“Ain’t Nobody Like My Desi Girl”: An Analysis of New York City’s Indian-American Women as Model Minorities

Mallika Walia

Senior Thesis for the Urban Studies Program
Barnard College, Columbia University
Submitted April 20, 2016
Thesis Advisor: Meredith Linn
ABSTRACT

Indian immigrants have flourished in the United States, often outperforming both other immigrant groups and the native-born population. Consequently, they have come to be considered “model minorities” who are deemed too successful to truly be a minority. However, this framework paints Indian-Americans in an inaccurate light, especially obscuring the struggles of Indian-American women. This thesis sheds light on the compelling factors that impact these women’s lives on a day-to-day basis and shows that these factors significantly shape their perception of their hyphenated identities, a truly difficult struggle that is not adequately captured by the model minority paradigm. Indian-American women battle internal pressure applied by their families and communities to eschew American values and instead adhere to their ethnic identities while simultaneously bearing the brunt of external pressure, such as racism and stereotypes, that cast their Indian roots in a negative light, especially post-9/11. Thus, these women must constantly negotiate the tension between their two seemingly incompatible worlds. Today, these women look to each other and to organizations that foster Indian-American female solidarity to ameliorate some of this tension. Such spaces provide these women emotional support as well as a community that works together to address some of the most systemic issues that plague Indian-American women. These women have also begun reimagining their roles in America’s racial fabric and have started actively engaging with race as people of color. Thus, despite the numerous challenges they face and their misrepresentation by the model minority paradigm, there remains cause for optimism for the future of Indian-American women in New York City.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was a labor of great love and tremendous effort. There are countless individuals who deserve recognition for their guidance and support. First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents for inspiring this thesis. We have had our differences over the years but our evolving relationship has profoundly shaped who I am today. I have never said this formally, but thank you for making one of the boldest decisions that can be made and daring to dream of a better life for us. I will never truly grasp the depth of your individual and collective bravery and sacrifice over the last twenty-one years, but I will always respect it and never take it for granted. Without it, I would be nothing.

Next, I would like to applaud the women I have featured in this thesis and express my deepest gratitude for their allowing me an intimate glimpse into their lives and for their serving as the backbone of this entire project. It was such an immense pleasure to hear your stories and share memories, fears, ideas, and hopes. I am so proud to know such bright, insightful and motivated young women and I have no doubt that our generation will move our communities forward in unimaginable ways. Thank you for giving me the chance to represent some of your stories. I am so honored.

Similarly, I would like to thank all the Indian-American women in my life who have served as mentors, role models, and cherished friends. You are nothing short of pure magic and you all inspire me endlessly. I owe everything I have ever known about Indian womanhood to you. Thank you for always giving me strength and hope. This is all for you.

I would also like to thank Professor Meredith Linn for all of her guidance and support throughout this process. Your advice, critique, and willingness to get creative were absolutely paramount throughout this process. I really appreciated your humor,
warmth, and insight and it has been an honor to call myself your student. Similarly, I am extremely grateful to every member of our senior seminar. Thank you for all your input, suggestions, and encouragement. It was an incredible experience and I could not have asked for a better group of people to have by my side. Thank you all, for everything.

Finally, a huge, never-ending note of gratitude for three people who have always fostered the best in me and consistently celebrate my personal victories as an Indian-American woman - Kaavya, Sarika, and Arasan. Without you, I would never have the strength to care for our community the way I do and I would never have been brave enough to conceptualize and complete this thesis. Thank you for always understanding and giving me room to grow.
our backs
tell stories
no books have
the spine to
carry

*women of colour* – rupi kaur (157)
Introduction

On an October evening in 2014, eighteen-year-old Ramya Ramana took the stage at the NYC Votes 2014 Slam Final, an annual spoken word poetry competition that raises voter turnout by educating New York City students about their roles as leaders of the city. Greeted with roaring applause, she walked onstage with confidence and poise. Taking a few moments to compose herself and mutter something under her breath, Ramya stood tall and solemn, hands folded in front of her. She spoke forcefully and clearly, delivering a spoken word poem that eventually led to her crowning as the 2014 Youth Poet Laureate. She recited, word for word, tweets after Nina Davuluri was crowned 2014 Miss America:

“Miss New York is an Indian. With all due respect, this is America.”
“Miss America? You mean Miss 7-11?”
“Congratulations Al-Qaeda, Miss America is one of you.”
“Miss America. Foot long buffalo chicken on whole wheat, please and thank you.”

Ramya recited line after line of her poem, imploring those Indian-Americans who face racist retorts by Americans to stand firm. She begged them to speak up and claim America and its flag, rightfully, as their own. She urged them to remind those who deem them terrorists that it was, in fact, their own ancestors who, under the guise of colonialism, “raped, killed and oppressed every race in the world. You are the biggest terrorist [I] know.” She continued, celebrating the presence of Indian-Americans in America by referencing Nina Davuluri’s performance during the Miss America competition, a Bollywood fusion dance. Ramya boldly proclaims, “keep dancing” to Nina, but implicitly, to a larger audience, to keep dancing in a country that sometimes rejects them. In a truly praise-worthy and well-received finish, Ramya gestures forward,
sneering, “Dance, sing, stomp, say, ‘here’s your foot-long buffalo chicken on whole wheat.’”

In an arguably liberal city in the year 2014, an eighteen-year-old high school student had experienced enough in her short lifetime to understand that life in the American city doesn’t come easy for most, especially not for first-generation Indian-Americans like her. Ramya’s poem expresses a mere snapshot of the realities of today’s Indian-Americans in New York City. Despite some demonstrated successes, Indian-Americans still struggle daily to survive in a country which, for some, is the only home they know. This thesis is an attempt to uncover the experiences of Indian-American women that are swallowed by statistics. I will show that Indian-American women face both internal pressure and from their families and communities and external pressures from the American mainstream, often in the form of racism and stereotypes. These pressures are compelling, demanding these women fulfill expectations set by Indian and American culture respectively, which are often at odds. Being caught in this in-between place is not only personally taxing, but, especially since 9/11, has serious identity implications, forcing young Indian-American women to constantly negotiate the tension between being Indian and simultaneously being American. Whereas differing views from families and communities on things like dating and experimenting in college can often drive Indian-American women to more enthusiastically embrace these elements of American culture in place of some Indian values (such as valuing communal opinion), the external pressure of racism they experience throughout their lives remains a constant reminder of their immigrant roots and subsequent difference from mainstream white Americans.
The Indian-American Woman’s Woes

By virtue of their intersectional identity at the crossroads of ethnicity and gender, Indian-American women face a variety of unique pressures ranging from familial to societal. The balancing act of maintaining their ethnic identity and obeying the associated cultural cues while simultaneously navigating everyday challenges posed by the need to assimilate into the American mainstream is taxing, relentless, common, and yet, and misunderstood by many. As Ramana lamented, it becomes difficult to, “keep dancing” under such complex pressure.

Today, this unique intersection is experiencing a significant shift and dynamics of both ethnicity and gender are reshaping the lives of young Indian-American women like never before. Today’s increasingly globalized world is rapidly reconfiguring interpretation of and engagement with immigration. American-born Indian women who have never been to India can choose to remain intimately connected to their roots and yet, they can also choose to eschew them entirely. However, the previous generation that took the leap of faith to relocate to the opposite side of the globe did not have the luxury of choice. Their immigration was marked by a deep desire to attain success in America but also to keep their Indian culture alive and well, especially for their children. Without the convenience of high-speed internet and free communication apps however, immigrants who left India were largely cut off from their homeland. Thus, like many other immigrant groups, they had to make concerted efforts in America to create communities that were as similar to home as possible, both for their own comfort and for their children, who otherwise would have no knowledge of their ethnic histories. Today however, advances in technology have facilitated the transmission of everything from ideas to people and
thus, those children are rapidly exposed to both Indian and American culture. As a result,
they find themselves in a bind between having to embrace a culture they have not
personally been immersed in but were born into and embracing a culture they have grown
up in and known intimately.

Understandably, embodying sometimes opposing cultures comes with its
challenges, which I will expand on throughout this thesis. Notably however, this is a
perspective that does not seem to be accounted for in dominant academic discussions
about this population, especially not for women who are subject to vastly different
cultural expectations than men. Monisha Das Gupta, a professor at the University of
Hawai’i, argues that the stories and narratives of Indian-American women she
interviewed for her ethnographic study (1997) are complex and unique, not entirely
fitting into any dominant paradigm. She said:

I could find nothing in these theoretical options that described what these four women
told me. They had certainly not lost their identification with their “Indian” roots. Nor did
that knowledge coexist comfortably with what they understood to be “American” about
them. These two parts of their identity were in constant strife, eluding their designation as
Indian-Americans (575).

Das Gupta demonstrates a need for further inquiry into this unique strife, insisting that,
“the discreetness of the strung-together identities in a happy coming together of the
mainstream and margin failed to capture the complexity of their shifting identities…”
(575). Despite a hyphenated label that seems to account for both worlds, Indian-
American women continue facing pressing challenges in their everyday lives, especially
those presented by intense family and community pressure and racism and associated
stereotypes. Most importantly, many of these challenges are not adequately accounted for
in dominant theories, such as the model minority paradigm. This thesis will help bridge
this gap by shedding light on Indian-American women’s experiences with and navigation
of the aforementioned challenges. This thesis will also explore ways this strife can be ameliorated and how Indian-American women can be better understood, supported, and empowered.

“If I Can Make It There, I Can Make It Anywhere”: Why New York City?

Though Indian immigrants have moved to cities like Fremont, California and Dallas, Texas as well, New York City, the site of my study, offers particularly attractive features that continue to draw Indian immigrants. New York City’s reputation as a leading urban center is longstanding and globally held. Indians find New York City to be as cosmopolitan as their own Indian cities and regard it with charm and wonder. Indeed, the imagery of immigrants “making it” to and in New York City is not lost on Indians. There are two main reasons why the Indian-American experience in New York City is particularly worthy of study.

First, the city is incredibly diverse and liberal. For new immigrants, there are few places more tolerant than New York City, a city that has celebrated immigration for years and has, in many ways, been built by immigrants. The heterogeneity of the city is a source of pride and its population is seen as an agglomeration of multiple, equal, racially-distinct groups (Lessinger 1995, 19).

Second, New York City’s economy is varied and strong, providing multiple routes to success for immigrants, especially in service and financial sectors. Despite a recent economic downturn, Indian-Americans still widely believe that both the well-educated and the impoverished can find opportunities for socioeconomic mobility. Scientific employers readily employ Indian engineers and software designers, while New York City’s hotel business offers lucrative chances to invest. The finance industry and
medical field are saturated with Indian bankers and healthcare professionals and the public sector hires Indian immigrants as managers, administrators, and clerks. There is no shortage of jobs for unskilled laborers either.¹ Indian immigrants who are not middle-class or are unable to find steady middle-class jobs often work as waiters, shop clerks, taxi drivers, and security guards (Lessinger 1995, 17-18).

Finally, in addition to its cultural offerings, the fast-pace and hardy work culture has truly fueled New York City’s image as a city that never sleeps. Though captivating, it is considered an unforgiving city in that those who cannot keep up with the pace of life often cannot survive here. For immigrants, New York City thus becomes not only a land of opportunity but also a chance to be accepted as worthwhile Americans. Furthermore, New York state is also home to over 300,000 Indian-Americans, second only to California, which makes it an important locus in the Indian-American experience ("Asian Indian Demographics" 2010). Figure 1 illustrates this point:

¹ Despite availability of such jobs, it is vital to remember that these jobs are not well paid and don’t have benefits or scope for upward socioeconomic mobility. Regardless, it does yield an income, albeit a meager one.
Immigration History of Indian-Americans

Indian immigration to the United States began as early as 1850. For the most part, immigrants settled in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California and found work in railway construction, mines, and on farms. Many also came as political refugees. Between 1850 and 1960, an estimated 13,500 Indians had legally immigrated to the United States. It is assumed that at least some Indians also made their way to the country illegally but there is no way to be sure just how many (Lessinger 1995, 3-4).

1965 marked a landmark moment in immigration history (Maira 2002, 7). The national origins quota system, which had curtailed immigration into the United States since the 1920s, was finally lifted, opening doors to immigrants from Asia and Latin America. This gave rise to an era known as, “new immigration,” which allotted 20,000 yearly visas per country in Latin America and Asia (Lessinger 1995, 3). Visa allotment...
was based on a preference system, granting priority to skilled professionals who could fill the labor needs of the United States (Maira 2002, 7). This amended immigration policy thus presented Asian countries like India with increased opportunities for immigration. Furthermore, once immigrants achieved citizenship, they could sponsor relatives and friends, which set in motion chain migration on a grand scale. Between 1961 and 1980, more than 190,000 Indian immigrants had immigrated and become U.S. residents (Lessinger 1995, 3-4). By 1990, there were 815,000 Indian immigrants in the country and by 2000, that number expanded to 1,687,765 (Maira 2002, 7).

Old (i.e. pre-1965) and new (i.e. post-1965) Indian immigrants have several distinct differences that shape their position in the American mainstream today. Firstly, new wave Indian immigrants came primarily for economic reasons rather than to escape political persecution. Additionally, these immigrants are also more highly skilled and better educated than old wave immigrants (Maira 2002, 7). Whereas old immigrants found work as laborers, new immigrants, due to the visa preference system, tend to be of highly sophisticated professions, such as economics, nursing, medicine, management, and engineering. Finally, the new wave of immigrants is largely urban and has high expectations of increasing socioeconomic success (Lessinger 1995, 4). This is because the immigration process today is marked by self-selection and thus, for the most part, only those who can truly afford to make the move will immigrate (Lessinger 1995, 11). An overwhelming majority of immigrants come with some college education and some come with higher degrees as well. In 2013, 76% of Indian immigrants aged 25 and older had a bachelor’s degree (Zong and Batalova 2015). This sets them apart from other Asian immigrants, as well as whites, who for the same age category achieve degrees at 51% and
30% respectively (Richwine 2009). Finally, although Indian immigrants have immigrated to the United States from all over India, the largest concentration come from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra, all of which are highly industrialized. Migration is also notable from Punjab and Kerala, both of which have a long and rich history of labor out-migration. The map below shows these states, and others:

![Map of India showing states and regions](image)

**Figure 2:** This map of India shows all 29 states. Most immigrants come from Uttar Pradesh in central India and Gujarat and Maharashtra from the west. There is also significant migration to the United States from Punjab in the north and Kerala in the south (Prokeraia, 2015).
Within New York City, Indian immigrants tend to concentrate in certain areas. As new immigrants made their way to the city after 1965, most concentrated in Manhattan, particularly in midtown and downtown areas around Lexington Avenue, which became an ethnic enclave and remains one today. Indian food and clothing stores quickly opened in Manhattan, Bollywood films were regularly screened in theaters around Manhattan and student unions hosted cultural performances and concerts (Khandelwal 2002, 14). Eventually, immigrants began settling in Queens, a more affordable option. Chain migration played an especially important role in this. New immigrants often stayed with settled Indian families (both families they knew and families they were introduced to by a mutual friend) as guests before eventually moving into their own homes. This cycle continued until entire families and friend groups eventually found their way to New York City. This also drove the formation of several new ethnic enclaves such as Jackson Heights.

Today, Indian immigrants are spread out throughout Queens, but concentrated especially in Flushing, Elmhurst, Richmond Hill, and Jackson Heights. Flushing and Elmhurst serve as the receiving areas for most new immigrants because of the availability of housing and easy access via subway to Manhattan (Khandelwal 2002, 17). As immigrants settle and attain some upward mobility, the desire to achieve the “American dream” of a suburban house pushes them into other Queens neighborhoods, such as Bellerose, and out of New York City entirely and into Long Island suburbs. The following chart demonstrates how Indian immigration rose decade after decade throughout Queens:

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2 Even my family and I started out in Elmhurst, Queens. We lived in a one-bedroom apartment from 1997-2003, after moving out of my uncle’s home a few blocks away.
Table 1: This table lists neighborhoods in Queens and shows how the Indian-American population has steadily increased overall (Khandelwal 2002, 17).

Today, Indian immigrant populations in the many enclaves remains high and in Queens alone, there are 117,550 Indian immigrants, a significant majority of the over 192,000 Indians total in New York City (NYC Census FactFinder).

Indian immigration has been facilitated by the skills and capital Indian immigrants bring with them to New York City. There are two main advantages they enjoy over other immigrant groups that facilitate their continued migration. The first is fluency in English. Urban, middle-class Indians tend to be educated in Western schools that are taught in English with a British or American curriculum. This sets many immigrants up for success because, as mentioned, it opens doors in high-paying, prestigious fields such as finance, science, and technology, all of which are fields that are internationally recognized in English. This fluency also lessens the burden of
immigration by allowing immigrants to bypass the hurdle of learning the language of the receiving country, something many other Asian immigrants must do, and instead, directly apply for jobs and higher education programs.

The second major advantage Indian immigrants have over other immigrants, as well as native-born Americans, is the ability to quickly mobilize capital via family networks. This is not to say that Indian immigrants come from well-off families, nor is it a commentary on the monetary conversion between dollars and rupees (indeed, the current exchange rate favors the dollar, as about 66 rupees = 1 dollar). Rather, it is an observation of how immigrants appeal to multiple friends and family members and are able to pool small contributions into sizable investment capital. These loans are not only returned, but such a transaction creates an environment of reciprocity when it comes to assistance. For example, a hopeful immigrant might borrow money from his sister and friend in order to generate enough capital to move to New York City. Once settled, in addition to returning the money, he may also be expected by his sister and friend to sponsor their immigration as well. Broadly, this efficient use of capital benefits every party in the transaction (Lessinger 1995, 15-16). However, such networks may also give the impression that Indian immigrants are wealthy and outdo other immigrant groups when it comes to socioeconomic mobility. Coupled with their intense focus on education, as well as their efficient incorporation into New York City’s job market, many consider Indian-Americans to be a model minority. Though this idea may contain some seeds of

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3 There are some possible drawbacks to this. One is of course that by lending money in this way, families may find it difficult to save for themselves. However, families can avoid such situations by only lending what is feasible. That is certainly how my family handled such situations.

Walia 12
truth, it is far from perfect in describing the lived, every-day reality of Indian-Americans in New York City.

The Model Minority Myth: Fact or Fiction?

According to Wong et. al. (1998), the term “model minority” refers to a minority group that is perceived successful because it embodies qualities Americans value. This success is marked by achievements in education, rising income, and upward occupational mobility. The term was first coined in 1966 by William Petersen, a sociologist who wrote an article for the *New York Times*. Titled, “Success story: Japanese American style” the article discussed the structural and cultural factors, such as strong work ethic and reverence for family, that allowed for the dramatic upward mobility of Japanese American immigrants. Petersen emphasized that such success allowed this group to overcome discrimination (Petersen 1966). Eventually, “model minority” became an umbrella term for all Asian Americans, including Indians. Asian American scholars debated the term as early as the 1970s, arguing that the term was actually rooted in stereotypes resulting from a shifting racial climate rather than any performance indicators of Asian Americans. Other scholars, however, point to the marked socioeconomic gains of Asian Americans and argue that they are too successful to be considered a traditional minority (Wong et al 1998, 96). Such debate continues today and varies greatly within different Asian groups.

Indian-Americans (in addition to Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans, and Korean-Americans) are perhaps the most commonly cited example of a model minority. Indeed, they have been more economically successful than most other immigrant groups and in some cases, have even outperformed the native-born population (Lessinger 1995,
4). Indian-Americans make up a mere 1% of the overall US population, but constitute 3% of the country’s engineers, 8% of its physicians and surgeons, and 7% of its IT workers. They out-earn both other Asian Americans and native born white Americans with a median household income of $83,000 compared to $61,000 and $55,000 respectively. They are also overall less likely to be poor or incarcerated as compared to whites (Richwine 2009).

What is it about Indian-Americans that allows them to not only outcompete fellow immigrants, but also the native-born population? Part of the answer is rooted in the longstanding immigration history. Indians are extremely self-selective. Because immigration for them is a transatlantic journey, only the most motivated individuals will make the decision to immigrate and families will only opt to send members with the highest potential for success. Furthermore, the United States is also quite selective, granting preference to the most educated and skilled amongst all those who entertain the idea of immigrating. Self-selected individuals also bring with them a success-driven mentality that places an unrelenting emphasis on educational attainment and upward occupational mobility. This is only bolstered by a true willingness to roll up their sleeves and buckle down to meet their own lofty goals, whether they be individual goals or goals of their families (Richwine 2009). This mentality and work ethic stems from an awareness that there is great sacrifice involved in immigration, be it monetary to finance the venture, emotional to separate from family and friends in India, or social to move to a totally foreign country where they often do not know anyone. Thus, in order to legitimize the sacrifices immigrants (and sometimes their families) must make to get to America, they adopt a strict work ethic to ensure they receive the benefits that drew them to
American, such as wealth and occupational advancement. Such a mentality has indeed paid off, as Indian-Americans have made significant contributions to the economy and occupy leadership positions in various fields. To name a few, the United States Attorney for New York’s Southern District, the Dean of the extremely esteemed New York University’s Leonard N. Stern School of Business, and the Chief Executive Officer of MasterCard are all Indian-Americans (see Figure 3).

![Preet Bharara](image1) ![Geeta Menon](image2) ![Ajay Banga](image3)

**Figure 3:** In New York City, Indian-Americans hold leadership positions in virtually every industry. Preet Bharara, Geeta Menon, and Ajay Banga are a few examples of what would stereotypically be considered model minorities (Wikipedia Commons, 2016).

This commonly accepted portrayal of Indian-Americans as a model minority might be flattering in some ways but it remains quite problematic. Part of the reason for this is a shift in the understanding of a model minority. Much of the modern day discussion emphasizes the high socioeconomic expectations of the paradigm over cultural qualities such as respect for families and communal living. This could reflect a new pattern in American culture that values socioeconomic attainment above cultural traits.

As a result, popular cultural understanding of a model minority primarily evokes images of a high-paying and prestigious job backed by an Ivy League education. This is certainly reflected in Karan Mahajan’s 2015 article in *The New Yorker* entitled “The Two Asian
“Model Minority” Seems Like A Compliment But It Does Great Harm.’ Both articles in fact argue that the model minority paradigm is harmful to the Asian-American community, but specifically do so by highlighting the education and income gap amongst Asian-Americans. Unlike Petersen, Mahajan and Lim specifically refute the use of socioeconomic success as a means to deny minority status. They do not allude to other cultural values that Petersen emphasized, such as values for strong families, at all. Other bodies of work that do reference cultural observations Petersen wrote about, such as low crimes rates, still prioritize high educational attainment and high incomes. For example, Cliff Chen of the University of Southern California (1997) remarked, “Asian Americans are popularly believed to have high education attainment, high median family income, low crime rates, a lack of juvenile delinquency, and a lack of mental illness” (278). Thus, even discussions that allude to values other than strides made in school and at work seem to emphasize socioeconomic success as a primary defining feature of the model minority paradigm.

This understanding of the model minority paradigm does not totally ignore the cultural values that underpinned Petersen’s ideas. However, it does make a number of assumptions about the Indian-American community that are overly simplistic because it relies too much on stereotypical understandings of Indian culture and values rather than the unique qualities of individuals and/or collective strategies of immigrant groups.4 First,

4 A great example of this is the Tiger Mom stereotype. What Petersen heralded as strong work ethic and emphasis on family and community support has evolved into the image of a, “hyper-disciplining parenting and their laser-like focus on achievement and performance” (Park 2014). Indian Tiger Moms are considered stoic, strict, and prohibit “distractions” from academic excellence (i.e. leisurely activities such as playing sports or spending time with friends). Though rooted in a cultural value deemed desirable by Petersen, this stereotype ultimately harms Indian-Americans. For instance, it assumes all Indian parents conflate love with success and thus, are emotionless parents if their children do not adequately succeed.
in addition to emphasizing the idea that that success is measured primarily by economic and academic gains, it also does not allow for Indian-Americans to self-define success. Furthermore, it does not take into account the social realities of immigration, which are complicated and impact everyday life in various, interlocking ways. For example, first-generation Indian-Americans can experience racism and may be told by xenophobes to “go back to their country” on the basis of their ethnicity even though this nation is their home. This can cause a host of identity issues, as I will show in the coming chapters.

Furthermore, the model minority notion also assumes that all Indian immigrants will become wealthy by virtue of their drive for success and thus, shoves under the rug those who are less fortunate or denigrates these immigrants as failures for not achieving the typical socioeconomic mobility. Though the group is largely well educated and socioeconomically mobile, there is a subset of Indian immigrants who work in menial jobs that are not prestigious or lucrative because they do not arrive with university degrees or sizeable social, economic, and/or cultural capital (Lessinger 1995, 14). Structural barriers exist that hinder even the most driven Indian-American immigrants from attaining the socioeconomic success they desire. However, heir inability to attain

Thus, cultural values that once were heralded with awe and respect are now somewhat scoffed at and widely stereotyped.

5 How Indian-Americans define success varies widely, as it does for any demographic group. For many immigrants and first-generation immigrants, including those who I have interviewed, common definitions of success have indeed been academic and occupational because they believe this kind of success is the reward for having made sacrifices to immigrate in the first place. However, for the women I interviewed, success was also defined by happiness. Many of the women stated that as long as they are happy in the future with their choices, be they occupational or personal, they will consider themselves successful. They recognize however that their immigrant parents may disagree and instead, prioritize academic and occupational success. Though it seems possible that elements of the model minority myth have seeped into the Indian-American consciousness and thus influences their definitions of success, it is more likely that because socioeconomic gains are tangible (such as wealth), they are the easiest and thus most preferred way for many first-generation immigrants to “pay back” their parents for their sacrifices. Furthermore, honor and respect are highly prized in Indian culture and thus, the pathways to attaining those, i.e. education and occupational mobility, are too.
the expected outcomes of the model minority paradigm is not sufficient grounds to erase neither their existence nor their struggle as Indian-Americans.

Additionally, the model minority paradigm doesn’t account for other axes of identification, such as gender, race, class, ability, religion, etc. It merely assumes that the ethnic categorization is enough means to declare Indian-Americans “too successful to be considered a disadvantaged minority group” (Cheng 1997, 278). However, the lived reality of Indian-Americans shows otherwise. For example, Indian-American men and women face very different challenges, as I will show throughout this thesis.

Finally, Asian Americans, despite their successes and perceived model status, are still seen as the “other” by other Americans and are constantly the target of xenophobic abuse (Mahajan 2015). In a country where the black/white color line is so deeply entrenched, Indian-Americans struggle to find their place when they do not truly fit either. Despite their class privilege, they continue to face racial assaults (Maira 2002, 73). Jersey City, New Jersey, for example, saw a significant number of hate crimes throughout the 1980s and 1990s, especially by a group that referred to itself as “The Dotbusters” (referring to the bindi, an ornamental dot worn by Indian women on the forehead). Furthermore, as a consequence of 9/11, hate crimes, largely against Sikh men, have persisted. This kind of violence also trickles down to women. For example, women are sometimes left as sole providers of their families in the aftermath of such attacks on their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Though, fortunately, such extreme patterns of violence are not the norm, everyday instances of racism and microaggressive behavior

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6 Indian-Americans will differ in how they choose to mitigate this issue. Many will refer to themselves as people of color, while others simply refer to themselves as Indian-Americans. Race will be more deeply explored in Chapter 2.
are entirely too common. Thus, class privilege clearly is not enough to ward off racial biases and violent attacks (Mazumdar 1989, 52). The model minority paradigm hides these realities and thus, misses some significant and defining patterns of the Indian-American experience in New York City.

Methodology

Because this thesis seeks to examine the every-day lives of Indian-American women, which undoubtedly can drastically vary, I drew upon several different sources and bodies of research. Census reports and recent articles about Indian-American success provided some quantitative data, which was used primarily to situate Indian-American immigration history broadly. To bolster this data, I drew on a variety of ethnographic studies that examine the model minority myth as well as sources that examine Indian-American women specifically, especially their experiences with family, community, and racism. This includes Madhulika Khandelwal’s *Becoming American, Being Indian: An Immigrant Community in New York City* and Johanna Lessinger’s *From the Ganges to the Hudson: Indian Immigrants in New York City*.

The most vital portion of my methodology is the ethnographic research I have conducted to gather Indian-American women’s stories. A comprehensive list of interview questions can be found in the Appendix. Because the research question is primarily centered around young Indian-American women, I interviewed eight Indian-American women from 18-24 years old. Ancestrally, they hail from many of the aforementioned top sending states in India, specifically Punjab, Gujarat, and Kerala. For ease of comparison,
first-generation and 1.5 generation\textsuperscript{7} experiences will be categorically equivalent for this paper. Such categorization is widely accepted in many scholarly papers and this paper will continue that tradition. This is a feasible comparison because the bulk of socialization for even those who immigrated as babies occurred in New York City and thus, their place of birth does not weigh as heavily as it would have had they immigrated as older children or adults. I also drew on some informal conversations I had with these (and other) women and will cite appropriately throughout the thesis. Additionally, my focus on Indian-American women is not to obscure the struggles of Indian-American men, which are pressing and plenty. However, they are certainly not the same as Indian-American women and in many ways, Indian-American men remain more advantaged and thus, less marginalized. I will tease out these differences throughout each chapter.

Finally, I use several key terms throughout the paper that I define below. These are all terms used to delineate different identities that my respondents (and others) use to describe and situate themselves in the American mainstream:

- **Indian**: a person who was born in India and immigrated to the United States in their adult years. People who define themselves as Indian will often not see themselves as American at all, but rather as a through-and-through Indian who happens to live in America.
- **Indian-American**: a first generation (or 1.5 generation) immigrant who, by virtue of either being born in America or immigrating at a very young age, has grown up immersed in American culture. In contract to Indians (such as their parents) Indian-Americans will identify with aspects of both Indian and American culture as a result of growing up in American but practicing Indian cultural norms with their families.
- **Brown**: a colloquial term used largely by first-generation Indian-Americans that refers to Indian-Americans. This term can refer to any South Asian, but because India and South Asia are often conflated, its use is typically understood as referring to Indian. The intent of the word

\textsuperscript{7}1.5 generation was a term coined by Ruben Rumbaut in the 1970s that refers to those who immigrate as children, usually under the age of 12, whereas first-generation immigrants are the first children of the immigrating family to be born in the host-nation.
alludes to a shared experience and does not mean to emphasize race over culture.
• **Desi**- used in the title of this thesis (originally a lyric from a popular Bollywood song), this is another colloquial term that refers to people from the Indian subcontinent.

**Acknowledging My Biases**

This project is intended to understand the lived experiences of Indian-American women and as such, I can not discount my own experiences as a lifelong New York City resident of Indian descent. I am a 1.5 generation immigrant and immigrated in 1995 to New York City when I was six months old. I am a product of the very pressures and obligations I will detail in this paper and it is important to mention my biases. My own perceptions and opinions of the Indian-American community likely colored my interviews with respondents, as well as the presentation of their experiences. I am very proud to be an Indian-American woman but remain critical of my community. As such, I expected my interviewees to be of similar mindsets – proud of their heritage, but aware of the challenges women like them will inevitably face as a result of their complicated identities. Though some women undoubtedly were of similar opinions as I, some sharply diverged. For example, I expected all respondents to speak about the pressure they felt from their parents to succeed. However, a few women remarked that they do not face any pressure they consider crushing. I elaborate on this interesting contrast in Chapter 1.

It is also worth noting that a great deal of my passion about this topic has translated into activism, which has impacted the way I think about my community. I am a co-founder of Columbia University organization called the South Asian Feminism(s) Alliance which aims to foster a space on-campus that encourages dialogue and mobilizes leadership and community action to challenge racism, misogyny, and
sexism that is prevalent in the University, the South Asian diaspora, and beyond. In this group, I lead a committee dedicated to the professional development of South Asian women. I feel very strongly about properly equipping South Asian women early on in their professional careers with not only the tools and resources to become occupationally mobile, but also with the confidence and grit to pursue their passions and preferred routes, unapologetically. Because this is a group I am very passionate about and one I will discuss later on, my experiences have likely shape parts of the arguments I make. Where appropriate, I will be sure to distinguish my personal opinions apart from those of my respondents and from any scholarly work I may reference.

Finally, I was also a Programming Chair for the first ever South Asian Millennial Conference which was held in February 2016 at Columbia University. This three-day conference brought together the bright South Asian minds of today’s generation to engage and grapple with pressing issues in the South Asian diaspora. I directed programming that deals with sexual assault and domestic violence in the South Asian community. This is a direct extension of my work for another organization called Take Back the Night which addresses rape culture and seeks to support survivors on-campus. I chose to pursue such programming because the issue is still extremely stigmatized (often characterized by victim blaming) by many South Asians and as a result, women are often unable to access the resources and proper psychological aid they may need after enduring such violent trauma. This leaves them at a severe disadvantage in virtually every sphere of life – social, economic, etc. This is a topic that many respondents alluded to throughout their interviews. Though I do not explicitly speak about their experiences

8 This is not to discount male survivors of sexual and/or domestic violence. However, a majority of those who endure this trauma are women.
with this kind of violence, my personal advocacy for survivors certainly impacted my perception of these women’s stories. My ability to empathize with the women I interviewed, on this matter and many others, evoked complicated emotions. I detailed these alongside the respondent’s stories in order to separate the two. Despite the potential of bias, I believe my reactions are important in not only demonstrating the power and depth of shared experience, but also in noting the differences between seemingly similar Indian-American women. It serves as a nod to diversity in a category the model minority paradigm assumes is largely homogenous.

**Roadmap of What’s to Come**

What follows is a detailed account and analysis of interviews conducted with respondents. Each chapter addresses an area of these women’s lives that contributes heavily to their sense of self. First, I will discuss the family and societal expectations of women and how these forces from within their community impact Indian-American women, especially when it comes to how they understand their identities as Indian-Americans.

Identity issues will also be explored in Chapter 2, which discusses experiences outside of these women’s Indian communities, specifically with racism in school and occupational settings. Here, I trace how the model minority notion obscures an everyday reality for Indian-American women, which is constant struggle with microaggressive behavior and stereotyping. This further compounds these women’s identity issues.

Finally, Chapter 3 addresses how Indian-American women deal with these forces and contend how these pressures can be relieved moving forward. All assertions will be
grounded primarily in respondents’ experiences and bolstered by theory, as well as my own opinions and/or interpretation of their narrative.

Each chapter, though exclusive to its topic areas, will build towards the larger conclusion, which is that while seemingly complimentary, the model minority paradigm does not capture the reality of Indian-Americans in New York City, and it certainly doesn’t speak to the experiences of Indian-American women. It is stereotyping and flattening and highlights them as “others.” There needs to be a more holistic method of painting an accurate picture of Indian-American women in the city that never sleeps.
Chapter 1

Internal Strife: The Impact of Family and Community Expectations

In the Fall of 2012, my 12th grade class was in the midst of applying to colleges. I attended a small private school in Jackson Heights, Queens and my entire class was a mere twenty-two students. This small class size had various advantages and drawbacks, but an arguably useful asset was one-on-one attention from teachers and counselors. Throughout the arduous process of applying to college, our dedicated college counselor guided us carefully, meeting with us individually multiple times to discuss our progress. Before the first of these meetings, she emailed each student a form to gage our interests and preferences for colleges, including our intended fields of study, our current academic standing, and other relevant information.

A few friends and I filled out these forms together. On the second page of the form, there was a portion called “geographic preference.” It required us to rank portions of the United States on a scale of 1-10, 1 being most preferred and 10 being least preferred, of where in the United States we would be comfortable attending college. My friends immediately dove into the form, almost unanimously ranking both “New York City” and “New York State” a near 10. Having lived in New York City for most of their lives, they seemed eager to move away. They opted for instead for regions such as “Mid-Atlantic” and “Pacific Northwest.” I hesitated. Unsure of how to proceed, I stuffed my form into my bag and murmured that I needed to get to my next class. Walking back into the school building, I knew my friends were taken aback by my abrupt departure. Truth is, I was too.
For the rest of the school day, I debated how to fill out that section of the form. I could not understand the extreme discomfort I felt over this one portion when the rest of the form was a breeze to fill out. After finishing my homework that night at home, I pulled out the form from my bag again and carefully re-read the ten geographic areas. After a deep breath, I crossed areas off the sheet, one-by-one. In the end, I had four geographic areas remaining, ranked accordingly:

1. New York State
2. New York City
3. Northeast
4. Mid-Atlantic

Fully aware this would be one of the first things my college advisor would point out the next morning during our meeting, I tried to put the form out of mind.

As expected, my college counselor asked me the next morning why I had crossed off so many geographic areas on the form. I shrugged, telling her I did not want to leave the East Coast. My college counselor was totally puzzled, pausing before reminding me that excellent universities, such as Northwestern University and Stanford, would officially be off my list if I chose to confine myself to the East Coast. For a brief moment, I reconsidered my decision to exclude most of the country for my college search. Inexplicably however, I stuck to my resolve, insisting I wasn’t interested in those schools anyway and needed to stay on the East Coast. My college counselor was clearly uncomfortable, still struck by my decision to limit myself despite being a considerably competitive candidate. In her last attempt to change my mind, she asked me why it was so important to stay on the East Coast. Almost reflexively, I blurted out that I was an only child and needed to stay close to home in order to be available for my parents and family, should they ever need me. The sheer bewilderment on my college counselor’s face and
the awkward silence that had set it made me regret my words instantly. After a roll of her eyes, my college counselor let me know that I could pick up a preliminary suggestion list from her next week. Thanking her, I rushed out of her office back to class.

In hindsight, there were several notable forces at play in this particular instance. One was the stark contrast between my need to stay on the East Coast and my friends’ resolve to leave immediately. This dichotomy is one I certainly understand better now, but still struggle with. Looking back, I now understand the reason I felt so compelled to stay close to home was because of an overwhelming sense of obligation to my family. For reasons that will be expanded on throughout this chapter, my classmates did not carry such obligations. However, understanding this does not translate to comfort and the pressure remains crushing.

Another was my college counselor’s confusion over my decision, as well as her inability to mask her personal disapproval. Her dismissal of my decision compounded my already crippling anxiety over the situation. Thus, not only was I dealing with a great deal of internal pressure to make my decision the way I did, I also faced external pressure to pursue the exact opposite.

This kind of tension is something Indian-American women encounter nearly daily. They face a great deal of pressure from their families to meet certain expectations, but growing up in a city as diverse as New York City complicates this considerably. Indian-American women often get caught between fulfilling obligations (which more often than not, they do take quite seriously) and embracing American values and ideals that may clash with their own Indian practices. Thus, navigating daily life can become uniquely frustrating for Indian-American women. Moreover, these lived experiences are
not adequately captured by frameworks used to discuss Indian-American immigration such as the model minority paradigm, thus demonstrating the need for a closer look. Most notably, the model minority paradigm seems to miss the double burden many Indian-American women face of performing emotion work for their families and communities in addition to their efforts as students and young professionals. This double burden is made even more difficult to shoulder by an emphasis on fulfilling not only family expectations, but also community expectations. This intense pressure forces young Indian-American women to constantly negotiate the tension that inevitably arises between adhering to Indian cultural norms and embracing American values, ultimately complicating their already complex identities as hyphenated Americans.

The Centrality of Obligations and Expectations: Emotion Work in the Indian Context

Today, I understand that the sense of obligation I felt during the college process was only one manifestation of “emotion work” as defined by scholars Grace Yoo and Barbara Kim (2014). Yoo and Kim’s use of the concept comes from Arlie Hochschild, who argues that emotion work is, “the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling” (Hochschild 1979, 651). In this vein, Yoo and Kim argue that women do emotion work to evoke positive feelings in others, especially in their parents, and by doing so, they hold families together. In their study of Korean-American immigrants, Yoo and Kim demonstrate that children begin performing emotion work for their parents as they grow older in various forms. Like Hochschild’s interpretation, Yoo and Kim also argue that emotion work is also highly gendered. Although sons also provide this (as well as financial and tangible support), more often than not, daughters are
more likely to continue providing this support through marriage, whereas sons begin relying on their wives to do so on their behalf (Yoo and Kim 2014, 102).

Although Hochschild discusses emotion work in an “American” context and Yoo and Kim applied their definition in their study of Korean-American women, it is actually quite applicable to Indian-American women as well. Emotion work in the Korean-American context is underpinned by the Confucian idea of *hvo*, familial piety (Yoo and Kim 2014, 103). *Hyo* prizes expression of respect, sacrifice, and responsibility towards family, all of which are also foundational in Indian-American society and that too, arguably in greater degrees than in American society broadly.

Despite changes in immigration patterns over the past few decades, cultural values have persisted and thus, family and social roles among Indian-Americans, especially amongst first-generation children, have remained relatively unchanged. Broadly, Indians, regardless of gender, are expected by their families and their community at-large to complete their education, secure a lucrative job, and get married sometime in their twenties. However, there is certainly much more pressure on young women to adhere to this model and avoid straying than there is on men. Additionally, women are positioned as homemakers, in charge of all matters of the home including food preparation and fulfilling family needs. In addition to this being a classic form of labor, this is also a form of emotion work because their efforts in the home evokes peace and comfort in their family members. For example, a woman’s caretaking of the home brings both a sense of security to her children and comfort to her husband, who can rest assured that his wife has taken care of their family and home.
In addition to their being held to stricter standards in fulfilling their social roles, Indian-American women also do two kinds of work at once. Not only do they perform intensive labor in taking care of their homes and succeeding academically and occupationally, but they also simultaneously manage their emotions to evoke positive ones in their family, prioritizing their loved ones’ emotionality over theirs. In contrast, men are required to take charge primarily outside the home, bringing in a salary to support the family. They typically are not expected to do additional emotion work and thus, often do not do so. These roles are rigid and deeply socialized. Children in India internalize this structure at a young age and thus, are aware early on of the expectations made of them. Those children immigrate as adults and raise their own first-generation children. In fact, first-generation women face an even greater burden (one men do not) of fulfilling these roles and succeeding academically and occupationally without compromising their efforts in any realm (Khandelwal 2002, 117-118).

Emotion work for my respondents is especially inherent in high academic achievement and providing tangible and emotional support in the home, all of which are also energy and time intensive and therefore, examples of the two layers of work women do.9 Broadly, academic achievement serves as a source of pride and hope for the family’s future and tangible and emotional support at home alleviates some of the burden overworked parents feel to run their households and, in some cases, frees them to work instead. Infinitely valuable, this doubly demanding labor can be extremely arduous for these women.

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9 This could change as these women grow older and eventually live independently and/or get married. Thus, their emotional responsibilities only increase
When asked about general expectations they seek to fulfill for their parents, virtually every respondent began speaking about academic expectations. Though no respondents reported pressure to pursue any particular career, they reported a desire on their parents’ part that they do well in school in order to succeed in college and eventually land a well-paying, high status job. Thus, parent’s expectations are not career-driven, but rather success-driven. For Indian parents, their children’s success is often marked by status and money, which both serve as tangible proof of having “made it” as immigrants. Though undoubtedly a universal wish for parents, for Indian parents, children’s success is paramount because more often than not, it is the primary driver of their immigration. Thus, their children’s success becomes the sole affirmation of their life’s most difficult decision. Furthermore, children’s success serves as a source of hope for many parents who themselves may not have had higher education opportunities and/or come from low-income backgrounds. For example, many Indian-American college students who are the first in their families to graduate from college celebrate not only their degree, but also the sense of hope they bring to their parents who can rest assured that the future of their family is bright.

Interestingly enough, respondents reported that despite the emphasis parents placed on education, self-imposed pressure was significantly more crushing that that applied by their parents. Nineteen-year-old Upasna reported that her mother, a special

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10 The obligation to pay back immigrant parent’s sacrifices, known as the “immigrant bargain,” is not unique to Indian-Americans. It is widespread among many immigrant groups. However, it is noteworthy to point out that this is an additional force that Indian parents exert on their children that mainstream American children typically often do not experience, thus setting Indian-American children apart from their classmates.
education teacher, and her father, a self-employed business man, have never put pressure on her to academically succeed. She stated:

> If anything after elementary school, they were like, “okay, she knows she has to study and do well in life.” I was the one setting incredibly high goals for myself and my mom was kind of like, “honey, calm down. It’s all going to be okay. I just want you to do your best and be happy…” Ever since high school she was like, “I want you to do what you’re capable of and be happy in doing that”…and my father was always like, “I’m going to be proud of you no matter what you do.” (Upasna, personal communication 2016)

During our conversation, I asked Upasna why she sets such high goals for herself and how she began doing so and she credited her mother. She said her mother always made sure Upasna was completing her work on time and doing her best as a student. She was careful to make a distinction between “studying for the heck of it” and “studying so you can advance yourself later in life,” confirming that her mother reinforced academic discipline by positioning it as a means to a desired end. Additionally, Upasna’s mother was the top of her class throughout her own education and worked hard for her certification to teach in America\(^\text{11}\). She served as a positive example of dedication and work ethic and Upasna says she internalized the value of education at a young age because the “incentives were made very clear.” Thus, although Indian parents do not usually pressure their children to pursue a particular career, they certainly harp on the non-negotiable nature of education as a means to success, causing their children to set extremely high goals for themselves. Upasna did not seem to resent this kind of outlook, though she briefly mentioned that there were certainly times she questioned why she was working so hard. However, she says that this burden is mitigated by her achieving her

\[^{11}\text{Many Indian immigrants come with specialized degrees, but due to program differences, those degrees are sometimes not accepted by American employers as sufficient training. My mother is another example of a woman who had to go back to school. Despite extensive education in psychology and education, she was forced to enroll in a Licensed Clinical Social Worker program to obtain a social work degree that could yield a job.}\]
own goals and simultaneously making her parents proud. The end result, both her good grades and her parent’s pride, justify her labor.

In this case, Upasna’s self-imposed pressure speaks volumes about how much she values the emotional component of her labor as a daughter. Her parents do not outright pressure her, and yet, she remains unwaveringly committed to her high expectations. She justifies the taxing nature of consistent academic success with the pride she evokes in her parents. As such, I imagine that if she were to fall short in her achievements, her own fear of disappointing her mother would likely be much more crippling than any disapproval her mother may show. This is noteworthy because it demonstrates that despite the doubly difficult nature of an Indian-American daughter’s obligations, the sacrifices Upasna may personally make to succeed, in this case, academically, are acceptable so long as she can make her parents happy. She takes her emotion work seriously and is therefore willing to manage the accompanying “actual” work despite its demanding nature.

Although most respondents, like Upasna, seemed to be understanding of their parents’ emphasis on academic success and took their academics (and subsequently, their work as daughters) seriously, some expressed some frustration over the depth of their parents’ insistence that school remain a priority. Shreeja, an active high-school senior in New York City recounted how she had to give up extracurricular activities that she was passionate about because her parents were uncomfortable with the possibility of interference with school work. She said:

“For 8th grade and freshman year I was on the lacrosse team. In freshman year I made varsity lacrosse and then the following year, sophomore year, I wanted to be on the team again but my parents were like, ‘you just can’t do lacrosse.’ It’s a spring sport so I was swimming in the Fall and doing lacrosse in the Spring and they were like, ‘your grades are going to drop, it’s such an important semester and you have so much on your plate.’ It was kind of a non-negotiable thing and they said no and I kind of just did not do it.” (Shreeja, personal communication 2016)
Shreeja said she was quite disappointed with this decision at the time because lacrosse was something she greatly enjoyed and had a unique opportunity to pursue at the varsity level. In retrospect, she does say it was likely the right decision. Considering all of her extracurricular activities and the rigor of that semester, it is likely her grades would indeed have suffered had she included lacrosse, but that does not obscure her frustration at the time. Like Upasna however, she justified that disappointment by taking pride in her academic success of that semester. She continued to excel, thus meeting her parents’ expectations and providing them pride and solace in her bright future. Shreeja’s story, like Upasna’s, also exemplifies the emotional implications of Indian-American women’s success. Had she continued to play lacrosse and caused her grades to suffer, the disappointment her parents would have felt would be too crushing to imagine. She could have chosen to rebel against their disapproval and continue playing anyway, but she admits in the end she herself chose to quit. Her sacrifice was no doubt rooted in maintaining her parent’s comfort and therefore, is an example of emotion work. Thus, both Shreeja’s and Upasna’s stories demonstrate how truly integral emotion work is for Indian-American women and how seriously they take this obligation even despite it being an additional obligation on top of their already exhausting work as dedicated students.

Indian-American daughters’ commitment to fulfilling emotion work is also evident in their tangible and non-tangible contributions to the home and family. Upasna spoke at length about familiar non-tangible emotion work:

[I feel] basic familial obligations. You’re going to be home for the holidays. My mom asked me, “can you come home for Diwali?” so I spent the night for Diwali…I’m really close to my mom and she wants to see me more than she can so she’ll be like “can you come home this weekend” but that’s like just because she loves and misses me…if I wasn’t home for my brother’s birthday, my mom would definitely be upset and my brother would be upset about that but there is no universe
in which I would not be home for his birthday anyway (Upasna, personal communication 2016).

Because Upasna lives close to where she goes to college, her responsibilities towards her family can still be actively fulfilled and thus, she makes an effort to do so. For example, instead of perhaps staying at college for the weekend to attend a party, she may opt to go home. Thus, she continues to sacrifice her time and social life in college (seemingly, with no resentment) in favor of performing emotion work for her family, which in this case is simply being present. Her insistence that there is no possibility that she would ever not prioritize family obligations like her brother’s birthday is further confirmation that emotionally fulfilling her family remains of paramount importance to her.

As Upasna spoke about herself however, I found myself making a startling comparison. My family also lives in New York City where I attend college. I have always felt a similar compulsion to go home often and be emotionally present with my family, simply because I know they miss me and by being home, I mitigate the “empty nest syndrome.” However, unlike Upasna, my resolve to not miss important events such as birthdays has waned over the years. Though I initially would make it a point to be home for my parents’ birthdays and those of other family members, I began prioritizing my work and college events over these milestones and generally have gone home less often, much to my parents’ disappointment. Only after speaking to Upasna did I remember that by missing these occasions, I had been neglecting my emotional obligations towards my family. That is not to say that my sense of obligation had diminished, but it had certainly become easier to overlook in favor of schoolwork or social commitments with friends. After speaking with Upasna, who felt such strong obligations towards her family in addition to the ones they placed on her, I felt a slight pang of guilt for neglecting mine.
This is precisely the kind of push-and-pull tension many daughters face\textsuperscript{12} and speaks to the inherent difficulty of emotion work. Fulfilling such work for families means making some level of personal sacrifice. Daughters may resent that from time-to-time, like Shreeja when she quit lacrosse. They may also decide not to make the sacrifice at all, thus prioritizing themselves over their emotional obligations. The consequences of this on Indian-American women will be detailed later in the chapter.

In addition to academic achievement and non-tangible emotion work, daughters also contribute heavily to running the household via physical work. Many work alongside their mothers to perform chores and ensure their homes are clean, safe, and happy. This is the most obvious example of multi-layered work done by Indian-American women. Not only is it physical labor, but it also eases some of the burden parents feel in maintaining their homes because daughters take up some of the responsibilities. In some cases, it also frees up parents entirely to enter the workforce with the peace of mind that their homes are still taken care of by their daughters. Thus, this labor is both physical work and also emotion work because it brings a sense of relief to parents whose daughters shoulder some (sometimes most) of the burden of managing the home and thus, mitigate some of their anxiety.

As in most cases, contributions to the Indian-American household remains highly gendered across generations. Every respondent confirmed that women in their households performed all the chores, whereas support from men in their households, be them fathers, 

\textsuperscript{12} This is not to say that Indian sons don’t feel these obligations, but they certainly feel them less and are less likely to be penalized (i.e. shamed/chastised) for neglecting them. A great example is my younger cousin. If he already has plans on an important day for the family, he will always prioritize those plans over being present for family events. He is never punished or scolded for this and nobody in the family ever brings it up during gatherings. In contrast, I (admittedly begrudgingly) will always cancel my other plans if a family-related event comes up. If I ever miss such an event, such as a cousin’s birthday, I bear the brunt of a great deal of passive aggression.
brothers, or uncles, was minimal at best and non-existent at worst. Navjot, a twenty-four-year-old recent college graduate who lives with her parents, two siblings and extended family, seemed moderately annoyed as she explained her family’s system for household work:

My brother and my cousin have never done anything. They’re not expected to cook, clean, take out the garbage, even make their own beds or do their own laundry, or pick up their clothes or fold their own clothes, any of that. Me and my sister, ever since we were younger, we were expected to make roti.\(^\text{13}\) I stated making roti when I was in the second grade. I could not reach the counter so I had to step on a stool and we had a stepping ladder to do the dishes. This wasn’t my mom doing it to us, it was my oldest aunt…now with my brother, we make sure he does the dishes, we make sure he takes out the garbage. And my cousin. It’s like pulling teeth though because it’s not expected of them. They’re not conditioned to be like, “if I see dishes in the sink I should wash them.” (Navjot, personal communication 2016)

Navjot’s parents have both worked long hours all her life so they heavily depended on this kind of support from their children to ensure their home was taken care of. However, the burden has disproportionately fallen on their daughters and that too, from a young age. Navjot could not even reach the counter when she was first expected to start cooking and yet, she assumed her role as a caregiver without resistance. She acknowledged that if she had not, her home would not have been taken care of and subsequently, this would have increased the pressure her immigrant parents felt to both earn incomes and manage their household, responsibilities that can be made infinitely more difficult by factors such as language barriers and lower-income status. It is likely that if Navjot and her sister did not contribute to the household, both of her parents could not work. Thus, it was a responsibility she could not afford to ignore. By assuming the burden for caring for her home, Navjot took on a significant burden that demanded both physical exertion and sacrifice of her own time and social life. However, in doing so she also ameliorated the

\(^{13}\) *Roti* is a traditional flat bread cooked on a stove top. It is a staple food in the Indian diet and can be served for every meal of the day.
anxiety her parents faced in both working and performing a “second shift” at home.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, like Upasna and Shreeja, Navjot also prioritizes her emotion work, even if it means personal sacrifice.

Despite these daughters’ acute understanding of the immeasurable value of their emotion work towards their families, they note that men in their families do not share a similar sense of obligation. Though pressure daughters feel to manage their homes is somewhat uniform across most respondents, they note that their fathers are often not expected by anyone in the household to perform chores, though some may if they are asked to by wives or children. It is assumed that fathers have already fulfilled their duties to the home by earning their salaries. Navjot’s story exemplifies how deeply entrenched these expectations are. Even now, her college-age brother and cousin struggle to contribute to household chores, and indeed, likely do not feel obligated to do so, because it was never expected of them. This, along with an unwavering expectation of Navjot to always contribute, has left her extremely frustrated. Several times during the interview, she just sighed, “you know,” acknowledging that these inequities are shared among women like her. Despite her commitment to her work, she (and my other respondents) expressed frustration that these sacrifices seem exclusive to women. Thus, despite adherence to their social roles, Indian-American women are not necessarily convinced these roles need be gendered, as exemplified by Navjot’s attempts to make her brother and cousin also contribute to the household. In the future, these women may therefore assign these roles to both sons and daughters as they begin their own families.

\textsuperscript{14} “Second shift” is a concept coined by Arlie Hochschild (1989) and refers to the burden that predominantly falls on women’s shoulders to work both outside and inside the home. By caring for her home, Navjot ensures that her parents do not have a second shift, even though she herself has assumed one.
Upasna, Shreeja, and Navjot’s lived experiences demonstrate the multiple ways Indian-American daughters meet their parent’s obligations. Often, meeting obligations entails performing both actual work and also performing emotion work, which is undoubtedly difficult and can foster resentment. The onerous nature of this layered and complicated work is not taken into consideration by dominant paradigms such as the model minority paradigm. Despite spotlighting some of the values one must have to fulfill this work (such as commitment and value for family), the model minority paradigm does not adequately capture the difficult reality of actually putting these values into practice. It certainly does not capture the additional emotional layer of work these women do, which is perhaps the most important element of their work. This may stem from the fact that emotion work and household chores are not considered actual labor. Because emotion work is largely seen as an extension of women’s natural caring and motherly nature, it is taken for granted. However, lived experience shows that this work is both integral to daily life and difficult. Evoking emotions of pride, hope, and solace in their families is an obligation Indian-American women hold especially close and yet, it can also cause varying degrees of issues and difficulties for women, including, in Navjot’s case, resentment. By discounting this complicated reality of Indian-American women’s lives, the model minority myth misses a bigger picture – cultural values for hard work and family may yield positive results that can be defined as successful (i.e. socioeconomic mobility or prestige), but those results, and the accompanying success, are not without sacrifice and consequences for young Indian-American women. Discounting those darker undertones is to paint Indian-American success in a false light.
It may seem that these examples of emotion work in general are actually universal and not unique to Indian-Americans. For example, most American parents want their children to do well in school and expect some level of contributions to running their households. Most American teenagers have differing opinions than their parents. However, Indian families’ expectations and their daughters’ subsequent fulfilling of those obligations are set apart by an additional social layer that is not found in mainstream urban American society; an intense focus on community.\textsuperscript{15} Although these respondents largely understand the root of their parents’ expectations, and thus, can reason their discomforts, they inevitably, like most adolescents, sometimes question them or disobey them. However, in the Indian context, this proves dangerous. God forbid a daughter should stray from her family obligations, log kya kehenge?

\textit{Log Kya Kehenge?}: The Added Pressure of Community Values in an Individualistic Society

According to Hasan Minhaj, an Indian-American comedian, log kya kehenge is the killer of every Indian child’s dreams. In Hindi, it means “what will people say?” and is a commonly used phrase to indicate a tone of disapproval. However, this disapproval isn’t necessarily from a parent or even a family, but rather from society at-large. Out of a deep cultural reverence for extended family, Indians have always prized community and Indian-American immigrants have continued such traditions in New York City. In fact, the value of community in a land far away from home becomes even more salient. However, this proves to be a significant source of distress for many first-generation

\textsuperscript{15} Close knit communities can be found in America, largely in small towns and suburbs. However, because this paper is focusing on New York City, these smaller communities will not be discussed. It is worth mentioning however that the challenges Indian-Americans may face in such a situation may be markedly different than those faced by Indian-Americans in New York City.
women as they attempt to fulfill expectations and obligations towards their families while simultaneously navigating American society. It is yet another social complication that is misrepresented by dominant frameworks such as the model minority paradigm.

According to Khandelwal (2002), all Indian families exist within a community that they consider extremely important, more so than mainstream Americans typically do. This community can be based on religion, cultural practices, intracommunity and endogamous marriages, and sometimes caste. Communities proved especially important for Indian immigrants as they arrived in New York City and other areas of America. They often regarded all other Indian immigrants as members of their community in an attempt to both maintain their culture and make up for the lack of nearby family. As immigration continued throughout the 1990s and entire families immigrated together, the concept of community for Indian-Americans came to encompass both those related by region, origin, and blood, as well as friends. This was certainly the case for my family. When I was a toddler, my parents befriended several other Indian families from our ancestral state, Punjab, with whom we celebrated birthdays and holidays. Within this community, we could reasonably expect support as well, whether that be a small financial loan or childcare. As my extended family began immigrating to New York City, they were simply incorporated into those groups and our community grew.

Although community is not uniquely an Indian-American concept, it is certainly quite different in the American context, which is defined by ideas of individualism and capitalism as described by Max Weber. In his landmark *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argues that the individual pursues economic gain and this individual-centric spirit is precisely what defines capitalism, especially in the Western
context. Weber is careful to distinguish capitalism in the Western context from that in China and even India, remarking that capitalism in these Eastern countries is not marked by a similar individualistic spirit (Weber 1958, 51-52). Indeed, it is not. Western capitalist values stand in stark opposition to Indian values of collectivism. In fact, most Indian immigrants, at least in their initial years in New York City, experienced a serious culture shock in this regard. They found Americans to be lacking in social sensitivity and rejected American notions of marriage and family as too different from their own (Khandelwal 2002, 120).

My own parents are prime examples of the contrast between American and Indian conceptions of community. To this day, they insist that Indian family values are simply too different from American family values, which seem cold and individualistic to them. For example, they have never understood how my friends can call money “theirs” simply because they earned it from a job or internship. For most Indian families, any money earned by anyone in the family becomes the family’s money. There is no sense of ownership based on who earned it and thus, things like allowances have remained foreign to them. They have always said that if I need money, I just need to ask and the family’s money would be used. There is absolutely no obligation to pay it back. It will be interesting to see how, if at all, this view evolves in the next year as I begin my first full-time job.

Another factor that sets Indian communities apart from American ones is their transnational nature. Even after immigration, Indians will maintain their kinship ties and friendships in India (and around the United States) via visits, family gatherings, and religious observances. This has become increasingly easier as technology has advanced,
but even during the 1990s, immigrants found ways to keep in touch. My parents wrote letters and made collect calls. Several respondents recalled their parents purchasing calling cards that would allow them to call home for a few cents per minute. Thus, distance did not totally sever pre-existing ties for Indian immigrants (though it certainly did present serious challenges) and their communities were actually all the more extensive.

Because of these unique factors, Indian communities have a strikingly different conception of the individuals than do most Americans. In American society, the individual is a totally exclusive unit that forms new relationships when joined with another individual, for example, via marriage. In Indian society however, individuals are not considered to be exclusive units. Rather, they are representatives of their families and/or communities at all times. This collective identity shared by all members of the community trumps individual idiosyncrasies and thus, individuals are not regarded as particularly unique or special (Khandelwal 2002, 119-120).

This emphasis on community and added layers of transnationalism and communalism particularly subjects Indian-American women to intense scrutiny by entire groups, as opposed to just by close family and friends. As representatives of their family, they are expected by all to adhere to their respective gendered roles (i.e. provide actual and emotion) and to behave accordingly. More often than not, men are given significantly more leeway in society then women are for deviating from expected gender roles and any deviations committed are often easily forgiven or explained. Women, however, risk prematurely ruining their reputations and those of their families should they stray from their imposed gender expectations (Khandelwal 2002, 119). This is because, much like in
the aforementioned Korean concept of *hyo*, traditional Indian family values position daughters as carriers of family honor and thus, their transgressions affect an entire lineage, not just the daughter herself. For daughters, this means that not only are they expected to fulfill obligations via multiple forms of work, but they are also under a great deal of pressure to not stray from gendered expectations or make mistakes. This is a stark contrast from consequences for Indian-American men who do not adhere to gendered expectations (for example, getting high-paying jobs). While they too are scrutinized, it is certainly not to the degree women are because men, while prized as breadwinners, are not considered carriers of family honor. Their transgressions are thus not consequential beyond their immediate families.

This communal pressure can be crushing for many Indian women. Community members openly express their opinions on virtually every decision any given Indian woman can make. For Sahi, a junior in college, for example, there are two particularly salient areas of her life that her community becomes especially relevant. One is her academics. Sahi chose to attend a liberal arts high school over a STEM specific one. This decision was heavily scrutinized by her parents who worried that Sahi would pursue a career that isn’t lucrative as a result. However, Sahi stressed that her family in India was equally vocal:

> It’s not just my parents, it’s my extended family. I’ll make that once a month phone call where everyone would be like, “Sahi what are you doing with your life.” (Sahi, personal communication 2016)

This is a particularly striking example of extended family members’ willingness to constantly comment on decisions taken. This kind of scrutiny is not one that most mainstream Americans experience, a difference I came to understand quite young. My non-Indian friends were quite puzzled when I explained how openly my community
criticizes each other, insisting that their opinions were irrelevant and shouldn’t be given weight. They also did not understand why the opinions of extended family mattered to “personal” decisions, such as where I went to college. However, Sahi’s story demonstrates precisely why it is relevant. If she pursued liberal arts, she risked disappointing her parents by not pursuing a lucrative career. Furthermore, she would be setting a dangerous precedent for going against the community consensus. This is a cause for collective concern because it violates the community’s status quo and thus, is justification for the community to look down upon Sahi’s family. To prevent such a calamity, Sahi’s entire family feels comfortable stepping in with their respective two cents. Such an incident would not happen in the average American household because community is not an intrinsic element and thus, Sahi’s “transgression” would impact only her.

Sahi also experiences a great deal of communal pressure to refrain from undesired social behavior, such as dating outside of her ethnic group or drinking alcohol. Sahi happens to be extremely active within her community, which she considers an extension of her family. In a local organization, she serves as a Youth Leader for other Indian children. Regarding this social role, Sahi remarked:

> At the beginning, youth stuff was more performance related but then I also thought we could do more than this. We could do charity stuff and help the actual community. Maybe some sort of education-based programs. My parents would say, “this is what you need to be doing. You need to be a role model human being for other people to learn from.” And now they’re always like, “make sure you don’t do any things because you know, there’s a lot of kids that look up to you know.” So I’m like, “okay…I guess I won’t do stupid things.” (Sahi, personal communication 2016)

Additionally, Sahi stated that she kept her romantic, inter-religious relationship during high school a secret. Several children from her community group also attended her high school and she feared they would find out about her boyfriend and word would somehow
get back to her parents. Thus, as part of being a good Indian daughter and role model, Sahi also had to account for the fact that her relationship would not be accepted in the community and would cause a great deal of disappointment in her and potentially, gossip about her family. Maintaining her image was truly draining (and indeed, another example of emotion work), but if she hadn’t, the disappointment would be too great to bear, both for her parents and for the community at-large. Fortunately, in this case, Sahi ended her relationship as privately as she began it and it never came under the scrutiny of her community.

In other cases, the fear of log kya kehenge can bring about even more serious consequences for behavior that is totally normal in mainstream America. It is widely understood that as children go to college, they begin experimenting with alcohol and attending parties. However, for traditional Indian parents, this is usually unsettling and they sometimes consider it unacceptable behavior, especially for daughters. Attending parties, especially those where alcohol is consumed, are considered inappropriate behavior that is improper for women. However, this is quite normal in college contexts and even beyond. For example, Navjot is prohibited from going to clubs with her friends so she usually keeps her social life a secret from her family. Now that she no longer lives in a dorm and has moved back into her family’s house, she uses work as an excuse to go out with her friends. She always tells her mother that she is going to hang out with her friends, but does not necessarily mention what they will be doing. She tells the rest of her family that she is attending a work related event or conference. When asked about what would happen if her father and extended family were to find out, she outlines dire consequences:
They would be very disappointed. We’re past the point where they can tell me not to do it but they would probably say, “okay well, just get out of our house. Go get married and do what you want but you can’t stay here. We’re not going to tolerate this.” I think if I was a little younger and I did not have a job and could not support myself they would probably send me to India to get married (Navjot, Personal communication 2016)

Partying and clubbing are not only unacceptable to her family, but they also are grounds for termination of family relations, which is arguably the most serious possible punishment. Sending a daughter back to India for marriage is a method of both salvaging a family’s soiled reputation (as a result of their daughters’ transgression) and of transferring the burden of those transgression largely to her husband’s family. This frees the natal family from having to bear the societal brunt of any future transgression their daughter may commit. After all, if people were to find out, log kya kehenge?

Like emotion work, meeting community expectations is not accounted for in the model minority paradigm. It simply assumes that individual people can espouse certain values and that, along with their effort, will translate into success. However, as I have demonstrated for Indian-Americans, the individual is not nearly as important a unit as the community at-large and thus, the general applicability of the model minority paradigm is questionable. There are certainly Indian-Americans who seem to fit the myth. They very well may have begun as immigrants and socioeconomically progressed to near-parity with white Americans. However, these Indian-Americans are not taken to kindly within the community. For example, Indra Nooyi, the CEO of Pepsi Co. is an Indian-born American who is arguably one of the most powerful women in the world. In an interview,

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16 I do not personally know anyone who has had this experience. However, there are several stories told in my (and my respondents’) communities about women who have had this experience. Their transgressions are kept as private as possible (for example, if a parent catches their daughter in a relationship, they will keep the knowledge to themselves only) and they are immediately presented to the community as “ready for marriage.” Community members often gossip about women who are suddenly marriage-ready, wondering what they might have done. This community gossip serves as an implicit warning to other women not to stray the way the woman in question did.
she spoke at length about how she attained her success by focusing on her career instead of her family. Some members of my community did not take to this well and many spoke disapprovingly of how “American” she was. Despite her being successful, she garners disapproval because she eschewed traditional female roles in order to obtain that success. Ideally, by community standards, she should have managed both. While there remains pressure for Indian-American women to also be successful outside the home in addition to their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, there is an arguably unfair expectation that these women excel fully in all spheres of their lives without compromising efforts in any one sphere. It is especially frowned upon when women prioritize their careers over their obligations as mothers, wives, and/or daughters because that is an outright violation of gendered expectations. Thus, there is some consensus that those who do fit the model minority myth are outcasts and thus, outliers. They, and the model minority framework that attempts to define them, are not representative.

As we have seen, the pressure to constantly toe the line as set by their community positions and simultaneously provide emotion work puts Indian-American women in a perpetual limbo. Though they actively strive to meet expectations and fulfill cultural obligations towards their families and communities, they also seek to participate actively in American society and culture, be that through dating or through socializing. However, they are pulled back by their birth culture and community which often look down upon it. In fact, Indian-Americans will commonly call those who stray “Americanized” or goreh (“white” in Hindi) as a way to both shame them for their choices and alienate them from the community that does not condone their behavior. However, as mentioned, having to constantly worry about log kya kehenge while simultaneously developing as a young
American can yield frustration and sometimes resentment. Over time, this gives rise to cultural clashes which can lead to identity crises that significantly impact how these women see themselves.

**Playing with Fire: The Consequences of Straying**

Every Indian-American (and most other first generation individuals) can attest to the very real consequences of the cultural gap that exists between them and their parents. Although the gap is an unavoidable consequence of immigrant parents raising children in a different country, increasing exposure to ideas outside of traditional Indian norms can cause young Indian-American women to eschew certain values and/or modify their personalities to fit into the American mainstream. By doing so, they venture further away from the Indian ideals their parents hold and thus, enter serious culture clashes. The following quotation from a Philadelphia newspaper illustrates this point:

Most of you already know that it's tough negotiating life with parents when you're no longer a little kid, but not yet grown-up and independent. Imagine how much harder things could be if you were born in America and felt like an American, but your parents still held on to the customs and beliefs of the country where they were born - India, Korea, Ghana or wherever. (Russ 1993).

Indeed, the customs and beliefs Russ coins refer to social roles and the meeting of set expectations. The pressure described here positions Indian households as a battleground for most Indian-American women who struggle to understand some of their parents’ decisions and general parenting philosophies. In the midst of such disagreements, another struggle often originates - an identity crisis.

Most Indian-American women I spoke to named at least one major cultural clash they encounter with their parents time and time again. For Nisha, a college senior who is currently finalizing her post-graduation plans, the major argument she has with her parents is over her future, specifically as it relates to what she calls, “the normal path.”
As already discussed, Indian society dictates that members are to complete their education, secure a job, and get married by their twenties, perhaps have a child soon after. Nisha’s parents, like many others, accept this as gospel. Because this is a core tenant of what society should look like, they are deeply troubled by Nisha’s assertion that she may pursue those milestones differently:

They [her parents] say, “have a plan and go do it. You plan your career XYZ, you don’t move too far from home, you find one boy, you date that one boy, you go straight to marriage, you have a child after marriage.” Those are things I would not mind doing but I would not have that in a plan for myself. I kind of want to see it grow and develop and I’m okay with changing it halfway through. Relationship-wise, I’m okay with the kid coming first and the marriage coming second and I don’t see my parents being okay with that. My mom says she’s okay with it but I don’t think she’s actually okay with it (Nisha, personal communication 2016).

As she plans her post-graduate life, Nisha says she finds herself having this argument with her parents more frequently than ever. She has begun to second-guess herself slightly more as a result. She says that if she truly does stray from the path in the future, she can expect significant backlash, but eventual forgiveness. Thus, though Nisha deals with a frustrating cultural clash, it is one that remains within her home and doesn’t, as of now, impact how she views herself. Most other respondents haven’t been so lucky.

Although Shreeja is quite young, she has already felt compelled to question her identity and roots. Her family is not strictly religious, but they do identify as Hindus and pray often. Shreeja mentioned that for her parents, Hindu culture and mythology was very prevalent as they grew up but it hasn’t been for her and therefore, she doesn’t feel the personal connection to the religion that her parents do. In fact, Shreeja identifies as atheist. She mentioned this to her parents in passing and they had a strong negative reaction. Shreeja said she was quite surprised by how uncomfortable they were that she did not hold a connection to Hinduism, telling her, “you’re Indian, you have to be
What is most striking however was her ability to reason through this tension as she spoke to me. Even at seventeen, she was astute enough to understand that her atheism is a natural extension of growing up in a removed environment with multiple perspectives. She did not blame her parents for their comments and rather, agreed to disagree. However, their comments did launch a serious introspection. Shreeja does not connect to her heritage via religion, but in her recent trip to India, she attempted to connect via other avenues such as language, food, and clothing. By insinuating that she would not be Indian if she had not self-identified as Hindu, Shreeja’s parents unknowingly caused her a mild identity crisis. She said she continues to explore her heritage, especially through her involvement in a South Asian club at her high school, but remains highly cognizant of her parents’ discomfort of “losing her” to America in some sense.

Shreeja’s story hit home in a rather personal way. I am the product of an inter-religious marriage and thus, identify as Hindu and Sikh. However, I feel intimately connected to neither. My parents are not extremely religious and thus, never emphasized it at home. However, on my own accord, I attempted to learn more about their respective histories and traditions. Based on my knowledge and how I have seen both religions practiced, I have had to deeply think about my own conception of God, which was a difficult process. By not accepting both religions for what they were, I felt as though I was distancing myself from my heritage. However, I could not negotiate the tension I felt in blindly accepting both religions as my own.

17 This is a particularly interesting comment. Although India is dominantly Hindu (upwards of 80%), all Indians are certainly not Hindus.
Growing up in America, I was exposed to a variety of different religions. I remember being particularly enamored with the idea of angels in Christianity as well as the poetic language of the Quran. Though this enriched me as a person, it posed to me a serious question – could I be Indian without adhering strictly to my Indian religion(s)? Over the years, I have decided I can. Today, my religious views are a reflection of teachings from multiple religions, including Hinduism and Sikhism. However, this continues to be difficult to justify to both my parents and to others in my community. Many question my “Indianness” in light of these views and though most insist they are simply joking, I can not help but wonder that even jokes contain some kernel of truth. Perhaps they truly are of the opinion that I can not hold such views as an Indian-American woman, which only reflects their own discomfort with the concept. Furthermore, their comments can be incredibly uncomfortable. One should not have to constantly justify their views based on the pre-conceived notions of others. Shreeja’s story impressed me because she is facing a similar issue but at a much younger age than I did. Although it seems to affect her in the same way, I admire how prudently she has acted to connect to her heritage via other avenues. It will be interesting to see in the future how she handles other instances such as this that cause her to question her identity, especially as she prepares to ship off to college.

Like Shreeja and me, Fatima also continuously questions her identity. However, she also continues to deal with a great deal of resentment as a result. Fatima, a junior in top New York City college, was admitted to Yale University her senior year of high school. Admission into such an elite school is a dream for anybody and very few could walk away from such an offer. Fatima, unfortunately, gave up on Yale because her
parents did not support her living in a dorm. Fatima’s parents are extremely traditional and religious Muslim Indians. They were extremely concerned about both Fatima’s ties to her religion, as well as what members of their community would say if there were to allow their daughter to leave their home before marriage, something that is usually looked down upon in traditional Indian society. In fact, Fatima recounted how her fight to convince her parents to at least visit Yale was set back quite often by unsolicited commentary from members of their local mosque. One man in particular said something quite nasty to Fatima’s father, which solidified his and her mother’s resolve to prohibit Fatima from going to Yale. After about a month of coaxing however, Fatima convinced her parents to at least see the college. There, they were particularly interested in seeing the religious accommodations they had for Muslim students and also wanted to meet the Muslim chaplain. The chaplain explained that their prayer area was not sex-segregated, which made Fatima’s parents extremely uncomfortable. Convinced that Fatima would be corrupted by this loose interpretation of Islam, which was not, “the right kind of Muslim,” they reiterated their disapproval. At that point, Fatima gave up.

As Fatima told me this story, it was clear she still had unresolved tension about this. It is an especially difficult experience because it is rooted specifically in her religion and in what her community would think of her. Though her window of opportunity to go to Yale has passed, the questions this incident posed about Fatima’s identity and how she sees herself as a Muslim Indian have persisted. Though she practices Islam, she does so markedly differently than her parents and thus, says her parents think she is a bad Muslim. She is especially insecure about this because her parents and the rest of her family regard Fatima’s sister as a great Muslim. Fatima’s sister is, “quiet and [she] cooks
a lot” and thus, she meets her community’s expectations for women. In comparison, Fatima, who wears a hijab and long flowy skirts, claims she appears much more spiritual than she is and “actually talks back a lot.” Unlike her parents, she is not as concerned about minute details, such as the exact time (down to the minute) of prayer, and thus, appreciates the spirit of Islam via a looser interpretation. Her parents are vocal about their disapproval, which compounds Fatima’s fear of being a “bad Muslim” in their eyes, despite her commitment to her own interpretation of Islam. Thus, not only did she have to give up a top-notch school as part of her personal obligations towards her family, but she still deals with remnants of its aftermath today and likely, will continue to do so as the Muslim identity is increasingly questioned by American society at-large.

Nisha, Shreeja, Fatima, and all of the above respondents all represent varying degrees of culture clash. What unites them is the impact each clash has had on the way they view themselves – effectively caught in a deadlock between their Indian roots and American values. Their unique roles in their families and in society impact their day-to-day lives in a way most Americans do not experience and usually cannot understand. Because they negotiate the differences between the culture they are born into and the one they grow up learning on a regular basis, they face a great deal of internal conflict, especially as it relates to their identity. Within their homes and communities, they must constantly consider how much of their “Indianness” they have held onto and if that is enough to please their parents and communities. In academic or social settings, they must adopt familiar American attitudes in order to fit it. The model minority paradigm does not capture these difficult realities and thus, obscures a fundamental underpinning of being Indian-American in a city like New York City.
Conclusion

I can still recall how difficult it was to begin crossing out options on my college form. At the time, my parents had not yet spoken to me about our options and yet, I had already decided I had few. It is difficult to draw a distinction between pressure applied by our parents and communities and pressure we apply ourselves. It is also difficult to confidently say that the pressure we apply on ourselves is not actually a direct offshoot of the pressure inherent in our families and communities. Thus, in a reinforcing cycle, internal pressure can persist for Indian-American women throughout their lives as pressure they apply on themselves to meet community norms. In my case and in my respondent’s cases, it is almost always a mix of the two that drive our decisions and behavior and cause us the most strife.

Young Indian-American women, like many other young immigrants, face the immense challenge of maintaining their roots and fulfilling their obligations to their families and communities. They do this directly by performing actual and emotion work simultaneously. For some women like Upasna, this means sacrificing her own time and social commitments to be physically present with her family and succeeding academically to evoke pride in her parents. For others like Shreeja, this sometimes means making a personal sacrifice to accommodate parental obligations, such as giving up a cherished extracurricular activity to assure nervous parents that she remains dedicated to her academics. For women like Navjot, it means making tangible contributions to the household, for example, via cooking and cleaning, which subsequently brings a sense of relief to her overworked parents. For most Indian-American women, emotional labor looks like a combination of the three and for all my respondents, emotion work is
something they value and prioritize. Despite the pressure that such complicated obligations can mount, women cannot stray from their responsibilities, lest the larger community catch wind and condemn their behavior. For women like Sahi, maintaining a private life and hiding things like boyfriends are common. The fear of societal rejection of their families and themselves is one that is too crushing to risk skewing their image as a “good” Indian daughter. Thus, the pressure initially applied on women by families and communities is internalized and reproduced and eventually becomes self-imposed.

As tough as it was to mitigate these pressures and cross off options, it was even more difficult to witness her reaction to my insisting that applying to far away, albeit top-notch, schools like Standford wasn’t appealing for me. The confusion and dismissal, especially her eye-roll, was one of the most distinct examples I can recall of times I felt like a misunderstood outsider. It was one of the first times I had ever become uncomfortably aware of how different I was in comparison to most of my classmates. Her silence and facial expression compounded the confliction I was already feeling. Essentially, internal pressure was met by an additional external pressure, which was marked both by confusion and a concerted effort to convince me to stray away from the decision I had made. This external pressure further complicates the already difficult position Indian-American women hold, and is the topic of the next chapter.
Chapter 2

External Pushback: Racism and Stereotyping in a Post-9/11 World

On a cool Saturday in December, my best friend Kaavya and I took the 1 train all the way downtown to NYU to watch a Bollywood dance competition. Active and passionate members of Columbia University’s own Bollywood-fusion dance team, Dhoom, we were excited to scope out some potential competition and be inspired by other teams’ creativity. The entire ride down, we spoke about what we expected from fan favorite teams and what our own team could learn from competitions like this. We spoke excitedly about other things too, especially all we had learned in our first semester as college freshmen living independently in Manhattan.

After exiting the train, we wandered narrow side streets downtown near 8th street for nearly half an hour, confused where to go. Despite her smartphone and my knowledge of New York City streets, we could not seem to find the auditorium where the competition was held. Cold and frustrated, Kaavya finally approached a group of three white men outside of a pub to ask for directions. They were much older than us, easily in their late thirties or early forties. After asking for directions, Kaavya turned away from the men and faced me, pointing down the street we had just come from and saying we needed to keep walking straight. She walked away from the men without thanking them, which they did not take kindly to. As Kaavya and I turned our backs, they shouted after us menacingly, “in this country, we say thank you!”

I froze. Completely shell-shocked, I turned to look back at the men who were snickering at the remark they had just made. Kaavya did not seem to hear them and only
turned around when she noticed I had stopped walking. I contemplated condemning them for making such a microaggressive and racist comment. Unfortunately, I couldn’t bring myself to respond. Granted, Kaavya should have thanked them out of common courtesy. However, their remark was certainly not the appropriate response for her forgetfulness. In the end, I could only shoot them a disgusted look to let them know I had heard what they said and had not taken it in jest. As I walked away, I explained to Kaavya what they had said. She was quiet, not sure what to say.

For the rest of the evening, that incident weighed on my mind. I could not focus on the show, but instead thought obsessively about what they had said and if they would have reacted differently if they knew we were both American citizens or if we were men. In fact, Kaavya was born in Queens, New York and raised in New Jersey and I am a nearly-lifelong New Yorker. We are both high-achieving students at an elite university in an incredibly liberal city, which made this incident particularly troubling. Cities like New York City are usually regarded as centers of culture and generally much more tolerant and cosmopolitan than suburbs or other small and/or homogenous communities. Racist encounters here are thus more alarming because in theory, they should not even be possible. Scholars remain divided. Theorists like Louis Wirth (1938) argue that although there can be great tolerance in cities due to the concentration of differently minded people and groups, there can also be intolerance and violence (Wirth 1938, 16). Nonetheless, racism in New York City remains exceptional because despite the existence of multiple ideologies, one that espouses hate can still reign from time to time. When this is possible in New York City, I can only wonder what form racism takes in suburban (or rural), more homogenous communities in other parts of the country, where other ideologies that
challenge racism either do not exist or are an extreme minority. Additionally, the fast pace of New York City can make it difficult to address microaggressions like the one Kaavya and I faced. Hatred can get lost in the hustle and bustle, making it all the more difficult to process and respond to racist comments.

Though I wish I had responded to those men, in hindsight, I can accept my silence as a function of fear, shock, and judgment to not exacerbate a hostile situation. As a woman, I am much more likely to let harassment like this racist comment slide out of fear for my personal safety, which compounds my frustration over having experienced it. Not only am I subject to this discrimination, but I also, more often than not, will not respond in the moment and will feel as though I have allowed the individual in question to get away with their transgression with no consequence. I might have reacted differently if I were a man.

Although racism certainly impacts Indian-American men, they experience and react to racism very differently than women. For example, Sikh men who wear turbans may be called “towelhead” whereas that is not a slur that women will hear. In contrast, women may face racialized street harassment that sexualizes them as “exotic” and therefore desirable. Because men are typically not subject to this form of harassment, they will not experience this kind of nuanced racism. Furthermore, as detailed in the last chapter, the socialization of men and women in the Indian context is very different and thus, each gender reacts differently to stimuli like racism. Because women are socialized to be gentle and nurturing, they are less likely to respond to racism than men, who are socialized to be aggressive and outspoken. As a result, women generally internalize

\[18\] This may not apply to extremely small communities where people have a greater opportunity to get to know each other.
racism more than men, which, in the long run, can cause them more psychological distress via their disempowering silence. This is definitely part of the reason I could not respond to the three men near NYU. An additional factor for me (and many other women) is that remarks directed at us by men will often be ignored out of fear for our personal safety. For men, this is a lesser consideration.

Despite my disappointment with the situation, I came to the sad conclusion that regardless of all of my attempts to rationalize the encounter, Kaavya’s and my ethnicity was the only point of contention. All these men saw was two brown-skinned young women and based on solely that, they cast a great deal of assumptions. It was disturbing to be reduced to phenotypic features that signal an Indian (perhaps in their mind, Middle Eastern)\textsuperscript{19} ethnicity when there are so many other factors that define both me and Kaavya, especially as New Yorkers and Americans. In fact, my skin color is not something I would have immediately used to describe myself. Unfortunately, this is the reality for brown-skinned New Yorkers, who, as mentioned in the Introduction, are of South Asian origin. Regardless of whether or not we think our skin tone is significant, it remains important to the mainstream population. This heightened awareness of racial difference is a major external influence that impacts Indian-Americans women in multiple nuanced ways throughout their lives. What starts as seemingly innocuous comments in elementary school become more microaggressive in the workplace, on the street, and in all other spaces Indian-Americans occupy. Especially in a post-9/11 era,

\textsuperscript{19} It is worth pointing out that instances like this often occur because people conflate brown skin with the Middle East or with Muslims, two identities that elicit a great deal of fear all around the world from ignorant people. Thus, the men likely made their comment assuming I was one or both of those two things, rather than because I am Indian. However, that distinction is not significant enough to override the intent of their actions, which was racial abuse. Even if they were not directing their hatred towards us for being Indian, we bore nonetheless the brunt of their hostility.
such racism is significant in shaping Indian-American women’s identities, contributing significantly to many women’s attempts to suppress their Indianness. This racism is also a significant opposing force to the internal pressure Indian-American women face.

Whereas experiences at home and with their communities cause Indian-American women to shy away from elements of their Indian roots in favor of American culture, they find that they are not fully accepted as Americans either. In fact, Americans often find them to be too Indian. Thus, Indian-American women remain in a perpetual identity deadlock.

The Politics of Color: Being Brown in Black and White America

A great deal of the racism that Indian-Americans face stems from the difficulties they endure fitting into a mainstream society that has historically been racially black and white. As a result, race is much less salient within Asian-American communities at-large. Indian-Americans especially are disengaged when it comes to conversations about race. By not quite fitting either side however, they have been likened to both sides throughout history. For example, blacks have historically been understood as a minority and thus, Asian-Americans are sometimes lumped with this category, the same way Irish and Italians immigrants once were. Alternatively, because of their high socioeconomic position, they are sometimes conflated with whites. Both confluations prove problematic because neither results in a fitting depiction of Asian-Americans, which, they arguably deserve. Stacey Lee (2009) echoes this, remarking, “Although Asian-American experiences have been influenced by the black-white racial paradigm, it would be a mistake to conclude that the black-white racial paradigm can sufficiently account for the

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20 Indians generally hold a lot of assumptions about skin color. In India, lighter skin is typically considered superior and colorism is a very serious issue. The relative silence of Indian-Americans in conversations about how they fit into the racial fabric of American is therefore both deafening and ironic.
racialized experiences of Asian Americans.” (Lee 2009, 4). Thus, there needs to be a way to recognize individual groups for their unique differences from others and yet, not mark them as lesser for it.

Lee’s statements, though general to all Asian groups, are highly applicable to the Indian-American community specifically. According to Lessinger (1995), “…for all their middle-class aspirations, Indians sometimes find themselves specifically targeted as immigrants, as foreigners, and as people of color” (Lessinger 1995, 131). Being cast as foreigners is particularly frustrating for Indian-Americans, especially because they are phenotypically distinguishable from mainstream America and thus, constantly wear their otherness. This makes for situations like the one Kaavya and I faced. Even when we are not necessarily paying attention to how our identities are being perceived in any given setting, our particular outward appearance speaks for itself and is read to be dangerous.

What is most notable about this is that “Indian” is not a race. Much of the prejudice Indian-Americans face stems from cultural difference, rather than racial. However, when this discrimination is broadly applied to all those of a certain appearance, in this case, brown-skinned people, it becomes racial. Thus, cultural prejudice transforms into racism because, like in my instance, all those who look a certain way are conflated and equally vulnerable to harassment. However, that is not to say that the racism faced by Indian-Americans is comparable to that faced by African Americans. Indeed, this difference is what has fueled their construction as a model minority, which in turn has serious implications for how Indian-Americans are perceived with regards to their race.

The model minority stereotype has not only been inadequate as a framework to describe Indian-American experiences in New York City, but has also historically served
as a way to perpetuate white supremacy. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it emerged during the mid 20th century, coincidentally, during the Civil Rights movement. Throughout the 1960s and following decade, social scientists, such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his now infamous *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, linked African Americans to a variety of social ills, including poverty, drug use, and violence criminal activity. To underscore this negative portrayal, other sociologists like William Peterson (credited as the first to formally use the concept) cast Asian Americans as a successful (or model) minority in relation to African Americans. Specifically, they harped on the role of culture and families in promoting good values amongst Asians, especially Indians. They became a beacon to aspire to for African Americans, who were cast as lacking family values and morals. The logic was that if Asian Americans could overcome their struggles and attain socioeconomic success, so too could African Americans. This set up an opposition in which African Americans were considered subordinate to Asian Americans and subsequently reinforced white Americans as the dominant societal group by detracting attention away from systemic racism and instead, generating a conversation on how minorities should behave (Lee 2009, 6-7). For Indian-Americans, this has resulted in seemingly positive stereotypes that in fact have very negatives consequences. Though a shift in popular perception from exotic to smart or diligent may seem productive, it in fact has caused Indian-American women significant difficulty throughout their lives.

“Kids Can Be Cruel”: Microaggressions and Racism in School

This heralding of Asian-Americans, and consequently, Indian-Americans, falls short significantly in capturing the reality of Indian-American women’s lives. Their lived
experiences, particularly specific anecdotes from my respondents, shows that they often face racism throughout their lives, beginning as young as in grade school. In fact, Lessinger remarks, “school children encounter racism and stereotyping from non-Indian classmates whose questions and teasing about racial and ethnic identity range from the simply ignorant to the intentionally hostile” (Lessinger 1995, 135). Encounters such as these at such a young and impressionable age can seriously impact one’s sense of identity. It certainly did for me. As a native Hindi speaker, I learned English in kindergarten. Though fluent by grade school, I still struggled with my accent and sometimes had difficulty understanding others when they spoke to me. I distinctly remember how I, as a child, pronounced the letter “H” as “etch.” At home, my parents speak Anglo-English as it is spoken in India. Thus, while I learned the language, I thought this was the American way to pronounce the letter as well. As I quickly learned, this was not the case. Friends at school laughed at my articulation of the letter. My attempts to explain myself were futile and eventually, I gave into the taunts and reluctantly changed my pronunciation to avoid further ridicule.

Though they were not directly commenting on my being Indian, these “kids being kids” constituted my first recallable encounter with racism. At that age and for many years after, I harbored some resentment against my Indianess, which seemed to mark me a different and deserving of mockery, as well as my parents, whose attempts at bettering my English did not seem good enough. I was marked as an outsider for my difficulties with language and it followed me for years. Even now, I do not have the heart to tell friends who recall those incidents with jest that they were so deeply and negatively
impactful to my sense of self. I was constantly aware that I was different and tiptoed around my classmates, trying to ensure that I was not presenting myself as too different. I raised my hand in class less often, afraid I would say something else worthy of parody and curated my words and personality carefully, making my best effort to blend in. Overall, my confidence level dipped.

I, of course, am not alone in facing this kind of microaggressive commentary. All eight of the women I interviewed reported various instances of racism throughout their school years, emphasizing the ways in which these instances negatively impacted how they viewed themselves as Indian-Americans. Sahi recalled how she was teased for various different things that “highlighted her Indianness”:

People will ask you about weird practices. They’ll ask, “do you practice voodoo?” or about red dots they’ll say, “it’s so exotic” and I hate being exoticized. It’s the worst. Sometimes people will try to be understanding and open minded about foreign cultures and they’ll try to say “namaste” and I’m always thinking to myself, “stop it!” I understand you’re trying to be nice and understand where I come from, but you’re not…I always used to be asked, “why is your Tupperware always yellow?” It’s such a common experience for a lot of Indian kids and it’s very weird…. when I was in elementary school I was always ashamed of my lunches and stuff… I would also always yell at my mom for putting oil in my hair like, “stop it mom, everyone is going to think I smell.”…I think those are some things I will always hold as horrible memories of my childhood. Now I think I’ve come to accept that my culture is different and they just have to deal with it but still, people will be ignorant forever (Sahi, personal communication 2016).

Once her cultural practices became a point of mockery, Sahi shied away from displaying her adherence to them and began harboring resentment. She stopped allowing her mother

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21 If you are reading this (you know who you are), know that I am not angry with you. You did not know any better. However, let this be a learning moment for you to take your words and intent seriously. Please, be better.

22 Microaggressions can be difficult to define. For the purposes of this work, they can be thought of as subtle but offensive comments or actions, both intended and unintended, that are directed towards a person or group (usually a minority) that reinforces a harmful stereotype about that minority.

23 Sahi was referring to the what is commonly known as a bindi. This is an ornamental dot worn on the head by many women. Though it was primarily only worn by unmarried women, today it is widely worn without attached significance. The “red dot” specifically is sindoor which is a dot of vermillion worn by married women. This retains cultural significance to this day and is only worn by women after marriage.
to oil her hair and commented that she became especially conscious during lunch periods that children would smell her food or mock her for her turmeric-stained Tupperware. Sahi also became wary of non-Indians trying to understand her culture. The line between curiosity and cultural appropriation and exotification is fine and often difficult to discern, especially as a young child. For Sahi, it seems most instances have fallen on the negative end of the spectrum and as a result, she is skeptical of virtually anyone who tries to “understand where [she] comes from.”

Most interestingly, Sahi herself stated that these instances are shared by many Indian children. I personally could, in fact, relate to her experiences, and it is noteworthy that she felt comfortable making that generalization. It suggests that this is something she has thought about deeply and brought up with her friends, which is an important point to consider because many times, this kind of teasing is dismissed by teachers, parents, and other students as an example of, “kids can be cruel.” Indeed, they can, and teasing and bullying psychologically impacts all children very deeply. However, for Indian-Americans, teasing in school is racialized more often than not. American children’s childhood (albeit, somewhat racist) curiosity of Indian classmates goes unchecked and evolves overtime into microaggression and overt racism. By failing to teach young children how to appropriately ask questions about different races and cultures, the impact of what appears to be childishness becomes long-lasting and shapes self-perception and behavior of Indian-American women. For Sahi, it meant a conscious effort to downplay her ethnicity at a very young age. She personally questioned the legitimacy of her cultural practices, such as oiling her hair and eating traditional food. As a result, she adapted her behavior to hide these things, for example, by not allowing her mother to oil her hair.
This adaptation is vital for Sahi and other Indian-American women because the fact remains that they will have to continue interacting with and growing up in American culture. Rejecting it entirely because of the negative experiences they have often does not seem feasible. Suppressing Indianness becomes a survival tactic.

Like Sahi, Shreeja also came to question her identity as a result of microaggressive comments in high school. Like me, she also faced a great deal of pressure throughout the college application process. However, unlike in my case, it was her fellow classmates who had the most biting words for her:

It’s not like I’ve always been really really good at math. There was a period from 7th to 9th grade where I was not doing badly in math but I was definitely struggling to maintain a good grade. It was hard for me and I was studying a lot and constantly going to the teacher for help or trying to do things with friends outside of class, asking them for help. I remember getting a lot of negative feedback about that from my friends. They were like, “why don’t you get this? I thought you were brown, I thought math was supposed to be easy for you.” No, just because I’m brown it’s not like my brain is genetically engineered for me to understand numbers really easily…but it was difficult for me. Now I love it because it’s something I’ve seen a progression in in myself. I’ve gotten better at it because I cared about it enough to work hard. But I don’t attribute that to me being brown. That does not take away from me being good at it (Shreeja, personal communication 2016).

Unlike Sahi, Shreeja battled a very common stereotype, one that directly stems from the model minority paradigm. Asian-Americans are stereotyped as extremely intelligent and Indian-Americans especially are stereotyped as extremely adept at math. However, this stereotype is not only extremely racial and cultural, it is also psychologically hazardous. According to Sapna Cheryan and Galen V. Bodenhausen (2000), researchers at Northwestern University, the salience of these stereotypes can contribute to “choking” under the extreme pressure of lofty expectations, especially prior to performance. In an experiment with forty-nine undergraduate students who self-reported that math performance is important to them, they found that heightening awareness of the participants’ race by administering a ten-question survey about their own perception of
their identities prior to a math exam caused them to perform more poorly than those who took the exam without taking the survey. These findings indicate that Indian-Americans like Shreeja have good reason to object to such a stereotype because falling short of the expected positive stereotype can come with heavy consequences (Cheryan and Bodenhausen 2000, 401). Though Shreeja was confident enough to ask for help from teachers and peers and is confident in her identity, she was not spared the mockery for not fitting their racial perception of Indian-Americans.

The heavy burden placed on Shreeja by such characterization has already demonstrated some of the deleterious consequences Cheryan and Bodenhausen warn of. Not only did she report feeling a significantly more crushing burden to be good at math because her parents were doctors and thus, it was implicitly expected that she also excel at it, but she also felt an added pressure from friends. She hesitated in admitting her interested in medical sciences. She says she refused to admit to herself her interest in becoming a doctor because she was well aware that she would be “playing into the stereotype.” In light of her friends’ stereotypical comments regarding the overrepresentation of Indians in the medical field, Shreeja’s hesitancy is significant. It demonstrates a sustained fear of microaggressive backlash based solely on stereotypes. Any average high school senior can tell you how difficult high school can get, especially when weighing career options. However, like Sahi, Shreeja faced an added burden of also considering the role her race plays in the decisions she makes, something her white American classmates likely do not do. For now, she has mitigated the burden well and has proceeded to apply to colleges as a perspective pre-medical student.
Sahi and Shreeja’s narratives demonstrate that despite the stereotypes that have emerged from the model minority paradigm of the high-achieving, self-motivated, and inevitably successful Asian student, Indian-American students continue to face significant microaggression in schools. In addition, most experience such stereotypes as early as elementary school and thus, are forced to consider the implications of their race and ethnic identity from a young age. For Sahi, Shreeja, and me, this often meant enduring mockery and negotiating embarrassment and resentment while modifying our behavior to obscure our Indianness. For others, like a twenty-two-year-old college student named Sarika, it meant being asked baffling questions she did not have the ability to properly answer. In elementary school, a classmate asked her if she was black, not realizing that non-white did not necessarily mean black and also not realizing that her question would make Sarika even more aware that she did not fit into either dominant group. Fatima shares in this experience. As a visible marker of difference, her hijab has been the source of many microaggressive comments and behaviors. Notably, all of us attended schools with both many other Indian-Americans and very few, which demonstrates that these experiences transcend factors like how many other Indians are in our environment.

None of these truths are captured by the model minority paradigm. It only addresses the likelihood of success of these women without any mention of the racist undertones that accompany it. Arguably, day-to-day instances of racism are more impactful on young Indian-American women than the abstract expectation of success by self-motivation, especially because these microaggressions impact self-perception and behavior. Furthermore, in context of the internal family and community pressures that
cause Indian-American women to shy away from the Indianness and embrace Americanness, these microaggressions demonstrate that these women are as scrutinized by their American friends and colleagues as they are by their families and communities. Their efforts to obscure their Indianness is a means of seeking acceptance, which they are denied by both Indians and Americans. This is highlighted beyond grade school, well into these women’s careers.

The Model Minority at Work: The Dark Underpinning of Occupational Success

Despite not accounting for the social pressures of being Indian-American, the model minority paradigm does point out an important pattern amongst Indian-Americans. As previously mentioned, Indian-Americans make up a mere 1% of the overall US population, but constitute 3% of the country’s engineers, 8% of its physicians and surgeons, and 7% of its IT workers (Richwine 2009). Thus, it seems logical to extrapolate that Indian-Americans concentrate in high-paying, high-caliber professions. Like the association between Indian-American students and skills in math, this has also become a common stereotype. However, the overrepresentation of Indian-Americans in these fields does not obscure the racism and differential treatment Indian-Americans still experience. As with school time experiences, racism faced in occupational settings also contributes heavily to identity issues. In addition to also causing Indian-American women to obscure their Indianness to avoid uncomfortable situations, these experiences with racism collectively serve as an external pushback to the internal pressure women face from their

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24 Some methods of mitigating this will be discussed later in the paper. However, it is worth mentioning here that many Indian-American women, including all of my respondents, admit to having split identities within and outside of their Indian communities. For example, girls may readily wear shorts while with their friends, but will never wear them in their homes. This is an attempt to somehow balance expectations of both cultures. Though common, it is certainly exhausting.
families and communities. This internal pressure that draws women away from embracing their Indianness and instead towards adopting American values is thus met by an opposing force that contends these women are not American enough to be accepted as such. This leaves women somewhere in the middle, unsure if they truly fit in anywhere.

Because Indian-Americans have come to be stereotyped as intelligent and self-driven, there is some reason to believe that they are received preferential treatment in terms of job recruitment. Richa certainly thinks so. Regarding her being an Indian-American in New York City, she says:

As someone who worked hard in high school to get into college and will hopefully continue working hard, I think it’s advantageous that there’s a stereotype that South Asian people are smart and dedicated and work hard. I think that going into the job market in four years, I feel like it will be different because an employer will hopefully not apply stereotypes at all, but in case they do one, it would be to my advantage and they’d consider me up to par (Richa, personal communication 2016).

Though Richa has not had to look for a job yet, she certainly has a point. It’s very likely that the positive stereotype has helped Indian-Americans’ mobility. In fact, some research has shown that human resources managers consider Asian Americans as overall hard-working and noncomplaining portion of their employee base (Cheng 1997, 278). Thus, it is plausible that while hiring, managers give preference to Indian-Americans.

This positive stereotype does not erase the inevitable discrimination that follows Indian-Americans as they take full-time jobs in New York City. Navjot, who graduated in May 2015, currently works at a top construction company as an Engineering Assistant. Navjot, unlike Richa, believes she was disadvantaged during her job search because of her recognizably Indian name. She understands that there is no way to know for sure if companies she was in touch with while looking for a job suddenly ceased communication because they were discriminatory, however, she recalls definitive instances of racism at
her current job. She spoke extensively about how she and the only other Indian-American woman in her team have been confused in the past:

She [the other woman] had a meeting with this guy who was a middle-aged white man. She was talking to him for three hours and they come out of the meeting while I’m in a different office talking to one of my bosses. He comes in and says, “goodbye everybody!” He looks at me and he goes, “I’ll follow up with you later” and I had no idea what he was talking about. My boss who is a Puerto Rican, 6’9 guy from the South Bronx was like, “damn you know what just happened right?” and I was like “what? He was talking to me?” and he was like, “yeah, do you know why?” and I was like this [expletive] is racist!

Even if Navjot was simply being paranoid about not getting jobs because of her race, this instance shows she may not be wrong to be wary in occupational settings. Although there is no way to be sure why the man confused Navjot and her co-worker, it is possible he did so because they are the only brown-skinned two women present. Navjot certainly thinks so. I personally have had such experiences in the workplace as well. A co-worker constantly misnamed me the only other Indian-American woman in the office throughout the several months we worked there. What set my experience apart from Navjot’s however is that her boss, also a minority, noticed immediately. In fact, he had to nudge Navjot into realizing what had occurred. This indicates that this is not an uncommon phenomenon and may even be shared by other minorities in the work place. For Indian-Americans however, especially in light of the model minority myth, this is significant. Despite their occupational mobility in comparison to other minority groups, they are still subject to many of the exact same racial offenses.

In addition to facing racism in everyday instances, Navjot mentions that she consciously adjusts her behavior around her white co-workers to be less “out there” or open. Her direct managers happen to be three Latino men and she says her relationship with them is professional but also relaxed. They all feel comfortable joking around with each other. However, this is not representative of the rest of the company, which, she
thinks is “white, middle-aged, Republican, heterosexual.” Though Navjot has not had to work with an all-white team yet, she expresses doubt that she will be able to do so as comfortably as she can with her current team. It is entirely possible this comes from stereotypes Navjot has developed regarding her white co-workers, however, her concern is not unfounded. Thus, despite having landed a great job, she still remains extremely conscious of her behavior based entirely on the racial make-up of the room. This demonstrates that the occupational benefits Richa speculated are not an end all, be all by any means and thus, the model minority paradigm’s explanation of Indian-American socioeconomic success is incomplete. Even if there is some reason to believe that Indian-Americans are advantaged in the professional world, they are not spared the racist undertones that come along with any given profession. In a city like New York City where individuals do not confine themselves to any one group (such as their coworkers, family, or even strangers), the impact of this racism is magnified. Because individuals can jump social circles freely and because these circles, unlike in rural communities, do not fit into each other neatly, urban dwellers are free to make snap judgments of people they encounter with relatively few ramifications. If an awkward situation were to arise, they can simply shift into another social group (Wirth 1938, 16). This facilitates microaggressions because it allows them to go largely unchecked.

Like the internal pressure exerted by communities, families, and sometimes selves, to be more Indian (i.e. fulfill obligations and not stray from expectations), the external pressure exerted on Indian-Americans by mainstream society via stereotypes and racism pushes them to be more American by pointing out just how different they are. The two forces together act on Indian-American women in a push-pull fashion, often
rendering them in a deadlock between embracing their American identity and also embodying their Indian roots. This yields a constant struggle to somehow have their cake and eat it too, which, in this case, means pleasing their families and communities by being requisite Indian while also assimilating and being American enough to thrive in school and at work. Sahi describes a fear she holds about how her ethnicity, which she is incredibly proud of, may one day serve as a drawback:

One of my biggest worries professionally is that a lot of doctors now are from India. Even in our generation a lot of people move here from India and start practice here and my biggest worry sometimes I wonder when I’ll reach the point when people will ask me if I’m a foreign grad. I wonder when people will ask, “when did you move to the United States?” and I’ll just be like “whoa, you just looked at me and thought I’m not from here!” (Sahi, personal communication 2016)

For Sahi, this is a particularly distressing fear because she is a self-proclaimed proud New Yorker and the assumption that she immigrated to New York City to begin her career juxtaposes her as an outsider and undermines her as an American. Furthermore, it leaves women like Sahi in a confusing intersection between being Indian and American where neither label seems to fully fit. As an Indian, she struggles to be “Indian enough” to please her family and community and as an American, she struggles to be accepted as one. This tension is one all respondents reported juggling throughout their everyday lives. Interestingly, several highlighted the severity of such a dilemma especially in a post 9/11 world. Indeed, today’s young Indian-American women remember that tragedy and have lived in its shadow for the majority of their lives.

The Perpetual Shadow of 9/11

9/11 was arguably a transformative event for the entire world, but a particularly watershed moment for all brown-skinned groups, including Indian-Americans. Indeed, it is the most consistent reminder of otherness and most easily identifiable root of modern racism. It unleashed a hatred of Muslims, which spilled over to all brown-skinned people,
that has persisted through the years and manifests in hate crimes and sociopolitical vitriol to this day. Prejudice stemming from 9/11 affects women in all spheres of their lives – on the street, in school, at work, etc. This makes this backlash a constantly looming threat that severely impacts the Indian-American psyche and contributes significantly to the identity crisis so many Indian-Americans experience, especially because other model minorities do not deal with these consequences.

According to Sunil Bhatia (2008), Associate Professor of Human Development at Connecticut College, Indian-Americans were forced to re-examine their identities after 9/11 like never before. Bhatia says they, “resembled the enemy and were racialized and constructed as non-American” (Bhatia 2008, 28). Additionally, scholars like Bhatia have demonstrated that the, “post-9/11 period has created a new category of identity in the USA that perceives Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners as disloyal and non-patriotic citizens or as individuals who are part of terrorist networks” (Bhatia 2008, 29). Phenotypically, Indian-Americans can easily be confused with these groups and thus, are as much a target as are the aforementioned peoples. Not only is their non-whiteness made even more salient, but that non-whiteness was constructed as something to be feared and hated, effectively shattering their sense of belonging.

9/11’s aftermath demonstrates that it is nearly impossible to evaluate the experiences of non-European/non-white immigrants in America without also observing how they have been othered from the American mainstream. This is especially applicable to my respondents who spent the majority of their lives growing up in this environment of heightened xenophobia. They have had the tedious job of having to constantly be aware of their ethnicity and manage the spectrum of perceptions mainstream America
holds, from curiosity to hostility. 9/11 has impacted my respondents in two particularly profound ways. First, it has yielded a heightened awareness of their appearance, which has led to efforts to stifle cultural difference and second, it has forced them to consider their identity in a broader, transnational sense despite having little to no connection to their ancestral homeland.

In a post 9/11 era, being visibly and discernibly Indian has become dangerous. In the immediate aftermath, and to this day, many South Asians report discomfort and fear as they move through public spaces, especially in New York City. Some even reported verbal and physical violence. To avoid such dramatic encounters, several Indian-Americans made efforts to conceal their identities by changing their appearance. Women were told by families to stop wearing *saris* and *salwar kameezes*, both of which are traditional garb (Bhatia 2008, 29). Sikh men who are easily identified by their beards and turbans, and also mistaken for Muslims or Arabs, debated cutting their beards and removing their turbans. In fact, this was something my father very briefly considered and decided against. He did not want to erase something so integral to his identity simply to appear more American, which is precisely why some people decided in favor of it and understandably so. Anything that would have preserved their safety seemed like a good idea in those particularly scary times. Indeed, 9/11 and its immediate aftermath were so powerful that any notions of Indian-Americans’ unique socioeconomic success and status as a model minority was utterly overshadowed by their now extremely salient status as

25 Considering there is an awareness amongst Indian-Americans that racist encounters are often the result of their being mistaken for members of Arab, Middle Eastern, or Muslim groups, it is notable that in changing their appearance, Indian-Americans decide to look more American rather than more Indian. They do not opt to clarify the misconceptions some Americans have when they conflate these groups and instead, opt for what they believe is the safer option. In looking less Indian, many believe they will blend into mainstream America and will not attract unwarranted attention to themselves. This demonstrates that the fear of racism and associated violence outweighs the desire to set themselves apart from these other groups.
racial minorities, which marginalized them and marked them as culturally different and potential terrorists (Bhatia 2008, 31).

It is precisely this fear of “being brown” (i.e. being brown skinned and therefore hated) that grips my respondents, especially Navjot and Fatima. As part of her job, Navjot often travels to Midwestern states like Oklahoma for a few days at a time. In these dominantly white states, Navjot expresses a discomfort that she does not encounter in New York City:

Being brown in American means everyone will look at you and think of 9/11…on the plane from Charlotte, North Carolina to Little Rock, Arkansas, that plane is so small. There is one line of seats on one side and two rows on the other and literally everybody is white. Every single person on that plane. And I’ve been there now six times. Every single time it’s been all white people and I don’t know what other people are thinking…but I instinctually just sit closer to myself on the chair is someone is sitting next to me and is white. I think about it in my own head like, “what am I doing here? Are people looking at me?” I’m very conscious of that and I always wonder if people are looking at me or talking about me. I always feel that only because I’m brown…when I go to the airport and stuff, all those concession stand people, they’ll always look at me twice. I see a slight look on their face like, “oh she’s different” (Sarika, personal communication 2016).

This instance demonstrates a kind of paranoia that many Indian-American women have of being totally and unmistakably visible and consequently, potentially mistaken as Muslims or Middle Eastern. They do not have the luxury of blending into their surroundings and as a result, they are available for any range of reactions from cautious interest to hostility. For Navjot, this means a constant self-construction as an outsider or, in her words, different. She cites this as one of her biggest personal struggles and

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26 This is not to say that if they were in fact Muslim or Middle Eastern, they would be deserving of such scrutiny. It is merely to point out a cruel irony. These women incur racism for ethnicities and religious affiliations they do not even espouse. Additionally, the clarification I made in this footnote is something Indian-Americans sometimes forget to do while defending themselves from racism that results from mistaken identification. While they certainly have the right to assert that they are Indian and not Middle Eastern, refusal to outright say that even Muslims and people of Middle Eastern are not deserving of racism can be mistaken as hostility towards these groups. Overall, there is little hostility amongst Indian-Americans towards the groups they are mistaken for, but refusal to outright defend them can be misinterpreted as such.
something she has had to deal with, unlike most mainstream Americans. As a self-identified Punjabi-American, this constant scrutiny effectively stifles Navjot’s Americanness. Regardless of anything she says or does, she believes her skin color single-handedly reduces her to an outsider.

Like Navjot, Fatima has also felt the backlash of portraying her identity outright. However, in addition to a noticeably browner skin tone, Fatima also wears a hijab. This overtly signals that she is a Muslim. In addition to her hijab, Fatima also used to wear shalwar kameez, a traditional Indian outfit, to school, which overtly signaled that she was also Indian:

I used to wear shalwar kameez a lot to school… I used to think about it a lot because I wasn’t always aware of it but sometimes I would really wonder what other students or teacher thought about it because nobody ever brought it up except for my friends. We would talk about it. But for everyone else, I would never really know what their reactions were. In high school, I think it was my sophomore or junior year, one of the girls from the year before told me, “when we first saw you in school, my friends would call you FOB or wonder if you just got here.” She was telling me about that and that’s when I realized how people saw it. I obviously knew people saw me differently but I wasn’t sure what their reactions would be because they still behaved normally with me…I guess because I had grown up not being made aware of these things much later, like in high school, I was pretty confident of wearing it and my culture and who I was. Now, because I’m so much more aware of it, I don’t know if I can just wear a shalwar kameez and just go to class because I’m a lot more aware of my race (Fatima, personal communication 2016).

Fatima’s narrative demonstrates an eventual progression in how race becomes personally salient for Indian-American women. She initially thought nothing of her race or her choice of clothing. However, as time went on and as external influences began characterizing her race as something un-American, she became uncomfortable via heightened awareness of her otherness. This is especially evident in her assertion that she would not wear a shalwar kameez today, which stands as an attempt to blend into her surroundings and stand out less. She continues to wear her hijab as a nod to her religion.
and as a result, remains susceptible to microaggressions, especially in an increasingly Islamophobic world.

Other respondents hide their Indianness in other smaller ways, sometimes at the behest of their parents. For Richa, the need to hide Indianness is more suggested by her parents than a self-made decision. She says they discourage her from applying eyeliner in a typically Indian way (i.e. drawn out and almond-shaped), remarking “why are you trying to look more Indian?” Though the motivation behind their disapproval is vague, it remains a glaring example of attempting to blend in, implying that there are consequences if Richa were to stand out. Unlike Richa, Sahi sometimes makes a conscious decision to mask her ethnicity on behalf of her mother. She recalled an incident where her mother, who speaks English with an accent, was not taken seriously by a pharmacist. Sahi stepped in speaking in what she calls a “total New Yorker accent” in order to obtain medicine efficiently for her mother. This demonstrates an awareness of the difference it makes to blend in. By hiding her difference, Sahi experiences totally different treatment than her mother, who makes no such attempts.

These narratives demonstrate a major implication of 9/11, which is a heightened awareness of otherness. These women have not had the luxury of ever growing up in an environment where brown skin was not conflated with that which does not belong and that which is a potential threat. This adds a layer in Indian-Americans’ already frustrating identity crisis by juxtaposing them simultaneously as model minorities and terrorists. While communities and families attempt to maintain and preserve Indian roots, the American mainstream actively challenges these roots and, especially after 9/11, casts them in a negative light. This leaves Indian-American women like Navjot and Fatima
especially confused. It seems that embracing either their Indian or American identity would prove inadequate and simultaneously embracing both seems impossible.

The struggle to somehow maintain both an American and Indian identity is most eloquently captured by Sarika. She recalls how rejection from both her family as an Indian and from her peers as an American left her conflicted and angry throughout high school and into college:

I’ve mentioned this to some people but it bothered me so much. I actively would say, “I am not a white girl.” And that was me saying this in elementary school. My brother and my cousins use to say, “oh you’re a white girl. You’re so spoiled, you have all these things.” I had to reflect on my own privilege as an elementary school kid…yeah, they tormented me as children. I remember having to see Lizzie McGuire and be like, “I’m not going to like this.” I associated that with being the white girl and I was like, “I’m not going to like this.” Even things like Uggs and all this stuff. I just made that judgment that this is whiteness and I’m going to reject it and hate it. It was something so early on (Sarika, personal communication 2016).

Sarika had extensive extended family in New York City and because her father is a cardiologist, she has had the privilege of growing up well off. Many Indian immigrant families however, including most of her own, do not have that experience and as a result, many of her cousins rejected her as the “white girl” in the family. In this case, whiteness is used to make a comment on socioeconomic class and tastes and for Sarika, this was excessively uncomfortable and that too, from a young age. Her conscious decision to reject popular culture that she associated with whiteness shows a concerted effort to prove that she is not different from her family and also shows a desire to be accepted by her immediate community and other non-white people.

Interestingly, Sarika’s attempts to reject whiteness did not equate to an embracing of brownness. In a post-9/11 world, Sarika was extremely aware of the
negative associations that came with being brown. She recalls her confliction with her ethnicity in a post-9/11 world:

I remember when I was in the bus with kids in school, my grandpa was walking on the sidewalk and some kid made a comment. I don’t even know if he said something ignorant or not but the moment I heard him say “grandpa” and “turban” I went off on him. As an automatic response. I did not want anyone saying anything that could be bad…I remember I always felt nervous walking with him. I was always worried about being the outsider. I did not like being different and I always felt like people were going to pick on me. I rejected being South Asian for a long time. Not that I wanted to be white, but I also did not want to be brown. I did not want to be something other people could joke about…I took that as, “what’s wrong with me?” I would think Indian culture is bad and I did not want to be in it (Sarika, personal communication 2016).

Sarika was able to put words to a confliction that all of my respondents, and many other Indian-American women, have faced. The constant othering, both internally from family and communities and externally from the American mainstream in schools or the workplace, leaves most women confused. With no place to truly fit in, they are forced to negotiate tensions in most spaces they occupy on a nearly daily basis. This can also prove difficult for women, who, over time, fatigued from past instances, can become hypersensitive to cultural commentary and may mistake innocent questions for racism. For Sarika, this meant extreme discomfort with displaying her brownness in white spaces. She reported being very uncomfortable dressing in cultural wear around New York City in any non-Indian settings. Conversely, she reported feeling alienated from the Indian community and did not feel like she ever belonged. It was only in college that she discovered a niche of other Indian-American students who had faced similar identity issues as she that she began speaking about her experiences and critically analyzing herself. Thus, in a post-9/11 world, the identity conflict Indian-American women already face are further complicated and compounded.

9/11 has also forced many young Indian-American women to consider the impact of their transnational identities on their sense of self. Most respondents were either born
in New York City, or moved to New York City as infants and therefore, have very little personal connection to India. However, for those born in India but raised in New York City, this can pose an even more serious threat to their sense of self as Americans. This is certainly the case for Upasna, who is currently a Green Card holder with Indian citizenship. As a result of new visa policies following 9/11, Upasna is still awaiting her American citizenship. Because she lacks the official title of being an American, she remains torn. She says she does not feel like she is an Indian since she immigrated as a toddler and yet, she carries the passport for a land she has no connection to or knowledge of. To add insult to injury, the country she does identify with has not welcomed her fully. This leaves Upasna, and other Indian-American women like her, in an endless limbo. In attempts to earn her American citizenship, Upasna admits to eschewing Indian culture in favor of American values. Though she did not provide examples, she insists that it was a compensation mechanism. Thus, just like Fatima and Navjot, Upasna must reconcile her Indianness with her desire to be American under the shadow of a single, life-changing event that has resulted in prolonging her application for citizenship. However, unlike Fatima and Navjot, she has had to do so in a much broader sense and has had to accept that despite her having no attachment to India, she remains caught in the transnational nature of her identity and will remain so until she is granted citizenship. In fact, it’s likely she will remain conflicted for years to come given that my other respondents were citizens and they continue to endure great difficulties.

The role 9/11 plays in these women’s lives cannot be overemphasized. By othering them and conflating them with terrorism rather than Americanism, this single historical event has created immense potential for that these women to face this kind of
discrimination for the rest of their lives. Other minorities certainly face similar stereotyping (for example, African Americans are often conflated with drugs and crime), however, given the global scale of Islamophobia and fear of terrorism, this is a force that can affect these women’s lives regardless of where they may be. Furthermore, it further compounds the already stiff tension between maintaining ethnic identity and assimilating into mainstream America. As Navjot, Fatima, and Upasna’s stories show, it can bring about a great deal of personal tension and call identity into serious question.

**Conclusion**

I was quite sure that the stereotypes created by 9/11 were at least part of the reason Kaavya and I were harassed by those three men near NYU. However, I also know it is much more complicated than that. The resentment they showed could also be rooted in a deep disdain for a positive stereotype, in addition to the obvious negative stereotype. It is possible that in denouncing me as an outsider, they were also denouncing whatever success they believe I have attained as an Indian-American in New York City. Thus, the issue for them isn’t simply that I am an outsider and potentially a terrorist, but perhaps also that I have flourished in “their” country despite that.

Racism is complicated and layered. For Indian-Americans, it is all too familiar and yet, is not addressed in the model minority paradigm. As has been the case for Sahi and Shreeja, Indian-American women begin facing microaggressions as early as elementary school. Comments can range from seemingly innocent comments about difference in cultural practice (i.e. Sahi oiling her hair) to stereotyping via the model minority myth (i.e. scrutiny of Shreeja’s math skills and decision to go to medical school). This kind of racism does not only persist in academic settings but follows these
women to occupational settings as well. Though there may be some merit to the positive stereotypes Indian-Americans hold to their advantage when searching for jobs, they continue to face racism, as was the case with Navjot. This racism is further compounded by their unique position as the largely post-9/11 generation. They have never known a life where their identities were not juxtaposed as the outsiders in America and thus, must constantly justify their American identities and reiterate that they are not threats to the country, despite either being born here or growing up here. However, by downplaying their Indian identities in favor of their American ones, they are also sometimes rejected by their own communities (as seen in Chapter 1), which perpetuates a constant struggle to adequately identify oneself, as Sarika demonstrated. My respondents show that these experiences are day-to-day and intimately connected to their sense of self. However, the model minority paradigm fails to account for this, thus effectively erasing the issue from popular perception entirely. By situating them as a successful and socioeconomically mobile group, the model minority paradigm has de-emphasized their role as minorities and effectively erased their struggles with racism.

It has been fourteen, almost fifteen years since 9/11. I was nine days shy of my sixth birthday. I remember the day all too well and more vividly remember what my family went through in the immediate aftermath. Every year on September 11th, I see my social media accounts flooded with memorial posts for the fallen and praise for the first responders, all of which are totally valid and deserved. However, in addition to mourning those who lost their lives, every year I feel an immense heaviness for the many brown-skinned people who have also lost their lives in fits of racism and I feel a sense of dread
for all those who will inevitably lose their lives in the coming year. On the fourteen-year anniversary, I expressed these sentiments on Facebook for the first time.

Figure 4: A Facebook status I posted on September 11th, 2015 to commemorate the lives lost, but also to make a point that the effects of that day continue to reverberate throughout Indian (and other brown-skinned) communities who mourn not only those who died that day, but also their own loved ones who continue to bear the brunt of an act of hate they did not commit but will sometimes be blamed for (Author’s personal Facebook page).

This status was liked by a total of 130 people and shared 12 times. At the time, that was about one-eighth of my total Facebook friends. The sheer number of people who agreed
with the sentiments and the private messages I received from many fellow minorities supporting my thoughts tells me that what I expressed is not unique. That single day infused New York City (and the world at-large) with a new sense of racism, one that has altered what it means to be Indian-American forever. As Navjot said, I, and many others, can no longer be sure if the lingering stare from a stranger on a subway or the TSA officer at the airport is because they are curious, or because they believe we are dangerous. Especially in the days after the 2015 Paris attacks that killed 130 people and the 2016 San Bernadino shooting that killed 14, Indian-Americans simply can not be too careful. This racism, especially in a post-9/11 world, is a burden we will have to carry for the rest of our lives.
Chapter 3

Now What?: Identity Politics Renegotiated

Early in October 2015, Huffington Post published an article in their Healthy Living Blog. The author, Sheena Vasani, highlighted a startling statistic – South Asian women in America exhibit some of the highest suicide rates. Vasani, coincidentally, argues that being a young South Asian woman in this country can be extremely stressful:

Undoubtedly, being a young South Asian woman in the U.S. poses unique pressures and challenges. There is the pressure to live up to the usual unhealthy mainstream standards of female perfection, but then there are also many cultural expectations to abide by. Combined, it amounts to a silent understanding that to be an acceptable young South Asian woman in the U.S. means to value being a somebody over simply oneself (Vasani 2015).

Vasani contends that these factors all contribute to elevated suicide rates, which are higher than those of the general American population. She specifically blames cultural stigma, anxiety, and increased racial and social issues affecting South Asian communities for causing these untimely deaths. Although conversations about mental health are uncommon in most countries and cultures, South Asians are especially hesitant to engage in such dialogue. Most of this stigma comes from an unfounded fear that any sort of mental illness will most certainly be crippling and impede socioeconomic success and tarnish reputations of the person affected and of their family. As a result, South Asians tend to suffer silently. Indeed, Aruna Rao, the associate director of the New Jersey chapter of the National Association on Mental Illness remarks, “we are a model minority, so there’s no one to talk to” (Vasani 2015).

This jarring statistic and unfortunate reality indicates that in addition to the identity issues Indian-American women encounter, there are even more grave
consequences for succumbing to any of the internal or external pressures they face. However, many Indian-American women undoubtedly avoid this fate and survive (arguably, thrive in) the most difficult life situations. How do they do it? Based on both my respondents’ answers and my personal observations, the answer is two-fold. First, Indian-American women mitigate the pressures of their lives by depending on each other. They lean into dialogue and discussion with other Indian-American women that is unique to them and specifically for them, such as affinity events on college campuses. They join (sometimes even create) affinity groups and focus their energies on not only speaking about the challenges they face with fellow Indian-Americans, but also on active efforts to combat them. Second, they have begun to use this combination of their resolve and of resources available to them in a city like New York City to also reimagine race and their place in American society as an Asian minority by challenging the black/white binary and promoting solidarity with other minorities. By doing so, Indian-American women are able to address both internal and external pressures they face and emerge confident in their idiosyncrasies while embracing their unique identities as Indian-American women.

Resolve Meets Resources: How New York City Facilitates Indian-American Community Organization

Despite facing an arguably difficult set of challenges, Indian-American women in New York City do enjoy some fantastic advantages. As a world-renowned city with an unparalleled access to seemingly never-ending resources, New York City proves to be a significant asset for Indian-American women as they mitigate the clashing pressures of their homes and communities with those of mainstream America. By coupling their own resolve to facilitate difficulties Indian-American women face with such resources,
today’s young Indian-American women become brokers of their communities and mainstream America. They channel their efforts specifically into creating spaces for Indian-American women geared towards their success, be it academic achievement or healthy living.

The resolve of today’s Indian-American women is unique and largely a result of continued immigration into New York City. Although the local Indian population has always been extremely motivated and success-minded, it now includes immigrants who define success differently and dedicate themselves to social change instead of lucrative careers. This is especially magnified on college campuses where conversations around identity politics and solidarity amongst minorities are commonplace (Lessinger 195, 131).

Although their juxtaposition between being Indian and being American can cause them great difficulty, it also grants these women unique access to both worlds. They are able to, “understand in detail the difficulties fellow immigrants face, the family structures they live with, the community gossip they fear, as well as the culturally determined reactions of shame and denial when things go wrong” (Lessinger 1995, 131). They are also immersed in American culture and understand its cultural specificities. Thus, today’s Indian-American women are well-equipped to bridge the cultural gap. Thanks to their insight into both cultures, they are the most appropriate demographic to lead efforts to mitigate the Indian-American culture gap on a grand scale.

Although some scholars like Lessinger contend that it is rare that Indian-American youth actually employ their resolve and resources, in cites like New York City, this has begun to shift drastically. Today’s urban millennial youth enjoy unprecedented
access to information, the internet, and each other. Remarkable advances in technology allow for ideas to be transmitted and consumed rapidly. Everything from grass-roots community organizations to established affinity groups can make use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to advertise their events and services and attract interested patrons. Because smartphones are now quite common, the average New Yorker can also consume this media at breakneck speed. Additionally, New York City prides itself on diversity and liberal ideals. This environment of relative tolerance and acceptance makes it easier for identity-based movements to come to fruition.

In addition to New York’s inclusive character, it is also home to several Indian enclaves, which serve as hotbeds for community organizing. A small portion of downtown Manhattan is referred to as “Little India” because of its abundant sari shops and curry houses. Similarly, Jackson Heights in Queens is considered the go-to for, “all Indian things,” a characterization I can confirm both as a long-time Queens resident and as someone who attended grade school in Jackson Heights for twelve years (Maira 2002, 104). The neighborhood caters almost exclusively to Indian-Americans with block after block of jewelry shops, tailors, Bollywood movie stores, and Indian-specific supermarkets. Enclaves like these attract Indian-Americans of varying immigration status, socioeconomic status, and religion. By serving as a physical space that concentrates ethnically similar people, urban ethnic enclaves in New York City, like Jackson Heights, facilitate communication between immigrants, especially those who are motivated enough to make use of their resources and insight.

Historically, it is indeed these enclaves that gave rise to community groups, especially women’s groups. A desire amongst motivated professional women is precisely
what fueled the creation of the first Indian women’s organization, Asian Indian Women in America (AIWA). These immigrant women had been members of other, already established Indian groups such as the Federation of Indian Americans (FIA) but, “felt the need for a new group to address women’s issues, and particularly those of Indian immigrant women struggling to adapt to American society” (Khandelwal 2002, 168). Thus, the precedent for spaces designed specifically for Indian-American women had been set as early as the 1980s. The AIWA supported its members in various occupational capacities, assisting with everything from finding a job to handling racial discrimination at the workplace (Khandelwal 2002, 168).

AIWA’s success spurred the creation of many other groups which focused on other issues that impact Indian-American women. The most notable of these organizations is Sakhi, an organization that provides support to women who are victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. In addition to connecting those who called into their hotline with the appropriate service agencies to provide legal and emotional support, the organization also launched awareness campaigns and demonstrations. Though this sent shockwaves into the elite portion of the community because it launched a taboo conversation, Sakhi flourished and quickly became one of the most progressive feminist organizations in New York City (Khandelwal 2002, 169). Furthermore, it expanded its scope, insisting that domestic violence is simply one form of disempowerment for Indian-American women and that factors such as education and health were also vital for Indian-American female success. Consequently, Sakhi opened doors to even more services for Indian-American women, including mental health services, English classes, and employment referrals (Khandelwal 2002, 170). Thus, not only has Indian-American
collective organization been historically possible amongst women in New York City, it has been successful. Sakhi continues its services today and is extremely well known in the community. Thanks to its management’s keen understanding of both Indian and American culture, it has aided countless Indian-American women over the years.

Organizations like AIWA and Sakhi were both founded by and continue to be run by motivated young women who noted either a woman-specific need in the community or wanted to take a stand against injustice. Both organizations attract support from women who are inspired to join spaces that support either a cause or a population they believe in, sometimes both. By doing so, they create and provide spaces for Indian-American women, themselves included, to flourish. These spaces mitigate many of the tensions I have highlighted thus far by serving as both a resource and a source of emotional support and belonging. By having somewhere to go for help and validation, Indian-American women manage the difficulties of their lives by depending on other women. Furthermore, because these spaces endure, they continue to prove beneficial for generations of women to come. Though my respondents are younger than many of the women who started AIWA and Sakhi, they already lean into other Indian-American spaces in their lives to mitigate the strain they face as Indian-American women.

“You Too?!”: Achieving Solidarity and Solace Among Young Indian-American Women

The common thread throughout many of my respondents’ stories was enthusiastic participation in some version of an affinity group. Be it a cultural group, a religious one, or even a dance team, Indian-American women look to spaces specific for women like them for comfort and a shared understanding of their hardships. Participation in such groups allows Indian-American women who perhaps grew up frustrated with issues they
may have believed were unique to only them to meet others like them. By connecting with others who deal with similar problems, Indian-American women see that many of their frustrations are shared and systemic, but actionable. Under the best of circumstances, they use this access to each other to negotiate the inherent tension they feel from both internal and external agents by fostering solidarity and solace. With additional access to other valuable resources, they can even tackle some of these issues.

For Shreeja and Richa, who attended the same high-school, a major source of support came from their school’s South Asian Youth Association (SAYA). Shreeja says she appreciated SAYA specifically because it provided her a way to connect with others like her:

I think one thing that I have gravitated towards in high school especially is having that community where I can talk to other South Asian students in my school about shared experiences we’ve had living as a South Asian in America just because in elementary school I was the only South Asian girl in my grade…I felt like I was looking for someone to understand my experiences for so long. I remember on the second day of 2nd grade, there was a boy in my class I had never met before and he looked brown to me so I automatically thought, “oh my gosh, I have an Indian friend now” and he wasn’t Indian at all. I think for me that was really disappointing…I wanted to join SAYA so I could have Indian friends and have people I can connect with who are also Indian and be able to laugh at jokes with and just have things in common with (Shreeja, personal communication 2016).

Shreeja’s story highlights a loneliness felt by other Indian-Americans in classrooms and other spaces. It is certainly one I have felt. Though she had no trouble making friends, Shreeja did comment that it remained difficult to talk to them about anything that was very specific to her heritage or experiences that are rooted in South Asian culture. Richa echoes these sentiments and, most notably, has continued to participate in similar affinity groups in college. Her comfort in and commitment to spaces that bring together people like her has sustained and likely will continue to do so. She too comments that her
involvement is driven by the comfort she feels in a space where other people’s experiences are familiar.

Although Nisha, as a busy college student, has plenty on her plate, she always has time for dance practice. Nisha is a dancer on an Indian classical fusion dance team at her college and in fact, she is currently its captain. She has danced all her life and thought it only natural to continue in college. By doing so, she continues a passion, but also maintains close ties with other women like her. She points out some additional interesting observations about her friend circle:

I have more South Asian friends in my academic and social circle than I do non-South Asian friends and what I think is interesting is that out of the non-South Asian people I still have a lot of Asian friends, like a lot of Chinese and Japanese and Korean and Arab friends. I think that we all have a similar culture and it’s all relatable…I think we have a lot of things in common and that helps stem a friendship (Nisha, personal communication 2016).

Like Shreeja, Nisha also alludes to her friends and chosen spaces being South Asian rather than Indian or Indian-American. In doing so, she situates herself as a portion of a larger identity that extends even beyond being Indian. South Asia, though encompassing several countries, does have a shared culture and many of the elements that are particular to Indian-Americans are also found in other neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, idiosyncrasies of each country still set each apart from the other. For example, Pakistan, unlike India, is predominantly Muslim and follows Sharia law. Thus, a Pakistani woman’s life is defined by different cultural parameters than an Indian woman’s and as a result, forces like family pressure and racism will shape her life

\[27\] It is also worth mentioning that the labels “South Asian” and “Indian” are often conflated. Though this is an unfair characterization, in some sense it holds true. South Asian spaces I have personally been in, even at Columbia University, remain overwhelmingly Indian. It is possible that Indian-Americans are more comfortable embracing the South Asian label than, for example, Pakistani-Americans.
differently than that of an Indian woman. And yet, there is still a shared understanding of these pressures that allows Nisha, and many other Indian-American women to feel nearly as comfortable with Bangladeshi or Pakistani friends as she does with Indian friends. Thus, when Indian-American women seek out spaces for women like themselves, they are free to define what constitutes “like themselves” and can appeal to the broader South-Asian community for comfort quite easily.

Like Nisha and Shreeja, Sarika also describes the spaces she participates in with a broader label than simply Indian-American:

Coming to Columbia/Barnard and feeling like I could be brown and proud was more revolutionary for me than anything. My family is always like, “oh Sarika, you’ve become so Punjabi/Sikh” and it’s not like I’ve become that way, it’s just that I finally let myself enjoy being a part of it.28 It even goes with my name. Being called “Sareeka” for eighteen years at school and then finally having people say my name how it’s actually pronounced, it’s such a different feeling (Sarika, personal communication 2016).

Though she does not use “South Asian” to describe her activities, she does use “brown,” which refers to anything from Indian to South Asian. Sarika’s usage indicates that her definition of the spaces in which she finds comfort goes beyond Indian-American. In this case, she makes a distinction between her white friends and her friends of color, both Indian and non-Indian. However, she narrows her focus to her involvement with a predominantly Indian student group called Sewa, a Sikh Student’s Association turned social justice group:

Freshman year, I was very close with my floormates. Two were half-Asian and two of them are white...it was definitely interesting because I feel like I am able to be with them but then I have my brown group, I have my Latina circle and I have my friends who are black so I feel like there still are pockets of people of color that I can interact with and get along with...with my suitemates, I feel like I get along with them fine but in sophomore year, culturally they didn’t get me...what I love about Sewa is that I can be myself 100% which is something I never felt like I could be before (Sarika, personal communication 2016).

28 To be clear, this is not to say that her family disapproves of her becoming “more Punjabi/Sikh.” It is merely to mark surprise considering she was previously uncomfortable with embracing that part of herself so openly.

Walia 95
Clearly, Sewa is somewhere she feels comfort with her identity and is able to fully embrace the complexities of being an Indian-American woman. Even though Sarika eventually clarifies that she feels most comfortable in such spaces, she first draws a distinction specifically between white people (specifically her roommates) and people of color, which ranged from South Asians to Latinas to African Americans. This demonstrates that despite obtaining the optimal level of comfort amongst South Asian spaces, other minority groups still share some common ground, which allows women like Sarika to relate and feel empowered to deconstruct their similar frustrations.

Navjot takes Sarika’s hinted message, as well as Shreeja and Nisha’s, to the next level by drawing a very clear distinction between white people and people of color. She says the people she feels most comfortable with are, “always minorities, but not necessarily Indians.” Her reasoning demonstrates a clear binary:

The thing is I can’t relate to Caucasians. There is nothing more to talk about. There’s a level about what we can talk about and share. You can explain your life and experiences to them but they’re never going to get it, it’s never going to click. There’s always going to be barriers and you might be like “yeah you’re a great person and I want to be your friend and I am your friend” but there’s a limit to that friendship, I would never randomly be like, “hey, want to come over? My mom made aloo paranthe²⁹. I just wouldn’t do that (Navjot, personal communication 2016).

Although there are certainly other levels on which people can connect, such as gender, place, occupation, interests, and hobbies, Navjot has deemed culture as a particularly important one. For her, it seems to be the most relevant factor in deeming comfort with others and thus, despite other similarities with people, for example, in her workplace, she may not personally be convinced that they “get it.” Nonetheless, Navjot adds to Sarika’s sentiment by offering an explanation for why Indian-American women need spaces that

²⁹ Aloo Paranthe is roti (bread) stuffed with potato
are catered to them in order to feel a sense of peace about the struggles they face. She is convinced that mainstream white America can only understand her to a point. She and Sarika are the only two respondents who made allusions to also finding comfort in other minority spaces. This is still significant because it indicates a willingness to branch out to others who may not experience quite the same difficulties as Indian-Americans specifically, but on the basis of having some sort of tension that mainstream white American may not experience, they are willing to unite in the power of their similar narratives. This has immense potential in addressing racism (to some degree) which I will revisit towards the end of this chapter.

From dance teams and friend circles to cultural groups, the Indian-American women I interviewed all depend on some kind of space tailored to them to feel comfortable with who they are. Because experiences with community pressure and racism are understood to be universal in these spaces, Indian-American women do not feel the need to curate their appearances or personalities the way they otherwise do. The need to simultaneously justify both their Indianness and Americanness is non-existent and therefore, such organizing is vital for Indian-American women in relieving the inevitable pressures of their lives. Furthermore, the bringing together of these likeminded and bright women in New York City can result in the creation of new organizations that cater specifically to them in the same way AIWA and Sakhi catered to the women of their time.

From the Dorm to the Desis: How a Student-Run Group is Building a New Legacy

Because the unease and discomfort my respondents reported throughout their daily lives is one that is also personally familiar, I understand their participation in
affinity groups quite well. In fact, it was the lack of one specifically for Indian-American women that drove me and two other students, Kaavya and Sarika (yes, the same Sarika) to establish a new campus group. Our vision for this group, called the South Asian Feminism(s) Alliance (SAFA) was to provide a space for South Asian (including Indian-American) women to lean on each other and grow together. SAFA is an example of the greatness that can happen when individual adversities are paired with resolve and resources.

SAFA was born in Kaavya’s dorm room as a conversation about a recent event Kaavya, Sarika, and I had helped plan. The event, titled, “Transnational Feminism in South Asia: An Embodiment of Contradictions” was wildly successful, selling out completely. It entailed several hours of spoken word poetry and moderated conversation with some of the most prominent South Asian trailblazing feminists, including Afiya Zia and Aradhana Sharma. Several attendees approached us after the event to thank us for holding the panel and express their desire for more events like this. Kaavya, Sarika and I personally enjoyed the panel a great deal, and for weeks afterwards, kept wishing we could continue having conversations about South Asian women’s struggles. As we sat in Kaavya’s dorm, I remarked that cultural affinity groups for women already exist. For example, Mujeres is an on-campus group specifically for Latinas, while Barnard Organization of Soul Sisters (BOSS) caters to African American women. Why not make one for South Asians?

While creating SAFA, we decided to expand its mission to include all South Asian women. Although, as I have already said, South Asian countries remain distinct and the struggles women in each face are still unique, in broad strokes, many of the issues that plague Indian-American women also plague other South Asian women. Thus, we felt it was appropriate to include them all. Furthermore, there is a particularly unique power in forming a coalition and simultaneously respecting and celebrating individual members’ differences.
As Kaavya, Sarika, and I mulled the idea of creating a new campus group, our biggest challenge was to consider what exactly would be its purpose and how we would best serve the various needs of South Asian women on campus. If we were going to create a campus resource, we wanted to make sure it was multifunctional. To answer this question, we looked inwards. We thought a lot about the individual issues we had had throughout college and where we felt it would have been helpful to have South Asian female guidance. After a great deal of debate, we created a four-committee executive board to reflect four areas we felt were most important and easily actionable. The SAFA constitution outlines each of the four areas:

**Community Engagement Chair**
- Connect with organizations like Sakhi, NYWAC, and other non-profit and activist groups
- Form a mentorship initiative with Sakhi and become involved with their campaign addressing campus sexual assault/violence.
- Develop avenues for community engagement on and off campus
- Establish forms of mentorship (both peer-mentorship and that with the external campus community)

**Alumni Networking Chair**
- Work with the secretary and Columbia and Barnard's career development office's to maintain a roster of South Asian alumnae
- Operate as a liaison between South Asian alumnae the working group on South Asian Feminism(s)
- Organize alumnae networking and pre-professional events

**Discussion Facilitator Chair**
- Brainstorm discussion topics for general body meetings
- Lead workshops and discussions on topics that complicate the lens of South Asian Feminism(s)
- Organize facilitator training sessions for committee members
- Train other group members as facilitators

**Event Programming Chair**
- Responsible for organizing panels and other types of events that engage with challenging the feminist discourse
- Brainstorm event ideas for the Fall and Spring semester. These can be in the form of open-mics, movie-screenings, and collaborations with other groups.

**Figure 5:** The SAFA constitution outlines the roles and purposes of each of the four committees – Community Engagement Chair, Alumni Networking Chair, Discussion Facilitator, and Event Programming Chair.
As a multi-faceted group, SAFA provides South Asian women resources for everything from pre-professional development to creating their own awareness campaigns to bringing members of the community together to discuss pertinent, and often personal, issues such as gender-based violence or forced marriages. We invite South Asian women to treat SAFA as a space where they can verbalize personal frustrations that arise from their background, be it family-related, school-related, or otherwise, and can expect a community that understands and supports them. They can also expect a community that is ready to stand with them and help drive collective action to address any given issue. As a young organization that is still less than a year old, we have already had several successful events inspired by our personal frustrations.

Our most successful event, “Overcoming College Transitions: The South Asian Experience” was inspired by a board member who began speaking about her personal struggles during a meeting. She spoke about how she felt as unsure and afraid as most first-year students do when she herself started college, but even more so because so many questions she had were further complicated by her identity. For example, something as prominent on college campuses as hookup culture became even more abstract and confusing as she began thinking of the Indian culture views on sexual activity and the stigma associated with premarital sex. She spoke about how other friends have had similar struggles when it comes to drinking alcohol. Many who were raised in religious Hindu or Muslim families that viewed drinking alcohol as a sin became both curious and conflicted in quick succession. Would they be straying from their culture if they were to have a drink?
This event was structured to help ameliorate some of the anxieties first-year students of South Asian background had been feeling. We created an anonymous submission box and allowed students to submit topics they wanted to hear about and compiled a student panel of South-Asian seniors who addressed each topic one by one. After the panel, we allowed the groups to mix, letting seniors and first-years speak one-on-one about even more personal topics and forge connections that would last beyond the event. It was one of our most attended events with about forty people in the room. Below is a sampling of the comments we received after this event:

**Figure 6:** These are just a few of the comments left on our Facebook page following the event (SAFA’s Facebook page).

As our attendees offer feedback, we see a few common themes emerge time and time again, regardless of the event we hold. Many thank us for holding a space where they feel comfortable enough speaking up about confictions dealing with family, college, etc. that they otherwise would keep to themselves. Many have also told us that this was exactly the kind of community they were hoping to find in college, one that understood
the needs of South Asian women and was flexible enough to offer support and serve as a platform for them to tackle issues they find personally pressing.

Most interestingly, all eight of my respondents remarked during their interview that if, in retrospect, they could have had any one thing that would have made their lives as Indian-American women easier, it was strong relationships with other Indian-American women, be that family, friends, or other role models. Thus, there is a demonstrated desire for organizations like SAFA where such bonds can be easily facilitated and fostered, especially as they work together towards an interactive discussion about a pressing problem female infanticide, or as they volunteer together with other youth organizations to establish mentorship programs. Most importantly however, spaces like SAFA also allows these women to just “be.” Surrounded by women like themselves, they feel no pressure to negotiate their identities and no fear of judgment. There is an implicit understanding that every woman has her own difficulties and thus, they all remain supportive of and compassionate towards each other.

Participation in SAFA brings benefits even greater than those directly felt by its members. By serving as a mechanism by which South Asian women can make an impact in their communities, SAFA not only benefits the women who join the group, but also the next generation of women who get to reap the benefits of the efforts today’s women make. Initiatives like a mentorship program, a pre-professional series, and discussion-based healing circles will all be readily available to them, a luxury that women like me did not personally have, but are happy to create. Furthermore, SAFA’s various initiatives allow Indian-American women to take active leadership roles and develop vital critical thinking skills and a sense of efficacy and responsibility. According to Barry Checkoway
(1998), scholar and professor at the University of Michigan School of Social Work, youth action organizations such as SAFA are particularly transformative tools. Because they entail group problem-solving in a public manner and often work towards social and political action, these groups foster strong citizenship skills that these women carry far beyond their involvement in groups like SAFA (Checkoway 1998, 783-785). They go on to exercise this sense of efficacy and action in other spheres of their lives (such as personal or professional) and thus, continue to make personal strides and actively participate in other means of sociopolitical betterment. The spirit of SAFA thus persists beyond the group itself, allowing its benefits to reverberate through society. The future is thus bright and I remain optimistic that the only place to go for all South-Asian women is only up.

Reimagining Race: Becoming People of Color

Although affiliations with affinity groups like SAFA seem effective insofar as ameliorating some of the inherent tension Indian-American women face as a consequence of culture clash, mitigating racism remains difficult. There is certainly a great sense of solidarity in affinity group spaces, but in context of mainstream America, Indian-Americans are still struggling to mitigate racism and battle the model minority stereotype. However, in cities like New York City, conversations around race have intensified in recent years and are rapidly transforming to accommodate more than just black and white voices. Indeed, though a painfully slow process, Indian-Americans can make their way into the conversation and include themselves in America’s changing perceptions of race. My respondents certainly have.
As race conversations evolve, it remains vital to remember that race (like the model minority paradigm) is a construction, not a biological reality. Thus, reimagining race first requires a deeper look into how racial distinctions were drawn and have changed over the years. The American Anthropological Association, in its traveling exhibit entitled *Race: Are We So Different?* examines both the scientific and cultural understandings of race through time. Historically, race as we know it today was constructed to safeguard superiority of white owners over slaves. Prior to slavery, indentured servitude of poor white Europeans was the primary labor force on American plantations. Fearing that the power dynamic between rich plantation owners and poor indentured servants would threaten plantation holdings, colonists eventually eliminated indentured servitude in favor of importing slaves from Africa. However, in order to reinforce the superiority of plantation owners, social and cultural separation of blacks and whites was codified. Slaves had limited rights and were widely assumed to be an inferior race ("RACE - History - Colonial Authority” (a) 2007). This conception of race has persisted despite the abolition of slavery and the 1960s Civil Rights movement and manifests in instances of stereotyping and racism.

What is even more compelling about this long-perpetuated sociocultural understanding of race is that despite multiple attempts by scientists to find genetic proof to support such discriminatory notions, there is no scientific evidence that suggests that human variation can be explained by race ("RACE - History - Colonial Authority” (b) 2007). Thus, not only is race a construction of hierarchy, it also has no scientifically observable basis. The grouping of people on the premise of skin color is a purely human activity. There is no evidence that suggests an observable commonality amongst all those
considered to be white, which can include demographics as varied as Europeans and lighter-skinned South Americans, that suggests superiority. Further, categorizing people on the basis of something as broad as race also ignores historical discrimination that existed in other categorical subgroupings. For example, Americans of Scottish and Irish descent would today be considered white by most with no reservations. However, historically, these particular white Americans were once considered inferior to other white Americans of British or French descent. There is a similar case with religion. Although Jews and Catholics appear phenotypically white, there has been historical discrimination against adherents of these religions.

Like the model minority myth, our modern understanding of race is also underpinned by stereotypes and shallow, discriminatory assumptions. Indian-Americans’ entrance into conversations about race is thus all the more vital. By rethinking their place in racial America and discussing their personal stake in the matter, they dismantle baseless assumptions made on appearance that also fuel the model minority paradigm. In doing so, they not only demonstrate that racism is something that they experience regularly, but they also indicate a willingness to unite with other minorities with similar experiences to address these pervasive issues.

Coincidentally, it is an opportune time in American for Indian-Americans to engage with race. Although historically characterized by a black/white divide, the current conversation on race in America seems to be changing drastically and instead, incorporating other minorities as people of color. “People of color” is an umbrella term that covers essentially everyone who is not Caucasian, including Asians and Latinos, who previously were not captured by the black/white color line. Ruchika Tulshayan, a writer
for The Establishment, insists that South Asians have a stake in this evolving conversation, especially in light of movements like Black Lives Matter:

As we contemplate the injustices faced by the black community in this country, it’s humbling to realize the “Black Lives Matter” movement is equally germane to all non-white communities. The message in this country is increasingly becoming: if you’re not white, you’re always considered a threat. And until we all stand together to challenge the status quo, injustices like these will continue (Tulshayan 2016).

Thus, in a new conception of race, all minorities can unite based on their similar experiences to stand together and challenge racism. Tulshayan is careful not to conflate experiences. She makes it clear that she is not conflating Black America’s systemic struggles with Indian-Americans’ experiences. She is, however, grouping them together on the basis of being perceived as outsiders or as threats and thus, argues they should unite to stand against the mainstream forces that construe their communities as non-American. Deepa Iyer, author of *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future* alludes to this in her conversation with Tulshayan:

Also, we need to talk about how the oppression of the Black Lives Matter movement is connected, although different, to some of the oppression South Asian communities face. In particular, you can look at the role of the state in police brutality, immigrant detentions and deportations, and surveillance of the Muslim communities. So the linkages are there for us to find, so we can connect our own histories and our oppressions to that movement as well. And see that we’re in it together (Tulshayan 2016).

Iyer calls upon communities of color to stand together and, while remembering their individual histories and experiences, also understand that there is a stake in unity for those who face eerily similar forms of oppression.

For Indian-Americans, this presents an unprecedented opportunity to take their place in as people of color mainstream America, which is indeed becoming increasingly less white. However, there are inherent difficulties present. Anti-blackness is extremely prevalent in Indian-American communities. Deeply embedded colorism that plagues
India has made its way across the ocean along with immigrants and has unfortunately taken root in Indian-American communities. Thus, it will certainly be a process for Indian-Americans to see themselves as allies to African Americans and also see themselves as people of color. However, in a liberal and diverse urban setting like New York City, racial tolerance and acceptance is significantly more probable than in suburban and rural settings (Wirth 1938). Additionally, my respondents have already begun that process. Richa says she thinks about race a great deal. In fact, she thinks her parents would be confused as to why she gives it so much thought. She says they themselves have seen America change a great deal but have been lucky enough not to face any significant racism. However, because Richa has grown up in a post-9/11 era and lives in New York City where instances of police brutality against young African Americans have come to blows, she says she considers her place as an Indian-American in such dynamics quite often. This demonstrates a leap forward from the immigrant generation to the first generation in perceptions about race. Whereas her parents do not consider race as often, Richa seems to allot it significant importance.

Like Richa, Sarika also remains engaged in conversations about race, further reinforcing the idea that today’s young Indian-American women are already reconsidering their place in race relations. She even openly referred to herself as a woman of color. Her usage of this terminology is striking because it shows that she already sees herself as a part of the evolving race structure of America. She has already allied herself with other minorities to stand against xenophobia and racism. Most intriguing is her admitting that she would not have considered herself a woman of color before college and it was only after participating in discussions about racism and how
minorities experience racism differently did she feel comfortable designating herself as one. I had a very similar experience. As an Indian-American woman, also referring to myself as a person of color allows me to participate in the conversation on race and still maintain my identity as an Indian-American in a sea of many other minorities. Sarika’s point about the timing of this label and how she only recently began using it demonstrates the fundamental shift in how Indian-American women perceive race and themselves in its light. More and more young women are willing to identify as people of color and thus, more Indian-Americans are being brought into the fold.

By situating themselves as people of color, Indian-American women do not prevent racism or combat it directly, but they do find entry into a conversation their communities have long kept their distance from. This is vital as a starting point for understanding exactly how racism impacts the Indian-American community and how it can take action with support from other minorities, including African Americans and Latinos. It also represents a significant shift away from the dominant ideology on race in the Indian-American community, which is largely community-wide silence. Race is not something the Indian-American community has engaged with deeply, largely because most try not to call undue attention to themselves, especially in a post-9/11 world where calling attention can quickly devolve to violence. However, silence becomes complacency, and complacency is just not an option my respondents, and Indian-American women at-large, are willing to take.

Most importantly, by engaging with race, Indian-Americans can reframe the common perception of their community via the model minority and unpack some of its most harmful assumptions. By identifying as people of color and bringing awareness to
racism specifically as it affects Indian-American communities, today’s young women debunk the myth that as a high-achieving minority, they are not truly a minority at all. By beginning the popular reframing of Indian-Americans themselves, they allot themselves the power to create a more holistic image of the Indian-American community, something the model minority paradigm has thus far not done. Moving forward, it will be interesting to see how these women continue bringing their communities into popular conceptions about race, especially in a city where this conversation remains on-going and heated.

While expressing solidarity with other people of color is vital for Indian-American women to mitigate the racism they face, this is only the first step. A major drawback of the black/white divide and also of the people of color/white divide is that it remains a partitioning force. Any categorization that divides humans on the basis of appearance is fundamentally counterproductive as a means of navigating racial dynamics. Thus, while it is important to bring Indian-Americans into the fold, in the long run, it is equally important to continue evolving towards a society that is not underpinned by divisive politics of color.

One way to address barriers between people of color and white Americans is to deconstruct whiteness. As mentioned, the historical conception of whiteness was merely a mechanism of subordination. There is nothing inherently superior about whiteness and in fact, even within this category, there were historical hierarchies that prized certain white-skinned individuals over others. When these distinctions become salient, it becomes all the more evident that politics of color between whites and people of color do not reflect anything other than stereotypical and racist attitudes. Thus, both people of color and white Americans need to continue engaging actively with race and come to an
understanding that differences, especially in skin tone, need not imply superiority or inferiority. However, such a step can only be taken when all voices are represented. Incorporating Indian-American women as people of color serves as a positive first step in a longer journey towards a racially tolerant America.

Conclusion

In a world that is changing and progressing rapidly, it is scary to think that Indian-American women are committing suicide at such an unprecedented rate. A combination of internal and external pressure (amongst many other causes) has shown some of its ugliest results in death that could have been prevented. However, noting the preference of Indian-American women for affinity and cultural groups, as well as a longstanding history in the community of such groups as agents of change, there seems to be hope. Today’s Indian-American women are markedly different and have different needs than the previous generation. Young women like Shreeja and Navjot do not face challenges with learning English or obtaining legal immigration status, but rather with professional success and connecting with their roots. Especially for young women, it is most vital to foster a sense of female comradery that can be leaned on for support. It is this shared connection that allows these young women to not only mitigate their personal tensions, but also remain active in their communities, speaking out against injustice and moving to help other women, for example, via groups like SAFA.

Race remains a little tougher to mitigate but nonetheless, today’s Indian-American women are actively engaged and ready to redefine the role of South Asians in racial America. This generation, including Richa and Sarika, has already begun bringing their communities forward by reconstructing themselves as people of color, rather than
solely Indian-Americans, and by thinking critically about how their experiences unites them with other minorities, but also makes them unique. Especially in light of a renewed and vigorous debate about police brutality and the impact of institutions such as the private prison complex on African Americans, race has become a salient topic for most Americans. As the conversation continues in the coming years and Asian Americans are brought into the fold, there remains great potential for Indian-Americans to ally themselves with other minorities to both claim their voices in America and also tackle the racism they face head-on.
Conclusion

On March 27th, 2012 after my fourth period Economics class, I checked my phone for the time, and instead, saw several text messages from my parents. They were congratulatory texts, telling me how proud they were and how exciting the news was. Confused, I scrolled up through the three-way conversation to understand what they were referring to. Turn out, a massive folder had made its way to my mailbox from Barnard College of Columbia University and inside was an invitation to a school I had only thought feasible in my wildest dreams.

I shrieked, announcing to my surprised friends nearby that I had gotten into Barnard. I ran through the hallways of my high school with a euphoria I had never experienced before, straight to my college counselor’s office. Bursting through her door, I gave her the good news. By now, I had caused such a ruckus in my small, independent high school that word got back to my Physics teacher, Ms. Hussain. Ms. Hussain was a young, Bangladeshi-American teacher who I had grown very close to. Not only was she the first teacher I ever had who looked like me, she was also a Barnard alumna. I had spoken to her a great deal over the past school year, confiding my anxieties about everything from college acceptances to my family in her. She had been a source of unwavering support; one I could not discount as part of the reason I even had the courage to apply to Barnard in the first place.

I ran out of my college counselor’s office, straight into Ms. Hussain, who had heard the news and had been searching the hallways for me. As we both jumped excitedly, hugged, and cried, I remembered to thank her for all she had done for me, letting her know she had had a huge hand in helping me grow into someone worthy of a
Barnard College acceptance. She placed her hands on my shoulders and told me, with tears in her eyes, how incredibly proud she was of me and how much I deserved this acceptance after overcoming so many obstacles to get to this very moment.

After almost four years at this institution, I still credit Ms. Hussain as a major driving force in my success. If it were not for her, a teacher who saw potential in me and yet, understood my story with a cultural sensitivity no other teacher could, I would never have applied to Barnard. Her guidance and willingness to serve as someone I could unconditionally confide in was paramount in building my confidence. Even throughout my college years, I have looked to her for strength and support, which she has always readily given me. As I prepare to graduate this May 2016 with a bright future to look forward to, I think back to words she has always repeated to me – that women from our communities are capable of anything if given the chance. My respondents’ and my experiences stand as a testament to the that.

In my time at Barnard, I have had access to unparalleled opportunities and privileges. I have received a world-class education and studied along-side some of the best and brightest of this generation. So have my respondents. Extremely accomplished and highly impressive, these women have excelled tremendously in their lifetimes thus far. With more than three-quarters of their lifetimes to go, one can only wonder how else this generation of Indian-American women will amaze. However, in the right light we see that these successes have always come with costs.

**Overview on Argument and Findings**

Contrary to their popular conception as model minorities, these women face compelling difficulties as minorities throughout their lives. By today’s cultural
understanding of the concept, Indian-American women are considered high-achieving and high-earning and therefore, not true minorities. However, this conception misses the impact of internal pressure from their families communities and external pressure from mainstream Americans at school and at work, both of which deeply impact their sense of identity, especially in a fast-paced, dynamic city like New York City.

By combining ethnographic data (obtained via interviews and personal experience) with relevant theories and bodies of research, I have discerned several significant pressures Indian-American women face that are obscured by the model minority paradigm. Much of the confliction these women feel begins at home, where they are subject to various culturally-dictated, gender-specific obligations, such as performing extensive emotion work. Most notably, they perform this work while simultaneously performing other forms of labor, such as striving for academic excellence, attempting to remain emotionally present for their families at all times, and making tangible contributions to running the household. This double-layered work allows women to yield tangible results such as good grades or a clean home while also ameliorating some of their immigrant parents’ anxieties and instead, evoking pride and hope. However, these efforts are crushing and are only further compounded by an intense emphasis on community, which subjects Indian-American women to scrutiny by entire communities for their decisions and behaviors, rather than just close family. Many of these women, while attempting to fulfill cultural obligations, also often embrace some elements of American culture that clash with Indian culture, and thus, the fear of log kya kehenge puts them in a bind. Though it feels natural to embrace elements of American culture, including dating or social drinking, community surveillance forces them to suppress those
desires and instead, adhere to traditional Indian gender roles and expectations to avoid backlash. Women who do not toe the line are often considered too American by their families and community members, which complicates their understanding of themselves as Indians.

To add insult to injury, Indian-American women are often simultaneously considered too Indian by mainstream Americans. Especially in a post-9/11 world, Indian-American women are consistently juxtaposed as outsiders. They bear the brunt of bullying and harmful stereotypes about their distinctions (such as language and food) as early as grade school. Even despite overrepresentation in certain occupations, they continue to experience racism in the workplace and are constantly reminded of their otherness and consequent non-Americanness. Especially after 9/11, these experiences prompt Indian-American women to suppress their Indianness, both out of fear for their own safety and out of a desire to be accepted as Americans. These women must also consider the impact of transnationalism, even if they feel no personal ties to India. Thus, an internal pressure from their families and communities that demands they eschew embracing American values and instead maintain their Indian identities is met by an external pressure from mainstream America that casts Indianness in a negative light and instead, compels them to obscure their Indianness. This push-pull dynamic that deeply impacts these women’s sense of identity is overlooked by the model minority paradigm. Though these women are cast as successful, there is no mention of the challenges they face to attain that success.

Despite the inevitable difficulties, Indian-American women, especially my respondents, often want the best of both worlds and they manage to get that in New York
City by combining their resolve with resources. Indian-American women depend on spaces that cater specifically to Indian-Americans, such as affinity groups (be they cultural, religious, or dance) to serve as safe havens. In such spaces, they meet others of similar backgrounds and thus, do not feel compelled to negotiate the tension between being both Indian and American as they do in other spheres of their lives, such as home, in school, and at work. Further, contact with others allows for deeper discussions on challenges they all face (such as those with their parents due to the generation gap) and endless resources in New York City allows them to organize effectively. Indian-American women can mitigate some of the pressures they face by creating and fostering groups like SAFA. In such spaces, they not only can expect a community that accepts them for all their intricacies as hyphenated Americans, but they can also work together towards combating the issues they collectively face. Additionally, these women have begun to address racism by actively participating in the current conversation on race in America and aligning themselves with other minorities as people of color. In doing so, they take one step in a much larger and society-wide aspiration of unraveling of race as a baseless construct. Furthermore, they tackle some of the same assumptions that underpin the model minority paradigm and demonstrate not only that it is a racist ideology, but also that it does not truly capture the reality of their lives experiences. Their stories, struggles, and perseverance in the face of adversity are a testament to their resilience, which the model minority paradigm fails to capture.

Avenues of Future Research

Because this thesis explored just some of the many issues Indian-American women, there remains significant avenue for future research. Meeting family and
community expectations and grappling with race are factors in Indian-American women’s lives that are missed by the model minority and yet, impact their day to day lives. Two other prevalent and significant forces that also impact Indian-American women are mental illness and sexual and domestic violence. Insight into this two factors specifically is important because these subjects remain extremely taboo in the Indian-American community and despite their prevalence, they are rarely addressed within the community in positive ways that benefit those who suffer. Thus, further research could bring valuable insight into how these forces bring added difficulties (specifically, as additional issues missed by the model minority paradigm) into Indian-American women’s lives, especially as topics that are often swept under the rug. Furthermore, insight into these topics could bring about some much needed relief for those who suffer and are often denied appropriate compassion.

As already mentioned, mental illness is an extremely taboo subject and often not discussed within families and Indian-American communities at large. From my personal observation, families are often in denial of their daughters’ mental illness, which compounds these women’s suffering. Not only are they in need of proper care such as therapy or medication and sometimes denied access to those things, but they are also kept out of public eye by their families. For example, if a family were to have company over, they may try to prevent their guests from seeing or interacting with their mentally ill child for more than a few requisite moments.\(^{31}\) This could be out of shame or out of fear of community judgment, but the fact remains that mentally ill women are certainly not getting the attention they merit. By not addressing mental illness properly, those who

\(^{31}\) I do not personally know a family like this, but friends of friends have had these experiences.
suffer are confined to the shadows. Especially in light of the staggering elevated suicide level amongst Indian-American women mentioned in Chapter 3, it is paramount to understand the ways in which this issue plagues Indian-American women. Continuing to shove this reality under the rug would mean a continued misrepresentation of this population even beyond the model minority paradigm.

Sexual and domestic violence also remain rampant in the Indian-American community, as it does in society at-large. As with suicides however, there is a significantly higher risk for South-Asian women to be victims of intimate partner violence. Some studies show that up to 40% of South-Asian women in America have faced intimate partner violence in their current relationship (Raj and Silverman 2003, 435). This is another extremely taboo topic in the Indian-American community and as a result, is rarely addressed. From my personal observation, many families and communities deny its existence, offer “boys will be boys” as an adequate explanation, and/or victim blame often. Thus, victims often do not come forward or seek resources, fearing backlash and dismissal. Many of my respondents briefly discussed sexual and/or domestic violence and how it impacts them and their families and it is evident that this kind of violence undoubtedly impacts women’s lives in far-reaching ways. In addition to the physical harm it can bring, it can also severally impact women mentally, and indeed, may feed the elevated suicide statistic. Further research on sexual and domestic violence in Indian-American communities and how it affects women would not only yield a more holistic picture of the reality of women’s lives, but it may also show gaps in our current

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32 This statistic, unlike the one for suicide, is for South-Asian women and thus includes, for example, Pakistani-American and Bangladeshi-American women as well. However, the sample employed for this study was overwhelmingly Indian, upwards of 80% (Raj and Silverman 2003, 435).
understanding that can be used to address the issue. For example, despite the existence of organizations like Sakhi, some victims do not have knowledge of these resources and sometimes also do not have access. By understanding the scope of the issue, we can more accurately represent Indian-American women’s struggles, but can also understand how to better handle it.

Implications, Significance, and Cause for Optimism

Amazingly, despite all the pressing difficulties (both those discussed in this thesis and those that require future research) the inadequacies and stereotypes of the model minority, each respondent comfortably and proudly identified as Indian-American (as opposed to just Indian and just American). Even though they feel their struggles as Indian-American women are often misunderstood and certainly misrepresented by the model minority paradigm, they take immense pride in being hyphenated Americans and celebrate that intersection proudly. They have optimistic visions for the future of Indian-Americans in New York City, despite the difficulties they will no doubt continue to face. Taken together, this indicates something incredibly powerful about today’s Indian-American women – they fully understand and embody the myriad challenges that are inherent to their precarious positions as hyphenated Americans, but they also demonstrate admirable grit and a subsequent willingness to take action and push for brighter futures for themselves and their communities.

Respondents reported optimism for the future of Indian-Americans in various different dimensions of life in New York City. Upasna believes that despite a current dearth of admirable Indian-American role models in politics, this generation will produce
bright and motivated minds. She is confident that members of this generation will take up leadership roles in politics and serve as positive role models that she herself did not have.

Shreeja echoes Upasna. Bemoaning a lack of role models in her everyday life who look like her, she remains optimistic that the face of America is changing. She points to an increased representation of South Asians on television and in the media as proof. Actors and actresses like Aziz Ansari of Master of None and Priyanka Chopra of Quantico have become household names and the faces of advertisement campaigns all over the city, as seen in Figure 7 below:

![Image of Master of None and Quantico posters]

**Figure 7:** Master of None and Quantico are two extremely successful shows that feature Indian-American actors as the main characters (Cruz 2015 and Fashion Gone Rogue 2015).

Most interestingly, Shreeja remarks that the Indian-American narrative is beginning to be taken more seriously. She believes more Indian-Americans have begun coming forward with their stories and experiences and thus, have begun making a face and name for themselves in mainstream America. Moving forward, she is confident that this generation will leave an indelible mark that future generations will continue building upon.
Sahi adds context to her personal optimism, insisting that Indian-Americans have broken major barriers to make the strides they have made thus far. She says that despite significant racism throughout the years, Indian-Americans have defied the odds and continue to flourish in New York City. However, Sahi insists we have a long way to go. As Indian-Americans, she believes we will continue to face discrimination, especially because ignorance is pervasive. However, she remarks how often she reads about Indian-American success in newspapers and hears about it via word of mouth. She adds that news like this fills her with pride and reinforces her faith in both her community at-large and in her fellow millennials. She is convinced that Indian-Americans have nowhere to go but up.

Perhaps most eloquently optimistic is Navjot. Like Sahi, she too does not underemphasize the barriers still present for Indian-Americans. She believes race is something the community will continue grappling with for many years and that the impact of 9/11 will be felt for several generations. However, she highlights the successes Indian-Americans have made thus far and insists that the community is incredibly resilient, coming back twice as hard when knocked down. She also believes that this generation particularly will excel and dedicate itself to social and community service work on behalf of Indian-American advancement at-large.

These observations and aspirations are profound. They demonstrate these women’s sustained hope but also coin a noteworthy prediction – that in the coming years, Indian-Americans will indeed be able to overcome assumptions of the model minority paradigm that have thus far seemed insurmountable by making visible strides in new realms. In doing so, they debunk the myth that Indian-Americans only concentrate in
stereotypical fields such as the medical field or finance. Visibility in non-traditional spheres such as media and politics allows Indian-Americans to call attention to their presence in these fields and thus, fuels a reconstruction of Indian-Americans in a more holistic light. In this reconstruction, they are also recognized as artists and authors rather than assumed to be doctors and engineers. They are as likely to own a dance studio as they are to practice corporate law. My respondents believe that a time will soon come where the achievements of Indian-Americans in all fields will be recognized and celebrated equally by both the Indian-American community and mainstream America.

In addition to a more holistic vision of Indian-American achievements, increased visibility and recognition also allows for increased interaction with other Americans, both minority and white. This sheer exposure in multiple different settings can yield increased understanding of Indian-Americans, which consequently can yield increased racial tolerance. Thus, instead of seeing Indian-Americans by their culture, skin tone, or other differences, other Americans will simply see them as people they work with, go to school with, or hang out with. They will be seen as people who have similar hopes and dreams but also battle similar demons. They will be seen as equals. My respondents’ vision of “making American browner” as per Fatima is one that could bring infinite positive change to the Indian-American community.

My respondents do not separate themselves from their visions of the future of the Indian-American community. Indeed, it is remarkable that my respondents are prepared, even eager, to, as Ramya Ramana proclaimed, “keep dancing.” As brokers of their communities and amalgamations of both Indian and American culture, they are ready to take on the challenge of bringing their people forward. In tackling these challenges and
serving as leaders for future generations, these women also position themselves to debunk some of the most harmful assumptions of the model minority paradigm. By sharing their experiences with and claiming their voices in the American mainstream, these women will definitely reshape perceptions of Indian-Americans in the years to come. They are set to create a more comprehensive vision than the one put forth by the model minority paradigm and I have no doubt they will show that there is significantly more to the average Indian-American woman than what meets the eye.
REFERENCES CITED


APPENDIX

Below is a set of interview questions I employed while interviewing my respondents. Depending on the flow of conversation, I did some improvising.

1. Could you tell me about yourself?
   a. What is your name?
   b. What is your gender?
   c. What is your age?
   d. What generation immigrant are you?
2. Could you tell me about your immigration history?
   a. Who in your family immigrated? When?
   b. How much of your family immigrated? When?
   c. Where in New York City have you lived?
3. Could you tell me about your family?
   a. Who lives with you?
   b. Do you have any extended family close by?
   c. What is your relationship with your family?
   d. Who are you closest to and why?
4. Does your family have any specific expectations of you? Are they the same as those you have of yourself?
   a. Are you meeting their expectations? Yours?
   b. How do you think they would react if you were not meeting expectations?
   c. How would you feel if you were not meeting your own expectations?
5. Could you tell me about your experiences in school/college/work (as applicable)?
   a. Do you have extracurricular activities? If so, how have your parents reacted to those interests?
   b. Do you think your identity has impacted your academic or occupational trajectory?
6. Could you tell me about your social life?
   a. Who do you spend time with? Do they come from similar backgrounds?
   b. Do you date?
   c. Does your family have any opinions about your social life?
7. How much do you factor in your family while making any kind of decision?
8. How do you answer the question, “where are you from?”
   a. Which, if any of these, do you identify most and why?
      i. Indian
      ii. American
      iii. Indian-American
9. Do you think you have ever experienced differential treatment (positive or negative) based on your identity?
10. Is there anything that would have made it easier to live, work, and be educated in this city with regards to your identity?
11. What do you think the future looks like for Indian-Americans in New York City?