

Cultural Assimilation: Identities of Second-Generation Indian Americans

Sanjana Reka¹ and Jim Haisler^{1#}

¹Obra D. Tompkins High School

#Advisor

ABSTRACT

Following the abolition of national origin quotas, the United States witnessed a substantial influx of Asian immigrants, with India accounting for 19 percent of incoming immigrants. Consequently, American society has become a mosaic of diverse cultures, often referred to as a "melting pot" or "salad bowl." However, this cultural diversity has profound implications for the offspring of immigrants, particularly second-generation Indian Americans, as they grapple with the intricate interplay between their Indian heritage and American upbringing. While the extant literature presents divergent viewpoints on the effects of cultural assimilation, it emphatically underscores the imperatives of inclusivity, cultural acceptance, and psychological support in mitigating the cultural and identity conflicts faced by second-generation Indian Americans. The review concludes by advocating for comprehensive interventions that foster a harmonious and inclusive approach to cultural assimilation, striking a delicate balance between the preservation of cultural heritage and the embrace of the enriching multicultural tapestry within the United States.

Introduction

Since the 1965 Amendment to the Immigrant Reform Act abolishing national origin quotas, the United States has seen a huge influx of Asian immigrants, causing the population to grow by millions, "with 19 percent of incoming immigrants belonging to India," (Hanna & Batalova, 2021), suggesting that the culture within the United States has grown to become diverse in the recent years, as words like "melting pot" and "salad bowl" are used to describe the culture found within the United States. While the cultural diversity within the United States may seem like a nice addition, it has drastic impacts on the identities of immigrant children, who are considered second-generation Indian Americans. According to Sonia Ladha, a professional from the University of New Orleans, it is the immigrant "children who determine the long term effects of immigrant group experience and thus hold significant influence in the future of America"(Ladha, 2005), which suggests the importance of learning about the impact that cultural assimilation has on the families of immigrants, more specifically individuals who identify as second-generation Indian Americans. The growing presence of Indian culture within the United States, portrays the rising influence of Indian Immigrants, as they have adopted the American culture while leaving parts of Indian culture throughout American society. The process, in which second-generation Indian Americans found an even balance between Indian and American culture, proved to be a difficult one, as conflicts pertaining to their identity arose around them. Thus, indicating that the stress that comes along with changing your identity, as many Indian families living in the United States prioritize "strong ties with family and extended family"(Rastogi, 2007), and the distance between India and US makes many immigrant families worry about if something were to happen, as one can't drop everything in the US and go to India to visit family and sort out issues. Thus, it becomes crucial to address the following question: To what extent has cultural assimilation affected the identities of second-generation Indian Americans since the implementation of the Immigrant Reform Act of 1965? Second-generation Indian Americans are affected by cultural assimilation, as both American and Indian cultures are present during building an identity. As a result, they cannot find a balance between their two cultures, which negatively impacts their mental health.

Inculcating a Cultural Identity

When discussing the impacts that cultural assimilation has on an individual's identity, more specifically second-generation Indian Americans, it becomes pertinent to discuss the generational differences in the process of constructing a cultural identity in the United States. Allowing immigrants to express themselves, culturally and socially, has been proven to be beneficial, as they will preserve their individualism rather than conforming with the majority, which results in them losing their identity and culture. Gelfand et al. (2020) argue the loss of individualism that occurs as a result of group conformity, which explains the action of second-generation Indian Americans conforming to American culture, and how as a result of these actions, they're losing some of their identity and individualism, as their family's Indian heritage fails to get represented in American society. Sonia Ladha (2005), a professional from the University of New Orleans, agrees with the loss of individuality that occurs due to individuals conforming as previously mentioned, as she states "while first-generation immigrants are more likely to stick with the traditional values of their home country, second-generation immigrants seem to acculturate into the dominant culture of the larger society." According to the scholars who are professionals in the topics of psychology, cultural evolution, and sociology, the likelihood of second-generation Indian Americans assimilating with American culture is more likely, as they have lived in the United States since they were very young, therefore making American Culture part of their identity, in addition to Indian Culture. The likelihood of cultural assimilation is dependent on the connection to the culture, as showcased in the Song of Freedom at the Estonian Song and Dance Festival, with the transformation of Estonian culture since they broke off from the United Socialist Soviet Republic. During their time under Soviet Rule, the identity of Estonia itself was suppressed, as a result of having a tight connection with Soviet Culture compared to that of their own, resulting in the loss of cultural identity. Veronica Ines Flores agrees with the claims made by Ladha, in the example of "person who was born in India or Indian family, and who holds an American passport may retain elements from both cultures and may not feel locked into one single cultural identity", in that it indicates connections formed between the cultures present in an individual's identity greatly impact the formation of the identity of immigrant children living in the United States, specifically the second-generation Indian American population of the United States. Overall, there are generational differences within the process of constructing a cultural identity within the United States, as the culture and surroundings of first-generation Indian Americans and second-generation Indian Americans vary greatly, which leads to the struggles that many second-generation Indian Americans face with balancing both their American culture and Indian culture, instigating the presence of culture and identity conflicts. Maira states, that as the distribution of Indian Americans across a country, such as the United States, may play part in the identity of second-generation Indian American adolescents, as more Indians near where life may lead the adolescents to be more culturally connected to Indian culture, compared to the individual who in places with a lack of Indian Immigrants.

Balancing the Culture

Multiple identities have quite the presence in immigrant communities, whether they be cultural, social, or religious identities. Hybrid Identities of second-generation individuals living in the United States may increase their sense of belonging and security by immersing themselves in the "melting pot", that is the United States, allowing them to attain a cultural balance. According to Nina Asher (2008), a professional in social work at the University of Minnesota and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, highlights the stereotypes that come to play within second-generation Indian American communities, as they try to balance the cultures present within their identity and form a cultural identity that better fits. Asher's arguments about the influence of stereotypes on cultural identity are portrayed in the "Name-sake" with Gogol. Gogol perceives that everyone around him is making fun of his name; within his mind. As all the people around him bear names that correspond to their culture, whereas his name does not conform to either his American or Bengali heritage. This showcases how stereotypes reflect an individual's cultural identity, as individuals

around Gogol had a cultural name, while he didn't, which acted as the catalyst for asking to change his name to better reflect his cultural identity. While Gogol changed his name to maintain the balance between cultures within his identity, a similar idea is presented by Jatinder Kaur, a professional from the University of Notre Dame. While observing the differences in the consumption of Indian Clothing by first-generation Indian Americans and second-generation Indian Americans, Kaur made the observations that "different experiences of immigrants and nonimmigrants influence their buying behavior" with the exposure to "U.S. cultural values from school and US mass media". The population of second-generation Indian Americans is more exposed to American culture, by listening to American music and watching American movies with their friends, while also feeling comfortable in their Indian culture. This explains why generational differences in the consumption of Indian apparel occur within the United States, as second-generation Indian Americans transmit and maintain their Indian culture with the presence of Indian apparel in their wardrobe, first-generation Indian Americans attempt to preserve the culture with Indian apparel. Although maintaining and preserving one's culture may seem to be an easy concept for many individuals who identify as the children of immigrants, it requires effort to be put forth, as conveyed by Lakshmi N. Tirumala, a professional at the Drake University in Iowa. Tirumala's discussion of second-generation Indian American maintaining their Indian heritage and culture through watching Bollywood movies underlines the impacts of cultural assimilation on the identities of second-generation Indian Americans, and the methods these individuals have to resort to maintaining their culture, in addition to the formation of a hybrid identity. "Musical and dance performances, have become a notable marker of cultural identity for second-generation immigrants of South Asian descent in the United States", therefore becoming a place for South Asian immigrants to come to when feeling homesick, and they want a taste of the culture in the United States, as Elizabeth Chacko and her colleague point out, further driving Kaur's point. Kurien provides the example of how Sikh identities changed change as a result of immigrant political activism, more specifically Sikh activism. In addition to the evolution that the Organization of Hindu Malayalees has partaken in, as a result of some Hindus becoming culturally assimilated with American culture, which plays a part in maintaining a balance between the culture, as how connected an individual is with Hindu culture greatly affects the extent to which American culture shapes your identity, as immigrants who are loosely connected with Hindu culture will tend to incorporate more aspects of American culture within the identity.

Culture VS Mental Health

When looking at the effects that cultural assimilation has on individual identity, it is important to take into account not only the cultural and societal effects but also the psychological impacts on one's mental health. As the move from a country and culture that is halfway across the world tends to be a stress-inducing process for many individuals who identify themselves as immigrants and their families. For instance, a study on the issues that Indian Americans living within the United States face as they deal with transitions related to immigration and culture (2007), revealed India's collectivist family view and respect based hierarchy often resulted in the development of stress, following the move to America and culturally transitioning, as the distance between India and America causes a strain in this relationships, in addition to the changing opinions of Indians living in the United States. As worries continue to form about the health of family and friends living in India, within the short time living in the United States, the toll of these worries on the mental health of an individual can be quite extensive. As many immigrants families within the United States, live with the constant worry that if something were to happen to their family and friends living in India, health-wise, they would be able to make it home fast enough to aid them during this time. While the transition from India to America may result in stress, stress is not the only psychological impact that this transition induces, as a result of it being a transition in the terms of both, distance and culture. As stated by Vaghela and his colleague, professionals from the Florida State University and Vanderbilt University with doctoral degrees in the subject of philosophy, "identity pairings are associated with mental health such as how lower levels of identity conflicts are associated with lower levels of depression and other mental disorders and vice versa".(Vaghela & Ueno, 2017)In addition to the association between low levels of identity conflicts and lower levels of depression and other mental disorders, Vaghela and his

colleague point out the fact, that a growing conflict between the identity of second-generation Asian adolescents can lead to deteriorating mental health that can lead the individual to get hospitalized if the identity conflict is not resolved. Hence, acknowledging the mental health problems that arise, portrays how assimilating into the US has affected a second-generation Indian American's identity. Moreover, cultural assimilation had a negative impact on the cultural identity of second-generation Indian Americans living in the United States after the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 was implemented. As it impacted the lives of millions of immigrants from Asia desiring to come to the United States for its opportunities, with its abolishment of Nation origins quota, limiting nationalities present within the United States to two percent.

The Recommendation

As assimilation in culture continues to take a part in the formation of identities of immigrants living within the United States, the address the growing influence of cultural assimilation on their children's identity becomes increasingly prevalent. Through the analysis of the relationship between cultural assimilation and second-generation identities, it can be seen that culture and identity conflicts are becoming increasingly prevalent when assessing the identities of second-generation Indian Americans within the United States. In the examination of this issue from a sociocultural perspective, it becomes apparent that while having a hybrid identity and being culturally assimilated into American culture proposes some positive benefits, it is crucial to take into account the negative that come about from this process. However, given the contrasting claims surrounding cultural assimilation and the identity of second-generation Indian Americans, it becomes difficult to determine the best cultural balance that is beneficial to both cultures and proposes no negative psychological effects on the individual. Therefore, to curb the presence of cultural and identity conflicts within the United States, the only solution with potential is the inclusivity of cultural schemas and addressing the psychological problems that come along with cultural assimilation by attending therapy or talking it out with others.

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge the help of Mr. Jim Haisler in guiding the creation of this literature review. I would also like to take a moment to thank my family and friends for supporting me on my academic endeavors.

References

- Asher, N. (2008). Listening to Hyphenated Americans: Hybrid Identities of Youth From Immigrant Families. *Theory Into Practice*, 47(1), 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405840701764680>
- Chacko, E., & Menon, R. (2013). Longings and belongings: Indian American youth identity, folk dance competitions, and the construction of 'tradition'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(1), 97-116. https://www2.gwu.edu/~sigur/assets/docs/publications/journals/2011/Chacko_2011_longing_EthnicRacial.pdf
- Chauhan, Rahul Vrajlal, "Psychocultural issues and defining events in the formation process of identity development in Second-Generation Indian -Americans" (2004). *ETD Collection for Fordham University*. AAI3134434.
- Flores, V.I. (2015). Cultural identity : different ways of constructing identity for first-and-Second-Generation immigrants in The namesake, by Jhumpa Lahiri. <https://rdu.unc.edu.ar/handle/11086/2287>

- Gelfand, M. J., Caluori, N., Jackson, J. C., & Taylor, M. K. (2020). The cultural evolutionary trade-off of ritualistic synchrony. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 375(1805), 20190432.
- Kaur, J. (2008). Indian apparel consumption: a cross-cultural comparison of first generation Indian and the Second-Generation Indian American females. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Title-%3A-Indian-Apparel-Consumption-%3A-A-Comparison-Kaur/8a915a7a8f79eb3a9f6b70fc163cf52e406734bb#paper-header>
- Kurien, P. (1998). Becoming American by becoming Hindu: Indian Americans take their place at the multicultural table. *Gatherings in diaspora: Religious communities and the new immigration*, 37, 70. http://www.bu.edu/religion/files/pdf/becoming_american.pdf
- Kurien, P. (2018). Shifting US racial and ethnic identities and Sikh American activism. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 4(5), 81-98. <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/4/5/81>
- Ladha, Sonia, "Second-Generation Immigrant Adaptation: Construction of a Hybrid Cultural Identity" (2005). University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations. 219. <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/219>
- Lahiri, J. (2004). *The namesake*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Maira, S. (1996). Ethnic Identity Development of Second-Generation Indian American Adolescents. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED398324.pdf>
- Mary Hanna and Jeanne Batalova. (2021, May 17). *Immigrants from Asia in the United States*. migrationpolicy.org. Retrieved March 29, 2022, from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrants-asia-united-states-2020#:~:text=With%20the%20passage%20of%20the,29%2Dfold%20increase%20from%201960>.
- Nikon Europe. (2014, July 18). *Nikon D810 | The Song of Freedom at the Estonian Song & Dance Festival* [Video]. YouTube
- Rastogi, M. (2007). Coping with Transitions in Asian Indian Families: Systemic Clinical Interventions with Immigrants. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 26(2), 55–67. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jsyt.2007.26.2.55>
- Tirumala, L. N. (2009). *Bollywood movies and cultural identity construction among Second-Generation Indian Americans* (Doctoral dissertation). https://ttu-ir.tdl.org/bitstream/handle/2346/18773/Tirumala_Lakshmi_Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Vaghela, P., & Ueno, K. (2017). Racial-ethnic Identity Pairings and Mental Health of Second-Generation Asian Adolescents. *Sociological Perspectives*, 60(4), 834–852. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26579836>