

## **IN THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY:**

### MEDIA AND THE INDIAN AMERICAN DIASPORA

Girija Kaimal, January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2004

#### *Introduction*

In this exploratory paper, I present the representations of Indian Americans in the media (mainly film and television). There are two aspects to these representations: media *depictions* of the diaspora and media *choices* of the diaspora. Using examples of media images, I will obviate the rather limited cultural roles and opportunities offered to South Asians. In response to these depictions or lack thereof, alternative expressions have arisen where the diaspora themselves create avenues of expression that they can identify with as South Asians in America. Finally, based on the implications of these media images, I recommend future avenues of research.

#### *Why do media images matter?*

Following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, it became frightening clear, how limited, narrow and misrepresented South Asians were in the United States. A few days after the planes crashed into the World Trade Center, friends of mine who wore salwar kameezes or turbans were harassed on buses and other public spaces. They were told to ‘go back to where they came from.’ Many stopped wearing outfits that identified them as being from South Asia in order to feel safe walking on the streets. Unfortunately, the ignorance about South Asia led to the killing of a Sikh gas attendant in Arizona. The sikh turban was

mistaken for the ones worn by the Taliban. These misrepresentations brought to the fore the abysmal knowledge about South Asia in the popular culture. I began to pay attention to the depictions of Indians specifically and South Asians in general in television, film and radio. The observations were disturbing.

Furthermore, the depictions in ubiquitous media become important because they can reinforce what Dubois (1901;1997) referred to as *double consciousness*. This refers to people of color in a predominantly white culture seeing themselves as dual entities: as they are and again through the stereotyped depictions of people of their kind. The disconnect between the two creates a crisis and conflict of identity that is stressful for children and youth.

Lastly, recording the stories and representations of a group ensures that their lives existed and that their history is known to the future. When memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. (Pierre Nora in Shankar & Balgopal, 2001).

### *South Asians in the United States*

The number of South Asians in the U.S. at the end of the nineteenth century was less than 700. This rose to about 7000 between 1900-1920 and to about 10,000 by 1965. The number rose sharply after 1965 to over 2 million and by the year 2000, over 2% of the population (U.S, Census, 2000).

The earliest recorded history of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent is those of the Punjabi farm workers who came to California in the early twentieth century (Hess, 1982). According to Hess (1982), workers from the Punjab region of the Indian

subcontinent had been lured to British Columbia by the Canadian government's promise of easy employment. In response to the rapid entry (approximately 2000 a year) of brown-skinned, culturally unfamiliar immigrants who were seen as potential competitors to the local labor, the Canadian government imposed restrictions. The Punjabi farmers moved South hoping for more hospitable conditions. However they were widely discriminated, clubbed generically as 'Hindus,' deemed ineligible for citizenship, described as unassimilable, uncivilized and a threat to the foundations of American culture<sup>1</sup>. Interestingly the image persists and discrimination continues till today as seen in the 9/11 related hate crime.

In 1965, new immigration laws took effect, which drastically altered the American landscape. The United States, engaged in a technological race with the Soviet Union, sought to import ready-made talent rather than wait to have it home-grown (Rocher, 1994). These new immigration laws favored the educated, the talented, and the skilled. For example, the medical profession loses many of its best practitioners to emigration. It is estimated that the emigration of a qualified doctor represents a loss of \$40,000 to India, and his/her immigration a gain of \$648, 000 to the U.S.(Helweg & Helweg, 1990). The Helwegs' (1990) estimate that the rate of emigration of graduates from the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology was about half the total in the years 1968 to 1976.

For all the siphoning of worldwide brain powers, this new immigration policy had its socially enlightened aspects. It did not favor Asians, but it gave Asians, for the first

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<sup>1</sup> In fact in 1907, in Bellingham Washington, over six hundred local lumberjacks herded over two hundred Hindus out of town, with many of them suffering serious injuries (Hess, 1982). In 1914, a senator from North Carolina introduced measures to exclude Hindu laborers. Indians along with Japanese and Chinese were excluded from entering the U.S. as part of the Pacific Barred Zone portion of the immigration act of 1917 (Hess, 1982; Shankar & Srikanth, 1998).

time, a chance to immigrate that was on a par with that of Europeans (Rocher, 1994). With a tradition of learning that is at the root of much of South Asian culture, a strong system of advanced education, and a knowledge of English and Western ways which is one of the few blessings of their colonial past, South Asians were in a strong position to avail themselves of opportunities in America (Meunier, 1997; Rocher, 1994).

Pre and post 1965 groups are also differentiated in educational and class backgrounds. In 1940, 85% of all Asian Indians living in the U.S. held blue-collar jobs, less than 4% held professional positions; majority were rural, male agricultural workers with less than four years of schooling. In contrast 80% of adult males arriving between 1965 and the mid 1980s were professionals, most with advanced degrees and about half the immigrants were women (Shankar & Balgopal, 2001). The 1990 census shows that 58% of all adult Asian Indians are college graduates compared with 20 percent of all Americans of that age group (Kitano & Daniels, 1995; Wong & Hirshman, 1983).

Since 1965, Asians as a group have constituted the largest immigrant group entering the U.S. every year and are the second fastest growing ethnic minority (Goyette, 1999). The effect of the changes in immigration law on South Asians has been particularly notable. South Asian Americans comprise the third largest Asian American group and are continuing to grow (Bufka, 1997)<sup>2</sup>. Indian Americans themselves are the fourth largest group, behind Chinese, Philipino, and Japanese Americans (Meunier, 1997; Goyette, 1996).

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<sup>2</sup> Asian Indians are 11.8% of the Asian American population, Pakistanis are 1.2%, Bangladeshis are 0.2%, and Sri Lankans are 0.2%, forming a total of 13.4%.

## DEPICTIONS OF THE SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN DIASPORA

Film and viewing setting become a means for viewers to locate themselves and others in the larger society (Srinivas, 1998). Viewers create and participate in public culture where the viewing setting becomes a public forum for articulation of cultural similarities and differences. Active viewing raises questions about the intersubjectivity of the viewing experience. Viewers position themselves in-between the world of everyday life and the imaginary world of film, to elaborate and transform its meanings (Srinivas, 1998). Although Srinivas speaks from the ethnography of hindi film viewing it is not a leap to consider the possible implicit messages inherent on depictions of cultural symbols and stereotypes.

The double lives of daughters: A persistent theme in Indian culture is the idea of the daughter as the beacon of culture: one who is kept close to the home and hearth (Uberoi, 1998). Both symbolically while wearing saris and while observing family traditions (Uberoi, 1998), the expectations are laid on her to ensure that the culture or status quo is maintained. The status quo includes respecting elders, deferring to the male members of the family and being hyperfeminine in speech and demeanor. The trouble with this cultural expectation is that the onus lies entirely on the daughters to negotiate the conflicts that they feel in the aspects of culture that do not mesh or do not relate to each other.

The daughters struggle to find satisfaction in being Indian in the parents' eyes, wearing Indian clothes and cooking Indian food, deferring to their fathers and husbands.

Yet this is not the life they have experienced. They see a whole other world when they go to school and with the mere act of stepping out of the house, their options and construction of culture is necessarily different. Yet daughters lead double lives, living the perfect daughter at home and being the woman searching/creating her own unique identity in her own space and time.

This is evident in two recent successful films depicting the Indian diaspora: *Monsoon Wedding* (MW) and *Bend it like Beckham* (BILB). In BILB, the heroine seeks to become a football player by sneaking out of the house on various pretexts. Not only does she have to hide her interests, but as a result, the development of her identity is of necessity a private struggle. The joys and disappointments are her own to endure. There might be an occasional friend or sibling to confide in but they do not form a constant support structure to help the girl grow through the process. In BILB, the protagonist's struggles are enough to overwhelm her into silence until a male friend fights for her right to play and forces her family to have a conversation about her interests. She herself is depicted as incapable of challenging the status quo, choosing instead to cry into her soccer cleats.

*Monsoon wedding* is a movie set in India. The references to the U.S however are enough to make it a movie that became quite a success in America. The bride in MW is the pampered daughter of a rich Indian businessman and is engaged to be married to an engineer who lives in the U.S. The aspirations are directed westward. One daughter is being married to America, clearly a step up for the girl and the family. The other daughter

meanwhile is aspiring to join a creative writing class. For both the intellectually inclined as well as the materially bound, the destination is paradoxically, the U.S. There is no reflection or depiction of what life is like after one leaves for the U.S. What happens to these daughters when they arrive here and negotiate the cultural and social parameters?

In both these movies, the 'future' of hope and possibility, the proverbial land of milk and honey is shown to be America. In *BILB*, there is this glowing hope that the scholarship to U.S. to join the W.U.S.A. is going to transform their lives forever from the humdrum banality of their lives in England. It is ironic that the WUSA has since gone bankrupt. In *Monsoon Wedding*, America implies upward mobility: a move up for the daughter. To the daughter however, it represents an unplanned freedom from the context in India. To her sister, America is the road to her future as a writer. She wants to do a course in creative writing: questionably impossible in India where her identity is limited to that of the 'unmarried older sister.'

The depictions seem to end with the journey. The reality of life in the U.S. either as a football player or wife has not been depicted, the assumption being that everything will be wonderfully perfect once in the U.S.

South Asian Doctors: Among Indian professionals there was the sense that the discrimination that has characteristically been encountered by every immigrant group for a generation or two might also stare them in the face (Lal, 1999). This feeling began to acquire some urgency in the early 1980s and was the impetus for the formation of a number of important professional organizations. As the laws governing the admission of

doctors from overseas into the American medical profession were tightened, the American Association of Physicians from India (AAPI) was formed to represent this constituency. According to an estimate furnished in 1993, Indian doctors comprised an extraordinary 4 percent of their profession, and the high profile of AAPI can be gauged by the fact that it's annual convention in 1995 was addressed by President Clinton (Lal, 1999).

A recognizable South Asian face on CNN is the medical advice given by Dr. Sanjay Gupta. The doctors lobby is probably an example of a powerful component of the South Asian community. Dr. Gupta is brought on CNN to comment and give advice on current medical and public health issues. But it is pertinent to mention that Dr. Sanjay Gupta is male and a second generation South Asian who does not speak with a foreign accent. Is this presence and relatively more positive portrayal a product of the influence wielded by the doctors associations? Interestingly doctors are not parodied except to bring in the issues of cultural conflict issues. Not surprisingly, it is not a male doctor but a female one is depicted as struggling with the conflicts of identity.

The star of BILB, Parminder Nagra is now on a popular primetime television drama called E.R. (emergency room). She is an immigrant from England, not from South Asia as many doctors who came after 1965 were. She plays an immigrant English doctor/resident named Neela, who is dealing with issues of identity in Chicago. She struggles to voice herself, struggles to be heard amongst her peers. She initially was even shown praying while suturing a patient: much to the amusement of her supervising black doctor. Furthermore, she is portrayed as a demure, "sensitive", caring doctor: quite the antithesis of the "aggressive" Americans who have no trouble saying what they think. It

seems to be hard to get away from the conceptions of femininity. Why a woman doctor who clearly has the initiative to come to a new country would be so diffident is quite unclear.

As the character is being developed she is depicted as a diffident doctor who always struggles to voice herself. In one episode she is asked her opinion and she says, “I didn’t think my opinion mattered.” She is told that if she does not think her opinion matters, then it would not. Soon after she has an outburst, voices her opinion by trying to raise attention to the human beings underlying the patients. She is now being depicted as a bookish student who excels at her exams but is unable to handle the pressures of real life medicine. The conflicts between attending family events in London and being a doctor in America are depicted as: a) angry exclamations on the hospital phone and b) a drunken confessional of her identity issues as a woman and an immigrant. How does she deal with it? She clings adoringly in friendship to a fellow White nurse/medical student.

People on the margins: What is most common in the media is depictions of South Asians as marginal individuals. They are dispensable, and if associated with the mainstream, then they are usually associated in a fleeting manner or to depict a foray of the mainstream into the exotic. For example, in the primetime television show called ‘Scrubs,’ the lead characters are a young black resident surgeon (Turk) and a young White resident. They rather expectedly represent the predominant racial dynamic in the United States, i.e. the main power struggle is between black and white. In one particular episode the lead White character makes fun of Turks’ one time Indian girlfriend. She is

called 'the girl who ate curry and smelt of it.' She has no identity or presence beyond the most obvious stereotypical sensory association.

In a popular movie called the 'Royal Tenenbaums' there is a character who is a sidekick to the lead character, Gene Hackman. Expectedly, he is from 'Calcutta' and oddly he is called Pagoda. Pagoda is portrayed as an emasculated, irrational lackey who has no identity or aspirations beyond that of being a dutiful slave to Gene Hackman. He is shown as willing to lie, cheat and impersonate in order to help his master. However, he also stabs his master with a small pocket-knife in irrational outbursts of rage. There is no explanation of why they co-exist and why this individual is such a devoted sidekick. Here too the main conflict is between a White man and a Black man for the affections of a woman, while the 'inscrutable' South Asian exists in the background.

'Friends' is a popular show in the U.S. depicting the story of six White friends living in New York City. Friends is conspicuous in its lack of any other minorities in its show. The recent addition of a beautiful black woman is a rare exception. One of the friends is a rather eccentric character called Phoebe. Phoebe is a lovable individual but ditzy and unpredictable in her activities and romantic interests. In one episode Phoebe brings in a South Asian boyfriend named Vikram. He comes in very briefly and is out just as fast. Interestingly, the eccentric and non-mainstream individuals in the show seem to be the ones that are associated the exotic South Asian character.

One potential hypothesis for this marginalization might arise from the lack of cohesion amongst South Asians, possibly leads to a lack of powerful presence (Lal,

1999). He suggests that what is most striking, however, is the manner in which the Internal politics of India, and of the Indian subcontinent, is echoed in the politics of South Asian communities in the United States (Lal, 1999). The rivalries within the subcontinent and the heterogeneity leads to in fighting that prevents organizing for the greater good. However others suggest that South Asians are not a monolithic group (Rocher, 1994) and the stereotypes that might be held about Indians or South Asians (non-materialism, oppression towards women, poverty and backwardness) might not apply to South Asians in America (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988).

#### Model minority students:

Educational aspirations and immigrants from South Asia have a long-standing relationship. From 1969 to 1971, approximately 90% of Asian Indian Immigrants were professionals with a post secondary education (Wong & Hirshman, 1983). Within the same period, the number of South Asian Immigrants who have chosen to remain as permanent residents or become citizens of the US has also remained high (Rocher, 1994; Meunier 1997). Furthermore every year, nearly 17,000 students come to the US from India alone (INS, 2000).

Although there are many differences between Asian American communities, there are also characteristics that unite them. The blocked opportunity perspective suggests that all Asian Americans regardless of ethnic group perceive that they have few paths to social mobility outside of education (Goyette, 1999). Education has both intrinsic value and is a cultural strategy for social mobility in a society where they have few other avenues for social mobility (Bufka, 1997; Goyette, 1996; Meunier, 1998). Career

advancement seems to be the primary motivator for both professionals and students who emigrate from India (Bufka, 1997). Researchers suggest that Asian Americans choose science and engineering majors and later science and engineering careers because more so than other occupations these jobs hire and reward occupants based on objective criteria (Wong & Hirschman, 1983; Xie & Goyette, 1999). Communication skills may be less important in science, engineering and technical positions. Asian Americans may lack the political resources or social networks necessary to get jobs in business and finance, law or other careers that have less “objective” standards for hiring and salary (Xie & Goyette, 1999).

To those who strongly believe that the U.S. is a meritocracy, Asian Americans provide evidence that non-White groups can succeed despite disadvantages they face as minorities and recent immigrants. Asian Americans are not only able to achieve more education and higher incomes than members of other minority groups but are also more successful than Whites.<sup>3</sup>

An interesting example of these aspects was ‘Spellbound’ an Oscar-nominated documentary that presents many of the above themes. It is a very well made film describing the journeys of eight eighth graders as they go through the rigorous competition of the National Spelling Bee. Two of the eight students are of Indian origin. Both are born and raised in the U.S. while their parents were immigrants. The parents implicitly and overtly have instilled in the children the appreciation of education as the route to success. One student is a boy named Neil (even the name has a global appeal and is not instantly recognizable as Indian). His father is a self-made success story who brags

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<sup>3</sup> For example the average annual incomes of South Asians in 1989 was 70,000\$ compared to that of whites which was 48,500\$ (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988).

about the houses he owns and the fabulous wealth of opportunity America presents. To help prepare his son for the competition, he hires tutors in Latin, French and German. The father has analyzed previous contests and has developed strategies that his son can use, including meditation and recorded tutoring that he provides himself.

Although he does not win in the end, the father claims that he wanted to teach his son the importance of working hard towards a goal. It is unclear what impact the whole process had on the son. Although Neil makes it to the top ten, he appears catatonic throughout the process. The parental investment of the first generation, verging on tyrannical control of the aspirations of the children, the pressure to succeed in a hyper-competitive context is painfully evident in the film.

There is a quote from the winner, a young girl who says, “In India there are no second chances like in America.” Clearly these are not insights attained by a thirteen-year old girl, but handed down by her parents. There is another clip from the girl’s teacher who says, “ I love it when there are Indian students in the class, they make great students.” There is no clear picture of what is going on with the students themselves when they don the aspirations that the social context has for them.

Interestingly, the film shows quotes from earlier winners who indicate that winning the spelling bee had no tangible impact on any aspect of their lives thereafter. The parents’ aggressive coaching for the students in this context becomes even harder to comprehend.

Grocery Store owners, Gas station attendants:

A popular stereotype in the U.S. of South Asians is that they are gas station attendants, convenience store owners/clerks and motel owners. Indians own over 50% of all motels in US and over a third of all hotels (Varadarajan, 1999). In an attempt at humor, for which she later apologized, Hilary Clinton recently remarked that ‘Gandhi was originally a gas station attendant in the Midwest.’ The post 9/11 attacks on South Asians in grocery stores and gas stations does not seem off the mark given this widespread, albeit somewhat justified stereotype.

One such fictional character in the media is that of Apu, the Kwik-E mart clerk/owner in the animated show ‘The Simpsons.’ Unlike many other depictions, Apu has moved from the margins (although still laden with the baggage of cultural stereotyping) to a friend of the family. Usually he comes into the picture when he is facing some sort of problem or crisis, eg, when he loses his job due to unsanitary conditions in the store, when he and his wife have fertility issues, when he cheats on his wife, when he is overwhelmed by the birth of octuplets, when he faces deportation etc. Incidentally his story is that he came to the U.S. as a student and overstayed his visa. His wife although vocal and a strong character in her own right is always wearing salwar-kameezes, speaks Hindi and English and has long dark braided hair.

In an interview, Selman (2003), one of the writers for the Simpsons and the creator of the character of Apu, responds to the questions about racial stereotypes. He says, “Apu is funny, because he started out as a stereotype, but we redeemed him by adding levels to his character. He is very spiritual and very intelligent. But he also gouges

people at the Kwik-E-Mart. He is one of the purest characters on the show, but also flawed. He plays off the stereotype instead of becoming the stereotype.”

Apu can be viewed as a stereotype in the fact that he is depicted as running a convenience store, has many children, came the student route to the U.S. However he seems to move beyond that in the shows. He appears to be somewhat integrated in the community scenes of the town. The stereotypes do not disappear altogether. For example, when he loses his job, he responds with a simplistic adoption of ‘karmic duties’ and is often depicted as an overly dutiful and culture-bound character. Apu is a part of the community in Springfield but the cultural context of his being an immigrant is still related to the stereotypes of overpopulation, immigration, a badly impersonated accent, somewhat eccentric and unpredictable behavior.

#### SHOWS FOR THE INDIAN DIASPORA BY THE DIASPORA

The previous section provided examples of the depictions of the diaspora in the media. How has the diaspora responded to these images? In the following paragraphs I will delineate some of my observations.

With the rise of globalization, in the early 90s shows from the U.S. began to filter into Indian homes through cable television. American day-time soap operas were re-run lagging a few hundred episodes behind, e.g., *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Santa Barbara*, etc. Eventually many Indian producers began creating their own long running soaps, usually very melodramatic stories of extended families. These replaced the earlier imports with more locally resonant fare.

Some scholars suggest that what is most important for the South Asian community in America, is the maintenance of family ties (Chekki, 1988; Rocher, 1994). It is the primary concern of the immigrant generation and, in spite of their worries that their children will sever these bonds, all the evidence shows that the pattern of family closeness and of extended family ties is the tradition that South Asian immigrants have transmitted most securely to the next generation, so securely that that generation is likely to emphasize its transmission to the next (Chekki, 1988).

Some South Asians even get satellite dish connectivity when parents from India visit for extended stays, so that they can be up to date on the news and entertainment back home. The movement is quiet and subdued but it does indicate a reversal of media interest.

As satellite dishes became ubiquitous, there emerged a reverse trend where the diaspora kept up with trends of the home country. There are soaps that are now seen in the homes of South Asian immigrants that are productions made for this specific audience. They include long running dramas as well as variety shows that air once a week. Typically the quality of the show is quite poor, with re-runs of old B-grade movies and song sequence medleys. The variety shows usually air over the weekends on a channel dedicated to international programming and have a few hours for South Asian programming. In a surprising display of interest by a mainstream television station called Turner Classic Movies , a series of Hindi movies were broadcast in June 2003. They were shown on Thursday nights beginning at 8 pm and going through the night. Clearly there was no market if they aired the movies during the daylight hours. Possibly in an attempt

to familiarize non-South Asian audiences, the movies were preceded by an analysis and discussion of the cast and context of the film.

Some Indian filmmakers have attempted to tap into the market for the South Asian American Diaspora in particular. 'Mitr' is a movie where the heroine is a lonely housewife in California, alienated from her husband and daughter. She begins an online friendship and coincidentally it turns out to be her husband who is the mysterious friend or 'mitr.' It depicts aspects of the South Asia that would be relevant exclusively to the diaspora, including the heroine's predicament of not being able to share her problems with her brother in India, the cultural and generational conflicts experienced by the daughter, resorting to obsessive cleaning to alleviate other anxieties.

Apart from the fictional worlds of film and televisions, a rising presence and example of building community through shared experiences, is that of amateur radio programming. During the World Cup cricket series in 2003, a few intrepid youngsters in the greater Philadelphia area, began broad casting commentary and news about the cricket matches. The presence of the channel spread through word of mouth. I heard of it through my obstetrician. The rivalries between India and Pakistan were relived through the broadcast, as South Asians stayed up late trying to catch up on the game. Bypassing the visual imagery of other media, radio might be a more creative and potentially rewarding realm of programming for the diaspora.

## **Discussion and Future directions**

The purpose of this paper was to explore the current state of depictions of South Asians in the media. Although it is highly constrained by own biases and opinions, my purpose was to open a dialogue around these issues. At heart is the question of the creation of identity and how it can be tainted or restricted by the ubiquity of media representations. How can the South Asian diaspora play a role in the construction of who are we, where we live and what we want to be? How can South Asians create an impact on the media that extends beyond marginal presence in videos sold at Indian stores and the occasional cheesy Sunday variety show? Further, systematic extensive study to understand the implications of popular media on the diaspora. The hypotheses that I have mentioned in the paper arise from three fundamental concerns: When we do not record our story, it never gets told and is never remembered; when there are inadequate role models children develop a 'double consciousness and when the status quo is not questioned, the status quo does not change.

In order to evaluate these issues actual interviews with children, adolescents and parents could be conducted to understand what impact these images have on children's development, attitudes and aspirations. How is their identity and their perception of role options in society constrained by these representations? How do the images of girls and boys limit or expand their options?

How do they locate themselves in the diaspora when there are limitations in the roles that they can envision themselves in? Moreover what can parents, educators and mentors do in order to inculcate options in the minds of children and adults. What activities do the parents engage in to help/strengthen children's identity development and

what do they find most challenging about the process? What support or resources would they find helpful? How can we begin to question the world, the images we are bombarded by and be active creators of our selves without being constrained by the options offered to us?

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