

Immigrant Indians' identity in second-generation Asian American context: interpretation of ethnicity, gender and religion

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to interpret the multidimensional Asian American identity of immigrant Indians in terms of pan-ethnicity, gender and religion.

Design/methodology/approach – The social construction and experience of race in the US and the intersection of multiethnic Asian American identity with race, gender and religion will be used in critically commenting on the interview of primary ethnic identity of Indian Americans including the pan-ethnic identity of Indians in the US as Asian Americans, the Mar Thoma Church community, the second-generation Patel family's union formation in terms of gender identity.

Findings – The future directives include Asian American Movement (AAM) which is trying to incorporate Indians as pan-ethnic identity assimilation and the process of holding American identity as primary identification of Indians.

Practical implications – Policy recommendations are that the US Census Bureau should include Indian Americans as separate ethnic identity for Indian immigrants like the Chinese Americans. USCIS (US Citizenship and Immigration Services) should reform policies to include the wives of H-4 visa holders. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should provide secure living environment for Indian immigrants. The US Department of Labor should provide equal opportunities for women in their immigration policies.

Originality/value – This paper will critically analyze the interview results of primary ethnic identity and justify the hypotheses of Asian American identity of Indians, whether (1) they merge with the American identity as part of cultural assimilation or (2) retain their Asian identity beyond Americanized identity or (3) go beyond both American and Asian identity to restate their Indian ethnicity.

Keywords Cultural assimilation, Culture shock, Social construction, Asian Americans, Model minority, Americanization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The debate about Indian-origin immigrant identities in the United States (US) remains important in the second decade of the 21st century. Different types of immigrants and a range of changing laws have positioned migrants and citizens of Indian origin within a variety of structural factors including pan-ethnicity, gender and religion. This research is important for Asian ethnic studies as it interprets the identity issue of Indian Asian Americans or of both cultural assimilation and disintegration, and it will pave the way forward for future research



on this topic. The second-generation Indians in America are fragmented in terms of triple identity of being Indian, Asian and American; using an intersectional approach, this paper will demonstrate the reasons behind their choice of different identities to assimilate with the American identity subscribing to either White or Black identity or to reinforce their Indianness by identifying themselves with Asian Americans.

The paper will further show the future directives of Indian American identity which include whether (1) they merge with the American identity as part of cultural assimilation or (2) retain their Asian identity beyond Americanized identity or (3) go beyond both American and Asian identity to restate their Indian ethnicity. Using an intersectional approach, this analysis will be organized beginning with pan-ethnicity, then gender and religion consecutively as part of thematic analysis and, finally, in the conclusion, the final results of the future directives of the intersectionality of identity of Indian Americans will be justified by statistical analysis.

Literature review

The existing literature on racialization of Indian Americans will be used by means of an intersectional approach to critically interpret the reasons and future directives of multilayered racialization of this group within a transnational context in the 21st century. According to Professor [Varghese \(2022\)](#), race is “a set of meanings attached to socially salient phenotypes that are used to categorize and sort people into groups that are then hierarchically organized.” Race is defined by [Dhingra and Rodriguez \(2014\)](#) as a social construction which often leads to stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination against the “other” non-whites, especially Asian Americans in the United States. But the irony is that the White or Caucasian immigrants consider Blacks, Latinos and Asians, among others, as immigrants, while they themselves put on firstly the majority and dominant group tags on themselves in terms of population even though they are also immigrants and, secondly, as “locals” or natives or “naturalized” citizens of America. [Mishra \(2016\)](#) shows that how *desis* including Indians divide within their ethnic identity in different professional, political subgroups in terms of class, gender and religion as in H-4 and H-1B visa holders and Mar Thoma Christian communities for their advantage. [Purkayastha \(2005a, b\)](#) shows that in the first decade of the 21st century, the second-generation Indian Americans’ ethnic identity is formed by their racial status not as “white” or “wholly Asian” but as their connection with family members across the globe and their being ethnic consumers of global consumer industry which provides the context of multifaceted identity of Indian Americans in this paper. Most research including [Purkayastha \(2005a, b\)](#) show that Indian Americans are still racialized even after completing the assimilation measures, including membership in non-Indian civic bodies. Some scholars including [Kibria \(2000\)](#) opine that the assimilation measures are wrong. By building upon these research, this paper will try to infer what are the new underlying causes of racialization of Indian Americans. [Joshi \(2006\)](#) shows how the second-generation Indians’ identities have developed distinctively from their parents and how religion often exerted a dramatic effect. By adding gender into [Joshi’s \(2006\)](#) religion as ethnic identifier will be used to show how these two affect the ethnic identity of second-generation Indians and will be contextualized for Patel community. [Joshi \(2020\)](#) provides the context of religious dimension of identity by connecting Christian privilege and White Supremacy, whereas in this paper, Christian privilege is associated with colored Indian’s assimilation with American hierarchy in terms of economic ascendancy. [Espiritu \(1997\)](#) shows how racist and gendered labor conditions and immigration laws impact the power structure between Asian American men and women. This study will carry these findings further by using intersectional approach of racialization of gender and ethnic identity of second-generation Indian Americans by immigration laws in the context of the second decade

of the 21st century. Based on the study of [Purkayastha \(2005a, b\)](#), the struggles of highly skilled Asian Indian women within the context of immigration policies, work place and household experiences will be used here to investigate further into the assimilation measures of Indian American women. [Narayan and Purkayastha \(2008\)](#) show how diverse and culturally dynamic South Asian women's religious practices emerge within the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender with religion, which will be used to dissect the ethno-religious boundaries of Indian women within the intersection of history and politics of the US. [Banerjee \(2022\)](#) provides insights into the gendered racialization of visa policy on the skilled wives with H-4 visa of H-B1 visa holder highly skilled males, and this result will be contextualized within the boundaries of ethno-national identity formation of Indian women.

The history of subjugating Asian Americans began by drawing on the distinction of White and non-White ("the other") including Asian Americans and Latinos. In *Breaking Ground of Public Broadcasting Service (2020)*, the distinction of races was determined by anthropologists as barbaric (non-Whites) and enlightened (Whites). There are many consequences of these racial discriminations such as immigration laws, racial profiling and hate crimes. Naturalization Law (1790 and 1870), The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), Jim Crow legislation, Immigration and Nationality Act barred non-White peoples to enter into the US and to mark them as "undocumented immigrants" ([Center for Migration Studies, 1987](#)). The Civil Rights Movement during 1954–68 was initiated to abolish institutional racial segregation including banning interracial marriage. As a result, Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, which banned all racial segregation on institutional level ([Dhingra and Rodriguez, 2014](#)).

Restrictions and exclusion of other minority groups followed. All the Asian ethnic groups including Indian Americans were required racial prerequisites to naturalization. [Dhingra and Rodriguez \(2014\)](#) say that Sorabjee, a Parsi Indian, became first naturalized citizen in 1890. During late-1890, Sikh Indians came to the West Coast, and Bengali Indians came to the Eastern Coast. The Indian pioneering migrants were predominantly Sikhs whose religious affiliation is distinct from Hindu Indians, but they were generalized and labeled as "Hindoos" ([Varghese, 2022](#)). Furthermore, they were affected by the Asian Immigration Ban of 1917. "Hindus too Brunette to vote here" is the title of a paper-cutting of 1923, which states that not even high-caste Brahmins were allowed the right to vote as they were not recognized as "free White persons" by the court even after scientific evidence of them being the descendant of the same Caucasian as any White person. In 1923, a soldier army, Bhagat Singh Thind, of Indian origin pledged for his citizenship as "Caucasian," but the court dismissed his case saying, "Hindu is not white." Asian Migration Ban was rescinded in 1965 when Indians were classified in the Census as white. They lobbied to get out of that category successfully and were placed within the Asian American race category. The success of Patel Indians in America mirrors the rise of Indian Americans in the US motel industry as they own half of that industry, leading them to be jokingly referred to as the Patel Motel Cartel ([Bhattacharjee, 2018](#)). The first Gujarati hotelier in the United States was a man named Kanji Manchhu Desai who took over a California hotel. Having immigrant parents who ran motels, many second- and third-generation Gujaratis in the United States imbibed an entrepreneurial spirit and ethic to launch their own business. In the US Census of 1980, Indian Americans were racially categorized as "Asian Indians," not as "Indian Americans," which further adds complexity to the question of their identity. On the other hand, the Indians claim themselves by phenotypic identification as "Black" in the US Census of 1990 more than other Asian ethnic groups to get more "racial" benefits from this identity ([Dhingra and Rodriguez, 2014](#), p. 27).

Theoretical frameworks

Identity formation theory is used in the frameworks of "acculturation" or cultural assimilation (to adapt the host culture with immigrant's own culture) as in cultural

“melting pot” where diverse immigrant groups give up their own ethnic identity to join the predominant group’s culture and “culture shock” (reverse reaction to cultural assimilation, dissociation with the host culture) which results when culturally diversified societies in America do not endorse the view of “cultural cosmopolitanism” which celebrates plurality and diversity within and outside the society. The metaphor “salad bowl” demonstrates a policy which celebrates plurality and diversity without which America cannot say that “America is a country of immigrants.” Hall (1989) explores two concepts of cultural identity: firstly, the essentialist view that emphasizes the similarities of diverse ethnic, religious and gender identities, and tags these groups as “one” and “a people” whose identity is stable and unchanging; secondly, the view of historical and sociological contingency which focuses on both the similarities and differences of diverse ethno-cultural, religious and gender groups whose identity is always in a cultural melting pot of their “true selves.” Hall (1989) supports the second view that identity formation is always in a flux as an ongoing process “of becoming” and “being.”

Racial classification theory is categorized into subjective and cognitive frameworks. On the subjective level, the “majority” is referred not as a numerical quantity, but as the membership of a dominant racial group. On the cognitive level, people presume race on behalf of the biological markers which do not tell about the skills or morality of those people.

The otherization theory is also involved in this research as identity formation process of Indians in America involves selfing and othering. It is equivalent to Sartre’s existential theory (Varghese, 2022). While their assumed identity is fixed by the authorities in the US, it is equivalent to *en-soi* or “Being-in-Itself” (*l’être en-soi*), not conscious about their existing identity, they also have conscious identity of themselves as their real identity of self, that is *pour-soi*, or “Being-for-Itself.”

Research methodology

An *online interview* was taken via Zoom meeting where the participants of each target community were asked separately about their primary ethnic identity and the reasons behind choosing that particular identity. The participants were selected from different Indian American social networking websites including Facebook. Responses were recorded in the following table. Detailed responses were analyzed further in the following thematic and statistical analysis section in terms of their relevance of racialization in terms of intersectional approach of ethnicity, gender and religion. The identities are presented in the following table as claimed by the interviewees and not all of these are officially recognized ethnic identity markers as many of the identities (e.g. Christians, Indian Americans) do not conform to the restricted framework of ethnic identity as “Asian Indians” in the US Census. The target communities include first- and second-generation Indian Americans, Patel community, Mar Thoma Church community and H-1B visa holders along with their wives of H-4 visa. A total of 15 participants were selected for each target community, and 90 participated. First-generation interviewees were at least above 45 years old, and second-generation were between 22 and 35 years old. First-generation interviewees held at least graduate degree, while the second-generation held at least higher secondary degree. Consents of the interviewees to participate in this interview were taken beforehand. Participants of the requisite categories were selected from social networks and invited for interview. Only the responses of maximum participants on each category on their ethnic identity are presented here.

The target communities for interview are chosen in terms of first- and second-generation immigrant Indians in America in general for racial identity, Mar Thoma Church community for religious identity and Patel community in America and H-B1 male and H-4 female visa holders for gender identity. As race of Indian Americans is a common concern for all of them,

the target community is set as the whole Indian community irrespective of class, gender, religion and other determiners. For religious identity, Mar Thoma Church community consists of two generations where older generation is loyal to Kerala-based church and the younger to Evangelical Christian church providing religious diversity. For gender entity, Patel community is selected as they (both male and female) represent diverse ethnic affinity in their union formation activities. H-B1 and H-4 visa holders are chosen as they provide a professional viewpoint on gender. In all of four target communities, both first- and second-generation responses will be evaluated for determining their affinity to their ethnic identity or beyond.

Both thematic analysis of intersection of racial, gender and religious identities and statistical analysis of Immigration and Nationality Act, H-4 visa and demographic locations of Indian Asian Americans will be used to justify whether the below stated hypotheses are justified or not.

- (1) Indians in America have separate identity as Asian Americans from East and South-East Asians,
- (2) The second-generation Indian Americans assimilate with union formation activities in terms of gender identity
- (3) The disagreement and negotiation in religious practices and social engagements among generations of Indians as Asian Americans forms social engagement of multigenerational Christian congregation.
- (4) Immigration policies of the US stimulate H-1B visa holder Indian males to assimilate with Americans, while H-4 holder wives of H-1B retain Indianness.

The analysis of important factors including intersection of pan-ethnicity, gender, race and religion with immigration policy, ethno-national status and cultural cosmopolitanism will be vital in the final results of the future directives of restructuring of identity of Indian Asian Americans in the second decade of the 21st century.

Results and discussion

Now the responses in [Table 1](#) will be analyzed to find out the reasons behind the intersectional choices of identity made by participants to justify the claims of the four hypotheses.

Thematic analysis

Race and ethnicity: immigrant Indians in America in general

The question is whether Indians have separate identity as Asian Americans from East and South-East Asians. From interview results ([Table 1](#)), the racial identity formation is seen to be inter-sectioned with gender, ethnicity and religion. The first-generation interviewees racially identify themselves as either “Black” or “White,” which are socially constructed identities on a cognitive level. To add to [Purkayastha’s \(2005a, b\)](#) reasons for racialization including family connections across the globe and their being ethnic consumers, varied ethno-geographical setting all over the US is one of the most important reasons for racialization of second-generation interviewees in the second decade of the 21st century. One group who came from non-Indian ethno-geographical setting mostly identified themselves as “Indian Americans,” taking ethno-national identity, while the other group from Indian ethno-geographical setting proclaimed to be “Asian Americans,” using pan-ethnic Asian identity. The interviewees told about historical, religious and phenotypic differences which continue to racialize them in

| Generations of Indians (ethnic identity formation) | 1. Indians have separate identity as “Indian Americans” (race) | 2. Union formation activities for Indian Patel community in US (gender) | 3. Mar Thoma Church community of Indians (religion) |
|--|--|---|---|
| First-generation Indians | Black/White | *Indian American | Mar Thoma Church- based Indian (Kerala-based) |
| Second generation Indians | Indian American (non-Indian demographic setting) Asian American (Indian demographic setting) | American | Christian American (Evangelical Christian) |
| Patel male (both first- and second-generation) | N/A | Americanized identity | N/A |
| Patel female first-generation | N/A | Patel/Indian ethnic identity | N/A |
| Second-generation Professional H-B1 visa male | American | Asian American identity N/A | N/A |
| Professional H-4 visa female | **Indian ethnic identity (under Trump) **American identity (under Biden) | N/A | N/A |

Note(s): *In actuality Black or White, assigned by government. **most answered both
Source(s): Table by author

Table 1.
Interview responses

largely non-Indian setting due to culture shock even after fulfilling assimilation measures including membership in non-Indian civic bodies, as described in [Purkayastha \(2005a, b\)](#). The US Census did not recognize Indians as “Indian Americans” as opposed to the other Asian subgroups like South-East Asians and East Asians (Kibria in [Schachter, 2014](#)). Even South Asians did not have separate identification as Asian sub-ethnic group and were termed as “ambiguously non-White” according to [Shankar \(1998\)](#). The 1990 US Census ([Hoeffel et al., 2012](#)) also shows that first-generation Indians categorized as Asians are more likely to reject the Asian identity and accept either White or Black identity to assimilate with the majority of the host country. The presumed or subjective racialization in generalizing East and South-East Asian image also do not match with that of Indians due to ascriptive and phenotypic differences. The East Asians welcomed the Vietnamese refugees during the Vietnamese war and in 1980s, but remained indifferent to Indians ([Schachter, 2014](#)). But there was no geopolitical event to facilitate the Indian immigrants integration according to [Bahri \(1998\)](#). The lower socioeconomic status of East and South-East Asians and Indo-Chinese like Vietnamese matched, and these groups shared similar goals and approaches to life which led to their pan-ethnic assimilation. Unlike them, the second-generation Indian interviewees who claimed to be highly skilled and well qualified in education but still failed to assimilate as these assimilation measures were wrong ([Kibria, 2000](#)). Indians are further otherized as they are now recognized as “Asian Indian” in US Census but none of the interviewees claimed to be so. Rather, they hold pour-soi, or Being-for-Itself, active agentic identity due to their presence in larger numbers, only trailing to China. [Khandelwal \(2002\)](#) is supported by the claims of the second-generation Indian interviewees who are more likely to assimilate with the other Asian minorities to form the pan-ethnicity as Asian Americans. To compare the assimilation of the Indian and the Chinese minority groups, [Schachter \(2014\)](#) found that the “nonthreatening” Chinese are subjected to the “model minority myth” propagated by the White American majority as opposed to the AAM, whereas the Indians are treated as “foreigner forever”

through racial discrimination. Charkravorty *et al.* (2016) show that even though 1% of American population is highly paid moneyed class of Indians, they still go through otherization via various sociopolitical measures. First-generation Indians in some cases identify themselves as Black or White, as their pan-ethnic identity as Asian American is often contested due to their phenotypic differences with other Asian American ethnic groups (Schachter, 2014). Another reason is that if the Indians identify themselves with pan-ethnic identity as Asian Americans through cultural assimilation, they are more exposed to racial discrimination according to Kibria (1996). Most of the interviewees in the non-Indian demographic setting provide strategies to hold on to Indian ethnic identity as Indian Americans during the Covid-19 pandemic by using various social media sites and online streaming apps like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar to connect with their relatives in India as well as Indian cultures. Indians are treated as “invaders,” and Chinese coexist with Whites as model minority, and so the Indians “blend in” with the Whites. Finally the ethnographic context of the first-generation Indians also facilitate their identity of merging with dominant Whites, as only 25% of them live in the West Coast and others are spread all over US, whereas 50% of Chinese live in West Coast. As West Coast is a predominantly multi-ethnic region with more exposure to Asian Americans, the 25% of all Indians living in the US identify themselves as Asian Americans. But the remaining 75% Indians are spread out all over the rest of the US mostly comprising of White majority states, leading to their identification as White or Black.

Gender and ethnicity: immigrant Patel community (Indian) in America

Joshi (2006) shows that the second-generation Indians’ identities have developed distinctively from their parents’ identities on which religion often exerted a dramatic effect. By adding gender into Joshi’s (2006) religion as ethnic identifier mostly accounts for the interview responses of formation of ethnic identity of the second-generation Indians and provides context for Patel community. Gender is used by the second-generation Patel immigrant community of India to interact with union formation activities in the US. The Patel-American females are seen as conservative of the “authentic” Patel ethnicity while confronting Americanization or acculturation according to Manohar (2008). Union formation is the process of cohabitation with probable marriage partners and/or direct marriage with partner, here among Patel community immigrants of Indian origin in the US. In union formation, the second-generation Patel female interviewees opine that they are exposed to more restrictions than Patel males, and they go through culture shock according to their public interviews. Furthermore, the second-generation Patels claimed in the interview that they reinforce their ethnic identity while performing union formation activities in both Patel community and American society. The transformation of union formation is twofold: identity-based and culture-based. The identity argument focuses on the bicultural identity of Asian Americans in merging Indian cultures in Western host culture according to Wakil *et al.*, 1981. The culture argument values Indian ethnic cultures irrespective of their affirmation or negation in host culture (Farver *et al.*, 2002). The union formation of the second-generation Patels is gendered, and female members are considered as “keepers” of “authentic” Patel or Indian ethnic identity. Women in Patels are prone to more stringent restrictions on union formation activities like dating, marriage and social congregation rather than Patel men (Manohar, 2008). In the interview, while the first-generation Patel females equated themselves with rebellious female-led movie characters like Patricia Rivera who took military training and exacted vengeance on her assaulters in Laneza, 1987, the second-generation focused on movies like Zongxiang, 2017, where Chinese female agent trio destroy underground money-laundering gangs. According to the first-generation female interviewees, they liked Latino actress more as opposed to Chinese actresses, as during 1980s, Indians felt threatened by the

Chinese who formed pan-ethnicity of “Asian American” with other East Asians neighbors. The second-generation females were more flexible in the second decade of the 21st century and claimed that they see Chinese women as their inspiration to be successful in choosing the preferred Western culture in terms of partner and profession selection. Gender role idealization has changed from first-generation’s “exacting revenge” on aggressive attitudes of American White ruling class to second-generation’s cultural solidarity with Chinese and Americans to choose their own life partner as well as to aspire to enter the highly sophisticated professions like FBI and CIA by defying the stereotyped gender norms. Patels are holding on to their ethnic identity as part of Being-for-Itself or active identity in the face of biculturalism. Gendered ethnicity of Indians is that of women whose conservative response in union formation activities including co-habitation, marriage and presenting themselves as representatives of preserving Indian ethnic identity (Manohar, 2008). Narayan and Purkayastha (2008) explains the process of diversity and culturally dynamic South Asian women’s religious practices. These emerge within the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender with religion, which reflect the responses of the interviewees, and these will be justified by the interview responses of Patel community which explore the ethno-religious boundaries of Indian women within the intersection of history and politics of the US. The second-generation Patel women interviewees claim that religious practice is taught to them as an essential part of female identity, which is supported by different minority right groups. Nagel (1994) identifies ethnicity as a social construct where interaction and negotiation between guest (India) and host (America) lead to cultural assimilation in Indianness merging with Americanization. “Gendered ethnicity and its corresponding interpretation of union formation are the agentic responses of Indians to their structural marginalization as a community of color in the United States” (Manohar, 2008, p. 212). Intersectional theory treats ethnicity as a multifaceted identity as cultural “melting pot” formed from the intersection of ethnic identity and host identity. Indians are, on the one hand, treated as model minorities by the dominant White people while, on the other hand, they are condemned as foreigners and non-Americans due to their non-White phenotype of skin color. Manohar (2008) defines the ethnic identity construction of Indians as “Indians designate the Indian community and Indian families as private spaces-shaped in response to external (‘public’) forces and envisaged as being structurally distinct from their American counterparts,” which is reflected on the views of the first-generation Patel interviewees who believe that protecting their “Indianness” is essential for their active agentic roles. In accordance with Bhattacharjee’s (1997) view of protection policy of the first-generation to save their second-generation from aggression of Americanization, the first-generation interviewees claim to keep on reinforcing the Indian ethnic identity on their children by advising them to watch movies and serials on channels such as Gujarati channels and Star Plus. Gender is constructed in a way that designates women the role of preserver of Indian ethnic rituals and practices. Gupta (1997) draws a fine line of ethnic preservation for women which includes being chaste, embodying Hindu culture through dress, religion, behavior and demeanor; most of the first-generation Patel interviewees consider these to be essential to preserve ethnic purity. The patriarchal gender roles for women also include their sole responsibility in household chores and little to no exposure to public world. But socialization is considered a vital medium in union formation for the second-generation Indian women. Union formation is seen through different spectacles in terms of gendered ethnicity as the first-generation people see dating as an illicit affair between men and women, a sin and social embarrassment which sometimes leads to domestic violence according to the second-generation Patel women interviewees. Along with dating, partying, drinking and sexuality are also considered as the vices of Americanization according to the first-generation Patel interviewees. Furthermore, they claim that movies like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* or *K3G* (2001) provides excellent example of how Indian ethnicity is kept alive by *sangskari bahus* (Indian traditionally cultured wives) of both first- and second-

generation Indians like Jaya and Kajal in London. But there is double standard in the judgement of the first-generation Indians like Patels who only apply these restrictions on social congregation of women and not of men. The second-generation Patel interviewees like Poo (Puja) in K3G (2001) claimed that dating is a way out of the restrictions on women, and they claimed that they used *Bharat Matrimony*, *Tinder* and other matrimonial sites to choose their partners, as these will be helpful for understanding one's male counterpart better with social interaction. The first-generation Indian parents consider arranged marriage of endogamy, which means the custom of marrying only within the limits of local, community, clan or tribe, and here the ethnic Indian Hindu community, to protect ethnic "purity" which is an escape from marrying the "wrong" kind to preserve and transform ethnicity (Mukhi, 2000). Marriage underscores their choice, and they feel humiliated in their role of traditional wife without any voice of individualism as Being-in-Itself or passive agent.

Religion and ethnicity: immigrant Mar Thoma (Christian) church community in America

The disagreement and negotiation in religious practices and social engagements among generations of Christian Indians takes place as they form multigenerational Christian congregation. The first-generation interviewees followed Kerala-based Christian Church doctrines about their religious and ethnic identity, whereas the second-generation formed different perceptions about Asian American to form cognitive identity by getting influenced by American Evangelical Christian community. It is the non-White racial status which barred the first-generation Asian or Indian people from immigrating into the US. But now for the second-generation Indians as Asian Americans, it is the Christian religious values and practices which are incorporating them into Americanization, while the first-generation continues to follow the rituals of ethnic Indian Church of Mar Thoma community. Joshi (2020) provides the context of religious dimension of identity by connecting Christian privilege and White supremacy, whereas the interview responses of the second-generation Indians show that Christian privilege is associated with colored Indian's assimilation with American hierarchy in terms of economic ascendancy. This provides the reason for cultural and religious assimilation of the second-generation Indian Mar Thoma communities as being Christians, as they claim in the interview that they enjoy more social, cultural and economic privileges than other non-Christian Indian Americans. Though Kibria (2000) opines that assimilation measure of economic ascendancy is wrong, the second-generation Indian interviewees claimed that they assimilate with Americans even after being racialized. According to the first-generation Indian interviewees, they formed their religious identity by practicing the beliefs of Mar Thoma Church in Kerala. The first-generation followed the liturgical and formal way of worship in "Church missions" in India, and the second-generation believes in the "church-seeker" tradition of the US Evangelical Christian community where informal and non-liturgical practices lead them to be more tolerant in allowing other ethnic and religious groups to pray. After the 9/11 attack, both generations claimed that they felt "safe" being Christians as is the case of cultural "melting pot" even though their brownish skin color equated them with Muslim Indians who were constantly under severe scrutiny of the US secret service agents (Kurien, 2013). "Serving the needs of immigrants and Evangelic community" is the primary goal of the second generation. These social service defines them as both Christian and American at the same time. Both the generations and especially the second-generation claimed that movies like *My Name is Khan* show how traumatic experiences shaped the identity of Indian American Muslims and being Christian, Indian Americans they can save their face from racial and religious attacks. The second-generation is not given committee positions in the Mar Thoma Church, and they are not encouraged to become church pastors as opposed to the first-generation. The first-generation Mar-Thoma Christians identified themselves ethnically as Indians or

Malayali, and they have the “obligation” of going to Kerala and other parts of India to serve the needy as more needy people live in India than in the US. Almost all the second-generation interviewees identify themselves primarily as Christians than Indian, Malayali or Mar Thomaite. The American Evangelical community influences the second-generation thoughts on being Asian American by forming their Americanized and Christian identity rather than Asian American or Indian identity. Indian ethnic identity is generally associated with Hindu identity which is an ethno-religious identity, and American ethnic identity is usually associated with Christianity which is also an ethno-religious identity. To avoid getting generalized as “Hindus” or Indians, and to avoid hate crimes, they identify themselves as Christians, an ethno-national identity. According to the second-generation interviewees, their civil participation leads to their formation of “Americanized” identity as Christians by eliminating Asian or Indian identity. Unlike them, the first-generation, by reinforcing their Asian American identity, try to hold on to the “pure” Indian ethno-religious identity in terms of their Mar Thoma religious practice.

Statistical analysis

[Espiritu \(1997\)](#) shows how racist and gendered labor conditions and immigration laws impact the power structure between Asian American men and women. Interview responses of H-B1 visa holders and their H-4 visa holders wives account for using intersectional approach of racialization of gender and ethnic identity of the second-generation Indian Americans by immigration laws in the context of the second decade of the 21st century. The statistical analysis of Asian Americans, especially the Indian Americans, will justify the claims made by the H-1B and H-4 visa holder interviewees that the laws, including Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Diversity Visa, H-4 visa and RAISE Act, as well as being highly skilled professionals, they possessed advantage over other Indian Americans and integrated more with the American community to assert their identity as they choose whether to be known as Indian Americans, American Christians or Asian Americans ([Mishra, 2016](#)). The following graphs, charts will provide a statistical basis for acculturation of Indian Americans and show how the first-generation’s culture shock will turn out to be acculturation for the second-generation.

- (1) The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was initiated to maintain the entrance of predominantly White immigrants from Europe in America. But the flow of “unintended immigrants” who are mostly Asians, including Indians and Latinos, the United States according to [Chisti et al. \(2015\)](#) as legal permanent residents among recent arrivals has seen a drastic growth from 297,000 in 1965 to around 1 million in mid-2000.
- (2) Another “Unintended Consequence” was a result of political compromise done to have the contrasting effect. But eventually after the fall of the British Empire, the Europeans mostly decided to stay back at the continent due to economic recession, and Asians and Latin Americans became the mainstream of the immigration. Before 1965, the flow of immigrants was from Europe, and later on Latinos and Asians were responsible for half and one-fourth of total immigrants, respectively, as in MPI report ([2019a, b](#)).

According to Migration Policy Institute (MPI) report ([2019a, b](#)) and [DHS \(2014\) Yearbook of Statistics](#), Indians share 7.7% of all new legal permanent residents of the US as the second largest racial group after the Mexicans. This shows the tendency of assimilating with American identity as Asian Americans or Christians rather than Indian Americans or Hindus. The law changed the racial and ethnic community structures as the number of Hispanics and Asians started to rise to 18 and 6% in 2015, from 4 and 1% in 1965, and

expected to rise to 24 and 14%, respectively. However, the Whites of European origin were reduced to 62% from 84%, and expected to go down to 46% in 2065 according to pew projects.

- (3) The consequences were “unintended” as the US leaders tried to convince people that the bill will not alter the demographic structure of White majority, but it did change. Indians and other Asian Americans who came under this law were highly skilled workers and have made themselves acculturated as they are welcomed by the US government via H-B1 visa with permanent residence and integrated in the US by reaping the harvest of their economic success according to [Chisti *et al.* \(2015\)](#). So, there are also positive way-out of this “unintended immigration.” But still the cultural question looms over the issue of national identity.
- (4) The H-4 is a temporary, non-immigrant visa category for the spouses and unmarried children under 21 years old individuals in one of the non-immigrant visa categories: H-1B (workers in a speciality occupation) and other professional groups including H-2A, H-2B, H3. The H-4 visa shaped the lives of women who came to the US with this visa in many ways. The H-1B visa was given to the highly skilled workers from India like Satya Nadella, CEO, Microsoft, and Sundar Pichai, CEO, Google, coming into the US, while H-4 visas were given to their spouses. Since 2001, 50.5% of H-B1 visas have been awarded to Indian nationals according to [Pew Research center \(2015a, b\)](#).

According to H-1B holder interviewees, it was not only the male skilled workers shifting to the US, but also their whole family moved with them. [Purkayastha \(2005a, b\)](#) demonstrates the struggles of highly skilled Asian Indian women within the context of immigration policies, work place and household experiences which provide insights into investigating further into the assimilation measures of Indian American women. Until 2015, it was legal to live in the US under H-4 visa, but work permit was not granted. As most of the H-B1 workers were Indians and the tradition in India was that the highly skilled workers with highly educated background marry highly educated women who are often highly skilled, so the spouses were allowed to work only after 6 years of staying in the US under H-4 visa in 2015 by Obama administration. Under Trump administration, the Reforming American Immigration for a Strong Economy (RAISE) Act in August 2017 was passed ([Pew Research Center, 2019](#)). The RAISE Act was initiated to decrease the legal immigration to the United States by 50% by reducing the number of green cards. But in 2019, under Trump administration, this largely predominant group of women lost their jobs due to a lawsuit filed by Save Job US, an IT firm. Members of this IT firm claimed that they lost their jobs due to H-B1 visa holders and the Obama administration’s H-B1 visa allowed foreigners to get any job more likely than American workers. It is more likely that if the spouses of H-B1 workers are not allowed to work, they may lose their aspiration to work in the US according to Miano, a lawyer of Save Job US. Under Biden administration, the policy of Trump is reversed, and Diversity Visa and Green cards are being provided to Indians and other minority groups of Asia. Biden proposed to provide permanent work permit to wives of H-1B visa holders, especially Indians, but without permanent citizenship ([Pew Research Center, 2022](#)).

This results in culture shock that the wives of H-B1 professionals go through, and H-4 visa holder interviewees identify themselves as Indian women than American women in the interview. [Banerjee \(2022\)](#) provides insights into the gendered racialization of visa policy on the skilled wives with H-4 visa of H-B1 visa holder highly skilled males, and this result will be contextualized within the boundaries of ethno-national identity formation of Indian women. The sense of being lost in identity crisis results from the existential crisis of those IT expert women who are not allowed Permanent Residence (PR) in the US and the sense of belonging to America is gone. Due to their inactive roles even after being highly skilled IT professionals,

they tend to leave America to other North American countries like Canada, other European countries where they could work as IT experts and exert their identity as the citizenship of that country plus their ethnic and gender identity like Canadian Indian women. According to [Anderson \(2021\)](#), the current Biden administration has agreed to provide automatic work authorization permits to the spouses of H-B1 visa holders. This move would likely allow acculturation for women of Indian origin working in India to exert their active roles in both family and work place, and they will identify themselves more as American free women due to their economic Independence.

- (5) According to Pew Research Center report of 2015, six origin groups make up 85% of all Asian Americans. While the Chinese are the dominant group with 23% of all Asian Americans, the Indians remain the second largest group among Asian Americans with 19% share of the whole Asian American population. The drop to 19% for Indians is the direct result of the anti-immigrant policy of Trump administration.

The 2019 Pew Research Center report ([2019](#)) shows that the six origin groups comprise of 85% of Asian Americans. Here, Chinese, Indians and Filipinos consist of 24%, 21 and 19%, respectively. From 2015 to 2019, the Chinese American population has risen to 24% from 23%, while the Indian population has risen from 19% to 21%. This growth is due to the change in the policy of the US government to allow more citizens from Asian countries including China and India. Both H-B1 and H-4 visa were responsible in the growth of highly skilled immigrant couples from India, leading to their taking American identity.

From final result in [Table 2](#) of comparative analysis of interview results and its comparison with the three hypotheses, the first two hypotheses are proven partially, and the third and fourth fully. It can be claimed that the identity of Indians as the second-generation Asian Americans goes beyond their Asian and American dual identity toward two directions.

In one way, it restates the ethnic Indian identity by reinforcing their Indian origin in union formation activities by Indian females. In the other way, the Christian or American identity is reinforced by the second-generation Mar Thoma Church goers in their religious practice

| Serial | Descriptions of each of the hypotheses | Final decision (yes/no) |
|--------|--|---|
| 1 | Indians in America have separate identity as Asian Americans from East and South-East Asians | Both yes and no Yes: Indian American (non-Indian demographic setting) No: Asian American (Indian demographic setting) |
| 2 | The second-generation Indian Americans assimilate with union formation activities in terms gender identity | Both Yes and No Yes: for male Patels both generation and female second Americanized identity No: for first-generation female Patels – Patel/ Indian ethnic identity |
| 3 | The disagreement and negotiation in religious practices and social engagements among generations of Indians as Asian Americans forms social engagement of multigenerational Christian congregation | Yes Yes for the second-generation Mar Thoma community who identify themselves as Christians unlike the first-generation's ethno-religious Mar Thoma (ethnic) identity |
| 4 | Immigration policies of the US stimulate H-1B visa holder Indian males to assimilate with Americans, while H-4 holder wives of H-1B retain Indianness | Yes H-1B visa holder males mostly assimilate with Americans, while H-4 visa holder wives assimilate with other countries of Western Hemisphere |

Source(s): Table by author

Table 2.
Result of the
hypotheses

influenced by Evangelical Christian beliefs with more civil exposure. The complexities of primary identity of Indians in America are multidimensional including religious, ethno-religious, racial or phenotypic identities which supersede the two extremities of American and Indian ethnic identity alongside Asian American pan-ethnic identity. The Indians as Asian Americans are in continuous struggle to reinforce their ethnic identity, as Indians or South Asians separate themselves from other ethnic Asian American groups like East Asians or South-East Asians. The “unintended consequences” of Immigration and Nationality Act led to the rise in the numbers of Asian American immigrants, especially the Chinese and the Indians. The Diversity Visa (DV) and H-4 visa also were responsible for offering lucrative professional opportunities for the Indian men and women.

Conclusion

The future directives of the identity of Indians as Asian Americans still remains evenly poised. On the one hand, the AAM is trying to incorporate Indians as their own people, and Indian participation in this movement is an encouraging sign for their pan-ethnic identity assimilation. On the other hand, the process of holding American identity as primary identification of Indians due to racial discrimination toward them is still going on via otherization.

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