



Confessions of an ABCD

By Reshmi Hebbar

In 1987, when I was eleven years old, I was almost accidentally converted to the Baptist faith. At this time, most Americans had never heard of henna tattoos, had never practiced yoga, and maybe had never thought of India as anything other than that faraway place Columbus had failed to reach. Hinduism, as a concept within the American mainstream, was murky at best. In my hometown of Pensacola, the public school forms only asked if you were "white," "black," or "other." It was unthinkable to mark "other." Ethnic identity markers were even more fallible than they are today, and I had little confidence that saying that I was "Indian" would make any sense to anyone else.

Within the next five to seven years, 1990's geopolitics would rapidly catalyze the following changes: 1) Indian metropolitan cities would begin transforming into the high-tech, globalized Asian hubs they are today; 2) Hollywood celebrities would discover the East; 3) cultural observations about the future of an increasingly non-white America would open up a place for more ethnic and racial identities beyond white and black, with categories like "Asian and Pacific Islander," and "Hispanic." By 1996, I would be able to call myself "Asian" as far as race. It would still be a few years before I would hear the term "South Asian American" for the first time, and even a few more years before I could freely use the label "Indian American" without feeling like I would be confused for "American Indian."

But again, in 1987 times were different, and I was young and in danger of being a bit lost. Having been invited for the first time with my best white American friend to her church, I also agreed to go up to the church altar to "pray" in the private yet public way I'd seen done in temples in India. Suddenly, I found myself sitting in a room alone with a conversion counselor. I was defenseless, having no useful language with which to protect myself from being "born again" or "saved," a state of mind that I, as a relatively confident Hindu ABCD, was not looking for.

As the counselor sat there and showed me a small book about a man going over a bridge, and as she asked me questions about Jesus, all I could think was that I had to preserve myself somehow. I remember wanting my parents. I felt huffy, but did not show it. How ridiculous, I thought, that anyone could look at me and assume I would want to be Baptist. "Do you know what this is?" the wide-eyed blond woman asked me in a southern accent characteristic of my town. "Do you know what is happening?" "Don't you know," I wanted to ask her, "that there are countries in the world where people are simply born into their religions?" But I didn't. I cowered and felt small. I stared and was silent. Finally I stammered: "I'm ? Indian." My tone, and not my choice of words, made my point. I was not converted. Instead I was apologized to. And yet, I remember thinking how I wish I could have explained myself better.



It did not feel right to say that I was "Hindu," not only because of American Christians' unfamiliarity with the religion then, but also because practicing Hinduism at this time was an activity fraught with irregularity, involving using churches for Diwali functions and founding the occasional Gita study group. Even though I knew and was friends with some Indian Christians and had been told about the multiple religions within India, to me, being Indian and being Hindu was practically the same thing. It was all part of a complex, inadequately named national, racial, religious classification that went into the mix of Indian identity during a time when those of us growing up here understood what it meant to bite our tongues and assume that who we were would never be able to be put into understandable words for our white American Christian peers.

These types of questions and issues about the idiosyncrasies of ABCD experiences and identity are exhaustively and even lovingly researched and discussed in a recent academic study by Khyati Joshi, a professor of education and scholar of religious studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Dr. Joshi is an ABCD and daughter of Atlanta, and her dedication to preserving the unique and seemingly inexplicable contradictions of first and second wave ABCD identity is apparent in interview-based research on the lives of the children of Indian immigrants. To put it simply, her book *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America* (Rutgers University Press, 2006) illuminates the complex reasons why people like me floundered as children in the eighties when it came to explaining who we were. It provides a language for our lack of language then, and it looks back in order to point to the ways in which being "Indian" in America today is far more specialized as an identity than being Indian at the beginning of the post-1965 American Immigration era. The book is a dense sociological and ethnographic study that investigates the intersections of social constructs and concepts like race and ethnicity, and she pioneers inquiry into the uncharted terrain of second generation lives via mapping questions about religious experiences.

Dr. Joshi's book rings true to me, and I am grateful for her conscientious case studies and her eloquent reminders about the performative and "situational" quality of identity, how we step into assumed roles depending on the type of people we are with, and how concepts of cultural identity change from moment to moment. Aside from its academic contributions, the book's observations about ABCD life reveal strong commonalities within our coming-of-age experiences, even for a generation of individuals who often felt isolated and singularly individual. Her study is one important archive of experiences like mine which, with time, are already being forgotten in the wake of new patterns of Indian immigration and the sophistication of technologies that now prevent the kind of cultural confusion that marked our youths.

After reading Khyati Joshi's book and noting the careful distinctions made in her introductory chart on Indian American youth identity (p.6), I now have a language to announce that I am a member of the first wave of second generation Indians: I was born before 1979, I was almost always the only Indian kid within my school's entire grade level, and though I may have



occasionally viewed "Bollywood movies on poor-quality bootleg VHS tapes," I was part of a generation that (sadly) "hated them." Many of us can remember a time when little Indian American boys wouldn't be caught dead dancing to Hindi songs for Diwali, even if bribed. Many of us, particularly those of us who grew up in the South, had to frequent church-related youth activities with our white American friends if we wished to maintain these relationships. Many of us could not wait to grow up and move to metropolitan and multicultural areas where we could finally feel like there were more people around like us.

Now that I'm grown up, educated, and even more articulate about all the complexities that have shaped my youth, I somehow long to go back to that bewildering, language-less time. Living in a place like Atlanta with all of its cultural advantages, I can't help but note that it's hard to compete with new immigrant culture, that it's difficult to maintain who I am and who I have been in a time when being Indian has come to mean participating in so much of a lifestyle that did not exist when I was a child: regional Indian associations reserved for only Maharashtrians or Gujaratis, etc., Hindi schools for the young (even those from South Indian families), theatre-showings of recent Hindi films, and suburban enclaves of Indian Americans with six-to-seven desi families living on the same street. Hardly anyone talks about the vastly different 1970's experiences of people who emigrated with my parents. Hardly any of the other Indians around town expect that when people like me open their mouths, they will speak with overwhelmingly American accents.

Could it be that as I grow older, I will feel increasingly more disconnected from both "American" and "Indian" mainstream culture unless I find ways to assimilate into these often unsatisfactory identity -labels—unsatisfactory in the way "white" and "black" were for me in the 1980's? Hindsight and education (and reading observations like Dr. Joshi's) reveal to me that in many ways, I will always be a minority, even within the realm of Indian American culture. With increasing numbers of new immigrants as well as a rapidly shrinking world, nobody will be able to remember a time when people did not know about India. This is hardly a bad thing: perhaps it is shameful or culturally ungrateful to point out the ways in which a more recognizable India is a less recognizable me.

So, I will continue to look forward to other people's studies and investigations into a time that I used to want to forget. Like the ways in which I now pester my parents for stories about their youths in India, I will hope for young people interested in my own strange, not necessarily Indian, not necessarily American past. I will have stories waiting for them.

--Reshmi Hebbar