

(Cultural) Identity Crisis: The Internet & the Indian Diaspora

Esha Dholia

The first truly Indian space I came across on the Internet was an email chain. The summer after fourth grade I visited India for my uncle's wedding, and some of my cousins and I got on so well we decided to exchange email addresses. For about six months we kept in constant touch. Though that thread was a nonsensical mess of neon-colored fonts, the early 2000's equivalent of bad memes, and general pointlessness, I knew there was something special about conversing with my family in this particular way. The kids at school had called my *mehendi* disgusting, and the temporary Indian accent I'd picked up in India had worn off; physically, I was as far from India as I possibly could have been, and the week it took me to adjust to the 12-hour time difference proved that. That email thread, though, was a piece of India I had that no one could touch, and no one did touch.

My story is not unique. The Internet is littered with tales like mine, of young South Asians struggling to balance being from countries that are both exoticized and mocked. There is a real lack of South Asian representation anywhere in the US, and save for a few sad stories of children in slums and Julia Roberts' *Eat Pray Love* excursion, India is nothing but an exotic mystery, especially for those who live in its diaspora. This is why the Internet is so important; as Dr. Madhavi Mallapragada, professor of communications and Asian studies, says, it provides people with access to resources and tools that may not necessarily be mainstream to explore and form connections with where they come from (Mallapragada 34). In response to prejudice towards and the essential erasure of its experiences in the US, the Indian diaspora began using the Internet to create specific spaces and resources to build communities and share experiences and ideas specific to the diaspora. Though it is argued by many that living in the Indian American diaspora can lead to the fragmentation of culture and a person's sense of cultural identity, the Internet is a force that brings people together and strengthens how they experience Indian culture. Consequently, the Indian American diaspora has been able to create for itself a new cultural identity that is built specifically on experiences unique to them.

Physically, the Indian diaspora refers to all those Indian communities that exist outside the physical borders of India. Despite its longevity in the US, the diaspora has a complicated relationship with itself because major forms of Indian and Indian American media – most obviously film and literature – constantly push that to be of the diaspora means to 'lose' one's culture and sense of being Indian. The 2000 Bollywood film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* perfectly demonstrates this. Rahul, the protagonist, moves from India to London, and is shown to become by Indian standards 'westernized;'; his values shift from family to money and work above all else. Films like this one insinuate that to leave India isn't a good thing and results in losing an individual's sense of culture.

The concept of culture itself is not easily defined. It is too multi-faceted and is experienced differently by everyone, and so a few words could never properly explain any single variety. Perhaps this is why the idea of 'losing' one's culture is seemingly so scary; not practicing it in an expected and typical way can lead to others passing judgments that are just as difficult to deal with as the struggle that comes with balancing culture is itself. This isn't surprising. In social

anthropologist Steven Vertovec's paper "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora,' Exemplified among South Asian Religions," he argues that a major proponent of diaspora is the conflicted identities of an individual between their 'homeland' and a second country in which they're living (10). Vertovec's claims are further supported by different literature. The book *Born Confused* by Indian American author Tanuja Desai Hidier relates the experiences of a young girl, Dimple, who struggles to balance being 'Indian' with also living in the US. Her struggle is one primarily based on trying to balance both cultures at the same time in spite of the emphasis by her family time and time again that to become 'too American' is to completely lose being Indian. Dimple's and Rahul's experiences are similar to mine and those of many of my diasporic friends and family – we're told we'll lose our culture if we become too 'Westernized,' but being Indian in the West is difficult because of the prejudice and lack of understanding most people have of India. In Dimple's case, the protagonist's white best friend Gwyn is a manifestation of the typical attitude non-South Asians have of South Asia. She loves saris and bindis, but scoffs at the prospect of arranged marriage; she likes the Indian culture when it's convenient and ignores it when it's not (Hidier 32). This is where the Internet comes into play; though it is not a conventional medium of connection, the Internet is a way by which diasporic Indians can connect back to and experience their culture without judgment or ignorance on anyone's part.

Young Indian Americans in particular use the Internet as a tool to talk about the manifestation of cultural identity in the US, demonstrating how diasporic Indians do not lose their culture abroad. Sociologist Stuart Hall defines cultural identity in several ways in his text "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." One of these definitions sees it "in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self'...which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (223). This definition assumes that all people of a certain culture practice it in the same way, and that this remains constant even with the increasing prevalence of immigration and shifting time. Hall argues this definition leads to a one-dimensional view of culture, when in reality culture is malleable and experienced differently by everyone. The motive behind an Indian American youth's Tumblr blog, *Reclaim the Bindi*, is in part to shed light on this idea. One of her posts, which received 287 'likes' and 'reblogs' on the site, discusses differences between the cultural identities of Indians living in India and Indians living abroad. She recognizes prejudices and internalized racism diasporic Indians experience, such as "[cringing] in embarrassment when your parents spoke your mother tongue to you in front of friends...[and] reclaiming your culture and identity from the same people who stared at you oddly when your mother spoke your native language in public [and now] have pillows with namaste written on them" (*Reclaim the Bindi*). There are qualities of culture that transcend borders like language and religion, but the way these characteristics manifest themselves in India and the US are very different. This is in part because Indian culture is the minority abroad versus native to India. Indian Americans are perhaps even more aware of the unique qualities that characterize their culture because of its foreignness, causing expression and discussion online like the one found on the *Reclaim the Bindi* blog. That this discussion about different experiences with culture is occurring shows that culture is not lost in the diaspora; in actuality, it is experienced in full and in a way that is colored by the minority status that comes with being Indian in the US. The acknowledgement of the variation in the ways culture is practiced abroad versus in India – and the consequent recognition of the pitfalls of one of Hall's definitions of cultural identity – is the foundation for the adoption of a cultural identity unique to Indian Americans.

Perhaps one of the most interesting things to come from the American diaspora is the large presence of South Asian and Indian religions online. These websites are significant to the diaspora because they represent the growing prevalence of Indian culture in the US. The creation of this more tangible community relates to Hall's second definition of cultural identity and is far closer to the actuality of how culture exists than the first. In this definition, cultural identity calls for "becoming" a member of a culture in order to "belong" (225). "Becoming" has to do with how someone experiences all the facets of his or her culture, and religion is certainly an elemental aspect of the Indian American one. These religions have existed for thousands of years, and as a result Hinduism, Jainism, and other traditionally South Asian belief systems are linked very closely to South Asian ethnicity and culture. As a child, I recall being sent picture books from India about the mythology of different Hindu gods. I've never seen these books as religious texts or teachings, but an elemental part of my upbringing and a key player in my understanding where my family came from. Similarly, through participating in online religious communities, the diaspora can come together to "become" a part of the Indian culture in the context of the US.

In his essay "The Politics of History on the Internet: Cyber-Diasporic Hinduism and the North American Hindu Diaspora," Dr. Vinay Lal, a history professor at UCLA, discusses the inception and evolution of Hinduism in North America that is happening online. Lal mentions the existence of many different websites that specifically have to do with Hinduism, such as *alt.hindu* and *soc.culture.indian*, and claims they were created in the diaspora because of the billion people living in India, only one million individuals readily and consistently have access to the Internet (140, 154). Lal goes on to contrast Hinduism in the US versus India, claiming, "Hindus [in America] have embraced forms of worship pursued by only the most dedicated Hindus in India" (148). This dedication has led to Indian American Hindus creating websites to document and share religious practices, and the online Hindu community is apparently flourishing. Hinduism in and of itself is a very decentralized and large religion; there are thousands of deities responsible for thousands of different things, and there is no one singular text all Hindus agree on as the authority (152). I've seen this work to the advantage of my grandparents and older members of my family, who all immigrated to the US within the last twenty years or so. They use YouTube to listen to *bhajans*, Hindu devotional songs, and have full autonomy over their song choice. The easy accessibility of YouTube fits their lifestyle in the US, where the nearest temple is nearly an hour from their home. I believe the dependence my relatives place upon themselves and on YouTube to stay connected to their religion strengthens their sense of cultural identity and allows it to flourish. By Hall's second definition, they're been able to "be" culturally Indian because they use the Internet to integrate themselves into their culture and religion in the diaspora (254). Hinduism's vastness also benefits independent religious websites, which allow members of the Hindu community to consolidate and share their interpretations of the religion with one another. This leads to the forging of significant relationships within the diasporic community and an increased identification with the Indian culture. The commitment people have to the creation and maintenance of these sites demonstrates that diasporic Indians do not lose their culture.

In addition to these religious websites and resources, the Internet is home to a hub of social media platforms that allow diasporic Indians to network and form their own communities in the US as well as connect with family and friends living abroad. By maintaining and building these relationships, diasporic Indians are able to preserve their senses of culture and cultural identities. First generation Indians are Indians who have grown up in India and moved to the US later on in

their lifetime. Surabhi Goswami, a Digital Communications Officer with the Technical University of Denmark, wrote her MA thesis on the Indian diaspora's relationship with social media. In examining first generation Indians' usage of Facebook, Goswami found that this particular group of Indian immigrants tended to use the platform as "an alternative space for the diaspora to engage in identity and community construction, and...to provide the support structure and companionship of a 'virtual family away from home' (80). In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, first generation Indian Rahul is shown to avoid speaking to his estranged family in India and does not seem to have many Indian friends outside his family in London. Though this may have been the norm for Rahul, Goswami's study demonstrates that it certainly isn't so for many diasporic Indians. The formation of these communities – and the sense of 'home away from home' they provide – allow first generation Indians to remain connected to their culture by building relationships bases specifically on being Indian and being of the diaspora.

Though the way first generation Indians use the Internet is fairly different from the way second generation Indians use it, that social media and the Internet are major forces in shaping their cultural identities remains constant across age and time. Second generation Indians are born and raised in the diaspora, the children of first generation immigrants, and the formation of virtual communities like their parents' is based more on the specific experiences diasporic Indians face rather than the desire to forge a "virtual family." Janaki Tambe's YouTube series *Bad Indian* reflects this. In the first episode of her self-produced show, the 30-year-old second generation woman acts in scenes that mimic experiences members of the diaspora are all too familiar with; from the deliberate mispronunciation of her name by non-Indian coworkers, to being compared to other young Indian women of the same age, to enduring the judgment by older Indian family friends for being unmarried, *Bad Indian* does a good job of portraying some of the definitive aspects of the Indian American experience. It also does well displaying experiences of a typical young person in the US, like getting laid off or being unable to find an apartment. As a second generation Indian myself, I think being Indian American is very typical but simultaneously not typical at all, and it is this confusing hodgepodge of an experience that Tambe portrays so well and second generation Indians are able to so readily connect with. The series was well received, and in the comments section of the first episode several other self-proclaimed second generation Indians claimed to have found a lot to relate to. *Bad Indian* is a testament to the Indian diasporic experience and has been a means of bringing together diasporic individuals to share and bond over these mutual experiences. This forging of a community and its significance resembles the "virtual families" of first generation Indians. The longevity of groups like these, that are inherently based on being Indian and being of the diaspora, prove just how powerful of a tool the Internet can be in influencing diasporic cultural identity. In particular, it is through the mass agreement of second generation Indians in their shared experiences and struggles as Indian Americans that shows how Indian culture survives in spite of large generational gaps. These individuals and myself recognize being Indian and aspects of a 'traditional' Indian upbringing as important tenets to their being Indian American, just as growing up in this US society was. Exposure to the Indian culture as children makes it possible for the diaspora to stay connected to it, but more than that the narrative diasporic individuals share, in which being Indian American is difficult and confusing as Tambe's web series shows, strengthens the second generational cultural identification in being Indian.

The Indian culture has manifested itself in many different ways on the Internet. Religious and social communities are thriving and allow Indians in the US to engage with their culture in a way

that suits the technology-dependent way of life in the US. Even though it has been argued that the Indian culture is forgotten by those living in the Indian American diaspora because they don't experience and practice it in the same way Indians in India do, the Internet demonstrates this is not so. Through bringing together and forging communities in the diaspora, the Internet enables Indian Americans to create for themselves a cultural identity specific to their experiences as members of the diaspora.

The Berklee School of Music recently collaborated with renowned Indian composer A.R. Rahman – famed for his work on *Slumdog Millionaire* and other films – to cover some of Rahman's most popular songs. Rahman's contributions to the music industry are beloved across the globe, and so even though Berklee's adaptations of his tunes were well-received in India, they were adored in the US and gained over a million views on YouTube. One of the songs covered was "Yeh Jo Des Hai Tera" – "This Land of Yours" – from the movie *Swades*. The film is about a NRI who travels back to India after living in the US for some years, and this tune chronicles the emotions he feels being back in his home country. The song is so important to me; I think its sentiments are ones all diasporic Indians who have struggled with being Indian abroad have had at some point: "Yeh jo des hai tera / Swades hai tera / Tujhe hai pukara / Yeh joh bandhan hai jo kabhi toot nahin sakta" (1-4). Directly translated: "this land of yours, this is your motherland. It is calling out to you, and the bond you share can never be broken."

The students who perform this song are Indians of the diaspora themselves in one way or another. Some are in the US from India to study; others are second generation Indians, hailing from Chicago or San Jose or other cities across America. In each of these students' faces is so much joy, so much love, for the song they were singing. And in the comments – which generally and especially on YouTube tend to be very negative – are words of praise, and understanding, and adoration. Non-resident Indians expressed their joy and love for this song that had been changed from its original state, melded and adapted to fit today's diaspora perfectly. This is the power of the Internet – it takes the vast beauty and richness of the Indian culture and makes it easily accessible to the diaspora via Google Chrome and a power cord. The Internet brings together and builds communities;; the Internet reaffirms people's love in being Indian.

Learning to meld my Indian heritage with my American surroundings has been challenging, but I have realized that embracing where my family is from does not mean I belong in the US any less than anyone else. My skin is dark with melanin and my *mehendi* is the richest red; you can smell my culture on my skin and see it in my face today and every day. I am proud to be where I am from. It only took ten years and an email chain to realize that.

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