

Between ABCD and DCBA:
Rise of the New Generation in Asian Indians in the United States

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1. Introduction

The minority community of Asian Indians is a relatively new comer to the United States. Most of them belong to the first generation who came to the US after 1965, or they are children of the first generation. Inspired from the word “ABC” (= American Born Chinese), the new generation is sometimes called “ABCD” (= American Born Child of *Desis*). Half-jokingly, its reverse “DCBA” could be used to refer to the old generation. DCBA stands for “*Desis* Came to Be an American.”

With its expanded population, Asian Indians, once comprised a richest elite-minority, are now facing social changes that have been experienced by other old immigrants in the US---they are now more diverse in their standard of life and economic prosperity, or in adapting themselves to the American culture and society. During this process, private lives have also been affected. Meanwhile, economic stability of their lives in the new world allows them to pay more attention to their domestic and family issues. Those issues inside the household are indeed becoming more immediate concerns among the Indians in the US.

Relations between ABCDs and DCBAs today are not so hostile, however. This can be seen from examples in their real life, in debates at their cultural groups, on the community papers, and also from the literature and films. The objective of this paper is first to compile diverse materials on ABCDs’ and DCBAs’ contemporary way of life. From analyzing those materials, I would like to demonstrate evidence for community’s maturing, characterizing their active response to changes in the larger society and the world they belong to. This is the second objective.

In the following, the history of Asian Indians is first discussed in Section 2 to give relevant background as well as to characterize the community today. In Section 3, typical relations between ABCDs and DCBAs are described, based on my personal experiences. Then in Section 4, materials extracted from Asian Indian literature are examined. In the final section, a tentative conclusion of the paper is given.

2. Brief History and the Community of Asian Indians

2.1. Earlier History

Immigration from India to the United States began around the beginning of the 20th century. The majority of early settlers were male farmers of Punjabi Sikhs working at farms, lumber mills and road constructions in the West Coast. Gradually during the 1920s, they began to form sizeable communities in farming areas of Central California.

Then came the US immigration policy to exclude Asians, in which new immigrants from India had been stopped. Under this policy, several restrictions were imposed for the non-Caucasian immigrants on naturalization, marriage and asset acquisition such as land and houses. Among these restrictions, the one on naturalization especially contributed to reduce the size of Indian communities. (During the 1950s their population was about 2,000 in all the country.)

After some amendments, the new immigration law with fewer elements of racial discrimination was introduced in 1965, leading to the new stage of the history of Indian immigrants. At that time, Indian economy suffered in the dead-end after two decades since India's independence. A number of prospective people with higher education were frustrated and already decided to go abroad like England. The boom in American industries created strong demand for professionals, preferably with little need to train. Educated Indians met this demand perfectly, resulting in the brain drain of such Indians. Those forerunners' success story caused many more to follow. Through the 1970s and the 1980s immigrants from India increased dramatically in the United States.

2.2. Development after the US Census, 1980

In the US Census of 1980, a new category "Asian Indians" was introduced as a sub-category of Asian Americans. Asian Indians include people who came from India (not necessarily in a direct way---some came via other British colonies) and their descendants. At this stage, information on the society of Indian immigrants became available in statistics of their population, economic conditions, or social conditions like housing or education, allowing us to draw the whole picture of the society more clearly.

The official recognition in the census statistics resulted in another change. Indian immigrants had obtained the official recognition and a position as a minority group in the United States.

This must have been a very important step to form their identity. Before the new category was introduced, the Indian immigrants used to call themselves by their

individual identity such as Sikhs, Punjabis, etc., while the host Americans used to call them Hindus or East Indians. But the official name broadly combined and united people who had struggled to find their common identity.

According to the 1980 census, the number of Asian Indians was 387,223. The 1990 census reported their number as 815,447. According to an estimate, it will be over 1 million in 2000, implying that they will surpass Japanese and Koreans to become the third numerous Asian minority. (From my experiences in the US, the community of Asian Indians seems larger than suggested by the above statistics. This is because smaller South Asian communities such as Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, or, temporal residents from India such as students are often found around Asian Indians. These groups *de fact* belong to their larger brother community of Asian Indians.)

Compared with old, Sikh-farmer immigrants, most of the new comers since 1965 were highly educated and established their professional status before they came to America. From India, they did not proceed to the existing 'ethnic towns' but proceeded directly to various locations, where they were guaranteed their new jobs and positions beforehand.

The above description applies only to the new elite class of immigrants. As was mentioned before, the community of Asian Indians are not so simple anymore. Diversity in their background ---such as their language, religion, and regions in India where they originally came from--- does not allow us to pretend to treat them as a homogenous community. Some argue that among relatively new immigrants, the number of less educated Indians is increasing, who are lacking in their English ability and facing economic difficulties. However, quantitative as well as qualitative information on those new groups are not sufficient. Therefore, I would like to leave to another research this matter, especially the contrast among communities with different geographical and religious origins.

3. ABCD and DCBA

3.1. Choice between the Two Values

After their settlement in the United States, new immigrant communities in general experience the population expansion with new birth of children who do not know the ancestors' land. Especially among Asian minorities, the conflicts between the old and new generations rise frequently. Their old traditions and values, not based on the European-Christianity culture, are substantially different from the all-American standard. Old generations are often very keen to preserve their old values and ask new generations to follow the same. But young people who easily accustom

to American culture may consider their parents as stiff and rebel against them.

This is of course a too simplified, stereo-typed story. The real situations are indeed much complicated. For some of the old immigrants, the assimilation to American culture was obligatory to some extent, enhancing their survival chance in the new land. Others willingly accepted American way because they wanted to come to this land of liberty, and raised their children to be a perfect American by birth. Those children seldom have a chance to learn matters related to their old land. But at the same time they do not need to worry about the difference between the two values. Or in the extreme condition like Japanese Americans under the World War II, they were forced to throw away their old tradition and relations with the old land.

New generations today are more flexible. They may be given opportunities to examine the two cultures and to choose either of them as their code of behavior according to their needs.

3.2. Characteristics of DCBAs

To examine the background of DCBAs in the homeland, it is important to notice that on average their families were well established socially, having certain responsibility to the society such as those expected as caste Hindus. They may not always very rich but usually rich enough to give higher education to their children. The generation of DCBAs thus naturally have formed their own discipline influenced by their background. They may not be so conservative in searching for a wider economic opportunity in the new land, but in general they are likely to be rather conservative in preserving their traditions and morals. They often oppose radical ideas that attempt to reconstruct the existing systems.

In the contemporary society of the US, it is much easier than before for DCBAs to continue their routine way of life as if they are in India. American society has become more open-minded to the non European-Christianity culture and allows each ethnic group to keep its tradition as they wish. Grocery stores provide Indian food and other materials for daily use. Regarding diet, they can prepare and eat traditional foods, even in the way that meets the strictest vegetarian norm. About clothes, they can wear traditional costumes at home or sometimes even in the office and shopping malls. Organizations for Asian Indians such as friendship societies (for all Indians or more regionally oriented ones such as for Punjabis and Gujaratis), religious groups and facilities (Hindu, Jain temples and Mosques) are within a reach from their home in most of the suburban areas of the United States. Indian restaurants not only serve foods but to provide a space to hold social events for local Asian Indian residents. Those institutions also support individuals psychologically to help them find their home place.

When they become parents, DCBAs have to consider various options carefully. First of all, naming their American-born children is a serious and sensitive issue. Names of non-Christian culture may sound strange for ordinary Americans, difficult to pronounce or to remember. Such names could become a target for uneasy feelings or discrimination. Mature minorities such as Japanese Americans had already chosen their first names in the western style. A number of new comer Chinese immigrants, whose names are apparently difficult for Americans, change their names or use nicknames immediately. Compared with these two groups, Asian Indians are still more conservative in this matter and therefore tend to name their children with Indian first names. Various books for Asian Indian names (with meanings and sections for each religion) are available in the United States. But the choice is not without a conflict.

“Indian names or American names” is a topic hotly discussed on Asian Indian media like newspaper and online chat. It is also a popular topic for debates at the Indian cultural function. While those in favor of Indian names insist that a name is a pride of the culture, those in favor of American names emphasize a practical advantage. They show examples of even DCBA generation using American names (inspired from their Indian names, such as Vikram to Vikky, Sushimita to Suzie) at their office. This practice not only helps these DCBAs establish their relationship with the clients but also accelerate their assimilation to the host country.

After naming, they need to decide on which discipline or policy to raise their children: in an American way or in an Indian way or in a combined way. Not a few DCBAs even today come to a conclusion that Indian values such as respects for family traditions and preservation of the traditional rituals and custom are more excellent than Western values. They may choose these Indian values to rely on.

Education comes the third. Not a few DCBAs give their children the education based on traditional culture. When children are small they send them to the Indian language class, traditional dance or music lessons. (Advertisements in Indian community papers show that an amazing number of Indian dance masters open their class in the US.)

Watching Indian films (of course from Bollywood) in videos in the living room with the whole family members is not only a pastime but an important ritual. Parents encourage children to sing filmi songs to learn the language; they point out the traditional practice from scenes of festivals or pujas. Through such occasions, they can also strengthen their family ties.

At the Indian functions of Diwali festival or Indian Independence Day, the performances by ABCD children such as a filmi-song dance and poem citing in

Indian languages are regular features in the program. Other programs for youth include awards for genius students, beauty pageants with traditional clothes, etc. If they live far from other Indian families, such occasions are more important for ABCD children to build their Asian Indian identity and to make friends of the same age with same identity.

When children enters the teenage stage, parents become restless to prevent their children from being polluted by “corrupt” American culture. At this young age, typical ABCDs spend longer hours outside home and prefer to stay with their friends, many of whom are non-Asian Indians. They may learn a lot from the circumstances. Theories come first, such as self-respect, liberalism, individualism from parents; then come practices, such as having a party, staying outside till too late, dating with particular partner, sex, alcohol, drug etc.

Some parents may check up all friends and advise not go along with a few whom they think not suitable for their children. Others may order their daughters to come home on time, not to date with anyone, even not to make any male friends in school. Some may even send their children to India for a decent boarding or convent school.

Even after their children are grown up, parents often interfere in their children’s choice with respect to higher education and occupation. Parents urge their children to choose a professional major at university such as engineering, medicine, and law (typical choices for Indian parents in India as well), whose degrees are closely related with authorized and respected careers. And they rarely prefer a major in English literature or European art, since these majors are suitable only for pastime. Most probably, they never allow their son to be a professional football player, since entertainers like sportplayers or musicians are established only in this county but are not regarded as having “respected” occupation by their standard.

Not a few parents chant to their children “*No Love Marriage, Must Arranged Marriage*” (no need to say, “*Must choose an Indian*”). Thanks to the effects of this chanting or of others, many ABCDs even today admit that an arranged marriage is reasonable and possibly acceptable to them. Matrimonial advertisements are an important part of most of the community papers of Asian Indians. Similarly, the Sunday matrimonial in newspapers in India now allocate a huge section for NRI’s including those in the US.

3.3. Response of ABCDs

How do ABCDs react to these parents’ strategy? At first, they are raised as an Indian at home under such conservative parents but they are soon faced with American society at school and in the neighborhood. At school, they are taught to be

an ideal citizen and learn all American standard culture from friends. With these influences, a few children begin to rebel right in front of parents, claiming that they are Americans by birth and deny all what parents want because they are completely nonsense, anti-human and feudalistic. The issue of ABCDs' first name may also come to the surface. Not a few ABCDs once complained to the parents about their "curious" Indian names in the childhood. Sometimes the conflict may deepen the generation gap seriously.

But for the other ABCDs, things are not so simple. Grown under the instruction of conservative DCBA parents, they experience both cultures in a highly complicated way.

Some ABCDs clearly remember their first experience of the encounter of the two cultures. It often happened to them in the pre-school days when they realized other cultures for the first time. For example, an ABCD girl had already adored Christmas trees on TV or on shopping malls. But one day she found her school friends had each Christmas tree of their own at home. She asked her parents one for her. But they didn't allow, telling her that they were not Christians. She felt so miserable because she was the only one that didn't have a Christmas tree. She said it had been taken for a long to understand what it meant. She, a college student then, never having had a Christmas tree of her own, confessed that Christmas trees on the street still made her recall an old disastrous memory.

Another example: little brothers in a vegetarian family wanted small toys which McDonald's offers with kids menu, because all of their pre school friends have them. But they could not eat McDonald's meals except French fries (which are not served with such toys). After their mother frequently took them to the near-by McDonald's just to buy French fries, the little brothers finally became so close to the staffs that they offered them the toys only with the purchase of French fries!

It is a very common and complicated experience for vegetarian ABCDs to find school lunch or cafeteria menu "completely inedible" and to be forced to bring their personal lunch box. Since they are not allowed to eat at their friends' birthday parties and from vendors in the amusement parks, they even carry personal foods to the school camping. Eating at the special place with friends is always a fancy experience for every kid. Such an experience drives some ABCDs to deny the traditional way of their parents. Their parents may try to explain the children about their belief, which sometimes succeeds in making the family ties tighter. Other children think deeply about the situation, which may help them in seeing themselves in an objective way or may drive them to be cynical to themselves.

Schools give an opportunity to learn American standard, system, society, logic, philosophy, or history (from Pilgrim Fathers to President Clinton). Schools in

the United States today also provide multi-cultural education. All children must search for background of their family and for the country where their ancestors came from. ABCDs must make the reports on India's history and culture. Sometimes they perform with a traditional costume in front of other pupils. Through these curriculums, ABCDs gradually learn that they are different from the rest of the classmates. Once they understand that cultures and traditions are diverse and not only them but others also have unique culture of their own, they may be able to comfort themselves. This opportunity must have influence ABCDs to build their own identities in some sense.

Not a few universities in the United States have student organizations for ABCDs.¹ Those are founded and managed by the Asian Indian students who positively accept or are interested in their background. Those students also eagerly attend courses of languages, culture and society related to India. Members meet regularly to discuss various issues ranging from current politics in India and traditional literature to the personal issues surrounding their own Asian Indian community. Many of the groups hold a annual cultural program, including traditional musical and dance performances, fashion shows of Indian costumes, skits or short story films and so on.

Topics of these skits and films are interesting sources from which we can infer the youth's response to or understanding of their situation. For example, I saw a comical family drama based on a conflict over a suitable bridegroom between a traditional DCBA father and an ABCD girl. An ABCD boy try to chant mysterious Vedic Mantras to catch a heart of his beloved girl or defeat his rival, a tall, macho African American dunking hero at a basketball game. Too caricatured but very realistic characters and descriptions are spotted during the play, such as a cheerful but too innocent grandmother speaking only Gujarati, a matrimonial with too many and funny requests, etc. It seems that ABCDs understand their real world objectively and they can be "cool" enough to make a big fun out of such serious issues for DCBA grown-ups.

Today these events are well approved by the local Asian Indian community and function as a fund raising opportunity. They can use the fund thus raised for bigger performances next year or for social charities here in the US or in India.

¹ These organizations for ABCDs act mainly at the undergraduate level, where the majority of Asian Indian students are enrolled. At the graduate level, where foreign students from India usually dominate ABCDs numerically, distinct student organizations for such foreign students may also exist and function very actively among graduate students. These two types of organizations usually function separately. At bigger functions or for important charity events (like the aid for great natural disasters in India), however, they often cooperate each other.

They have even founded their own NGOs based on these student activities, a few of which have been established firmly and are playing an important role in the global community (such as *ASHA* originally created by UC Berkeley and Stanford students with Asian Indian origins).

In his personal correspondence, Prof. Vinay Lal of UCLA suggests that for the youngest generation of ABCDs, internet is becoming their common experience about awaking on India. Sheer amount of information flowing-in from the cyber world and its visual effects make them feel that India is such a great country. Some even believe Hindutva version of Indian history.

As they grow up, however, common experiences among ABCDs become fewer. As an adult, they will need to survive to live in this country as a minority. At the same, they will need to be ready to become a parent to the next generation. It is to be seen what kind of discipline and value system they will have at that stage in general. But there is one source that suggest the direction of the near future, to which I will turn now.

4. ABCDs in the Literatures

During the 1990s, a number of ABCDs were coming-of-age and entering the real life. As grown-up individuals, they observe themselves more objectively and sometimes want to identify themselves in public. Literature must be one tool to express themselves. More Asian Indians are found writing stories, poems and articles based on the lives in their ethnic community. Some apparently reflect their own experiences, to describe a struggle as a minority against ordinary Americans. Others describe a conflict between ABCDs and DCBAs, which is one of main topics of Asian Indian literature.

Asian Indian writers² are an indispensable part of the contemporary American literature. During the late 1980s, a few Asian Indian names were found in the anthologies by Asian Americans. They raised strong responses from readers and critics who were impressed by the real confess of those minorities. Then several anthologies by South Asian women were published one by one. Those works first launched a brochure or a newsletter by an ethnic student association or a self-help group. Later, larger organizations sprung up to work on issues like politics for minority rights, gender, and domestic problems. On the other hand, those

² Categories of Asian Indian writers sometimes include Indians working both India and America

organizations made a plan to publish anthologies to provide young authors with more opportunities to write. Today, more independent Asian Indian writers are found in the United States, some of whose names were already seen on those anthologies.

Asian Indian writers include big names with a firmly established caliber, such as Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander. Both of the two often write on the life and society of Indian immigrants or inner struggles of individual members. Although their favorite topics include a description of the new generation, those two writers themselves belong to a rather old generation.

Mitali Perkins' "*Sunita Experiment*" (1993) is a juvenile novel, describing the experience of an Asian Indian early teenage girl Sunita in California. Sunita encountered India by the visit of her grandparents from India, who brought troubles and disasters (for her) to her home. She was shocked to see her mother with an established career taking the long off from her office, throwing her business suits into the closet to wear saris, and staying whole day cooking for her parents. When Sunita and her school friends were in the shopping mall, her friends witnessed Sunita's Grandpa walking in *dotis* with curious sticks and broke into laughter. Through these happenings, Sunita cursed her Indian background. But at last when she found Grandpa's hidden wisdom through conversation with him, she understood something about mother's feelings and noticed the value of Indianess a little bit.

Perkins herself came from India but wrote on the eye level of an ABCD girl. Although this book is for a juvenile, not regarded as a serious literature, it is important that it was almost the first literature that featured the life and mind of ABCDs. Some of the stereo-typed characters, especially for women, play a symbolic role in the real Asian Indian society, such as Sunita's mother as a working woman cum housewife and her elder sister Sangita as an anti-DCBA feminist. In comparison with those vivid women characters, Sunita's father, an intellectual who is successful as a well-to-do architect, does not play a significant role in the crisis of the family. Her elder brother away at the university hostel was even less significant---he was almost forgotten in the family.

Ameena Meer's novel "*Bombay Talkie*" (1994) is almost like a what-happen-next-to-Sunita story. An ABCD girl Sabah from a Muslim family was ready to be rebellious to the traditional morals in her teenage. Later she became more Americanized, left home and lived with a white boyfriend. Sabah eventually went to India visiting her relatives. Though they belonged to a sophisticated urban upper class, everything looked curious and uncomfortable for Sabah. There she met again her childhood friend, who is also an ABCD girl but came back earlier to India. The friend told Sabah that she was getting married with an Indian boy by arrangement, which was beyond Sabah's understanding.

To Sabah's eyes, all the Indian matters she learned, such as a feudalistic family system, close relations between a mother and a son, arranged marriages, bride burning, seemed too sensational, it was described. After psychological struggles over these matters, she, as an ABCD woman, finally began to feel that her strict American identity is breaking down, finding her Indianess she had never realized before.

More recently, California based Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is energetically publishing her poems, short stories and novels on Asian Indians' young generation. Divakaruni's works describe colorful characters of Asian Indians, probably inspired from real examples. Divakaruni must have heard or experienced these stories in her area, Northern California, where one of the biggest and most diverse population of Asian Indians in this country lives.

Other recent writers belonging to the young generation describe their ordinary life more often. Apparently they are spending a stable adult life as an American than Sunita or Sabha. Their inner world is characterized by multi-dimensional, complicated issues---far from a simple identity crisis.

At the same time, these writers, although with little real experience in India (except for occasional visits to relatives), prefer to pick up stories based on India. A monologue of an old servant or an old tale from a zamindar family is found frequently in detail. It is interesting that India strongly arrests the attention of young writers with little Indian experience. Some of the writers favor the topic while others seem to be simply haunted with the Indianess.

To describe the tradition and background of their community, writers from other minority groups like Chinese and Vietnamese tend to use the style of autobiographies or non fictional family histories when they write on the hardships during the Cultural Revolution or the memoir on the refugee boat. This is in sharp contrast to Indian writers who prefer fictional works even if they are based on their own or own ancestors' experiences. Is this an inherent characteristic of Asian Indian literature or not? We need more detailed analysis to answer this question.

A peculiar similarity found from these works is that many of notable Asian Indian writers are women. Furthermore, most of the impressive characters in these novels are also women.

In young societies of immigrants or minorities like Asian Indians, women are affected by and suffer from old traditions and changes in the society. Women are expected to work outside as well as to serve as a housekeeper without a domestic helper, unlike the situation back in India. Lack of stability of their life may make relations among family members uneasy. Some literatures picked up the issues of domestic violence and alcoholics.

As ABCD women, there are conflicts between the two cultures and

countries everywhere---independent woman or decent daughter; love or arranged marriage; be or not to be like Mothers(Indian women).

Of course this does not mean that there is no problem for male members. But unfortunately not much has been written on the inner side of the communities by male writers. Writing seems to be accepted as a suitable way for the Asian Indian women to express their search for the identity.

5. Conclusion

Although relations between ABCDs and DCBAs today are not so hostile as a whole, they still remain an important, but possibly not the biggest, issue of the society. They may be the most familiar issue for each member.

The expansion of the community seems to have eased the psychological tension among DCBAs. Organizations of Asian Indians, religious facilities and close friends support parents and share the responsibilities to educate children and make them follow the old tradition.

Young ABCDs saw so many values since childhood, not only Indian or so-called American standard, but also Christian or Muslim fundamentalism, triumph of capitalism and liberalism, money and stock worshippers, cyber gurus in the websites, etc. They now seem to have obtained a skill of living in double standards (even sometimes Indianess is fashionable or advantageous among sophisticated snobs in the cities) or skill of choosing the most relevant one from diverse values quickly according to the context.

As the real distance between India and the US is closer thanks to the improvement in transportation and communication, lifestyle between the two countries has also become more similar, especially for the middle-class youngsters in the metropolitan India, growing with Westernized fashion, MTV and Hollywood movies, and less experiences of Indian traditions. In some sense, ABCDs are more conservative or eager to preserve Indianess than those young Indians.

Today many of these Indian new generations are coming to the US mostly as university students. They are possibly the candidates for future Asian Indians. For ABCDs, business or holiday visits to India become more frequent. It is now easier for ABCDs to cross the border between the two countries and to narrow the gap between the two cultures, paying due respect to the Indian traditional culture. Close relation between ABCDs and Indian new generations will open a new phase. The class of ABCDs is indeed a new breed of its own.

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