

A DIASPORA DIALOGUE: FIRST GENERATION INDIAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE FILM *AMERICAN DESI*

by Julian Gill-Peterson

*Aap jaisa koi meree zindagi main aaye
To baat ban jaaye, haan, baat ban jaaye*

*If someone like you came into my life,
Then it would prosper, yes, it would prosper.¹*

As a community of over 2.6 million, Indian-Americans distinguish themselves as a “model” minority within the United States’ melting pot logic: affluent, English-speaking and highly educated.² Not surprisingly then, in a globalized age Indian-Americans are beginning to act on a desire to see their experience of America reflected in the popular culture they consume. *American Desi*, a 2001 film by debut director Piyush Dinker Pandya, is a rare incarnation of the Desi film, an emerging genre in American film. Desi, meaning in Hindi literally “something from India,” refers more generally to members of the Indian or South Asian diaspora.³ In *American Desi*, viewers are invited to follow the college experience of Krishnagopal “Kris” Reddy, a first generation Indian-American who eschews all things to do with his Indian background. Arriving on campus in New Jersey to pursue an engineering degree and, more importantly, escape his traditional Indian family, he is horrified to find that all of his roommates are Desis themselves. There is Ajay, a hip-hop Hindu, Jagjit, a Sikh with a secret passion for art, and Salim, a Muslim who feels Desi women are too Westernized. When Kris meets a student named Nina and falls in love with her — only to find out she is a Desi too — he is forced, ironically, to rely on the wisdom of his Indian roommates to win her heart through organizing an “Indian show” for the campus Indian student’s association. Along the way, the film serves as an exploration of questions of identity among contemporary Desi youth.

When asked about the film, director Piyush Pandya claimed he was confident that *American Desi* would “open up a new avenue of film that tells the colorful stories of South Asians in the US,”⁴ but that the film inherently raises critical questions regarding its subject matter. Pandya took on an ambitious project in attempting to use film to represent the contemporary experience of Indian-Americans. Minority identity and, more specifically, what literary theorist Homi Bhabha has called “cultural difference,” are multiplex experiences simultaneously lived through intersecting conduits of identity including gender, race and racism, class, consumerism and nationalism.⁵ Locating and evaluating the presentation of these competing and intersecting categories and their tensions within lived culture is thus the critical

¹ “Aap Jaise Koi,” *American Desi*, DVD Director’s Edition Official Motion Picture Soundtrack, directed by Piyush Diner Pandya (New York: American Desi Productions, 2001). Author’s translation.

² “Indian-American” is used to distinguish this group from the term “American-Indian” (Native American). The word “Desi” as a noun is, in popular use, interchangeable with “Indian-American” and will be used as such for the purposes of this work.

³ Sunaina Maira, “Identity Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Youth Subculture (New York Mix),” *Cultural Anthropology* 14:1 (February 1999): 29-60, 31. The definition NRI (non-resident-Indian) is also in current usage, especially in India.

⁴ Piyush D. Pandya, “American Desi”, *Upperstall*, Online, [http://www.upperstall.com/americandes.html] Accessed 19 March 2008.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 34.

benchmark for *American Desi* — one that, unfortunately, the film proves too superficial to meet with satisfaction. Nevertheless, the visual and narrative elements of the movie provide a timely opportunity to break ground on the ongoing negotiation of identity in this demographically noteworthy diasporic community.

Heavily-influenced by the Bollywood film style from India, *American Desi* made a mark within its genre of film because it was expressly made in the United States for an American audience of diaspora Indians. With the majority of dialogue in English, only a few lines of Hindi, a soundtrack that mixes American pop, Bollywood classics and contemporary Bhangara, and none of the characteristic dance numbers, *American Desi* presents itself, as one critic has argued, as a “a pure-hearted dissertation-comedy.”⁶ Focused on the dense subject matter of cultural difference and framed in the model of an American comedy, *American Desi* deviates noticeably from the standard Bollywood formula of “two stars, six songs, and three dances” all “bound together by an intensely stereotyped plot and performed by what often appear[s] to be an entire cast of character actors.”⁷ Still, the film’s poor critical reception and its rather low distribution reflects its near anomalous status within the Indian diaspora film industry, as bigger-budget, more deeply rooted Bollywood-style films have wrested discussion away from the question of cultural difference between the Indian Diaspora and India itself.

This is especially interesting given the mixed reception of the movie by various portions of those living in the U.S. While critics from the South Asian diaspora gave the film glowing reviews — one going as far as to call it “a masterpiece”⁸ — non-Indian American reviews were harsh, arguing that the film failed to handle its own complex narrative of cultural difference between Indians living in America, other Americans, and Indians living in India. In New York, home to a significant Indian-American population and where the film was screened in select theatres, *The Village Voice* excoriated *American Desi* as “Indian American culture smush,” arguing that director “Pandya blows any opportunity for pungency” and so the “movie never forgets about its second-gen[eration] issues, but never quite plumbs them, either.”⁹ In a less polemic fashion, the *New York Times* pointed out that the greatest weakness of *American Desi* was that “most of the conflicts it sets up are paper tigers”:

At the beginning of the film, it looks as if “American Desi” might seriously tackle some of the problems of cultural identity that Krishna’s situation brings up. But once he hits the campus, the movie settles for being a light romantic comedy in which he struggles to win the heart of Nina Shah...Of course, if the movie were being honest about Krishna’s self-loathing, he wouldn’t look twice at an Indian-American woman; he would be making a beeline for the nearest blond status symbol.¹⁰

⁶ Michael Atkinson, “Over The Moon Down Under,” *The Village Voice*, March 13, 2001, Online, [<http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-03-13/film/over-the-moon-down-under/1>] Accessed 13 June 2009.

⁷ Gregory Booth, “Traditional Content and Narrative Structure in the Hindi Commercial Cinema,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 52, 2 (1995):169-190, 171.

⁸ Ravi Ram, “Piyush Dinker Pandya: American Desi Mastermind,” *Desiclub.com: Connecting South Asians Worldwide*, Online, [http://www.desiclub.com/community/culture/culture_article.cfm?id=54] Accessed 13 June 2009.

⁹ Atkinson, “Over The Moon Down Under.”

¹⁰ “American Desi: He Wants to Be What He Can’t Be,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 2001, Online, [<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/16/arts/16DESI.html>] Accessed 13 June 2009.

It is not surprising, then, that since its release in 2001, *American Desi* has faded from the forefront of the Indian-American film genre as newer, bigger budget films capitalize on the Hollywood-Bollywood hybrid model. Nevertheless, a critical look at the film and, more broadly, first generation Indian-Americans, is timely and much needed. The traditional melting pot mindset of the U.S. has hitherto prohibited considering the children of immigrants as different from those of the white majority, casting the assimilation of American-Indians as part of an inevitable melting into “Americanism.” In the new, vaguely defined, multicultural America, the melting pot has been necessarily revised into some sort of ambiguous “salad bowl” as immigrants easily reject elements of assimilation within large, well-founded urban minority communities with higher household incomes. Immigrants from India are particularly well equipped to maintain traditional “Indian” culture in the face of American expectations for assimilation. With generally high expectations for economic standing and success and equally high levels of education, Indian-Americans reveal that a culture which shares the “traditional” American emphasis on mobility and middle-class status is uniquely positioned to both appear to be responding to integration, while still maintaining key aspects of Indian culture including language and customs, at least for the first generation.¹¹ This question of the tension between assimilation and multiculturalism is especially poignant today as the first generation of American-born children of the modern U.S. immigration system built during the Johnson administration and based on the recruitment of highly educated applicants was raised during the 1980s and 1990s. As they enter adulthood, the new generation of Indian-Americans recognizes a dearth of academic work on their experience and concept of America.

At the same time, the United States is navigating the turbulent public discourse surrounding the legitimacy of multiculturalism reverberating through much of the Western world. Key to this debate is the growing civic and political reaction to multiculturalism’s controversial inclusion of what professor of philosophy, Will Kymlicka, has called “the politicization of religion,” a topic which became especially politicized around the question of Muslim and non-Christian integration into the American social and cultural fabric.¹² In such a visceral debate, the experiences of first generation of Indian-Americans are especially instructive as a case study of what the children of modern multiculturalism must contend with. Yet surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the subject.¹³

Generally, *American Desi* succeeds in reflecting its diaspora on the surface. The audience is introduced from its very first scene to the deep and conscious contrasts built into the modern American minority experience, as the story’s main character, Kris, and Eric, his best friend, pack for college and Kris’ anxious mother insists on performing a Hindu *puja* ceremony — meant to mark one’s departure from the family home. The tension of this departure from the customs of the home is further emphasized when Kris, getting into his American car, notices in his side-view mirror the coloured dot his mother placed on his forehead during the *puja* and, after considering it for a moment, symbolically rubs it out and drives away. After this initial introduction to the tensions of “leaving home” in a world of competing

¹¹ Raj Mehta and Russell W. Belk, “Artifacts, Identity, and Transition: Favorite Possessions of Indians and Indian Immigrants to the United States”, *The Journal of Consumer Research* 17:4(March 1991): 398-411, 399.

¹² Will Kymlicka, “The Three Lives of Multiculturalism,” The UBC-Laurier Institution Multiculturalism Lecture Series (University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 15 April 2008).

¹³ For a notable exception, see Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

cultures, the film's plot becomes a standard college comedy: the story of Kris chasing women, attending mixer parties, going to boring lectures, and socializing in the campus cafeteria. Despite *American Desi's* apparent and rather abrupt descent into well-established comedic formulas, ostensibly Desi elements interrupt the college motif, alluding to the difficult cultural negotiation of the main characters: Kris' Desi roommates argue about how much time to spend studying, watch and discuss Bollywood in their dorm, and attend the campus Indian club to help organize the upcoming Indian show. Even Kris' character foil, a smart-talking, loudly dressed Desi named Rakesh who competes with him for Nina's favour, reveals a strange hybrid mix of the classic America villain — with two dim-witted sidekicks — and a culturally literate, bilingual aficionado of Bollywood. While the well-established twists and turn of the college comedy seem to guide the flow of *American Desi*, the clash of Desi and the Americanized college world remains key to the movie's plot and story arc. Chasing after the love of Nina, Kris' cultural worlds draw closer to clashing in the run up to the campus Indian show — the story's climax — as the tension between the Kris-Rakesh-Nina love triangle and his desire to fit in among his White friends multiplies.

With so much intentional textual contradiction, understanding the impetus behind *American Desi* requires a look at its intended audience, the Indian-American community. Like the problems presented in the film, the bizarre amalgamation of American comedy with a nagging and persistent consciousness about Desi culture is largely a product of recent US immigration policy and the cultural space and memory it has created for Indian-Americans. Indians began immigrating to the United States in the late 1800s.¹⁴ They were primarily unskilled men from rural states in North India able to exploit the global connections brought about by the increasingly integrated capitalist system of the British Empire. After Canada closed its doors to Indian immigration in 1908, many of these mobile labourers moved south in search of farmland in California and established the first recognizable Indian-American community.¹⁵ However, the United States too was gripped with popular racist sentiments and America closed its doors to Indians by 1914.¹⁶ As a result, the first Indian-American community was isolated and languished, never integrating into mainstream American society.

It was not until the liberalization of immigration brought about by the passage of the 1965 *Immigration and Nationalities Act* under Lyndon B. Johnson that the current Indian-American community began to take root. In fact, immigration from India to the United States increased more during this era than immigration from any other country.¹⁷ Unlike the much earlier one, this new wave of Indian-immigrants was comprised of highly skilled, educated and urban Indians, the elite type of candidate favoured by new US immigration regulations.¹⁸ Settling predominately in New York, California, New Jersey and Illinois, this urban community became characterized by an above average degree of affluence;

¹⁴ Gary R. Hess, "The Forgotten Asian Americans: The East Indian Community in the United States," *The Pacific Historical Review* 43:4 (November 1974): 576-579, 576.

¹⁵ Juan L. Gonzales Jr, "Asian Indian Immigration Patterns: The Origins of the Sikh Community in California," *International Migration Review* 20:1 (Spring 1986): 40-54, 42; Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komogata Maru: the Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989), 4. Canada's *Immigration Act* targeted Asian immigration by prohibiting entry to anyone who had not undertaken a "continuous journey" from their homeland to Canada, which was logistically impossible for Indians at the time given India's distance from Canada.

¹⁶ Hess, 582.

¹⁷ Hess, 595.

¹⁸ Hess, 595.

indeed, the average Indian-American household took home \$76,172 per year in 2006, compared to the US-wide average of \$48,451.¹⁹ By the late 1990s, the focus of immigration policy in the U.S. had shifted to family reunification, and the first generation of American-born Indians who had the ability to maintain a connection with India through communication and travel was raised. An overwhelmingly young population, there were some 862,039 Indian-Americans between the ages of 18-34 in 2006, a majority of which were enrolled in some level of post-secondary education; in fact, 67.3% of the whole community possess at least a bachelor's degree.²⁰ This demography of young, well-educated Indian's still connected to India—though largely through their parents—explains how a film like *American Desi*, set in New Jersey and dealing with affluent and English speaking Desis going to college, was produced.

However, the film also attempts to reflect the diversity of India as well as the tension between Americanism and Indian identity. Because India is one of the most diverse nations on Earth, American-Indian immigrants are a heterogeneous group. In the film, Kris, Ajay and Nina represent the overwhelming Hindu majority of the American-Indian diaspora, most of whom belong to the top three levels of the Indian caste system.²¹ Two of the largest religious minorities in India and within the wider Indian-American population are represented in Jagjit, a Sikh, and Salim, a Muslim. While *American Desi* purposefully points to religion as a key component of Indian identity, it is, however, only one of the many consequential markers of identity in Indian society which translate differently within American society.

Indian-American identity is in reality expressed and lived through a number of distinct categories, such as gender and class, than intersect with religion in a manner that strongly suggests what Homi Bhabha coined as “cultural difference.” In Bhabha’s view, it is important to examine the articulation of all the various differences between and within cultures and recognize them as meaningful, as opposed to a “cultural diversity” approach, which accepts culture as a static whole. Bhabha emphasizes that portraying cultural difference involves both deconstructing texts and their presentation. Through a careful analysis of its enunciation, culture itself reveals “a split in the performative present of cultural identification” between “traditional culturalist-demands for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference” and “the necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands...as a practice of domination or resistance.”²² Locating and critically evaluating the presentation of this tension between these two poles, which play out on the level of gender, sexuality, class, race and nationalism, is

¹⁹ “Selected Population Profile in the United States: Asian Indian alone or in any combination,” *US Census Bureau: American Fact Finder*, Online, [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ITable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201PR&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201T&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201TPR&-reg=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201:032;ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201PR:032;ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201T:032;ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201TPR:032&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_&-_lang=en&-format=] Accessed March 19, 2008.

²⁰ “Selected Population Profile in the United States: Asian Indian alone or in any combination,” *US Census Bureau: American Fact Finder*. The percentage among the entire American population, for comparison, is 27%.

²¹ Raymond Brady Williams, “Asian Indian and Pakistani Religions in the United States,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 558, *Americans and Religions in the Twenty-First Century* (July 1998): 178-195, 183; Mehta and Belk, 401.

²² Bhabha, 34-35.

thus the task at hand in examining *American Desi*.²³

One of the most obvious problems with the portrayal of Indians in *American Desi* is the near complete lack of representation of women or discussion of gender in relation to Indian-American identity. Nina is the only main female character in the film and because the story takes place from the point of view of Kris, her character is developed rather superficially. Nina does not deal with the questions of Indian or female identity that one would expect to see as a subtext in her life. In fact, Kris even mistakes Nina as white the first time he meets her, saying “you don’t look, or sound Indian at all.” What that is meant to imply about Nina and her role in the film is left by her ambiguously reply, “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or an insult.”²⁴

The only other female character of consequence in the film is Farah, a Muslim Desi that becomes Salim’s love interest, though he is initially against the idea of approaching a Desi woman, raised in America, whom he sees as too independent and corrupted by American culture. Salim’s interest is first expressed through markedly misogynist comments about Farah to his roommates: “[A]ll girls raised in American are corrupt. You saw Farah at the [freshman mixer] party — the way she was dressed. I can just imagine if her Daddy saw her. Poor guy would have a heart attack.”²⁵ Yet, in a strange twist of fate, drawn to her, Salim finds himself in her dorm room one evening when Farah’s parents arrive unexpectedly. To avoid creating a suggestive scene Salim dons her burkha and masquerades as a female friend — Mumtaz — who Farah’s Mother warms to instantly and offers to arrange a marriage for with a “good boy” from India. This gender-swap, which forces Salim into a woman’s clothing and — however briefly and superficially — into a woman’s world, prompts the only line in the film self-consciously concerning gender: Salim confesses to Farah that the cross-dressing “was the first time when I thought about what it must be like to be an Indian woman” and he apologizes for his sexist pretensions.²⁶

Ultimately though, the Indian-American identity presented by the film is overwhelmingly masculine and, in this, *American Desi* plays an avowedly performative role in reproducing and reinforcing traditional gender roles.²⁷ Kris does not find his masculine identity in conflict with his Indian or American counterparts at any point, because male gender is tacitly assumed by the film to be a universal, default category for all human beings, regardless of culture. Indeed, the main plot of the film — a group of freshman college men pursuing hyper-sexualized and gendered women on campus — confirms a rather

²³ Still, it should be said that the point of focusing on this tension is not to dismiss culture as an “undecidable” subject. In fact, Bhabha has been criticized for an over-subject methodology whereby, in the case of his analysis of nationalism for example, “an exclusive focus on the ‘interruptive interiority’ of nationalist discourse is premised on the claim that there is no ‘nationalism in general.’” As Manu Goswami points out about Bhabha’s work, “an acknowledgement of the the ambivalent character of nationalist” — or in this paper, culturalist — “discourse need not entail the strong assumption that [its] description lies primarily ore solely in its undecidability.” This paper is not trying to erase culture by focusing on a subjective (ie. film-based) reading of its expression, but rather it seeks to illustrate the link between this *subjective* expression of cultural difference and the *objective* origins and structures of cultural difference in contemporary America. Manu Goswami, “Rethinking the Modular Nation Form: Toward a Sociohistorical Conception of Nationalism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44,:4 (October 2002):770-799, 744-755.

²⁴ *American Desi*, “The Freshman Party,” 36:40.

²⁵ *American Desi*, “Night of a Thousand Adventures,” 53:03.

²⁶ *American Desi*, “The Garba,” 1:26:27.

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, Routledge, 2004), 209. I am borrowing the idea of the performativity of gender from Butler. Cultural mediums like film play an active role in reinforcing the imaginary ideas of gender that are reproduced by the subject consuming them and thereby cement their power.

unsophisticated level of gender discussion in *American Desi*. Still, the presentation of Kris' masculinity is what ironically renders the portrayal of Nina and Farah so glaringly out of place to the critical eye, for it is obvious that they cannot be represented as hyper-sexual college-aged women because the traditional gender roles for women in Indian cultures are markedly different than those of American culture. For men, however, the cultural milieu is irrelevant: patriarchy remains patriarchy, whether in India or in America. Kris is allowed to be a man, an American, and an Indian, all at once.

Women on the other hand, are demonstrably not in the same position. Women are seen in Indian culture as the safeguards of culture; it is they who must preserve tradition.²⁸ Indian women live a double tension within the space of cultural difference, because they are not expected to be independent, bringing them into conflict with the "modern" conception (among most Western feminists, at least) of the role that women should be free to play in American society. Moreover, in a culture where marriages are typically arranged, dating is often not considered respectable by many traditionalist parents, especially when daughters and women must also contend with *izaat*, the honour and duty to obey one's parents.²⁹ The end result of what can best be described as the internalization of a heavily patriarchal subtext is that women are left with a more difficult bridge to build between American and Indian cultures, and are at the same time given less support by their families to do so. Many sons, however, are allowed generous freedom because parents traditionally valorize them more than daughters.³⁰

Again, *American Desi* mostly ignores this male and female identity differential and the respective problems each gender faces. Though Kris' pursuit of Nina suggests the possibility for some exploration of gender dynamics, the tension between the two of them rests squarely in the narrow and traditional cultural realm of a romantic pursuit. When Nina tries to introduce Kris to Indian culture for example, whether through watching Bollywood or by teaching him to dance, and he spurns her, she only reacts angrily to his cultural hostility. She complains that he does not like anything Indian, and when he protests, "Why does it always have to be about Indian culture? Why can't it be about just us?" she replies categorically, "Because I am Indian. And since you can't stand anything Indian, there is no us."³¹ Though their relationship is originally one of attraction, not cultural affinity, the dialogue of *American Desi* blurs the boundaries between cultural affinity, belonging and romantic attraction. In presenting the plot in this way, two problematic things are implied. First, that Kris' identity as an Indian and an American are both always present, static, and simply in need of recognition. Second, that his performed maleness is perfectly compatible with both his Indian and American identity; something that is demonstrably not the case for women.

While it is unfortunate that *American Desi* chooses not to address these tensions, it does succeed in presenting one aspect of young Desi identity particularly well. The phenomenon that started in the 1990s, often referred to as "Desi youth culture," is best described as a mixing of Western and Indian motifs into a package attractive to youth in urban centres like New York. Desi youth subculture culminates

²⁸ Maira, 45-46.

²⁹ Kamala Elizabeth Nayar, *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver: Three Generations amid Tradition, Modernity, and Multiculturalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 47-48. The word *izaat* is from Punjabi. There are equivalents in Hindi and other Indian languages for the same idea.

³⁰ Maira, 45-46.

³¹ *American Desi*, "Bhangara Party," 1:20:36.

in Indian dance clubs that play a fusion of Hindi film music, Punjabi bhangra, and American hip-hop, attracting crowds of young Desis, often college students who are exploring the meshing of cultural systems through everyday life and practice.³² This meeting of Western and Indian worlds manifests itself in men wearing hip-hop style clothing and sometimes turbans, while women dress like Bollywood film actresses. Generally, women are more likely to mix Indian fashion with Western items than men, reflecting the traditional expectation that they will safeguard Indian culture.³³ In *American Desi*, there is a dance scene during which Indian-Americans, African-Americans, and white students alike partake in a Desi campus mixer infused with Bhangara and Bollywood music. But even this mixing of cultural motifs actually reasserts gender differences that cross cultural divides, as women are meant to be seductive, yet not “corruptive” and “Westernizing,” and men are emphasizing their masculinity. *American Desi* is far more interested; however, in the influence of hip-hop on this youth culture, something that comes from a shared urban experience between African-Americans and Indian-Americans, who both contend with discrimination and racism in the country they were born and raised, in addition to confronting their parents’ values.³⁴

This cultural meshing is captured best in Ajay, who appears to have convinced himself he is black by virtue of “tectonic” geographical and cultural affinities between Africans and Indians. On closer inspection, Ajay’s character is far more complex than presented and fulfills an important, subversive role through this apparently light-hearted parody. Breaking down the categories of ethnicity and culture by appropriating and “playing” an ethno-cultural persona other than the one he was socialized with from birth, Ajay plays an interesting and transgressive position within the film. Jagjit tries to make sense of the parody through humour, asking Salim, “did you ever see that episode of Gilligan’s Island where the personalities got switched?” to which he replies, “I know what you mean. Somewhere in Jersey there’s a black guy driving around in a Honda Accord, praying to Lord Ganesh.”³⁵ While it appears absurd — his persona and his birth culture do not “match” in his presentation — Ajay’s character skillfully drives at the very falseness of *all* ethno-cultural identities. By performing as an African-American, he reveals identity as a performatively constructed regime — he reveals the “transferability of the attribute” of cultural difference.³⁶ Thus, comedy serves an unintentionally subversive purpose in *American Desi*.

Remarkably, however, the one person who seems ignorant of the possibility and presence of this subtext is the director of the film. Far from serving as the sage jester, holding a humorous and irreverent light up to those things that others take as cultural norms, Ajay is coercively punished throughout the film, either rejected by the women who he pursues or dismissed by his roommates as eccentric. Ajay’s adoption of cultural traits associated with African-American-ness is judged “incorrect,” actually reinforcing an essentialist definition of ethnicity and culture that has already been revealed as fake through this very

³² Maira, 31-33.

³³ Mehta and Belk, 406.

³⁴ Mehta and Belk, 39-40.

³⁵ *American Desi*, “Meeting the Room Partners,” 15:30.

³⁶ Butler, 213. I am allegorizing here Judith Butler’s discussion of drag as a subversive demonstration of gender as a performatively constructed category. Butler explains that the fact that drag queens can “do” gender better than she ever could or want to do, proves that the very category of “woman” that she is supposed to be deterministically imbued with simply does not exist as a fact — it can be played by anyone, including men. Here, Ajay is doing the same, but with ethnicity and culture.

act of parody. When Kris asks Ajay seriously, “Why the whole Afro-centric Hindu-home-boy thing?” Ajay’s empty reply is: “I’m just trying to keep it real, man. Blacks and Indians have a hell of a lot more in common than you think.”³⁷

This is an important choice, for within Desi youth culture there are a variety of real, mainstream ethnic, religious and linguistic tensions imported from India that often come into contact and conflict, just as Bhabha’s notion of cultural difference highlights. At dance clubs popular among Desi youth, Hindi film music and Punjabi bhangra cause emotive clashes by exacerbating tensions within the culturalist value system that Desi youth have inherited from their parents.³⁸ For example, as a minority within India, Punjabis often associate strongly with Punjab province as their nationalist homeland as much as India itself. Thus, the popular phrase “mera desh panjab hai” (my homeland is Punjab) in Bhangara lyrics can clash with the other type of Indian music played at Desi dance clubs, Bollywood tracks. The Bollywood industry, based out of Mumbai, is made in the Hindi language and heavily influenced by Hinduism and Hindu culture. Pitting Punjabi nationalism against an equally culturalist Hindutva (Hindu pride) is the type of imported cultural tension that can manifest itself among first generation Desi youth not raised in South Asia.³⁹ However, *American Desi* is silent on the issue of imported cultural conflict. Though two Hindus, a Punjabi Sikh and a Muslim share one dorm room, the pressing issue of ethnic, religious and linguistic tensions never presents itself leaving the viewer with a sense that India is more culturally cohesive than most Indians would admit.

This lack of depth of diversity plays itself out on questions of class as well. While Indian-Americans are generally an affluent minority, the question of economic class is conspicuously absent in the film. Kris and his roommates have no financial constraints while at college and this leads to an unintended consequence: Kris is able to buy his way into a white-American identity. Dressing like an affluent white American college boy and driving a luxury car, Kris has no problems with mobility or performing his American-ness through cultural dress, indicating that he has ostensibly bought his way into the American identity he clings to at the beginning of the film. Purchasing and displaying consumer products like clothing is in fact not an unusual method employed by immigrants to try and fit in with the majority culture.⁴⁰ However, what is striking about the beginning and end of *American Desi* is that Kris does not change the way he looks or acts, despite apparently having discovered a belonging to a deeper and true Indian identity.

While this unconscious adherence to American cultural mores could be seen as a simple oversight, I would argue that it is part of a wider ‘invisibilized’ issue in the film: American individualism. It is perhaps not unusual that, as an American film, *American Desi* operates on a value system that takes consumer-driven individualism as a given fundamental belief, though it stands in marked contrast to traditional Indian culture’s emphasis on the collective. But this individualism has consequences for how broader social tensions are addressed. Specifically, they cannot be discussed at all, as what might be considered or interpreted as broader social issues are passed as individualized problems. Notably, or rather unremarkably, racism is not a theme in *American Desi*. Seen through a Foucauldian lens,

³⁷ *American Desi* “Reflections,” 1:22:50.

³⁸ Maira, 43.

³⁹ Maira, 43.

⁴⁰ Mehta and Belk, 399.

this is an obvious example of a modern disciplinary regime in which racism renders itself invisible, omnipresent and internalized within individuals where it retains its power rather than part of collective issues where the power of cultural assumptions are called into question.⁴¹ The individualistic, consumer culture of America is allowed to cloak the underlying regime of racism that operates within the United States, and *American Desi* reproduces this mirage through its visual representations of the characters and their material possessions. Kris' racial belonging as white seems apparent from the outset of the film *because* the question of class and the capacity to use wealth to buy ones way into cultural positions is left untouched.

Perfectly illustrating the quintessential strengths and weaknesses of *American Desi* is a scene that brings together the unique Hollywood-Bollywood style of the film, while summarizing all of the identity issues that it tries, though ultimately fails to address.⁴² Towards the end of the film, as each of the main characters is reaching the defining moment of identity struggle, a three minute montage depicts the climax of their personal trials, set to an a cappella version of the Hindi film song "Aap Jaisa Koi" (literally, "Someone Like You") and further borrowed from the Bollywood film *Qurbani* (1980). Kris spends the montage getting to know Nina better and trying to impress her around campus; Jagjit works in seclusion on his art, while making sure his father does not see his work when he comes to visit, for he does not approve of a son pursuing a non-traditional career; Ajay continues to try and meet women on campus, employing his hip-hop style without success; and Salim tries to evade Farah, of whom he is still wary. This is a low point for all of the characters, because this montage is supposed to represent the climax of their being caught in between the Western and Indian world, their being a product of American multiculturalism and a diaspora logic that keeps them in limbo. The Indian diaspora gives them an artificial sense of nationalism, and while they fully understand American culture and values, they do not fully fit in because they also conserve, operate in and inevitably represent Indian values.⁴³ As such, the montage is probably the high point of the film, for the difficult identity questions benefit from concentrating the layered identity problematic into a scene, devoid of the distraction of dialogue. Elsewhere in the film, the presentation of the identity problematic among the main characters is too mono-dimensional to allow for a discussion of gender, religion, class and nationalism.

The ending to *American Desi* is, perhaps not surprisingly, is extremely formulaic. Situated against the backdrop of an Indian Show, where Kris impresses Nina with his mastery of the *garba* dance students have assembled to perform, *American Desi* forfeits its fragile attempt at examining cultural difference by ending with a fistfight. Rakesh, still competing with Kris for Nina's favour, punches him, provoking an over-the-top brawl during which Nina is rendered a helpless victim by one of Rakesh's associates and the men fight for Kris' honour. Once Rakesh and company are defeated by Kris and his Desi roommates, on cue, Nina finally gives all her love to him. As if to imply the film is omnisciently aware of its own hyperbole, as Nina and Kris share a classic on-screen kiss, Jagjit inserts a rather telling remark: "Shaabhaash yaar [good job friend], just like in the movies! The hero beats the villain and wins

⁴¹ Frédéric Gros, *Michel Foucault* (Paris: PUF, 1996), 66-72.

⁴² *American Desi*, "Aap Jaise Koi Montage," 49:54-52:15.

⁴³ Arjun Appadurai, "The Heart of Whiteness," *Callaloo*, 16: 4, On "Post-Colonial Discourse": A Special Issue (Autumn, 1993): 796-807, 799.

the beautiful heroine. Tick tock, just like a Hindi film.”⁴⁴ The fundamental problem with *American Desi* is that it never matches its ambitious designs to be a careful consideration of cultural difference, instead becoming bogged down by clumsy and reductionist cinematic romantic comedy formulas. Kris and Nina are happy together — and so are Farah and Salim — yet none have really changed, nor is it clear that they have learned anything from the experience.

Despite disappointing writing, *American Desi* must be understood as groundbreaking because it created an American based precedent for dealing with identity questions, as opposed to continuing the India-based production of other films, such as *Monsoon Wedding* (Mira Nair, 2001), which were Bollywood-style films exported to the United States. It also demonstrated one cultural avenue through which minority communities can produce meaningful representations of their own lives. A generation who went to the cinemas by the hundreds of millions in India in the 1960s and then immigrated to America is able to now see its children combining the Indian and American love of film.⁴⁵

However, it is unfortunate that *American Desi* does not also provide a thoughtful conversation about cultural difference in modern America. As the social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai relates, it is a profoundly deterritorializing experience to encounter racism in what one considers her “own country,” which is essentially what first generation ethnic minorities in America are set up to endure as they mature.⁴⁶ Appadurai remembers in particular an experience in New Jersey, where he encountered road rage that escalated into racism when man originally arguing with him on the street over his driving told his wife in a fit of anger to “wipe that dot off your face.”⁴⁷ This racist polemic revealed to Appadurai his unclear status as an Indian-American, chained by the hyphen between two worlds. As he observes, “Someone out there hated me,” but at the same time, “I was certainly American now,” and so the experience isolated him in an empty between place, without the right to feel at home in either India or America. Keenly attuned to the larger scope of this problematic, Appadurai concludes that “the United States, always in its self-perception of a land of immigrants, finds itself awash in these global diasporas, no longer a closed space for the melting pot to work its magic.”⁴⁸

Appadurai exposes here the limits of — to employ Benedict Anderson’s term — the “imagined community” of the modern nation, which, built upon reified notions of a homogenous racial body, cannot contain the inherently pluralistic, diasporic national identities of immigrant populations.⁴⁹ Anderson’s work first provided the notion of nationalism as “modular,” a term since revised to mean “the historically constituted transposable, dynamic, doubled and durable character of the post-nineteenth century nation form.”⁵⁰ Within this historically-placed framework, contemporary nationalist sentiments that exist in an inherently interstate setting, such as those brought about by modern immigration regimes

⁴⁴ *American Desi*, “The Garba,” 1:33:46.

⁴⁵ Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 711. In 1961, over 300 films were being made in Bollywood, based in Bombay (now Mumbai), per year.

⁴⁶ Appadurai, 801-802.

⁴⁷ The “dot” refers to a bindi, a decorative dot of colour placed on the forehead of many South Asian women.

⁴⁸ Appadurai, 803.

⁴⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 4-5.

⁵⁰ Goswami 783.

and their diasporas, are resultant of “the multi-temporal, multi-scalar, and uneven processes of global restructuring” that characterizes the post-World War II period.⁵¹ Seen within this grounded socio-historical context, the sort of trans-national, diasporic national identity that troubles Kris and other characters in *American Desi* is precisely troubling because it uncovers the tensions inherent in narrow definitions of classic nationalism, reductionist cultural diversity, and multiculturalism which still pervade the public sphere of America and other “multicultural democracies.”⁵²

Indeed, as diasporas mature and continue to increase in size, they bring with them a unique set of difficult questions concerning integration, racism and the very limits of nationalism and cultural difference. What does a young person do when she feels just as American as anyone else, but encounters racism at the hands of a fellow citizen from the majority? Or, how can first generation Indian-Americans grow and prosper when they do not feel at home in either of their two supposed nations? These are complex questions that *American Desi* tries, but ultimately fails, to answer. Like many films that are first and foremost a reflection of society, *American Desi* never manages to rise above the complex relationship between what society wants to see in itself and what society actually is.⁵³ The film remains grounded in a messy essentialism where the categories it tries to examine — race, culture, gender, or nationalism — are ultimately presented as *a priori* categories, though they are actually better understood as constructs with a specific historicity. Since *American Desi*'s release in 2001, most of the Desi films released in the United States have privileged the Bollywood model adapted for an overseas audience: often in English, they concentrate on dance numbers featuring big stars. *Bride and Prejudice* (Gurinder Chadha, 2004), for example, attempted to merge East and West by proposing an Indian take on the classic English *Pride and Prejudice*, tailored for diaspora Indians.. In contrast however, American audiences warmly received *The Namesake* (Mira Nair, 2007), a serious attempt by mainstream American film at exploring the identity question. Bringing together a mainstream Hollywood actor, Kal Penn — who plays Ajay in *American Desi* — as well as two renowned actors in several Indian-language film industries, Tabu and Irrfan Khan, *The Namesake* ventured where *American Desi* chose not to go, offering an intriguing model for the future evolution of Desi cinema in the United States. Perhaps Penn's transformation from Ajay, the hip-hop Hindu, to Gogal, the self-reflective and multi-faceted Desi in search of an authentic identity, is indicative of a wider maturation to come in the genre.⁵⁴ In any case however, *American Desi* played the important role of being the first film to explicitly look at identity among Indian-Americans from an Indian-American perspective and, in doing so, set an important precedent.

⁵¹ Goswami, 795.

⁵² Goswami, 796. As Goswami points out, the popular imagining of nationalism does not have to reflect the shifting and dynamic reality of the contemporary epoch. Indeed, one need only look at the resurgent nationalist, anti-immigration movements of Western Europe for proof of how the effects of globalization need not entail complementary changes in national discourses. Thus, even though first-generation Indian-Americans reflect a historical fact — the immigration of their parents and the consequent transposition of nationalism that accompanied it — their existence does not necessitate a re-imagining of the American nation; hence, the fundamental identity crisis they experience.

⁵³ Marc Ferro, “Film as an Agent, Product and Source of History,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, 3, *Historians and Movies: The State of the Art: Part 1* (July 1983): 357-364, 358.

⁵⁴ Oscar winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), which starred a UK-born Desi, also raises the spectre of a new mainstream, popular success for films on Indian subjects. However, yet again, this film is set in India, not the United States.

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