

# ‘American Desi’: Multiple Identities among Contemporary Asian Indians

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## Introduction

About fifteen years ago when I lived in Northern California, I came across many Indians living there. Not expecting to find so many Indians in the US, I, as a specialist of modern Indian studies, was interested in who they were and why they were there. Since then, I have been observing Indians in America whenever the opportunity arises.

Indians in the United States, officially known as “Asian Indians,” are relative new comers. This community has been growing rapidly: the population of Asian Indians is now the third largest among Asian Americans, within only two generations of migrants to the country.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the trends and characteristics of contemporary Asian Indians as one of the American community in the US. My examination pays particular attention to their relationship to India, which differentiates this paper from existing studies on Asian Indians in the United States.

There are a number of studies on Asian Indians conducted from historical and sociological perspectives. But because reliable data on the entire community are limited to population census and immigration records, it is difficult to attain a more comprehensive view of the Asian Indian community.

To address this problem, this paper uses not only these secondary data but also extracts information from other sources, such as my personal interviews conducted in the United States, the Asian Indian media, and the media in India. Nevertheless, this paper may also suffer from the same limitation of not being able to capture fully the experiences of the entire community.

## 1. Asian Indians as Asian Americans

‘Asian Indians’ is one ethnic category in the US census. This category refers to both people who migrated from India and people whose ancestors migrated to the British Colonies and then migrated to America. It has become an independent sub-category within the category of “Asian Americans” since the Census of 1980.

There are two types of Asian Indians. The first type refers to the first wave of Asian Indians who migrated in the early 20th century. Many of them were young single males from Indian villages. They worked as agricultural laborers and construction workers on the West Coast, mainly in California. After the Immigration Act of 1924, they were forced to leave the US and went back to India. Some of those older immigrants married Hispanic women and settled in the countryside of California.

The second type refers to contemporary Asian Indians who migrated to America or were born in America after the 1965 US Immigration and Naturalization Act. Because of the huge historical gap between the two waves of immigrants, they maintain limited contact. Currently, the second type comprises the majority of Asian Indians. Since there are a number of notable studies on the older waves of Asian Indian immigrants (La Brack, 1988; Leonard, 1992; Singh, 1960), this paper covers the second type only.

In the 1960s and 1970s, students and young specialists from India went to America and stayed there for their further education. Sensing more opportunities in that country, many of them decided never to go back to their home country. There are a number of success stories about those pioneers, which enticed young and talented to become future migrants. Since the late 1970s till today, thousands of legal immigrants from India have been crossing the sea to go to the US each year.

According to the Census of 1980, in which the subcategory of 'Asian Indians' was employed for the first time, the population of Asian Indians was 387,223. This number grew rapidly, reaching 815,447 in the Census of 1990 and 1,645,510 in the Census of 2000.

Another migration spurt came at the end of the 20th century. Asian Indians contributed significantly to the solution of the Y2K problem. This raised their social standing in America and the number of new Indians entering the US jumped. In the early 2000s, more than seven thousand Indians have been going to America annually.

Asian Indians are concentrated in major metropolitan areas. In 2000, the biggest population was in California, followed by those in New Jersey, New York, Illinois, and Texas. The highest density of Asian Indians, meanwhile, is found in New Jersey, where every fiftieth resident is an Asian Indian. These states also have large populations of other major Asian groups such as Chinese and Filipinos.

In addition, we can also find a substantial number of Asian Indians in smaller, more rural states and areas without many other Asians, are barely found. This scattering of Asian Indians across the US demonstrates that the professions of Asian Indians, such as medical doctors, professors, teachers, and motel owners, generally not much dependent on ethnic community so that Asian Indians can survive in America in diverse social climates.

In addition to population distribution, the Census of 2000 reports on income. The median income of Asian Indians was \$43,539 and the percentage of Asian Indians with bachelor's degrees was 63.9%. These numbers are the highest among all Asian groups.

As mentioned above, the contemporary Asian Indian society as a whole looks considerably well-off and stable in America. Asian Indians are often called a 'model minority' or 'elite ethnics,' and they proudly admit that they are.

## **2. Indians as Desis**

Although Asian Indians are quite successful and seem to enjoy their lives in the United States, they do not strive for complete assimilation to the American culture. On the contrary, there is enthusiasm among Asian Indians in looking back towards India.

Thanks to the development of information technology and transportation, and also to their own economic strength, Asian Indians can enjoy constant communication with and make frequent home trips to India. Because of this closeness to India, living in New York or San Jose is not much different from living in Delhi or Bangalore. Even for American-born Asian Indians, India is not a foreign country but, rather, a place where they can visit their grandparents every holiday. The lifestyle of their cousins in India is also westernized due to the influence of American TV dramas and movies.

In their neighborhoods, offices and schools in America, Asian Indians can easily find fellow countrymates with whom to spend time and socialize.<sup>1)</sup> As Indians they can buy necessary items and afford the services from Indian groceries and retailers or from the internet of Indian specialties. They can spend weekends with close Indian friends in their home in the US watching Bollywood movies and Cricket matches on Satellite TV from India,<sup>2)</sup> or go to Indian community centers and religious places like Hindu temples where they enjoy can a pleasant atmosphere which includes communicating in their native language and familiar cultural activities. Their children can also attend Indian language classes or dance lessons and can learn the Indian values and culture to be a *descent* Indian.<sup>3)</sup>

Each individual of Asian Indians identifies not only as an Indian but also belonging to sub-communities within the community of Asian Indians. Asian Indians in general have a complicated background distinguished by castes, regions of family origin, ethnicity, and religions. With the growing numbers of Asian Indians in America, it is now possible to find *suitable* friends from a similar background. Unsatisfied with a general Asian Indian identity, a number of Indians leave 'All-India' type associations and join or make smaller groups for Indian sub-communities such as Bengalis, Punjabis (regional), Jains, and Parsis (religious).<sup>4)</sup>

In this context, the word 'American Desi' is frequently being used by Asian Indians with a new connotation. 'Desi' is a Hindi word, meaning 'native person.' This word has been used by Indian communities abroad to distinguish them from the people of the host country. Today,

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<sup>1)</sup> In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, "The Namesake," the family of the Indian protagonist living in New England spent every weekend with Bengali families who came from their homeland area, and never tried to build close relationship with ordinary Americans. Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 62-63

<sup>2)</sup> Movies and cricket are two major forms of modern entertainments in India. They are also important types of entertainments for overseas Indians. Because of the large size of the overseas Indian audiences, the Indian movie industry cannot ignore this market anymore. A new type of films called 'NRI movies' are coming out, they are shot in London, New York, or Dubai, and feature Indians living abroad (e.g. *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge*, and *Kal Ho Na Ho*). These films attract audiences in India that enjoy the flavor of foreign dramas. At the same time, these films satisfy overseas Indians by giving them the feeling that their world is a part of India. Influenced by the passion of their parents' generation towards cricket, the American-born youth also prefer that sports. Many of American born Asian Indians never play baseball or football. Cricket is not well-known in the United States. But in the college towns and the suburban areas of major cities, cricket is often played by South Asians and other ethnic minorities on weekends. There are regional cricket leagues in California and New York. In recent years, the Cricket National Team of the United States was formed by those minorities and participated in international competitions.

because of the image of successful overseas Indians, Asian Indians living in America prefer to be introduced to Indians in India as ‘American Desis.’ The use of this phrase has a very symbolic meaning, making Indians in India envious.

This is in sharp contrast to the history of overseas Indians in general, dating back to the old days of British India. In India, overseas Indians had been looked down upon because it was believed that they gave up their homeland and lived among corrupted infidels so they were complete foreigners. Even Indians who have migrated to developed countries in recent years have been regarded in the same way.

But the situation has changed. Because of India’s rapid economic growth and its presence in international politics, successful overseas Indians are now regarded as the pride of India.<sup>5)</sup> Reflecting this change, the Government of India now recognizes these people officially as ‘NRI’ (Non-Resident Indians) or ‘PIO’ (Person of Indian Origin) and gives them political and financial advantages in order to promote their economic activities related to India.<sup>6)</sup> The link between India and American Desis is not limited to economic and family affairs. Political forces in India influenced by Hindu nationalism have pointed to successful Desis as evidence of a great and shining India.<sup>7)</sup>

These new developments seem to suggest that India and American Desis are finally in love with each other, both prefer the concept of ‘American Desi’ over that of ‘Asian Indian.’ Among American Desis, the expression ‘Desi’ raises familiar, vivid, and sometimes sore feelings, which come from the winding road they have traveled. The official category of ‘Asian Indian’ does not convey such sentimental feelings.

### 3. ‘Indianness’: A Strategic Choice

Because of the positive image of Asian Indians as a model minority, being an Asian Indian has some advantages in America. But even after establishing their stable positions in America,

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<sup>3)</sup> Community centers are the gateway to knowing about the Indian community in each region. Many of the Indian community centers used to support social issues like housing, jobs, legal issues, medical advice, and welfare. More recently, they have been specializing in cultural issues such as holding traditional festivals, organizing Indian cultural classes and cultural education programs for the younger generations, and providing venues for various activities. Sekiguchi Mari, “Amerika ni okeru Indo-kei Komyuniti no Soshiki to Media” [Organizations and the Ethnic Media of Asian Indians in the United States], in *Ekkyō suru Minami Asiakei Imin* [South Asian Immigrants Crossing Border: The Relation with the Host Countries], ed. Minamino Takeshi, Sekiguchi Mari, and Sawa Munenori (University of Tokyo, 2001), 105–120; Mari Sekiguchi, “Between ABCD and DCBA: Rise of the New Generation in Asian Indians in the United States,” in *South Asian Migration in Comparative Perspective: Movement, Settlement and Diaspora, Population Movement in the Modern World V*, eds. Y. Hase, H. Miyake, and F. Oshikawa, JCAS Symposium Series 13 (2002), 101–114.

<sup>4)</sup> In 936, Zoroastrians from Persia settled on the Northwest coast of India where they became known as Parsis. Despite being a very small community, Parsis are famous for being successful businessmen and intellectuals, such as the Tata business family or the music conductor Zubin Mehta. Due to a decreasing birthrate and increasing immigration to abroad, the Parsi community in India is shrinking. As a result, Parsis in the United States are regarded as the key to the community’s future.

the treatment of most of Asian Indians is still based on appearance and religion. Unlike Caucasians, the skin color of the average Indian is not fair; the majority of Indians are not Christian. Moreover, the distance between the polytheism of Hindu and the monotheism of Christianity is huge. How often Asian Indians must find these differences between the 'American Standard' and themselves insurmountable, and thus feel handicapped?

Historically, one option for American minorities has been to abandon tradition and be absorbed into American culture to avoid prejudice and discrimination. Contemporary Asian Indians, especially American-born youth, tend to take pride in their uniqueness of an Indian. They often call this uniqueness 'Indianness.'

Asian Indian youth, similar to youth from other immigrant communities, feel torn between the values of their parents and those of America. The second generation also uses the term of 'ABCD,' short for 'an American Born Child of a Desi,' or more often jokingly described as 'an American Born Confused Desi.' However, Asian Indian youth seem to accept the two worlds and their multiple identities as something positive. They often make fun of their 'Confusion.'<sup>8)</sup> The American-born generation is quite active; students often organize their own associations

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<sup>5)</sup> For example, they include V.S. Naipaul, a novelist from an Indian immigrant family in Trinidad and a Nobel Prize laureate in 2001, and Salman Rushdie, a novelist famous for his controversial work, *the Satanic Verses*, born and raised in Bombay and residing in England. These two writers are of Indian origin but most of Indians treated them as foreigners and not much attention was paid to their works until the past decade. Naipaul was especially infamous for his harsh and critical attitudes toward India. Now these two have become the pride of India and have been covered extensively by the Indian media. It now seems that their criticism of India is regarded as coming from Indians. Naipaul and Rushdie also act as they are considered Indian intellectuals. Another example is an astronaut Kalpana Chaula who died in the Space Shuttle explosion in 2003. She came from North India but abandoned her original citizenship to become an US citizen because US citizenship was required to become a NASA specialist. Because of her US citizenship, her first Space Shuttle mission in 1996 was almost ignored in India. But after the second and last mission for her in 2003, she came to be known all over India. After the tragedy, she was honored by the Indian government as a heroine of India. Another interesting example is the politician, Bobby Zindal, who contested the election for the governor of Louisiana (and lost) and is now a Republican Congressman. The Indian media focused in details on his campaign for Congress in 2004. India was crazed over his triumph. But the Asian Indian community in America did not receive his political success warmly. They appreciated his political achievements but he did not represent the interests of the Asian Indian Community or of minorities in general. Though he was an Asian Indian, he presented himself as an ordinary American so that he is accepted by his constituency in Louisiana where not many Asian Indians lived. On this point, Zindal was not well-received by the Asian Indian community in the United States.

<sup>6)</sup> As an additional advantage, the Government of India is now considering the introduction of a dual citizenship system for overseas Indians.

<sup>7)</sup> 'India Shining' was the campaign slogan of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the incumbent party at that time, in the Indian general elections of 2004. Though the BJP lost the election, 'India Shining' or 'Shining India' has become a popular catchphrase alluding to the rising economic and political power of India as recognized by the Indian mass media as well as by overseas communities.

<sup>8)</sup> ABCD writers often choose generational and cultural gaps between Indian parents and American-born children as themes in their writings. On the other hand, they also make fun of their parents' accented English, Hindu rituals and other Indian particularities in their conversation.

for Asian Indians. They enthusiastically learn about India, often discovering the greatness of Indian Civilization. They are keen on offering Indian cultural programs to their non-Indian neighbors as well as organizing social activities and charity drives for India. After graduating, many join similar organizations for youth (often called 'Professional Associations'). Through these networks and activities, they become more confident in their Indianness.<sup>9)</sup>

Due to social trends that periodically include things Indian, Americans have become more open to Indian culture. For sophisticated people in cities whom young Asian Indians usually associate with, Indian things such as philosophy, yoga, art, and music are 'cool.' Thus, the Indianness of these young Asian Indians becomes an asset which other elite Americans can not be acquirable.

#### 4. American Desis in the Era of Globalization

Even though Asian Indians are relatively new to the United States and their population is still small, they now form more than just a minority group. They do not need support from American society but rather they have responsibilities to the society because they have enough ability, economic strength, and social influence.

However, in general they are not very committed to the social issues. Unlike Japanese Americans who once suffered in their history, Asian Indians have limited experiences of discrimination in American society. For this reason, Asian Indians did not need to unite the entire community in order to confront adverse conditions and protect the community. Thus, on both an individual and a community level, Asian Indians (even when he/she is economically self-sufficient) have not been active in taking political or social action.

This tendency still continues today. 'September 11' could have been a turning point because after the event, a number of Asian Indians were harassed and attacked by people who misunderstood what their backgrounds were. This was the first time for Asian Indians to realize that they are different from most Americans and are at risk of being the target of discrimination and hate crimes. Unfortunately, however, these occurrences were not enough to change their general tendencies.

Compared to their apathetic behavior towards American society, Asian Indians' exposure to and concern for Indian affairs is increasing day by day. Examining various Indian media, Asian Indian media, newspapers, magazines, broadcasts, internet events, etc, it is difficult to

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<sup>9)</sup> Network of Indian Professionals (Netip) is one such organization for the younger generation of Asian Indians. Netip holds a huge annual conference each year at luxurious venues like five-star hotels. Netip branches found in most major cities in the United States, support members in constructing business and personal networks through meetings and activities. An especially important role of these group activities for Asian Indian youth is to provide opportunities to find a good match in the Indian matrimonial system. Sekiguchi Mari, "Amerika no Indokei Komyuniti no Saikin no Dōkō to Dainisedai no Esunikku Soshiki ni okeru Indo no Juyō" [The Current Situation of Asian Indians in the United States and the Acceptance of the 'Indianness' from the Second generations], in *Kan Indoyō Sekai ni okeru Network to Chiiki Keisei* [The Construction of the Network and Area in the Pan Pacific Region], ed., Hirose Masashi, Discussion Paper, 2002.

distinguish between Indian issues and American issues. From the information found on the internet, it is almost impossible to infer whether someone is originally from India or elsewhere.

Among migrants in general, it is not unusual for the first generation to look toward the homeland. But what distinguishes Asian Indians from other migrant communities is the continuation of this gaze generations later. American multiculturalism allows Asian Indians to retain their values. India's political and economic success in the globalizing world encourage the pride to be an Indian. In this point of view, to preserve such Indian values is meaningful for Asian Indians. This situation contributes to the spread of, Indian Nationalism, linking Asian Indians to India through the shared feeling of 'We, Indians.'

As Americans, Asian Indians enjoy a privileged life, an efficient public system, security and a status of an American citizen which all Indian are envious. At the same time, they are Desis, the natives of India, the world's oldest and greatest civilization. The expression 'American Desi' symbolizes their multiple identities and their pride associated with these identities.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to provide an overview of the Asian Indian society in America, focusing on those who belong to the typical 'model minority' type. Asian Indians today are more diverse, including people who do not fit this characterization. The role of non-elite Indians is not well-documented in this paper nor in existing studies. It may also be important to distinguishing between Asian Indians who are naturalized Americans and those who are Indian citizens with work visas, due to their different legal status. Due to the unavailability of proper data, these issues are not investigated here. They are thus left for future research agendas.