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Women and Migration

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SAMOSAS AND CEMENT:

An Oral History of Meera Gandhi and Kiran Gandhi

Introduction

The increase in international communication, business, travel, and immigration has led to a proliferation of pluralism in communities across the world. In the United States especially, diversity, while not always honored, is ingrained in the national psyche. Once inside American borders, however, many immigrants experience cultural and identity crises arising from the challenges of assimilating into American society while retaining personal traditions. For many first-generation migrants, language barriers, religious practice, and deep-seated ethnic associations make this balance nearly impossible to achieve. Adaptation, then, is a gradual process, one that “would take place over several generations, largely as a result of natural processes of cultural diffusion.”¹

This idea of adaptation was explored in interviews with Meera Gandhi, a first-generation emigrant from India, and her daughter Kiran Gandhi, who was born and raised in the United States. With an Indian father and an Irish mother, Mrs. Gandhi has been an ethnic minority in both India and the United States, and has grown accustomed to being different. Kiran, who is three-quarters Indian, grew up in a predominantly Caucasian community in New York and has had a similar experiences. An additional influence in the lives of both women was the Gandhi family’s relocation to India for three years (1997 through 2000). This was especially significant for Kiran, as she was required to find a

harmony between her native culture and her American upbringing. In the interviews, the overarching theme was one of amalgamation—both women identified the most necessary skill as the capacity to create a hybrid of cultures and nationalities and use it to adapt, explain, and exist. This equilibrium is indeed one of the most recognizable aspects of American culture today, and a significant contributor to our unique pluralism. In the following analysis, I will seek to prove that integration is a gradual process by expanding on themes of family, gender, multiculturalism, and assimilation that emerged in both interviews. First, however, I will prepare a context for my assessment by investigating statistics on Indian migration as a whole.

Understanding Indian Migration

Indian immigrants to the U.S. are generally viewed as a “model minority.”² While Indian immigrants account for only 0.6% of the American population,³ they are among the best-educated and most successful residents:⁴ 62% of Indian immigrants have a college degree (compared to 20% of Americans),⁵ they earn 115% of the national average income,⁶ and only 10.4% live below the poverty line, the lowest percentage of all South Asian groups and lower than the national average.⁷ It can be inferred that Indian immigrants tend to be among the most motivated and prepared. Unfortunately, this is the perfect example of the “brain drain” caused by emigration. As a growing “tiger economy,”⁸ India has a labor surplus that tends to push the most qualified individuals abroad. In fact, the peak of Indian emigration to the United States occurred from 1981 to 2000,⁹ right at the zenith of the technology and communications boom. In 1986, when Meera Gandhi immigrated to Boston with her husband Vikram Gandhi, there was a high

demand for professional bankers, and after both earned Master of Business Administration degrees they immediately entered the finance workforce. Even today, Indian immigrants are most commonly employed in economics, medicine, and technology. The professional focus of India's educational system ensures specialization in certain fields, while also preparing recent graduates for success abroad. India is currently one of the top source countries for foreign students in the United States,¹⁰ and upon graduation these students are generally able to find American jobs quickly, as was the case with Meera and Vikram Gandhi. Studying in the United States also helps Indian natives avoid the threat of downward mobility,¹¹ since American certification more or less guarantees American employment.

The success of Indian immigrants can be credited to the motivation, discipline, and focus intrinsic in Indian culture. As a society based largely on order and respect, India prepares its emigrants for an environment of fierce competition, which does not always exist in the United States. Thus, Indian immigrants are generally poised to achieve upon arrival, which inspires a warm reception from the American community such as is almost never bestowed upon lower class, unskilled immigrants.¹² Push factors for Indian immigrants are usually economic and social, with some fear that the caste system will follow expatriates wherever they go.¹³ This might be one reason for the popularity of the United States as a destination: with hard work, anyone can climb the ranks. Mrs. Gandhi discussed this attitude in our interview:

This is a hard-working society where achievements of any measure are respected. Basically the work force in America is very respected. You can be a taxi driver who then owned a small restaurant and now owns the top Indian restaurant...and is very well respected. This would not happen in India.¹⁴

Mrs. Gandhi's own progression, from struggling to simultaneously pay a mortgage and tend to two young daughters, to being an internationally recognized social philanthropist and mother of three high-achieving children, reflects the uniquely American veneration of possibility that draws in so many visitors. In turn, she has worked to instill values of gratitude and opportunism in her own children.

Family

Very few cultures place as high a premium on individualism than is witnessed in America. In Asian societies, where business and responsibility are passed down by generation, family units tend to be much closer and more united. Mrs. Gandhi's mother played an especially important role in developing a positive and open family dynamic and making the children feel comfortable. Mrs. Gandhi's father's position in the navy required the family to relocate frequently and, as Mrs. Gandhi says, the constant change meant that she "got used to being the 'new girl'."¹⁵ Her family was especially important during her childhood, as it was the sole constant. Mrs. Gandhi discussed the influence of her mother, Ellen Agarwal, at length, citing her as the source of much of her own parenting style. The Irish Mrs. Agarwal was unique in India, and she gracefully acclimatized to such a different culture. "She really made India her home," says Mrs. Gandhi, "even though she was obviously an anomaly in our community. I still find this so impressive."¹⁶ By incorporating Irish tradition into the Indian household by way of diet, religion, and behavior, Mrs. Agarwal managed to find a positive balance between two entirely dissimilar cultures. This influence on Mrs. Gandhi gave her a multicultural view that is now expressed through Indian decoration and tradition at the Gandhi family's

home in Manhattan. Mrs. Gandhi also mentioned that her mother's accessibility and presence during her childhood were key, and she has worked to emulate this as she raises her own children: "I like to be there for them, I like to be visible, because my mother was very visible and we were always proud of her."¹⁷ A final point of stimulus for Mrs. Gandhi's current parenting style was the constant support she received from her own parents. As an extremely bright and motivated girl, she was encouraged to pursue her studies at her own fast pace, earning the title of Head Girl in high school, role of Student Body President in college, and positioning in the top 5% of her MBA class at Boston University. She dedicates much of her success to her parents' outlook:

My parents made [me] believe that [I was] the best no matter, I mean I never heard them compare [me] to other people. And when you grow up there's so much praise, you have a very high sense of ability and self-esteem. And my parents did that for me, they were there for me and I would have to say they played a very big role in who I am today.¹⁸

Mrs. Gandhi seeks to foster this same commitment in her own home, only at a level "one step more encouraging."¹⁹ She has made a conscious effort to support her children in all of their interests with both time and monetary investments. She has much to be proud of. Not only is Kiran a star student, she is also a nationally ranked squash player, a drummer in two bands, and a passionate women's and children's rights activist. She attributes much of her academic and extracurricular success to her parents' unending support: "I don't know a lot of parents like that,"²⁰ she says. Not surprisingly, the confidence inspired by this support is widespread among second-generation Indian-Americans, and leads to a certain buoyancy that allows them to pursue goals without fear of failure.²¹

One of the greatest differences between Mrs. Gandhi's and Kiran's family experiences is in their level of emotional connection with their respective parents. Mrs. Gandhi saw her parents more as leaders in the household, and love was generally expressed through protection and guidance. Although Kiran mentioned that this was also true in her upbringing, and especially during the three years in India, she has noticed a slight switch in her parents' roles from strict supervisors and benefactors to companions. This may reflect assimilation in the spirit of American informality, but it also reflects the contemporary expectation of American children who do not find it enough to "lead parallel lives" and instead look to their parents for emotional support.²² As she begins her new life in Washington, D.C., Kiran feels more connected to her family than ever, a sensation that Mrs. Gandhi never discussed.

While Mrs. Gandhi was raised in an environment based on responsibility and respect but also on support and reward, she has adapted to American values by parenting with plenty of room. The Gandhi family is very close-knit, but not in a forced manner; dinnertime is the primary time for communication, and freedom abounds for the children to live in whatever manner they choose (so long as it is smart). Whether Mrs. Gandhi's change is the result of generational differences or American cultural experiences, judging by Kiran's words, it has been a success. Of her parents, the leaders-cum-companions, she says, "They're really good parents. They really want to be in our lives."²³ But in true American spirit, she has also found her own autonomy: "I guess I think of my family as a base, and they really are my foundation, but I'm also learning to combine everything they've taught me to become my own person. That's an ongoing process really."²⁴ This

statement demonstrates the immediate influences of a liberal upbringing on a second-generation outlook.

Gender Roles

Both Mrs. Gandhi and Kiran are strong women. They have both been known to speak up in situations of gender bias, to support females breaking into predominantly male industries, and are each extremely successful in their own right. They both credit their mothers for cultivating their feminist attitudes. However, the two have very different views regarding the current state of gender equality in the United States, a discrepancy likely attributable to the age and environment in which each woman grew up.

Despite the Agarwal family's relatively progressive and cultured posture, Mrs. Gandhi was raised in extremely rigid surroundings. South Asian societies have very strict notions of the rightful place of a woman, and even with the Western influence of an Irish mother, the Agarwal household operated under a more controlled system than that of the Gandhi family. In our interview, Mrs. Gandhi gave several examples of the clash between her mother's liberal perspective and the traditionalist expectations of her Indian grandmother and indicated that these were the first hints of a greater disagreement. "I knew even as a child that something was wrong,"²⁵ she says. Ironically, her mother's influence actually prepared her for a far more pioneering worldview than the one she later witnessed in the United States. "I feel that my mother, being of a Western mind and a woman beyond our time, she always made us understand we were equal"²⁶ explains Mrs. Gandhi, but in terms of the way American women behave, "I'm sorry to say I was quite disgusted."²⁷ As an educated and capable woman, Mrs. Gandhi immigrated to the United

States with a plan and the motivation to succeed but was shocked at the number of women throwing away expensive educations to become trophy wives. Like many female Indian immigrants, Mrs. Gandhi experienced the struggle of balancing motherhood with her career,²⁸ but claims that the independence and personal gain was worth it. The respect earned through hard work was especially empowering:

What used to amaze my husband was when people would come to dinner and we would discuss the fact that I was a couture buyer, even though I was only earning a little less money than my husband on Wall Street. People were very interested to hear what I was doing...and that actually amazed me too.²⁹

Now, dividing her time between parenting and social philanthropy, she is the perfect example of the image of a modern, successful woman in the sense that she has managed to strike a balance between home and work. Many of her other Upper East Side female counterparts have not yet found this equilibrium, and struggle to occupy their time. The notion that only men should work, still a prevalent attitude in some upper class subcultures, irritates Mrs. Gandhi, and she views it as chauvinistic: "I'm astonished that in America today on Park Avenue, in the upper echelon of American society, it still exists where women are not exactly equal to men."³⁰

Kiran, on the other hand, actually finds reasons to be impressed by the organization of her Manhattan environment. Because her empirical reference is her single-sex childhood education at The Chapin School, she has always felt a sense of ability: "At Chapin, the primary outlook was that we were all strong, capable girls who were going to be successful regardless of whether or not we were competing with boys."³¹ Even during the three years the Gandhi family spent in India, where she was often the only girl participating in sports, Kiran never really questioned the validity of

gender equality. Now that she is a freshman at a coed university (and still the only female on the squash team and in a campus rock band), she is strengthening her feminist arguments. For Kiran, the Upper East Side subculture—where men typically work and women volunteer, chair events, and organize the social scene—is actually empowering. She maintains that these roles maximize positive qualities inherent in each gender. While she says that the nurturing, responsible side of the female gender has “certainly been exploited”³² to adopt the role of homemaker, she also suggests that “striking a balance between being a good parent, a good family figure, and having a life outside shows initiative...and that’s empowering.”³³ Who better to exemplify this than her own mother? “She has strength by balancing work and being a mother,” says Kiran, “she knows what she’s good at and has really sort of capitalized on this.”³⁴

Upbringing and environment clearly influence each woman’s feminist outlook. By witnessing the collision of two very different cultural ideologies as a child, Mrs. Gandhi grew up well aware of the difficulty achieving gender equality, and was thus disappointed by her expectations of parity in the United States. Her perspective, then, is one of tailored adaptation, of an argument built from a broken idealism. For Kiran, who was raised in American society and is thus familiar with egalitarianism as it exists now, the fight for equality is one of outreach. There is no denying, however, that strong mother presences in both women’s lives inspired in them the notion that the battle against inequity could be won.

Multiculturalism

The most relevant similarity in both Mrs. Gandhi and Kiran's upbringings and migration experiences was, and still remains, the influence of multiculturalism. On living in an Indian household with an Irish mother, Mrs. Gandhi says: "I really grew up in a home that was a mix."³⁵ Although her childhood culture was mostly Indian, in terms of diet, religion, and gender roles there was also a strong Irish presence. While this biculturalism was certainly evident in how she interacted with people of either heritage, the constant relocation of the Agarwal family allowed her to grow more and more comfortable with herself. This self-assurance was particularly beneficial during her immigration to the United States, where racial and cultural barriers can often feel threatening, especially for immigrants without strong familial networks. As she says:

When I was in India I was the odd man out, because I wasn't really Indian. I was half and half, my mother was Irish, my upbringing was different, I looked a little different, I spoke a little different, my attitude was different, my thinking was different... and in America, you know, it's the same thing. Not really American, because I didn't grow up here, I didn't go to school here, but I'm very comfortable in being different.³⁶

Once in the United States, there is a common tendency for Asian immigrant groups to "develop solidarity for social, economic, and political action along panethnic lines,"³⁷ which generally leads to limited interaction within the new society. For Mrs. Gandhi, who was already well versed in Western culture, this was not the case; in fact, her lack of a solid social network within New York is what likely fueled her success. Although she initially experienced loneliness in her new country, she says, "I think my childhood experiences helped me overcome that,"³⁸ giving her the confidence to seek out a niche

that not only accepted but also valued her multiculturalism. Ironically, this niche is in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, a notoriously exclusive Caucasian community.

American liberalism, unlike Europe's obsession with "pure identity,"³⁹ leaves plenty of room for cultural isolation and it is not uncommon to witness immigrant families who hardly stray from the familiar. As a second-generation Indian, Kiran finds this forced cultural preservation absurd, and is proud of her open upbringing. As she says, "I see a lot of Indian families... battling with the fact that they're in America but trying to raise Indian kids with the same values, whereas with my parents, I think they're good about realizing you can't raise entirely Indian children in an American environment."⁴⁰ This progressiveness, often expressed in a balance between regular family dinners and late-night independence, has allowed Kiran to avoid one of the most frequent challenges facing second-generation Indians: dealing with the two "incompatible systems [of] Western individualism and Indian collectivism."⁴¹

However, Kiran also mentioned that during the three years in India she always felt a little out of place because of her Americanization. After describing the awkwardness of walking into her third-grade classroom with a clean American accent and being told off by her classmates for faking it, she says of the immigration experience, "there were definitely some expectations of my behavior that were never met." Kiran admits that while she is proud of her Indian heritage, she feels far more at home in Caucasian communities: "culturally, I'd say I'm American... I usually feel weird when I'm around other Indians in America."⁴³

Regarding race, Kiran considers her ethnic in-between-ness to be a blessing because it allows her to associate with all kinds of people—in actuality, she is often

mistaken as Persian. She is also comfortable with her racial exoticism, unlike many Indian-American girls who feel it creates a “dual metaphor” of being both desirable and marginalized.⁴⁴ She reports never having faced discrimination, but as she says, “it also probably helps that compared to other races or cultures, Indians aren’t generalized too negatively, and people who first meet me don’t usually mistrust or fear me.”⁴⁵ This is another example of the “model minority” label in action.

As a first-generation immigrant, it is entirely expected that Mrs. Gandhi would feel “dual national loyalties”⁴⁶ between India and America, and triple cultural loyalties between Ireland, India, and America. Because she was so well prepared for American society by her Western mother and her top-notch education, and because she did not relocate to an awaiting network, she has been able to find a positive average between her cultural identities. Mr. Gandhi’s heritage is also perpetuated through her children, who all carry Indian first names and Irish middle names. As a second-generation Indian-American, it is also not uncommon that Kiran would choose to associate more with her new culture. What is interesting, then, is to consider what is yet to come: although Kiran plans to carry aspects of Indian life into her future, she also hopes to focus her travels, residencies, and relationships in Europe, which could lead to a fourth generation of cultural fusion.

Assimilation

Several factors made Mrs. Gandhi's assimilation into American culture fairly effortless. First, the language barrier was almost nonexistent, as she had grown up with an English-speaking mother in a country where English is one of the national languages. While she still retains a slight accent, her mastery of English, especially American colloquial, is immaculate. A second factor in her assimilation was the fact that she arrived in Boston as a graduate student, already surpassing the vast majority of Americans in education. Although she mentioned that the few years following her graduation and the birth of Kiran were challenging in terms of scheduling, she did not experience any extreme difficulties in familiarizing herself with American culture. This ease, she says, was mostly due to her many migration experiences as a child: "That kind of transient lifestyle makes you very resilient,"⁴⁷ and with this resilience also came confidence. Mrs. Gandhi mentioned that by not fearing judgment, her "transition... into that situation or that community or that country [was] so much easier."⁴⁸

Another important piece of her assimilation experience was recognizing the impossibility of maintaining strict Indian and strict American cultures simultaneously. "You can't live in America and think you're in Delhi, and you can't live in India and think you're totally American."⁴⁹ This accommodating attitude was essential during the return migration to India, where she had to adapt to the more unhurried but hierarchical system. For Mrs. Gandhi, the hardest part of acclimatization, to the United States, to India again, and back to the United States, was the social structure. Although she always earned back her spot at the top of the scene in every location, Mrs. Gandhi did mention that the loss of a strong circle of friends and connections with each move was difficult.

Considering that networks, especially ethnic, are a major source of mobility for immigrants,⁵⁰ it is impressive that she has been able to establish herself so quickly in every environment.

Kiran has experienced little to no difficulty in fitting in with American culture, and has been able to share her proficiency with her parents. In India Mr. and Mrs. Gandhi used their experience and upbringing to “bring out our Indian selves,”⁵¹ as Kiran says. This reciprocity reflects what sociology professor Jean Bacon claims is a recurring theme in multigenerational immigrant families: “Although both the immigrant and the second generations come to their generational identities differently, their generational identities together become the anchors for the process of assimilation and the construction of community.”⁵² This is especially relevant considering the closeness of their mother-daughter relationship.

Fortunately, discrimination was never really a barrier in the assimilation process for either Mrs. Gandhi or Kiran. Mr. and Mrs. Gandhi are both highly successful in their industries and are thus economically beneficial to American society, a contribution that forestalls hostility.⁵³ Additionally, Indian culture is generally welcomed in the United States,⁵⁴ as Kiran confirms. She mentioned that at Chapin as well as Georgetown, students often approach her with questions regarding India, and at home in New York she is usually seen as “the token samosa person.”⁵⁵ By wearing saris and authentic jewelry to A-list parties, Mrs. Gandhi also celebrates (and thus legitimizes) her Indian culture within the American sphere. Assimilation goes both ways—it is not only about fitting into America, but about helping America be comfortable with all the pieces in the melting pot.

Summary

The immigration stories of Meera Gandhi and Kiran Gandhi affirm that migration and acculturation experiences vary by generation, and that concepts of identity are affected less by heritage than by environment. Mrs. Gandhi, a half-Irish half-Indian resident of America, has been very successful in adapting to new societies, and this can be credited to her frequent migratory experiences as a child. She has also managed to tailor her own cultural traditions to fit in with American practices. As a first-generation migrant, she compares India and America from an Indian perspective, which has made her integration and acculturation experiences empirical and based in expectation.

In contrast, Kiran was born into American culture, and her assimilation into Indian culture was rooted in what she had learned and experienced via her parents. As a member of the second generation, she is much less attached to her heritage, even considering India to be "...my parents' history, their culture, their association, since they were both born and raised there...For me, it's part of my lineage but not necessarily my future."⁵⁶ This is not to say that it does not factor into her identity—after all, she is Indian—but her identity has been shaped by American symbols. As professor Stanley Renshon defines it, national identity is "primarily a psychological attachment to one's national community, its institutions and practices, the people who constitute it, the psychology of its way of life, and the ideals for which it stands."⁵⁷ For Mrs. Gandhi, this has meant dividing her attachment three ways between Ireland, India, and America. For Kiran, this has meant focusing her attachment primarily on her American background—and in a third generation, this focus would likely be magnified even more.

Both women feel very strongly that confidence is crucial to positive immigration and integration experiences. Confidence creates a shield against judgment, and helps the immigrant avoid inwardly marginalizing a different culture. Open-mindedness is also necessary and, as evidenced by the extensive travel experiences of both Mrs. Gandhi and Kiran, makes understanding new cultures much easier. “The most important thing,” says Kiran, “is to appreciate the best of all worlds.”⁵⁸ Finally, Mrs. Gandhi finds initiative to be paramount to a successful experience. Migration, she says, “ [is] like swimming. You have to find your own depth in water, you know?” After a pause, she continues. “If someone is constantly holding you up, you never know how deep the water is or fast you have to swim.”⁵⁹ This drive and steadfastness, visible in both Meera Gandhi and her daughter, Kiran Gandhi, are undoubtedly chief reasons behind their accomplishments.

Notes

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