being successful (that is, of being “white”). (94)

An examination of the “acculturation” experiences of Priya, Raju and Ranjit as individuals living in the diaspora allows us to examine the distinct racialised experiences of non-Western/European immigrants. Moreover, given the existence of racial prejudice in American society, non-European immigrants have been more likely to face exclusion and discrimination than their European counterparts. When a new immigrant – whether Caribbean, Chilean, Chinese, Indian, Mexican or Vietnamese enters the USA, they are introduced to the stories, legacies and the immigration heritage of their respective ethnic group. Subsequently, through personal remembering and shared histories, tales of discrimination, hardships and sheer exploitation are kept alive in most non-European immigrant communities.

Many of these narratives are circulated as unofficial histories of immigrant communities and are intimately bound up with the formation of an individual immigrant’s identity. To suggest that such a process is universal and that all immigrants undergo the same psychological processes in their acculturation journey minimises the inequities and injustices faced by many non-European immigrants. These members from the diaspora mentioned above had assumed that they were not only assimilated in American society, but were also able to integrate both American and Indian cultures. However, the events of 9/11 have clearly shown that acculturation in these “First World”, postcolonial diasporas is not a universal, bicultural process. Furthermore, classifying culture as an “antecedent” variable, and the properties of the self as universal, natural and pre-given, is a view that plays an important role in shaping acculturation research in cross-cultural psychology. Thus, for Berry and his colleagues, culture and history are variables that enable the “display” of the pre-given properties of the acculturating self, but these very variables are not taken to be inextricably interwoven with the self. The historical, structural and political aspects of immigration rarely enter the discussion, and when they do, they are classified as group variables.

**Acculturation and Transnational Diasporas**

The analysis of the three Indian participants’ responses immediately after 9/11 underscores the importance of studying the structural and political forces that shape
the acculturation process. These narratives also make it clear that the racial and ethnic positioning of these Indian migrants made their acculturation process different from the previous great wave of immigration at the turn of the last century. In 1890, over 90 per cent of immigrants were European, whereas in 1990 only 25 per cent were European with 25 per cent Asian and 43 per cent from Latin America (Rong and Preissle). This striking shift can be largely attributed to the changes in immigration law in the 1960s, when several racially motivated “Exclusion Acts” were eliminated in order to meet the demands of the US labour market (Mohanty). These new immigrants often find themselves struggling with asymmetrical cultural positions, racially charged contexts and an oppressive political rhetoric. Additionally, in contrast to their turn-of-the-century European counterparts, new immigrants have far better access to transatlantic travel and can take advantage of the accelerations in global communication technology.

Glick-Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc define the new immigrants as “transnational” whose lived experiences and everyday activities are shaped by multiple connections and linkages to several nations and cultures through travel, technology and media (48). The web of contradictory discourses related to race, community, ethnicity and loyalty experienced by the new immigrants as well as their children demand that we rethink our traditional notions of immigrant adaptation and acculturation. The narratives from the Indian diaspora analysed above show how they negotiate their hybrid sense of self in such a context of cultural difference and racial politics (Bhatia and Ram “Rethinking ‘Acculturation’”; “Culture, Hybridity”; Bhatia “Acculturation, Dialogical Voices”).

Thus, when one considers how many diasporic immigrants such as Turkish-Germans, Nigerian-Americans or Pakistani-British and so on are “coming to terms” with “who they are” and negotiating and renegotiating their selfhood in the “First Worlds”, we realise the usefulness of using theoretical models of acculturation that move beyond the psychological plane and focus on the larger sociological and political forces that shape immigrant life in the USA. These models not only highlight the tensions and contradictions of living with racialised hyphenated identities in the “First World”, but also pose a challenge to cross-cultural psychology’s notion of acculturation strategies in general and the concept of integration strategy in particular. Examples of diasporic immigrants in North America are Asian-Indians, Armenian-Americans, Hispanic Americans, Chinese-Canadians, Iranian-Canadians, and other such communities within Europe are Black-British, Franco-Magherbi, Surinamese-Dutch and Turkish-Germans.

Given the increasing discursive and material emergence of the diaspora, we can no longer insist on thinking about culture as contained by national boundaries or as reified, polarised entities. Scholars studying issues related to the diaspora make us confront questions about the status of “culture” in global, transnational, diasporic societies: Is there anything such as a univocal, monolithic, American, English or Indian culture? What does it mean to have hyphenated identities such as African-American, Asian American or Mexican-American in the larger American society?
How do “Third World”, postcolonial immigrants residing in “First World” societies’ countries negotiate their identities in relation to both Western/European/“First World” settlers and to other non-European “Third World” immigrants?

Consider, for example, the notions of acculturation strategies. To recall, Berry and his colleagues argue that the four main acculturation strategies are integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation. An immigrant adopts an integration strategy when he or she attempts to maintain cultural and psychological contact in his/her everyday interactions with both his or her ethnic group as well as the dominant group. Similarly, the concept of “bicultural competence” suggests that an immigrant can possibly achieve a happy, balanced blend that entails “becoming effective in the new culture and remaining competent in his or her culture of origin” (LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton 148). Those immigrants who do not achieve this goal, experience higher acculturative stress (Berry “Immigration, Acculturation”) and/or are not as physically or psychologically healthy (LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton). Although integration and bicultural competency may be worthy goals to achieve, the narratives analysed above show that for most people living in contemporary diasporas, their negotiation with multiple cultural sites is fluid, dynamic, interminable and often unstable. Thus, there are several conceptual problems with describing the integration strategy as the developmental end goal in the immigrant’s acculturation process.

First, Berry and his colleagues describe the integration strategy as being an end goal of an immigrant’s acculturation without explaining the process by which such a goal would be achieved. Second, missing from their discussion on “integration strategy” is how issues of conflict, power and asymmetry affect many diasporic immigrants’ acculturation process. For example, integration, at least as discussed by Berry and his colleagues, implicitly assumes that both the majority and minority cultures have equal status and power. Furthermore, it is not clear what the term integration exactly means? How does one know when someone is integrated or not with the host culture? Who decides whether an immigrant is pursuing a strategy of marginalisation, integration or separation?

Raju, Neelam, Ranjit and Priya firmly believed that they were acculturated in American society. But the events of 9/11 illustrated that becoming acculturated in the host culture has to be explicitly or implicitly sanctioned by the majority members of the culture. The structural forces that came in to play immediately after 9/11 through the lens of race and class have significantly altered the acculturation process of the participants in my study. Furthermore, the narratives from the Indian diaspora suggest that acculturation is a never-ending process. When does one stop being a migrant and become an “accultured citizen”? These narratives from the Indian diaspora also show that the notion of multiple, hyphenated and racialised identities of the diaspora is a challenge to the idea that there can be some kind of a blissful marriage or integration of the cultures between the hyphen. Recognising the complications involved in understanding the diasporic identity, Radhakrishnan engages in raising a series of insightful questions. He asks:
When someone speaks as an Asian American, who is exactly speaking? If we dwell in the hyphen who represents the hyphen: the Asian or the American, or can the hyphen speak for itself without creating an imbalance between the Asian and America components [...] True, both components have status, but which has the power and the potential to read and interpret the other on its terms? If the Asian is to be Americanized, will the American submit to Asianization? (211)

Through these questions Radhakrishnan is foregrounding the point that the acculturation process is not a matter of one’s individual strategy where one has the free choice to unproblematically, integrate the values of the host culture and one’s own immigrant group. Consider scholar and writer Yep’s reflections on his own multicultural identity. He defines himself as Asianlatinoamerican, being born in a Chinese family, and lived first in Peru and then later in the USA. He believes that he has integrated all three cultures within himself. However, he does not claim his “integration” to be always harmonious or free from tension. Rather his experience with his own multicultural identity brings him “internal and external conflicts” (80). Similarly, through her research on Asian Indian women immigrants, Hegde demonstrates how cultural relocation and the unfolding of migrant identities involve a constant negotiation with old and new environments. Such mediations of selfhood are never finite, complete or benign. Rather as she illustrates that “the theme of being other continually echoes in the lives of immigrants, displacing and deferring their sense of coherence about self” (51). The perspective adopted in this paper is that acculturation is not necessarily made up of a series of phases where one goes from being less acculturated to more acculturated over time. Instead, I am suggesting that there is a dynamic play among several structural and psychological forces and we need to think of acculturation as a process and not as a product. It is not a process that is moving inexorably towards a finite end that can be captured by fixed categories, but a process that is spiral, revolving and interminable with an emphasis on multiplicity, conflict and contradiction (Bhatia and Ram “Rethinking ‘Acculturation’”).

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue against the universal and categorically static concepts of acculturation. I use narratives from the Indian diaspora to provide an alternative account of the acculturation process. The analyses of the 9/11 narratives illustrate how modes of othering and racialisation are inseparable from the everyday experiences of a non-European/non-white immigrant in the USA. These analyses also show that when referring to an immigrant’s acculturation process, we need to be attentive to how issues of race and class impact the acculturation trajectories of migrants during periods of political conflict and crisis. The paper emphasises that universal notions of culture and self fail to explain the challenges accompanying the acculturation process within a diasporic world where an immigrant cannot freely
choose whether they want to assimilate, become marginalised or integrated within the larger society.

To suggest that the acculturation process, merely involves “culture shedding” or “some behavioural shift” or the “unlearning of one’s previous repertoire”, as much scholarship on acculturation in psychology demonstrates, implies that one can float in and out of cultures, shedding one’s history, politics and replacing them with a new set of cultural and political “behaviours” whenever needed. Advocating the strategy of “integration” as an endpoint or examining acculturation in terms of universal categories overlooks the multiple, contested and sometimes painful voices that are associated with living in diaspora cultures. The concept of acculturation is rooted in history, culture and politics: a process that involves an ongoing, contested negotiation of voices from here and there, past and present, homeland and hostland, self and other.

The paper demonstrates that the acculturation experiences of Indian immigrants, living in the diaspora, are constructed through a back-and-forth play between the different voices of being both privileged and marginalised. This paper also indicates that prior to 9/11, participants such as Raju, Priya and Ranjit had assumed that their middle-class status and their proximity to mainly white suburbs had made their racial positions and subjectivities irrelevant to their larger self-identities. The post-9/11 spotlight and media coverage had suddenly thrust many South Asian male adults into the camp of the terrorist–enemy and their physical resemblance to “Muslim/Arab/Middle Eastern” had made them vulnerable to attacks from the public.

The status of the Indian diaspora as model minorities has ensured them a slice of the American dream in the suburban enclaves of America, where they own houses and have the requisite middle-class material comforts and send their children to expensive colleges and universities. On the surface, it would appear that these professional Indians have “made it” in America and ultimately are structurally integrated within the larger society. Their experiences with fear, alienation and racism after 9/11, however, forced them to reanalyse their identities as assimilated citizens of America. The larger US foreign policy towards the Middle East and the anti-Muslim fervour that was prevalent after 9/11 clearly altered their sense of belonging and place in America.

The acculturation experiences of the professional Indians is also shaped by their class positions back home, their advanced educational backgrounds, their success as elite professionals in America, the colonial and postcolonial history of India, and the history of multicultural discourse about race and otherness in America. The Indian participants’ acculturation struggles are linked to and constituted by going back and forth between multiple homes, societies, identities and languages. The responses of the Indian participants in the diaspora do not fit in either the category of being fully assimilated or being separated from American culture. Rather, the acculturation process and construction of cultural and racial identities in the diaspora, as previously stated, involves a constant process of negotiation, intervention and mediation that is connected to a larger set of political and historical practices. Rather
than posit migrant identity as an allocation of different cultural components in a fortuitous, congenial amalgam, the concept of racialised identities in the diaspora allows us to emphasise the constant contradiction, struggle and negotiation that immigrants experience between different cultural selves. It is this process of negotiation and contestation between different voices that adds varying levels of complexity to the study of identity in the diaspora.

Notes

[1] Desi is a colloquial Hindi word that is etymologically connected to the word Desh. Desi refers to first- and second-generation families who have origins in South Asia. See Bahri (1996) for a detailed discussion of the changing conceptions of the label “South Asians” in the USA.

[2] I have put “Indianness”, “Indian culture” and “Indian identity” in quotation marks to indicate that there is no fixed, static and essential definition of Indianness. These terms have overlapping meanings and are used by participants to invoke a particular form of “Indianness” that is tied to their identity.

[3] All the names of the participants have been changed in order to protect their identities.

Works Cited


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