

The Evolution of Indian Immigration: Identity in the Context of Technological Advancements

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Abstract: Immigration has many patterns that have been present throughout the history of immigration itself. America as a land of immigrants has experienced many of these changes through its time as well, especially after the larger sociological shifts that happened in history. First with the 1965 Immigration Act and subsequent acts, the demographics of immigrants shifted from Europeans to other continents such South America and Asia. In particular was the increase of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent who are some of the least understood peoples of the recent century. As they work to gain their own foothold in America, as everyone else they have been aided by technology. Technology exists as a significant tool in the culturally diverse and different immigrants from the Indian sub-continent, allowing them to maintain their culture in such a way they are able to remain as hyphenated identities, a people of bicultural Indian-American heritage. While this is something that's been relatively unseen before, this relatively new phenomenon speaks to our potential future as global citizens.

Key Words: *Indian Immigration, American Immigration, Biculturalism, IT Revolution, Ethnogenesis*

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INTRODUCTION

Immigration has been an essential part of the American story. It began as pilgrims and colonies ran by England, France, and Spain. While today immigration has become a hot-button issue in terms of legality, citizenship rights, and asylum, America is still made up almost entirely of immigrants or the descendants of immigrants. According to the 2013 American census, only two percent of the American population is 'Native American' and of that two percent, just over half (51%) are a combination of Native American and another race (Census 2016). Meaning that 99% of current-day Americans are effectively immigrants or descendants of immigrants. In effect this means that the history of the United States of America has been built by immigrants. They brought their culture, their ways of life, and their beliefs to the hodgepodge country and found something new and a reason good enough to stay all the way from the time of the pilgrims to present day America.

Many today may believe that this number is too large and contest it has put a strain on the economy, making it difficult for workers such as blue collared workers to find adequate

employment. However this is not the case. Jobs are changing as we move from post-modern times into the silicon age and manufacturing jobs become jobs in the field of information technology. As this field is ever expanding and more and more jobs are opening quicker than America is able to educate and re-educate its citizens, leaving a large gap between what jobs are available and the trained personnel needed in these fields. This has then opened up a large job market for those abroad that has a demographic young enough to be able to enter the IT job market or enter into universities to quicker fill this gap. As a result there is a changing demographic in immigrants themselves, especially in immigrants from the Indian sub-continent. There is an ever increasing number of immigrants from this region of the world and while it is good for America as it means they are on the receiving end of a Brain Gain, this also has a large impact on their culture. These immigrants are old enough to already have a fully formed cultural identity, and so they bring that over with them when they immigrate. As a result many retain part of their home culture and identity while acculturating in such a way that they can function in the United States. Over the history of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent, there has been a significant shift in the way they acculturate in the United States all due to the emerging Technological Revolution. Immigrants from the Indian sub-continent of today are able to become permanently bicultural and maintain a hyphenated Indian-American identity in part due to the rapid evolution of technology allowing eased communications between cultures.

EARLY AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS FROM INDIA: THE SIKHS OF THE 19TH CENTURY

The first from the Indian sub-continent to immigrate to America were the Sikhs of Punjab with the first sole Indian granted admission to the United States of America in 1820 (Rangaswamy 2000:41). While their numbers continued to increase throughout the 19th century, by the 1900 Census there were 2,050 Indians (Rangaswamy 200:41). As described by Juan L. Gonzales Jr. of California State University, “these immigrants were primarily unskilled and uneducated agriculturalists from the rural areas of the Punjab, who arrived as single males or as married men without their wives and children” (1986:42). A large part of this immigration was due in part to a large drought and famine that took a large toll on the farmers in Punjab during the latter part of the 19th century, who were already losing a large yield of their crops to the British system of land-holding that was present at that time (Rangaswamy 2000:42). It was the same pattern as other immigrants from Asia at this time. These were not men looking for a permanent change of residency but men looking for an opportunity to make money to send home, much in the same vein as Chinese immigrants of this same time.

While these men were generally unskilled and uneducated, they did have many skills in agriculture. The Punjab region exists in the northern of the Indian sub-continent, south slightly from the Kashmir region and the Himalayan Mountains and is currently divided between India and Pakistan. As according to Pritam Singh, the name “Punjab” is derived from the Persian words meaning “five rivers” for the five main rivers of the region (2008:3). It is an area that focuses heavily on agriculture and as such, many of these Punjabi men found success in the agricultural sector of places like California in the United States. This is also due in part to how similar the climate and agricultural products is between these two regions (Gonzalez 1986:41). This allowed many of the Sikh men who worked in the agricultural sector to quickly rise in the

ranks by introducing farming methods from their native Punjab to improve the crop yield and agricultural practices which would earn them the nickname of “Hindu Rice Kings” (Rangaswamy 2000:43).

However, despite this success they remained very much outside of the mainstream. While they were not indentured slaves, they were still not a part of the dominant White culture that existed in the United States. Many Whites at this time were fearful of the non-white Sikhs, who were buying and leasing large amounts of land after rising in ranks at other farms. They were a migrant population that saw so much success the Whites felt they were in danger of losing their dominant economic and sociological foothold of the area to people considerably different from themselves. This fear turned into hate that soon was institutionalized with acts such as the Alien Land Acts of California in 1913, the Barred Zone Act of 1917, the 1923 ruling of the *Bhagat Singh Thind* case and another law to affect the Punjabi farmers, the antimiscengenation laws (Rangaswamy 2000:43-44).

Ethnogenesis of These Early Sikh Immigrants

All these laws effectively kept the Sikh immigrants as stagnant, isolated outsiders from the White mainstream. They were not allowed citizenship and thus not allowed to own land. Nor could they even marry someone outside their own race, which in addition to the Barred Zone Act which prevented any other immigrants from the Indian sub-continent, meant the few thousand Indian immigrants felt the brunt of the racism both economically and socially. However, there did exist a small silver lining for these isolated immigrants. Many were able to marry Mexican women, of whom they would usually meet in the agricultural fields they would both work in. In

the documentary, *Roots in the Sand*, the Mexican women are remarked as being very similar to the women of Punjab. They comment how the women of both areas would cover their skin while they worked in the fields, as well as how the women faced similar discrimination as they were not considered White. So as Rangaswamy remarks, “many of them married Mexican women and raised families of Punjabi-Mexican identity.” (Rangaswamy 2000:44) Later on this would be even more advantageous of the couple after being stripped of citizenship due to the *Bhagat Singh Thind* case. If they were able to bear a child, the child would be a citizen by natural birthright, giving the Sikhs a name to register their land and assets under.

The children from these marriages were American for all purposes, but were not part of the cultural mainstream of the United States. Instead they were children of an ethnogenesis between two alternative cultures; Punjabi and Mexican. There became a new Punjabi-Mexican culture in California, though their connections with Punjab would eventually fade. Unfortunately for these children, it's explained in *Roots in the Sand* that many Punjabi fathers were considerably older than their Mexican wives, usually leaving the wives widowed at very young ages. As there would then be no additional tie to Punjab or Punjab culture, these children would grow up in a more Mexican culture, rendering most of the earlier ethnogenesis null. The only real communication between India and the United States at this time had actually nothing to do with maintaining these children as Punjabi-Mexican, but instead was either anti-British politics in nature or simply letters of recruitment from further north trying to enlist more men from Punjab to become lumber workers (Rangaswamy 2000:42).

IMMIGRANTS PRE-1965 IMMIGRATION REFORM

European Immigration in the Post 19th Century Climate

While the 1965 Immigration Act has already been brought up as the figurative doorway between a restrictive, white-washed immigration and less restrictive, more diverse immigration patterns, that's not to say there has only been European immigrants until 1965. That's also not to say that immigration and attitudes towards immigration had remained stagnant from the time of the first Sikh immigrants until this noted date. Even European immigration began to change in the post 19th century climate. The end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century is regarded usually "as the watershed separating the "old" immigration from the "new.""

(Sengstock 2009:5) This is where immigration from Europe was no longer centered on the Western and Scandinavian populations that had long made up the bulk of the American population. Instead there were now what were considered as Ethnic Europeans; the Italians, Poles, Irish, Greeks, Slavs, and Jews (Sengstock 2009:5).

While today they can all be grouped together as a large White mainstream, at this point in time they were as different as could be. The time of their immigration in the early 20th century was at the crux of a very anti-immigration time, where many immigrants were already looked at as a strain on the system (Sengstock 2009:5). Then in addition to the pre-existing resentment, these Ethnic European groups were seen as too different, be it on the base of their darker skin color such as the Italians (Sengstock 2009:14), their history in the context of British history such as the Irish (Sengstock 2009:12), or even their difference in religion, such as the Catholic and Jewish Poles (Sengstock 2009:16-17). The average Ethnic European was as unskilled as the early Sikh immigrants; they usually did not speak the language and came from impoverished areas

themselves in order to find a better life just the same. However they had one advantage the Sikhs did not. As different as the mainstream of the United States found the Ethnic European immigrants, they had the possibility to assimilate.

The Sikhs managed to work out a way to thrive in an alternative mainstream, but for Ethnic Europeans their skin color would allow them the key to accessing the true mainstream of America. At around the time of the Ethnic Europeans' immigration, assimilation was seen as the key to a good life. It was American to assimilate as it showed solidarity with the new culture. Homogeneity was the motto at this time, not only for America but most of Europe, whose rising nationalistic populations believed it was heterogeneity that split up countries and caused wars (Eberhardt 2003:449). So many of these Ethnic European immigrants took it upon themselves to lose their old cultural identity and become fully mainstreamed into what would become the White mainstream of America. There were no trips back to the homeland and there was no wanting to have a hyphenated identity; they soon would become as American as the rest of their neighbors.

Indian Immigrants: Able to Immigrate, Unable to Assimilate

As stated before, despite the Barred Zone Act from 1917, immigrants from the Indian sub-continent did not stop coming to America until 1965. While it was illegal post-1917, the Barred Zone Act was eventually rescinded and replaced with the Luce-Celler Bill of 1946 and were given a low 100 immigrant per year quota but were also once again allowed to be citizens of the United States (Gonzalez 1986:49). However during this time, the Punjabis' numbers had dwindled to a measly 2,405 by 1940, down over a thousand from even 1930 and were now

considerably older on average as “half were over the age of 40, one-third were over 50, and almost one out of ten were over 60.” (Gonzalez 1986:49). So with a low quota set and no real need to bring anyone over, there were very few who actually did immigrate from 1946 to 1965. This is also in part due to India’s independence coming in 1947 and the subsequent years taken to form India into a self-governing state as well as the soon-to-be problems that resulted in Pakistan gaining independence a few months later.

So in effect while there were still immigrants from India at this time, it was a very slow trickle with no apparently overwhelming push or pull factors. As for those who were still in the United States, while they could become citizens now, they could not assimilate like their Ethnic European counterparts, even though they had been in America for longer. Still, their race was something that kept them out of the mainstream, unable to truly become American despite once again being able to become an American citizen.

INDIAN IMMIGRATION, 1965-1995

The Demographic Shift: From the Un-educated to the Educated

The largest change in the demographics of who was immigrating to America came in the years after 1965. 1965 as stated before was a big year as it was the year that President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into effect the 1965 Immigration Reform act, “which abolished the national origins system and replaced it with hemispheric quotas.” (Rangaswamy 2000:44-45) This way it did not matter what country the immigrant was from, but rather the hemisphere, allowing 20,000 immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere every year, although this was notably smaller than the

limit placed on the Western Hemisphere of 170,000(Rangaswamy 2000:45). It would allow a total of 31,200 new immigrants from the Indian sub-continent just within the first five years, although that number would balloon to 176,800 in the seventies and then an additional 261,900 immigrants in the eighties (Rangaswamy 2000:48). This later exponential growth would be at the hands of a statute made in 1976 in which the quotas went from hemispheric to world-wide, setting a total limit of 290,000 new immigrants from anywhere in the world, setting no real preference for one region over another (Rangaswamy 200:46).

Who were these new-wave immigrants from the Indian sub-continent though? Compared to their Sikh predecessors, these new post-1965 immigrants were significantly different. Whereas the agricultural Sikhs were unskilled laborers who came as single men, the dynamics of the new wave would be at the other end of the spectrum. As explained by Rangaswamy, “most of those who immigrated in the first post-1965 wave were urban, middle-class professionals in their twenties and thirties, eager to explore opportunities abroad.” (2000:49) and by 1975, 93% were “professional/technical workers” or their families (2000:47). Obviously this brings about a completely new dynamic as they are skilled, urban, well-educated families. They are not down on their luck or suffering from droughts or famines, but already well-off families who are searching for something else, something greater: their own version of the American dream.

Technological Advances in the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century in America and India

While the immigrants themselves changed, there was a persistent change in the world as well, especially when it came to things like technology. From the technology that was created to destroy in the 40's to the energy technologies that came about in the 70's, the 21st century saw an

exponential increase in technological advances. In the United States, it was a technological arms race against the Soviet as the Cold War quietly raged. This pressure however would be beneficial in the long run as it pushed forward the production of further technology. While not fully the reasoning behind the progression of technology, this would help to result in technologies that would then see the introduction of the home computer in the late seventies, followed by consumer-based internet in the nineties. This quick progression and adaption from government to public consumption in America would help to keep America at the global economic forefront as not only did it hold the technologies, but average citizens had a chance to use these new tools.

On the other hand of this journey, we have the technological advancements that happened in India at this time. India, unlike its western counterpart, would have a significantly more difficult time in the technological domain. This was due to their apparent lack of infrastructure. When America was able to transition from industrial to modern to post mode at a moderate pace thanks to its continual growth, India was not as lucky. The immigrants that were arriving in America from the Indian sub-continent were disproportionately not who the average Indian was. While 93% of immigrants from India were classified as “professional” or as the family of a professional (Rangaswamy 2000:47), the overwhelming majority of Indians were impoverished and still agricultural based such as the Sikhs who immigrated a century prior. It stood as testament to the amount of work that would need to be done in India to progress from a relatively stagnant agricultural and traditional structured economy that had persisted for hundreds of years into a postmodern society.

Despite this, India still knew its future needed some technological infrastructure to be able to compete in the slowly globalizing world, which set the scene for the NCST. The NCST, or Indian

National Committee on Science and Technology was a specialized branch of the Indian Department of Science and Technology formed in 1971 (Bhaneja 1976:99). It was the NCST that came up with the 600 page *Science and Technology Plan, 1974-79* which was made to outline technological research and development that India would undertake in those five years as “the general attitude of the Indian Government towards science and technology since early Independence days has been that the material benefits accruing from the large-scale application of science would overcome the possibility of major societal upheaval.” (Bhaneja 1976:99) So while America had a very large private sector and public consumption of technology at this time, India was beginning to set up the future first from inside the government with the idea that implementing the technology from the seat of the government would be more feasible overall (Bhaneja 1976:99).

New-Wave Indians' Journey in America

This then would be the setting behind these new American immigrants from the Indian sub-continent. As explained before the overwhelming majority of the new immigrants from this region were successful socioeconomically, meaning in America they would have access to these new technologies. They also did not have pressures to mainstream as their Ethnic European counterparts due to their obvious physical differences. As well as that was the rise of orientalism that surged in America during the seventies, potentially culling the xenophobic sentiments slightly although this resulted in a long-lasting stereotype that would make all Indians one “Indian.”

So while the Indian immigrants would not be treated the same, what technology was there would allow them to find some cultural solace. They would have to adapt in the work sphere as any would, but at home there was no additional pressure put on to force the hand of assimilation. However, the current technologies could not be used in a way to maintain heritage like they have adapted to in modern times. As India lacked the infrastructure for citizens to communicate efficiently or cheaply from America to India, most of their contact with Indian culture would come from one of two places; visits to India or other immigrants from India. In Rangaswamy's studies, she polled 574 immigrants from India who lived in an enclave in Chicago and found that almost two out of three respondents would visit India once every three years and one of four would visit once every other year (2000:124). Obviously then to these immigrants, maintaining a cultural tie with their place of origin is important. In this case it's the fact that technology is lagging behind that prevents them from a more consistent connection. This is further substantiated by the behavior of the immigrants at this time. With such large numbers, these immigrants are now able to set up self-sustaining societies as well as general social-welfare clubs and other social infrastructure systems. Religious institutions are one such place, such as the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago which was constructed post 1965. These exist as places not only of worship, but also of culture and socialization. It also is great in the fact it provides a sense of community for these Indian-Americans who have acculturated enough to not necessarily conform to mainstream India either. Here the culture tries its best to maintain and converge, though the energy needed to maintain Indian cultural solidarity is too much, resulting in a community of a new type of culture, the Indian-American culture.

IMMIGRANTS POST-1995 AND THE CONTINUATION OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

The State of Communication in the Post-1995 World

While the internet existed long before 1995, it was not until this time where it became something the average citizen had access too as it became commercialized. Now with this new tool, communication could be rapidly advanced. In America this was due to the aid of the private markets and non-government funded research, leading to messaging systems like AOL's chat rooms at this same time. Technology had become so ingrained in average American life as well that adaptations were quick to pick up, allowing the communication methods to rapidly mutate and evolve with very little backlash placed on the user as long as they were competent enough. From there we furthered with communication tools such as video chats on platforms like Skype, and even with the availability of satellites to bring media from India to America and vice versa, opening up plenty of cultural mediums. Here, the two cultures would be able to interact and would allow as much reliance as one as the other where in the past there was a limit on the availability of interaction from the side of India. Despite India still working to catch up to the post-modern society, the strides taken have been large enough to close the gap enough that they have a large enough foothold in the world as an independent power. Their history remains, but with new mediums available to the burgeoning society, they are able to test out their own norms instead of simply being a norm-dependent society, allowing a rich, self-maintaining culture. As both nations develop, and India goes in a way not completely aligned with America, some see some concern as the values still remain markedly different. The cultures would not diverge

though; instead, they would simply be decentralized, a prospect different from the general consensus that “globalization equals westernization.”

America's Lag: The Shift in Necessary Education and the Need for a Brain Gain

Currently America is going under a very large educational shift. Where each new time faces a new economic challenge, there is a need for people to be educated in such a way to meet them. Unfortunately these transitions are not as smooth as would be hoped however. Instead there exists a lag as the education or specialization necessary to get to the new platform is larger than the amount of time granted to catch up in. America as of now is dealing with this as it tries to educate its youth for its growing demand of IT-focused jobs, yet desperately needs educated professionals long before their own supply will be trained enough. This then leaves room open for the professionals from other parts of the world who already have the training or are capable at beginning at very advanced levels, such as the immigrants from the Indian sub-continent. As many already search for more opportunities, the law of demand would make it seem almost blatantly obvious that America would be a prime location for potential growth. This in turn has drawn more immigrants from this region who are able to now contact India with ease and able to take advantage of family-priority immigration. This also is a large benefit to America as it allows them to stay on the top percentile of technological development and stay competitive until the time that the younger generation will be able to perform in these fields.

As for those who do immigrate however, as part of the IT field themselves they are already technologically savvy. This would mean it would not be too difficult to assume them likely candidates for using social media and social networking as well as other technologically current

modes of communication, making them a very stable and very resourceful group socially, not just economically.

Ethnogenesis as Aided by the Technological Revolution

While the newer immigrants may want to live with more socioeconomically aligned neighbors as compared to culturally, they still share another bond with those who have had similar life experiences and a similar culture. This was the essence of earlier enclaves. So to say they would completely ignore their culture in favor of the socioeconomic alignment is without reason. The cultural institutions still stood at this time, although they themselves might be updated. It's true that at this time there exists a significantly more direct line between America and India than decades before, but that does not mean these immigrants are now any more "Indian" than their predecessors. These immigrants were now secure, both socially, economically, and culturally. They were seen as model citizens, as human assets to fill in the gap between America's education and what jobs were required, were able to have ample access to both cultural streams at command, and did not suffer the terrible prejudices as a whole as they had before. So in their safety, they were allowed to pick and choose more and more, to construct their own identity as not American, but not necessarily Indian either. They were the forerunners in their own identity with the resources from two advancing systems. With this came the real ethnogenesis and the creation of true Indian-Americans.

It's an odd thing to be said, but with the technology also came the possibility of assimilation. Many do not wish for this to happen and there still exists a very negative connotation with the word, but some very much wish to assimilate. In my personal experience,

it's children who are especially at odds with having a bicultural identity. Of the many immigrants from the Indian sub-continent whom I know that came over in what Rangaswamy titles the "knee-high generation" (2000:167), at least three have expressed their wishes as kids to assimilate. One in particular I had interviewed for a case study on the social aspects of her interlanguage and throughout the interview remarked how she was bullied and wished to be completely assimilated in order to avoid this. In the linguistics theories surrounding this, John Schumann's so aptly named acculturation model explains acquisition and social factors as dependents of 'distance' (Ellis [1997] 2008:39). In this, someone could highlight their differences to escape being part of the mainstream to 'diverge', or attempt to find and create similarities to 'converge' but successful acquisition is due to someone's close social and psychological proximity (Ellis [1997] 2008:40). So, in theory the technology that could help maintain someone's home culture could be the very same technology to help someone assimilate; it's up to the individual themselves to figure how to use it to form their own personal identity within the social constraints.

However for the most part these immigrants from the Indian sub-continent used this communication to share in what made them distinctly Indian-American. It gave them a platform to share their own mainstream where any shade of identity was acceptable. Again in a theory of linguistics, Peirce's social identity model explains communication is the best and most productive when a person is able to maintain identities that allows them to connect and give credibility to their requests for help and their statements (Ellis [1997] 2008:41). Here, they were able to make their own mainstream with the help of technology. They were able to maintain whatever identity they wished and have the credibility of both cultural systems both actuated and

realized in the conglomerate culture they made. This again would provide another cultural pool for these individuals, further deepening their cultural grasp. With all these potential resources fueled by the technological advances allowing the accumulation of the different cultures, the Indian-American population exists as one with the full depth of biculturalism. This allows them to seamlessly transition through cultural references, granting them plenty of tools to be used anywhere they could be of need. If then on the context once again of Peirce's social identity model, this allows them many different brands of credibility to many different individuals.

Indian Culture Emerging as an Entity inside the American Mainstream

As Indian-Americans continue to embrace and flourish with their own bicultural identities and their number continues to grow, their presence in the mainstream begins to make an appearance. While it is near impossible to completely alter the mainstream, with enough contact between an alternative social construct and the mainstream there is the ability to share and exchange ideas. This is the basic concept behind the idea of acculturation which has been discussed a considerable amount before in this essay. So while the Indian-Americans can pull what they wish from the mainstream, with a large enough presence from them the mainstream, the mainstream may take note. It had already been seen before on a smaller level back in the seventies when we saw the alternative sub-culture of the hippies delving deep into orientalism. Although their knowledge was truly limited and was mostly based off of stereotypes instead of exposure, now in an age of technological contact and awareness there could be mutual understanding between the Indian-American and American cultures. Since then there has been a revival of Indian influence on the mainstream and with enough dialogue, they may learn how to

exist together and not come into contention or disenfranchise the other. The adoption and popularity of Bollywood and Indian-specific television channels is one such example. It allows for the exposure and adoption of Indian cultural traits into the mainstream without necessarily misattributing the true nature of such media.

CONCLUSION

Immigration is something that will continue as long as nations continue. As society continues to go towards a global consciousness and become further globalized, people who can sustain themselves in more than one culture will become necessary. So far the United States has been fairly lucky with the fact that while it has a large number of immigrants, it is relatively culturally and linguistically isolated and stood as a normative pillar for the world. As technology continues to integrate the United States with the rest of the world, it will have to come to face with its own shortcomings in understanding other cultures. People who can maintain a bicultural identity already stand at the threshold between post-modern society and what is potentially to come, making bicultural citizens such as Indian-Americans a valuable asset for what's foreseeable. It's a possibility Indian-Americans may lose their hyphenated identity in future generations as each number does represent an individual, but they already hold the tools for the future global citizenship as they are free to pick and choose between these two cultural pools. So while they themselves may not be the future, understanding the mechanisms which they can maintain two usable and significantly different identities will be important no matter who maintains them. Two

things are certain though; technology will advance further, and the world will need a greater interdependence as humans of the same planet to be able to navigate the future.

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