

# Navigating Desi American Cultural Identity

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## ABSTRACT

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 began a major shift in US immigration patterns, with Indian immigration seeing a notable uptick in the late 1900s. As Indian immigrant populations began increasing in the United States, the predominantly Christian America began to increase tolerance towards religions previously viewed as “heathenistic” (i.e., Hinduism). Understanding the impact Asian-Indian immigrants have had on the cultural and religious landscape of the Western world is essential in order to conceptualize and navigate the true depth of South Asian cultural identities. Thus, it becomes crucial to acknowledge these cultural placements not as a haphazard assemblage of identities, but rather as a product of relationships with religion and the adoption of both ethnic and racial identifying terms. A more assiduous exploration of the comprehensive history of Hinduism in America and the discourse of social identity development as a Desi-American illuminates the dichotomous relationship between religion and socialization in the formation of cultural identity. For South Asian Americans especially, the contiguity of learned cultures, in addition to the cultural environment an individual is raised in plays a significant role in the construction of one’s identity. Consequently, the differences in identity development and perspectives between two Indian sub-groups in the US (first-generation/Indian-born; second-generation/American-born) can be understood by canvassing several socio-cultural factors of influence such as the level of interplay within culture and religion in the social landscape, availability and access to temples, nomenclature used for personal identification, and conformity to the “Model Minority” myth.

## Introduction

Despite being a non-proselytizing, ethnic religion, Hinduism has managed to work its way into the American cultural and religious landscape. Prior to the 1960s, South Asian populations within the US were menial in numbers as a result of the Immigration Act of 1924, which included the Asian Exclusion Act and the National Origins Act and subsequently prohibited any Asian immigration into the United States and placed strict quotas on general immigration from the Eastern hemisphere. Nevertheless, the effects of this eugenics-inspired and nativist act were rectified when the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act sparked an influx of Asian immigration, and Indian diasporic populations in the US began to dramatically increase for the first time in American history (Lucia, 2017). The diffusion of Hindu culture into American society amidst the immigration of Hindu families, imaginaries, and emissaries from India into the US led to the effective establishment of a Hindu presence within the American religious landscape (Lucia, 2017). These Indian families, who faced ethnic stereotypes and limited resources for Hindu religious expression, began challenging the preexisting Hindu narratives in the US - which devalued the importance of deities, personal devotion, and ritualistic worship - by building temples and subsequent Hindu cultural centers of communal solidarity (Palmer, 2006). Hinduism also had a significant impact on American culture through the encompassment of Hindu philosophies into American thought and even religion, as “the Hinduism that flourished in the North American context drew heavily from the neo-Vedantic theology of monism” propagated from the Hindu reform movements of the 19th century, which found general compatibility with Protestant Christianity (Lucia, 2017). This fact is evident in the Hindu ideologies borrowed by Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson regarding the duality of nature and soul (*satya*) and the unity/relationship every individual has with God as a universal existence within all human beings (*maya* and

*atman*), both of which being aspects which domineered the period of American thought reform (De Mora, 1997). Indian emissaries brought Hindu ways of life along with them into the US, which - along with the increasing spiritualism filtering from Eastern philosophy into the US - was modified into the Americanized practices of yoga, meditation, and general spiritualism as methods to improve one's lifestyle by virtue of strength, health, and self-realization (Lucia, 2017). As Chandrasekaran (2017) articulates, the "commodification of "Indian culture" through the yoga and textile industry" (p. 38) deemed Hindus culturally "safe" to American interests, which allowed for the ethnic minority to prosper in ways many other minority communities within the United States lacked the opportunity to. These South Asian diasporic populations forever altered the religious and cultural landscapes of America, establishing an avenue by which other Indian immigrants could find their place in the US. Subsequently, a new population of South Asians born in the United States gave way to the colloquially coined generation of "ABCDs": American-Born Confused Desis (Souter, 2008). Born into a simultaneously hegemonic and increasingly diverse United States, second-generation Indian Americans are forced to navigate their identities as a summation of the Western culture they're immersed in, their ethnic background which they are semi-estranged from, and the several other factors which play into living as a South Asian American in the US - all of which inspires the question: Taking into consideration the influence South Asian diasporic populations have had on Western culture and vice versa, how may the developed identity of second-generation Indian Americans born in the US differ from that of first-generation Indian-born Indian American immigrants? While South Asian immigrants have certainly left a permanent impact on American culture, the reconstruction and development of South Asian American cultural identities as a function of religion and racial stereotypes in the US are further molded within a hegemonically white America by the model minority myth, as South Asian Americans are forced to navigate a perpetual "foreigner" status.

## Hinduism in America

### Exploring Americanized Hindu Philosophy

Hinduism exists in a multitude of interpretations, philosophies, and modes of worship. That being said, Judeo-Christian influences saw to the transformation of Hinduism after its transplantation into a Western, specifically American, context. In Lucia's 2017 work, she details the effects Indian American populations have had on the American public's view of Hinduism, and how increased immigration led to the North American Hindu narrative drifting away from the previous imagining of Hinduism as a form of "heathenism" by white Americans and churches of monotheistic religions, considering that "the Christian category of "heathen" religions often conflated non-Abrahamic faiths" (Lucia, 2017, p. 2). This issue was resolved by Swami Vivekananda, who, upon his arrival in the United States, spoke on behalf of Hinduism as a whole all over the US at several religious conventions, expositions, and organizations. Vivekananda declared Hinduism to entail no polytheism whatsoever, catering to Christian American audiences as he described a religion which practiced worship of a singular, all-mighty God. Due to this, Hinduism took on a monistic theology in the US, disenfranchising the significance of the Hindu deities (which are all manifestations of Brahman: the supreme truth and universal soul), temple worship, and varying interpretations of Hindu literature and philosophy. The popularization of Hinduism as a religion of absolute monism is additionally discussed by De Mora (1997); he recognizes the common mistake made by the generalization of Hinduism through a Western-Christian lens, as in reality, Hinduism follows a fluid mosaic of non-absolute monistic/pantheistic theology with no strict, right or wrong way to worship. Through the diffusion of Hinduism into the US through figures like Vivekananda, the Western concept of Hinduism delineated from its previous model to absolute monism, as the Advanta Vedanta that Vivekananda lectured on was directly interpreted as being Hinduism rather than a single sect among numerous interpretations and beliefs. De Mora notes that simplifying Hinduism into congruence with Judeo-Christianity is difficult because the religion has "no dogma, no founder and no limits" (p. 2). The endeavors of swamis such as Vivekananda have impacted the story of Hinduism in North America, consequently creating a rift between first-generation and second-

generation Desi Americans on topics regarding religion. There's an inconsistency between the group of South Asian Americans who grew up in India versus the other group who grew up in America, as while Hinduism can be viewed as a monistic religion with polytheistic faith, the latter group of Desi-Americans who grew up in the US tend to adhere more closely to its pantheistic and abstract philosophies (hence are less religious), whereas first-generation Indian immigrants place more importance on the ritualistic worship of the several deities - and are hence more religious. Hindu religious practices such as holiday celebrations, aarti, poojas, and prayer, in general, are practiced less frequently by second-generation populations, as the passing down of Hindu ethnic culture becoming watered down in an American setting has resulted in many Desi-Americans simply not knowing what to do for each practice, in addition to not knowing the stories, symbolism, or significance behind each deity. If the children of these immigrant families are unable to learn the depth of Hindu cultural practices while being immersed in the Western world, they're unable to form comprehensive cultural identities which incorporate their Hindu ethnic backgrounds, and consequently, are unable to pass down the culture to their own children later on.

### Effect of Temple Access on Cultural Identity

The immigrant parents of second-generation children are not the only teaching sources when it comes to passing down knowledge on Indian culture. Temples began appearing in the US following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, as Hindus in the United States reevaluated the necessity of establishing institutions to facilitate the sustaining and transmission of Hindu cultural practices; many felt they required a place to "maintain their Hindu identity and for children to learn Hindu culture and practices" (Palmer, 2006, p. 100). Because religion is learned, the initial religious imprints of second-generation Desi-Americans in addition to the information that is absorbed from other members in the community regarding Hinduism impact the formation and development of religious identity. Lucia (2017) signifies temples as cultural centers that foster the "expression of cultural and religious values" (p. 8) in a hegemonically Christian country. In temples, Hindus can "connect with each other and teach their children about Hinduism" (pp. 8-9) while joining together in communal solidarity with peers of similar experiences and backgrounds. In temples, the devotional and ritualistic aspects of Hinduism are able to be revived and taught to younger generations, but this is somewhat negated by low temple access for Hindus across the US: Although there are around 1.15 million Hindus in America, Lucia (2017) puts the number of temples in America in the 400s, compared to a staggering approximation of about 2 million Hindu temples in India. Palmer (2006) found that in addition to religion in general, temples provide communities where cultural aspects which play a role in identity development other than religion such as language, food, and dating/marriage customs can be sustained and/or passed down. However, there is once again a rift that is evident between the Indian-born and American-born Indian American populations. Growing up in a primarily English speaking country, it is only natural that many second-generation Desi-Americans aren't fluent in their mother tongue, especially considering English is generally their first language; although many South Asians learn English before immigrating to the US, English is often secondary to the native language they grew up with, making bilingualism easier for first-generation immigrants - they're immersed in their secondary language rather than their primary one in the US and are forced to adapt. Cultural preferences regarding food and dating/marriage customs are also significant in the development of cultural identity, as American-born Desi populations tend to adhere to American preferences, eating American food often as opposed to Indian food and holding more lax perspectives on dating at a young age (before marriage) and divorce compared to Indian-born Indian Americans, who tend to hold more traditional Hindu values (Palmer, 2006). While American practices are significant to both populations of South Asian Americans, it is the younger generations who see their cultural identity reflect the duality of their Desi-American marginal status.

## Stereotyping South Asian Americans

### Identifying Nomenclature and Ethnic Ambiguity

At the core of South Asian American identity is the nomenclature used to identify the duality between nationality and race, or rather, American and Indian culture. This marginality involved with belonging to two groups calls for the juggling of two vastly different cultures. Although Souter (2008) distinguishes that “marginals have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity” (p. 23), Chowdhury (2017) references Jean Kim’s 5-stage racial identity development model, which outlines the progression of Asian American identity development by integration ethnic and racial identities within a predominantly white context, in order to depict the process by which these two cultures mesh together to produce a singular identity which encompasses both cultures. This, however, gives rise to yet another contention regarding nomenclature relevant to first-generation Indian Americans: How does one apply the term “Asian American” to a population of immigrants who have never before used the term “Asian” to classify themselves? Due to the enormous diversity of cultures in India, Indians typically identify with their individual ethnic and lingual groups before identifying with Indian culture as a whole (Chowdhury, 2017). Upon arriving in America, the significance of said individual ethnic identities became reduced as Indian immigrants became “Asian” to fit the American categorization of all Eastern world under a single, generalized nomenclature, despite the substantial differences between the cultures of the general Asian continent and Indian subcontinent. Existing beneath the broad hood of “Asian American,” Indian populations tend to be marginalized by the generalization of all Eastern world immigrants as “Asian,” a blanket term that typically results in East-Asian narratives dominating the “Asian” identity as a whole (Chowdhury, 2017). This generalization not only devalues the distinct experiences of the South Asian subgroup, but also provides another identity with which Indian Americans must contend as they navigate the development of a cumulative cultural identity. Although the issue of “Asian-ness” is one that troubles mainly Indian-born Desi Americans, being “Asian” means that all Indian Americans have to fit a certain mold of what being stereotypically Asian means and are hence “expected to believe in certain things and agree to certain approaches” (Chowdhury, 2017, p. 63). Because of the lack of congruence between Asian and Indian experiences, the forced categorization of Indian Americans as “Asians” in the US can be viewed as a political identity rather than a cultural one. In addition to the term “Asian,” the colloquial term “Desi” has proven to embody a reclamation of Indian identity for Indian Americans despite the term’s disputed history and interpretations of proper use. Because many feel as though the term misconstrues South Asian identity, the usage of the ambiguous and general term “brown” instead has demonstrated to be a more prominent identifier for contemporary Indian Americans. With this degree of multiculturalism comes the perception of “whiteness,” as being immersed in a hegemonically white society results in American-born Indians feeling “too white” to fit in within an ethnically Indian setting. When discussing his own experiences, Chowdhury (2017) notes that he “wasn’t brown enough or Asian enough” for his peers, nor did he feel “inclusion in white society...despite adopting white ways of being and doing,” all of which made fitting - or even assimilating - into a singular group difficult (pp. 62-63). The nomenclature assigned to identify a person’s ethnic, racial, and cultural background influences the development of their cultural identity, as Indian Americans of all generations are forced to navigate an identity that incorporates not just Indian culture, but also “brown-ness,” “American” or “white-ness,” and “Asian-ness.”

### Model Minority Myth

Along with being classified as “Asian” comes the stereotypes and prejudicial barriers that are inevitably tied to the racial identifier. Although South Asians are less likely to be connotated with being Asian American, their assumed political identity in the US results in Indian Americans being affected by the American concept of the “model minority

myth.” When exploring the construct, Park (2008) found that “the model minority myth functions as a political mechanism of control that alters one’s sense of reality to justify the unequal social order,” which subsequently impacts the development of an Indian American’s cultural identity as they grapple their contrastingly joint likeness to “whiteness” and distinction as “other” by American society (p. 136). Second-generation South Asian Americans may be born in the US, but the stereotypical embodiment of the “model minority” that they represent solidifies a paradoxical compulsion to justify their presence in the United States, a presence that is distinguished as “other” rather than American, which Park (2008) proves through numerous interviews conducted with the second-generation children of Asian American immigrants. Chandrasekaran (2017) points out that although the model minority myth proves to be a positive construct at face value, “The notion of a model minority does not imply full citizenship rights but, rather, a secondary one reserved for particular minorities who “behave” appropriately and stay in their designated secondary space without complaint,” distinguishing that a model minority is still a minority nonetheless (p. 135). The model minority trope simultaneously elevates those it diminishes, effectively shifting the focus away from social obstacles such as prejudice and racial stereotypes Asian populations experience in favor of stereotyping Asian sub-groups as the favorable American ethnic minority who are well-educated, prosperous, and economically beneficial to the US (Chandrasekaran, 2017). No matter the case, Asian Americans play the role of the foreigner/outsider in American society; Asian Americans must be foreign in order to fit into the model minority myth that legitimizes their “membership/insider” role in the US, while simultaneously being marginalized as “too foreign” if they don’t fit the definitive mold created by the “model minority” trope (Park, 2008). As a result, Asian Americans are labeled as foreign regardless of whether or not they were born in the US. For second-generation Desi Americans, this means that their cultural awareness incorporates an unspoken identity of “otherness.” For Indian American Hindus, Chandrasekaran (2017) found this meant “being praised, on the one hand, and racially targeted, on the other. They are simultaneously being informed of their proximity to “whiteness”/“real Americanness” and reminded of a line that is impossible and dangerous to cross.” The stereotypes that trail Indians in America as the “model minority” group who are upwardly mobile and generally more affluent than other minority groups overshadow the prejudice Indians experience despite their “model status.” Because of the ambiguity in identity for Indian Americans, most (whether intentionally or unintentionally) end up fitting into the model minority myth. As a paradigm that gives Asian Americans an obvious role within American society, adhering to stereotypes becomes inevitable and almost easier, despite the oppressive aspects which inhibit Indians in America from rising beyond the glass ceiling imposed by their ethnic status. However, Lu (2020) offers a counter perspective, as through his studies conducted with several other scholars, he found that “East Asians were less likely than South Asians and whites to attain leadership positions, whereas South Asians were more likely than whites to do so” (p. 4590). Asians are disproportionately underrepresented in leadership positions despite being called the “model minority,” but the leadership gap between East Asians and South Asians suggests that the issue is not necessarily one of “Asian-ness,” but rather cultural-fit (Lu, 2020). Regardless, this continues to prove that the cultural identity development of Indians in America is one that emulsifies several cultures into an ambiguous identity as a whole. Although Indian Americans are politically classified as Asian American and experience the cultural implications of the Asian group identity, the cultural background and connotations regarding what is “truly” Asian in America warrant an entirely new set of social experiences which set South Asians apart from East Asians. Once again, the attempt to “Americanize” Indian culture into an identity that is more digestible to white Christian populations has demanded Desi-Americans, especially those who have grown up in the United States, to fit into American narratives of several cultures that all, in some way, shape, or form, perpetuate an “outsider” or “foreigner” status in the US for South Asian Americans, whether or not they were actually born in the US.

## Conclusion

America has been - and will remain for quite some time - hegemonic at its core due to majorly Christian and white Western influences. While history cannot be rewritten, cultural minorities are slowly being written into American

history. Within this narrative, the development of Desi American cultural identity, regardless of generational differences, is largely a product of the interactions between Hindu, Asian, and American cultures. Accepting the multiplicity of South Asian cultural identity development in America can serve to benefit existing and future Desi generations to come, as establishing the Indian American identity as a culmination of several aspects into a singular ipseity rather than attempting to force Indian identity into a box proximal to “whiteness,” “Asian-ness,” or “brown-ness” will result in a less conflicted self-understanding that proves to be a better representation of a Desi American’s experiences as a whole. While incorporating all aspects of cultural experience into a single identity can help the overall development of cultural quiddity for South Asian groups in America, the differences between the cultural identities of first-generation Indian-born immigrants and second-generation American-born Indian Americans continue to exist. For many second-generation Desi-Americans, there is a certain guilt associated with being “too white” or “too brown,” making American-born Desis - to some degree - “foreigners” to Indian, American, and Asian cultural groups. Because of this, cultural identity development becomes a discussion of power. For South Asians particularly, cultural power is not unilateral - rather, it reaches horizontally across the community and begs questions regarding who holds more “power” in a hegemonically white America: the first-generation Indian American who has a more intimate knowledge of Indian culture and is hence more “authentic,” or the second-generation Indian American who has a higher perceived “whiteness” and is hence more easily written into the American narrative. Though the latter may hold more power in America due to being better versed in American values, it is that same “white-washed” American-born demographic who is envious of the “authenticity” of the former group. On the other hand, it is easier to attain “whiteness” in America through assimilation than it is to gain ethnic authenticity in your own cultural background, making those born in India the ones who hold more cultural power. Because there is no true answer to which generation holds more power culturally, what matters, in the end, is that cultural identity is a spectrum, and where one falls on that spectrum plays no role in the validity of one’s religious, social, or cultural identity.

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