

# **Calibrating Identities: The Indian Diaspora in the United States**

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## **Introduction:**

*“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both”*

~ C.W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 1959

Students of social sciences, despite their allegiance to divergent schools of thought have come to collectively acknowledge the constant interdependence of the social and the individual. The two not only shape each other, but also feed off of one another. While personal narratives provide an insight into broader socio historical realities, cultural milieu amongst other factors moulds one’s personality. Larger structural forces and individual agency are thus inextricably linked. In today’s increasingly globalised world, one cannot study any community or culture in isolation. The colossal exercise of Globalisation has not only encouraged resource exchange, regular travel, and communication between nations, but also led to higher rates of migration, placing those in the ‘diaspora’ in the category of a ‘transnational community’ with links beyond borders. Certain questions then come to mind. Is such a diasporic community different or similar to citizens in the motherland? How does their process of identity formation differ from those in their land of origin? What factors account for the same? Which place do these individuals call ‘home’? It would be worthwhile to explore the intended and unintended consequences produced by such diasporic diversity, vis-a-vis the way it views the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’, in context of the Indian Diaspora in the States.

## **Research Question:**

What elements constitute the Identity Formation of young adults of the Indian diaspora in the United States?

## **Aim and Rationale of Choosing the topic:**

The motivation to choose this topic of research was personal. Although I was born and brought up in India, my closest friends have constantly moved in and out of the United States

ever since I knew them (which was, through our community affiliations). They moved to different states, at distinct ages and for varying periods of time, and happened to be the first, second, or even third generation immigrants, thus having their own, unique experiences and distinct opinions. While not much was noticeable in our interactions as children, in their recent visits to India, one could tell how different their lifestyle, perspectives and mindsets were, from other people around me. Such a process of identity formation in no way can be unidirectional. Hence, the aim was to investigate what differences and similarities the diaspora shared with the citizens of India. While my focus was on young adults from ages 15 to 22, I also engaged in conversations with their parents, who many a time seemed to differ in their outlook, from their children. It was interesting to note how age, gender, sexuality, caste, class, religion, citizenship and language among other elements, influenced their structuring of the idea of the self and society.

### **Methodology: Approach and Tools**

The approach chosen to analyse the topic, falls under the category of Trans-Disciplinarity, and the method used is that of Life Narratives/Oral Histories. The former is ‘a path to curriculum integration which dissolves the boundaries between the conventional disciplines and organises teaching and learning around the construction of meaning in the context of real-world problems or themes’<sup>1</sup>. The study has borrowed concepts from Social psychology, like the Social Identity theory (Henry Tajfel, 1978), studying the influence of the social context in shaping an individual’s emotions, thoughts and identity, alongside the Sociological vantage of ‘Social Construction of Reality’ (Peter Burger and Thomas Lukmann, 1966). The integration of the two perspectives; looking at the micro and the macro, help in a comprehensive interrogation of the so-called starkly different ‘collectivistic’ and ‘individualistic’ cultures of India and America, and their impact on Identity formation on the diaspora.

#### **1. Primary Data:**

Oral history, as a method to understand lives, has transformed both the content of history, and the process of writing it. Despite challenges, like that of subjectivity in interpretation and credibility of memory, the method holds utmost importance,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/glossary-curriculum-terminology/t/transdisciplinary-approach>

especially to study categories like that of women, who have been hidden from history. The method aids the scholar in straddling through the elusive divide between the personal narrative and the objective truth. These accounts help reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individual, but also that of the wider society, offering us a window into the historical, political, social, and transnational contexts that shape lived experiences. First, a preliminary Questionnaire was sent to all participants, to get a basic understanding of their travel years, reasons behind the same etc. Such a method is usually cost efficient, and quick. Following this, the Interview method was used to collect rich, in-depth qualitative data, through open-ended questions.

## 2. Secondary Data:

Around twenty-five articles, essays and book chapters were used to get a holistic understanding of the concepts of Diaspora, Transnationalism and Collective and Individualistic cultures, to name a few. Class lectures and discussions on kinship, and bollywood films like *Kabhie Khushi Kabhi Gham* and *Kal Ho Na Ho*, with plots revolving around the Indian Diaspora in the West, too, guided the analysis.

## **Diaspora and Transnationalism: An Introduction**

Thomas Faist, in the book *Diaspora and Transnationalism* (2010) elucidated upon the historical meaning and usage of the terms ‘Diaspora’ and ‘Transnationalism’, their evolution, similarities and differences. These concepts have served as prominent research lenses to view the aftermath of international migration, and although both terms refer to cross-border processes, diaspora as a term is much older.

For the Greeks, notes Mukesh Bagoria in *Tracing the Historical Migration of Indians to the United States* (2010), the term ‘Diaspora’ was used to describe the colonisation of Asian Minor and Mediterranean in the Archaic period (800-600 B.C.E). However, in the contemporary world of globalisation, the term denotes much more. Diaspora has often been used to ‘denote religious or national groups living outside an (imagined) homeland’<sup>2</sup>, whereas transnationalism is ‘often used both more narrowly – to refer to migrants’ durable ties across

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<sup>2</sup> Faist, Thomas. 2010. “Diaspora and Transnationalism: What kind of dance partners?”. In *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, edited by Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, 9-34. Amsterdam University Press.

countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organisations’<sup>3</sup>.

Causes of movement have changed, and are highly varied. A considerable number of people moved to the States after India and Pakistan's independence in 1947, and later after the enactment of the 1965 Immigration laws. Once India decided to open up its economy around the 1990s, parallel to the information technology boom in the United States, computer software engineers from India migrated in large numbers. As of May 2023, over 4.5 million Indians live in the United States<sup>4</sup>.

Over the last two decades, the term ‘diaspora’ has become popular in both academic literature and public discourses. While the usages of the terms ‘Diaspora’ and ‘Transnationalism’ often overlap, ‘diasporic phenomena can be conceived as a subset of transnational social formations that have broader scope’<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Data Collected:**

##### **1. In-depth interviews**

##### **2. Survey: In a nutshell** (For charts, go to appendix)

- The focus of the study was on 9 young adults
- 2 identified as Males and 7 as Females
- 1 was 15 years old, 2 were 16 years old, 3 were 20 years and 3 were 22 years old
- 3 of them were students in India, 3 of them were students in America and 3 were working in America
- 5 of them were American citizens, 2 were green card holders and 2 were Indian citizens
- They lived in a number of states in America: Illinois, Los Angeles, Texas, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Oregon
- They lived in a number of states in India as well: Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana
- 7 of them moved to the States because of their father’s job, and 2 of them (sisters) because of their mother’s job, who was also a citizen
- All of them live in nuclear families

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_Americans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Americans)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

- 8 of them moved back in between for a few years due to various reasons: grandparent's ill health/demise, desire to be closer to family and community, on recommendation by religious leader, recession in the States
- 3 of these participants live in India at present and aspire to shift to either the States or other countries, as soon as possible. 5 of them who reside in the US want to continue to do so, and 1 wants to leave the US whenever possible, though unsure to which place

### **Interpretation:**

This research compiled a number of specified topics under a single heading. Since the aim was to examine the process of identity formation amongst the Indian diaspora in the United States, one had to study as many of its socio-cultural determinants as possible. Certain queries prefaced the interactions.

To begin with, could a diaspora ever be clubbed in a single category? Gijbert Oonk in *Global Indian Diasporas: Exploring Trajectories of Migration and Theory* (2007) explained that there were in fact, limits to the diaspora concept, since there were many South Asian Migrants who did not fit into the Indian diaspora owing to their diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, the causes and durations of their migrations, and the extent to which they adapt to local societies. While certain characteristics did mark a diaspora, quite a few overseas Indians were not interested in reconnecting with their homeland. In *The Conundrum of 'Home' in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora: An Interpretive Analysis* (2015), Chandrima Karmakar wrote about how the idea of a diaspora gave rise to an ambiguity when one tried to locate their 'home'- with a community with some members clearly lost in nostalgia, and some who find it difficult to understand the nostalgia. Thus, while attempting to study the Identity Formation process of these young adults, the study tried encompassing a number of facets.

As the theory of sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann suggests, 'not only do we construct our own society and realities through social interactions, but we also accept it as it is because others have created it before us'. Society, according to this theory, is in fact shaped by humans and human interaction, which the authors call 'habitualization'. In other words, society is, in fact, a "habit" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.71).

Henry Tajfel's 'Social Identity Theory', similarly targets to specify and predict the circumstances under which people think of themselves as individuals, or as group members by 'social categorization, identification, and then comparison'<sup>6</sup>. As Masaki Yuki in *Intergroup Comparison versus Intra Group Relationships: A Cross-Cultural Examination of Social Identity Theory in North American and East Asian Cultural Contexts* (2003) noted, 'when individuals categorise the 'self' and view themselves as indistinguishable from their in-group, they also view other in-group members as interchangeable with one another. In other words, depersonalization as a process takes place at the collective level'<sup>7</sup>. This is, certainly, considered to be all the stronger in Collectivistic Cultures, like India.

Both Collectivism and Individualism are multidimensional constructs to study cultures and societies (Triandis et al. 1986), the principal distinction being the level of in-group identity (Triandis et al. 1988; Yamaguchi 1994). The central theme of individualism is the 'conception of individuals as autonomous beings who are separate from groups; the central theme of collectivism is the conception of individuals as aspects of groups or collectives.'<sup>8</sup> The United States and East Asia have most often been treated as prototypes of the two extremes. Is it really the case? Are there any variations? Let us evaluate this as we review the Identity Formation process.

### **1. Caste: still a factor shaping the 'Self'?**

Tajfel's Social identity theory is primarily intergroup-focused. It identifies intergroup comparison as a key source of in-group identification. However, South and East Asian collectivism is based largely on intra-group cooperation. Based on the three models of Collectivism, South and East Asian cultures are characterised by the relational and the coexistence modes- with either porous boundaries between in-group members or a separation between publicly collectivist and privately individual and relational selves<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Tajfel, Henri.& Turner, J.C. 1986. The Social Identity Theory of Inter-Group Behaviour. In S. Worchel and W. G. Austin (Eds.). *The Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Vol. 2, pp. 7-24.

<sup>7</sup> Yuki, Masaki. 2003. "Intergroup Comparison versus Intragroup Relationships: A Cross-Cultural Examination of Social Identity Theory in North American and East Asian Cultural Contexts." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66, no. 2 : 166-83.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

The Caste System in the Indian context thus becomes important. It has operated as a pan-Indian system of categorisation, exclusion, hierarchy and oppression for centuries. Although it stems from Hinduism, through historical occurrences and trajectories in the subcontinent, people from other religious communities also associate themselves with one of the five major *Varnas*, or the sixth bracket of the *Panchamas* (untouchables). Intra-group, i.e., Intra-Caste allegiance hence, is most prominent and visible in India, till date. Thus, the intragroup relational model better suits the Indian situation by postulating that the goal of East Asian group behaviours is to maintain mutually beneficial relationships with fellow in-group members, based primarily on the self as a relational unit and on an awareness of one's in-groups as networks of relationships<sup>10</sup>.

In the interview, when the participants were asked whether they ever felt out of place in either of the two countries, it felt like one had opened up a Pandora's box. All of them had distinct experiences to share: from racism to class-based discrimination. One of them, 20y Female, studying at Pittsburg, in this very context, spoke of how she experienced Indian-Americans initiating conversation by asking about her caste. *"Oh accha, Kayastha ho?"* (Oh, so you belong to the *Kayastha* caste?), she recalled. *"Indians would never let go of Caste. In fact, many Indian-Americans seem to be all the more protective of this very system, since it has remained as a connection to their so-called roots."*, she claimed.

Another participant, 15y Female, a high school student in India, explained how although she was too young to know about caste when she was in the US, it may have precisely been because she was privileged enough not to be aware of it. *"As we came back to India, I heard boys and girls asking me if I was a Brahmin or a Vaishya. I was puzzled. I had to ask my parents what caste we belonged to. But today, at an age when I read the newspaper, daily caste violence comes as no surprise to one."*

Another friend, 22y Female, working in Boston spoke in a mocking tone: *"The US has its own problems. I do not hope to stay here all my life. But India is no less. Growing up around*

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- <sup>10</sup> Yuki, Masaki. 2003. Intergroup Comparison versus Intragroup Relationships: A Cross-Cultural Examination of Social Identity Theory in North American and East Asian Cultural Contexts. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66, no. 2.

*violence against the lower castes pushed me to align myself to the Marxist school of thought. Indian-Americans, at least the ones I have met, tend to perpetuate the caste system as much.”*

Without a doubt, Dalits’ (untouchables) lives are rarely at the centre of discussions of South Asian diaspora, similar to their case within the Nation. As scholars Shweta Adur and Anjana Narayan (2017) wrote, ‘being double minorities, their bid to assimilate is thwarted not only by racism in the mainstream US but also by casteism within their own ethnic communities, making them a diaspora within a diaspora’<sup>11</sup>. Despite their upper-class, seemingly assimilated lives, Dalit immigrants in the US continue to remain on the fringes of dominant and conservative Indian American culture.

As one understands it, the Indian Diaspora in the United States seems to be in a conflict in relation to the maintenance of their Caste identities. While many Indian Americans practise endogamy, many others are increasingly marrying outside nationalities. Does this mean caste does not matter to them? This can be a topic for an even specified, future study. However, one thing is assured in either scenario: these people are well aware of both- their caste, and the potential importance it holds.

## **2. Class: a perineal source of identity formation**

Well known as the ‘Cradle of Capitalism’, people across the world aspire to move to the United States in hopes of a well-paying job and higher standards of living. All the persons interviewed in this study shifted to the States for the same. When asked about life in the US, a 22y Female working in Texas said *“I mean, you know how America is called a ‘class-society’- it’s true. The gap between the poor and the rich is obvious. But I mean, isn’t it blatantly obvious in India as well?”*

A 20y Male currently studying in IIT, India, spoke of how he went to a ‘cheaper school’ while studying in the States. *“You know how we knew we weren’t well-to-do by American standards? Our entire apartment building only had Indian residents! Not that my school was bad- it was great. But I had other Indian-American friends going to richer, private schools.*

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<sup>11</sup> Adur, Shweta Majumdar, and Anjana Narayan. 2017. “Stories of Dalit Diaspora: Migration, Life Narratives and Caste in the US”. *Biography* 40, no. 1: 244–64.



*And oh, they flaunted that in more than one way. I didn't care much about Americans doing the same, they're born with that privilege. But it's strange when Indians back home look at you as an elite-star and better-off Indians here smirk at you” he expressed.*

Class as an integral facet of Identity, even for young adults, was then visible. There was a complexity in self-estimate based on perception of the other. While some of them knew that they were on the lower side of the class hierarchy in the States, their ego was bolstered when visiting India, where knowing that one lives in America is a matter of pride in itself. *“In India, having a househelp is taken for granted. Your house work is taken care of by someone else. That isn't the case in the US. Only the richest can afford help- and oh, even they have to be treated with utmost respect. Not how we take our didis for granted.”* conveyed a 16y Female respondent, who happens to be an American citizen, but currently living in India.

On similar lines, Vibha Bhalla (2008) wrote on how gendered class experiences were for the diaspora. Migration had not only snatched working women's class privileges by having to perform servants' chores as part of their wifely duties, but also newer tasks which were for them, 'male oriented'- like yard work, grocery shopping, and driving children around for their various activities<sup>12</sup>. What one can make out then, is the simultaneous occurrence of a dual, almost dichotomous process: the participants were humbled by doing all chores on their own in the US, and at the same time treated as elites when visiting India, further inflated by their accents. However, both these processes were equally influenced by gender.

### **3. Gender and Sexuality**

Discrimination based on gender, and subjection of women hasn't lost the taint of its brutal origin. As John Stuart Mill addressed in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), the general opinion of men (and women alike) is that a woman's natural vocation is that of a wife and mother- she has to dress and behave elegantly, as womanhood is 'morally' supreme. Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) noted that men learned to institute dominance and hierarchy over other people by their earlier practice of doing so on their women.

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<sup>12</sup> Bhalla, Vibha. 2008. 'Couch Potatoes and Super-Women': Gender, Migration, and the Emerging Discourse on Housework among Asian Indian Immigrants. *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27, no. 4:71-99.

However, one may assume that in an open, liberal and Individualistic society like that of America, gender roles wouldn't have remained stagnant. This, of course, initiates a debate in itself. Our focus though, is on the Indian Diaspora in the States. What shape has their life taken after migration? How has it influenced the identity formation process of young adults?

In April 1991 a letter written by Ms. Subbi Mathur and titled “*Couch Potatoes and Super-Women*” appeared in *India Abroad*, the first newspaper of the non-native Indian community in the US<sup>13</sup>. The letter focused on Indian immigrant wives’ increasing workload as a consequence of migration and their transformation into ‘super-women’ who continuously juggled between household chores and careers. In sharp contrast, the letter labelled Indian immigrant husbands as ‘couch potatoes’, who seemed rather oblivious to their wives’ increasing chores and instead chose to remain glued to the television.

Immigrant families obviously hope to create a ‘home away from home’, to recuperate the loss of homeland. In this exercise, roles and codes of femininity and womanhood, masculinity and manhood are defined. Women, globally become the sign and the marker of political goals, cultural identity, and signifiers of the community’s honour<sup>14</sup>. In this study, two out of the nine interviewees, who happened to be sisters, were born in the States due to their mother’s job, who had worked all her life in the field of Computational biology. Mothers of the rest of the participant’s were homemakers in the States, or had done voluntary work on and off. When in India, most of them had jobs. Nandi Bhatia in *Women, Homelands and the Indian Diaspora* (1998) put together how in the context of shifting and multiple identities, narratives that present cultural ideals of home as fixed and symbolic of national boundaries are regressive mechanisms that seek to structure women’s lives. They perpetuate women’s systematic subjugation, being all the more detrimental to their positions in a racist society where stereotypes of ‘Asian’ women abound and affect their subjectivities<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Adur, Shweta Majumdar, and Anjana Narayan. 2017. “Stories of Dalit Diaspora: Migration, Life Narratives and Caste in the US”. *Biography* 40, no. 1: 244–64.

<sup>15</sup> Bhatia, Nandi. 1998. “Women, Homelands and the Indian Diaspora”. *The Centennial Review* 42, no. 3: 511–26.

Out of the nine respondents, two identified as gay, 1 as bisexual, while the others were heterosexual. All the nine participants talked about how ‘accepting’ the US as a society is, making it one of the major reasons they would also like to settle there. One of the females, aged 20, identifying as queer explained *“Now see that's what. For someone like me, America is a better place to be in, knowing I can't be myself back in India, let alone dream of marrying another girl one day. But mind you, it is a better place only in comparison to India. Gender parity in wages is still a major issue. Abortion is banned in so many states! This is a topic of discussion in its own right.”* Another participant, a 20y male studying at Yale claimed America to be the closest to Democratic values and equality. *“I'm sure my male privilege has a role to play here, but I don't think it gets better than America anywhere else in the world.”*

All the female respondents spoke profusely of how they felt ‘safer’ wearing clothes of their choice in the States than in India. *“India has what, one woman raped every fifteen minutes? Whatever the statistics may be, my parents never put any conditions on what I wore back in the US. Here (India) you straight up get stared at and harassed, clothing of course being only one of the reasons. We recently went for vacation abroad, and they had no objections to what I wore!”* expressed one of the female participants.

Another female participant, aged 22, had come to visit India after seven years. *“My wardrobe back home had nothing India friendly haha! I've only got jeans- rest I'll buy from here. Cannot take a risk.”* she said. *“....It took them (parents) time to get acquainted with the American way of life and clothing. I mean I get it, it's not our culture. But now that we're here to stay, we need to blend in.”* she continued.

Experiences of the male and female interviewees were certainly different, in both the countries. While the males reportedly felt the same, in terms of safety, in both India and America, the females felt more liberated in the States. They felt comfortable expressing their sexuality and style of clothing in the latter. However, one must note, for some of them, it was not visits to India alone that alerted them, but also trips back from college to home, to their families, who imposed certain ‘values’ and ‘culture’ themselves.

#### **4. Religion: one of the closest links to ‘Indian’ identity**

The very basis of knowing the interviewees for this study, was through our common religious community. All of our parents have been followers of a particular sect of Hinduism, which although has its headquarters in Agra, India, has branches/smaller associations world wide. All participants exclaimed that whether or not they believed in the faith today, it had a significant role to play in their growing up years.

*“For both me and my parents, the Satsang community became the closest we felt to home. We used to look forward to the weekends, even though we had to drive three hours from Austin to Houston. We have grown up with these values. And we have made friendships of a lifetime through it!”* a 22y female working in Texas, recalled.

None of the nine interviewees ate meat, smoked cigarettes or drank alcohol. *“This is how we were brought up. I remember, I did try alcohol once at a freshers party, and died of guilt. I could never tell my parents about it. And honestly, I don't wish to have it again.”* recounted a 20y male in Chicago. Two of the interviewees on the other hand expressed their desire to try it once to see what all the hype was about.

Religious identity, in India as in much of the world, is a prominent marker of power, status and privilege. Certainly, as Emile Durkheim and many others propounded, religion serves social function by maintaining group identity. solidarity and coordination. It can, in the same breadth, be the cause of intergroup rivalry and conflict. Most importantly, whether one believes in religion or not, the communal aspect of it cannot be ignored.

*“Till date, the idea of Seva (service) and the zeal to prepare for Basant is constant. And I don't think that would ever leave me. I may be conflicted by the philosophy of religion, but there's no way I can ever question the community it provided me with.”* revealed a 16y female living in Pennsylvania. *“Haha, you know how it is. Kahin bhi jao, pata hai ki koi na koi satsangi nikal hi aayega madad ke liye.”* (haha, wherever you go you know you'll find some satsangi through connections and they'll be ready to help) exclaimed her 20y sister.

## **5. Culture: Food, Language and National sentiments**

When I asked my interviewees about one thing they would retain in their everyday life from Indian culture, all nine of them enthusiastically responded by saying 'food', 'Hindi' and

‘traditional attire’. Unquestionably, food, language and clothing are aspects of culture that have led to the genesis and preservation of communities and societies universally.

“*There's no better food than Indian food. The spices and masalas man!*” exclaimed one of the participants. “*It's hard to find actual good Indian food restaurants here.*” sighed another. When at home, all the participants had Indian meals on a daily basis, most often prepared by their mothers. In *Food, Identity, and Cultural Reproduction in Immigrant Communities* (2014), Fabio Parasecoli elucidated upon how immigrants recreate a sense of place and space through food production, preparation, and consumption, both at the personal and interpersonal levels, in order to cope with disorientation and movement. Hence meanings attributed to food are never completely defined once and for all, rather are negotiated and transformed through practices, discourse, and representations. Due to the (un)availability of ingredients, the exposure to different flavours and techniques, immigrants constantly need to shape and reshape culinary systems. Women are likely to be in charge of cultural reproduction through food, trying to meet expectations that certain dishes and meals maintain similarities with preexisting customs.

As M.N Karna in *Language, Region and National Identity* (1999) explains, language is the maker of nationalism, acting as its vehicle of expansion. The speakers of the same language develop a common bond and share a ‘common store of social memories’ as language establishes a link with the past. Without a doubt then, language can be intimately related to ideology and power, especially in collectivistic cultures like India. ‘The dominant language, both inter and intra state(s) are viewed as a symbol of identity and integration’<sup>16</sup>.

My interviewees had interesting instances to share. For all of them, Hindi was like a code language in the US. While a few of them were not as fluent in it, they could understand it just as well. One of the participants, a 20y female, had to move to Hyderabad, India, for her mother’s job. She recalled, “*That's when the north-south divide became so evident. Everyone knew Telugu. Devi\* (her sister) and I felt left out. We felt as protective and possessive of Hindi there, as we do here, in the States!*” Another female, 22y old stated “*Ah how I love when I hear*

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<sup>16</sup> Rahman, Tariq.2002. “Language, Power and Ideology.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 44/45: 4556–60.

\* Name changed

*someone speak in hindi in public transport! It's not like we don't have Indians here in Texas, but they're mostly south Indians. So I can speak in Hindi only at home”*

Earlier, language was simply seen as a vehicle for the transmission of ‘ideas’. It was through works of linguists, anthropologists like Morgan and sociologists like Durkheim that a distinct relationship between kinship, nomenclature, collective representations and its social usages was acknowledged. Thus, as Sapir noted, language is a form of socialisation, a symbol of social cohesion, and a culture-preserving instrument<sup>17</sup>.

All the interviewees were conflicted about holding national sentiments for either of the countries, though they did feel more protective about India. In their opinion, both the countries had their own strengths and weaknesses. *“I remember, even in the 1st grade, we used to have emergency drills in school to prepare for mass shootings. It's beyond sad. But then, India, too, has its own problems right.”* recalled one of the participants. Although only four of the interviewees kept tabs on everyday happenings in India, when asked what nationalism meant to them, they said they felt a sense of pride *‘when India achieved something’*. Out of nine, eight of the participants indicated a preference for their potential partner to be *at least* Asian, if not Indian, so that they *‘understand their culture better’*. However, eventually, while these young adults realised that their ethnic roots were in India, they were not sure if they could call India ‘Home’ anymore, except one 16y female participant.

## **6. Viewing the ‘Other’: the Indian Vantage**

On exchanging dialogue with the participants during the interview, one realised that a great deal of how they perceive themselves was based on how both- Americans in the US and Indians in India saw them. NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) are many times jokingly called *‘ABCD’- American Born Confused Desi*. There exist many stereotypes about the diaspora, regarding their food habits, how they only wear Indian attire on a festival, how they don't understand Hindi properly, can barely tolerate spice etc. Such labels exist in the US too, with respect to how Indians and their food ‘smell bad’, how their accent is strange and of course, how dark they are, in colour.

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<sup>17</sup> Barker, George C.1945. “The Social Functions of Language.” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 2, no. 4: 228–34.

*“It’s funny really. When I first moved to the US, I remember a girl mocking me for my accent. Today, whenever I visit India, I make sure to only speak in Hindi, knowing I would be made fun of if my accent comes out in English. But even my Hindi is made fun of, so I don’t know where to go lol.”* expressed a participant. *“Oh please! Like all Indians have high spice tolerance. Why should I become the laughing stalk of the day?”* disclosed another. *“Colourism is prevalent in both the countries. At least I have been targeted for my dark skin in both places.”* revealed a third one.

However, at the same time, the diaspora is viewed as high in Symbolic Capital (Pierre Bourdieu, 1979) by Indians. A culmination of what is considered highly valued and sophisticated in a particular society, symbolic capital may be both a cause and consequence of increased levels of economic, cultural and social respect and recognition (capital). *“When I first entered my old apartment in Noida after seven years, my neighbours looked at me as if I was a celebrity. Initially even though we did not have our home in the US, just staying there was a matter of pride for my relatives.”* jokingly recalled one of the respondents.

C.H Cooley’s ‘Looking-Glass Self’ theory (1902) explains how one’s self image is based on others’ perception of the self, as the people around us become ‘mirrors’. Joy and grief depend on the treatment the rudimentary social self receives<sup>18</sup>. The theory involves a three-step understanding of self-based on a) how one imagines one appears to others, b) how one reacts to others judgement and c) how one develops a sense of self and responds through perceived judgements. A discussion on stereotypes and labels is closely linked with the concept of ‘Othering’. ‘Othering’ becomes the foundation on which groups base identities that subsume within themselves a sense of inequality and marginality.<sup>19</sup> There is little doubt that concept of ‘Othering’ is founded on the idea of similarity and difference that in turn shapes our sense of identity and social belonging. Identities do have a component of uniqueness. Many societies manage collective ideas about who gets to belong to their group and which types of people are seen as different – the strangers to the society.

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<sup>18</sup> Cooley, C.H. 2011. ‘Looking Glass-Self’. In Jodi O’Brien. (Ed.). *Production of Reality: Essays and Readings on Social Interaction*. pp 126-128: Sage Publications.

<sup>19</sup> <https://otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/>

## **Conclusion:**

This short research paper would hopefully materialise into an expansive project, wherein one would look into issues that could not be dealt with over here, like impact of political affiliations of persons in their identity formation. The aim was to at once generalise propositions as well as dig into particularities. Conclusively, it was apparent that while the engagement with the idea of 'home' is a common factor among the diaspora, its value differs from one to the other depending on their socio-economic background and the generation to which they belong<sup>20</sup>. As Chandrima Karmakar writes, for second and third generation migrants, India is not '*Desh*'<sup>21</sup>. It was made clear that the 'Indian Diaspora' like Indian citizens back home, is not a single category that can be united under one flag. However, that being said, there is still a sense of 'Indianness' that solidifies the Indian-American community, and certainly, Caste-consciousness is still alive. As identity formation is a lifelong process in itself, it must be understood through different and overlapping axes of differentiation in terms of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, generation, and religion.

## **Limitations:**

- The Interview method, being a qualitative one, always poses a risk of bias, subjectivity and differences in interpretation. Although one tries avoiding these by framing clear questions and taking down meticulous notes, the risk remains inherent.
- Since I have known these families all my life, complete objectivity could not have been a possibility. However, the same was also an advantage- I knew intimate details and stories.
- The case study involves only five families, of a particular religious community. This certainly has its own consequences in terms of shaping their children's identity and social relations.
- The study noted experiences of only two males.

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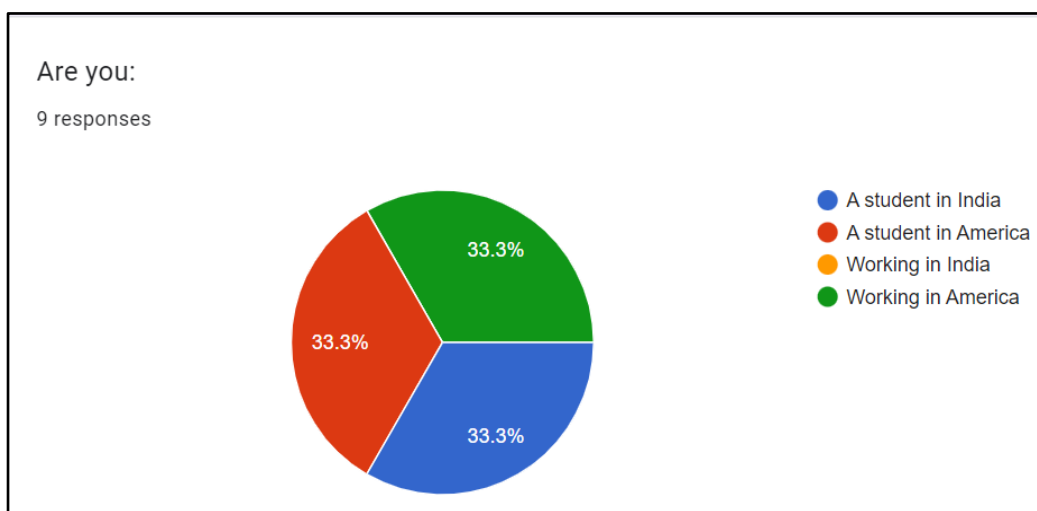
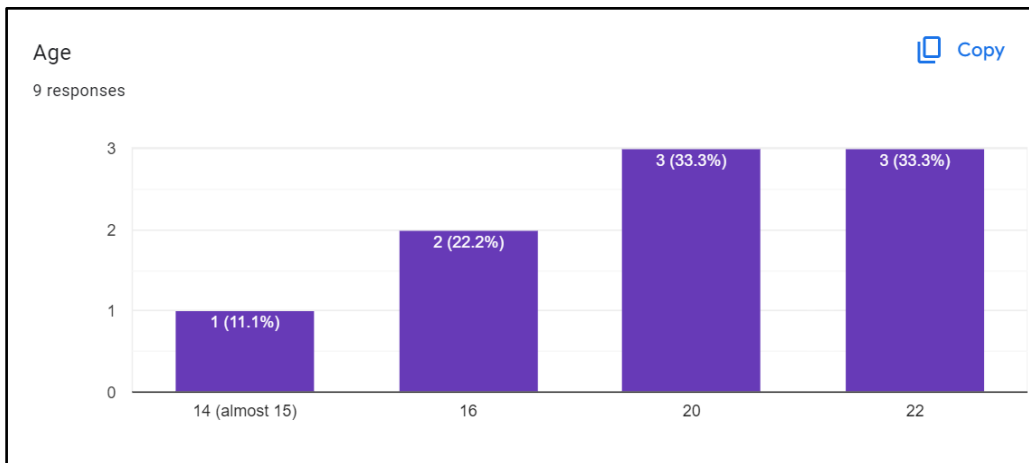
<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



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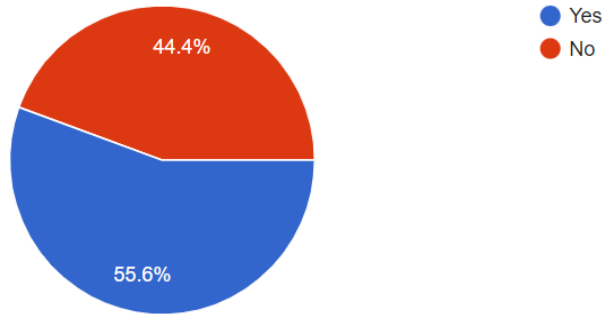
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## Appendix



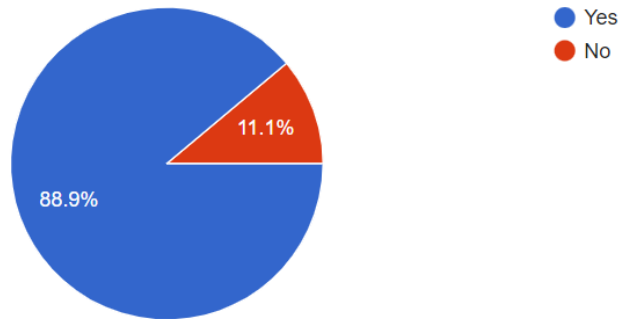
Were you born in the US?

9 responses



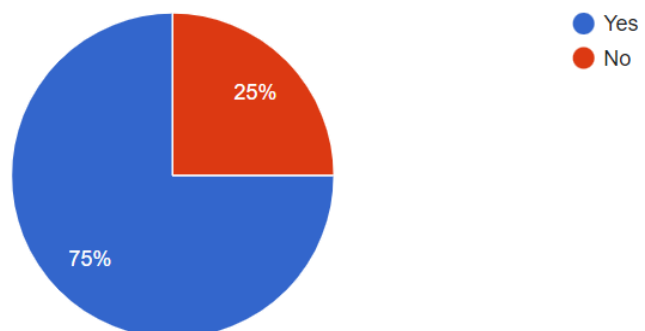
Did you shift back to India after some time?

9 responses



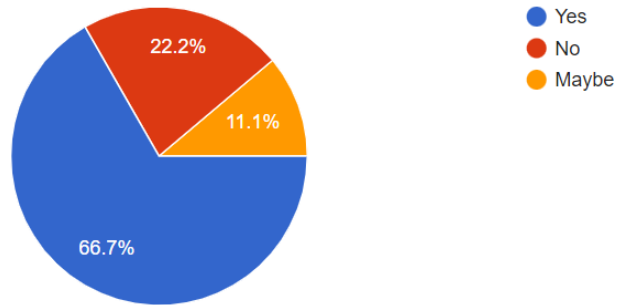
Did you move to the US again?

8 responses



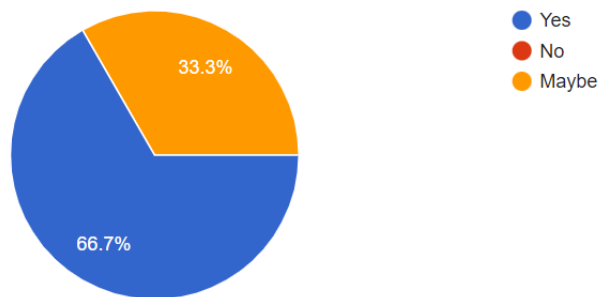
Do you hope to stay in the country you live in, right now?

9 responses



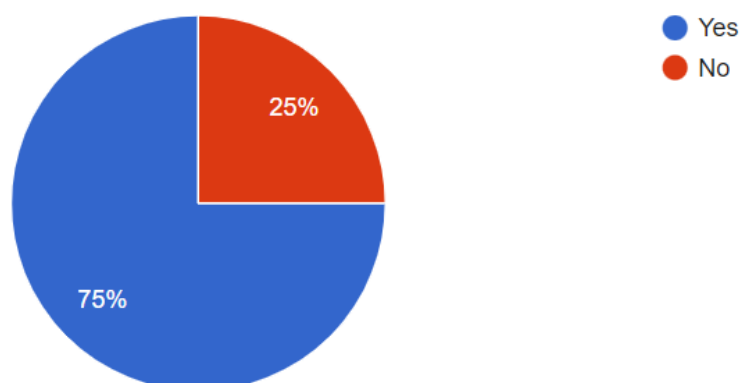
If you are presently in India, do you aspire to go to the States (or anywhere abroad) in the future?

3 responses



If not citizenship, do you hold a green card?

4 responses



What is one major aspect of Indian lifestyle/culture that you would want to carry with you irrespective of your place of residence? (if any)

9 responses

Indian food (if that counts as culture) and my faith in the religion I follow

I'll get back to you :)

The idea of togetherness. Bringing people together and celebrate indian cultures.

The food.

The tradition around home remedies and hospitality that I constantly saw the mothers in our society displaying. The use of the remedies may be debated as to whether they work or not (since the answer differs from person to person), however, the intention behind preparing a home remedy, and the nostalgic comfort that comes with one is something very special to me.

LOVE FOR FOOD AND KEEPING IN CONTACT W LOVED ONES

Family values. Plus food obviously.

Music ( and food)