CHAPTER 23

#3

Hybrid Revivals

Ethnicity and South Asian Celebration

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Dancers swirl into the night as the music soars high with its rhythmic beat. The scene is the Edison District of central New Jersey and the dancers in their colorful clothes are South Asians[1] celebrating *Navaratri,* the Hindu festival that signifies the cosmic victory of good over evil. To immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, the months of October and November are a special time of togetherness, the time for a community to renew its commitment to the traditions of the past. Every year the number of people who gather here to participate in this traditional folk dance grows dramatically. According to the organizers, the event is "the largest *Navaratri* celebration outside of India" (Goodnough 1995).

In contrast to the popularity of the event among South Asian immigrants, its celebration and music has met sharp resistance elsewhere. To other residents in the Edison area, the sounds of *Navaratri* are nothing more than a nuisance and perhaps more a reminder of the intrusion of new immigrants who are redefining the locale. Each year, almost in sync with the music, there is a matching tempo of complaints registered to the police about the event from local residents. The ethnic organizers argue that the festival is in an area separated from the residential neighborhood by a highway. When they applied for a permit for their celebration in 1995, the Town Council of Edison clamped down with a list of restrictions, primarily that the festival should end promptly at 2 a.m. and take place only on Friday and Saturday nights. The council pushed for another provision that would allow it to shut down the event if the noise levels exceeded the limit three times, although this was dismissed by a federal judge in Newark. The celebration finally did take place amidst an atmosphere of tension and increased surveillance. The struggle and its conflicting interpretations continue from both sides of the ethnic divide.

This episode from New Jersey exemplifies some of the ways in which ethnic groups must negotiate their identity in the face of the external resentment of their presence. Migrants, says Rushdie (1991), must of necessity make a new, imaginative relationship with the world because of the loss of familiar habitats. Celebrations like *Navaratri* provide this connection and a sense of affirmation to immigrants, playing an important part in the process of redefining selfhood and establishing a sense of community in a new environment. The vivid display of the celebration is generally an active reconstruction of significant symbols from the past. Many of these events are centered around religious festivals.[2] Ethnic celebrations can also be interpreted as a way of asserting a cultural distinctiveness. To immigrants like myself, these are opportunities to enjoy being Indian and to savor the colors, clothes, tastes, and sounds of a home left behind.

The South Asian Experience

Traveling between cultural worlds constitutes the lived reality of the migrant experience (Lugones, 1990). Questions of identity, home, and community emerge prominently in the experience of relocation and its ensuing displacement. In a world where one is painfully aware of being different, there is a constant sense among South Asian immigrants of having severed their connections, left marooned without roots. "Neither here nor there" is a typical refrain I hear from South Asians irrespective of how long they have stayed in the United States. A persistent ambivalence surrounds this awareness of inhabiting the borderlands or the realm in between. Conflict and contradiction seem inevitable in the process of moving in and out of multiple cultural frames. As I talk to my friends in the South Asian community, I notice how our social locations are marked not only by the sudden loss of familiarity, but by continuous reminders of one's status as the foreigner, the outsider, or the "other." Hence ethnic groups provide the space and opportunity to enact familiar scripts of interactions, prompting a spontaneity that contrasts one's self-conscious posturing in the world outside.

Immigrants from the Indian subcontinent are one of the fastest-growing Asian immigrant groups in the United States. Their major influx began after 1960 when changes in the immigration law permitted the entry of professionally trained people. This wave of South Asians was characterized by high levels of education and professional attainments in scientific and technological fields.[3] Today the community has grown far beyond this small homogenous elite, their numbers now concentrated on the West and East Coasts of the United States.

South Asians, like other ethnic groups, tend to be very conscious of their cultural heritage (Fisher, 1980). Coming from a traditional culture that places great emphasis on communal links and kinship structures, these immigrants form tightly organized ethnic social bonds. Networks formed around commonalities such as language, place of origin, religion, and music have recaptured the social nuances experienced in the past. The proliferation of ethnic organizations is directly related to the diversity within the Indian community. Some of these organizations are attempting to create a unified identity in the United States and provide a political voice for the ethnic group. More recently, several South Asian feminist and gay groups with a strong activist agenda have become highly visible in major American cities. Clearly, though, the main thrust of ethnic organizations has been the reinvention of traditional culture.

Religion and the presence of places of worship have become central to this process of cultural reproduction. For example, Hindu temples are the sites for the ritual participation of communal life, evoking connections to an ancient religiosity. Often old church buildings are renovated and redecorated on the inside to double as Hindu temples; other temples are constructed more lavishly to replicate the ancient ones of India. Some groups go to great lengths to raise money, commissioning artists and artisans from India to create sculptures and artwork for the new Hindu temples. Weekends bristle with events and festivals in most Hindu temples across the United States. In addition to the regular religious rituals and ceremonies, temples provide the space and the focus for cultural activities, religion classes (even Hindu Sunday school), and musical events. The whole culture that develops around Hindu temples far transcends the mystical mantras chanted for the spiritual sustenance of immigrants in their new environment. The temples represent a space for the ethnic group to collectively reconnect with the celebratory symbols that bring India and Indianness to life.

The Inside/Outside View of Ethnic Celebration

> Though separated from community, country
> and time,
> A continuity exists,
> Because of the imprints of experience
> brought forth by memory.
>
> —*Patanajali (1924)*

The process of cultural relocation involves the complex negotiations of claiming a position in the present and reclaiming versions of the past. Memory plays an important role in the negotiation between past and present. As Ganguly (1992) writes, the past provides a crucial discursive terrain for reconsolidating selfhood and identity, especially for those whose

present world has been rendered unpredictable as a consequence of the displacement caused by migration. The migrant experience is characterized by a sense of interruption and historical discontinuity. The isolation and alienation experienced by South Asians in the outside world intensify the disjuncture in the narrative of self that has already been created by cultural relocation. Ethnicity provides the essential thread to establish experiential and historical continuity in migrant lives.

However, it represents far more than a nostalgic preoccupation with the past. As Hall (1990) states, cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being" and belongs to the future as much as to the past. Cultural identities, although grounded in history, are also constantly transforming and reproducing themselves. The narratives of identity have to move forward from the past to an anticipated and projected future. South Asian immigrants from India frequently articulate their anxieties about the future: Will our children know about India and maintain their Indianness? The need to perpetuate tradition and carry significant cultural symbols into the future is the driving force behind the energy and zeal of ethnic celebrations.

The active production of ethnic culture can be seen as the process of shaping the discourse of ethnicity. This enterprise gains its momentum from the many ways by which the difference and dichotomy between "us" and "them" plays a significant role in the everyday lives of immigrants. As Rutherford (1990) writes, "Our struggles for identity and a sense of personal coherence and intelligibility are centered on this threshold between interior and exterior, between self and other" (p. 24). The term *inside/outside* metaphorically captures the tensions and ambivalence of trying to establish one's presence as a minority group.

The dichotomy between the inner and the outer, one's home and the world at large, played an important role in the construction of nationalist identity in the wake of colonialism in India. Today these terms have a special resonance that helps to situate the meaning of celebration and ritual in an immigrant context from both a spatial and a philosophical perspective. The world represents the external, the domain of the material; the home is a symbolic extension of one's spiritual self (Chatterjee, 1989). In the immigrant context the outside world represents an adaptation to Western norms and the pressures to assimilate. In contrast, the home represents a cultural oasis, a space for South Asian immigrants to practice and instill their own versions of proper "Indianness."

"I have always had a small shrine in my house where I pray," says my friend Mira. She tells me it is important that her son remember what it means to be an Indian. For example, on *Ganesh Chathurti,* the festival to celebrate the God of auspicious beginnings, the family shrine flourishes with flowers, lights, and incense, and the house comes alive with the sounds of Indian music and the chanting of Sanskrit prayers. These parents are eager to teach the chants to their children, often driven by the passionate need to instill in their children the values that underlie these celebrations. Stories are told of ancient heroes and their virtues, of Hindu gods and goddesses. Tales are recounted of the celebration back home: "Do you know how many types of sweet delicacies your grandmother used to serve? Twenty-one, and each one was a specialty." The past appears as a mirage and dissolves into the fragrance that spirals up from the burning incense.

Deepavali, the festival of lights, occurs in late autumn. An Indian friend who lives in New Jersey tells me, "Ours is the only house all lit up at this time of the year." In India, the lamps are lit and the sounds of fireworks crackle in the air. Here the festival assumes a different public form. At South Street Seaport in New York City, South Asian groups have orchestrated the event as an urban ethnic spectacle. There are booths and stalls set up to display Indian handicrafts, folk art, dance, puppet shows, and, of course, food from all parts of the subcontinent. Every year the event culminates in a public display of fireworks against the city skyline in honor of an epic hero from another time and another place.

August brings another important day in the lives and histories of Indian immigrants—the day India gained independence from Britain. Following other ethnic groups in New York City, Indians in New York City have also established a tradition of floats and parades to celebrate the occasion, during which various groups and ethnic businesses march with their displays. This public celebration assumes the grandeur of spectacle and pageantry, usually with an

Indian movie star or celebrity acting as the Grand Marshal. Immigrants get a chance to experience their homeland as a simulacrum, a floating image, a collage of past and present, inside and outside. A veil of Indianness covers the city and at least momentarily the spectacle blends into the mosaic.

The Authentic Hybrid?

Celebration in the ethnic context involves an accurate re-creation of the original event, so authenticity of representation becomes central to the production of this spectacle. To transplant a cultural aura, painstaking efforts are taken to create the perfect ambiance, capture the exact flavor, and acquire the right elements. Even as ethnic groups continue in their romanticization of the past, transatlantic productions assume a material form and identity of their own. In the process of imitating the original culture, South Asians translate and transform it, which involves an innovative mutation of both form and content. Their reinvention creates an interesting pastiche of symbols—a hybridization of cultural forms.

In 1994 a musical event in New York City's Central Park captured the magic of this blending of cultural forms. It was the first public performance of *Bhangra,* an Indian musical form that is the current rage in Britain and is fast catching on among ethnic circles in the United States. *Bhangra* is a traditional rhythm from Punjab, a northern Indian state. South Asian youths have re-created *Bhangra* by fusing the traditional beat with a cosmopolitan flavor, resulting in the production of a vibrant new musical statement. In the world of migrants this hybrid blending is perhaps the only one that can truly claim any type of authenticity.

The celebration of weddings in the South Asian community is another interesting example of hybrid authenticity. I recently attended a wedding that took place in an elite hotel. As the guests arrived, there was a rustling pageantry of saris (the traditional dress worn by Indian women) in pure silk of many colors and hues. The wedding room was decorated with Indian motifs, Hindu priests chanted the marriage rites on a decorative stage reminiscent of those used by the maharajas of India, and the strains of classical Indian music wafted through the room. During the reception, however, the cultural pendulum swung in a different direction. A wedding cake is an ethnic variation that certainly does not exist in Hindu weddings in India. Dancing is not normally part of Indian wedding celebrations, but among the diaspora the *Bhangra* beat and Indian rock were vibrantly present. For the immigrants, the new aesthetic standard in planning these events lies in the right blend of East and West, the right *masala.*[4]

In the multicultural market, difference sells. Commodifying authenticity and marketing otherness for ethnic consumers is a thriving business. If you take a stroll through the Little Indias springing up in almost all major American cities, you will witness the spectacle of Indian ethnicity, the sensuous feel of a different space–time configuration. There are restaurants serving Indian delicacies from various parts of the country, sari shops, and ethnic video rental houses carrying every single film ever produced in Bombay. More recently there has been a visible growth in services that provide festival and celebration paraphernalia to the immigrant population. One-stop services for authentic celebrations are becoming very popular business ventures in the Little Indias. The packaging of culture includes everything from Indian-style floral decorations, traditional clothes and bridal makeup, and complete arrangements for Hindu weddings to vegetarian cakes for religious occasions and DJs offering the right combination of popular Indian music and Western rhythms. Often at Indian festivals I hear the statement, "You can be more of an Indian in America." Such a baffling pronouncement attests to the fact that to immigrants India represents an unchanging essence. The costumes and the staging serve as props for an eclectic production of the past.

Behind the Spectacle

Rushdie (1991) writes of a photograph of his family home in Bombay, a city he had left behind years ago: "The photograph had naturally been taken in black and white; and my memory, feeding on images as this, had begun to see my childhood in the same way monochromatically. The colors of my history had seeped out of my mind's eye" (p. 10). Rushdie continues poignantly, describing how much he desired to

restore the past "not in the faded greys of family-album snapshots but whole, in Cinemascope and glorious Technicolor" (p. 10).

To immigrants the evocation of the past provides an imaginary coherence to the experience of displacement and isolation. Celebrations become an awe-inspiring reproduction with displays that try to capture a distilled image of Indianness. To the individual immigrant and the ethnic group as a whole these celebrations are communicative statements to announce the presence and cementing of ethnic bonds. The experience of seeing oneself represented as the "other" makes immigrants feel highly speculative and anxious to construct narratives that connect their relationship to that "otherness." Celebrations are the illustrations that accompany this narrative.

Yet bicultural living is fraught with emotional stress, and celebrations that jumble up symbols can also spell shame, particularly to second-generation South Asians to whom India is often only a construct. Sheela Bhatt (1993) recalls some of those awkward moments of celebrations and ethnic realities:

> I have memories of doing strange things when my friends' families seemed to be following the normal American etiquette. For example, on Thanksgiving, we would eat Indian food, along with vegetarian stuffing, mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce. (Of course, we kids would have liked to have had a more traditional meal on Thanksgiving like all of our friends!) Or even worse, my brothers, with my father, once had to change their Brahmin sacred thread (in front of onlookers) on a beach in Santa Cruz. Every year they would change their thread on a certain day near a body of water—whether it was an ocean, lake, pond or even a stream. Unfortunately, that year the closest body of water was one of the biggest tourist beaches in California. It was a totally humiliating situation for my brothers and me, but my father didn't even notice. (p. 317)

The gaze from the outside that demarcates differences as weird, strange, and deviant takes a wrenching toll on the construction of immigrant subjectivity. The intergenerational dynamics of this issue are even more complex. In this culturally varied and relational constellation, South Asians (like most migrants) engage in frequent questions about their transplanted locations. The experience of cultural displacement from relocation destabilizes one's sense of belonging and community, the basic structures of subjectivity. Ethnicity provides the antidote. For South Asian immigrants, weekends crammed with ethnic social events and celebrations provide a significant thematic coherence in their otherwise fragmented experiences of cultural change.

As we return to the scene of the *Navaratri* celebration, the dancers are still swirling away but it is now 2 a.m. and the festivities have to stop. With an almost Cinderellaesque urgency they leave and speed away down the New Jersey highways back to reality.

ENDNOTES

1. The term *South Asian immigrants* refers to people from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan.
2. The religious festivals described here are Hindu traditions. Although the majority of Indians are Hindus, India is a land of many religions.
3. For studies on the acculturation patterns of Asian Indians in the United States, see Helweg and Helweg (1990) and Saran and Eames (1985).
4. *Masala* is a term used in Indian cooking to denote an aromatic mixture of spices.

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