

**ASIAN INDIAN STUDENTS: ACHIEVEMENT, SCHOOLING,  
AND POSITIVE STEREOTYPING**

by

Rupam Saran

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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Dr. Kenneth Tobin

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of Examining Committee

Dr. Philip M. Anderson

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Executive Officer

Dr. Kenneth Tobin

Dr. Philip M. Anderson

Dr. Joe L. Kincheloe

Supervision Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

**ASIAN INDIAN STUDENTS: ACHIEVEMENT, SCHOOLING, AND  
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Rupam Saran

Advisor: Professor Kenneth Tobin

This minority-performance dissertation examines the effect of positive stereotyping on patterns of educational achievements and key educational issues of Asian Indian students in New York City schools. Asian Indians migrated from India to the United States in search of a better life. Their economic and professional successes have earned them the status of a “model minority.” This positive stereotyping of Indian immigrants, although celebratory, has been instrumental in promoting hegemony, masking their needs and educational issues, promoting rivalry among other ethnic minorities and Indian community, and instigating antagonistic social relationships. Using the cross generational design this study explores the catalytic role of cultural capital, social capital and the achievement ideology of first generation Asian Indians in their children’s school performance. Contextualized within the constructivist paradigm and the phenomenological hermeneutic framework, this study examines the enactment of Asian Indian students’ agency and cultural capital in earning social capital, educational attainments, and coping with contradictions that appear in goal attainment. Implications of this study will serve schools students, parents and the Indian community by helping them recognize the academic, emotional, and social needs of Indian students.

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# CHAPTER I

## THE PROBLEM

### Introduction

*Betty (White): Mr. Nedrel I am not going to share a room with that Indian girl. I want another room.*

*Simran (Indian): I know why Betty does not like me. Mr. Nedrel I did not ask you to select me. It is not my fault that I won the debate contest. I did not ask them to send me to represent New York. Everybody has an equal chance. Go and get the highest grade in class. If I am school president, I get scholarships, why does it bother others? Everybody has a chance to get 100s on tests. I work hard. I do not complain. I know why you are blaming me.*

*Mom: Simran you are a big girl. You are in high school. This is your fight. I am not like those parents who go to school and fight for their children for the wrong reasons. You have to prove yourself Simran.*

During the 2000-2001 academic school year, a very disturbing incident took place in the Derrick school district in Long Island. Indian students were mocked for their names and threatened with physical violence. The police were called and 19 Indian (all American-born) students were arrested. School officials did try to investigate the causes and determine the truth, and they blamed the Indian students. The irony is that all of these children were in honors classes, had no history of misconduct in school,

had won many competitions, and had brought prestige to their school. Parents intervened and used their political contacts until all charges were finally dropped and the administration apologized (India Abroad, 2000). As the Indian population increased in the Derrick school district, the school ratings went up; this district is now competing with the best schools in the nation.

This story and many other stories that have been shared with me have motivated me to explore the educational experiences of Asian Indian students in New York City public schools. Although Asian Indians are known as a “successful minority,” not much is known about their children’s educational experiences in urban schools or their capacity to overcome barriers. Specifically, my goal is to identify contradictions and to understand how the complexities of the “model minority” phenomenon have been impacting their lives. Asian Indian students constantly construct and reconstruct their identities due to conflicting messages received in school and from their parents. Positive stereotyping challenges them with high expectations, compliance, peer envy, and prejudice, thus creating stress for them.

Simultaneously, my study explores the relationship among educational and professional attainment of first-generation Asian Indians and their children’s school performance. Deterministic assumptions predicted that because they are “model minorities,” Asian Indian students have smoother educational experiences. I hypothesize that positive stereotyping has problematic connotations and creates conflicts and stress for some students. While it is true that generally, Asian Indian students attain a higher

level of achievement in math, science, and technology, there are many Asian Indian students who are low achievers and need more support and assistance from school. Delpit (1995) points out that stereotyped reputation of Asian students as “good Asian students” often works against them. Asian students “do not need proper instruction” because teachers believe all well behaved Asians are the best students. Delpit (1995) asserts:

There is a widespread belief that Asian-American children are the “perfect” students, that they will do well regardless of the academic setting in which they are placed. This stereotype has led to a negative backlash in which the academic needs of the majority of Asian-American students are overlooked (p. 170).

Delpit has pointed out a very common practice in urban schools. In urban classrooms teachers categorize culturally influenced, undemanding, and undisruptive Asian students as the “best student.” Consequently, these students who do not demand their teachers’ attention end up not receiving proper instruction and attention that they deserve.

I hope to bring this issue to the attention of policymakers and school administrations, and urge them to take steps to improve the quality of educational experiences for Asian Indian students. In addition, they should try to fulfill Asian Indian students’ needs, for example by hiring more Asian Indian teachers in schools that have a significant Asian Indian student population. In New York City, 3,260 Indian children are enrolled in elementary, middle, and high schools (Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, 2004). The growing Asian Indian population in urban schools demands that and educators make efforts to understand the cultural capital of Asian Indian students at

both micro and macro levels to prevent downward mobility. Simultaneously, educators and policymakers should go beyond the stereotype and look into the complexities of their educational experiences.

The policymakers and educators should realize that there is a need to understand the lifeworlds and cultural capital of Asian students at micro and macro levels to prevent downward mobility. Tobin (2004) says “When the teacher and students are from different ethnic and class backgrounds there is a potential difficulty for each to make sense of the other’s practices and limitations” (p. 2). To be specific, teachers need to be sensitive to students’ sociocultural needs, and understand and respect the social and cultural resources that they bring from home. Elmesky (2001) argues “To teach successfully in an urban school, in ways that are potentially transformative, teachers have to learn to identify and connect with the social cultural resources of their students” (p.11). The growing Asian Indian population in urban schools demands that educators, school administrators, and teachers should try to understand Asian Indian students’ lifeworlds and make connection with them.

### **My Identity: Insider/Outsider Status of Researcher**

The rapid growth of the immigrant population has encouraged immigration studies that explore the experiences of various ethnic groups. The immigrant studies tell us the history of ethnic experiences in the mainstream culture. The study of immigration and ethnicity has been “in essence a century-long affair, beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century, during a time of heavy European immigration in which nativist and racialist controversies were prevalent among commentators” (Foner, Rumbaut, & Gold,

2000, p. 3). This community-based study is typical of other immigrant studies that are concerned with social issues such as “discrimination, identity, and social access.” How a researcher’s ethnic identity affects his or her research has been an issue of debate among researchers. Addressing the characteristics of immigrant studies that are concerned with racial and ethnic complexities, Foner et al. (2000) justify researchers of immigrant origin, stating that “they are especially sensitive to issues of discrimination and marginalization among immigrants they study, whatever their social class or educational level. For example, Jane Junn, Ragael Alarcon, and Catherin Ceniza Choy all ask to what extent skilled newcomers are stereotyped, blocked by ‘glass ceilings,’ or incorporated into forms of political participation that may be biased against them,” (p. 11).

As a researcher of Asian Indian origin, I consider myself an insider and native ethnographer. My position as a native ethnographer is vulnerable because the rationality of a “native” researcher is often questioned in regard to objectivity and authenticity. Yet, I consider my status as an insider a privileged position enabling me to explore the complexity of the model minority phenomenon authentically through the lenses of race, ethnicity, power, class, and gender. As an ethnographer, the issue of identity is important to me because the ethnographer’s perception of a phenomenon is influenced by his or her identity. In the context of maintaining objectivity in an inquiry, a researcher is obliged to remain objective while studying the phenomena. Regarding the issue of objectivity Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue:

The epistemological question is answered by adherents of the constructivist paradigm by asserting that it is impossible to separate the inquirer from the inquired into. It is precisely their

interaction that creates the data that will emerge from inquiry...

For if what-there-is-that-can-be-known does not exist independently but only in connection with an inquiry process (which need to be formalized, of course), then it is not possible to ask the questions, “What is there that can be known?” and “What is the relationship of the knower and the Known?” (p. 88)

Guba and Lincoln consider the issue of objectivity in research an epistemological issue, and argue that researchers cannot “escape their humanness” while inquiring about human issues and interacting with human respondents. Subjectivity is a researcher’s own perspectives, values, and constructions. In an inquiry, a researcher’s value or construction influences research. The constructivist paradigm acknowledges the role of an inquirer’s construction in an inquiry because “no inquirer engages in an inquiry with a blank mind, a tabula rasa” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 23). As a constructivist researcher, I realize that it is unrealistic to draw thick distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity, yet I know I must maintain a fine sense of objectivity and restrain my subjectivity to prevail over the constructions of participants. My insider status provides me a better understanding of the phenomenon I am studying, and I am privileged with better means to interpret the complexities of academic achievements of the second-generation Asian Indian students in mainstream society.

In the context of subjectivity and objectivity, I draw on feminist researcher Patti Lather (1991) who asserts that inquiry and researchers are not separate entities, because subjectivity and objectivity “are interwoven and mutually informing,” (p. 66). According

to Lather researchers can draw upon their life experiences to interpret a phenomenon. In the interpretive paradigm inquiry revolves around humanness and a researcher cannot stay outside the research. Kincheloe (2001) supports the feminist stance and says, “Inquiry begins with researchers drawing upon their own experience” (p. 504). Since in this research I am studying human beings (Asian Indian Students) and I am also an Indian, I am “privy to the inner world experiences” (p. 505). I have the understanding of the lifeworld of Asian Indian students and the phenomena I am researching. The positivistic scientific research tradition views objectivity as separation of thought and feeling. However, Feminist theorists devalue the positivistic research tradition and emphasize that thought and feeling cannot be separated because researchers are an essential part of the research process.

Although I am an insider, and I have the privilege of authentic complex ethnic experiences, as an ethnographer I have the status of an “outsider,” hence my responsibility is to maintain objectivity throughout the research. With regard to conflicts of the insider/outsider status of a native researcher, Clair Alexander (2004) argues, “native researchers occupy an innate ‘insider’ status that places them apart from the oppressive regimes embodied by mainstream White, middle-class, male ‘professional’ academics and guarantee access to hidden ‘truth’ of experience” (p. 141). Alexander asserts that in order to understand Asian communities in Western societies, to avoid misunderstandings, and damaging consequences for the community, an insider’s view and ethnography is an epistemological tool. As an insider ethnographer, I have tried to avoid subjectivity and maintain objectivity in the study. In particular, I have negotiated my insider/outsider status to speak authentically for the community.

## **Minority Children in New York City Urban Schools**

Children of immigrants are a major population of American urban schools. The number of immigrant children in schools in the United States is increasing rapidly every year. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) point out “Immigrant children and U.S.-born children of immigrants are the fastest-growing segment of the country’s total population of children” (p.19). According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, out of the 75 percent American urban population most are minorities and immigrants. During 2001, the immigrant population in New York City was 57 percent (Elmesky, 2001; Barton & Tobin, 2001). By 2004, the immigrant population in New York City had increased to 60 percent (Noguera, 2005). The composition of immigrant students in New York City has shifted from European to African American, Latino, and Asian American origin. In many NYC public schools white students are underrepresented in the total population of schools. The Asian population in New York City is 11 percent of the total population. The Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF, 2006) reported that among all Asians, about 78 percent are immigrants. Currently, 12.4 percent of all students attending New York City public schools are Asian Americans.

## **School Achievement or Failure of Immigrant Children**

### **Contributing Factors**

Higher outcomes of college education and openness of the American education system inspire immigrants to strive for education and have perpetuated the belief that investment in education promises higher payoffs. Although education in American society fosters social stratification, immigrants view education as a gateway to mainstream society. Over the years immigration characteristics have changed. The Eastern European image of immigrants has been replaced by Asian and Hispanic immigrants. The changing pattern of immigration is most evident in New York and California urban schools where the ethnic composition of schools has changed dramatically, and where schools are challenged by increasing racial, linguistic, and cultural diversity in student populations. The majority of new immigrants come from Asia and Latin America and they are better-educated skilled professionals compared to early immigrants. New immigrants come to America with a point of reference that they can go back to their country if they fail to achieve their goal in the foreign land, but their children do not have this privilege; they are in America to stay. The second-generation immigrant children, either U.S.-born or foreign-born, will not go back to their parents' old country because their point of reference is this country. Their cultural experiences, and their educational achievements or failures are grounded in the American context and they consider America as their home (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

The economic and professional success of first-generation immigrants depends on their skills and the educational capital they bring with them, but the economic success or

failure of the second-generation immigrant children depends on their school experiences and their academic achievements in school. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) point out that “for the second generation the key outcomes are linked to academic achievement. How well they do and how far they go in school will govern their eventual position in the American status system. This applies both individually and collectively...” (p. 234). Although immigrants’ human capital (their education, skills, professional training, and job experiences), their family structure, their social position in the host country, and their high expectations influence their children’s academic attainment, the educational environment of school and school context are critical factors of academic attainment. Inner-city low-performing schools lead students to low achievement, and high-scoring competitive schools push students to perform better.

While immigrant students go through an Americanization process in school, they face tremendous familial pressure to maintain their ethnic culture and at the same time at school they are expected to adapt to school norms. Immigrant students from families with higher human capital and better resources are able to cope with this pressure and perform better in school. A family with a higher level of human capital can obtain better educational opportunities such as private or suburban schools, tutoring services, and a support system to deal with the complexities of the school environment.

The length of stay in America and the length of acculturation are also determinants of academic achievement. Although children of socially well-adjusted immigrant parents perform better in school, a high level of Americanization produces an adverse effect on academic achievement among second-generation immigrant students. Students who successfully navigate the process of “Becoming American” think that being

American means ignoring family values, surrendering to peer pressure, having a negative attitude towards school performance, and consequently, their grades decline. Portes & Rumbaut (2001) suggest “Second-generation children gradually lose their achievement drive with increasing acculturation,” (p. 239).

One of the key dimensions of academic achievement is strong family structure and intact families. Immigrant children of intact families tend to show better grades and low dropout rates. The structured family environment is helpful in instilling a positive attitude towards school, setting up high achievement goals, enhancing future educational and economic goals, and instilling positive self-image in children. In addition to family composition, family expectations and aspirations play vital roles in children’s academic aspirations. Although all parents possess high ambitions for their children and want them to achieve economic success, immigrant parents see their children’s academic achievement as the ladder to their offspring’s upward mobility and fulfillment of their own dreams of success. Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters (2004) point out, “For children of immigrants, just as for those native parents, education thus represents both the most obvious path of upward mobility and a highly potent set of institutional barriers to that mobility” (p. 21). Most immigrant parents view education as the only defense to discrimination and marginalization in mainstream society. Louie (2004) in her study of Chinese immigrants found out that Chinese parents, regardless of their social class, view their children’s education as an investment for a secure future. They encourage their offspring to pursue college education and strive for “practical” majors that will enable them to get professional jobs and economic security. And second-generation Chinese children tried to live up to their parents’ expectations.

Although there are many predictors of the educational outcomes of immigrant children, their psychological and social characteristics determine their educational performance. Individual motivation and aspiration play very important roles in an individual's educational achievement; however, social context shapes one's attitude and leads them to success or failure. While it is true that immigrant parents share high aspirations for their offspring, the variability in educational achievement is that there are many factors that play a vital role in school performance.

### **The Second-Generation and “1.5” Foreign-Born Immigrant Children**

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990 reported that 480,000 visas were issued every year for families with children. The act issued 226,000 visas for adult children of U.S. citizens and relatives of immigrants. The children who migrate with their parents have different educational experiences than minority second-generation native-born children of immigrant parents. Rumbaut (1997) distinguishes foreign-born immigrant children as “1.5” children. The socialization experiences of “1.5” children are more complex than experiences of the native-born second-generation children. Alarcon (2000) points out that “The age of arrival of an immigrant is an important factor in his or her integration into the United States: for example, those who arrive before the age of six are considerably more likely to speak English without an accent” (p. 311). Alarcon states that 1.5 children enter America at various ages with “disparate educational experiences.” School-age Asian Indian 1.5 children, who migrate to America with their parents, experience more cultural, emotional, and psychological conflicts than their native-born

peers in schools. Gibson (1988) mentions the differences in experiences of native-born and foreign-born children in school: “There are sharper differences between the American-educated Punjabis and newer arrivals. Those who arrive in this country after fourth grade fare far less well in school than those raised from early childhood in America” (p. 27). Although most of the new arrivals do overcome their difficulties, many struggle harder than others to break through social, cultural, and academic barriers in schools. The variability in academic achievement of immigrant children is influenced by their linguistic, academic, and cultural backgrounds. At the same time, minority school performance is affected by how minority children are perceived in schools, and by how minority children perceive school.

### **Asian Indian Students in New York City**

New York City has the highest immigrant population in the United States. In New York City the Asian population has increased by 71 percent since 1990 to the present. According to the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, New York has the largest Asian American population in any one city. Among Asian immigrants, the Indian immigrant population is the fastest-growing segment of the nation’s population. In the United States the Asian population is 1,678,000—in other words, less than 1 percent of the total population (U.S. Census, 2000). In the New York metropolitan area, there are currently more than 100,000 Indians living in Queens County.

In New York City, 3,260 Indian children are enrolled in elementary, middle, and high schools. In Queens education districts 24, 26, and 27, the concentration of Indian

students is very high. In neighboring suburbs such as Great Neck, Manhasset, and Roslyn, the Indian population is also growing very rapidly.

### **Looking at the Testing Rates**

The testing scores of Asian Indian students report comparatively high academic achievements. Generally Asian American students score high on standardized tests. The Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CAACF, 2004) reports that during 2002, in New York City, “Asian American high school students graduated at a rate of 67 percent, second only to white students at 71 percent and significantly higher than black (44.4 percent) and Hispanic (41.1percent)” (p.14). Although there are differences between scores of native-born and foreign-born Asian American students, the number of failing students is very low compared to other ethnic groups. In the context of standardized tests and academic achievement, Louie reports, “Asian Indians and Japanese students perform the best, followed by Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Southeast Asians” (p. xxvii).

The testing data of 1999-2000 elementary and middle school students by race reported that in mathematics Asian students scored better than white, black, and Latino students. In reading, Asian American students were second to only white students. However, native-born Asian children scored better than foreign-born Asian American students. English language proficiency was the main factor of the lower score in reading. Foreign-born Asian American students face an English proficiency challenge. The New York City Department of Standardized Test Scores reported that in 2003, Asian

American students performed extremely well in mathematics tests. According to the national report on standardized tests and performance by race and ethnicity, the total number of Asians scoring at high levels on the math SAT has increased dramatically. Asian American students have had a 46 percent increase in the number of students scoring above 600 on the math SAT since 1987.

### **Who Are Asian Indians?**

The U.S. Census Bureau in 1980 classified immigrants from India or having Indian origin as “Asian Indians.” Before the 1980 Census, immigrants from South Asia did not have their own ethnic identity. For sociopolitical purposes, all immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka were categorized as South Asians. After 1980 people from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are classified as “Other” in the U.S. Census (Barringer & Kassenbaum, 1989). The term Asian Indian denotes a group of people who migrated to the United States from India of their own will. Asian Indians are highly educated and they use “schooling” for upward mobility.

### **Model Minority Discourse in Mainstream Society**

This study explores the complexities of the model minority phenomenon. In American society the model minority status idealizes Asian Americans. The term model minority defines Asian Americans as hard-working, smart, high-achieving people belonging to good cultures (Lee, 1996, 2005; Winnick, 1990). Although this term implies

prestige and recognition of contributions, it originated as a hegemonic mechanism to reduce racial and the ethnic tension of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Instead of crediting Asian Americans for their contributions to American society, the media propagated the term to ignore the demands of African Americans and other minority groups for equal rights. The dominant sociopolitical establishment used Asian American success as an example to other minority groups to seek educational and economic success without governmental assistance (Lee, 1996; Osajima, 1988). The model minority phenomenon assumes that if Asian Americans can succeed on their own, all minority groups should achieve economic success without governmental support. Thus, the model minority term was used for legitimizing the issue of racial inequality and suppressing public outcry for improvements in educational and social systems of the mainstream society (Lee, 2005). The model minority myth is still being used to undermine contributions of Asian Americans and to ignore demands of other minorities.

### Purpose of the Study

One of the main purposes of this study is to explore different dimensions of Asian Indian students' perceptions of their schools, and schools' perception of them as high achievers. In attempting to understand the impact of cultural and social forces affecting educational experiences of Asian Indian students, it is vital to understand the perception of Asian Indian students by their teachers, peers, and school administration. And it is equally important to get insight into Asian Indian students' perceptions of their schools as a "whole"—their teachers, peers, and school administrators.

The framework of this study is guided by two themes: First, how complexities of the model minority phenomenon affect educational experiences of Asian Indian students in school settings. Second, how the close family structure and parental professional and educational attainment influence Asian Indian students' academic achievements.

### **Significance of the Study**

Most minority performance studies examine underachievement and negative stereotyping of minority groups. Gibson (1988) points out, "Far less attention has been given to the school-adaptation patterns of those minority groups or subgroups that meet with a comparatively high degree of academic success..." (p. 32). Gibson raises the issue of studying ethnic groups that have earned a distinct place in mainstream society with their comparatively higher degree of academic success despite the cultural, social, and linguistic barriers they face. In this context, the significance of my study is that it examines school performance of children of Asian Indians who have been successful economically and professionally in American society.

Generally, the Asian American success story refers to the achievements of South East Asian immigrants. Foner (1987) writes that all research on new immigrants from Asia focuses on immigrants from China, Korea, Japan, Philippines, and Vietnam. Most of the research on Asian immigrants treats all people of Asia in one category despite their cultural and linguistic diversities. Immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are categorized as South Asians and are neglected by most researchers. Current available research on South Asians examines as a "whole" because of their small number

in mainstream society and because of their cultural similarities. Because Asian Indians are the fastest growing ethnicity in the United States and they are the largest immigrant population among all South Asians, they should be studied as a separate entity.

Much research and writing has been done on the “older” immigrants from the Western Hemisphere of the world, but there are few works on newer immigrants, especially on Asian Indians. Asian Indian migration has not been studied as a social process. Historically there have been two main reasons for this lack of research work. First, during the early years, the majority of Indians in American academia were in the process of establishing themselves professionally and they were unable to study the Indian community from a sociological perspective. Second, Asian Indians were not very visible in American society and the American academia and political establishments did not consider Asian Indians as part of minority groups that needed attention. As a result, American scholars did not study the socioeconomic composition of Asian Indian migration for a long time. In many other countries such as Great Britain, Africa, and the West Indies, some research has been done on Indian immigrants. In the United States, however, there was no research study to explore the impact of migration on the East Indian community until the late 1970s.

By the 1970s, the growing number of Asian Indian immigrants and their professional and economic success in the American society started to attract the attention of American scholars. Glazer (1980) noted that Asian Indians were an eminent ethnic group that was distinguished by their high level of education, concentration in academia, and economic gains in mainstream society. According to Saran, in the United States from 1970 and onward, a few scholars studied the East Indian community as a “whole” and

provided insight into their lifestyle (Saran, 1985). The longitudinal study by Saran described life experiences, adaptation, and acculturation of the Asian Indian community in the United States. Although Gibson (1988) studied an Asian Indian population in her ethnographic study in California, it concentrated only on a Punjabi Sikh community. Gibson's study described the *adaptation and acculturation without assimilation* pattern of the farmer Sikh community and schooling of their children in rural California. Mazumdar (1993) also focused on issues of accommodation and acculturation of Asian Indians in the United States. Asher (1999) explored school-related issues of South Asian (i.e., of Asian Indian, Bangladeshi, or Pakistani origin) high school students' personal and ethnic identity issues, concerns related to their social behavior, and academic achievement in elite school setting in New York City. In a similar tradition, Avashia (2003) studied the identity formation of the ethnically isolated high school Asian Indian students' performance in school settings, and their reactions to the ethnic isolation in a predominantly white small town without an ethnic community. Though Asher and Avashia studied Asian Indian youth, their studies describe Asian youth in suburban and elite school settings and focused mainly on identity formation in school. In New York City, there is no scholarly research on educational or professional attainment of Asian Indians, let alone the educational achievement of second-generation and 1.5 Asian Indian students. In this context, this study is relevant because it explores educational achievements and effect of positive stereotyping of Asian Indian youth in the city's urban schools.

Olson (1997) observed that Asian American success is interpreted by mainstream students as an act of pushing out. The growing number of Asian American students and

their scholastic achievements are causing anxiety and resentment among mainstream students, and often these feelings are translated into harassments and hostilities toward Asian American students. The social realities of American society demand improvement of ethnic relations and education in schools. Regarding unjust social realities, Kincheloe (2001) argues for critical research that promotes a deep level of sociopolitical understanding of a phenomenon that needs to be investigated, and appeals to researchers to study social conflicts, injustice, and social biases that are based on ideologies of white supremacy. In this context, the rationale for my study is that it explores the sociopolitical aspect of model minority phenomenon—a hegemonic process of silencing Asians by projecting them as hard working, achievement oriented, humble, obedient, and a silent minority (Goodwin, 2003).

Although overall scholastic achievement of Asian Indian students is impressive, signs of downward mobility are appearing among the second-generation Asian Indians. The second-generation decline theory predicts that assimilation and higher education will not elevate second-generation Asians to ranks of whites as it did for Southern and Eastern European immigrants. The second-generation Asian immigrants will face more discrimination than their parents because their skin color might be more significant than their class, and will consequently experience downward mobility (Gans, 1992; Kasinitz, Mollenkof, & Waters, 2004). In this context, there is an urgency to explore the school experiences of Asian Indian students. In order to unveil the model minority myth, this research is very much needed. Given this scenario the relevance of my study is that it addresses issues concerning downward mobility and community actions that might be

helpful in curbing downward mobility and instilling positive ethnic identity that is essential for strong self-esteem and self-identification.

## **Characteristics of Urban Schools**

### **Social Control and Hegemony**

Unfortunately in a country like the United States where educational policies promise equal opportunities for all students regardless of their ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds, performance of urban schools is not very impressive. Urban schools promote social control by academic tracking and perpetuating social stratification. The hidden curricula of urban schools teach students to be obedient, contribute to the maintenance of hegemony, and train students to be passive learners (Apple, 1990). Consequently, urban schools create conflicts and tension among schools.

Hegemonic characteristic of urban school requires submission of the marginalized minority group to the dominant group. Schools condition students to follow institutional academic and behavior norms and expect them to seek acceptance of a dominant group by adapting their values. Apple (1990) explains schools' process of establishing hegemony: "Schools do not merely 'process' people but they 'process' knowledge as well. They enhance and give legitimacy to particular types of cultural resources which are related to unequal economic forms" (p. 36). Thus, urban schools legitimize knowledge that will bring better economic returns and perpetuate hegemony to maintain the power of a dominant group. I argue that schools process Asian Indians to accept hegemony and embrace social behavior that is legitimized by mainstream culture.

### **Hierarchy of Resources**

Urban schools in poor communities have limited physical and human resources. Schools in poor communities have less funding than urban schools of middle-class or rich neighborhoods. Consequently, poor neighborhood schools have meager resources for their students. Schools in ill-funded neighborhoods have less qualified teachers and have very high teacher turnover. Linda Darling Hammond (1994) points out that in poor neighborhood schools children are taught by less-qualified or out-of-subject-area teachers. On the contrary, urban schools in middle-class neighborhoods schools have well-qualified experienced teachers. In fact, the middle-class neighborhood schools are very selective in hiring their instructional staffs.

In urban settings, magnet schools are continuing the tradition of elite schooling. Magnet schools select students on the basis of their entrance test scores and their grade point average of their entire academic career. Such schools then prepare students for college-bound standardized tests. Many magnet school students belong to wealthy families who provide expensive test preparation courses to help them pass the entrance test. The students of magnet schools have high achievement rates on standardized tests, and they succeed in getting admitted to prestigious colleges. The magnet schools function as trainers and recruiters for college. They provide special programs and comparatively more challenging academic opportunities for students.

Asian Indians living in urban sectors try to live in middle-class neighborhoods for better schools, because these schools provide better material and human opportunities for

their children. Among Asian Indians, magnet schools and specialized high schools are very popular because these schools train their children for entrance to competitive colleges.

### **Urban School Curricula**

In New York City schools where 60 percent of students are of immigrant origin, the ethnic population has outnumbered the Anglo-Saxon white population. Although the ethnic composition has changed, urban schools are mandated to follow Anglo-Saxon Eurocentric curricula that lack sensitivity to the needs of the Asian American population. There is a cultural gap between the diverse urban population and the prescribed curricula that are being taught in schools. The mainstream curricula lack appreciation for different perspectives and different cultures. Consequently, insensitivity to minority culture, subjugated knowledge, and different perspectives creates disconnect between minority students and teachers.

### **Context of The Study: Mango Grove Middle School**

Lotus Valley, a rich urban community in the Northeast region of the United States, is densely populated with Asian Indian immigrants. The Mango Grove Middle School is situated in Lotus Valley, a neighborhood of Queens, New York. Indian immigrants living in this area are generally middle-class to lower-middle-class recent immigrants who migrated during the 1980s and are still flooding to this area. A majority

of Indians residing in Lotus Valley live there with the intentions of moving to the neighboring Long Island suburbs with their comparatively better schools. The rationale of many of Indians living in this area is that Mango Grove is one of the better schools of this school district. I will be discussing the school context in chapter five.

## **Study Design and Methodology**

This critical ethnographic study follows a phenomenological hermeneutic framework, which allows me to gain insights into participants' lives by learning through their experiences. In the context of the learning and achievement of Asian Indian students, one must understand their "lifeworld," the enactment of their agencies in different fields, and how they construct meaning from their experiences in different fields. Critical ethnography enables researchers to understand how cultural symbols, meanings, social skills, cultural practices, experiences, and agency (that is, one's power to change position in social space) (Sewell, 1999), affect students' learning inside and outside schools, as well as their educational achievement. Critical ethnography provides me the opportunity to credit the perspective of insiders who are not recognized in traditional research methods and draw upon Indian students' history, traditions, and their cultural interactions.

Criticality honors different perspectives and multiple ways of seeing the world. Criticality and the *bricolage* method enable a researcher to examine a phenomenon through different lenses. In my study I use the *bricolage* method or the multiple methods of inquiry to get different perspectives of the phenomenon. To get insight into the lived

world of Asian Indian students I employ phenomenology. I use hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret their schooling experiences, and autobiography to get their stories. In addition, I apply historiography to analyze Asian Indian migration and compare their experiences with other immigrant groups such as Jewish and Cuban.

In this interpretive study I am using *narrative inquiry* to interpret meanings of the *powerful reality stories* of Asian Indian students and their parents. In addition to narrative inquiry I use a *participant observation* method to allow objectivity and simultaneous involvement. This method allows me opportunities to be an engaged participant in the lives of Asian students and at the same time it provides “simultaneous emotional involvement and objective detachment” (Tedlock, p.465). This method allows me opportunities to be an engaged participant in the lives of Asian students and at the same time to be a “dispassionate observer,” I cannot detached myself completely from participants, because it is believed that “This strangely empathetic yet impassive methodology...somehow reflected natives own point of view” (Tedlock, p. 465). This is a *reflective* or self- challenging study and as a researcher my obligation is to reflect on challenges such as cultural bias, frame of references, and interpretation of observations.

Using a *cross-generational design*, this study examines the impact of parents’ human and cultural capital, and achievement ideology on students’ academic performance. Simultaneously, the study brings together the symbolic and material aspects of “achievement,” and critically examines biological, psychological, and cultural aspects of Asian Indian parents’ unwillingness to confront schools or to raise their voices against overt or secret discrimination.

## Data Collection and Data Sources

I was a participant observer in Mango Grove Middle School for three months in 2005. I interviewed specialized high school students during spring and summer of the year 2005. In the process of gathering qualitative data I took field notes, listened to participants' narratives, audiotaped and videotaped the classroom discourses. I informally interviewed student participants to obtain in-depth accounts of their experiences regarding their academic achievements and goals; their personal and ethnic identity; their perception of their peers, teachers, school administrators; and the conflicts and problems they encounter in school. The three months I was in the school allowed me enough time to observe students' social interactions and communication, their attitudes towards their peers and peers' attitude towards them, and the environment of school. By using the *Kinesics* ethnographic technique, that is "the study of body movement" (Best & Kahn, 1998, p. 257), I was able to study students' verbal and nonverbal communications. Videotaping captured the nonverbal communications such as gestures, facial expressions, and other body movements. The micro analysis of videotape has enabled me to gain insight into students' nonverbal gestures and positive or negative facial expressions that might easily have been missed during note-taking time. I played and replayed videotapes many times to confirm or negate some assumptions that might be made during observations.

## Overview of the Dissertation

**Chapter One:** I introduce the problem, purpose, and rationale for the study. In addition, the chapter provides an overview of my insider status in the study. I provide factors that influence minority school performance and how Asian Indian students are performing in urban schools.

**Chapter Two:** The theoretical underpinnings for the study are provided. Using the bricolage method I examine complexities of the model minority phenomenon. In addition, drawing upon Bourdieu's cultural and educational capital, this chapter examines Asian students' academic achievements in school setting. Using Ogbu's voluntary immigration theory, I have explored the role of achievement ideology in Asian Indians' migrant experiences in mainstream society. Using Swell's (1999) theory of dialectical relationship between agency and structure, I examine how Asian Indian students use their agencies and cultural capital to enact their learning and whether Asian Indian students become part of the structure of the classroom.

**Chapter Three:** I discuss the methodological framework of this study. This chapter discusses the procedures employed and presents the framework for data collection. Because this study concentrates on the sociopolitical positioning of a marginalized ethnic group and complexities of their experiences, critical ethnography is best suited for the purpose. In this critical ethnography, schooling experiences of Asian students are examined with micro, meso, and macro perspectives.

**Chapter Four:** I provide an historical overview of Asian Indian immigration to the United States and discuss what salient features of their migration have added to their

model minority status in mainstream society. In this chapter I have explored what characteristics of Asian Indian immigrant are similar to the characteristics of early Cuban and Jewish immigrants. In addition, I have given an account of educational achievement of Asian Indian immigrants in the United States. Simultaneously, I have analyzed what factors contribute to their high academic achievement.

**Chapter Five:** The school context and its role in positive stereotyping of Asian Indian students is provided. I have analyzed how school context perpetuates model minority myth and how schools ignore covert prejudice and discrimination. I have described how school context plays a vital role in model minority discourse.

**Chapter Six:** In this chapter I have analyzed my qualitative data. This chapter presents lives under model minority status and provides how Asian Indian students negotiate model minority discourse and how they form their identity as a model minority student, how conflicts and covert prejudice of school experiences influence their identity formation, and how they react to their model minority image.

**Chapter Seven:** This chapter is a continuation of the data analysis. The chapter describes Asian Indian students' perception of race and ethnicity, what survival strategies Asian Indian students use to maintain their model minority image, and what messages they receive from home to negotiate complexities of their school experiences. In addition in this chapter I draw on how Asian youth marginalize themselves by opting for certain academic fields and excluding many other fields of study that are known as non-Asian academic fields.

**Chapter Eight:** I conclude my study and address research questions raised in the first chapter of this dissertation. I explain that model minority image may not hold in the

future because although a fraction of Asian Indian youths are trying to reproduce model minority image, there are students who do not fit to a positive stereotyped image and might dismantle this image.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this study I am analyzing how Asian Indian students' academic achievement and their learning are a conversion of their cultural and social capital and how they use their agency to expand or impede their academic achievement and life success. In this dissertation I explore factors that play vital roles in Asian Indian success in a foreign land where they achieved the status of "honorary whites." I would not hesitate to admit that this study grew out of my life experiences as a model minority individual. In this study, by listening to stories of first-generation and 1.5 Asian Indian youth I argue that that model minority is a myth and it might not hold in the future as the parental inspiration and involvement would be weakened by the Americanization process and conflicting identities. In this dissertation, I find that contradictions to model minority image speak of a future when Americanized and rebellious Asian Indian youth would not live up to their collective positively stereotyped image and would embrace a path that might take them to downward mobility.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the theoretical framework for this study. Positive stereotyping and the model minority phenomenon are problematic issues. Model minority status is associated with high educational and economic success of Asian Americans in mainstream society. Because one or two theoretical lenses would not have been sufficient for exploring the complexities of the model minority stereotype, I have used the multilogicality or bricolage method instead.

This chapter reviews literature pertaining to the nature of Asian Indian migration to the United States, the stereotyping of Asian Indian students, their educational achievements, as well as prejudice and discrimination. The post-1965 new Asian Indian immigrants and their children are included within the context of Asian immigrants.

The term immigrant minority refers to actual immigrants as well as to those whose ancestors were immigrants and who continue to uphold a separate minority-group identity (Gibson, 1991). In this dissertation the immigrant minority refers specifically to people who migrated to the United States voluntarily in quest of a better life and who are culturally, linguistically, and physically different from the dominant population. Immigrant minorities are often marginalized in mainstream society and experience prejudice and discrimination.

## **Asian Indian Students: Explanation of Attainment, Achievement, and Contradictions**

The model minority stereotype depicts Asian Americans as academic superstars. Images of Asian American math geniuses, computer science experts, and high school valedictorians are ingrained in the minds of Americans (Lee, 1996, p. 52).

Asian Indian students are discussed within the Asian framework and like all Asians they are stereotyped as math/science whizzes, an English-speaking scientific community, and an achievement-oriented minority. American media and scholars have promoted a stereotyped positive image of second-generation Asian Indian students in American society. Asian Indian students often are quoted in scholarly minority performance literature and are compared with other minority groups and the white population. Although Asian Indians are positively stereotyped, I argue that model minority discourse is a myth that perpetuates dominant values and cultural norms and overlooks increasing variability within diverse group. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) point out the variability within Asian students and argue that all Asian students are not model minority students. They explain:

It would be a mistake, however to conclude that all Asian Students are thriving in well-functioning integrated schools. The recent Asian immigrant experience suggests two distinct pathways. As more Asian Immigrants find themselves in poor and segregated schools, they face

the same limited opportunities of other immigrants of color. As a result, for these students academic achievement and pursuit of the American dream is more elusive....While some are following the expectations attached to the “model minority” stereotype, others are struggling with schoolwork and are performing the same level as other ethnic and racial minorities. (pp. 134-135)

## **Stereotyping and Asian Indians**

### **Stereotyping Is an Act of False Generalization and Categorization**

Regarding variability in minority students' schooling, academic performance, and achievement, Pedro Noguera (2003) addresses the tendency to generalize the high or low performance of a few individuals to represent the whole group. He says that researchers, policymakers, and the media do not take into account the diversity in immigrant populations and stereotyped minority groups on the basis of academic success or failure of a few members of minority groups. Research shows that the scholarship of any given minority group is influenced by many factors. However, scholars and media generalize and stereotype, resulting in a negation of the diversity and variability in academic performance.

The Asian Indian immigrants have been positively stereotyped. Although positive stereotyping has positive connotations and it is viewed by some as a source of respect, stereotyping whether negative or positive has potentially deleterious consequences.

Although a positive stereotype may be favorable to Asian Indians, it does not always serve them well because stereotyping is always attached with false generalization. Allport (1954) defines stereotype saying, “Whether favorable or unfavorable, a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (p.191). Stereotyping is a process of labeling or categorization, and it is a fixed idea that is based on perception and judgment.

Stereotyping negates differentiated opinion, generalizes a category, and portrays a specific image of a category or a group. Allport regards stereotyping as a “justificatory device for categorical acceptance or rejection of a group” (p.192). Thus, stereotyping justifies and rationalizes an individual’s love-prejudice or hate-prejudice.

Simultaneously, Allport views stereotyping as a continuous process of “selected perception” and “selective forgetting” that celebrates a group for its success but forgets their contribution if the group fails to achieve success. Asian Indians are categorized and stereotyped as a “model minority” and are accepted by the dominant society in the belief that Asian Indians possess specific traits. In other words, stereotyping of Asian Indians is based on a generalized collective judgment that all Asian Indians are hard working and intelligent.

In the context of stereotyping and prejudice, Allport (1954) refers to two kinds of social status: *ascribed* and *achieved*. Ascribed status is forced or acquired through heredity. For example, African Americans were forced to be slaves, or in India people are ascribed to a certain caste. Achieved status is attained by individuals through their own efforts. In America class status is a status that people achieve through education and economic success. Asian Indians have dual status in American society. They are not

whites or a part of a dominant group, thus they are *ascribed* a marginalized status in American society. However, the paradox is that they have *achieved* a higher status of “honorary whites” (Tuan, 1998), through higher education and economic success. Because of the duality of their unique position they experience prejudice and discrimination. Their success is often perceived negatively and they are discriminated by prejudice in disguise. Although overt prejudice is “not in fashion,” often they experience overt prejudice as being a marginalized population. Allport (1954) defines prejudice as a psychological aspect of stereotyping and views prejudice as “an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group” (p. 7).

The psychoanalytical theory of prejudice explains the nature of ethnic prejudice: “ethnic hostility is a projection of unacceptable inner strivings onto a minority group” (p.199). Regarding ethnic prejudice Allport says that members of an ethnic group experience prejudice because of their membership in that group. For example, Asian Americans experience prejudice not because of their individual traits but rather because of the fact that they are Asians. He describes ethnic prejudice: “Ethnic prejudice is an antipathy based on a faulty and inflexible generalization” (p. 10); and very often prejudice is justified because false perceptions are treated as truth by groups who blame minority groups even for their positive attributes.

## **Stereotyping is Social Belief and Social Behavior**

Stangor (2000) conceptualizes stereotyping from two complementary perspectives: individual and collective representations of belief. Individuals develop belief and perception about the characteristic of an individual, an object, a group, or a phenomenon that, over time, transforms into stereotype. Consequently, an individual's judgment and the belief of a group influence the social belief of a group. Theorists using a cultural approach to stereotyping describe the ways in which social consensus and group values are the fundamental base of stereotyping. According to the social cognitive perspective, stereotyping is a mental representation of the world that influences the social belief and social behavior of a group (Fyack & Stangor, 1994). The social cognitive tradition describes stereotyping as a learned behavior of an individual that is changed by the group judgment and the information provided by other group members. Stangor refers to the traditional approach to stereotyping that denotes that an individual's stereotype is based on a cognitive schema of an individual or a group. According to Schneider (2004) stereotyping is correlated with "traits and group membership." People associate a certain visible trait with a group and stereotype that group, and perceive a certain trait as the characteristic of all group members. For example, when people say that blacks are good musicians, they associate a talent with a race and make a correlation between the African race and a trait. Thus, stereotyping is an act of discriminating one group against another on the basis of characteristics or traits. Stereotyping always implies a discriminatory comparison of two or many groups.

Examining different perspectives of stereotyping I find that teachers and academic communities stereotype Asian Indians individually and academically. For example, if in a class of 25 students, five Indian students excel and impress their teacher with their docile behavior, the teacher stereotypes all Indian students as high achievers and well behaved. In a given school, many Asian students take the top-level or advanced placement courses, and it becomes a norm of the school that Asian Indians often have a high performance rate. Consequently, because of the collective belief, the school stereotypes Asian students as high achievers and often overlooks those Indian students who are low achievers and need instructional help. The history of Asian Indian migration reveals that most of the early students migrated to the United States for educational reasons and generally the majority of them excelled in their fields of study. Later migrants were professionals who succeeded in the dominant society because of their professional training and their quest for higher education. There are many academic fields such as computer science, medicine, and engineering labeled as Asian fields. Asian Indians are stereotyped that they are good in math and science. In academia, teachers and professors perceive Asian Indian students as good, polite, humble, compliant students, and generally perceive all Asian Indians as high achievers.

### **Stereotyping Facilitates Discriminatory Practices and Prejudice**

Schneider (2004) analyzes stereotyping as a discriminatory practice because it always compares two groups or many groups in a discriminatory way. Asian Indians along with other Asian minorities are compared with African Americans, Latinos, and

other minority groups to negatively stereotype African Americans, Latinas, and other groups as low achievers. The other implication of stereotyping is that people always accept a behavior from a stereotyped group or individual that fits into the framework of that stereotype. If they find that an individual is inconsistent with the stereotyped behavior they react to it negatively. This stereotyped-based high expectation often poses problems for Asian Indian students who are not high achievers or the ones who need help in school.

Stereotyping facilitates discriminatory practices in society. Schneider (2004) asserts that “stereotyping traits are those that generally discriminate the stereotyped group from others” (p.182). Stereotype is an evaluative phenomenon and it is directly related to prejudice. Prejudice and stereotyping blame the stereotyped group for their achievements or their shortcomings, or in many cases they are used as a scapegoat. Schneider argues that prejudice can be expressed in many forms, and “Prejudice can encompass any number of feelings or emotions. It makes perfect sense to speak of prejudice, but prototypically prejudice is on intimate terms with hatred. It can also include other affective reactions such as pity or envy” (p. 267). This statement explains why other ethnic groups that experience failure may envy and blame Asian Indians. Asian Indian students are praised for their hard work, their scholarship, and their humble behavior. However, often praises are laced with disguised envy and prejudice. Stereotype, whether positive or negative, does not serve well the people to whom it is applied. The academic achievements of Asian Americans have been receiving negative responses from the dominant group in the form of stereotyping and prejudice.

Olson (1997) observes the prejudice of mainstream students towards Asian American students in school and writes, “many expressed anxiety or resentment at the increasing number of immigrants and Asians they perceive as pushing them out of their place in the academic hierarchy” (p. 68). Unfortunately, the resentment against Asian students’ achievement is growing rapidly and is prevalent all over America. Their success is producing negative feelings in the white population as well as in other minority groups. The superiority of whiteness is manifested by white students in schools as hate and rejection towards Asian students. Olson provides an example of how white students show their prejudice and blame Asian students for pushing them out in their academic classes:

They come to take our jobs, and they are willing to break their backs for shift pay, and we can’t compete. These Chinese kids come over here and all they do is work and work and work, and all you have to do is look in the AP (Advanced Placement) and you will see they are filling them up. No one else can compete anymore. They just want to take over (p. 68).

Olson expresses that although the school promised to honor all ethnicities, there was no effort from the administration or teachers to address the “inequities and discrimination against students of color” (p. 68). The Asian success is interpreted as an act of pushing out. Mass media are instrumental in establishing the stereotype. Media organizations support categorization and project people as holders of certain characteristics and affirm the stereotype status of a group. Minority or dominant groups are praised or unnoticed in the mass media. Cocchira (2004) points out that racism and

discrimination are known causes of stress in ethnic minorities. While negative stereotyping adversely influences performance of racial groups, positive performance stereotyping may also have an adverse effect.

One might argue that positive stereotyping gives rise to the claim that one is capable of doing something better than others or inherently is better than others, and the categorization “superior” or “inferior” is a status-maker. Still, whiteness is an extremely significant and influential factor in stereotyping ethnicity or race for the “pleasure” and justification of racial superiority. Positive stereotyping magnifies the notion of “Otherness.” bell hooks (1992) argues that the commodification of otherness has been very successful because it is offered as a new delight. It is more intense and more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream White culture. Although bell hooks used the metaphor of “spice and seasoning” in the context of images of black culture, her assertion is very true in the context of the positionality of Asian Indians in American society. Asian Indians are praised for their accomplishments and cultural heritages as long as they remain as a “spice” or “seasoning” in mainstream Anglo-Saxon American society. Their emergence as one of the main ingredients of the “dull dish” is not appreciated by mainstream culture. However, Asian Indians are experiencing transformation in identity from merely a “spice or seasoning” into a “main ingredient” of the dish, and this transformation is not viewed very positively by the dominant culture.

India was a British colony for a long time and as a result the British treated Indians as a subjugated population (Harding, 1998). Although India has gained political

freedom and is no longer a colony, Western societies still consider the Asian Indian culture subjugated, and their knowledge is considered “indigenous knowledge” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). Kincheloe (2001) stresses that the marginalized groups are judged in mainstream society by their sociopolitical histories and their sociopolitical power.

Although mainstream society views Asian Indians as a model minority, they are considered a “subjugated population” and “people of color.” Asian Indians’ history as “colonized people” is still affecting their position in the “web of realities.”

### **Asian Indians: Consequences of Model Minority Status**

The model minority stereotype is an ideological yet highly problematic phenomenon. The increased academic success of Asian Americans from China, Japan, the Philippines, India, and South East Asia attracted public awareness, and as a result of positive stereotyping model minority status was reinforced for all Asians. In 1999 the study by Goyette and Yu (1999) confirmed the model minority phenomenon. The study compared 980 students (10<sup>th</sup> graders) of Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, South East Asians, and South Asian ethnicities only with white students and concluded that Asian Indian students had higher expectations. Chinn (2001) mentions a report from the National Science Foundation (NSF) that confirms the model minority status. According to the 2000 Census Asian Americans are 3.6 percent of the U.S. population “but have made up 10 percent of the nation’s scientists and engineers (NSF, 2000), and during the period 1989 to 1996 “nearly half of the bachelors’ degrees in science and engineering

were received by Asian students (NSF, 2000). In general mainstream society still views Asians as a model minority. However, implications of positive stereotyping are complex.

In 1960 American media promoted the myth of a model minority, which projected that Asian Americans are hard-working, achievement-oriented and have achieved the American dream without help from any political or social forum (Lee, 1996). The model minority phenomenon marginalizes Asian Indian experiences in mainstream society. It does not celebrate their success rather it magnifies their success to mask racism and subjugation. Asians are a model minority because they do not ask for their rights, they do not raise voices for benefits they deserve, and they work extremely hard to succeed in mainstream society. The model minority image depicts Asian success as an exemplary phenomenon, and conveys the message to other minorities that they should learn lessons from Asian Americans. The thought is that if Asian Americans can succeed, all minorities are capable of succeeding and their failure is their own fault (Walker-Mofatts, 1995).

### **Model Minority Status Is a Hegemonic Condition**

The model minority discourse is a hegemonic regime that motivates individuals to form their identity within an oppressive framework. Gramsci (1971) defines hegemony as a power structure in which marginalized groups comply to the dominant group with their consent. Model minority discourse assumes that all Asian Americans are obedient, submissive, believe in conformity, and respect authority. In the school context, students who show these characteristics are rewarded by teachers and school authorities (Lee,

2002), but students who are vocal are reprimanded by schools. Like most of the Asian American students, Indian students are also supposed to be highly disciplined obedient students and if they raise their voices against antagonism, envy, and harassment they are punished severely or are silenced by authorities.

The model minority myth is a political and racial discourse that treats all Asians as one “horde” without distinguishing their cultural differences. The acceptance and continuance of the model minority stereotype is a political act to mask oppression and marginalization of minorities. According to Goodwin (2003) the model minority discourse has accomplished three political aims without aggravating Asian Americans. First, by providing a distinguished status, externally it made Asians feel obliged and appreciative of white policymakers. It makes Asian Americans accept hegemonic conditions, and stay within parameters of conformity and compliance. It instills in Asian Americans the fear that they might lose their “prized status” if they demand something. Therefore, out of insecurity they behave as if they are powerless. Second, the model minority phenomenon overlooks the needs of Asian Americans. They are constantly reminded that they do not need or deserve help or assistance because they are successful academically and economically. The Asian Indian community has internalized this message and will not ask for assistance. Third, the model minority phenomenon has created separation among minorities. Other minorities perceive Asian Americans as rivals not to be trusted.

### **Model Minority Perpetuates Ethnic Rivalry and Racism**

McLaren (1994) argues that discourses of labeling and stereotyping cultural groups have negative consequences because they create conditions of “inner-ethnic rivalry” that lead to a “culture of victimization,” and negative competitive trends within people of color. The portrayal of Asian immigrants as model minorities has produced a culture of victimization among ethnic groups. McLaren states:

Displaying a form of ethnic absolution, government bureaucrats and pundits hold up Asian immigrants as model minorities in order to encourage inner-ethnic rivalry based on the ethos of competitive individualism and individual success...In this case the myth of meritocracy gets enforced by the punitive assumptions that every one in every group has an equal chance to become a model minority by confirming a group consensus. (McLaren quoted in Kincheloe, 1997)

This perspective explains the complexities of the model minority phenomenon. The irony is that education policymakers and politicians use the educational and economic accomplishments of Asian Indians to justify the notion of meritocracy and the slogan of equal opportunities for all. Thus, the model minority image helps to manipulate educational achievement as a means to create rivalry and envy among various ethnic groups.

In the specific context of Asian Indians, the model minority discourse has created more conflicts. The mainstream population perceives them as a population that does not

belong to European, African American, Latino, or other Asian races. In mainstream society the term Asian refers most often to the oriental Asian population, not to Indians from India. Therefore, they are a separate category of people who have succeeded but have to construct their space in the mainstream society. Finally, the most important accomplished goal is that the model minority discourse has been successful in involving Asian Americans in internalization of their subjugation and marginalization.

### **Model Minority Stereotype: A Myth in Asian Indian Context**

*Asian Students Pay a Price for Their Model Minority Image.* Asian American students are stereotyped as super achievers and are highly concentrated in science, technology, medicine, and economics. The model minority myth portrays Asian Indian students as the top strata of American academia and a minority to be modeled and respected. However, positive stereotyping has its downsides. Cocchira (2004) argues that Asian students construct their identity on the basis of the stereotyped reputation of their group and are expected to perform to the stereotyped high standards. Like other Asian students, Asian Indian students live under a stereotype threat that expects them to excel and reprimands them for failing to live up to high expectations. The study by Ho, Driscoll, and Loosbrock (1998) reported that on a mathematics test Asian American students had to pay a heavier price for failing the test. The graders of the test penalized Asian American students with fewer points compared to white students who performed identically on the test. Asian Americans have to live up to the high expectations of the model minority and they are overly concerned about their grades. According to Cherian

and Bodenhausen (2000), “positive stereotypes (at least when they form the basis for salient public expectations) can place a considerable burden on members of the stereotyped group, adversely affecting their performance in the stereotyped domain” (p. 401). Although positive stereotyping is often instrumental in motivating students and boosting their esteem, it can be conducive in producing stereotype threats. Positive stereotyping is also damaging to students’ identity because it produces pressure and unrealistic demands on students. The positive image of Asian Indian students as “whiz kids” or “academic stars” is counterproductive and can be dysfunctional to students who are labeled so (Schafer, 2002, p. 39). Asian Indian students, very often face their parents’ as well as criticism from their teachers for not meeting the demands of the expectation of being a “whiz kid.” These high expectations often cause depression and anxiety. Although the school dropout rate is very low among Indian students, it is increasing among Asian Indians.

*Asian Indians Have Low Rates of Economic Return Compared to Whites.*

Although Asian Indians have attained very high socioeconomic and educational gains in American society, they face discrimination and are not rewarded for their accomplishments when compared to whites with the same educational and professional backgrounds. The study by Barringer and Kassenbaum (1989) found out that although there is an unusual concentration of Asian Indians in professional and managerial occupations and similarly there is an unusually high percent of both Asian Indian men and women with higher college degrees, yet they get lower returns for their expertise compared to whites with same or less qualifications. Their research indicates the glass-ceiling effect Asian Indians experience despite their academic achievements. The model

minority assumption is that Asian Indians will not raise their voices against discrimination and will bear it silently.

*The Model Minority Phenomenon Is a Power Game.* It is a way to control the immigrant population with positive reinforcement. The model minority status is defined by the dominant group, so it instills the notion of disempowerment in Asian immigrants. Asian Americans identify with the model minority image and are concerned to maintain their positively stereotyped image. In the context of learning and schooling, Asian parents feel disempowered and do not get involved in school affairs. Often they are afraid to fight for their children's needs and do not demand assistance from school or government. Parents perceive schools as unwelcoming and hostile and often prefer to stay silent and not to complain.

*Model Minority Discourse Influences Students' Identity Formation.* The model minority discourse influences the schooling experience and identity formation of Asian Indian students; and the schooling experiences influence students' identity formation. Asian Indian students are forced to "interpret and assert identity" in light of expectations held by schools and their families (Asher, 1999, p. 267). According to Asher the model minority stereotype challenges students with high academic expectations, thus creating stress for students. Asian Indian students are constantly constructing and reconstructing their identities in the shadow of stress, high expectations, and compliance. Their marginalized identities are defined by others who have power, and students struggle in school to hold on to the identities that are ascribed to them. As hegemonic powers shape their thinking, Asian Indian students construct their own identity as high achievers. They are always under pressure and fear of losing their identity: "if I do not excel I will be

losing my identity of a high achiever.” According to Goodwin (2003), “Asian Americans are named and defined by others; we have found ourselves in between, neither belonging to the majority nor to the minority” (p. 22).

### **The Role of Educational, Cultural and Social Capital in Schooling and Achievement**

*Simran: My mom and my dad are doctors. My mom has an M.B.A degree also. Mom would be like me to be a gynecologist. I would like to be a doctor but I am not going for an M.B.A. like my mom. My mom is s respected by all the doctors she works with. I would like to have a life like hers. Well, it is a lot of hard work but I do not mind it. I am in high school and if I can handle this internship, I think I can handle Harvard. My mom wanted me to apply to Harvard for undergrad work. I would like to go to Brown University. But dad says the Harvard Med program is very good, and if I get my undergrad from Harvard it might be easier to get into Harvard Med School.*

*Amar: I want to be a lawyer. I think I can get into Cordozo Law School. My friend's sister was not very smart but she made it to Cordozo Law School. My mom has a master's in psychology from India and my dad has an M.B.A. from India. I am not very good in science and I do not like math or computers. My parents think law might be a good field for me. I will try.*

These stories by Asian Indian students show that educated parents motivate their children for higher education and guide them in their college or career choices. I do not mean that only educated parents have the capacity to guide their children; my argument is that educated parents are better equipped to guide their children in educational matters. Literature on the influence of parental educational attainment on their children's education reveals that paternal and maternal education has strong "positive relationship" with children's educational attainment (e.g., Poch, 2003; Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Teachman & Paasch, 1996). Parental education, parents' social class status, and parental professions are determinants of their children's educational attainment and future success (Louie, 2004; Lee, 2004; Tuan, 1998). In the context of a family's influence on students' school performance and their role in goal setting for their children, Anderson (1999) introduces the concept of "decent" and street families. Decent families instill a sense of responsibility in children and "They value hard work and self-reliance and are willing to sacrifice for their children: they harbor hopes for a better future for their children" (p. 38).

Park's study (2003) reveals that educated parents influenced and determined their children's academic achievement through their high expectations. Asian Indian students internalize their parents' high expectations and often try to fulfill their parents' wishes. Park says that "Students, whose parents had higher educational levels, had higher educational aspirations, and students whose parents had lower educational levels, had lower educational aspirations" (p. 150). Educated parents are role models for their children and their educational backgrounds are an important variable in explaining their

children's educational aspirations. Park (2003) analyzes, "Perhaps because the majority of Korean and Chinese parents were college graduates, they may have served as role models for their children, and expected, quite naturally, their children go to college or graduate or professional schools like themselves," (p. 150). Thus students' scholastic attainments and their will to learn are associated with their parents' levels of education.

Immigrant children and youth build their capital on their parental human, education, and social capital. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) define human capital:

The skills that immigrants bring along in the form of education, job experience, and language knowledge are referred to as their *human capital* and plays a decisive role in the economic adaptation...by and large, educated immigrants are in a much better position and are more likely to succeed occupationally and economically in their new environment (p. 46).

Economic success of immigrants in the host society is determined by their human capital, education, and the perception of their home country in mainstream society. Economic success does not solely depend on human capital; however, by large with human and education capital immigrants gain economic success and higher social status in the host society and pass on their capital to their children. Parents with higher levels of human, education, and cultural capital provide symbolic and material resources that are essential for school success.

Figure 2.1 **Conversion of Parental Capital into a Higher Level of Capital by Immigrant Youths: A Model**

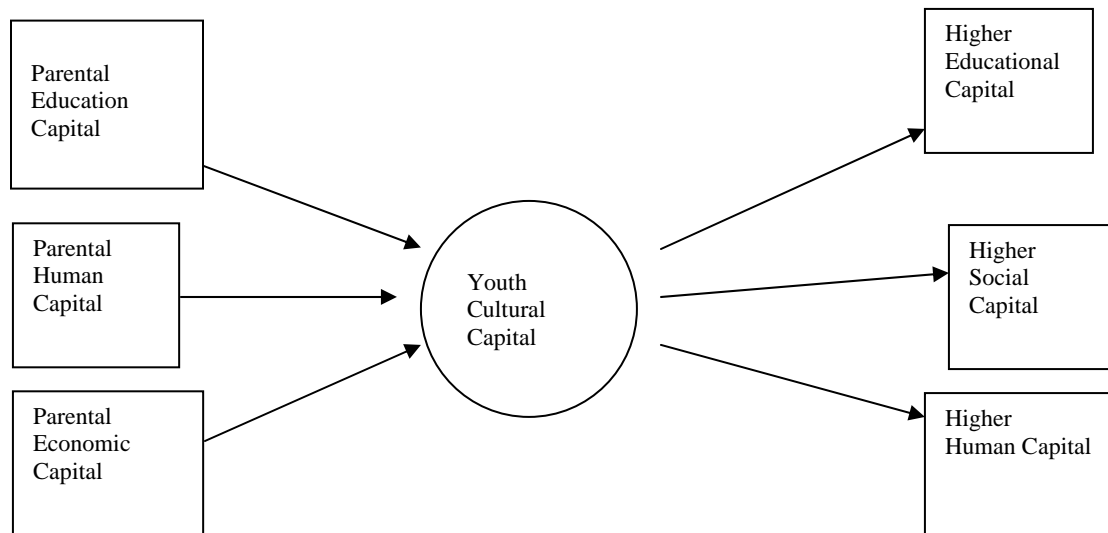


Figure 2.1 shows the conversion of capital into educational, social and human capital by immigrant youths. This process of capital conversion by immigrant youth is not always smooth, but it explains the overall high achievement of their school success. There are many other dimensions of the immigrant adaptation process that influence immigrant children’s school performance. Many external factors impede this conversion process for many immigrant children. While discussing academic achievement of Asian Indians one needs to have understanding of “their cultural, educational, and social capitals” that they carried with them from “back home” and their efforts to build new capitals by assimilating into and adapting to ways of their host society. Asian Indian immigrants carry with them human, educational, and cultural capital that paved their way in a foreign land. A large segment of early immigrants, for example Sikhs in California,

did not come with professional degrees. However, their cultural capital motivated their children to gain academic qualifications in America.

Bourdieu (1979) emphasizes the importance of parental educational and cultural capital in children's school outcomes. He describes three kinds of capital—cultural, social, and symbolic—that one acquires from one's habitus. Cultural capital includes all knowledge, skills, dispositions, linguistic abilities, and all conscious and un-conscious attributes that can help or hinder an individual's goals attainment. Thus, cultural capital is comprised of one's resources to interact with other's habitus, which is one's way of being in the world or logic of practice.

Social capital is an individual's resources that they use to influence others and construct social relationships for goal attainment. An individual's thinking process, their ability to influence people around them positively, their dispositions, and the art or mechanism of presenting themselves in a context effectively are translated in social capital. Individuals' social capital enables them to create social networks, social trust, and facilitates development of positive behavior. Social capital is earned by interacting with other individuals' cultural capital and individuals accomplish complex goals through the mechanism of social capital. For example, in a classroom setting, interaction between teachers' cultural capital and students' cultural capital creates the social capital of teacher and student. The interaction of a teacher's habitus and a student's habitus generates social capital. According to Bourdieu social capital is a "capital of social connections." Students bring their parents' social and cultural capital with them to school and cultivate a social capital of their own. By creating social capital in the classroom students create connections with teachers and their peers, which facilitate their learning. This learning

depends on whether they employ their capital to create negative or positive social relationships in school.

Symbolic capital is one's symbolic status and one's identity (Bourdieu, 1980). One can earn symbolic capital in the form of respect, trust, or power to use one's agencies. In a classroom setting, a student earns symbolic capital by being smart, a good speaker, a high achiever, and also by following classroom norms. With symbolic capitals students create their identity.

Figure 2.2 **Cyclical Process of Capital Construction: A Model**

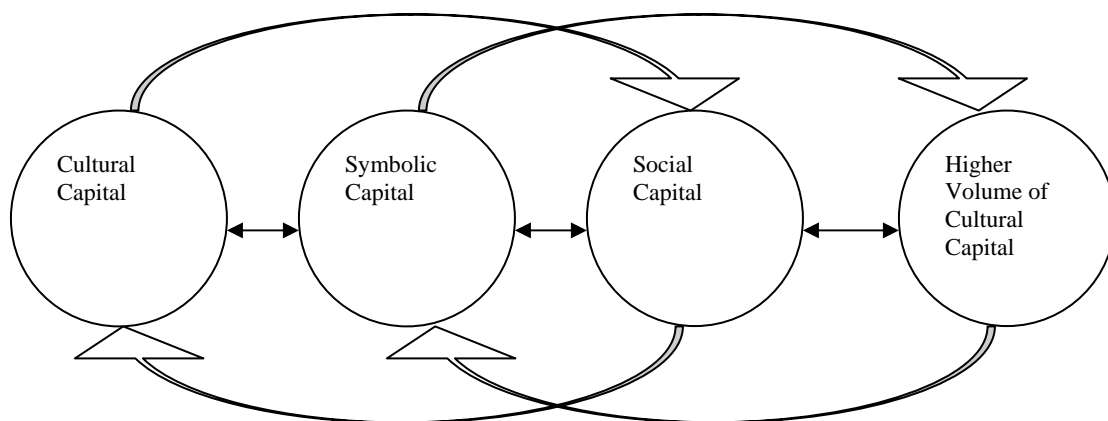


Figure 2.2 explains the cyclical process of capital cultivation by youth in school.

A combination of cultural and educational capital enables individuals to attain high academic achievement and gain the symbolic and social capital that is required for school success.

Asian Indian immigrants' educational and cultural capital, strong work ethic, high respect for education, and docile behavior mediate their children's academic achievements and motivate them to deal positively with the challenges of schooling and strive for upward mobility through education. Bourdieu (1979) explains the relationship among inherited cultural capital, educational capital, and schooling:

Given that scholastic success mainly depends on inherited cultural capital and on the propensity to invest in the educational system (and that the latter varies with the degree to which maintained or improved social position depends on success), it is clear why the proportion of pupils in a given school or college who come from the culturally richest fractions rises with the position of that school in the specifically academic hierarchy (measured for example, by previous academic success). (p.122)

Bourdieu's theory of academic success and academic hierarchy has a deterministic quality to its approach. However, it explains the high concentration of Asian Indian students in elite schools and high-ranking colleges. Professional or nonprofessional, most Indian immigrants wish to send their children to high-ranking colleges because of their belief that by attending those educational institutions their children may have a better life and they might gain social capital and power alongside the dominant group of society. Asian Indian immigrants know that as a minority group they do not have any political and social power in America. However they realize that by using their educational capital and acquiring professional status through education they

can gain power in the dominant society. They gain social capital by making social connections through their professional and educational contacts.

Bourdieu (1979) points out that professionals “invest in their children’s education but also and specially in cultural practices which symbolize possession of the material means of maintaining a bourgeois life-style and which provide a social capital, a capital of social connections, honorability and respectability that is often essential in winning and keeping the confidence of high society and with a clientele, and may be drawn on, for example, in making a political career” (p. 122). This statement explains why Asian Indian immigrants and their children are overrepresented in elite schools and colleges. Coming from a society that is built upon a caste system, Indians are familiar with the hierarchy of caste and class. They use education to achieve economic and political power. They are aware of their marginalized position in American society and realize that they can acquire upper-class status by gaining power through education.

### **Teacher Expectations: Construction of Symbolic, Social, and Cultural Capital**

In a classroom setting a teacher’s attitude mediates students’ academic achievement and their capital-building process. A teacher’s positive attitude towards students, their positive interactions with students, willingness to step into students’ cultural field and to understand their students’ cultural capital motivates students to gain higher academic achievement. In the social structure of the classroom a student’s performance very much depends how he or she is perceived by the teacher. Students who

are expected to demonstrate higher levels of achievement perform better than students who are expected to perform poorly. Teacher dynamics plays an important role in the acquisition of symbolic and social capital. Consequently, a teacher's classroom practices with students can create a structure that can impede or expand students' social and cultural capital construction.

Figure 2.3 **Teacher's Expectations and Students' Capital Cultivation: A Model**

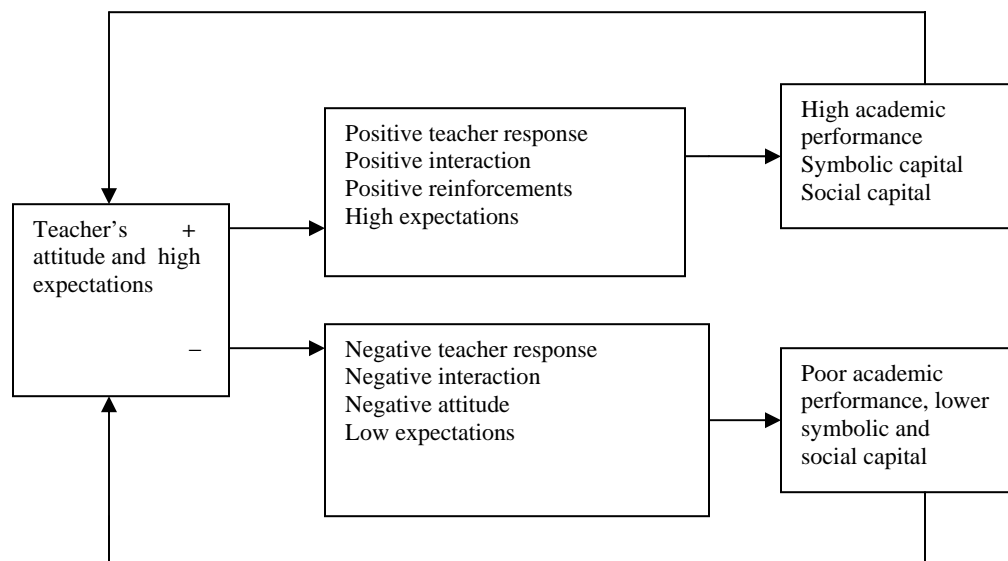


Figure 2.3 explains relationship among teacher's expectations, academic performance, and acquisition of capital. A smooth and positive exchange of cultural capital between teacher and students creates a social structure that is conducive to building mutual trust. In a structure of trust and respect students build symbolic and social capital. For successful academic performance in school it is essential that teachers and students exchange their cultural capital and create social capital (Bourdieu, 1998;

Tobin, 2002). I observed that my respondents of a Special Placement (SP) science class had earned their teacher's trust and respect by their behavior and high achievement. Their science teacher had high expectations for them. Their teacher's high expectations and positive attitude towards them enabled them to build a social capital that is necessary for school success. The building of social and cultural capital in the classroom increases students' learning and attainment. With a higher level of social capital, immigrant children navigate their adaptation process smoothly.

In the case of Asian Indian students' schooling it is evident that their parents' educational and cultural capital, their social class, strong family structure, and interactions in school play catalytic roles. Indian students use their academic achievement, as well as their inherited cultural and educational capital, to build social capital in school. Indian students' cultural capital, including respect for the teacher, docile behavior, and hard work, allows them to step into the teacher's cultural capital and earn the symbolic capital of the teacher's respect for them. Simultaneously, they earn honor, self-esteem, and create a positive image in school. Thus, by gaining symbolic capital Indian students make positive social connections. Bourdieu (1980) describes symbolic capital as honor and prestige that is accumulated by one's conscious or unconscious efforts or strategies and also as "credit of honorability" (p.121). The symbolic capital influences one's academic achievement positively and helps in building social capital. Bourdieu (1979) emphasizes the role of cultural, educational, and social capital in one's life by stressing that human beings need capital and resources to access knowledge. Individuals' cultural, educational, and social capital influence their schooling and learning. In school settings, students constantly add layers of new capital on the

existing capital that they bring from the family. Thus, the learning process in school settings involves continuous production of capital.

Research focusing on socioeconomic and educational attainment (e.g., Zeng & Xie, 2003; Poch, 2003; Nakhaie & Curtis, 1998) suggests Asian American children's educational outcomes are positively affected by their parents' educational attainments, years of stay in the United States, family structure, and their age of arrival. Poch (2003) refers to the 1996 General Social Survey in Canada "found that paternal and maternal education continues to have strong, positive relationships with children's educational attainment, controlling for social class" (p. 9). Although there is a lack of research focusing on educational achievement of Asian Indians, the research on South Asian immigrants suggests that effect of parental education is highly significant in predicting the educational performance of South Asian students.

Bourdieu's idea of habitus and capitals helps understand Asian Indian students' schooling experiences. According to Bourdieu one's habitus enable him or her to acquire capital and guide their experiences and their actions. Bourdieu explains:

The habitus acquired in family underlies the structuring of school experiences, and the habitus transformed by schooling, itself diversified in turn underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences (e.g., the reception and assimilation of the message of the culture industry or work experience, and so on), from restructuring to restructuring. (p. 87)

Individuals' habitus restrict or broaden their class, power, economic, and social positions. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) viewed habitus as a "system of lasting, transposable dispositions, which integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (p. 83). According to Bourdieu the enactment of one's habitus results in acquiring capitals. Individuals construct habitus through their socialization in their primary world and their habitus enable them to acquire various capitals, power, and success in the society they live in. One's attitude and dispositions toward learning and schooling, one's behavior and interactions, and use of language are part of their habitus that they acquire through their primary socialization in the family. School success and failure are correlated with ones' habitus and cultural capital. Bourdieu used the concept of capital to explain complexities of pedagogic action, school authority, social reproduction, educational systems, pedagogical connection, and work of schooling. Lave (1988) interpreted habitus as structured dispositions. In the context of schooling and learning MacLeod (1995) described habitus as a cluster of family structure, ethnicity, educational history, peer interaction, and social class.

The concept of habitus and capital describe social reproduction and internalized values. Bourdieu's deterministic theory of habitus and conversion of capital fails to explain how many external factors, such as race, gender, political, and historical, besides habitus and capital influence one's academic achievement and life success. However in the context of Asian Indian students' school experience Bourdieu's concept of habitus is helpful in explaining Asian Indian school performance and experience.

Coleman (1988) builds on the idea of social capital and analyzes the influence of social capital on children's academic performance and their schooling experiences. The

variability in minority children's academic performance can be explained by the enactment of their social capital in school. Coleman emphasizes that students' social capital plays a very important role in building relationships with teachers, peers, school principals, guidance counselors, and other school officials. Simultaneously, it determines their attitude towards school. The social network that students establish in school predicts their school success. In his analytical framework, Noguera (2003, 2004) explores the role of social capital in migrant children's school success. According to him schools are the "sites" where students create social capital in the form of social relations. The social relationships that they establish with other students and teachers help them create their own identities. The quality of their social relationships and their negative or positive identity shape their attitude towards school, which then translates into poor or good academic performance. Noguera (2004) says "social class influences the ability of students and families to obtain valued educational goods. For this reason, in addition to social capital, much of the current research on immigrants and schooling, like earlier research in the sociology of education, has concentrated on themes of mobility, socialization, and social reproduction"(p.182). The analytical framework of social capital enables researchers to understand the complexities of the schooling of immigrant minority students and other minorities. The focus on social capital enables a researcher to explore how certain social relationships negate or promote successful schooling.

## **Role of Agency and Structure in Learning**

Asian Indian students' school performance and their achievement cannot be separated from their cultural context. Bourdieu's concept of scheme and habitus and agency and structure provides understanding of the connection between micro and macro social realities. Individuals' interactions and their agency (ability to produce) are guided by structure (social limitations) in which they live. Bourdieu sees learning and school experiences as a conversion of one's habitus and their capital. Sewell (1992) sees learning as a cultural production that is made of structure, practices, schemas, and resources. Inspired by Bourdieu's idea of habitus and schemes, Sewell came up with an agency and structure theory that conceives culture as a system of symbols and meanings as well as a system of practices. Bourdieu uses the term "mental structure" for schemes and "the world of objects" for resources in his concept of habitus. Sewell builds upon Bourdieu's ideas of the duality of schemas and resources that guide one's actions and interactions. Like Bourdieu's schemes and resources, Sewell's agency and structure both represent assumptions that guide our actions. In the context of schooling and the learning culture as a system of practices refers to a power relationship between teachers and students, teaching practices, positive or negative discipline reinforcements, and students' behavior in the classroom. In school or classroom settings individuals use various symbols to accomplish their cultural practices. Sewell (1999) says "The employment of a symbol can be expected to accomplish a particular goal only because the symbols have more or less determinate meanings—meanings specified by their systematically structured relation to other symbols" (p. 47). In a classroom setting symbols can be

rewards for good behavior, homework certificates for excellent and regular homework, and suspension from school for demonstrating disruptive behavior in class. However each symbol is attached with another symbol. Good behavior can be a symbol of submissive behavior that is not healthy for that student's identity; suspension from school would be demeaning for the student. According to Sewell the mechanisms of symbols and practices of any given culture are what constitute structure. Structures are made of schemas and resources that are dialectically related.

Sewell (1992) defines structures as “sets of mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that social reproduction” (p.19). The relationship between schemas and resources mediate actors' agency that are their *capacity to reinterpret and mobilize* sets of resources. Actors use their resources to interpret or reproduce old schemas and create new ones. Actors use schemas to empower or restrict their agencies. Asian Indian high achievers use their agency in school to attain higher levels of academic achievement but many Asian Indian students are using their agency to “fit-in” popular culture.

Sewell (1992) explains that cultural production, social interactions, and social life occur in multiple fields. Fields have porous boundaries and fields can be nested within one another or they can overlap. Individuals participate in different fields and they cultivate culture in each field with schemas that are available to them in that particular field. Cultural production and cultural practices are enacted consciously or unconsciously in accordance with one's agency. Individuals simultaneously participate in more one field and they experience agency | structure relationships that are innate in that field. Consciously or unconsciously cultural capital cultivated in one field is used by

individuals in another field for goal accomplishment. In the context of schooling, students and teachers are involved in different fields simultaneously and they use capital of one field in another field to reach their goal. In a productive learning environment teachers and students cross boundaries of their field and learning occurs. However, when teachers and students field do not intersect contradictions appear. Because fields have porous boundaries enactment of culture from one field mediates cultural production in other fields. For example, Asian Indian students' school experiences are mediated by their cultural production in various fields outside and inside school. They use their cultural capital to gain academic success in the classroom fields. Many Asian Indian students cross boundaries and interact with their teachers' field and accomplish their goal of high achievement.

Figure 2. 4 **Fields with Porous Boundaries: A Model**

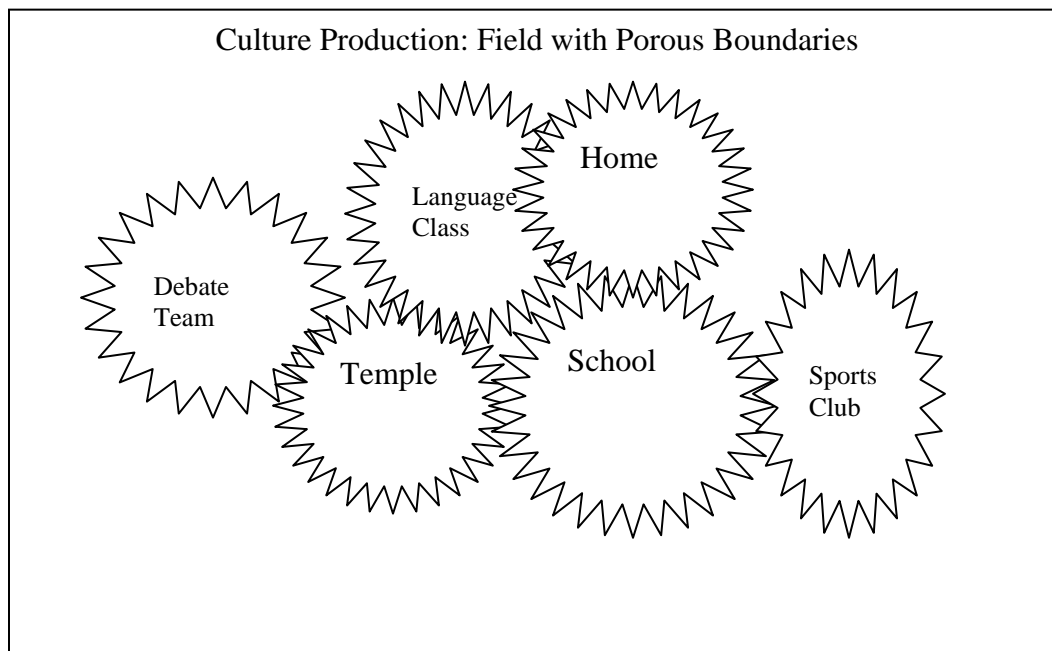


Figure 2.4 explains the cultural in fields with porous boundaries. Asian Indian students cultivate cultural capital simultaneously in different fields. Since fields have porous boundaries, the culture of fields has an effect on one another. Cultural capital moves across boundaries and contributes to shaping events in fields other than those produced there. The conception of porous boundaries and fields explains the fluidity of social relationships and social interactions. Individuals use their agency to access resources/schemas of a field and cultivate cultural capital. The accession of resources is associated with success, contradictions, and conflicts. Students who use their cultural capital to access resources of the classroom field achieve success and cultivate higher cultural capital. However, students who are unsuccessful in negotiating cultural exchange and cultural production often experience conflict.

### **Achievement Ideology: A Schema**

Sewell (1992) views schemas as a source of agency. He says “Agency arises from the actor’s knowledge of schemas” (p. 20). Thus, schemas are one’s capability to apply existing schemas in new situations and the ability to control their resources. The achievement ideology of American society is the dominant ideology of the Asian Indian minority group. They migrated to the United States with this ideology and this schema guides their children’s schooling. Credentialism and the achievement/success ideology place great emphasis on an individual’s high academic achievement and an individual’s merit. In a stratified society like the United States, high academic achievements are considered a gateway to economic success. American school culture is dominated by this achievement ideology. School culture forces students to internalize the ideology that hard

work earns them good grades, and a ticket to college, followed by high-paying jobs and economic success. The common belief is that one's economic success depends on one's inherent intellect rather than cultural, economic, and linguistic experiences. The *achievement ideology* of the dominant mainstream culture celebrates "individual intellectual abilities" and credits solely individuals for their success or failures (MacLeod, 1995). Thus, the prevalent *achievement ideology* trains students to attain high academic achievement and gain economic success in society. Accordingly, the achievement ideology confirms a positive stereotype that one's academic success is an inherent trait and that failure in school is the result of an inherent deficit or the incapability to succeed academically.

The Asian Indian immigrant minority group endorses an achievement ideology that promotes meritocracy and hold students responsible for their success or failure (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991). Asian Indians come from a culture that emphasizes higher education and believes that education is the gateway to economic success and prosperity. Not all but a majority of Asian Indian students are motivated by their families' and dominant society's achievement ideology. Standardized tests are viewed as doors for college. Indian students are supposed to score high on those tests because elite and other goods colleges require high scores. Thus Indian students attempt to gain high achievement in school and college, and get economic rewards by commanding greater professional and occupational prestige and higher income. Asian families want their sons and daughters to "be doctors or lawyers" and "pursue occupations that held high promise for financial security and thus were practical and safe" (Louie 2004). Although achievement ideology promotes social stratification, legitimizes social reproduction, and

can be oppressive, Asian Indians use their achievement ideology to motivate their children for better school performance.

### **Enactment of Agency in Different Cultural Structures**

Agency is an individual's capacity or power to act within a structure. Agency is directed by individuals' arrays of schemas and resources that are available in their cultural structure. An Indian student, who enters an American school with a good knowledge of the English language, and uses his agencies creatively, performs better in school and scores higher grades on essay writing and the verbal component of standardized tests than does a Latino student with limited English proficiency. In the same fashion a student who attends math enrichment courses and has a family-provided math tutor gets better grades on math tests and has better chances to be admitted to college. Asian American students come from family structures that have educational values similar to the dominant culture. Although Asian immigrants are marginalized in the dominant society, they avail themselves of the same educational opportunities and perform as well as the dominant population. They exercise their agency to earn good grades and behave according to the norms of school structure. They form their identities as high achievers and as good students in the classroom. However, there are Asian Indian students who do not use their agencies constructively because resources are not available to them and they do not fit into their parents' and schools' achievement ideology schema. These students get involved in counterproductive activities that lead to downward

mobility. Individuals' agency is influenced by agency of others. A family's collective agency influences children's agencies to perform in school. Sewell (1992) explains:

Agency is collective as well as individual...Agency entails an ability to coordinate one's actions with others and against others, to form collective projects, to persuade, to coerce, and to monitor the simultaneous effects of one's own and others' activities. (p. 21)

Asian Indian students' school performance is directed by their individual and collective agencies. Using their cultural and educational capital as a collective agency, Asian Indian students succeed in school. Students use their existing resources for learning new skills and acquiring new resources. Individuals use different levels and types of agency to gain social positions in the classroom and in society.

### **Agency in Different Fields: Triple Quandary**

Human experiences are collections of the experiences of different fields. All minority Asian Indian students' experiences are distributed in different fields. The fields are fluid and have porous boundaries and individuals change their fields depending on the activities in which they engage. Individuals operate in multiple fields and use their agencies to access resources of each field either productively or counterproductively. In a school and learning context, students operate in three fields: classroom, school, and family. The successful schooling experiences depends on how well students use their

agencies within each field and how well they try to empower their learning and assimilate their resources of one field to another, in spite of the differences that exist between their home culture and their school culture.

Asian Indian students are centered in three fields: mainstream culture, minority culture (status), and ethnic (Indian) culture. Their identities are shaped by their experiences in these three different fields that, at the same time, are overshadowed by the dominant culture.

Figure 2.5 **Asian Indian Youths Nested in Triple Quandary: A Model**

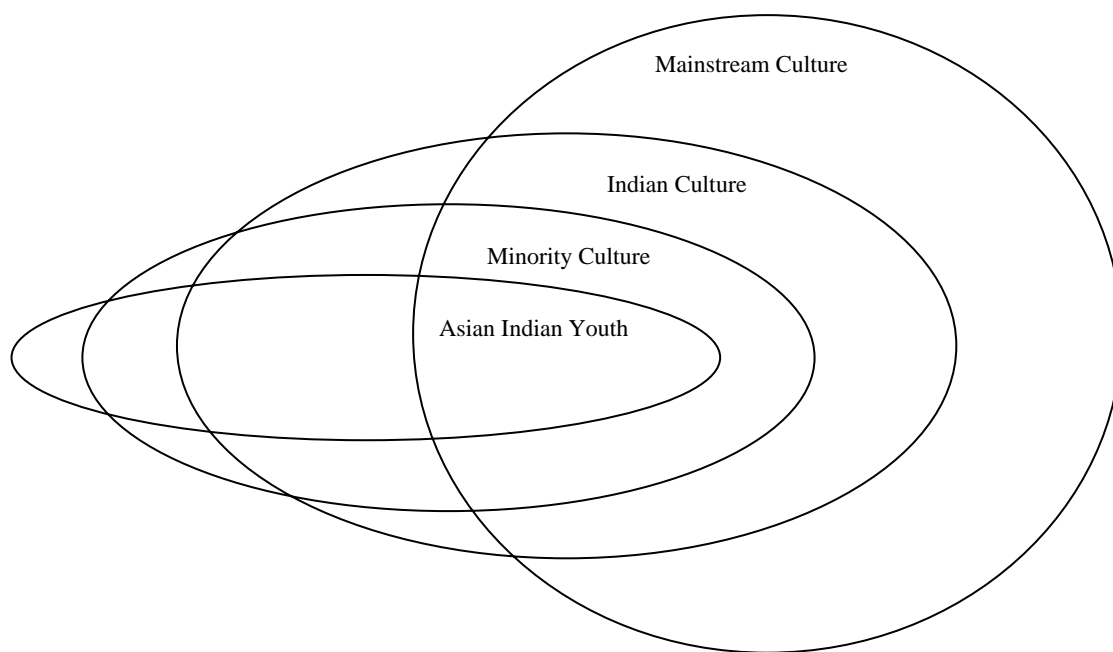


Figure 2.5 explains Asian Indian youths position within three cultures. The idea of a triple quandary that Boykin (1986) introduced in the context of schooling of African American children is relevant for the schooling of Asian Indian children as well. Asian

Indian students must use the resources of each field to succeed in the mainstream culture. Their minority experiences are conceived through their exposure to social, economic, and political hegemony. The minority experiences influence their ethnic identities and their Indian culture. Asian Indian experiences accumulated in triple quandary are experiences of hegemony. Hegemonic conditions conceal oppression and marginalization by manipulating the oppressed to comply willingly. Asian Indian students' academic achievements and better school performance are not celebrated by the dominant society; instead they are used to create hegemony. Boykin (1986) says that "one's identity is based on what one acquires and possesses—and egalitarian conformity" (p. 67). Boykin has discussed how African-American children construct their identity and negotiate multiple challenges of school and cultural differences between them and their teachers. African-American students also struggle to maintain their identity in an environment where the teachers are predominantly white and student population is diverse. Boykin asserts that school follow Eurocentric values and classroom practices are based on Euro-American values. Often these Eurocentric values create problems for minority students because they demand conformity. In American society, second-generation Asian students experience conflicts in an environment in which they are constantly challenged by cultural conflicts mediated by Eurocentric values. Their identity is based on their experiences of conformity to the dominant culture.

Asian Indian academic and economic success in mainstream society depends on how well they conform to norms of whiteness. Asian Indian students try to maintain their "Indian-ness" at home and at school. Their ethnic identity and cultural schema is constantly challenged by pressures from home and dominant culture. At home they are

supposed to maintain their ethnic identity and at school they are expected to follow norms of whiteness. This creates tension for Asian Indian youth. In school the second-generation Asian Indians are trying to reproduce their identity as model minority. Simultaneously, at home they to practice their ethnicity and expected by their parents to retain their ethnic cultural values. Rudrappa (2002) explains this tension:

With an increasing backlash against immigration in American politics, the average Indian in the United States strives hard to reproduce herself/himself in the public sphere as a model minority. The workplace, the school, the playground are examples of public spaces where immigrants need to prove their ability to fit into a ‘white’ world. On the other hand, in the private sphere of home the immigrant individual attempts to cultivate his/her Indian-ness self-consciously. (p. 90)

Asian Indian students are constantly struggling to maintain their Indian-ness within the framework of whiteness and their negative ascribed minority status and at the same time they are expected to reproduces their identity as model minority. Although Asian Indian students are doing well in school they do not blend into racialized American culture because of their cultural values and ethnicity. Likewise their parents, Asian Indian youth try to project themselves as a good-minority in mainstream society where anti-immigrant sentiment is increasing. Despite their positive image in a multicultural society the second-

generation Asians “still encounter moderate levels of prejudice and discrimination” and “regardless of the level of acculturation to American society” Asians are treated as foreigners and aliens (Min, 2002, p. 9). Asian Indian students’ school experiences are influenced by complexities of their minority status and ethnic identity.

### **Asian Indian Students: Contradictions and Resistance in Goal Attainment**

*Lila (Indian): I am worried for my son. He was an A student in elementary school. In the eighth grade he got friendly with bad students. He says he has to be their friend; if he does not hang out with them they will beat him. Now he does not like to study; he wastes his time outside home with his American friends. His father died last year. I do not know what to do. (A parent)*

Many times contradictions appear because Asian Indian students counteract to learning mainly as a result of peer pressure or the ignorance of teachers and school officials. In the context of Asian Indian students’ learning and achievement, contradictions and oppositional behaviors appear due to cultural differences, peer envy, and in a few cases to linguistic barriers. According to MacLeod (1995) members of a subculture or subhabitus are often involved in oppositional behavior to protest unfair treatment of mainstream culture. Contradictions and resistances appear because of Asian Indian students’ negative experiences in classrooms and schools and often negate goals of scholastic attainment.

According to activity theory perspective, in any given activity participants achieve their goals through interactions with tools, rules, resources, and division of labor (Engstrom,1999). Rules are schemas, values, and beliefs. Thus rules are abstract and they can be explicit and implicit. Resources are human, symbolic, and material. Students come to school with their resources for learning. Students' scholastic attainments depend on their successful use of material and symbolic resources, as well as on how well they use their cultural and social capital for learning. Low achievement, lack of confidence, and failure are a result of contradictions that appear between resources and students. Contradictions appear due to students' inability to use their cultural and social capital successfully. Often in order to earn their peers' respect, Asian Indian students try to ignore classroom rules and their own symbolic resources, and deviate from goal achievement.

Asian Indian students' learning and academic achievements are a collective activity of family, students, and school. Research in the area of parental influence and aspiration show that Asian American parents influence their children's academic achievement, place considerable value on education, and very closely monitor their children's education (Fejgin, 1995; Schneider & Lee, 1990). Thus, in a classroom setting goal achievement is a collective activity. The goal of both teacher and family is to enable students to learn and perform better, and the goal of the students is to learn and gain academic success. However, contradictions arise when Asian Indian students do not apply their resources and succumb to peer- pressures or teachers' negative attitudes.

Thus, students' educational aspirations and confidence are an outcome of the high expectations of teachers and family, teachers' positive attitudes towards students, and

students' abilities to use material and symbolic resources successfully and to adhere to rules. In learning activities, students and teachers use physical, human, and symbolic resources to achieve their goals. Nevertheless, there are contradictions that appear due to frictions between resources students and teachers bring to the classroom in the form of their cultural capital. In a classroom setting, if teacher and students successfully use their cultural capital to build social capital, then learning and teaching occur smoothly. Social capital is the most important element of active student participation in the classroom.

## **Asian Indians: A Voluntary Immigrant Minority**

### **Comparative Model of Minority Performance**

*Rita: I am a pediatrician and I want my daughter to be a doctor or a dentist. I came to the United States in 1979 with my husband who came here in 1977. After coming to New York, I had to take the ECFMG exam to earn a residency in any of the hospitals. My husband and I both were students those days. We worked very hard to pass our exams and find a job in a hospital. I passed my exam and got a residency in a hospital in Brooklyn. My husband also got a good job in a Queens, New York City hospital. Currently, we have our own medical practice. I hope my daughter works hard and gets admitted to a good college. She is in eighth grade. So far she is an "A" student. I hope she continues to be a good student.*

*Ratan: I came to America in 1986. I was an engineer in India. I had a good job but I wanted my children to have a better education and better opportunities. I could not find a good engineering job in New York so I joined an Indian construction company. Though I do not have an engineering job, financially I am doing better than I would have done as an engineer. I consider myself very lucky in terms of my children's education. My son is a doctor and my daughter earned a Masters in business management from Columbia University.*

All these immigrants are from different regions of India, and they have different educational backgrounds. However, their stories have a few significant elements in common. All of these immigrants came to the United States for a better life, valued hard work, and were highly motivated to succeed in a foreign country. The most common characteristics shared by all Asian immigrants were that they valued American degrees and had high academic expectations of their children. They emphasized that educational opportunities for them and their children were major reasons for their migration. They expressed hope and trust in academic institutions. These immigrants are representatives of all of the Indian immigrants who left their country with a strong will to face the challenges of a foreign country.

In order to explain immigrant minorities' status, their academic achievement or failure, and their children's schooling, Ogbu (1991) introduces the comparative model of minority performance and success. According to his categorization, immigrants who migrated to United States willingly in search of a better life are voluntary minorities. The minorities that were forced to come to the United States or became part of the United States without their consent are involuntary minorities. Ogbu argued that voluntary

immigrant minorities' and involuntary minorities' conceptual perceptions of the dominant society differ, and each reacts to social realities differently. Voluntary immigrant minorities do better in school and attain higher academic achievement because they interpret their struggle in their host country as an obstacle to overcome, not a permanent impediment blocking their way. Ogbu points out that unlike involuntary minorities who see prejudice and discrimination in a dominant society's institutionalized cultural system, voluntary minorities perceive discrimination and prejudice as an inevitable temporary aspect of the migration process and they try to deal with it silently. They compare their situation with that of their families or friends "back home" and find that they have more opportunities and better options in the host country, so they try to work hard to compete in the dominant society.

The Asian Indian migration to the United States is voluntary. Asian Indians come to the United States willingly for a better life and they try to construct a positive image in the dominant society by working hard and achieving economic success. They view educational gains in the United States as the most important factor of social mobility and economic success. Gibson and Ogbu (1991) explain this belief: "Sikhs believed that their best weapon against job discrimination is good education....They assumed that their children, armed with U.S. credentials, would be competitive in the American job market" (p.11).

Ogbu (1991) argues that *sociohistorical inequalities* of any given group appears as an *oppositional identity* and provokes disadvantaged groups to reject dominant values. Ogbu explains that because of their oppositional identities involuntary minorities view schooling as forced assimilation and react negatively to schooling. On the contrary,

voluntary immigrant minorities differ from involuntary minorities because their frames of reference and their cultural identities and norms are different. As a voluntary immigrant minority group, Asian Indians have migrated with a cultural model that values meritocracy and credentialism. They come from a hierarchical society and are aware of complexities of caste and class systems. Their cultural framework influences their positive attitude towards the American model of schooling.

Ogbu and Simons' (1998) cultural model theory emphasizes five key points that set voluntary minorities apart from involuntary minorities and affect their performance in the dominant society. The key points are: (1) a frame of reference that enables voluntary minorities to understand their present status and future possibilities in the dominant society, (2) an ideology of achieving success through education, (3) a collective identity, (4) a cultural frame of reference to evaluate proper behavior and interactions in the host society, and (5) a sense of trust and respect for the host society. The cultural model theory is helpful in understanding characteristics of Asian Indians' distinct achievement patterns in the United States.

## Conclusion

The cultural model theory interprets and describes differences in school performance of minority children. A minority group's cultural model is made up of that group's cultural values as well as their perception of education, and their interaction with dominant culture. Each cultural group, whether dominant or "ethnic/racial minority," is guided by its cultural characteristics and values. The Asian Indian children's school success and experiences can be understood in the context of Asian Indians' perception of the host society. As a voluntary minority group, Asian Indians trust the host country to a considerable degree, and because of a comparatively positive attitude and optimistic view it is easier for them to achieve success. Asian Indians migrated to the United States with the faith in the American education system and American economy. Their understanding of America is of a society that rewards hard work and meritocracy. It is their collective belief that in American society they can gain economic success through higher education. They find American political, economic, and social conditions problematic but negotiable. Voluntary minorities have the security of a "back home" support system and an option of returning to India if they decide to go back. Another factor that contributes to their academic success is that they feel that despite of prejudice and discrimination they can cross social and economic barriers.

Ogbu's theory of voluntary and involuntary minorities is deterministic because it explains the cultural aspect of minority success. His theory does not explain the impact of school context on academic failure or success of children of volunteer immigrants. In addition his theory does not explain how race, economic status, length of stay in

America, and the Americanization process influence academic achievement of minority children.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) emphasize that in order to understand the academic success of immigrant children one needs to understand how immigrants are received by the host society. According to Portes and Rumbaut, individual features of immigrants such as their education, experience, and linguistic assets or barriers and their reception by the host society and governmental agencies influence their success in the host society.

In their study of schooling and academic performance of Sikh children (immigrants from India) in California, Gibson and Bhachu (1991) noted that Sikh immigrants hold their children responsible for their own education and emphasized that it was their duty to make the best of the opportunities that American schools provide them. There are no excuses for failure in school and failing children are told that they did not work hard enough to excel. Gibson writes about Sikh immigrants' attitude towards education, saying "They perceive moreover, a strong correlation between the amount of education one has and the type of education one can expect to obtain. Parents and children alike view formal education as an investment in the future" (p. 73). Although Sikhs are aware of racial hostilities their children face in schools, they encourage their children not to use school problems as an excuse for poor academic performance; parents continue to stress great respect for education.

Yangsook Lee (1991) refers to three interrelated factors to explain the Asian immigrants' academic achievement in the dominant society. In order to have insight into the academic achievement of Asian immigrants one must have understanding of the minority group's cultural background and the structure of the host society, and to ground

this cultural and structural understanding in a historical context. Simultaneously, one must have insight into the interrelationships of family members, and children's interactions with their teachers and peers in school. All these interrelated factors influence the academic achievements of Asian Indian children. Asian Indian family structure and cultural values teach children obedience and respect for authority and these values are translated into positive school behaviors. Overall, Asian Indian immigrants in the United States hold education to be valued and view education as one of the most important assets necessary to succeed in their host country. Research in the area of educational attainment of Indian immigrants overwhelmingly supports this claim. According to Mehra (2003) Asian Americans view education as a source of power in American society, and education provides strength and confidence to fight prejudice and discrimination.

The cultural explanation of Asian Indian academic achievement explains school success but does not provide explanation of school failure. Cultural ecologists Ogbu (1991), Gibson (1988), and Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) provide insights into better school performance of voluntary minority children and argue that voluntary minorities believe education provides social mobility. Bourdieu's theory of habituéés and cultural capital explains academic achievement but fails to explain contradictions. The sociocultural theory focuses on agency and structure relationship and provides explanations of contradictions and school success, but this theory does not look into historical aspects of a minority success in mainstream society. However, in my ethnography I find all these theoretical lances have enabled me to analyze complexities of school experience of Asian Indian students.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

#### Introduction

This critical ethnography is contextualized within the critical constructivist paradigm and follows the phenomenological hermeneutic framework. This methodological approach has enabled me to examine the complex schooling experiences of Asian Indian students who are stereotyped in mainstream society as a model minority because of their academic achievements, specifically in math and science. This ethnographic study grows out of my years of experience in the United States as a member of an immigrant minority that has attracted attention of the mainstream by its distinct scholastic character and economic gains.

Because one or two methodological approaches would not have been adequate for investigating the complexities of the model minority phenomena and the experiences of Asian Indian students in school settings, I have used *bricolage*: a multiple method of inquiry because it provides me with multiple lenses to examine the phenomena of my interest. Kincheloe (2001) emphasizes the need for eclectic methods in critical ethnography and asserts that critical researchers can assume the role of a bricoleur. They may use an array of data-gathering techniques and interpretive theoretical frameworks for researching phenomena. As a critical researcher, in this study I have employed critical ethnography to observe the hegemonic nature of positive stereotyping, phenomenology/hermeneutics to study Indian students' experiences and interpret their lived experiences, and autobiography to get insight into their lifeworlds. In addition, I am using historiography to get the historical perspective of Asian Indian immigration and

accomplishments in the United States; and to compare Asian Indian experiences with experiences of other early immigrants. I draw on participant observation, interviews, audiotaping, and micro-analytic approaches to study Asian Indian students' experiences in school. I videotaped science and math lessons to study Asian students' identity formation in math and science classes and enactment of their agency in a classroom structure.

### **Research Questions**

This study focuses on the complexities of the schooling experiences of Asian Indian students within the context of the model minority stereotype. The framework of this study is guided by two themes: first, how the complexities of the model minority phenomenon affect the educational experiences of Asian Indian students in school settings; second, how the close family structure, and parental professional and educational attainment, influence Asian Indian students' academic achievements. Within this framework this study is guided by the following three questions and subsets of questions:

1. What problems and conflicts emerge from the social relationships produced by the model minority positive stereotyping of Asian Indian students?
  - In what ways do the problems and conflicts that arise from positive stereotyping impede students' agency in regard to their achievements and goals?
  - In what ways does the process of positive stereotyping expand students' agency in different fields of school?

- What strategies do Indian students use to cope with the contradictions and barriers that arise from positive stereotyping?
  - How do Asian Indian students relate to issues of racial and ethnic prejudice in school?
2. What is the relationship between parents' educational, cultural, and social capital and Asian Indian students' academic achievement?
- In what ways does parents' educational capital set high expectations in two fields: family and school?
  - Because high expectations generate pressure for students, how do they apply their agency to cope with pressure in both fields, school and home?
  - Why do Asian students strive for high achievement in math science and technology?
3. What role does cultural capital play in the identity shaping of Asian students in school?
- How do Asian Indian students' cultural and ethnic identities influence their social relationships in school?
  - What messages from home help Asian Indian students shape their identity in different fields?
  - What additive or subtractive messages do they receive from school pertaining to their ethnic identity and school performance?
  - How do they construct their identity in math and science classes?

This study describes the educational experiences of an Asian Indian immigrant minority in urban schools where Asian Indian students are depicted as hard-working, show a firm belief in meritocracy, demonstrate a strong commitment to education, but are assigned subordinate positions by the dominant population (Saran, 1985; Gibson, 1988).

### **Selection of Research Site**

I selected Mango Grove Middle School because of its unique demographic composition, high academic performance, and high reputation. This school has a significant number of 1.5 and native-born second-generation Asian Indians. The attendance rate of this school is 96 percent, which is very high compared to other urban schools in this region. Members of the instructional staff of this school are well qualified. Out of a total population of teachers, 85 percent have permanent certification and all teachers are teaching in their certification area. Most of the Asian Indians living in this area are new immigrants who migrated to the United States in the 1980s or 1990s. A large number of these Indians are homeowners and have professional or semiprofessional backgrounds. Lotus Valley is an ethnic neighborhood laced with a good number of Asian Indian grocery stores, restaurants, and other Indian businesses.

Mango Grove Middle School is one of the top schools of the New York City Department of Education in terms of students' academic achievements. According to 2002-2003 8<sup>th</sup> grade state test results, in science 87 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders met the high performance levels 3 and 4, and in mathematics 76 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders met the 3 and 4 performance levels. This means that students who scored at

level 4 exceeded the standards on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade science test; students who attained level 3 met the standards on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade science test. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics state test results revealed that 76 percent of Asian /Pacific Islander students met performance levels 3 and 4. In math Asian Indian students scored at the same level as white students and in science they scored second to the white students. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade English language arts state test results showed that Asian Indians attending this school did not have serious linguistic problems—65 percent of them performed at performance levels 3 and 4, 33% met level 2, and only 2 percent of Indian students were at level 1 in English proficiency.

### **Gaining Entry**

After selecting the school, my first step was to gain entry to the school to conduct my research. To my surprise during the first phone conversation, the principal of Mango Grove Middle School was very welcoming and receptive of my study. Immediately he set up an appointment with me for a meeting concerning my study. Our meeting turned out to very productive and promising. The principal was very impressed with my proposal and said that a research project like mine was needed in a school where the Asian Indian population is growing every year but teachers were not aware of needs of these students. I believe that two factors were instrumental in my easy entry to the research site. First, my ethnic identity provided me an insider status in the research process. The principal viewed my ethnicity as an advantage to the study. From his point of view, by being an insider I could easily win students' trust. In addition I could identify with Indian students' schooling experiences. Second, my professional status as a licensed and tenured teacher

with the Department of Education paved my entry to the school. The principal and teachers were comfortable with a teacher as a researcher. The principal provided me with the demographic data of school and state test results on school performance. I could not get individual students' test results because test results are considered confidential information and an outsider is not allowed to view students' confidential records.

### **Participant Selection**

I selected middle school participants for this study with help of the school principal and assistant principal who arranged my first meeting prior to the study with math and science teachers, who also helped select student participants. I selected student participants intentionally and serially on the basis of homogeneity of ethnicity and diversity of gender. All participants are of Indian origin. Variability in test scores, behavior, class participation, and involvement in extracurricular activities were the selection criteria. The teachers provided me variability information. Prior to the study I distributed permission forms to potential participants to be signed by their parents. From the pool of students who had signed a permission slip from their parents, I selected ten students to participate in my study. I also sent invitation letters to participant students' parents to be a part of the study. In addition I invited teachers to be a part of the study and asked their permission to be interviewed. Although teachers were very nice, they all refused to be videotaped. They said the only way they would allow me in their classroom was if I would not videotape them. The principal had no say in this matter because it was

the teachers' choice not to be videotaped; however, he negotiated with them and assured them that they would not be videotaped.

I selected high school participants from two specialized high schools. Specialized high schools usually do not welcome researchers in school. Their argument is that a researcher in the classroom is a distraction for students and teacher. The principal of one school said "Our students do so much in school that they can not afford to waste time on anything that is not related to their academic work." However, I was not discouraged by these answers. Another principal said "We do not allow participant observation in classrooms." However, I contacted the India Club of the specialized high schools and received a very warm response from the club presidents of two schools. Members of India Club were excited to meet a researcher of their own ethnicity and agreed to participate in study. I selected my participants from the club members and interviewed them during the summer months of 2005. I enjoyed working with high school students and they were also very enthusiastic about the study.

### **Data Collection and Data Sources**

I used participant observation, audiotaping (a major data source), and videotaping to collect data for this study. In order to collect qualitative data, I audiotaped all participants' interviews and classroom interactions. While I observed lessons I placed a tape recorder on the table to record informal conversations and discussions, utterances, and comments. I audiotaped all informal interviews to capture students' experiences and their life stories. Audiotapes provided me with information that time constraints made it impossible to write in a notebook. The audio-taped conversations provided me with

insights into students' lifeworlds, their cultural lives, and their lived experiences.

Although I relied heavily on audiotapes for data, I took field notes as supplementary data.

While I observed students outside the classroom, I could not audiotape or videotape them. In these situations I took field notes to record events and situations. In addition to field notes and audiotaping, I videotaped students in their math and science classrooms.

### **Methodological Approach**

According to Lee (1996) "We never get angry within the model minority discourse, and 'good' minorities like 'good' women are silent. Good minorities know their place within the system and do not challenge the existing system" (p. 7) This image of Asian Indians is within the context of an Asian image that is alive in the twenty-first century and is being used to silence successful as well as failing Asians.

#### **Critical Methodological Approach**

Empowered individuals understand the power of their own agency. As a practitioner of criticality I have been able to recognize the powerlessness of Indian parents and their children in hegemonic conditions of school. At the same time I have realized my power as a researcher to uncover social realities. Many Asian Indian parents feel intimidated by the power of school and so they hesitate to demand help for their children or to defend them in school. As a result many Asian Indian students revolt and deviate from their stereotyped role.

### **A Researcher in a Critical Constructivist Paradigm**

Critical ethnography assumes the equal involvement of researcher and participants in a research process. As a participant observer and as an “inquirer” I am a part of this study and I am constantly contributing to the research process. I cannot position myself outside the research process because a constructivist belief asserts that an “inquirer and the inquired-into are interlocked in such a way that the findings of an investigation are the literal creation of the inquiry process” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 84). As a critical researcher and as an insider I am in an advantaged position. I have applied my insider knowledge and the insights of the Asian Indian community in this study, and have explored the dialectical relationship of academic achievement and parents’ educational and socioeconomic backgrounds.

It would be unfair of me to claim that my identity was neutral in the research process, and that it had no influence on participants’ attitudes or their responses. My identity as an insider was a very important factor in winning participants’ trust, and that is one of the vital elements of ethnography. The success of an ethnographic study is often contingent upon the trust developed between the ethnographer and the participants. My identity was an equal catalyst in winning the participants’ and the schools’ trust. School officials perceived my insider status to be beneficial to the research process. According to the schools I had the advantage of insights into the Asian Indian community, and for research purposes this was a valuable advantage. Although I tried to be neutral, my identity, my sociopolitical beliefs, and my experiences as a community member unconsciously and consciously influenced my interpretation of participants’ stories. As

an insider I was able to identify with their experiences and could understand their feelings.

### **Why Critical Ethnography?**

Critical ethnography is another example of a critical research methodology that can be adapted to the bricolage. Ethnography, the study of events as they evolve in their natural setting, is often described as the most basic form of social research...ethnography attempts to gain knowledge about a particular culture, to identify patterns of social interactions and to develop holistic interpretations of societies and social institutions. (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 499)

Kincheloe describes critical ethnography as one of the best suited for the bricolage method. Critical ethnography enables researchers to understand the nature of contradictions, discontinuities, and inconsistencies in schools, and allows ethnographers to develop a holistic approach and interpretations of social phenomenon. Criticality also allows researchers to understand the complexities of the impacts of political structures and agencies on individual and collective experiences. Kincheloe describes critical ethnography as a basic tool for education research, and about the role of the critical ethnographer he says:

The critical ethnographer of education seeks to describe the concrete experiences of everyday school/educational

life and the social patterns, the deep structures, that construct it. One of the most basic tools of the critical researcher involves the research orientations derived from the ethnographic traditions. (p. 500)

According to Kincheloe critical ethnographers have the authority to question a dominant group's power over individual and collective identity of a marginalized and subjugated group. In addition critical ethnographers are equipped to gain understanding of the way people evaluate their position in the dominant society and to examine the world through the lenses of race, class, and gender (p. 498).

In this study I examine problems and conflicts that emerge from the positive stereotyping of Asian Indian students. I conceived the critical ethnographic methodological framework to be best suited for my study because it enabled me to record and analyze the schooling experiences of Asian Indian students critically (in an urban setting) within the context of the model minority stereotype. The critical ethnographic approach enables the researcher to examine discriminatory practices of schools and policymakers, grounded on methodological and theoretical frames of critical theory and ethnography (Seiler, 2001). Seiler argues that "Drawing from feminist research, neo-Marxism, and Freire's emancipatory theory,...this research enables researchers to use student experiences to challenge norms and practices in education" (p. 1003). Critical ethnography enabled me to examine critically the experiences of Asian Indian students whose schooling occurs in the shadow of the model minority stereotype and who are

silenced on the grounds that they are excelling therefore they do not need assistance like other domestic or immigrant minorities.

Van Manen (1990) conceives criticality as “critical tales,” and defines it as a means for asking questions related to exploitation, power struggle, economy, and history. Lather (1991) elaborates the critical perspective by saying “Critical theories are informed by identification with the interest in oppositional social movement. While in practice, not known to have *instrumental* moments, critical theories are positioned in relation to counter-hegemonic social movements” (p. 3). Furthermore, Lather explains the idea of “counter-hegemony” as an empowerment to analyze elements that produce a sense of powerlessness, and to recognize the nature of oppressive forces in the intellectual and academic worlds.

Megha, one of my participants, expressed her powerlessness against the power of school. She felt that her agency was impeded by the school and she was forced to settle for less than she deserved. She expressed:

*Megha (Indian): They are scared that parents will question why an Indian girl is getting these positions. I ran for vice president of the student council and won, and then applied for editor-in-chief of the school newspaper. The current policy is that the president of the school cannot be editor-in-chief, but it does not say anything about being vice president. I was given the position of editor-in-chief. The next day, the administration took away the editor-in-chief title from me and replaced it with “managing editor,” claiming I could have the same authority and responsibilities as editor-in-chief. I wanted to run for president of the debate team, but the administration told me that I could not run for president of the debate team because my responsibilities*

*would conflict; so I sacrificed my candidacy for president of the debate team to become “managing editor” of the newspaper. Why do they have a problem with editor-in-chief title? Why should I settle for less? They know I can do the job...I am working hard. They should not restrict my opportunities. I had a good talk with my principal. I am not like my sister or my mom who take abuse from PTA parents and keep quiet. I can always change school. The principal cannot change my grades.*

Megha is aware of her powerlessness but at the same time she likes to speak up against hegemonic conditions of school and expresses her opinions to school authorities. She believes in her agency and feels she can be successful academically if she uses her agency positively in any setting. Her sister Simran did not raise her voice against prejudice of the dominant group in her school, but Megha decided to talk to her principal against the oppressive power of the school administration. She felt she should have been given a chance to be president of the debate team. For her, “editor-in-chief” is a prestigious symbolic capital. She did not like to lose her capital and settled for second-class designation. I argue that that Megha’s reaction is a counter hegemonic act.

### **Critical Ethnography: A Method to Analyze Marginalization**

My rationale for using critical ethnography is that it is rooted in critical theory that analyzes how power, domination, and culture influence the consciousness of the marginalized. Simultaneously, critical ethnography focuses on transforming and improving the lives of participants. Kincheloe (2001) argues that “culture, power, and

domination work in complex ways to shape our consciousness...critical theory is devoted to tracing the specific ways this process works to create both oppressive and emancipatory ways of viewing self and world” (p.149). As a critical ethnographer I have “traced” the oppressive nature of positive stereotyping. In addition, I explored how Asian Indian students’ habitus and cultural capital enable them to cope with the stresses created by the model minority stereotype. Asian Indian students bring their habitus—their ways of seeing and being in the world—to school. Their scholastic performances and their academic aspirations are guided by their habitus. Their identities in school, their career choices, their motivations, and their behaviors are formed by the cultural, educational, and social capital (habitus) they bring to school from home and schools’ perceptions of their capitals. Students incorporate their capital and exercise their agencies in learning. However, the incorporation of cultural capital and agency depends on how teachers and school view students’ capitals and agency. Concurrently, I examine the way in which Asian Indian students shape and reshape their identities in schools where they have a marginalized status but are constantly judged by standards of model minority. I argue that model minority is a myth and in this ethnography I explore the issue of model minority myth.

### **Critical Ethnography: Honoring Different Perspectives**

Critical ethnography honors different perspectives and different ways of seeing the world. It values those voices that are silenced by the dominant society. As a result of the domination, minority culture, history, and traditions are subjugated. Asian Indians are

silenced by their model minority status. In school settings their academic achievements are undermined by their subjugated positions in a dominant society. The positive stereotype affects Asian Americans' ability to articulate their experience of racism (Lee, 1996). The critical ethnographic approach enables me to investigate different perspectives of the model minority stereotype and to expose covert prejudice and discrimination. For example, I am able to examine how students who do not fit the model minority image are struggling in school. In Mango Grove Middle School students with a language barrier are failing, and their parents' English language proficiency is very low. Consequently, they are unable to communicate to the school administration and cannot ask for one-to-one language paraprofessional help for their children. Surjeet, one of the parents, confided to me in Punjabi (an Indian language):

*I do not understand English and I cannot read or write English. In school they do not understand me. I cannot express myself in English. My husband says that the school is good and they will take care of my son, but he failed the test a second time. I wish I could help him. He is trying very hard but he is having a bad time in school. He says he does not like school anymore. I am scared he might drop out of school as my friend's son did. We came to America for his education not for this. Can you assist me when I talk to the principal?*

Stories like this are overshadowed by success stories. Surjeet does not know that the school can provide an interpreter for parents like her, can employ bilingual teachers for Indian students, and can arrange one-to-one paraprofessionals for students with

linguistic difficulties. However, the school is not interested in taking concrete steps to help Asian Indian students who are a contradiction to the model minority image and are struggling to adapt to American ways. The school administration knows that Indian parents are submissive and unaware of privileges that they can avail as parents.

Neeta, Megha's and Simran's mother, is a doctor in one of the most prestigious hospitals, has a very successful medical practice, belongs to an aristocratic family from India, and has an upper-class status in American society. Her daughter Simran is a high achiever and her school's star student. She experienced overt prejudice from the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA). She expressed her anger and frustration:

*You know Simran is star of her school. She has not done anything wrong She has brought prestige to her school. The PTA president is a white woman. She could not tolerate Simran's success. She was jealous of Simran. Her daughter is Simran's classmate. The PTA president was frustrated that her daughter could not compete with Simran. You know she was sending e-mail to all parents and students against Simran. She made banners saying horrible things about Simran. And the principal did not take any action against this. Many students were angry about this situation and many students thought that Simran was being victimized by a mean group of parents and students. The conspiracy against Simran backfired and Simran won the student government election the second time. I am frustrated that Mr. Simpson (the school principal) did not take steps to stop all this. He knows my girls. He always says he is proud of my girls. I could have taken legal action but I did not want to blow this thing*

*up. After all we have minority status in this country and things like this will happen with us and our children. I am very angry but I have satisfaction that Simran is accepted at Harvard and this summer she won the most competitive medical internship at Washington, DC.*

Experiences like this always remain hidden.

In addition, I was able to explore hegemonic assumptions of the model minority myth. Critical ethnography enables me to gain insight into why Indian parents are very involved in their children's learning but try to stay away from schools and pretend that "we never get angry" and "we are silent voices and we are not threatening" (Lee, 1996, p. 7). Seiler (2002) says that "Critical ethnography is concerned with unmasking dominant social constructions and their interests, studying society with the goal of transforming it, and freeing individuals from sources of domination and repression" (p. 28). From this vantage point this study is a typical ethnography because it unmask the model minority myth, a political act of the dominant society to validate their ignorance of needs of minorities.

### **Phenomenological Methodology and Lived Experiences**

First, lived experiences are characterized by immediacy, vividness, or presentness, in which there is no separation into subject and object. Secondly, lived experience is a unit as a whole; it has already an articulated structure. Thirdly, lived experience always has the sense of lasting importance and significance. Lived

meaning is what can be remembered vividly, even in the future, with its impact and import, even though the precise interpretation of the original experience may change through time. (Mikio Fujita, 1987, pp. 4-5)

Lived experiences stay in our memory and have significance in our lifeworld. An individual's experiences are his or her awareness of their lived world. Phenomenology studies lived experiences. Van Manen (1990) defines phenomenology as "the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experiences (p.10). Pinar (2000) writes about this research method saying, "The phenomenological investigator questions how phenomena—"the things themselves"—present themselves in the lived experience of the individual, especially as they present themselves in lived time" (p. 405). Thus, phenomenology is the study of conscious lived experiences of individuals.

Phenomenology studies how an experience is related to other experiences; in other words how an experience relates to the occurrence or prevalence of other conditions or events that influence a chain of experiences. For example, Asian Indian parents' educational experiences lead their children to high scholastic performance and their academic success and because of their high achievement they are ascribed model minority status. Because I am investigating Asian Indian students' lived experiences of their lifeworld, this study is phenomenological. Van Manen (1990) describes the main characteristics of phenomenology:

- phenomenological study investigates lived experiences and studies lifeworld as it is immediately experienced;
- it explores essences and meaning of experiences;
- it is not interested in “how” questions rather it focuses on “what” questions;
- it studies conscious practice of “thoughtfulness” or “attunement” to what it feels like to be in the world as man, woman, child;
- it cannot be reduced to “results” because phenomenology is interested in analysis, description, and interpretation of a situation.

This study focuses on the essence and meaning of life experiences and lived worlds of Asian Indian students. For example, I am not concerned with how Indian students perform on standardized tests. Rather I focus on what it means to an Indian student to be a high achiever, or how an Indian student interprets his family’s educational and economic successes and relates them to his academic aspirations. The study does not intend to find the causes or effects of the model minority stereotype. Instead, its goal is to interpret the lived experiences of Indian students in school and family settings.

Phenomenological research does not solve problems; my research study is not capable of solving the problems of positive stereotyping, but it is interested in exploring the significance of the model minority phenomenon and gaining insights into the schooling experiences of Asian Indian students. According to Van Manen (1990) a phenomenological researcher investigates any given phenomenon “as it is lived” not as it is theorized. This study investigates the model minority phenomenon as it is lived by Indian students and does not focus on the theoretical aspect of stereotyping.

## **Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Interpreting Model Minority**

### **Stereotyping**

Hermeneutic Phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is a descriptive (phenomenological) methodology because...it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an interpretive (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena (Manen, 1990, p. 180).

I am using hermeneutic phenomenology because this research methodology enables me to interpret the meanings of the lived experiences of my participants. According to Manen, “lived experiences need to be captured in language and ...this is inevitably an interpretive process” (p. 181). All lived experiences have meanings that need to be interpreted. Asian Indian students’ experiences as model minority ethnicity need analysis and interpretation to bring out hidden complexities of their experiences.

Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation. Pinar (2000) says the “significance of hermeneutics is to problematize the hegemony of dominant culture in order to engage it transformatively” (p. 423). Hegemony is the dominance of a powerful group over marginalized groups without employing external force and by winning their consent. Kincheloe (2002) defines hegemony: “Hegemony involves the maintenance of domination, not through force, but through winning the consent of the individual being dominated,” (p. 47). My study interprets the hegemonic assumptions of the model minority discourse and willingness of Asian Indians to embrace their ascribed status as a

model minority. Hermeneutic inquiry consists of the interpretation of relationships and individuals' struggles in their webs of reality, and of how people make sense of their experiences. Interpretation is not reliving somebody's experiences; instead it "is the power to grasp one's own possibilities for being in the world in a certain way" (Manen, 1990, p. 180). Furthermore, Manen says that in interpretation we cannot separate from the text, and in order to interpret a text or an experience the interpreter must have an understanding of the problems or feelings that are revealed. This understanding comes from a good grasp of language because individuals express their identities, and their stories through the dynamics of language. Atkins (1988) says that hermeneutical phenomenology is structured with the concepts of historical consciousness, dialogue, interpretation, community, and language. All these are essential aspects of hermeneutical phenomenology. My Asian Indian students with limited English language proficiency narrated their lived experiences in Hindi (an Indian language). I interpreted this act as their willingness to share their problems and conflicts with me.

This study is the interpretation of experiences of an immigrant minority in the United States. It is the interpretation of the thoughts and feelings of immigrant community members, memories of their original experiences of stereotyping, and covert and overt discrimination. Phenomenological research distinguishes between appearance and essence. For example, if an Indian student says he or she does not like to interact with his teacher, the essence of the story involves many factors that influence this student's decision to avoid interaction. This student's statement conveys his or her feelings, thinking, identity, past experiences, and intentions to be invisible in the classroom. Although the student might be the top student in the class, he or she could also

be the quietest in the class, and his or her silence could be interpreted as resentment, shyness, or an effect of cultural differences. Vineet, one of my middle school participants, expresses that she did not like to interact with her male peers and her male teacher. She explained that she does not like to talk too much. Her grade point average is higher than 95 and she is a very smart student. I interpret her unwillingness to talk in class, specifically to male peers and a male teacher, as reflective of her cultural upbringing, her shy personality, and her stubbornness. Her teacher wanted her to participate in class discussions and took 20 points off from her final grade of 100. She was very upset with her reduced grade point average and resented her teacher's action. Instead of deciding to increase her class participation she decided against it. She declared "I do not like to talk too much and I will not talk in class."

## **Autobiographies**

### **Personal Life Stories as a Source of Experiential Material**

Since this is a hermeneutic phenomenological study concerned with Asian students' lifeworlds and essence of their experiences, personal life stories are a vital part of this research. This study is based on cross-generational design that treats parents as a part of the study. Knowledge of parents' biographies can aid in achieving an understanding of the lived experiences of them and their children. Thus, life stories whether oral narratives or in the form of diaries and journals, are sources of lived experiences which help in addressing research questions. This study explores Asian

Indian students' lived experiences in "everyday situations and relations" and structure of their lived world that is "full of immense complexities." Although the adult lived world and that of their children have different experiential qualities, there is a strong relationship between parents' and children's lived worlds. Parents' life stories and their educational experiences are essential to analyze the relationships between parental education and their children's school performance. Manen (1990) points out that "Selected phenomenological materials enable us to reflect more deeply on the way we tend to make interpretive sense of lived experiences" (p. 75). High achievement of Asian Indian students and their stereotyping as model minority individuals cannot be interpreted in isolation of their parents' achievements. An autobiographical method enables the researcher to gain insights into the cultural/social situation of experiences. I argue that in order to understand the complexities of educational experiences of Indian students, one must know where students are coming from, and what capitals they bring from home.

### **Historiography: Historical Understanding of Stereotyping of Asian Indians**

In the phenomenological domain of research, historiography involves historical understanding of a phenomenon. Historiography is a synthesis and interpretation of historical accounts. Kincheloe (2001) explains that historiography "involves the synthesizing of information into a historical narrative through the process of interpretation" (p. 593). The history of Asian Indians' immigration to the United States, and their sociopolitical, economic, and academic standing in mainstream society, helps

understand their positive stereotyping in mainstream society. The model minority discourse cannot be studied as an isolated form. Without insights into their migration pattern and history, their social and economic status in India, and their reception in the host country, one cannot explain their success stories. The history of Asian Indians in the United States provides insights into their cultural schemas that they brought from India. The historiographical perspective enables a researcher to study a phenomenon in a phenomenological/hermeneutic framework.

Simran is a high achiever. In her high school she was the valedictorian, won a Presidential Scholarship, won the best debater award, was selected for a very prestigious medical internship, was the president of the school government club for two consecutive years, and was the recipient of many other prestigious awards in her high school. Her life history enabled me to interpret her success in the school context. She told me:

*My maternal grandfather came to America as a student. He went back to India after he finished his studies. He was a diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service and he was posted to many countries. He retired as an ambassador of the Indian government. My grandmother had a M.A. from a very prestigious university in India. My mom and my dad are from very rich families. My mom and my dad are doctors and most of my uncles and aunts are professionals. My parents finished med school in India and came to America to get higher degrees. My mom has a very successful medical practice. I have to go to Harvard Med school. I am accepted at Harvard for undergrad... You know I have to do*

*well in school...it is hereditary.*

This historical account of Simran's family provides me insights into her parents' economic, professional, and social background in India and in the United States and enables me to interpret her success in school. Without knowing her family background I would not have been able to understand her identity formation and her motivation to excel. Kincheloe (2000) explains the importance of historical perspectives: "A deeper understanding of one's background involves insight into the origin of one's personal belief system and a comprehension of why these beliefs have been chosen over others" (p. 591). Many life histories like Simran's helped me analyze and interpret my students' life experiences.

### **Gathering Stories: Looking into Lived Experiences and Lifeworlds**

The most salient feature of this phenomenological/hermeneutic ethnography was to listening to voices. Voices provided me with vivid lived experiences and insight into lived worlds and life stories. The voices were gathered through informal interviews with students, their parents, and their teachers. An informal set of themes guided my conversations with participants. For example, the first interview focused on students' lived experiences related to achievement, while the second interview focused on the messages they received from home and school regarding their performance in school. Students were interviewed three times a week. Each interview session lasted 30 to 35 minutes. Because this is a cross-generational study, I interviewed the participating parents twice. All interviews were audiotaped. Informal interviews provided insights into students' home life and their schooling experiences.

## **Micro-Analytic Approach**

In this ethnography I used a micro-analytic approach to study Indian students' math and science learning in an urban classroom. I videotaped students to capture their behavior, their learning style, their social interactions with peers and teachers, and conversations that were indicative of the enactment of their agency. I analyzed videotapes by using a standard ethnographic micro-analytical approach, to capture participants' non-verbal gestures, positive or negative facial expressions, and body movement that would have been easily missed during note taking. The videotape of classroom discourses provided me with a "reviewable" data source. I played and replayed the scenes many times on slow motion to identify how students used their cultural resources, how they tried to build social capital by exchanging cultural capitals, and how their classroom learning and performance earned them symbolic capital.

The meso analysis of video enabled me to view how Asian Indian students employed their cultural capital in the classroom for learning. The slow viewing of videotapes allowed me to gain awareness of the contradictions that appeared during teaching and learning. In addition I learned how to identify the dialectical relationship between patterns of thin coherences and contradictions. The videotape analysis allowed me to gain insight into how students and teachers were applying their agency for enactment of their micro practices and micro identities. The meso level of analysis enabled me to identify presence or lack of synchrony in science and math classrooms as well as to ascertain whether verbal and nonverbal positive gestures were involved in creating social and symbolic capital. During the video analysis I paid greater attention to

nonverbal gestures because nonverbal behaviors are as salient as verbal behaviors. By analyzing videotapes at a macro level I learned how teachers and students used their agency to enact across their cultural fields. In all math and science classes, teachers were racially white. Thus, the Asian Indian students and white teachers had to cross their cultural boundaries for enactment of learning and teaching.

I digitized and analyzed all relevant videos using iMovie, a video annotation software. I viewed all videotapes on very slow motion many times and identified vignettes that were salient to my research questions. I played and replayed vignettes at slow speeds to capture images because, according to Tobin (2004) videos should be analyzed “by slowing down and speeding up the playing and moving image by image to capture phenomena at the micro level, where we often observe patterned actions that are not discernible in real time” (p.10). I transcribed and analyzed vignettes that revealed salient events.

### **Observing Students in a School Setting**

My role in the school was that of a participant-observer. I observed students’ lived experiences in the school and took field notes on the enactment of their agencies in different fields. I have been an inner-city schoolteacher for many years. Consequently, I am familiar with the educational and social setting of urban schools. During my career I have had the opportunity to work in schools with students of diverse ethnic backgrounds. To my advantage I often worked in schools with a heavy concentration of Asian Indian students of different socioeconomic backgrounds, and in the course of my teaching I had the chance to observe their social interactions, academic achievements, and the

involvement of their families in schools. Describing the researcher's role in ethnographic studies Best and Kahn (1998) state:

The researcher must understand the setting and nature of the social structure and its traditions, values, and norms of behavior. It is important to observe and interpret as an outside observer but also to observe and interpret in terms of the subject how they view the situation, how they interpret their own thoughts, words, activities as well as those of others in group. The researcher gets inside the minds of the subject, at the same time interpreting the behavior from his or her own perspective. (p. 252)

As an ethnographer and as a participant observer I was able to “share the same experiences as the subject, to understand better why they acted in the way they did and to see things as those involved see things” (Bell, 1987, p. 13). I observed students in their math and science classrooms, during lunch periods and game time, in hallways, and during extracurricular activities. I took field notes of their interactions in and outside their classrooms, as well as their nonverbal and verbal expressions. As a participant observer I followed teachers' routines and classroom procedures.

## **Judging the Quality of Research**

This is a qualitative study and it follows a phenomenological/hermeneutic framework. This is a standard ethnography and I am not judging its authenticity by the Fourth Generation evaluation criteria. Through peer debriefing, I ensured the credibility of the study and to “test out” the findings, I shared them with my committee members and my peers who were not involved in the research process. I received constructive input and a variety of perspectives, enabling me to evaluate and enrich my research practices. The member-checking process provided me opportunities to verify lived world experiences (data) with participants who provided them. During the collection and analysis period I constantly asked students to verify their narratives, their responses, and their life stories for accuracy and consistency between what was recorded and “what was intended to communicate.” The member checking provided me chances to correct errors, and it allowed participants to confirm data and judge the adequacy of the interview.

## **Authenticity of the Study**

### **Fairness of the study**

Guba and Lincoln (1998) define authenticity criteria for critical research. The criteria for an authentic study are *fairness, ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical authenticity*. Guba and Lincoln stress that the first and foremost quality of an authentic study is *fairness*. The fairness of a study is reflected in the way it solicits, honors, and respects the perspectives of all participants equally. In order to maintain the fairness of

this study, I carried out negotiations and data gathering in full view of all participants, and focused on relevant matters only during the observation and interviewing processes.

### **Ontological Authenticity**

This study meets the criteria of ontological authenticity because it changed my construction: I learned about the life world of my participants. I became aware of the complexities of school experiences of Asian Indian students. Since this is phenomenological research, it requires the researcher to understand lived experience “in all its modalities and aspects” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 32). This research enabled me to understand the conflicts, contradictions, and complexities of school experiences of Asian Indian students who are ascribed the model minority status. Simultaneously, I learned how positive stereotyping mediated school experiences of Asian Indian students in urban schools. I learned how Asian Indian students and their parents perceived school performance and their minority status, and how they navigated the challenges of mainstream culture.

### **Conclusion**

Making use of phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical ethnography and historiography, I explored the life worlds of Asian Indian students and interpreted their school experiences as a model minority. In this study I do not claim to change lives of Asian Indian youth, I only examine how they are positioned in the mainstream society, how they negotiate their positive and negative experiences, and how contradictions emerge. This study is an effort to get insight into lived experiences, and the complexities of the lived world are the essence of this ethnography.

## CHAPTER IV

### **The History of Asian Indian Migration to the United States**

While this study focuses on the achievements of Asian Indian immigrants' children who are attending and graduating from American schools, it is very important to know where they come from. Who are they and who are their role models? What conditions motivate them to excel, and whose success ideology is influencing their achievements? A close look at the history of Indian immigration might provide answers to these questions.

Cultural diversity in contemporary American society is the legacy of immigration between 1565 and 2004. Indian migration to different parts of the world is not a new phenomenon. There has been significant research by many scholars (i.e., Desai, 1963; Elkan, 1960; and Klass, 1961) on the migration patterns of South East Indians to different parts of the world. Asian Indians migrated to Africa, the West Indies, and England before migrating to the United States. The legacy of Indian migration is of people who left their country for higher education and gained economic success and higher social status in American society.

The history of Asian Indian migration shows that a vast number of Asian Indian immigrants were attracted to American educational institutions because they offered wider educational opportunities to them. Since the Second World War, the large American universities served as magnets to attract students from India. Baltzell (1964) has explained the role of elite American universities:

While Harvard was engaged at the turn of the century in educating the sons of Anglo-Saxon establishment along with a small minority of talented youths from less privileged backgrounds, it is today educating and training a highly ambitious and carefully selected body from all classes, from all over the world, from a wide variety of racial, religious, and ethnic groups...and only partially leavened by a minority of the more talented members of the traditional Eastern Seaboard establishment. Rather than educating a privileged elite to better perform their duties, it is now training an ambitious elite to accept the responsibilities, which will go with the privileges and power they will eventually acquire. (p. 340)

Although this was stated in the context of Harvard University, it explains the changing role of elite universities. Asian Indian immigrants are the largest group of immigrants to be positively affected by the systematic policy of the elite American education. Indian immigrants took advantage of the American education policy that “steadily retreated modern admission policies which stress individual accomplishment rather than family background” (Baltzell, 1964, p.341). This policy has acted in favor of the Asian immigrant population and the majority of early Asians who migrated to the United States for this purpose.

In the late nineteenth century, American public schools were also an attraction for many other immigrant populations. According to Ravitch (2000), “Unlike Europe, which

was burdened with rigid class barriers, in America it was believed that public schools could enable any youngster to rise above the most humble origins” (p.13). American public schools promised a bright future and opportunities for all who were willing to “learn and study.” Asian Indian immigrants believed in this promise and worked hard to take advantage of the opportunities offered by American education. Although there are contradictions in the American education system, from 1800 to 2004 this has attracted a vast number of Asian Indian immigrants. The prevalent belief of this immigrant group is that if they work hard they can achieve high educational attainment and the gateway to economic success.

In 1965, the United States Congress passed the Hart-Celler Act, an immigration law that preferred skills over nationality to fulfill a growing need for qualified professionals. During the period from 1965 through the 1980s, the changes in immigration policy allowed highly educated professional Asian Indians to migrate to the United States. The majority of these professionals were doctors and engineers, and English-speaking. According to the Census Bureau from 1981 to 2001, Indian immigrants comprised 10.3 percent of all Asian immigrants, and by the year 2000 that number had grown to 16.4%. From 1981 to 2000, there was a golden period for students with a computer technology background and a vast number of these students migrated to the United States. In most of the American universities computer science and mathematics departments were made up of as much as 90 percent Chinese and Indian students. Although the education level of the most recent Indian immigrant group is not very high, the overall picture is still very impressive. Compared to the general population, three times the proportion of Asian Indians age 25 or older have a college degree from

India (Schafer, 2002). With the asset of proficiency in the English language, these Indian immigrants did not face much difficulty in finding employment. According to a 10-year Harvard study of immigrant children that was funded by the National Science Foundation's cultural anthropology division, Indians and other Asian groups are the wealthiest immigrant group in America.

Asian Americans are not evenly distributed in the United States. They tend to concentrate in urban areas where they have easy access to better education and better job opportunities. All over the United States, universities have the highest concentrations of Asian Indians. According to Schafer, Asian Indians initially "flocked to the northeast" but by 1990, California had the largest Asian Indian population.

### **The Composition of the Asian Indian Immigrant Population**

Asian Indians who migrated to the United States can be categorized into six basic groups based on the time of their arrival and their educational level:

1. Indians who migrated during the mid- to late-1800s.
2. The India pre-Independence and post-Independence (before 1965) students' migrations.
3. The migration of the Indian population after the 1965 Immigration Act.
4. Those who migrated during the 1980s-1990s on the basis of kinship.
5. The current student population who migrated during the 1980s, and continued to arrive in the United States after the tragedy of 9/11 for education.

6. The second-generation Indian youth attending American schools and colleges and young professionals “who are born and brought up in America” or who migrated with their parents.

### **Asian Indians Who Migrated During the 1800s**

The immigration record shows that Indians migrated to the United States as early as 1850-1860. Early research on Indian immigrants reveals that between 1850 and 1860 a “trickle” of Indian immigrants continued to come to the United States because labor recruiters from Hawaiian sugar plantations recruited workers from India. This process ended in 1890 when Hawaii stopped recruiting Indians, and by 1900 most of these Indians had left Hawaii for the mainland (Mayo & Parella, 1998). The majority of these Indian immigrants settled in farming as laborers, railroad construction workers, and mining along with other Asian immigrants in North Carolina, Washington, and Oregon (Lessinger, 1995). However the number of these immigrants was not significant in the larger society.

### **The Indian Pre-Independence and Post-Independence (before 1965)**

#### **Students’ Migrations to the United States**

The number of pre-Independence students coming to America was very small and most of them belonged to the elite class of Indian society. A large number of them went back to India after completing their education at American universities, becoming prominent nationalists and joining the Independence movement in India. The post-Independence Asian Indian students who migrated to America for higher education

preferred to stay in the United States because it represented a “multiethnic land of the immigrant” and provided educational opportunities for their children”(Nimbark, 1980). Students who came to the United States after 1947 were rich and unrepresentative of the general economy of their homeland. The number of Indian students increased enormously by the mid-1950s. Out of the 5,000 Indians in the United States, 2,000 were students. By 1965, the number of Indian students enrolled in American colleges grew very high. According to Nimbark (1980), “Of all Indians studying abroad (approximately) two thirds were in the United States. In contrast to pre-independence students these students stayed on in America for better economic and educational opportunities for their children” (p. 249). Thus majority of the Asian Indians who came to the United States after post- independence decided to stay on.

### **Asian Indians Who Migrated due to the Impact of the 1965 Immigration Act**

This act had a radical effect on the previous immigration policies by removing race as an important element and focusing on skill as the most important factor in granting immigration, and it assigned quotas to Asian countries. This act had a “profound effect” on the immigrant population in terms of demography and skill level (Sandis, 1980). This skill-based immigration law invited an influx of Indian immigrants who were highly skilled professionals and set a quota for professional Indians along with their families to enter the United States as immigrants.

In the context of the Asian Indian immigration pattern Foner et al. (2000) state:

India provides the United States the largest number of highly educated immigrants...Indian engineers and scientists have a comparative advantage over other professionals in the developing world...Indian professionals generally come from more affluent families— supports the notion that Indians, like other Asian immigrants, have already experienced a more severe selection process when trying to emigrate to the United States. (p. 317)

Regarding educational and professional backgrounds of many newer Asian Indians, Feigelman et al. (2002) referred to these Indians as “primary” immigrants. This new Indian immigrant population is very different from the population of previous Indian immigrants. According to Lessinger (1995), the newcomer Indian immigrants are, overall, better educated and more skilled than their nineteenth-century predecessors, and they arrived with high expectations of economic success. These immigrants had higher expectations for their children, and they were role models for their children.

### **Asian Indians Who Migrated Between 1980 and 1990**

Compared to the previous immigrants, these were not highly educated or skilled. They were granted visas on the basis of kinship. The professionals who migrated to the United States and established themselves as academically and economically successful individuals sponsored their relatives who were comparatively less educated and less

qualified. Feigelman et al. referred to these immigrants as the “secondary” immigrant group. Although the members of this population are not highly qualified, they try their best to educate their children and send them to college. The recent Indian immigrant population in the United States is highly diversified, yet it is a very distinct population. According to Mogelonsky (1995), the Asian-Indian population is a well educated, highly skilled, and professional ethnic minority.

### **Asian Indians Who Migrated in the 1980s and Early 1990s as Students**

Recently, there has been a 22 percent increase in enrollment in American colleges and universities. *India Abroad*, the oldest South Asian community newspaper, reports that “India has taken over China as the largest sender of foreign students to the US” (*India Abroad*, 2002). The most unique feature of this population is that 67.9 percent of these students do not have the privilege of scholarships or foreign private sponsors. They are supported by their families or are working while attending college. *India Abroad* refers to the annual 2002 Open Doors report published on November 18, 2002, during the celebration of International Week by the Institute of International Education and the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. According to this report, between 2001 and 2002 the Indian student population increased to 12 percent of the student population. In the context of sending students to American universities, China stands in second position while Korea holds the third position in the world.

The 2002 Open Doors report is based on a survey of 2,700 accredited U.S. educational institutions. According to this report, of the large number of international Indian students, 74.4 percent are enrolled at graduate-level studies in contrast to the

21.4 percent in undergraduate-level programs. The percentage of students enrolled in nondegree programs is only 4.2 percent of the total Indian student population. It is the “joint initiative” of the State Department and the Education Department to promote programs that “attract future leaders from abroad to study and exchange experiences in the US.” The high enrollment rate of Indian students in American universities is not in isolation but follows “the larger Asian trend over the last 40 years” (*India Abroad*, 2002).

The highest concentration of the Indian student population is in the New York and Southern California universities. The recent trend is that more and more students are applying to Texas-Arlington, Purdue, and Arizona Universities because of the low cost of living compared to New York, as well as their improved ratings. However, Ivy League colleges are the first choices among Indians who can afford them. Among all universities, the most popular choices are Harvard University or Yale University because of their elite standing in the American education system. The majority of Indians coming from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds consider a Harvard degree as their ticket into the elite class. Baltzell (1964) explains the caste-like hierarchy of the American education system:

The uncomfortable paradox of the American Society in the twentieth century is that it has tried to combine the democratic ideal of equality of opportunity in an ethnically diverse society with persistent and conservative traditions of the Anglo-Saxon caste ideal at the top. (p. 48)

The majority of Asian Indian immigrants who come from the upper-middle or upper class belong to the higher castes. Coming from a society where caste and class politics are one of the most important elements of one's life, it is easy for these students to adapt to the hierarchical education system of American society. Nimbark (1980) explains this characteristic of Indian immigrants as a "high correlation between upper class names and scientific productivity" (p.254). In the context of migration patterns of Indian immigrants, their socioeconomic status back home and high rate of immigration are closely related.

Among the Asian American students and professional immigrants, the majority of them are male. The Indian immigrant population is not against the rule. Approximately 75 to 85 percent of the Asian Indian doctors, engineers, scientists, and scholars have been male. However, among the recent migrants, the number of female doctors, computer scientists, and nurses has been significantly higher. Like their male counterparts, female immigrants go for higher education and extended training in their field.

### **Second-Generation Indian Youth Who Are Attending American High Schools and Colleges, and Young Professionals Who Were Born Here or Migrated at a Very Young Age**

Children of those immigrants who came between 1965 and 1975 have graduate degrees and are working as young professionals or in semiprofessional jobs (a small number). Indian immigrants firmly believe that their children's success in life depends on their achievement in school. The Indian students of the mid-1960s and 1970s excelled in school and were able to pursue their professional goals. Indian immigrants are aware of their immigrant status, but in the context of education they consider themselves equal to

the dominant group. Although there are some exceptions, the percentage of unsuccessful Indian immigrants is not significant compared to the number of more successful students. In New York City all the magnet schools of the Board of Education are flooded with Indian students.

### **The Indian Diaspora**

While this study examines experiences of second-generation and 1.5 Asian Indian students and their parents in the United States, it is justified to take a look at the Indian Diaspora around the world. In order to understand the unique migration pattern of Asian Indians to the United States, one should have an overview of Indian immigration to other countries. Although Indians migrated to different parts of the world over different periods of time, carrying with them cultural and regional differences, there is a common thread that runs through their struggle to establish themselves in alien environments. This study would be incomplete if I did not provide a brief history of Asian Indian experiences in other Anglo-Saxon Western countries that have a significant Asian Indian population. The United States, Great Britain, and Canada are Anglo-Saxon societies with significantly growing Asian Indian populations that share many common racial, economic, and political characteristics. Although there are geographical, historical, and political differences among these three countries and immigrant experiences differ from one another, in each there are also similarities. The first- and second-generation Asian Indian immigrants go through similar experiences in the United States, Great Britain, and Canada.

The ancient history of India speaks of Indian migration to the Far East Asia during the time of Gautama Buddha (c.563-483 B.C.) to spread religious and spiritual

messages to the world. With the changing times and regimes, migration patterns and the purpose of migration also changed. During the British rule, in the early 1800s and onward, people of the Indian subcontinent were lured by plantation owners, railroad builders, and cheap labor recruiters of Guyana, Trinidad, Mauritius Islands, Fiji, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Hawaii, South and East Africa (Kurian & Srivastava 1983; Mayo & Parella, 1998). The history of early migration reveals that most of the early migrants who left India voluntarily were of rural backgrounds. These early migrants were adventurers and left India in search for better employment and a better life without much educational or economic capital.

During late 1800s and early 1900s, the migration pattern changed, and a few Indians ventured to the United States, Great Britain, Germany (Goel, 1988), and a few other West European countries for higher education. The majority of people during this period who went abroad for higher degrees went back to India after they finished their education. However, a very few early Indian students stayed on in Britain and in the United States after finishing their degrees and took jobs in academia, but the number of such immigrants is insignificant.

### **Asian Indians in Great Britain**

After India's independence in 1947 the migration pattern changed significantly. The 1950s and 1960s were the prime time for the labor migration to West European countries. The post-Independence Asian Indian migration was concentrated to Great Britain. The first South Asian immigrants to Britain were Punjabi single men. By the 1960s and onward, families of these men started settling in Britain (Ballard 1994b; Goel, 1988). The Asian Indians in Britain are mainly from Gujarat and Punjab, and most of

them are Hindus. The number of Asian Indians in academia, elite professions, and in highly skilled jobs is relatively low. While most of the Asian Indian immigrants are in semiskilled or unskilled jobs, many have succeeded in businesses, and they are concerned with their children's educational achievements. Compared to the United States, Britain's Asian Indian community is older and larger. In Britain, not only the second generation of Asian Indians, but also the third and fourth generations are attending school (Ballard, 1994; Goel, 1988). There was a lack of research on Asian Indians and their children in Britain until the 1960s, but their growing number in British society and the signs of cultural conflicts and prejudice attracted scholars to study this ethnic population. During the 1970s many scholars studied various aspects of Asian Indians' lives and the experiences of the second-generation Asian Indians in Britain (Brah, 1978; Bhatti, 1999). Much work has been done after 1970 on Asian Indians and their children in England. The ethnographic studies by Hall (2002) examined the educational experiences of the second-generation Punjabi Sikhs in British society. Similar to earlier research on Asian Indians, Hall also studied cultural conflicts, cultural identity, and identity formation in the context of racism and prejudice. Hall explains the nature of cultural racism:

As a normalizing discourse, however, cultural racism not only classifies designated groups in seemingly objective terms, it also regulates these differences through the imposition of normalizing judgments. Asian cultural practices are not only different, they are "not normal," out of the ordinary, and therefore a source of fear and aversion. As much, Asians become targets of normalization, recipients of the call to assimilation. (p. 118)

Hall describes that Sikh teens constantly experience cultural dilemma. “They never feel completely ‘Indian’ or completely ‘English.’ Hall’s analysis of Asian Indian students’ identity formation and cultural conflict in a racist society indeed relates to the experiences of the second-generation Asian Indians in Canada and the United States. This study speaks in the context of racism and lays out how second-generation Asian Indians realize their otherness in the mainstream society via their skin color and their ethnicity.

### **Asian Indians in Canada**

In Canada the term East Indian is used for all immigrants of the Indian subcontinent that includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The East Indian migration to Canada started in 1904. The immigration records of Canada report that the first immigrants from India came to Canada in 1904, and their number multiplied every year (Srivastava, 1983). Although East Indian migration to Canada continued at a slow speed, the Immigration Act of 1976 accelerated the rate of East Indian migration. Wood (1983) explains the nature of this act: “Despite grass roots opposition to Third World immigration, the Act ultimately reflected a compromise which limited overall numbers of immigrants but accommodated the interest of East Indians.”(p. 3).

The majority of Indian immigrants in Canada are from Punjab. Thus in Canada the older Indian immigrants are Punjabi Sikhs who were not highly skilled or educated. The newer Asian Indian immigrants who came to Canada had diverse backgrounds and came from different parts of India, other than the Punjab. The newcomers were highly educated, professional, and highly skilled. During the 1950s and 1960s, the old-timer East Indian immigrants did not experience prejudice because Canadians did not perceive

them as a threat. However, the newer immigrants experienced hostility because they threatened Canadians by competing with them professionally. Srivastava (1983) says “Lacking connections and seeing hostility beyond the bounds of their own communities, East Indians have thus far remained in social and political isolation” (p.15).

Many scholars have explored the adjustment and adaptation problems, needs, and experiences of East Indian families in Canada. There have been many studies that deal with prejudice and discrimination of the first-generation immigrant groups in various Canadian cities. However, needs of East Indian youths in school and colleges are neglected by researchers. The experiences of the second-generation East Indian youths have been explored indirectly with the problems of their families (Desai & Subramanian, 2000). The study by Desai and Subramanian explores the experiences of youths living with prejudice and hostility in Canada. Wadhvani’s study (1999) is also dedicated to “at-risk” young East Indians in Canada. Although her study does not provide answers to problems of prejudice, it focuses on a very serious problem: suicidal tendencies among young East Indians in Canada. The study provides an understanding of social and psychological factors that contribute to suicidal tendencies. The study by Desai and Subramanian (2000) provides insight into the complex school experiences of East Indian students in schools:

The participants in the study very dramatically show us the limited options that South Asian youth have in terms of making life choices and the tremendous pressure they face to “be cool” or “one of the gang.” Faced with racial attitudes and racial harassment, the youth are obviously

drawn towards other racial minority youth that are respected or even feared by the dominant group. Belonging to or becoming a part of this “select” club often brings with it power and privileges which are otherwise denied because of the color of their skin. It is not surprising then that the youth find the pressure to belong to this group difficult to counter or resist or that these become their role models. (p. 51)

Thus, East Indian students develop coping strategies to survive during school experiences that are consequences of negative stereotypes. In Canadian schools the negative stereotype of East Indian students by the dominant group are often translated into harassment, teasing, bullying, name-calling, peer envy, and discrimination within schools. In the process of identifying problems that immigrant children face in Anglo-Saxon society, the study also explored how linguistic and academic needs of newcomer immigrant children were ignored by schools in Canada.

### **The Historical Perspective**

The United States is a nation of immigrants. Since the mass immigration of the nineteenth century to the present, the phenomenon of immigration has constructed the fabric of American society. The early immigrants had to overcome economic, cultural, social, and political barriers in the Anglo-Saxon host country. The rapid growth in immigrant population has encouraged studies that explore immigrant experiences of

various ethnic groups. The study of immigration and ethnicity has been “in essence a century-long affair, beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century, during a time of heavy European immigration in which nativist and racialist controversies were prevalent among commentators” (Foner et al., 2000, p.3). In The United States immigrants are identified on the basis of ethnicity. Groups such as Irish, Italians, Jewish, Asians, Mexicans, and many others are categorized on the basis of their ethnicity. Theoretically, ethnicity is defined as a cultural issue, and ethnic groups imply groups of people that share a subculture and are distinguished as different than the dominant group (Feagin & Feagin, 1996). Many early ethnic groups of the white race were discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicities, and they were not considered white. However, after a long time, due to their political, educational, and economic power, they assimilated into “whiteness” and earned the status of whites.

Although Asian Indian immigrants are racially different than whites, they share many characteristics of early immigrants who earned the status of “whites.” Indian immigrants share many characteristics with Jewish immigrants: Both groups came to the United States with strong education backgrounds and constructed their identity and status in American society by penetrating academia and business. The success story of Jewish people in American society is the most impressive example of ethnic success in America. Although many historical, social, and economic elements were instrumental in Jewish successes, their cultural values, dedication and aspiration for success, hard work, ambition for higher social status, and thriftiness attributed to their success (Lee, 2004; Orleck, 2001). Early East European Jewish immigrants came to America with skills, experiences, and a desire to succeed. Their human and cultural capital contributed to their

upward mobility in American society. In regards to Jewish success in American society, Steinberg (1981) explains that Jewish immigrants succeeded in America by converging their experience, education, and skills. The post-1970 Russian Jewish “immigrants came to the United States well educated—many of them are engineers, doctors, teachers, or members of the managerial and professional classes” (Zeltzer-Zubida, 2004, p. 341). According to Zeltzer-Zubida second-generation Russian Jews are “following their parents’ footsteps” and strive for higher educational and professional attainment. Zeltzer-Zubida points out, “The fact that children of Russian Jewish immigrants are considered to be white, that they have high educational attainment, and the most of them come from well-educated and economically stable families has significant effects on the way they think of themselves and their community”(p. 343).

In similar fashion, Asian Indians with their higher volume of education capital, professional backgrounds, and their preimmigration class advantages climbed the rungs of upward mobility comparatively rapidly. The post-1965 Asian Indian immigrants migrated to the United States with higher levels of human and cultural capital and established themselves in the mainstream society. With their hard work and thriftiness Asian Indians have become property and business owners. Like many newer educated Jewish immigrants who are forced to work as cab drivers, store clerks, or other low-level positions, many educated Asian Indians despite their college degrees are also working in low-level jobs. However, like Jewish immigrants Asian Indians push their children for high educational attainment and their children are doing well in school.

## **Asian Indian Students in the National Achievement Milieu**

From elementary through graduate school, the achievements of Asian-American students are nothing less than remarkable. Already their academic success has been reflected in economic and intellectual achievements in a number of fields. (Lee & Rong, 1988)

Recent research by Stuart Anderson (2004) for the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) examines educational accomplishments and contributions of children of new Asian Indian immigrants. Anderson reported, “60 percent of the top science students and 65 percent of the top math students in the United States are children of immigrants. In addition, foreign-born high school students make up 50 percent of the 2004 U.S. Math Olympiad’s top scores, 46 percent of the U.S. Physics Team, and 25 percent of the Intel Science Search finalists” (p. 1). Among these top students are children of Chinese and Indian immigrants.

In May 2004, the *New York Times* reported that the United States is losing its dominance in the area of science and scientific innovations and that there is a lack of concern over this issue. Given this condition, contributions of the immigrant population in the areas of math, science, and technology cannot be ignored by education policy-makers and politicians. The NFAP 2004 report showed that according to the National Science Foundation, “More than 50 percent of the engineers with Ph.D.’s working in the

United States are foreign-born...in addition, 45 percent of math and computer scientists with Ph.D.s, are foreign-born. Among master's degree recipients working today, 29.4 percent of engineers, 37 percent of math and computer scientists, and 25 percent of physicists are foreign-born" (Anderson, 2004). These data do not disclose the ethnicity of these foreign-born high achievers. However, the data on parental information of students who entered and won the Intel Science Talent Search (ITS) until 2004 reveal that the majority of winners are children of Asian American immigrant parents. In 2004, 1,500 high school seniors entered the ITS, and among the 40 finalists, 7 were Asian Indians, 2 of whom won awards. Among all 40 finalists nearly half of the students were children of immigrants, and among the winners, 9 of them were children of Asian immigrants (Anderson, 2004).

In the area of mathematics, Asian-American children dominated the 2004 U.S. Math Olympiad winning team. Out of the 20 winners in the Math Olympiad, 13 (65%) were children of immigrants. Among the 13 winners, 4 were Chinese, 4 Korean, 3 Russian, and 2 Asian Indians. Nearly all of the 2004 U.S. Physics Team members were of Chinese heritage, with one Russian who was one of five finalists to represent the United States and one Asian Indian student who was ranked sixth in the group of finalists (Anderson, 2004).

*India Abroad* reports that in the 6<sup>th</sup> annual Discovery Channel Young Scientist contest in 2004, the nation's premier science contest for students in grades 5-8, about 30 students were of South Asian origin, with most of them being Indian students (born in America). The goal of the contest is to discover young scientists of the next generation in America. The participants of this contest were selected from a pool of boys and girls, 10

to 15 years old. For the contest, 400 semifinalists were selected from a pool of 1,795 formal entries from 75,000 students who entered the science fair nationwide. Among the 400 semifinalists, 40 students were selected to compete for \$100,000 worth in scholarships and an expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C., for an awards ceremony.

In spring 2004, the Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans awarded 10 Asian Indian college students with fellowships. Among the 10 fellowship recipients, 8 were pursuing careers in science and math. From 1998 to 2004, the Asian Indian students have dominated this fellowship in the areas of math, science, and technology. Although Asian Indian students were excelling in other competitive disciplines such as business, the arts, and many other fields, careers in medicine, engineering, and law have traditionally been the top career choices.

### **Asian Indians in Academia**

Asian Indians have achieved success in American society with the asset of high educational achievements. While not all Asians are highly educated professionals, one cannot deny that a majority of first-generation Asian Indians is excelling in professional fields. The second-generation Asian Indian population is still in school or college. Although there are a good number of second-generation Asian Indians who are in challenging professions, their number is relatively small compared to the school-going population. According to Gibson and Ogbu although all Asian Americans do not excel academically, they are “disproportionately” represented in top high schools and colleges (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Rong & Grant, 1992). Astonishingly, Asian American students

are still holding a “disproportionate representation” in American academics. Recent data on school enrollment report that Asian Indians have higher rates of school enrollment in comparison to the total population. In 1999, the percentage of Asian American bachelor’s degree holders 25 years or older was 42 percent higher than the white American population. Among all Asian groups—Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, and Japanese Americans—the Asian Indians have the highest level of educational achievement (Feigelman et al., 2002; Schafer, 2002).

According to U. S. immigration sources, Indian immigrants are the most highly educated immigrants. “India provides with the largest number of highly educated groups” (Alarcon, 2000, p.301). Alarcon categorizes Asian Indian immigrants as “skilled immigrants” who are permanent residents or naturalized citizens. In the context of Asian Indian immigration patterns, Alarcon states:

India provides the United States the largest number of highly educated immigrants...Indian engineers and scientists have a comparative advantage over other professionals in the developing world. The apparent difference in the social and economic backgrounds on Mexican and Indian professionals-Indian professionals generally come from more affluent families- supports the notion that Indians, like other Asian immigrants, have already experienced a more severe selection process when trying to emigrate to the United States. (p. 317)

## **Educational Performance: Asian Indians in the United States, Britain, and Canada**

The saga of Asian Indian migration in the United States, Britain, and Canada is the story of a minority group that is successful in spite of the odds. In any given society minority status is generally associated with low income, a lower level of academic achievements, problems in school, and unemployment. On the contrary, Asian Indians have done fairly well despite discrimination and prejudice. The comparative literature on Asian Indian migration to the United States, Britain, and Canada show that Asian Indian children perform better in schools and try to achieve upward mobility through higher education (Hall, 2002; Reitz, 2001).

In Britain, after the late 1960s, Asian Indians were among the highest qualified students in British academia (Anwar, 1998; Salmon, 1996).

Asian Indians exhibit better educational performance compared to the native British population, and they demonstrate a “much better capacity than do white children to overcome the well-known obstacles of class in the British educational system” (Ballard, 1985, p. 263). Furthermore, Gibson (1988) says that Asian Indians are persistent in their academic pursuits. The British data suggest that Asian Indian students are highly successful academically, and they are better able to cross class barriers than native white students.

In Canada, second-generation Asian Indian students are pushing toward upward mobility through education in spite of growing antagonism and racism against Asians in general. Reitz (2003) writes about the academic performance of

Asians in Canada, saying “The comparative degree of upward inter-generational mobility in education for the native-born might well be greater ...The direction for change was most positive for Koreans, Chinese, South Asians, and Latin Americans” (p.13).

In the United States, Asian Indians are considered a model minority and are competing with their counterparts in Britain and Canada. Gibson and Bachu (1991) compare Asian Indians in Britain and the United States: “Sikh youths raised in Britain and in the United States are comparatively successful in school, more successful by a number of criteria than their majority-group mates” (p. 63). Asian Indian minorities are among the successful minorities in Western countries. Although they face linguistic, cultural, and economic barriers upon their arrival in a foreign country, they overcome these obstacles and implant themselves in their host country successfully. Surprisingly, they find their way around social obstacles such as prejudice and discrimination.

## **Catalyst Variables of High Achievements**

### **The Role of Culture**

Asian Indian culture teaches students to respect their teachers and school authorities, and the success ideology of their families forces them to be goal-oriented and hard-working. Due to these distinct characteristics, they often gain the respect and admiration of their teachers and school administration. According to Indian culture, it is a student’s duty to attain knowledge and sharpen their intellectual abilities. Yet, like other

Asian immigrants, if an Indian student gets the highest grade in class there is nothing much to be proud of because it is expected of him or her as a student. Though high expectations produce good results, many times they have negative consequences.

### **Parental Values and Expectations**

Parental attitudes and ideas are forces that shape children's achievement patterns in school. A major study in the area of attitude and achievement reports that although Indian immigrants believe that hard work and personal effort are essential for academic success, they do not emphasize individual limitations as much as Americans do, and they set high standards for educational accomplishments (Campbell & Connolly, 1987). Like other new Asian immigrants, Asian Indian parents place the most emphasis on studies, and they try to instill in their children the value of self-motivation. They train them to believe that education is the highest priority in their lives. Families' high expectations are one of the major motivating forces for students to attain high achievement in school and college.

### **Authoritarian Parenting**

As one finds in other Asian families the close-knit Indian families believe in the authoritarian style of parenting. Authoritative families demand obedience, discipline, upward mobility, and high achievement. They set rules and expectations. Research by Dornbusch et al. (1987) concluded that Asians ranked highest on the scale of authoritarian parenting style, but their children had the highest grade point averages in schools and colleges. Although they are demanding, they are supportive of their children.

Research shows that children coming from authoritarian families perform and attain better, possess better social skills, and have high self-esteem (Baumrind, 1991, Weiner, 1986). The majority of Indian parents set education goals for their children. Raised in authoritative families and being aware of their parents' sacrifices, Indian children feel obliged to attain higher educational and professional success.

### **Parent's Educational Background**

The office of Academic Initiatives Task Force (2004) reports that "European American and Asian-Americans still account for most students who have parents with college degrees and Latinos and African Americans constitute the majority of students without high school diplomas," and groups that are most academically successful provide the most support to their children, thus providing supplemental educational opportunities. The 1999 Census data show that among the population aged 25 or over, 40 percent of Asian males had earned a master's degree or higher; in contrast to 10 percent of the non-Hispanic white population and 5 percent for all other minority males; 19 percent of Indian woman had a master's degree or higher. This is in comparison to 7percent of non-Hispanic white women, and 4 percent of all minority females. Among Asian Indian immigrants, 70 percent were born in India and a large number of them have college or professional degrees from their country of birth. But the majority of Asian Indians attended American colleges and universities for higher professional degrees.

Asian Indian men have been able to achieve higher professional and occupational status compared to all other minority groups. There is a higher percentage of physicians, engineers, computer scientists and programmers, college professors, physical-science-

related employment, and other occupations (medical and computer technicians). Due to their higher educational attainment, Indian immigrants are overrepresented in professional/managerial, technical, and business occupations. A high 75 percent of Asian Indian men are employed in high-paying prestigious jobs compared to 47 percent non-Hispanic whites, and 32 percent of all other minority immigrant males.

A majority of Indian females migrated to the United States with good educational backgrounds. Indian women are now holding traditionally male professional occupations such as physicians, professional or managerial jobs, nursing, health-related jobs, technical jobs, and sales jobs. The number of Asian women working in the traditional female jobs such as typists, secretaries, elementary or high school teachers is very low. As the data demonstrate, 77 percent of Indian females are in high-paying professional or managerial jobs, and technical fields, compared to the 72 percent among non-Hispanic white women and 57 percent of all other minority women.

Although Asian Indian parents are inactive in Parent Teacher Associations, they are very much involved in educational aspects of schooling. They are aware of the process of higher education, and therefore do not depend on school personnel for college choices, enrichment programs, or SAT preparations. Wealthy Indian parents spend as much as \$250 or more an hour for SAT tutors. The most expensive SAT preparation service that mostly caters to the white elite American and Indian communities is run by young Indians. In New York many Hindu temples advertise for SAT and magnet school test preparation programs along with religious programs. Children are trained from an early age to work for a perfect SAT score so they can gain admission into a prestigious college.

## **English Language Proficiency**

The majority of Indians who migrated to the United States from 1960 to 2000 are bilingual and proficient in English. Bilingual capacity contributes to academic achievement. Bankston and Zhou (1995) assert that immigrant students, especially younger ones, benefit from their bilingual abilities and that supporting skills in a first language lead to transferable cognitive skills that facilitate better learning. Coming from a country that was a British colony, Indian parents understand the implications of being proficient in English. They are concerned about their children's acquisition of the English language. It is very common among Indian immigrants to give mastery of the English language priority over their native language.

Language proficiency is seen as real capital in the modern global economy (Mall & Ruiz, 2002). The majority of Indian immigrants rank high in the "linguistic marketplace" where language proficiency is a valuable asset for assimilating and succeeding in the mainstream professional and social world successfully. Without the wealth of the English language, many other monolingual immigrant communities such as the Hispanic community have had difficulties assimilating into mainstream American society. In contrast, children of Indian immigrants had a smoother process of adaptation in school due to their rich background in the English language. Alarcon (2000) explains that "It is easier for Indian professionals to find employment in the United States because they are fluent English speakers upon arrival, English being the official language of the higher education in India" (p. 317). Coming from India, a country that has as much

language diversity as the United States, Indian immigrants have a greater capability of dealing with diversity of cultures and languages.

In the context of language proficiency and achievement in school, a student who is proficient in the English language understands grammatical rules, knows reading/writing procedures, comprehends content, and accesses literacy better than the one who has limited to no English proficiency. Thus linguistic abilities and linguistic structures affect students' negative or positive outcomes in school.

### **High Socioeconomic Status**

Research shows that there is a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievements. Nasaw (1979) argues, "Academic ability, as measured by high school grade point average or any of the standard aptitude tests, is directly related to (though not exactly) correlated with class background and family income" (p. 22). The students who live in the suburbs are "pursuing a more traditional program" that prepares them for private colleges and universities. Nasaw compares students on "academic ability" and states that "For every 100 students with high socioeconomic status and high ability, 82 will enter senior college and 63 will graduate" (p. 225). Thus high socioeconomic status and homeownership in a wealthy community are associated with one's educational achievements. In order to provide a good education for their children, affluent Indian immigrants move to suburbs with good schools. In the New York area all affluent suburbs with top school districts have very high Indian populations. The same pattern repeats in New Jersey. Due to comparatively lower real estate values in New Jersey, a comparably less affluent Indian population has been able to buy houses. Indian

immigrants who cannot afford a house in the suburbs or who want to live in the city for other reasons try their best to send their children to city magnet schools.

Results of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth supported the hypothesis that socioeconomic status is a determinant of children's school achievement. Parents of higher socioeconomic status have richer academic skills compared to families of lower socioeconomic status, and they tend to motivate their children for higher academic achievements. One of the most critical factors of achievement is social class. The Coleman study concluded that "The single most important criterion for school achievement was socioeconomic status (SES) especially related to a child's home environment" (Coleman, 1966). Although there are many factors associated with academic achievement, parental education as an element of SES is the most important part of one's economic achievement. Research demonstrates that the power of SES dominates academic achievement when many factors such as immigration status, measured intelligence, and race are held constant. Children of higher SES achieve higher in school compared to low SES or underclass children (Entwistle & Alexander, 1992; Nito, 1995; Milligan, 1993).

In the context of the academic achievement of Indian immigrants, SES as the most powerful element of individual achievement is consistent. Their educational and professional backgrounds have enabled them to achieve the status of upper-middle and middle class within mainstream American society. The mean income of Indian immigrants is higher than other newly arrived immigrant groups because they are concentrated in high-paying jobs or have successful businesses. Some 38 percent of Indian immigrant households have more than \$55,000 total income compared to 22

percent among non-Hispanic white groups and among all other minority households.

Asian Indians are leading non-Hispanic whites by about \$ 9,000 and are almost \$22,000 ahead of other minority immigrant groups.

The Indian immigrant population is fully aware of the fact that after being schooled in failing or low-performing schools, one has a remote chance of being admitted into an Ivy League or comparable college. Thus inner-city home ownership is less desirable than home ownership in the suburbs. There are a small number of Indian professionals living in urban areas but their children attend private schools or the top school districts in the city. There are a few Indians living in less desirable city neighborhoods, but they all try to save money to move out to the suburbs, and they do not hesitate to spend all their savings on expensive private colleges.

### **Test-Taking Culture**

As in China, Japan, and Korea, in India college entrance exams are a predictor of one's economic success in life. School students are forced to sharpen their test-taking skills. Educated Indian parents know the importance of high grades throughout school and college. The American education system also values ranking and higher grades in one's educational career. Consequently, Indian parents in America retain traditions of "prep courses," tutoring, and enrichment classes to maximize scores throughout the school careers of their children. The Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (2002) reports that on average, Asian-American students have passed standardized examinations at high passing rates, comparable to white students. In 2002, Asian-American high school students graduated at a rate of 66.9 percent, second only to white

students at 70.5 percent and significantly higher than blacks (44.4 percent) and Hispanic (41.1 percent). Though there are cases of failure among Indian children the percentage is very low.

### **Why Do Indian Immigrants Strive for High Achievement in Math, Science, and Technology?**

Most of the post-1965 Asian Indians were admitted to the United States on the basis of their professional background of medicine and engineering. Although professionals and students in other fields also migrated to the United States at that time, their number was significantly lower compared to individuals in math, science, and technology fields. In the 1990s the United States Immigration Act created a category of temporary workers that was for high-tech workers. By the end of 1998 the quota of 65,000 high-tech workers was exhausted and during the years 1999 and 2000 the quota was increased to 142,500, for a few more years. This quota is mainly for computer-related or electrical engineering positions (Alarcon, 2000). According to Alarcon, India has been providing more than half of the high-tech positions. American companies are attracting high-tech Indian workers with attractive salaries and benefits. Most of these Indian high-tech workers succeed in getting immigrant status in the United States.

Because a majority of Indian immigrants gained their entry to the United States due to their math and science backgrounds, they consider math, science, and technology education as key to economic success. They encourage their children to excel in math and science because they know that a sound education in these disciplines and high scores

will open the doors for elite colleges. Elite private colleges have raised the standards for math and science literacy and require higher levels of math for college-bound students. In addition, prestigious colleges require high math and verbal scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) from students even if they opt for another professional degree such as law or business. For high-tech industries, professionals need to have strong math and science backgrounds. Indian immigrants are aware of the vital role of science, math, and technology in shaping their children's futures.

Coming from a tradition that values math and science education as one's economic success and prosperity, and having proved themselves in American society academically and economically due to their pre-migration degrees in medicine, engineering, or other challenging fields from Indian institutions, Indian immigrants expect their children to excel in math science and technology. Consequently, math scores for Asian Americans are higher than for white students but surprisingly lower than for East Asians (Chen & Stevenson, 1995). As do other Asian American immigrants, Indian parents set higher standards for mathematics scores and stress the development of a higher degree of mathematics skills in schools. According to Crystal and Stevenson (1991), American parents are less critical of their children's math and science achievements compared to Asian American parents.

In the United States, math and science education is considered a major tool for professional success. In the context of math and science literacy and college education Moses & Cobb (2001) states that "the traditional role of science and math education has been to train an elite, create a priesthood, find bright students and bring them into university research" (p.16). Further, Moses points to the importance of math education

for minorities in gaining economic success. He asserts that “the idea of minority people is now linked to the issue of math and science education” (p. 14). The recent “standard college prep math curriculum” means that a student should have completed high-level math courses such as precalculus and calculus in high school and be prepared to do advanced math in college. Most professional Asian Indians encourage their children to finish the college prep math curriculum in high school and maintain a high score in math as preparation for professional degrees that lead to high-paying jobs. According to Simpson (2001), “In general, the more mathematics courses a student takes in high school, the more likely the student is to choose a technical rather than non-technical degree program”(p.78). Regarding science courses, Simpson asserts that “The number of science courses a student takes in high school is influential in choice of an academic major. With the exception of health-related majors, the more science courses a student has in high school, the more likely the student is to choose a technical degree” (p. 79). Simpson concludes that the trend among Asian Americans is to prefer technical degrees.

In the American education system, math education is the gatekeeper to higher education. Students with low scores in math on standardized tests have fewer chances of being admitted to competitive colleges. In inner city schools, math curricula do not prepare students for high-standard mathematics tests. Indian parents are very aware of this fact. They move to good school districts in the suburbs if they can afford to. The Indian immigrant population living in New York City prepares their children for city magnet schools and specialized competition exams. They send their children to coaching schools or hire private tutors, move to neighborhoods with better schools, and make

every effort to send them to schools where they can receive a good education in math and science. The affluence of Indian immigrants and mathematics achievements are strongly related.

With the “culture of math and science literacy” from back home, the adaptation of the American “culture of math literacy” was a natural discourse to Indian immigrants. The study conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) of students in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades demonstrated a strong unrelenting performance gap “among subgroups defined by socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity” (NCTM, 2000). The NCTM reports that the achievement gap in mathematics demonstrates that White students of higher socioeconomic status perform better compared to poor children and students of color except Asians.

The new definition of learning mathematics contradicts the classical Cartesian intellectualist theory that defines learning as an individualistic act, and endorses the theory that views learning as an act of engagement and participation. The new vision of learning supports the idea of “collaborative production” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.15). In this context, learning by Asian Indian children is a collaborative effort between parents and their children. Parents are there to facilitate their children’s learning physically, emotionally, and economically. They make sure that their children spend enough time on their schoolwork.

Social norms of any given society credit one’s educational and social accomplishment to his or her intellect, and the overall belief is that learning is directly related to one’s intelligence. In the context of intelligence and learning, Pea (1988) argues that intelligence is distributed across the individual tools and social context and

“across minds, persons, and the symbolic and physical environment both natural and artificial” (p. 47). Pea claims that one can hone intelligence by exploiting external resources around them. I argue that all Indian students are not intelligent or super-smart. However, the majority of second-generation Asian Indian students hone their intelligence through their physical and psychological environment that their parents provide for them and attain high scholastic achievement.

According to a research study by Verna and Campbell (2002) Asian-Indians have a “mathematical edge”; math scores for Asian American students are higher than those of Caucasian-American students, but lower than East Asians. A survey conducted by the National Science Foundation (NSF) places Indian scientists and doctors above other immigrants. According to the NSF report, “while immigrant scientists and engineers from all countries altogether authored 2,810 publications, the Indian scientists and engineers alone authored 708 publications, the British 506, the Chinese 240, and the Canadians 199” (Nimbark, 1980). Indian immigrants use their math and science achievements as assets in intellectual, economic, and social dimensions of American society.

Western Eurocentric education believes in “math teaching that considers mathematical discovery and knowledge-production, emerging only from a rigorous application of deductive axiomatic logic” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). This Eurocentric view of mathematics learning is problematic for diverse cultural groups because it hinders their mathematics learning. Ironically, the mainstream Western mathematics curriculum has facilitated mathematics learning and positively affected the mathematics achievement of Indian immigrants and their children. India was a British colony for more than a century, and as a result the Indian education system is still following Western ways

of mathematics and science teaching. Indian immigrants adapted to the mainstream math and science curricula naturally. Many Indian immigrant parents with science and math backgrounds monitor their children's math and science learning. They complain that mainstream mathematics curricula are easy and not challenging enough for their children.

### **Asian Indian Students in the United States: Upward or Downward Mobility?**

Although overall scholastic achievement of Asian Indian students is impressive and promising, a tinge of downward mobility is visible among the second-generation Asian Indians. Contradictions and oppositional behavior to the model minority image are appearing. There are second-generation Asian Indian students who find it hard to live up to model minority standards, surrender easily to peer pressure, find street culture more attractive than home culture, and think that to "fit in" to American culture it is "cool" to sacrifice grades. The second-generation decline theory predicts that assimilation and higher education will not elevate second-generation Asian Indians to the rank of whites as it did for South and East European immigrants. The second-generation Asian immigrants will face more discrimination than their parents because their skin color might be more significant than their class, and they will consequently experience downward mobility (Kasinitz et al., 2004). In the context of educational performance of second-generation Asians and their future economic prospects in mainstream society, Gans (1992) points out:

Today's Asian-American second generation is currently being slotted into the role of the European Jews in the contemporary version of the ethnic-success myth, although (as among the Jews) only a minority of the Asian-Americans can live up to the myth. In today's economy, as in the past eras, it is the children of middle-class immigrants, Asian-American and other, who are most likely to use education in upward mobility. (p.173)

While Herbert Gans acknowledges the educational success of second-generation Asian Americans in mainstream society, he expresses his concerns over the second-generation decline of children of immigrants. His theory of second-generation decline is pessimistic and opposes the "straight-line" assimilation theory, which argues that assimilation and acculturation determine upward mobility of the second generation. Warner and Srole (1945) conceived the sociocultural *straight-line* assimilation theory in the context of South and East European immigration. This theory predicts that second-generation immigrants will experience upward mobility by assimilating and being educated in American society. Gans (1992) argues that the *straight-line* theory is not concerned with changing economic conditions; therefore, in the future it might not be valid. The second-generation Americanized Asians will experience downward mobility because they will lose their parents' work ethics and will not welcome immigrant jobs (Kasinitz et al., 2004; Rumbaut, 1990). The second generation will not move up solely with their education because assimilation and higher education will not elevate them to

the rank of “whites” as it did for South and East European immigrants. The second-generation Asian immigrants always will be dark skinned and will face more discrimination than their parents because their skin color might be more significant than class. However, the emergence of a new ethnic identity that rejects the acculturation process might curb the downward mobility of second-generation immigrant youth.

Reitz (2003) suggests that in Canada the second-generation Asian immigrants from Korea, China, Japan, and South Asia (and India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) have higher educational attainments and reflect “a major upgrade in standards compared to earlier generations” (p. 4). In the United States, Poch (2003) conducted a similar study of second-generation children of new immigrants. He argues that because of variability in immigrant population it is hard to predict one fate for all immigrant population. Noguera (2004) responds to the generalizing trend in immigrant studies and says that “Several important challenges to the thesis of the Asian model minority demonstrated that academic success among Asian American students was by no means uniform” (p.181). Furthermore, Noguera suggest that because of “considerable variability in the academic performance” of various immigrant groups it is hard to predict or explain their future. Gans (1992) hopes:

In the longer run, education may become a more important means for upward mobility than it is today, for as firms become larger, the global economy more competitive, and the division of labor more specialized, the most up-to-date technical or professional education will become an ever-

greater job prerequisite, while parental social status become less important. (p.173)

Gans is skeptical about the future of second-generation Asian Indians. I argue that Gans' skepticism is rooted in inevitable realities. Although, at present, Asian immigrants are in privileged positions in American society because of their skills and scholastic attainment, in the future they might not hold such an advantaged status in the mainstream society. Research by the Federal Glass Ceiling in Silicon Valley found that "Indian males with at least a bachelor's degree were less likely than either the total Asian and Pacific Islander male population or white males to be in management positions" (Alarcon, 2000, p. 18). In the future, second-generation Asian Indians might face more discrimination and prejudice.

## CHAPTER V

### Introduction

When the stranger enters the school she encounters the “liberal call to assimilate.” She is invited to claim her right to embrace the modern principles of equality of opportunity, freedom of self-constitution, and individual achievement—to transform herself through education by removing her difference ....At the same time, however, it reinscribes the superiority of dominant culture in the act of calling strangers and internal enemies to assimilate to it.

(Hall, 2002, p. 121)

Hall in her ethnographic study of Indian children in Britain pointed out schools’ call for cultural assimilation. American schools also challenge cultural identity of immigrant children and expect them to assimilate into the mainstream culture, conform to school norms, and demonstrate behavior accepted by dominant culture. The meritocratic values of the American education system reward youths who achieve middle-class achievement ideology and academic standards.

In this chapter, I discuss school context because it plays vital role in identity construction, stereotyping, and marginalization of immigrant youths. Specifically, in the context of immigrant children’s academic success or failure, school context is significant in determining their achievement. Academic and social expectations of school reward

those students who meet school norms. On the other hand school is not sensitive to students who struggle hard to rise up to school's standard, or fail to meet school norms.

## **Middle School Context**

### **Demographic Makeup of Mango Grove Middle School**

Compared with many other urban middle schools, Mango Grove is a very small middle school. In 2004 the total population of the school was 1,244. In the 2002-2003 academic year the South Asian population (Asian Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) increased from 50 percent to 53 percent of the total population of the school. However, Asian Indians comprised 50 percent of the total school population. In other similar urban middle schools of the Northeast region, the South Asian population is 13 percent of the total school population. About 4 percent of Asian Indian students out of the total Asian Indian population of Mango Grove were born in India and migrated to this country with their parents. This school serves children of newer middle- and lower-middle-class Asian Indian immigrants. The white population in this school is 22 percent, blacks make up 13 percent of the school population, and Hispanic students are 12 percent of the total population of the school. Mango Grove Middle School has the largest Asian Indian population in this large urban center.

## **The History of Mango Grove**

Since the late 1970s and 1980s the Asian Indian student population in Mango Grove Middle School has been increasing. During this period, Mango Grove was a transitional school for most of the Asian Indians, who moved to Lotus Valley for better schools. A large number of Asian Indians living in Lotus Valley later moved to adjacent expensive suburban areas with comparatively better schools. At present, most of the Asian Indians in Lotus Valley are homeowners. A large number of my parent respondents expressed that they are in Lotus Valley to stay.

For the past 25 years Mango Grove was a prestigious magnet school, but in 2004 the school lost funding, and now it is a zoned school. All students living in this zone are entitled to attend Mango Grove. However, much like a magnet school, Mango Grove accepts out-of-zone students with a high grade point average. The implicit message I received from the principal and other teachers was that although technically Mango Grove is not a magnet school, it still holds the status of an elite magnet school. For the last three years many students from Mango Grove have been competing to get into specialized elite high schools. In the Lotus Valley school district, a school's status is upgraded by the number of students it sends to specialized elite high schools. The academic status of Mango Grove is upgraded by the increased number of its students who are competing on the standardized entrance exam for specialized high schools. A large number of Asian Indian students appear for the admission test for elite schools, and a significant number of them are admitted to specialized high schools.

Since Mango Grove was a magnet school, a majority of students who were admitted there were of middle-class background. Mango Grove subscribes to middle-class meritocratic values. Although Mango Grove is an urban school, its previous principals tried to maintain its reputation as a “better school” of Lotus Valley. I had an opportunity to interview three Asian Indian alumni of Mango Grove. Two of them are doctors and one is a computer consultant. All of these people went to specialized high schools and attended prestigious universities. They praised their teachers and the principal of Mango Grove, and they credited Mango Grove for good education and their success in life. Mango Grove is not a typical urban middle school with metal detectors, constant surveillance of police, and hallway hangers. It has a reputation as a safe school with high academic standards. Its status as a magnet school has strengthened the elitist image of Mango Grove, and this image has continued to the present.

### **School Administration and Faculty**

In Lotus Valley the school enrollment has shifted over the past 20 years from a predominantly white population to a population that is 53 percent South Asian. The influx of Asian Indian immigrants has fundamentally changed the racial and linguistic composition of Mango Grove and Lotus Valley. Although the student population of Mango Grove has changed, the instructional and administrative staff has remained almost the same as it was 20 years ago.

### **Predominantly White Teachers**

The instructional and administrative staff of Mango Grove is 95 percent white. All the administrative staff is white; and on the instructional staff, there are two African Americans, one West Indian, two Asian Indians, and three Hispanic teachers in the school. Most of the teachers are white middle-class suburbanites who commute to the school from neighboring suburbs. There is one Asian Indian teacher, a substitute who is trying to get a permanent position in the school and covers classes for absent teachers very often. Lotus Valley is one of the top school district of this large urban center. There is no teacher turnover in this school district, and in Mango Grove the average teacher remains in the classroom for 21 years. As a result, a majority of teachers in the school have been there for many years.

### **New Principal**

Mr. Romano has been at Mango Grove only for a year, having transferred to the school in the fall of 2004, and he is treated like an outsider. Mr. Romano is aware of cultural differences and disconnect between teachers and students in the school. He stated:

*The teachers do not try to understand their students. There is a cultural misunderstanding between teachers and students. If the teachers connected with the students many problems would be solved. Nobody tries to understand these students or their problems. I think not only Asian Indian students, but all minority students should be studied and we should try to understand their*

*lives. I welcome your study, and I think there should be more studies like this.*

Although Mr. Romano did not mention the presence of cultural or racial tensions, the implicit message I received was that there were cultural and racial conflicts at school. He seemed aware of complexities and conflicts that Asian Indian students experience at school. It was apparent from his response that he was sensitive to the needs of Asian Indian students and was willing to bring about changes in the school. According to him, cultural conflicts between teachers and students create problems, and he suggested that teachers try to understand cultural issues.

However, as a new principal in a school where most of the teachers are old timers and are set in their ways, his mission to bring about change is not an easy task. Soon I discovered that most of the teachers disapproved of his ideas and policies, and he had no significant support in school. Teachers blamed him for implementing his “top-down” policies, and he blamed teachers for their arrogance and the cultural disconnect with students. But while blame was being shifted from teachers to administration and vice versa, the students’ cultural interests were suffering. Although he wanted to bring about changes to improve the schooling of ethnic minorities in Mango Grove, he was petrified by his white instructional staff. Many times he expressed his apprehension, “This is a very sensitive school Mrs. Saran. I have to worry about my teachers. I am afraid if teachers do not agree to ....” It was apparent that he was threatened by his staff. A majority of the teachers viewed Mr. Romano as a mean, insensitive person. The Social Studies and ESL teacher pointed out that the school needed multicultural activities and the principal should acknowledge Indian holidays.

## Academic Structure of Mango Grove

As a magnet school Mango Grove had been designated by the Lotus Valley School District as a screened admission school. At present Mango Grove is a zoned school, it is not a special admission school; however, for out-of-zone students, Mango Grove is a highly competitive school. Mango Grove requires out of zone students to have a 90 or above grade point average. Admission to Mango Grove Middle School is a status and prestige issue for many students. Many of my respondents who lived in neighborhoods that had low-achieving zoned middle schools traveled one hour each way to attend Mango Grove.

One of the most important features of Mango Grove is tracking. Students are ranked in three tracks based on their elementary school standardized test scores and grade point averages. Tracking is a way of grouping students together for 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. The tracking system determines students' academic levels and social interactions. Many of my respondents told me that they tried to interact with students outside their track but because they were always with students within their track most of their interactions were limited to their track friends.

Students with the highest grade point average are placed in the Special Placement (SP) class, which is the highest and most prestigious track. All students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade SP class take Regents exams and are taught the 9<sup>th</sup> grade math and science curriculum. The norm is that all SP students take the standardized entrance exam for specialized high schools. In Mango Grove, it is an honor for teachers to get SP classes. Students of SP classes are traditionally comprised of hard-working students. These are the students who

offer their services to lunchtime tutoring classes, and they participate in debate competitions and many other high status academic activities.

## **Standardized Testing and Instructional Practices at Mango Grove**

Field Notes. October 17, 2005

*I am testing today. I test them every Monday and every Friday to keep them on the right track. Tests keep them going. They do not have to work very hard for their big exams. I give them quizzes during the middle of the week. If I do not test them; they do not study. This year they are taking Regents. I like to prepare them for Regents. I want them to do well in Regents. They are in the SP class, and they should do very well on exams. (Science Teacher)*

### **Test-Centered Teaching**

At Mango Grove, teaching practices, curriculum, and academic cores are driven by mandated standardized tests. Students are taught how to do well on standardized tests. Teachers focus on preparing students for tests and raising test scores. In SP classes students have to maintain a minimum of an 85 percent score on exams. If they keep receiving lower grades, they are disqualified from the SP track. The SP math teacher explained that she likes to test her students twice a week to keep them on “the right

track.” The test-taking culture and highly competitive environment of Mango Grove appeal to Asian Indian parents. These parents said that Mango Grove is “better” than typical urban zoned schools because it prepares students for standardized tests. Teachers explained that the administration and parents expected good scores. If students scored high on standardized tests and maintained high grade point averages, teachers had “nothing to worry about.”

I observed that in math and science class teachers preferred a traditional teaching method, and their argument was that they have to cover a vast curriculum to prepare their students for big tests; therefore, they cannot afford to waste time in trying out fancy things in class. Throughout the school, teaching practices are very traditional, and the school administration does not bother teachers as long as their students are doing well on tests. The argument in favor of traditional mode of teaching is, “why try to change something that works?”

### **Standardized Testing Is a Priority**

Twice a week teachers are given double periods to prepare students in math, science, and English. Teachers like double periods because they get extra time for teaching and project work. Because standardized test scores are determinants of a school’s prestige and honor, high-performing schools enjoy many privileges. Consequently, at Mango Grove standardized testing is a priority.

Mango Grove is popular among the Asian Indian community because of its test-preparation policy. Asian Indians come from a test-taking culture where students are

always preparing for competitive tests. Most Asian Indian parents know that low scores on standardized tests impede upward mobility. Asian Indians appreciate the test-oriented teaching of Mango Grove because they believe tests help children develop good study skills needed for competitive high school entrance exams and academic success. Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (2001) point out, “On one end of the spectrum, we find children from middle-class urban backgrounds who have been preparing in their countries since early childhood for high-stakes, competitive exams. These children are highly literate and have well-developed study skills; their parents have taught them well what it takes to succeed in school” (p.128). The Suarez-Orozcos refer to successful new immigrants and their children who perform better in school and do well on standardized tests.

### **Peer Tutoring**

A peer-tutoring program is designed to help students who need help in academic subjects. During lunch periods students can attend peer-tutoring centers, where SP students volunteer. A large number of Asian Indian students are peer tutors. Being a tutor is honorable, and almost all SP Asian Indian students proudly provide their services to the peer-tutoring center.

### **Neighborhood Context**

*Saran: Why did your parents move to Lotus Valley?*

*Sanam: Because this is a better neighborhood and the school is better.*

*Saran: What do you mean by a better school? What makes a neighborhood good or bad?*

*Sanam: It is the neighborhood that makes a school good or bad. It is all about neighborhood. You know a neighborhood is people. People make neighborhoods. People in this neighborhood are good. A lot of Indian people live in this neighborhood. This place is safe. Very few black or Spanish people live here.*

Lotus Valley is one of the better neighborhoods of this Northeastern urban center. Like Sanam's family, most of my respondents' families moved to Lotus Valley because it is a predominantly white and Asian neighborhood. Sanam defined a "better" neighborhood as a community with good people and a good school. For Sanam, whites and Asians are good people and a neighborhood with whites and Asians is safer than a neighborhood with black and Hispanic people.

Demography, a better school, affordable real estate prices, and the geography of Lotus Valley are appealing to Asian Indians. Lotus Valley is nestled within an elite suburban neighborhood, and it shares its border with one of the most expensive and elite suburbs of the Northeast region. Asian Indians who cannot afford a house in the neighboring suburb buy homes or rent apartments in Lotus Valley. Although this is an urban neighborhood, its characteristics are of a white middle class suburb. Many of my respondent parents told me that this neighborhood has a good school, and it is like a suburb but a lot cheaper than the neighboring suburb. They like Lotus Valley because it is safer for their children. The implicit message parents and students relayed was that "Place Matters" (Dreier et al., 2001) for them. Arguing for importance of place in one's upward mobility and education, Dreier et al write:

In short, whether we are skilled professionals, or minimum-wage

workers, where we live matters. Place affects our access to jobs and public services (especially education) our access to shopping and culture, our level of personal security, the availability of medical services, and even the air we breath. People still care deeply where they live. (p. 2)

This explanation precisely describes Asian Indians' preference for Lotus Valley; it is conducive to educational achievement. Asian Indians are still fleeing to Lotus Valley from inner-city neighborhoods because those schools are not conducive to upward mobility. Asian Indians are aware of the power of "Codes of the Street," and by moving to a middle class neighborhood they try to save their children from the codes of inner city streets. In his ethnographic study of African American ghetto youths, Anderson (1999) describes the influence of inner-city neighborhoods on the lives of African American children and youths. Although Anderson acknowledges the importance of family values and upbringing in children's life success, he concedes to the powerful influence of neighborhood on children's lives:

The important point here is that the kind of home a child comes from influences but does not always determine the way the child will turn out. The neighborhood and the surrounding environmental influences, including available social and economic opportunities and how the child adapts to this environment, are key. (p. 68)

According to Anderson, neighborhood influences are visible by upper elementary school age. He states, "By the age of ten children from decent and street-oriented

families alike are mingling on the neighborhood streets and figuring out their identities” (p. 68). Anderson’s statement explains Asian Indian families’ transitions to better neighborhoods when their children finish elementary school. Many of my respondent parents said that inner city neighborhoods were not a “good place” for raising teenage youths. They like the Lotus Valley neighborhood because people in Lotus Valley are “people like us.” Here “people like us” implies a middle-class, predominantly white/Asian neighborhood. Asian Indians feel closer to white and Asian populations than to African American and Hispanic populations; therefore, a white neighborhood is more desirable to them.

### **ESL Class: A Nurturing Place**

Although the principal of Mango Grove claimed that there are no language problems in Mango Grove, and for English Language Learners the school provides an English as Second Language (ESL) program, there is a need for better ESL and bilingual programs. According to the ESL teacher, the school does not have a significant ESL population; however, ESL students need a stronger support system in school than a 40-minute period. Many students need one on one service. Most of the ESL Asian Indian students are trying very hard to learn English, but they are facing problems in other classes because their teachers are not sensitive to their needs. Very often their frustration vents in behavior problems. The ESL teacher Ms. Champagne explained:

*I have only 90 ESL students in the school, and most of them are really trying hard, but you know they are in middle school. Many are at a first grade level in English. Most of these students are*

*recent immigrants. Their parents have English barriers and they cannot communicate with teachers, school authorities, or guidance counselors. I wish they had a bilingual teacher...somebody who can communicate with them. Your presence in my class makes things easier for them. These students are trying hard but they have no help at home, and in school I am the only one to help them. Other teachers do not like them. Really, nobody cares for them...They never liked immigrants...They always wanted to keep immigrants under control...*

Ms. Champagne complained that the school overlooks the needs of ESL students, and many immigrant students are failing in school because of language barriers. She complained, “You know many white teachers do not care for these students. For them a language barrier is a deficiency and they feel only an ESL teacher is responsible for these students.” Ms. Champagne further confided:

*...they do not like immigrants to be really successful. There are a few who really like immigrants, but you know most whites hate to see them getting ahead. It is better to keep them in control...you may not believe me, but I am telling you the truth. In reality, nobody wants to help immigrant children...these children will have a hard time in high school...other teachers do not like to hear the truth...You are an educated person...you know what I am talking about.*

I understood Ms. Champagne's frustration and concern. She was the only teacher in Mango Grove to point out a hidden reality and identify acts of anti-immigrant sentiment. As an ESL teacher, she had experienced the dark side of the model minority discourse. Most of her ESL Asian Indian students did not fit to the model minority image and were victimized by anti-immigrant sentiments. The Suarez-Orozcos (2001) argue, "In the United States, the history of anti-immigrant sentiment is as long as the history of immigration itself. Today, this sentiment appears to endure as a 'last frontier' in which citizens openly vent racial and ethnic hostilities," (p. 7). ESL children experienced anti-immigrant sentiments in other classes and were discouraged by their teachers' arrogant attitudes. I observed that many teachers viewed ESL children as an extra burden, and they treated them with insensitivity.

I noticed that all Asian Indian ESL students liked their ESL teacher and felt she really cared for them. Akram, who demonstrated behavior problems in science and math class, was one of the most-well-behaved students in the ESL class. Puja, Rupa, Ram, and many others who demonstrated social and psychological problems in other classes were well-behaved, hard-working students in ESL class. For them ESL was the safest and the most desirable place in school. They liked the nurturing structure of ESL class and they were able to make connection with Ms. Champagne. Ms. Champagne is a culturally sensitive professional, and she respected cultural differences. She allowed students to use their native languages in her class. Although English is the medium of instruction in ESL class, she encouraged her Asian Indian students to speak with me in their native language. Although Ms. Champagne complained that the parents of her Asian Indian students were not involved in school and were not assertive, she understood that their

language barrier prevents them from being active in school discourses. She praised Asian Indian parents for teaching their children to respect teachers, making sure that their children attend school regularly, and turning in homework assignments on time. In her class, students were grouped according to their academic strength and her advanced students tutored beginner students. She taught ESL American social norms, but she constantly praised children's cultural norms and taught them that they should learn American behavior codes to become successful in school.

In addition to addressing issues of parental involvement in school and the importance of first language in second language acquisition, Ms. Champagne mentioned how a majority of teachers were resentful of ESL students and felt burdened by the presence of these students in their classes. I agree with Ms. Champagne's observation because in the course of my study I saw many ESL Asian Indian students struggling to do class work with their limited English competence, becoming frustrated and being engaged in disruptive behavior to get the teacher's attention. In exploring issues of the failure or success of English Language Learners (ELL), Asian Indian children, and the teacher's role in their learning, the Suarez-Orozcos (2001) write, "As immigrant children progress in their acquisition of English skills, learning can accelerate. Over time, much will depend on whether the teacher can engage children who are often linguistically as well as culturally different from herself" (p. 147). I noticed in the ESL class that Ms. Champagne was successful in crossing the boundary of her cultural field and stepping into her students' cultural field, thereby helping her students learn English and facilitating their success in school. According to her math teacher, Rupa had psychological problems and she was a "lost case"; the math teacher did not know how to deal with Rupa. Within

a few weeks after her placement in the ESL class Rupa bloomed. Ms. Champagne reported, “Rupa is very sweet. I enjoy her in my class. She is trying very hard to learn English. She is very smart.”

Ms. Champagne tried to reach out to her students’ parents but was not very successful with the Asian Indian parents. In her opinion, parents of Indian ESL children were different from professional Indians. They lacked knowledge of American ways, were intimidated by Americans, and were nervous about communicating with school authorities. Consequently, they stayed away from school. In order to help ESL students succeed academically and to involve parents, the school should arrange parent outreach programs.

## **Asian Indians at Mango Grove**

### **School’s Perception of Asian Indian Students**

A school’s perception of minority students is guided by the students’ navigation of the normative structure of the school and how well they use their agency to articulate and conform to the normative expectations of academic and social fields within the structure of the school. A school’s normative structure consists of academic and social fields that require students to act according to the prescribed meritocratic and social norms of school and to assimilate to school culture. Despite their marginalized social position, minority students who live up to dominant standards, internalize dominant meritocratic values, and gain academic achievement and respect in school are perceived positively by the school. In her ethnographic study of the second-generation British

Indian youths in British schools, Hall (2002) points out the hegemonic nature of schools and argues that schools assume or “take for granted” that minority students must use their intellectual abilities to gain academic success and adapt to schools’ middle-class values. Students who are unable to gain academic success and social acceptance in school are perceived negatively by the school.

Asian Indian students in Mango Grove apply their agency to conform to the school’s academic and social norms and are viewed as model students. Ms. Plum, the social study teacher thinks Mango Grove Middle School is a “heaven” for urban schoolteachers. She exclaimed:

*This is a heaven, Mrs. Saran. These children are cream. When I taught in the Brookhaven School, children were bad. There were fights in school everyday. Here children are good; they try to learn. I work hard for them, but I am pleased with results. I must say Asian students are good kids...You are a teacher; you know it's the children that make the difference. No school is good or bad; its children and their parents make a school good or bad. The school's performance has gone up, and test scores are better than before because of the increased Indian population.*

At Mango Grove Asian Indian students are stereotyped as good, hard-working students. The school principal, guidance counselors, and teachers perceive Indians as disciplined, success-oriented students who come to school with a positive attitude. The overall consensus of the school was that parental guidance and parents’ attitude towards

school was responsible for the success of Asian Indian students in the school. The science teacher explained, “Indian parents train their children to do well in school. They support teachers and have a positive attitude about school. Parents’ attitudes and their support for their children reflect in my students’ homework and class work.” Although these statements stereotype Asian Indian students in a school context, they are reflective of the school’s overall perception of Indian students. This positive reputation is reflective of the general immigrant characteristic identified by the Suarez-Orozcos (2001). According to them, “The parents’ attitudes toward education are passed down to their children. The children of immigrant arrive in our school with very positive attitudes towards teachers and other school authorities” (p.125). Although the anti-immigrant sentiment is present in school, many teachers are frustrated with ESL, and there are a few low-performing Indian students, these negative attitudes are overshadowed by the positive perception of Asian Indians.

### **Students’ Perception of Mango Grove**

One’s perceptions of an object or an entity are guided by one’s preconceived schemas, past and present experiences in various fields, and ascribed and achieved positions in a field. Asian Indian students’ perceptions of Mango Grove are guided by their schemas of good and bad schools. Most of my respondents constructed the schema of “good and bad school” based on their experiences in elementary school. They have better academic and social experiences at Mango Grove and they viewed it as a “better” school. Although many students were sharp enough to identify hidden racism and the

complexities of positive stereotyping, their overall evaluation of Mango Grove was positive. According to Anil, one of my respondents:

*Mango Grove is a much better school than other zoned middle schools. The teachers are good. There are very few suspensions and very few fights. There are so many Indians in this school, and that makes a difference. We have more Indian friends here. Teachers and other students are used to Indians. You know in elementary school, Sikh [an Indian religion] children had problems because of their turbans, but here there are so many Sikh children; so everybody is used to their turbans, and they do not have any problems.*

It is evident from Anil's statement that in Mango Grove, Asian Indian students felt less social pressure to assimilate because of a heavy presence of an Asian Indian population. They liked the school because it provided a safe environment and educational opportunities.

### **Parents' Perception of Mango Grove**

My respondent parents brought their educational norms with them from India and expected their children to follow those educational norms. They believed that it is the school's responsibility to teach their children, and it is their children's duty to learn in school. In the context of these expectations, parents perceived Mango Grove as a "better" urban school because it was providing equal educational opportunities to their children,

preparing them for high-stake testing, and providing a safe learning environment for their children. Parents compared Mango Grove with other zoned schools and concluded that the school was good. The gist of many parental interviews was that a “good school” disciplined students, taught them middle-class norms, and expected students to excel academically. By the parents’ standards, Mango Grove was a good school.

My Indian respondent parents were similar to the Chinese parents of Louie’s (2004) ethnographic study in that both Chinese and Indian parents believe that American schools and colleges provide “excellent and affordable” education. Like other Asian parents, Asian Indian parents encourage their children to access higher education that is provided to them by school.

However, via a string of interviews with parents I found out that middle-class professional Indian parents realized that math and science education at Mango Grove was not challenging for “intelligent” students, and the school was not preparing students to get perfect scores on standardized tests. They thought their children needed advanced and rigorous curricula in math and science. Many parents made arrangements for their children to get additional support in these subjects. One parent said, “I cannot depend only on the school for math teaching. Schoolteachers are not good math teachers. I teach math to my daughter.” Professional middle-class parents were also aware of anti-immigrant sentiments of urban schools, but they prepared their children to deal with prejudice in school.

In contrast, less-educated working-class parents had simplistic views of Mango Grove. According to this group of parents, Mango Grove was a “good school” and their children were getting a good education there. Most of these parents relied on word of

mouth to evaluate Mango Grove's scholastic reputation. Instead of looking into the school's academic report card, they formed their opinion of the school by their friends' and family members' evaluations of school.

Although both middle-class professional and working-class parents viewed Mango Grove as a good school that promoted scholastic success, they perceived the school's responsibilities in different ways. Middle-class Indian parents felt that the school alone was incapable of meeting the educational needs of their children, and they tried to compensate by providing symbolic and physical material to their children. My working-class parent respondents perceived Mango Grove as fully capable of fulfilling their children's academic needs, and they believe that as a top middle school Mango Grove would insure their children's academic success. This finding is consistent with Louie's (2004) study demonstrating that socioeconomic status shapes parents' perceptions of educational attainment and the schools their children attend.

### **Students' Socialization Practices at Mango Grove**

At Mango Grove, social relationships are shaped by the school's tracking system. Students placed in one track take all their classes with their track mates. Consequently, their interactions are often limited to their track mates. Prakash explained their limited interactions in school:

*All my close friends are in the SP class. We stay together all day long and do not get time to be friends with other people in school. During lunch time I am tutoring or*

*helping teachers in the library. I do not find enough time to see other students. I do not mind being friends with students of other tracks but...*

Prakash described the internal segregation policy of Mango Grove. Upon their arrival at the school, students are tracked according to their grade point averages, and if they maintain their grade point average, they remain in that track for 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This policy is exemplary of a segregated system based on academic achievement and stereotyping. In this system, model minority students are lumped together and are supposed to develop relationships within their group, thus creating social boundaries and social reproduction. Asian Indian students placed in the highest academic tracks try hard to reproduce their model minority image, and the social structure of school is conducive to their efforts of image reproduction. Furthermore, I did not witness close cross-ethnic relationships among white, African American, and Asian students at Mango Grove. As the school exercises its power to track the students, it also controls and regulates social relationships in school, in effect producing an academic hierarchy in the social fabric of the school. At Mango Grove, academic success is the only way to gain access to a privileged status within the school and to create social relationships with top students. SP classes in school are dominated by white, Asian, and Asian Indian students, many of whom said that they were always in the top class, and they worked hard to stay in the SP class.

Hall (2002) asserts that by tracking according to test scores and “maintaining these standards” schools “marginalize students who are not so academically inclined”(p.

102). According to Hall, the tracking system dominates all social relationships in school and creates an academic status system. Hall describes the vital role of the tracking system in school:

Set ranking is a standard against which students assess themselves and one another. More significantly, perhaps, the distribution of students into sets serves to organize student movement in time and space. Set-based classes provide the primary opportunity for meeting friends....the set structure organizes social relations, influences the formation of peer groups, and provides symbolic resources for the creation of subcultural styles. (p. 102).

Although Hall's ethnographic study examined British Asian Indian youths in England and she described the tracking system and social relationships at Grange Hill School (Leeds, England), this description accurately fits with Mango Grove Middle School. At Mango Grove each track has its own culture, norms, and standards, and students accept this unquestioningly.

### **Multicultural Issues at Mango Grove**

An effective school has a number of common characteristics. These include: Positive leadership and high staff morale; high academic expectations for all students regardless of background; a high value placed on the students' cultures and languages; and a safe and orderly

school environment.(Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p.132)

Although Mango Grove has many of the characteristics of an effective school, it does not place high value on students' culture and language. To remedy the language issues I discussed earlier, the school could arrange to have bilingual paraprofessionals for Asian Indian students with language problems. Or the administration could appeal to the Department of Education to have a provision for a bilingual program in the school. With such a high concentration of Asian Indian students, this is a unique school within the North east region.

The administration of Mango Grove appears ignorant of Asian Indian students' culture. Principal Romano expressed concern over cultural conflicts and cultural misunderstanding, but he did not mention any concrete steps for dealing with cultural conflicts. The complexity of students' academic and social worlds might be reduced if their lifeworld and culture were given importance in school. My high school Asian Indian respondents expressed their satisfaction with multicultural activities at their high school. Many of my Mango Grove respondents and teachers talked about cultural issues and argued that there should be multicultural activities in school. Vineet expressed:

*We are in America so we have to learn about America, but we should also learn about India. We can have elective courses about India. We can have multicultural activities in school.*

The ESL teacher voiced her opinion:

*In this school there is nothing for Asian Indian students. More than half of the school is Indian but he [the principal] does not do anything for them. At least on Diwali [an Indian Festival] he could say Happy Diwali in the morning at assembly time. It does not take much to do that. It will make these children feel better. They whisper to each other on their holidays, "today is Diwali..." I think it is very insensitive. I do things for my ESL children. On ESL day [yearly ESL presentation day] students perform songs or dances from their culture. They are proud of it.*

The ESL teacher said that in the past there were two teachers (they are now retired) who had greetings written in different languages in their classroom. They learned a few Indian words, and tried to learn about India and Indian culture. These teachers were successful in creating connections with their Indian students and were popular among them.

This spirit has since disappeared from Mango Grove, and the school is transmitting a test-taking culture and promoting white middle school norms in a uniform manner. In the absence of recognition of their cultural heritage, Asian Indian students' ethnic self-identification is more complex and conflicted. Among my respondents, many

did not know how to translate their ethnic identity. They are aware of their panethnic identity and the salient social markers that keep them apart from mainstream culture. They regard themselves as Indian and American, but at the same time, they understand that culturally they are not Americans. In the context of ethnic self-identification, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) assert, “Relative to the first generation, the process of ethnic self-identification of second generation children is more complex. . . . Situated within two cultural worlds, they must define themselves in relation to multiple reference groups” (p. 150). I noted that Asian Indian students were constantly struggling to maintain a balance between two cultural values. Students like Prakash felt their Indian identity was optional. He expressed, “Yes I am Indian. My parents want me to behave Indian but I look like Mexican or Spanish. I am an American and I will live here all my life. All my friends are Indians. Acting Indian is not important.” I interpret his statement as an expression of his identity conflict. Although he is not concerned about his ethnic categorization overtly, psychologically he is confused about it. He cannot decide who he is. He does not look Indian, but Indian-ness is his primary point of reference. I argue that a multicultural environment and a platform for expression of ethnic and cultural heritage are essential for the psychological well being of minority students. Then, ethnic self-identification might be less conflicted for Asian Indian adolescents at school. The Suarez-Orozcos (2001), explain the complexities of the ethnic identification process:

In the culture of multiculturalism, identities are created by the person as well as by those around him. Identities are both self crafted and imposed. Immigrants must come to terms with those impositions. They may include cultural

notions of who is a “real American,” who is a “successful student,” and how one’s “color and race” fit into existing ethnic categories. (p. 65)

Although Mango Grove is not culturally sensitive, and there is no multicultural framework for ethnic self-identification within the school, Asian Indian students have been able to achieve their educational goals. School context is one of the most important factors of immigrant students’ academic achievements and life successes. I argue that Asian Indian immigrants understand the importance of school context and try to enroll their children in more affluent, highly competitive, and more integrated schools to reproduce their model minority image.

## CHAPTER VI

### **Asian Indian Students: Negotiation of Model Minority Status**

First-generation Asian Indians and second-generation Asian Indian youths are perceived as economically and academically successful in the United States, and have achieved the reputation of a model minority. Their racial and ethnic image in mainstream society is of a minority group that values education and believes in hard work. Although there is diversity among the Asian Indian population, my respondents were first-generation Asian Indians (parents), second-generation Indians (students), and their teachers, and all confirmed the collective ascribed stereotype of a model minority image. The second-generation Asian Indian students, their parents, and teachers believed that the model minority image was an accurate collective image of Asian Indians. One of the participant students declared:

*All Indian students are good students. We do not get in trouble. In this school all Indians are doing well. I do not know about other schools...my cousins, my friends' brothers and sisters all are in good colleges....All Indian people try to work hard, live well, and make sacrifices for their children. (Faiz, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

The science teacher's perception:

*Asian Indian students are good kids...they are smart. Most of them*

*work hard. They are well behaved and respect their teachers. Their parents make sure they do their homework on time and they do well in class. Our Special Placement classes are full of Indian students.*

An Indian parent's perspective:

*Our children are doing very well in school. They get awards, scholarships. I tell my children to work hard and have a good education because only education will bring success to them.*

Although the model minority stereotype is a myth, my participants in this study believed that the image described them accurately. Faiz referred to all Asian Indian students as “we,” and many of my other respondents used collective terms like “we” and “us” for all Asian Indians. This term implied a collective identity, common characteristics, a sense of generalization, and togetherness. The majority of Asian Indian families believe that overall their children's performance is exemplary, and they are proud of their achievements. In general, teachers positively stereotype Asian Indian students because they are well behaved, follow classroom rules, show respect to authorities, work hard, and their parents cooperate with teachers.

## **Identity Construction: Achievement, Agency, and Self-Perception**

*I am a good student. I do not want to do anything that will interfere with my study. All Indian students are doing well in this school and many are on the honor roll. I am always on the honor roll and I always want to be on it. My parents never pressure me to get good grades but when I get 95 my mom says, what happened to the other 5? I do not mind this. You know this is good for me. She keeps me on track. If she is happy with 85, I guess I will not work hard to get more than 80 or 85, that is not a good grade for me. (Anil, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*I was always a model student. I learned content faster than anybody in my class. In my elementary and middle schools my teachers adored me because I was their top student. I was a well-behaved student. I went to a magnet middle school, and I was lucky to be accepted in a top ranking specialized high school.... You know specialized high schools are ranked according to their performance. I was the valedictorian in my elementary and middle schools. And I hope to be valedictorian in high school. In my high school everybody is smart... here I am not special... I am an average student...that is scary. I feel my grades speak for me. Nobody can take my grades away from me. (Trihita, 12<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*I knew at a very early age that if I got good grades I would have an easy time in school. All Indian girls in my elementary and middle schools tried to do well on*

*standardized tests because we knew that those grades were very important for us and no mean teacher could change those grades. There were mean teachers who did not like us and would do things like that. I am in this school because of my grades... and I have a good score on the SAT test ... I like to write poetries. I won a New York City poetry contest when I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. My father collected all my poetries and published them as a book when I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. (Rehana, 12<sup>th</sup> grade)*

According to Roth (2005) identity is dialectic and is a consequence of an agency /structure dialectic. My respondents are “A” students and they are using the social structure of school to reproduce for themselves the identity of “high achievers.” Roth explains, “Social structure provides resources to action, and therefore resources to the re/production of identity (p. 147).” Many of my respondents expressed that they like school tests, standardized tests, and other ongoing evaluations in different fields. They view tests as resources to reproduce their identities of good students. They exercise their agency to study hard and to get high scores on tests. Within the school structure, tests are resources for them to gain entry into magnet middle schools, specialized high schools, and competitive colleges. All these participants are constructing their identities in different fields of their school. Their agency is employed to meet the model minority standards in different fields of school structure.

In general, Asian Indian students are stereotyped as high achievers in math, science, and technology. Rehana reported that in her specialized high school Asian Indian students are labeled as math and science “nerds.” Most of the Indian parents push their children to excel in math and science because those subjects open doors for medical and

engineering schools. Rehana said she always got good grades in math and science but she knew that she was “cut” (she is a good writer) for writing. By enacting their agency at the macro level through “participation in more than one field, including schools, where fields are nested within one another and intersect to create complex organization” (Tobin, 2000, p. 25), these second-generation Indian youths confirm their stereotyped reputations in different fields nested within the school structure, meeting academic standards set by the dominant culture. They define their racial and ethnic identities through the lens of the model minority phenomenon.

In the context of re/production of identity, Roth explains “identity and emotions are not stable or personal features of human existence but are continuously re/produced individually and collectively” (p. 150).” My high-achieving respondents are continuously re/producing their identities individually as high achievers and collectively as members of a model minority. Defining her identity as a high achiever Rehana described herself as a person who is “compelled to excel.” She said “I put pressure on myself. My parents do not pressure on me to study. They know that I do not like to be told to study and I am doing pretty well they leave me alone.” She defined her “inner self “as an overachiever. She viewed standardized tests as a field in which she could expand her agency. Her scores are reflective of her expanded agency. Speaking of Indian students she always used the collective identity “we.” The individual and collective identity of motivated Asian Indian students is reproduced in the school context through the internalization of their parents’ achievement schemes, their desire to work hard and get ahead.

My in-depth interviews with them revealed that they constructed their identities as high achievers, and their racial and ethnic identities were intertwined with their academic

identities. All of my correspondents indicated that their parents and teachers expected them to excel in school, get admitted to good colleges, and to have professional jobs. They mentioned that they tried to overcome discrimination or prejudice through good grades and hard work.

The second-generation Asian Indian respondents of my study who are living up to model minority standards did not limit their ethnic or racial identities to “Indian-ness” but instead stressed that they were smart students and high achievers. Many Asian Indian students expressed indirectly that being Indian means they are supposed to work hard in school, respect their teachers and other school authorities, and stay away from problems. To a certain extent, they expressed their identities as high-achieving Indian youths. Anil said “I am an Indian, but for my family and me it is very important to be a good student because if I do well in middle school I will get into a specialized high school and a good college and will have a good job. It is very important to have a good job.” Students like Anil construct their identities internalizing parental and external expectations and pressures.

### **Cultural Capital: Dialectic Relationship of Achievement and Cultural Capital**

The habitué is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social class. Each class conditioned is defined, simultaneously, by its intrinsic properties. (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 170)

According to Bourdieu, habitus is a “structured structure” that is made of individuals’ values, practices, and schemas of the social class to which they belong. This structured structure systematically conditions individuals to internalize salient properties, values, schemas, rules, and practices of the particular habitus of that social class. Individuals transform their experiences and the internalized values of their habitus, and generate dispositions that enable their agency to learn practices of another habitus. Habitus is a system of practices and schemas, and these practices and schemas are transformable to another habitus. Practices are an individual’s or a group’s actions/interactions, relationships, and rituals within a field of a structure (Sewell, 1992). I define schema as values, beliefs, ideas, rules, and procedures that are assigned to an action. In the context of Asian Indian students’ scholastic performance, I assert that the practices of their home habitus condition them to internalize their parents’ schemas of achievement and generate dispositions that are transferable in different habitus. My respondents’ perceptions and interpretations of their families’ achievement schemas are translated to their school performance. Because habitus, the “structuring structure,” generates a mass of cultural, symbolic, and social capital, all the practices of one field are translated into different fields. A student with a high volume of cultural, educational, and symbolic capital translates his or her capitals in different fields of a structure naturally. By field, I refer to physical and psychological space. A structure can have different physical and psychological fields. For example, in a science classroom structure, a teacher’s homework rules, her expectations or students’ adherence to lab procedures are different psychological fields.

Bourdieu asserts that individuals “soak up” values, beliefs, and schemas of their habitus, and their actions are guided by their habitus. Habitus is constituted of different structures and fields and individuals enact their agency in all structures. Production of an action transforms into habitus and individuals cultivate their cultural capital from their habitus. Thus habitus is structured and at the same time it is structuring cultural, social, and symbolic capital. One’s practices and schemas constitute culture, and cultural enactment is cultural capital. As individuals’ habitus expand, their agency expands. Students bring their cultural capital to school and it guides them. Trihita, Vandana, and Anil explain the natural translation of their capitals in the habitus of school. Their habitus have conditioned them to internalize their parents’ aspirations and to organize their learning practices to reach their goals. For Trihita being admitted to an elite college was natural because her educational capital meant it was expected of her. She said,

*I got in Columbia University. You know it was sort of natural for me to end up in a college like Columbia College. My younger sister is smarter than me and she is planning to get into Harvard University. My parents expected me to do better than them. Mom has a M.B.A. from India and my dad competed one of the toughest civil service competitions and was a commissioner in his state. I dared not to end up in a community college.*

For Vandana admission to law or med school is easy. She was admitted to medical school but she had not decided. She said:

*I have not decided yet, but maybe I will be a doctor. My mom*

*wants her daughters to be doctors. My older sister is in Med School. My father is a computer science professor at Baruch College. I am good in math and science so mom thinks I should be a doctor. I think being a doctor is easier than being a lawyer. My mom is an accountant. She wants her daughters to be better than her.*

Anil wants to be an engineer like his father. He expressed:

*I want to be a computer scientist or electronic engineer or something like that. My dad is an engineer and my mom also has a college degree in biology. She is a CAT SCAN technician in a good hospital.*

Like many other model minority Asian students, these students come to school with habitus of rich cultural and educational capital. Cultural capital is comprised of an individual's education, class location, values, beliefs, language patterns, moral character, image of success, sophistication of social relationships, and lifestyle. An Individual's cultural capital determines and validates their position in different social structures and fields. Their social mobility, social interactions, and accumulation of social capital are guided by cultural capital. Although educational capital is an *element* of cultural capital, I argue that in the context of model minority it is also an *indicator* of an individual's volume of cultural capital. Generally, individuals with a higher level of education capital have higher levels of human and economic capital and with this capital individuals construct a mass of cultural capital. Parents of Trihita, Vandana, and Anil migrated to the

United States with high levels of education and human capital and they accumulated higher levels of economic capital. Their cultural capital is made up of their cultural, human, and economic capital.

Bourdieu (1979) explains that educational capital corresponds to cultural capital. The cultural capital (inherited and earned) of my respondents provided them with a clear image of success and self-assurance and they were able to earn positive reputations in different fields of school. For example, with her high grade point average, Trihita had earned teachers' admiration and occupied the position of peer tutor, best debater, and valedictorian. Bourdieu (1979) explains the relationship between self-assurance and cultural capital. According to him the notion of an individual's self-assurance, their values, are "very closely linked" to their cultural capital and their status in "social space and trajectory." My respondents demonstrated high levels of self-assurance, confidence in their agency and their success images, and their social values are rooted in their habitus. None of my respondents desired to be a low wage earner. I argue that their habitus has conditioned them to internalize their social class values and motivate them to reproduce educational and cultural capital.

The correspondence between my respondents' scholastic performance and their parents' educational and cultural capital reveals that children inherit and internalize their parents' capital. In the scholastic habitus of school, students reproduce inherited capital. Bourdieu (1979) points out this reproduction of capital:

Generally increased schooling has the effect of increasing the mass of cultural capital which, at every moment, exists in an "embodied" state.

Since the success of the school's educative action and the durability of

its effects depend on how much cultural capital had been directly transmitted by the family, it can be presumed that the efficiency of school-based educative action tends to rise constantly, other things being equal (p. 133)

The inherited and reproduced capital is generally measured by individuals' educational qualifications and their ability to gain economic capital. My respondent parents valued or devalued a profession or a job by its economic return and advised their children to get "secure jobs." The process of reconversion of cultural and educational capital into economic capital, and investment of economic capital to gain cultural capital and educational capital, is a strategy of "upclassing" (Bourdieu, 1979) and upward mobility. All my respondents reported that their parents enforced the idea of traditional, secure jobs; they wanted their children to invest their educational capital in order to ensure higher economic returns. For example, Rumi is accepted at Yale University and she wants to pursue her career in creative writing, but her father does not want to invest his economic capital in a direction that does not promise a secure job for his daughter. Rumi has inherited a higher mass of cultural, educational, economic, and social capital from her parents. Her father, with math and accounting degrees from India and the United States, is CEO of a fashion design company. Her mother earned her master's in math from an American university. Rumi's parents approve of her sister who graduated from Columbia and earned her law degree from New York University. According to Rumi's family, a degree in creative writing does not promise "upclassing." In her father's opinion one does not need to spend money to be a writer. He advises his daughter to

invest capital for the reproduction of capital. His belief supports Bourdieu's (1979) assertions that "The reconversion of economic capital into educational capital is one of the strategies which enable the business bourgeoisie to maintain the position of some or all of its heirs (p.137). Through the reconversion of his inherited cultural and educational capital, Rumi's father has a higher mass of educational, cultural, and economic capital and has crafted his social status as upper middle class. Consequently, as a model minority Rumi is supposed to maintain her class position by conversion of her father's economic capital into educational capital.

### **Social Capital: Structuring Relationships and Networking in Different Fields**

*We help each other. Anil will help me in science. I think with his help my grades will improve. (Sakim)*

*Most of the Indian students are well behaved. Indian parents teach their children to respect teachers...they make sure that students do assignments on time. (science teacher)*

*Students of my elementary school were racist and we had a hard time in school. But I was a good student, I was always well behaved, and my teachers liked me. My sister was in the same school, and all teachers knew I was her sister. You know all teachers liked her because she worked very hard. She is a year ahead of me. Her*

*friends were always there for me and my friends. In elementary school we took care of each other and we tried to help our friends. But you know how things are in elementary school, teachers are not interested in you.... You have to do your work...you have to be really good. (Sangeeta)*

It is apparent from these stories that these students' schooling experiences were mediated by their educational, cultural, and social capital. Bourdieu defines social capital as "capital of social connections." Individuals use their cultural and social capital of one habitus to create a volume of social capital in another habitus. My respondents invested their inherited cultural and social capital in the classroom structure to earn symbolic capital (respect, positive relationship with teachers, and higher grades), and by using this symbolic capital they constructed a social capital. The social capital earned in the classroom is then used as a resource for goal achievement. Individuals' inherited social class status, their social capital, and their symbolic capital enable them to earn more social capital in school habitus. Thus the production of capital inscribes one's agency and identity.

Sakim is using his social capital (his networking and friendship with Indian students) to improve his grades in science class. Ankeeta and her sister employed their symbolic capital (good behavior, hard work, and respect for teachers) to earn teachers' positive attitudes and praises. Ankeeta said, "We respected our teachers, followed classroom rules, and tried to stay away from problems." By earning symbolic capital in

the classroom, Ankeeta and her sister created a network of friends and a support system that helped them survive in a school that was not sensitive to Asian Indian children.

The middle school science teacher had a positive attitude towards Asian Indian students because of their good behavior and the support she received from their parents. Asian Indian students' social capital has a strong relationship with their academic achievement and their ranking as a model minority. Shital said that their academic grades were influenced by their behavior and conduct in school. In her middle school, if a grade of 90 on a test is followed with an unsatisfactory conduct report, teachers reduce the numerical score of 90 to a lower grade. All the middle school participants emphasized good behavior and good conduct. They earned a higher volume of social capital with their good behavior and higher level of academic achievements. Trihita entered elementary school with a high volume of cultural capital, but because of the language barrier, she could not make friends for a year. However, with her higher level of academic competence and achievements, she established positive relationships with teachers, school principals, and peers, and thus accumulated a higher level of symbolic capital that was transformed into a higher mass of social capital.

My respondents' narratives support Valenzuela's (1999) assertion, "In contrast to other forms of capital (i.e., human, physical, and cultural), social capital is neither a single entity nor reflective of individuals' attributes. Social capital is defined by its *function* in group or network structures" (p. 27). Valenzuela defines social capital as school-based relationships that are established by immigrant students with nonimmigrant peers and school authorities. According to Valenzuela, social capital is not as intrinsic as cultural capital. In the school context youth create social capital "Whenever they make

use of resources residing within the web of social relationship.” Within the structure of school, my respondents created highly prolific positive relationships and accumulated a higher mass of symbolic capital in the form of trust, access to higher status, higher grades, awards, and positive reputation. A higher mass of social capital enables students to accomplish their scholastic goals collectively. In the absence of social capital, immigrant students cannot achieve their scholastic goals individually, and academic achievement “is best understood not as an individual attribute but as collective process” (p. 27). It is evident that Asian Indian students created a strong ethnic network of other Indian students who shared similar academic and behavioral goals, in order to provide material and psychological support. Thus, social capital is both individual and collective. Asian Indian students have accumulated individual and collective social capital; their group symbolic capital has earned them collective identity and honor.

Coleman (1988) argues that social capital plays a vital role in immigrant students’ success in school and in shaping up their economic futures. Immigrant students’ academic competence enables them to “contribute significantly” to their friendship network and social capital. According to Coleman, “acquisition of social capital is not automatic.” Immigrant students have to make an effort to gain social capital in school. In their effort to earn social capital, their academic competition plays a very important role. My respondents described their efforts to earn good grades, capture teachers’ trust, and maintain friendships with Indians and non-Indians. Asian Indian students realize that they must be friends with non-Indians in order to earn the goodwill of their nonethnic peers. On the other hand, their ethnic support system is very valuable to them. Most of the participants expressed their liking for their high schools and their dislike of elementary

school. I argue that during their early elementary years they had not yet developed a support system, and had a lower volume of social capital. As their support system and social networking grew stronger, their school experiences became more enjoyable. High school students acknowledged that their high school years were the best of their schooling. Specialized high schools had multicultural activities and ethnic clubs that provided a sense of belonging for students. It was evident that Asian Indian students enjoyed the India Club at their high school because it provided them with a support system and helped them to accumulate a higher level of social capital.

Although the concept of social capital explains Asian students' success in school, this theory does not take account of contradictions and the "socially de-capitalized" status that appear as the result of powerful factors, including race, identity, class, and culture (Valenzuela, 1999). Many Asian Indian students were competent enough to succeed in school, and had the potential to earn a higher level of social capital. However, many external factors and unfavorable school contexts truncated their agency to exchange their cultural capital into social capital, thus shunting their academic achievement and future opportunities. I argue that low-achieving Asian Indian students are deprived of social capital in school, and they translate this lack of capital into a negative relationship with school authorities and teachers, manifested in aggressive, resistant, attention-seeking negative behavior, distancing themselves from high academic aspirations.

### **“Cool Indian” Syndrome: Americanization and Subtractive Assimilation**

*I am a “cool Indian”... You know I am an Indian but I am a cool Indian. I want to be an American and an Indian. So... I can act cool. You know I am in SP class... I am smart. I can be smart and cool.*

(Maganjot, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)

Maganjot thinks he is cool because he does not act “nerdy” like other Indian students, he dresses “baggy,” and he has more American friends in school. He translates being cool as being an “Americanized” Indian. For him being cool means he can read a magazine while the teacher is teaching an important math lesson, and he can refrain from competing with the other students in his SP class, by being relaxed about class work, by not preparing for tests, by talking loud in the classroom, and by being careless about his rapidly falling grades. When I asked his name, he twisted the pronunciation of his name to the extent that it did not sound like an Indian name at all. I had to ask him to write his name. I spelled his name and asked “is this your name?” He agreed that I had his name right and he admitted that his parents call him by this name. Among his classmates his nickname is “Mango.” He dresses in baggy clothes that are not favored by Asian Indian students. I noticed that in general Asian Indian girls and boys followed the informal dress codes of their school.

His teachers complained that his grades are declining and if this trend continues he will be thrown out of SP class. He always avoided me and never agreed to be interviewed. However, we always had conversation in the lunchroom. He is from a very traditional religious family. His parents speak Punjabi at home and are very involved in religious activities. His father works for an Indian construction company and his mother

is a nurse in a very well-known hospital. Unlike model minority high achievers, Maganjot has no plans for his future. He has no desire to get into highly competitive specialized schools. He is happy to be “cool” and “American.” His identity, “I am a cool Indian,” implies that his Asian Indian classmates are “un-cool” or nerdy. I argue that indirectly he rejects the model minority image, and by acting cool he distances himself from the dominant academic norms of school. Although Maganjot calls himself Indian he uses the adjective “cool” to effect a “de-Indianization” of his “Indian-ness,” and to deconstruct the idealized image of Indian students in his school.

For Maganjot, “being American” means embracing oppositional behavior, and identifying with students who do not fit the model minority image. Valenzuela (1999) explains the relationship between “Americanization” and the countercultural action of the immigrant youths. According to Valenzuela, many immigrant youths show “stark” differences from their parents in demeanor, dress, language, and other cultural dispositions because of their rapid cultural assimilation and their psychological need to be accepted by their “Americanized” peer group. Minority immigrant youths feel strong pressures to assimilate subtractively and imitate the demeanors and clothing styles of “dispossessed youth.” Valenzuela explains the countercultural tendency of Americanized immigrant youths “Because peer models favor the hip-hop attire and comportment that currently characterize urban, dispossessed youth, ‘American-ness’ itself assumes a countercultural connotation. Thus, immigrant youth emulate a marginal peer group culture when fulfilling their desire to “fit in” (p. 84). In the context of immigrant youths the subtractive assimilation is the “Americanization” process. The subtractive assimilation and Americanization process negatively impact minority performance and

the economic and political integration of minorities in mainstream society (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). Maganjot's Americanization has negative consequences for him and many other students like him. I argue that the subtractive assimilation of Asian Indian students like Maganjot might ruin the high reputation of all Indian students.

All of my respondents voiced their opposition to the "cool Indian" image and claimed that they did not want to associate with these "cool Indians." Faiz, one of the top students of the SP class, said that "many students hang out with bad students and are influenced by them...they try to act like them, they dress like them ...these baggy clothes are not for good kids. When you act cool and dress baggy people think you are bad ...people judge you by your friends." Vineet pointed out that there are many Indian students who are pressured by their peers to behave like them. She said

*Many non-Asian students make fun of Indians because they are different than them, they are not cool. They want Asian Indian students to behave like them and many Asian Indian students want to fit-in and want to be popular among their peers and try to be cool, and their grades go down. They do not understand that only grades matter.*

The model minority students' opinions of Americanized "cool" immigrant youths support Valenzuela's theory of subtractive assimilation and immigrant students' psychological needs to be accepted by their American peers in school. Although all SP Asian Indian students talked to Maganjot in the cafeteria, they thought that students like Maganjot were degraded and had lower status than them. Though they did not use the

term model minority, they implied that the “cool behavior” of Americanized Indians is a threat to their “good student” image and a sign of the downward mobility of those students.

I interpret the “cool Indian” identity as a critique of model minority image. Students like cool Indians identify themselves as Indian but not as “model” Indians. They are re-creating their identity by adapting an oppositional identity in school culture. Lee (2005) in her ethnographic study of Hmong students explains an underlying basis of this oppositional identity, “Americanized students have adopted a hip hop style as a form of oppositional power. They have not “lost” their cultures or identities, but are searching for new ways of being” (p. 86). I assert that for students like Maganjot, “Americanized” means embracing oppositional behavior and gaining acceptance of American friends. While high-achieving Asian Indian students gain power and status in school with scholastic achievements and good conduct, cool Indian students attempt to seek power through their “Americanized” identity and being critical of the traditional “good Indian image.”

I would say that many Asian Indian students like Maganjot react to their marginal ethnic identity, their powerlessness in school, and interpret “American-ness” in their own way. They reject being passive victims of racial prejudice and hegemony in school and construct an identity that is opposed to white meritocratic norms. I found out that Asian Indian students from the lower middle class or working class experienced a higher volume of prejudice and marginality in school because of their lower level of cultural and educational capital, and they adapted oppositional behavior as a defense mechanism.

## **Americanized Indian Students: “Good Americanized” and “Bad Americanized”**

Although Asian Indian parents viewed the “Americanization” process negatively and did not want their children to be Americanized, my respondents pointed out characteristics of good and bad Americanized students. In particular they were aware of underlying reasons for bad Americanization. They understood that failure to not fit in the dominant school culture led to bad Americanization of many Asian Indian youths. In discussion of American ways and Americanization all my respondents claimed that they are living in America, therefore they must learn American ways. They emphasized dual identity. Most of the high achievers associated American-ness with white meritocratic norms (getting high grades, working hard, going to elite schools, and attaining high-paying jobs). However, they created categories of “Bad Americanized” and “Good Americanized” Asian Indian students. Sangeeta declared:

*I am an American and an Indian. I am doing well in school. I got in the Seven Year Medical Program at Stony Brook, and Bryn Mawr College. I think I will go to Stony Brook medical program. All Indian students in my school are doing very well. But you know there are a few Indians who are members of the “Gothic Club.” People who do not fit in any club become member of this club. They wear only black clothes, color their hair, boys wear earrings and they do things like that...you know wearing gang-like clothes they think they are Americanized. They are weird. Many student*

*from my school drop out because they cannot keep up with the things we have to do in school.*

Sangeeta implicitly highlighted characteristics of “Good Americanized” and “Bad Americanized” and explained the reason for bad Americanization. Failure to fit in white academic and social norms of the highly competitive school culture is translated into taking the path to bad Americanization. According to Sangeeta these students “think they are Americanized” by acting “weird” and failing or dropping out of school. Good Americanized students are motivated to move ahead on a path to economic and social success. However, students who self-defined themselves as “Americanized” tried to assimilate in mainstream society by rejecting school norms and their ethnic values.

### **Attitude toward Schooling: K-12 Years**

The second-generation Asian Indian high-achieving students had positive attitudes toward schooling. Almost all of my respondents said that they liked their middle and high school experiences better than the elementary school years. They expressed an enjoyment of their model minority status in school. In general, all of my respondents began to like school more after their grades improved. Trihita said she was adored by all her teachers, and the principal of her school was very proud of her because she was a model student. She recalled her early years at elementary school when she was having language problems. She migrated to the United States with her parents at the age of 5 and was placed in an English as Second Language (ESL) kindergarten class. Soon she

discovered that “language was very important and I had to learn English. I realized at a very young age that good communication was a very important tool to be successful in school.” She explained that Asian Indian students who migrated to this country with limited knowledge of the English language had a harder time than U.S-born Asian Indian students. She said that in her school there were many students from Bangladesh and Pakistan who had problems with the English language in their early elementary years. She used her agency to improve her English language proficiency and to be successful in school. In her elementary school she tutored her classmates with English language difficulties. She enjoyed her prized status in school and tried her best to maintain her high-achiever image. Now as a 12<sup>th</sup> grader, she revealed her liking for school:

*I love school. I was valedictorian in elementary and middle school. High school is challenging. You know there is nothing to do if I am not in school. I have good time in school. I did not like school when I was in kindergarten and first grade because my English was not very good. I was lonely and I did not have friends. I figured out that I had to improve my language skills and in second grade I did very well in all subjects...I always scored 100 in Spanish. I guess I have a thing for language.*

Trihita likes her high school because in this specialized high school everybody is “smart” and her studies are more challenging than in middle and elementary school. She said “in high school I realized I had to work really hard because there were many students smarter than me, I was not special, and I had to prove myself.” She described her early

school years as the worst of her schooling because of the language barrier and her loneliness.

For Prakash “life is boring without school.” He is one of the top students in his class. His teacher used his class notes and his homework as the model work on parents’ night. Prakash was lonely in kindergarten and first grade because he had no friends. By the second grade he became friendly with his classmates and he began to like school. The middle school he attends is not his zone school, but he was admitted because his grade point average was 100. Every day he spends as much as two hours commuting to and from school. As an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, Prakash appeared in the competition for specialized high schools and he hopes that he will get into his choice school. He is aware of the fact that he is smart and his teachers like him. He likes school because he likes his positive image and he knows he has to work hard to fulfill his parents’ dream. His science teacher is proud of him and considers him a model student. Prakash explains:

*School is good. I do not mind tests. I always liked school... first grade was not good, in first grade I did not enjoy school...but after first grade I started liking school. In elementary school my average was 100, but in middle school it is 95, I think because these days I am spending more time playing outside. In summer after a few days of staying home I get really bored. There is nothing much to do....My mom does not want me to hang out with my neighborhood friends.*

The theme voiced by my high-achieving respondents is that school played a positive role in their identity formation. They associated schooling with challenges,

achievement, prestige, and a path to college and a brighter future. Prakash likes school because it keeps him away from his neighborhood. His neighborhood friends (African American, West Indian, and Spanish boys) want him to act like and dress like them, hang out on the street with them, and not listen to his parents. Prakash does not want to be like them. His parents do not allow him to hang out on street and spend time with those boys. School is a sanctuary for him. He has more in common with his school friends. They share the same academic and cultural values. All his school friends are south Asians and are from Special Placement class.

Nisha said that she loved school because only by being in school and working hard can she be a pediatric cardiac surgeon. She declared that “If I do not do well on tests there is no way I can be a doctor.” Her father is a surgeon. She knows that the middle school years are very important for her. She liked her elementary school but she likes her middle school more. She finds her math class boring because she learns all the material in her math tutoring class. However, she pays attention to the class work and finishes her work very quickly. She considers schooling to be the path to reach her goal.

These students strive to live up to the model minority stereotype and they use the school context to gain prestige inside and outside school. Lee (1996) explained the characteristics of model minority students: “Their desire to live up to the model minority stereotype was based on their assumption that they had the opportunity to achieve some social mobility (p. 9).” In her study Lee observed that the model minority Asian students “Silenced behaviors and experiences that failed to measured up to model minority standard” (p. 9). In fact many high achievers disapproved of students who tried to be like others. Vineet stated:

*Many Indian students try to be somebody that they are not and try to behave like others. They think they are cool and behave like other students to fit in and do not study. They do not realize that grades matter ...by acting cool they hurt themselves.*

High-achieving Asian students demonstrated strong motivation for goal achievement and positive attitudes for school. Their positive attitude towards schooling is driven by many elements. According to Portes and Rumbaut (2001) Asian students translate “strong parental drive for achievement,” and “extraordinary” parental pressures for a higher volume of scholastic performance. This molds children’s attitude towards school.

### **Parental Aspirations: Driving Force of Academic Achievement**

*My parents kind of want me to be a doctor or an engineer. My father is a cab driver and my mom works in a department store. My uncles ave good jobs; my cousin graduated from Baruch [a business school] and he works in a big firm. My cousin’s sister is doing her M.B.A. You know in my family only my father did not finish college. He wants me to do what he could not do in his life. (Sanam)*

*My father is a cardiac surgeon. He owns three medical practice offices. My mom is a teacher. My one brother is a dentist and one sister is working*

*in a medical firm after finishing her Ph.D. in biology. I want to be a doctor... I hope I can be a doctor.... No my father never pushed me to be a doctor, but I am sure he would like me to be a doctor and take over his practice. (Nisha)*

*My father is working in an American restaurant as a waiter for 12 years. My mom was a teacher in India, but here she stays home to take care of us. My parents want me to be a doctor or a lawyer. I do not like science. I want to be a lawyer like my aunt. Most of my family members are in England and in France. My aunt and uncle practice law in London. In their family everybody is in law. (Deepa)*

Although the participants in my study come from diverse social classes, they conveyed a common experience of parental aspiration and expectation. Middle-class and working-class parents had high aspirations and expectations for their children, and these serve as a driving force in academic achievement. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) assert, “A second and more central aspect of subjective drive consists of the aspirations and expectations that children have for their future. These dimensions have been shown to affect positive and consistent subsequent educational and occupational achievement (p. 215).” My ethnographic data revealed that although class differences influence students’ future planning for college choices, middle- and working- class parents have similar aspirations for their children. I should make clear the difference between *aspirations* and *expectations*. Aspirations are related to future planning for livelihood and they can be

unrealistic. Expectations are expected performances for the future. Portes and Rumbaut define aspirations and expectation saying,

Aspirations refer to desired levels of future performance (what people want to happen); expectations are beliefs about a probable future state of affairs (what people will think will happen).

Aspirations are less realistic than expectations, since what people subjectively desire typically exceeds, what they rationally expect. (p. 215)

My study supports Portes and Rumbaut's assertions about aspirations and expectations. I observed that many parents' aspirations for their children were unrealistic. Deepa's parents are of a high social status in India, but in the United States they belong to the lower class. They are unaware of the different educational opportunities offered to gifted and talented children. Deepa was selected by her school to attend a specialized school for gifted and talented children, but her mother declined the offer on the grounds that school was too far away and her daughter would have to travel by school bus for one hour each way. In middle school Deepa appeared for the specialized high school entrance test, and she may pass it. However, she is inclined not to attend the specialized high school because it is also too far away and her mom is still uncomfortable with her daughter attending a school so far from home. Ironically Deepa's parents want her to be a doctor or a lawyer but their habitus are truncating their daughter's agency. Although she is in SP class in middle school, if her agency is limited to an inner-city high school her chances of becoming a lawyer or doctor are not as high.

Faiz's mother and father are doctors and they own their own medical practices. Faiz stated proudly,

*I come from a very smart family. My paternal great grandfather was a lawyer and my maternal great grandfather was the first doctor in his state. Both of my grandfathers (maternal and paternal) are doctors. My many uncles and aunts are doctors, businesspersons, and professors. My parents want me to follow the family tradition and become a doctor. I want to be a doctor like my parents and grandfathers.*

It is clear that Faiz's parents are from a highly educated professional family and they have know-how of the American education system; their aspirations are more realistic than those of Deepa's parents. Looking at Deepa's elementary school performance and achievements, her parents have an ideal frame of aspiration for their daughter but they are unable to understand that a gifted and talented school, or a specialized high school, will open many doors for their daughter, and thus her agency is truncated in her family structure. In contrast, Faiz's parents with their higher volume of educational and cultural capital have structured a habitué that is conducive to Faiz's agency. His parents provide him symbolic and material resources needed for expansion of his agency and fulfillment of his parents' aspirations for him.

Although Trihita's parents want her to be a doctor, she told them that she is not interested in medicine. She has been accepted by Columbia College of Columbia University and wants to pursue her career in business. She said, "It was my parents'

dream to send me to Columbia or Harvard University. As long as I am at Columbia they have reconciled with my decision. But they want my younger sister to be a doctor and they are planning to send her to Harvard University.”

Rehana has also been accepted by Columbia University. Her father is a diplomat and he has played an active role in his children’s education. Rehana’s brother graduated from a good business school and he is in investment banking. Rehana explained,

*When I won many poetry contests and published my first book in elementary school, my father knew that I had talent for writing and he did not push me to be a doctor or lawyer but he wants me to have a secure profession. However, he really pushed me to prepare for specialized high school. With his low salary he could not buy a house in a good suburb, so he wanted us to attend magnet middle schools and specialized schools and we all went to those schools. My brother is in a magnet school.*

Rehana and Trihita had the freedom to decide college majors that were not sanctioned by their parents. However, they were advised by their parents to choose majors that would provide them with economic security in future. Rehana said “my parents would be very upset if I major in creative writing or literature. If I go for investment banking or something like that they will be satisfied.” She said, “I understand my father’s point. If I really want to write, I can always write poetries and publish. But I need good money to live well.”

According to Prakash, a high achiever in elementary and middle school,

*My best subjects are math and science. I want to be an airplane engineer or a car engineer. My dad wants me to do something in computer science because you make good money in computers ...my mom thinks I should be a doctor. But I know I have to be an airplane engineer.*

Prakash is from a lower-middle-class family. His father is a priest in a Hindu [an Indian religion] temple in a lower-middle-class neighborhood. His mom is a homemaker. Prakash took the specialized high school entrance test but he is not planning to attend even if he qualifies for the school. He thinks all inner city high schools have good math and science programs. He did not believe me that he has a very good chance to enter a good engineering college if he attends a specialized math and science high school. I suspect his parents do not know much about the school system and college prep courses. Although they have high inspirations for their son they are unable to provide any concrete structure or symbolic resources for the expansion of their son's agency.

Regardless of their socioeconomic status, educational background, and provenance of these aspirations, parents motivated their children in comparable ways. It is evident from these accounts of participants from diverse backgrounds that their parents influenced them to work hard for practical, high-paying careers. All parents had high aspirations for their sons and daughters and they hoped for upward mobility. Portes and Rumbaut's study (2001) of second-generation immigrant students in the Florida school system concluded that "Significant differences in aspirations and expectations emerged among nationalities. The most ambitious groups were Cubans in bilingual private schools

in Miami, and Chinese and other Asians (mostly Japanese, Koreans, and Indians)...these were the groups that showed the most significant *increase* in educational expectations over time” (p. 216). I argue that although parental aspiration can cause pressure, in general it motivates Asian Indian students to use their agency to take the path of upward mobility.

### **A Daily Struggle: Living in the Triple Quandary**

*You know I am very busy after school. I have to work hard in the evening. After my homework, I have to do my religious study, after that I study for tests. On weekends I have go to mosque, study hard, and visit my cousins with my family. We are very close family and we are always visiting each other. At mosque I learn Urdu [an Indian/Pakistani language] so I have to practice reading and writing Urdu...there is no time. (Sakim)*

*We live in America so we have to learn American ways but we are Indian... we have to maintain our culture. We must have both cultures. Every weekend I go to Gurudwara [Sikh temple] with my family. I learn Punjabi [an Indian language] at Gurudwara Sunday school. I speak in Punjabi with my family and with my parent's friends. In school I learn Spanish and I can speak good Hindi [an Indian language]. On weekdays I spend all my time in doing homework and preparing for Regents tests. (Deepa)*

*My parents are very much into religious and cultural things. I wear Indian dresses to school on Diwali and other Indian festivals. At my high school graduation I wore my Indian outfit...my Indian friends think in school we should always wear American clothes. I do not agree with that ... I am competing with all these American students. I was valedictorian in my elementary and middle schools. I can wear Indian dress whenever I want to. I can speak four languages fluently...I am in America but it does not mean I forget my culture. (Trihita)*

Within the model minority rhetoric, students like Trihita, Sakim, and Deepa are considered good minority students who are living up to the standards of the dominant culture. I argue that they are complying with hegemonic conditions. Their minority experience and marginalized status influence their ethnic identity. They know that in order to be successful in the mainstream culture, learning the “American way of life” is vital. However, they realize that they need to keep their ethnic culture alive.

I observed that these Asian Indian students are trying very hard to maintain a balance in different fields. They are using the resources of each field productively. Their successful schooling depends on their everyday struggle to achieve a number of aims: to use their agency to maintain their ethnic culture (observing ethnic cultural practices); to live by the norms of the dominant culture (trying to learn American ways); to understand their marginalized ethnic position in the mainstream society; and to maintain their image of high achiever. Symbolically, by wearing Indian outfits on her graduation day, Trihita magnified her marginalized status in the mainstream culture. She employed her agency in

different fields; she succeeded in the school culture, lived up to the dominant culture norms, and proved herself as a model minority student.

Asian Indian experiences are nested in three fields: mainstream culture, ethnic culture, and the model minority experience. Although their identities are shaped in these three fields, at the same time, their everyday experiences are overshadowed by the dominant culture. My assertion is that although all Indian students are not part of the model minority, their experiences are also shaped by model minority status. Boykin (1986) explained the theory of triple quandary, which asserts that the dominant culture overpowers minority experiences in each field, and consequently minority experiences are conceived through social, economic, and political hegemony. My respondents expressed their belief in the dominant values of meritocracy, and they negotiate their ethnic values in hegemonic conditions. For them and their parents, ethnic culture is essential but academic achievement is more important because it will lead them to success in a mainstream white culture. They constantly remind themselves that they are in America and have to live by American values and standards.

Sangeeta described her identity saying,

*I am born in America. I am an American. My parents are from India; that makes me Indian. As an Indian and as an American I have to work hard in it does not mean I will quit school and be a dancer. I'd better go to a good college. I competed for specialized high school ...I am not very smart...but I just did it, I do not know how I did it; probably I was lucky... you know my sister hates science, she wants to be a lawyer. I guess I have to be mom's girl and be a doctor. I hate math but science is OK...mom says*

*being an Indian I need to work harder than others... I believe her...there are not many Indians... you know compared to blacks or Puerto Ricans....I need to work harder than others I mean to be somebody.*

Sangeeta is conscious of her dual identity. She claims that she is an American and an Indian. Ankeeta told me that her father came to the United States as a business student. He received his master's in business administration. He is a businessman and a community leader, and is very well known in the Indian community. She identifies herself as American Indian. She has to be Indian culturally, but at the same time she needs to fit in and has to prove herself in American society. For her "only being Indian" is not enough; she also has to be American. For her, "American" identity is white identity. She takes pride in her brownness "I am brown. I will never be a white person and I do not want to be white because then I will not be exotic." She has constructed her identity in several different fields and has used the resources (material and psychological) of each field to accomplish her goal. She attended predominantly Italian inner-city elementary and middle schools that were "not too great." Like many other Asian Indian students she did not like her elementary school because in her lower-middle-class, all-white school "White students were very mean to Indian students. They were very racist. There were very few Indian students. Though we had other friends we tried to stay with each other." She felt little better in her middle school because there were West Indies students and their presence in school made Indian students more comfortable in school. She explained, "high schools in my neighborhood are very bad so I knew I had to compete for a good high school or my parents had to move to a suburb." Ankeeta defined

her position in a triple quandary very clearly. She described the richness of each field and the way she used her agency to employ the resources of each field. She is aware of her marginalized position in the mainstream culture. However, in contrast to Willis' lads (1977) who demonstrate oppositional behavior, resistance, and subversion of authority, she is using her agency constructively. Willis' ethnography of working-class youths provides insight into lifeworlds of marginalized youths who denounce achievement ideology of the dominant class and translated their repression as an act of rebellion. Ankeeta, in recognizing her position in mainstream society and comparing herself with other minorities, understands that in order to accomplish her goal, she must enact her agency to comply with school norms and model minority standards.

Sewell (1992) describes a structure comprised of multiple fields and cultures within each field mediating with the cultures of each field. According to Sewell, culture should be "understood as a dialectic of system and practices" and "as a system of symbols possessing a real but thin coherence that is continuously put at risk in practice and therefore subject to transformation" (p. 52). Culture lacks coherence and has porous boundaries, and the porous nature of the boundaries allows resources of one field to be utilized in another. Individual fields are structured by cultures but the boundaries of fields are porous so capitals and resources can transfer from one field to another in order to reproduce or transform the structure of the field. Like many other minority students, Ankeeta is positioned in a triple quandary that is overlapped by the dominant culture, and she is transferring her cultural capital and her resources from her home culture (respect for authority, parents' achievement ideology) within the structure of the school culture in order to attain her goal. She qualified for an elite specialized high school, thus she used

her agency to take advantage of opportunities that came to her within the school structure. According to Sewell (1992) “culture as practice” is connected to “culture as system.” Sewell explains: “To engage in culture as practice means to utilize an existing cultural symbol to accomplish some end. The employment of a symbol can be expected to accomplish a particular goal” (p. 47). All symbols have meanings that are systematically attached to other symbols. Thus, culture is a system of symbols and “succession of practices.” Human practices are mediated by their environment or context and all environments and contexts are “shaped and reshaped” by other contexts. For example Indian culture, marginalized culture, and youth culture are shaped and reshaped by the dominant culture. Ankeeta and many other students nested in the triple quandary use practices from one social location (their home culture) in another social location (school culture). Asian Indian students’ cultural practices at school are shaped by their home culture and the triple quandary of cultures. Asian Indian students who do not meet the model minority standards are not utilizing physical and material resources of each field.

### **Identity Formation by Extracurricular Activities**

Trihita recalls her mom's instructions about after-school programs:

*Do not join "Knitting Club" or "Jewelry Making Club" after school programs. Join the debate team, Math Club or Spanish enrichment after school programs. You are not going to waste your time in school doing nothing.*

Rumi said:

*I learn Indian classical vocal and instrumental music. I have no time for after-school programs. I am involved in the debate team and the Writing Club. My mom says I can learn cooking at home; I should not waste my time in cooking class at school.*

Anil expressed:

*I do not want to waste time in activities that interfere with my study. I am a peer tutor at school. I work at the school library and I am active in the debate team.*

My high-achiever respondents are involved in extracurricular activities that add to their positive stereotyped image. Parents instruct their children not to be involved in non-academic extracurricular activities. Simran said that her mom allowed her to join Photography Club because it sounds good on her resume. Simran is involved in many extracurricular activities but all of these activities are known as high-ranking prestigious activities.

I found out that extracurricular activities such as debate team, Math Olympiad, school newspaper, School Government Club, tutoring activities, library volunteer tutoring program, and volunteer work at local hospitals, and many other activities like these were high-ranked prestigious activities. Asian Indian parents approved of these activities and encouraged their children to join such activities because in order to get admitted to a good college, students need high-ranking extracurricular activities besides high grade point averages. The Mango Grove Middle School and specialized high school debate teams have as much as 90 percent Asian Indian students. I argue that Asian Indian students and their parents use these activities as status symbols in the school context. Parents view these high-ranking activities as assets for college admission.

### **Self/Family-Imposed Dress Code: An Identity Marker for High Achievers**

It is this body that is adorned, coiffed, and put in relief by means of special clothing. The body, carrier of emotions, is central to identity, aspirations, and identification of youth. This body is so important, because it is the “mediator between the self and a world which is itself taken in accordance with its variable degrees of practicability and so of foreignness” ....At the same time human beings are more than their bodies: They are persons who relate intentionally to other things and beings... (Roth, 2006, p. 146).

Roth (2006) explains importance of material body image in identity construction of youth. I noticed that high achieving Asian Indian students connected their *selfhood* (human being as a person) with clothing. They expressed their distinctness (high academic status) through their clothing style. They asserted being different by presenting a body image that is accepted by school's meritocratic norms. Although as "A" students high achieving Asian Indian students have had higher social status in school they were insecure about their material identity. Within the social structure of school they wanted to protect their identity by keeping themselves distinct from others.

Most of my respondents were sensitive about their clothes in school. Almost all high achievers expressed that they did not like to wear baggy clothes or "street clothes" because these clothes do not fit to their model minority image. I observed that high-achieving Asian Indian students followed a dress code that was imposed by their families and themselves. High achievers associated "baggy clothes" below their status. Their clothes were part of their identity. According to high-achieving Asian Indian students, "good students do not wear those clothes." For them, it was very important to look different than those students who were not doing well in school and tried to "show off" by wearing "hip-hop" style clothing. My respondents distanced themselves from those students who tried to look "Americanized" outwardly. They evaluated their peers by their dressing style. Although in schools there are no formal dress codes, they choose to wear outfits that are informally expected by their schools.

I argue that their sensitivity to their appearance and their informal dress code is an expression of their identity. They are model minority students and they want to follow the invisible middle-class dress code that is the "white way of dress style." Prakash said that

his father does not want him to wear “baggy clothes” because black and Puerto Rican neighborhood boys wear those clothes. Prakash’s father wants his son to dress like a white middle-class student. I observed that Asian Indian students who were keeping up with model minority standards used their clothing style as an expression of their identity.

## **Conclusion**

Growing up in a society where they are positively stereotyped, Asian Indian students constantly face challenges to construct and maintain their identities as high achievers. Although they are ascribed model minority status, their school experiences are complex. The normative expectations of different fields of school structure guide their academic performance, social interactions, behavior, and the way they dress. I argue that high-achieving Asian Indian students have internalized their familial and schools’ meritocratic norms and enact their identity to achieve social mobility and social status promised by meritocracy. However, there are Asian Indian students who are struggling to conform to meritocratic norms and find it hard to maintain their positively stereotyped image. These students contradict meritocratic norms and try to assimilate in the dominant culture by adapting to popular culture.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **Asian Indian Youths: Negotiation of Negative School Experiences**

The model minority discourse paints Asians as good minorities who try to stay out of trouble and conceal their anger and frustrations. Asians are perceived as non-threatening, good, quiet, and silent because they are reluctant to express their anger and frustrations. Asian Indians also fit this model minority mold and try to maintain their “good minority” image in the dominant culture. They teach their children to stay out of trouble and keep quiet and try not to challenge the system. In order to avoid bad reputations and deal with discrimination, prejudice, fights, and many other contradictions in school, Asian Indian parents often teach their children to self-discipline themselves. Asian Indian parents feel the need to protect their children by teaching them self-discipline and “staying away strategies.” They instruct their children to maintain their positive stereotyped image and to maintain academic success despite prejudice and racism (Gibson, 1989). Gibson’s Asian Indian respondents told their children that education was the best weapon to fight racism and prejudice in the mainstream society and they should not waste their time in fights and they should try to keep away from students who tried to give them hard time in school. Asian Indian parents relayed the message to their children that nobody could take away their education from them and with education they can access economic success and a higher social status in the mainstream society. Parent instructed their children that it was children’s duty to study and get good grades and it was parents’ duty to support their children.

In this chapter I interweave classroom observations, excerpts from interviews, field notes, and video analysis of different vignettes (at the meso level) to identify and analyze coherent patterns of social interactions among Asian Indian students. In addition,

I use the data sources to identify contradictions (instances that we expect to occur but are not observed) that negatively mediate school experiences of Asian Indian students.

### **“Staying Away” Strategies: Maintaining Social Distance**

*I try to stay away from fights. You know there are many students who are bad, like many African Americans they curse, get in fights all the time. I try to stay away from them...if they call names I keep silent. I do not answer them...my parents do not want me to get in trouble. I stick with my friends. (Anil, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*My father says not to be friends with bad students...you know students who smoke in bathroom, mess up with girls, and get into fights....If they curse or call names I do not answer them. I try to stay away from them. (Sanam, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*In my elementary school many kids called Indian students “smelly.” They made fun of our names. Same thing happened in middle school but we ignored them. It’s our grades that matter. These students are jealous of us. They think we are quiet so they bother us more than others. My brother was beaten up by his second-grade classmates many times. He did not tell my mom about these incidents because he thought mom would be angry with him for messing up with bad boys. He did not fight back so they ganged up on him. Finally the principal came to know about this through*

*a parent and those boys were punished. I am in a specialized high school. There are many Indian students who experience these things, but we try to keep to ourselves.* (Rehana, 11<sup>th</sup> grade)

All these examples speak of strategies adapted by high achievers to stay away from confrontations and unpleasant situations with other students in school. My correspondents tried to be silent about experiences of prejudice and harassments. They all mentioned that they had experienced name-calling and confrontational situations, but they dealt with them silently. No one mentioned that they complained to their teachers or school authorities.

Caught between the identity of “us” and “them,” Asian Indian students prefer to stay within the safety zone “us” and stay away from “them,” those who might cause problems. Staying away from fights, confrontation, and defiant and disruptive students is one of the major aspects of their schooling. Academically oriented Asian Indian students demonstrated a passive attitude towards abuse and confrontation. They showed a greater degree of maturity and self-control. Asian Indian high achievers maintained a social distance from students who demonstrated oppositional behavior, and who did not conform to school norms. They kept a social distance in school, tried to “fit into” dominant norms, and gave priority to academic standards.

Asian Indian children bring “staying away” and “nonconfrontational” dispositions from their habitus and these strategies become a part of their cultural and social capital. The “staying away” tactic is one of the most important adaptation strategies Asian Indians use to survive in the foreign land. Indians migrated to the United States for a better future and they come with a mission to succeed in their adapted country and they

tend to overlook prejudice as a temporary obstacle to be overcome, and they place a higher value on academic achievement. Asian Indian parents instruct their children to ignore prejudice and abusive conditions, focus on academic performance, and acquiesce to authority. All my respondents informed me that their parents advise them to stay away from trouble and keep a social distance from “them.” The development of the collective identities of “we-ness” and “they-ness” defines categories of a social world where “them” or “they” are elements that can be road blocks to Asian Indian students’ achievement.

### **Strategy of Silence and Accommodation: Survival Techniques**

*I am very quiet and I do not like to talk in class. This semester I scored 100 on a social studies test and 100 on project work, but my average came down to 93 because Mr. Campbell, the social studies teacher, gave me 80 in class participation. I do not like this but I did not say anything. He knows I do good work but I do not like to talk much. I was like that in elementary school. My parents said he is my teacher and I should respect him. You know I do not like to talk and I will not talk in class. (Vineet, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

Vineet’s habitus does not allow her to be talkative and step into her teacher’s cultural field. Her cultural capital and her agency are not conducive to participation in classroom activities. She is a model minority student but her habitus prevents her from using her agency in the classroom to score 100 percent. She is not successful in

establishing positive interactions with her teacher and has built up a negative relationship. According to Tobin (2004) “Within a field, culture is enacted at nodes that are spatially and temporally distributed (p. 4).” Some examples of nodes are classroom discussion, project work, activities involving computer research, or even chalkboard instruction. Vineet is not part of the culture enacted in the classroom discussion and it seemed to her teacher that she was not using resources of that field. The classroom discussions are resources that all students access during the course of learning. Not all student access classroom resources overtly; they might prefer to access them covertly (Tobin, 2002). Individuals have different learning styles and strategies and teachers must be able to recognize the variability in learning styles. Vineet is among those students who prefer to access classroom resources covertly. It was apparent from her grades that she accessed resources and learned in the classroom structure.

For Vineet, a model minority student, practices and schema of the class discussions are not very important because there is no resonance between her and the teacher. It was evident that Vineet perceived her teacher’s action negatively and she was frustrated. Vineet did not express her frustration overtly but she was angry about her low grade and the teacher’s misunderstanding of her dispositions. Vineet did not complain to her teacher or expressed her frustration in class. However, she talked to her parents about this incidence and discussed it among her friends her reaction is the evidence of contradiction. Although she does not talk in class and likes to do her work quietly her decision “I will not talk” shows her stubbornness and her covert rebellion. She is not a submissive individual---she has a strong personality. Her decision not to talk in class is a sign of resistance and rebellion. Rebellion is expressed in different forms and it is not

always verbal or overt it can be in disguise and can be expressed covertly. I assert that if Vineet were a submissive individual she would have listened to her teacher and would have started participating in the classroom to please her teacher. Her continued withdrawal from classroom discussions is a form of rebellion. In her quiet manner she had declared that her social study teacher can not force her to be somebody that she is not.

It is evident that Vineet's social interactions in the social studies classroom are limited to Asian Indian girls and she has not created social capital with her teacher. Because structure and agency exist in a dialectical relationship, teachers' and students' social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) expand or impede students' agency in classroom structure. A student's cultural capital (values, academic standing, dispositions), social capital (interactions with teacher and students, attitudes, and friendship), and symbolic capital (self-assurance, respect for others, social reputation) have significant relationships with his or her classroom practices. Vineet has more cultural and symbolic capital than social capital in the social studies classroom. Her teacher does not appear to recognize her cultural and symbolic capital, and Vineet does not want to expand her social capital by participating in classroom work. Vineet is aware of her educational capital and her symbolic capital (being in a Special Placement class is a prestigious status in school) and she is not interested in creating a positive interaction with her teacher. She declared her intention: "I do not like to talk and I will not talk in class." Obviously, this stance limits the amount of verbal interaction involving Vineet and constrains the ways in which she learns.

Vineet's mom came to school and talked to the teacher politely about changing the grade and her daughter's shy nature, but the teacher would not listen to her mom and didn't change the grade. Vineet's mother thinks that Vineet is penalized heavily for her introverted personality and her shyness. However, she feels powerless and prefers to be silent about this incident. She is afraid to take matters to the principal. She thinks this will aggravate the teacher and she will have to pay a heavier price in her final semester.

Vineet's parents told her that it is better to be silent, and after all "Your teacher is your Guru. You should respect your teacher even if he is unfair or not good to you." Vineet is very angry, but "not with her teacher, she is angry with herself for not participating in class." She blames herself for losing 20 points. However, she has decided that she is going to law school, and to get into law school she needs to work hard and get good grades. She thinks she can do that. I argue that by blaming herself for losing points and earning a low average, Vineet expressed her powerlessness and disconnections with a class structure that goes not recognize students' cultural capital and dispositions toward silence, listening, and selective forms of learning. Her parents' decision to recommend continued silent is a survival strategy. I assert that Vineet does not have a low average, understanding of content and her grade is lower than what she expected.

Rehana recalls her experiences in elementary school:

*We were always silent about many things that happened in school.*

*In my fifth grade a white teacher called an African boy "Vermin."*

*The same teacher did not like Indian children; she treated us like we were vermin. She did not like when I got the highest score in my class, or when I won the New York Times Poetry Competition and got a \$12,000 award. She always shunned South Asian children in class and always ignored us. However, we never complained about this teacher. When my brother topped his class in fifth grade, his African American and Spanish classmates wrote a four-letter word in his yearbook. They wrote “you nerd we hate you”; “Stupid nerd I hope you die.” We did not let our parents know about this because we knew they could not do anything to stop these things...and they would be worried. We did not report this to the school because we did not want to create more problems for us.*

Rehana’s story is typical of many Asian Indian model minority students who demonstrate nonconfrontational behavior and keep silent. In the Asian context, Lee (1996) describes the nonconfrontational behavior as a “strategy of silence,” and a consequence of the feeling of powerless. In the context of her Asian respondents’ silence strategy Lee explained: “They believed that the best way to deal with confrontation was to avoid it or to be silent” (p. 31). Rehana, her brother, and other Asian Indian friends felt an inability to stop prejudice and antagonism, and preferred to be silent. They have internalized their parents’ schema of their marginalized position in the dominant culture and truncated their agency to confront prejudice. Rehana expressed that her elementary and middle school years were tough for her and those experiences always stay with her. She told me, “I was always conscious of my ethnicity. I always felt that I was a second-

class citizen but I knew that it was better to keep quiet.” Osajima (1988) argued that Asians use silence as a survival strategy. In his framework of minority performance, Osajima explains that Asians perceive discrimination and prejudice as an inevitable temporary aspect of the migration process and they try to deal with it silently.

Sakim almost cried when he narrated his story to me. He explained that in his Special Placement science class he is assigned a back seat and he has difficulty understanding his teacher because she speaks very softly. He said “I always raise my hand to ask her if I do not understand something, but my teacher never pays attention to me.” His assertion of being ignored was supported by my observation. When I observed his class I noticed that the science teacher hardly paid any attention to him. Sakim is a quiet, very gentle, and well-behaved student. He narrated his story very sadly:

*I cannot get into any good high school now. My average was 90-96. But now it is 84. I failed a science test because I was sick and missed the test and the science teacher refused to give me the test on another day. She said it was my fault. I should have copied notes from my friends. My parents did not talk to my teacher about the test, they told me to work hard and get focused. I am really worried...you know all good high schools take students with 90 and above average. I am trying hard. You know in my elementary school I was the only Asian Indian and I had highest math score in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade standardized test. I received a certificate for that but now...*

Sakim and his parents are silent about this problem. Rather than complaining to the teacher or the principal about his difficulties, his parents asked him to work hard and focus. Sakim said that he has asked Anil to help him in science and he is hoping to improve his average. However, he is convinced that he will end up in a zone high school with his low average. He did not talk to his teacher about the seating arrangement on the assumption that she will not listen to him. Although Sakim is a Special Placement student with a good academic history, he feels powerless to improve his learning experience. He is bearing his difficulties silently. He blames himself for his failure. He said “I should have borrowed notes from my friends. It is my mistake. I did not know that she covered test material in her notes.” Sakim revealed that he did not like his elementary school because his African American, Mexican, and Latino classmates were jealous of him. He confided to me that “They were angry with me because I always got the highest score in class. They did not play with me. I was lonely. I had nobody to share with. I hated my elementary school.” His parents moved to a better neighborhood with a better school, but Sakim had a hard time in that school also. Although he is having difficulty in his science class, he is much happier in middle school because he has many friends there. All his friends are South Asians and West Indians and his social capital has enabled him to create a support system and a social network with his friends. Although he is worried about high school, his social and cultural capital have provided him self-assurance and enabled him to expand his agency to improve the volume of his educational capital. He is depending on his support system: his friends.

Asian students are stereotyped as model minority students with no schooling problems. I argue that they are not vocal about their problems, and their complex

experiences remain hidden behind success stories. They use silence strategies to deal with negative experiences. Asian Indian parents teach their children that failure is their fault and students are responsible for their own learning. Gibson (1991) in her ethnographic study of Sikh families (Asian Indian immigrants from Punjab province in India) noted that Asian Indian parents hold their children responsible for their own learning and achievement, saying that there is no excuse for failure in school. Failing children are told that they should work harder to excel. Both Sakim and Vineet have internalized this message and they blamed themselves for their difficulties and failures.

Asian Indians are often intimidated by the powers of school staff and faculty, and they can feel unwanted in public schools. Many Asian Indian parents have willingly accepted their second-class position in the sociopolitical field of mainstream society. Although Asian Indians are positively stereotyped, the mainstream population views them as powerless and harmless. Most of the Indian parents have internalized their powerlessness in the dominant culture, try not to assert their power, and try to deal with unpleasant situations silently.

Of course, not all Asian Indian parents are alike; upper-middle or middle-class professional Asian Indians are more assertive in schools than newer less-educated urban Asian Indians. One of my respondent's parents is a math teacher in a high school, and her husband is a professor. Both of them were educated in American universities and have an insight into the education system. She reported:

*My son was in speech class for a minor speech problem. I had to talk to school about his speech evaluation. After waiting two hours to talk to the secretary about the purpose*

*of my visit, I heard a sarcastic remark from her that I should be thankful for all the free services I am getting from school and I should not be complaining. I was really angry at her remark and with her attitude. I told her “Nothing is free I am paying for all these services. This is my tax money and you know this is your job to serve parents. You are not obliging me. You are paid by our money.” You know they did not expect an answer like that from an Indian woman. They thought that I will take their nonsense...probably my humble disposition, patience, and my sari [Indian dress] led them to think that I was one of those newcomers who would be at their mercy.*

Many other Asian Indian parents reported similar experiences and complained about the arrogant attitude of school. However, most of them said that they did not argue or complain because they did not want to fight with school officials. In model minority rhetoric, Asian Indians are projected as a passive minority who are not supposed to complain.

## **Contradictions and Oppositional Behavior**

### **Peer Pressure**

*I used to get good grades. I always got above a 90 in all subjects. I never bothered anybody and I tried to be nice to everyone. But these blacks would always beat me up. No teacher took my side.*

*They always told me it was my fault. I was punished all the time.*

*My parents do not come to school and talk to the teachers. All these black and white parents run to school and fight with teachers and the principal. All teachers are scared of parents who fight with them. I have to defend myself. Now I am bad. I behave like them and now they are scared of me. I do not care for my grades now. It is better to be bad than beaten up and cursed at every day. (Raj, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*I am worried for my son. He was an A student in elementary school. In seventh grade he got friendly with bad students. He says he has to be their friend; if he does not hang out with them they will beat him. Now he does not like to study; he wastes his time outside home with his American friends. (An Indian parent)*

*My daughter is in law school and my youngest son is doing well in school. I am very upset with my middle son. He dropped out of high school. He was a very good student in middle school but in high school he changed. He became friendly with bad students. He stopped listening to us and followed his friends. He started failing tests and slowly stopped going to school. (An Indian parent)*

All these stories contradict the model minority discourse and reveal that there are many Asian Indian students who surrender to external forces that impede their agency in order to live up to the positive stereotyped reputation. Often contradictions appear

because Asian Indian students counteract to learning as a result of peer pressure, or because of the ignorance of teachers and school officials. Contradictions and oppositional behaviors appear due to cultural differences, peer envy, and in a few cases to linguistic barriers. According to MacLeod (1995), members of a subculture or subhabitus are often involved in oppositional behavior to protest unfair treatment by the mainstream culture. Contradictions and resistance appear because of Asian Indian students' negative experiences in classroom and schools and often students show oppositional behavior. Raj represents those students who stray from "patterns of cultural enactment" and norms and apply their agency to create "asynchronous interactions in different fields" (Tobin, 2002, p. 3). Raj declared that he did not want to be beaten up every day and his grades were not important to him anymore. He refused to be a timid helpless individual. He acted in self-defense, and traded his identity of high achiever for low achiever. Raj's expression of resistance deviates from the "Asian Indian behavior norm" that conditions Asian Indian youth to follow "silence and staying-away strategies."

According to activity theory, that is an articulation of agency | structure relationships. In any given activity participants achieve their goals through interactions with tools, rules, resources, and division of labor (Engestrom, 1999). Rules are schemas, values, and beliefs—abstract rules that can be explicit and implicit. Resources (structure) can be human, symbolic, and material. Students come to school with their resources for learning. Their scholastic attainment relies on their successful use of materials, symbolic resources, and on how well they use their cultural and social capital for learning. Low achievement, lack of confidence, and failure are a result of contradictions that appear between resources and students. Contradictions appear due to

students' inability to use their cultural and social capital successfully, failing to step into teachers' cultural fields, and truncating their agency to the cultural fields of their peers. Often in order to earn their peers' respect, Asian Indian students try to ignore classroom rules and their own symbolic resources, and deviate from goal achievement.

Asian Indian students' learning and academic achievements are a collective activity of family, students, and school. Research in the area of the parental influence, and aspiration shows that Asian American parents influence their children's academic achievement, place considerable value on education, and very closely monitor their children's education (Schneider & Lee, 1990). Asian parents have higher expectations and evaluate their children's school performance critically and are not satisfied with lower grades. It is very common among Asian parents to push their children to get perfect score, and they have stricter guidelines for school performance and academic achievement. For example, many of my respondents revealed that their parents were not happy with a 95 or 92 on tests. Parents ask "What happened? If you can get 95 it is easy for you to get 99 or 100 on a test." Asian parents have strict rules for doing school work, they closely monitor their children's homework, often help their children in doing homework, hire tutors, buy material resources for their children, and give priority to their children's educational needs. Many of my respondents said that their parents helped them in math and science homework. Thus in a classroom setting, goal achievement is a collective activity. The goal of both teacher and family is to enable students to learn and perform better, and the student's goal is to learn and gain academic success. However, contradictions arise when Asian Indian students fail to apply their agency and resources and succumb to peer pressure, or teachers' negative attitudes.

I assert that Raj and other students like him exerted their agency in another direction; he adapted a “non-model-minority” survival strategy. Instead of “keeping silent,” and adapting to a “nonconfrontational behavior” he opted for a self-defense strategy and other survival strategies that were not achievement-oriented. There are many students who might be refuting their model minority image because of their non-Asian survival strategies.

As Gibson (1991) have stated, Asian Indian parents hold their children responsible for their learning. However, it does not mean that Asian Indian parents are ignorant of the importance of school context. All my participants reported that their parents moved to predominantly white or Asian neighborhoods with good schools (schools with high academic performance), and wanted their children to compete for entrance to magnet or specialized high schools. Asian Indian parents understand the importance of school context, but they do not want their children to use school context as the sole cause for their failure. Asian Indian parents want their children to use their agency in more constructive ways and to use those survival strategies to defend themselves in ways that would not impede their agency. I argue that all students cannot survive harsh school contexts and it is not easy for all students to be model minority students. School context is a structure and because individuals have different volume of capital they access appropriate structures differently. Thus their agency and identities differ.

### **Language-Related Academic and Behavior Problems**

*You know only my ESL teacher understands me now...I cannot speak English fluently and I cannot write well. I am trying*

*to learn English. The English teacher failed all ESL students in my class. My teachers do not care for me and they think I am a bad kid. ... Last year all students made fun of my name and thought I am a fool. If I do not behave like this they will kill me. (Ramjeet, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

This conversation took place in Hindi. Because Ramjeet is not fluent in English I knew it would be hard for her to express himself in English. He was overjoyed when I offered to converse in Hindi. His English proficiency is at a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level but he is placed in 8<sup>th</sup> grade because of his age. His physical attributes make him look like a high school student. He is very tall, big, and has a beard. Physically and academically he is a misfit in his class. His father migrated to the United States in 2002, and he followed his father in 2004 with his mother and two siblings. His family has a language barrier and they are not fluent in English. There is nobody at home who can help Ramjeet with his homework. He is good in math and he likes science but because of the language barrier he has problems in science classes. He gets along with his ESL teacher because she praises him for his efforts. His ESL teacher confided:

*He was tough! He acted very arrogant in class...but I handled him with positive reinforcements.... But you know the English teacher failed all of the ESL students. This is demoralizing for them. They are working hard in this class. He could have passed them; they needed only 5-7 more points to pass the test. The English teacher does not like immigrants.*

Thus, Ramjeet's academic and behavioral problems are related to his language barrier and his family's inability to provide him with support. I assert that Ramjeet's behavior is his defense mechanism, and a tool for survival in school. He is trying hard in ESL class and according to the ESL teacher his performance is remarkable, but he is not doing as well in other classes. Because of the language barrier a communication gap exists among his parents, the principal of the school, and his teachers. His agency and his learning are impeded by an asynchrony that exists between him and his teachers (except the ESL teacher) in classrooms. In the absence of a synchronous relationship with his teachers he is not learning. Tobin (2002) explains contradictions that appear due to lack of synchronous relationships: "When a lack of synchrony occurs, contradictions to the patterns of thin coherence can arise. There can be many reasons for asynchrony, including an inability or unwillingness to access and appropriate particular resources" (p. 3). Ramjeet's agency is truncated in classrooms where teachers' view his English Language barrier with negative attitude. I assert that Ramjeet's inability to read or write English on grade level was viewed by his teachers as his "unwillingness" and his "permanent deficit" to learn. Instead of helping him his teachers labeled him as a problem student. Ramjeet is unable to use his agency to access resources of classrooms. His parents do not know that upon their request school can provide them with an interpreter so that they can communicate with their son's teachers and discuss his academic and behavioral difficulties.

Puja's academic problems are related to her language barrier. Her teacher complained that "This girl does not speak, does not interact with anybody, does not participate in classroom activities; I do not know what to do with her." After a month's

interval the same teacher informed me “Puja is placed in ESL class and I am not worried about her. She is trying hard in ESL class.” This teacher implied that her responsibilities to Puja were transferred to the ESL teacher, and the ESL teacher will take care of Puja’s academic and social needs. I conversed with Puja in Hindi:

*I am in this country for eight months. My family is from a village in Punjab. I cannot speak English but I am trying to learn. Teachers think I do not want to do my work. My mother does not know English. My father is not very good in English. My brother and sister are in this school and they have the same problem. My teacher thinks I do not respect her when I do not answer her. My ESL teacher is very good and she tries to help me.*

It is possible that Puja’s teachers (except the ESL teacher) did not try to understand Puja’s language difficulties and Puja’s willingness to learn. As a newcomer to school and to the United States, it is hard for her to access resources of different fields of school structure. The structure of the classroom did not help her in this process. Often newcomers to a field lack cultural resources to access resources of that particular field (Tobin, 2002). Puja’s cultural capital and her habitus did not provide her resources to access English language rapidly. Puja need more time to learn how to access symbolic, material, and human resources of the classroom field; and she is trying to do so. However, her classroom teacher was impatient and was insensitive to Puja’s needs and concluded that placing Puja in the ESL was class the only solution.

Puja and Ramjeet do not fit the model minority image. Their academic and behavior problems stem from their language barrier. Many newer Indian immigrants and their children experience similar problems and are struggling to improve their situation. They are not professionals nor are they well educated, and they lack the “know-how” of the American education system. They claim that they migrated to the United States for their children’s education and they want their children to be successful in school, attain higher degrees, and be successful. However, these newcomers need insights about the American education system. They lack educational and cultural capital that other Asian Indian families have and they are a contradiction to model minority stereotypes. Puja’s and Ram’s parents want to help their children but they do not have material and symbolic resources to assist them. School personal are not sensitive to needs of children like Ramjeet and Puja.

### **Under Shadow of Success Stories: Hidden Pressure and Tensions**

*Sometimes I feel I need little more understanding from my parents. I always score above 90 in tests. I like math and science. In my last science test my score was 85 and my father and uncle were upset. I heard that I should pay more attention to my studies....I need a break. (Shital, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*My parents never pressure me to study. They are not one of those parents who always nag their children to study. My mom is a doctor and I know*

*she wants me to be a doctor but she never told me to be a doctor and my high school is one of the top schools for math and science in the nation so I should be a doctor. I scored 1550 on SAT out of 1600. Well I do not need to worry about this now, I have enough time to decide. (Alok, 11<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*My parents want me to be a doctor or a lawyer because I am a smart student. My brother and I go to a private tutor 4 times a week for homework and other help. In my family all my uncles and aunts are educated except my father. Only my father did not finish college. He drives a cab and my mom does not work. I have to do well in school. (Sanam, 8<sup>th</sup> grade)*

Many students like Alok, Shital, and Sanam deny that they experienced parental pressure. They have internalized their parents' expectations and achievement ideologies. They are compelled to do well in school in order to establish good careers that will bring them financial safety and respect. Schools also expect model Asian Indian students to perform to the model minority standards. These students try to hide their tension, and they struggle to live up to the positive stereotyped reputation. Asian Indian students are compelled to "interpret and assert identity" in light of expectations held by schools and their families. According to Asher (1999) the model minority stereotype challenges students with high academic expectations, thus creating stress for students. Asian Indian students are constantly constructing and reconstructing their identities in the shadow of stress, high expectations, and compliance. As hegemonic powers shape their thinking and

behavior in school, Asian Indian students construct their own identities under the shadow of identities assigned to them by the dominant culture. However, the fluidity of identity is a major concern for them and identity threat is an integral part of their discourses in school. They are always under the pressure of losing their identity as noted “If I do not excel I will be losing my identity of high achiever and I will be failing to live up to expectations of my parents and teachers.” While the model minority positive stereotype provides symbolic structures for high achievement and motivates students to expand their individual agency, it might create a psychological threat for many Asian Indian students’ identities.

A relevant explanation for Asian students’ better school performance is the theory of Anglo conformity (Gibson, 1988). Asian Indians, like other Asian groups, confide that assimilation in American society is the price they must pay for upward mobility. There is a dialectical relationship between educational and economic success and Americanization. Asians are constantly under pressure to be Americanized and assimilate into mainstream society. Often the first-generation Asian immigrants perceive this pressure as a threat to their ethnic identity and so they resist the Americanization of their children. A common trend among Asian Indians is to try to delay the Americanization of their children by restricting them from participating in school-related social activities and pressuring them to study all the time. The common belief among Asians is that Americanized second-generation youths are less motivated to attain academic credentials, and they tend to spend their time and agency in activities that impede their economic success. Thus, Asian Indian immigrants do not view positively Americanization of the second generation.

## **Race Relations and Racism: Asian Indian Perceptions**

*Faiz: My father says that people recognize you by your education not by your skin color. People should not be judged by their faces or their skin color.*

*Saran: Do you believe this, Faiz?*

*Faiz: No. People judge you by your skin color. First thing they see is your color.*

Faiz was hesitant to talk about racial prejudice, racism, and ethnic identity. He explained that people's color was not an issue for him, but other people judged him by color. However, he admitted that he had experienced racial prejudice in the form of jealousy and hostility from his non-Asian friends. He pointed out that in elementary school in the beginning he experienced hostility from other children in his class because most of the time he scored highest in the class. He said that in his middle school Asian Indians feel comfortable because more than half of the school population is Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and West Indian. Although Faiz said color did not matter for him, all his friends are from India, Pakistan, and the West Indies. He feels comfortable with people of his race and ethnicity. He explained that "white people do not understand us because we are very different than them, and others African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans get jealous of us." He preferred other Asians and liked to be friends with them, but Asians stay with their own group.

I noticed that middle school students were uncomfortable with the race issue and were reluctant to talk about racism. However, as the conversations unfolded they talked

about their experiences of racism. They all agreed that in middle school they do not experience overt racism because of the large number of Indians in the school. Shital confided, “When we get high scores other students (white and black) do not like it. But they cannot do anything to us. They get jealous and try to make fun of us or joke about it. Joking or making fun is a sign that they do not like us to do better than them.” Sanam, Vineet, Deepa, Sakim, Shital, and Anil all felt they were different from white and African American students and they experienced jealousy and prejudice because of that difference. Prakash said that he never experienced racism in elementary or middle school. Later on he explained “You know because I do not look Indian, everybody thinks that I am Spanish.” Consciously he thinks that his looks prevented him from the experience of racism. Like all other respondents, he felt comfortable with other Indians and most of his interactions were limited to his close friends. Nisha and Prakash denied any interracial tension or racism in their current school, but they anticipated that things might be different in other schools with high African American and Hispanic populations. Nisha expressed that color should not be the basis of friendship, and she likes to be friends with everybody. She said, “People should look beyond color because everybody is a human being.” She mentioned that most of her father’s friends are whites because there are not many Indian doctors in Sloan-Kettering Hospital. Her parents have friends from all over. On the contrary, Shital mentioned that her parents do not want her to be influenced by other students and they have instructed her to be friends with only Indians. Anil described a coping strategy of high-achieving Indian students collectively:

*We talk to everybody. You know we like everybody and we are friends with everybody. We do not get into fights. We are well behaved and we stay out of trouble. You know there are people who curse, do bad things like smoke, disrespect their teachers....it is only a matter of comfort. We are comfortable with our Indian friends...with each other. We can share with each other and we help each other.*

Anil explained that they have learned to live with people of other races, but they are most comfortable with their own race. Despite the fact that Asian Indian students talked about being friendly with everybody, they socialize solely with students of their own race and a similar ethnic background. Students from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan socialized intimately.

High school students were open about the race issue, and I assume that their maturity enabled them to discuss this sensitive issue openly with me. Rehana observed racism everywhere. She said that in elementary school it was overt because younger children are not good at hiding it and elementary school teachers had the misconception that young children did not feel racial connotations. She added that in middle and in high school racism is covert and you have to recognize it. She is in an elite high school and in this school more than half of the students are Asians. African American and other minorities are underrepresented. She said we all live in our space:

*White students do not interact with us, Asians think they are the smartest, and other students are not happy with us because we have outnumbered*

*them. In this school there are so many racial cliques and nobody says anything about it. We have many ethnic and racial clubs and we can be members of any club but we all stick to our ethnic clubs. We have racial divides but it is hidden and nobody wants to talk about it. Indian students are supposed to be humble, respectful, and submissive and we try to stick to this image. . . . You know my father taught me how to deal with racism. He said be quiet, be a diplomat, watch what you say to others.*

Rehana is very observant and she acknowledged the hidden racial tension and lack of interracial relationships in school. She is aware that Asian Indians are stereotyped as well-behaved model minorities and that they are supposed to stick to this defined image. She mentioned that Asians had very strong cliques in high school and students felt secure in their cliques. Within ethnic cliques there were subcliques of high achievers and low achievers and high-achieving Asian Indian students felt superior to low achievers.

Trihita acknowledged racial factors in school but said that it is hidden and you do not see it if you do not want to see it. Her outlook was different than Rehana's. She blamed Indian students for staying within their cliques. She said you have to interact with others; if you do not mix with them they will never know "who you are. You cannot alienate yourself from others. You need to break barriers." Trihita likes to cross lines and mix with everyone. However, her best friends are Asian Indian girls. She said her parents face racism in their workplaces and they have warned her about racial prejudice:

*My parents tell me that only with education you can fight racism in American society. I know I can defend myself with education against discrimination and prejudice. We are judged by how we look, what we wear, and by our customs. We are different than whites, blacks, and everybody. When my teachers and other students ask me “why do I always wear long pants and do not wear shorts, or will my parents arrange my marriage, or things like that” they imply that there is something wrong with Indian ways.*

Trihita thinks that she can fight racism with education and mixing with others. She has Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Middle Eastern friends. She does not have any white or African American friends. About her elementary and middle schools, she said “There were so many colored students in school but there were very few colored teachers.” She defined herself and other south Asians as colored but she does not identify with the black race. She said, “We are not white but we are not black, Mexicans, or Puerto Rican.”

“In a white neighborhood if you are the only Indian in school you do not experience racism,” Vandana explained. Race was never an issue in school. In her elementary and middle schools she was the only Indian student. Her parents moved from a mixed urban neighborhood to a white upper-middle-class suburb because they did not want their children to attend schools with a large African American, and Hispanic population. Vandana is attending a specialized elite school with a diverse population. She is very strong in math and science, and during her elementary and middle school years she won many Math Olympiads and prestigious science competitions. She was a star in

her school. In her high school she has received a Columbia University grant to work on a science project. In high school she became aware of racial divides. Vandana's story supports bell hooks' (1992) argument that ethnicity is praised and appreciated as long it remains a "spice" in white culture. Vandana was appreciated for her accomplishments in elementary and middle school and did not experience racism. However, it is evident that her parents feared that her academic performance would be negatively influenced by other minority children. They were aware of the fact that urban inner-city schools lack resources and educational opportunities that suburban schools offer.

Asian Indians are positively stereotyped by the dominant group, but they themselves stereotype many other minority groups as low achievers. It was evident to me that Indian parents formed their opinions regarding other minorities as a result of hearing about the school failures of South Asian students and the influence of bad company (students of other ethnic groups) on Indian students. Many Asian Indian parents experienced the influence of inner-city schools on their children's academic achievement. A majority of my respondent parents moved from neighborhoods with high African American and Hispanic populations because they realized that their children were not getting a good education. For Asian Indian parents "good education" means an education that prepares students for college and high paying jobs. Many Indian students complained that they did not learn in classrooms where the majority of students were African American and Puerto Rican. Sanam and Deepa described racially mixed classrooms where they had a tough time: "Classes were noisy. Students did not respect their teachers, they did not listen to teachers and it was very hard to learn anything. I did not learn much in school. I had to study hard at home." I heard this complaint over and over. All of my

respondents said that their parents want them to stay away from bad children because they can influence them. When I asked where they got their attitude about African American students, Asian Indian students explained that they like good African American students. They spoke highly of Tiffany (the only African American student in SP class). They said that in general African American students are rough, disruptive, and get in trouble. Asian Indian parents oppose their relationship with bad African American students. Asian Indian students described the way they are discouraged by their parents to associate with other minority groups and are instructed to stay with their own kind, or with good students. They stigmatized the low academic achievement and failure of other minorities. Unfortunately, the underrepresentation of many other minorities in high-performing schools, advanced placement classes, special placement courses, and honors list classes affirms their belief about other minorities.

In her ethnographic study of Asian American youth, Lee (1996) explains the positionality of African Americans in high-achieving schools and the negative attitude of Asians towards African Americans. She argues,

The model minority stereotype negatively affects Koreans' attitudes toward African Americans. The model minority stereotype implicitly stereotypes African Americans as a lazy group of people who fail to help themselves. I would add that the position of African Americans inside Academic High confirmed Korean-identified students' belief that African Americans were inferior. (p.103)

I assert that Asian Indians share many characteristics of Korean immigrants and many Asian Indian parents form their opinions of other minorities on the basis of their

underrepresentation in high-performing schools. Asian Indian parents approve interracial relationships with middle-class whites and other Asians.

None of my respondents spoke of parental disapproval of friendships with white or Asian students. Because Asian Indians believe in white meritocratic values and respect white scholastic standards, they approve their children's association with white students. Asian Indians believe that they have earned the model minority status and like other Asians they are better than many other minorities. Many Asian Indian students repeatedly spoke of their experiences in schools with high proportions of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Latinos. They complained of students' disruptive behavior and lack of learning. During my interviews I discovered that my respondents' negative attitudes toward other minorities were formed as a result of their experiences. Their perceptions are not solely based on the adult world opinion. Unfortunately, their parents support their children's negative attitudes towards other minorities, and instruct them to distance themselves from other low-performing minority children.

### **Expression of Ethnicity**

I consider primordial ties, especially their parents' home country and its culture, of great significance for second-generation Asian Americans' ethnicity. Ethnic culture is important for ethnic identity among the second generation mainly because the latter have no choice but to live with it in an immigrant home in their formative years. (Min, 2002, p. 7)

According to Min, for second-generation Asian students' success in the dominant culture, their ethnic identification is important. Ethnicity is comprised of cultural characteristics such as customs, values, beliefs, dress, language, food, and holidays. Alba (1990) asserts "Ethnic groups generally define their uniqueness in regard to other ethnic groups largely through the medium of culture" (p. 79). There is a close connection between quality of school experience, school success, and individuals' ethnicity. Asian children come from ethnic culture that is very different than mainstream culture and their ethnic culture is very important for their ethnic identity. Their ethnic culture has significant importance for them because in their formative years their lives are shaped by the ethnic culture of their habitus and they inherit their cultural capital is immersed in their ethnic culture.

I assert that retention, preservation, and expression of ethnicity are vital for one's psychological well-being. Specifically, in the context of minority adolescents' success in school, ethnic identity is important. My specialized high school respondents liked their high schools better than their elementary and middle schools. They expressed that their high school was sensitive to their social needs because schools provided them a forum to express their ethnic identity. High schools allowed ethnic clubs in school and provided students opportunities to feel proud of their ethnic culture. High school respondents celebrated their ethnic holidays in their ethnic clubs, arranged discussions related to ethnic issues, invited ethnic scholars to their ethnic clubs. They experienced a sense of accomplishment, belongingness, and derived meaning of their ethnic heritage. Thus they gained a sense of empowerment in dominant culture by introducing their ethnic heritage to others.

Trihita expressed:

*In high school we celebrated Id [a Muslim holiday] and Diwali [a Hindu holiday]. We enjoyed celebrating holidays. We wore Indian dresses on holiday celebrations. Our principal was very interested in our cultural things. I think all schools should have cultural clubs.*

My middle school respondents felt ethnic isolation in school where their “Indian-ness” or their ethnicity was not important. Their ethnic world was limited to their family and their ethnic community. I noticed that middle school Asian Indian students tried to conceal their ethnicity. They felt their ethnicity was nothing to be mentioned in school.

Sanam expressed:

*In school I am like other students. I guess I am an American in school. But at home I talk in Punjabi [an Indian language], I go to Gurudwara [a Sikh worship place] every Sunday, I like to eat Indian food everyday at home. I think it is important to have our culture. I like to learn Punjabi. In school our teachers do not know much about Indian culture. I think it would be nice if they learn about our culture.*

In middle school Asian Indian students were deprived of their ethnic identities and expressed that it would be nice if school recognized their ethnic culture. I assert that in middle school, Asian Indian students were experiencing ethnic isolation. In a school where the Asian Indian population is more than 50 percent, Asian Indian students have no forum to express their ethnicity. They feel alienated and marginalized. Suarez-Orozco

and Suarez-Orozco (2001) point out that immigrant children who experience marginalization and are culturally disparaged develop an “adversarial style of adaptation” (p. 107). Many immigrant children react to cultural isolation by adapting oppositional behavior. Rahman is an example of students who need their ethnic identity to be recognized by school. His agency is impeded in classrooms that do not recognize his ethnic culture and he can not access resources of different structures of classroom. He is a newcomer to the United States and he is not familiar with “American ways” and he is trying to learn “American way of life”. His teachers have labeled him as a problem student because he is not behaving “proper” and he is different than high-achieving Indian students. He expressed that he feels “very strange” in school because school culture is very different than his culture at home. He thinks acting Indian in school is damaging to him. He is trying to behave like other American students, but his teachers think he is not respectful to them like other Asian students. Many students like Rahman would do better in school if they could get opportunities to express their ethnicity. Many Sikh children expressed that they are made fun of because of their turbans. Sukhbeer said that only people who do not know about the significance of the turban made fun of them, and if Americans would be educated about Indian customs they would be more understanding about ethnic heritages. Although my middle school respondents were not vocal about the need for ethnic recognition, they pointed out the lack of ethnic and cultural understanding in school. While high-achieving Asian Indian students are successful in school without recognition of their ethnicity, there are Asian Indian students who might do better in school if their ethnic identities are emphasized by the schools.

## Self-Marginalization by Career Choices

They are achieving the exam grades, the university placements, the occupational positions, and the trappings of a proper middle-class style of the life; but still they feel excluded, marked and marginalized by race. (Hall, 2002, p. 123)

Like Hall's British Asian respondents American Asian Indian students are marginalized in the mainstream society despite their model minority status. Overall the Asian Indian population aims for social mobility by academic achievement. However, in their pursuit of social mobility they are marginalizing themselves by monopolizing only a few professions. Asian Indian parents push their children only for those careers that will bring economic stability. In this process they are limiting their children's career choices and are self-marginalizing themselves. Ankeeta said that math and science are considered "Indian subjects." She explained:

*Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students in my school are good in many things. They take music, arts and a lot of other things but we Indians are very good in study. All Indian students are good in math and science. I like sociology a lot because it addresses many issues like racism, culture, and much more. But I will not be a sociologist. I want to be a lawyer or doctor because my parents would like me to be a doctor. In my school many of my friends are hoping to go to med school.*

Each of respondents expressed a sense of obligation to fulfill their parents' dream of obtaining financially secure jobs. In the process of fulfilling their parents' dreams Asian Indian students feel pressured to opt for careers that are valued by their parents. Asian Indian students are not encouraged by their parents to take advantage of diverse opportunities that are available for them. Asian Indian parents want to preserve their model minority image in the mainstream society and therefore motivate their children to pursue their career in medicine, law, engineering, computer technology. Thus Asian Indian parents are marginalizing their children in the mainstream society. Rumi expressed a desire to be something else and diversify her career choices but her father disapproved of her goal to be a writer and become a doctor or a lawyer and do writing in her spare time. I noticed that most of my respondents were inclined to follow their parents' footsteps and believed that they should have a secure profession because of economic considerations.

## **Video Analysis: A Window in a Math Classroom**

### **Employment of Agency in a Math Classroom**

At Mango Grove Middle School, teachers expressed that Asian Indian students are very easy to control and the presence of Asian Indian students in a classroom makes the classroom management task easy for them. At Mango Grove Middle School, according to school administrators a quiet class is reflective of a teacher's ability to run his or her class successfully. The math teacher said "My SP students are very cooperative, specifically Indian students can do their work quietly for the whole period and I seldom have to raise my voice." I videotaped students in math and science

classrooms to analyze how they employed their agency in different fields of the classroom structure and what contradictions appeared during enactment of their cultural practices and learning. In addition I studied how they used their agency to construct and reconstruct their identities of high-achieving students.

My Special Placement (SP) Asian Indian students said that they liked math and science and they usually scored highest in those classes, however they did not learn much in math classroom because the curriculum was too easy. Many of the students reported that they learned the content during summer in a math enrichment program or they learned math at home from their parents or from their private tutors. The math teacher said that these students complained to her that “it is too easy...it is boring because we learn the content over the summer.” The math teacher explained that she has to teach them what is prescribed in curriculum and “they are learning 9<sup>th</sup> grade math in 8<sup>th</sup> grade for the Regents exam. If it is too easy for them I cannot do anything about it.”

However, all students liked the math teacher. Anil said “I like her because she is a good teacher and she is very structured.” Other respondents had a similar comment about the math teacher. It was apparent that these students like “structure” in a class and liked a teacher who was structured. Anil and Nisha explained that the math teacher was fair, she was very clear about her expectations, she had a strict behavior code in her class, and she was not confusing. It was evident that they wanted a teacher to be clear “not confusing” and fair. They compared the math teacher with the science teacher and evaluated the math teacher by their criteria of “structure” and concluded that the science teacher was not structured because sometimes her directions were confusing for students.

## **Field Note**

### *A Typical Day in Math Class*

*Students enter the double-period math class and very quietly take their assigned seats and start doing their “do now” assignment while the teacher takes attendance and takes care of some routine work at the beginning of the class. By the time she finishes taking attendance students who finish “do now” go to the board and write their work on the board. The teacher checks the work written on the board and discusses the work with students. After “do now” the teacher presents a mini-lesson and students get a few more math problems to do in the class. Again they write their work on the board and the teacher checks the work. During the mini-lesson time students ask questions. At the end of the class the teacher goes over the homework. Sometimes during double period the teacher assigns them project work.*

## **The Mesoscopic Lens of Analysis: The Agency Structure Dialectic**

I played and replayed the scenes many times on slow motion and selected two one-minute vignettes to analyze Asian Indian students’ learning practices in math class. This video analysis highlights how Asian Indian students were playing the role of model students in the classroom and at the same time unconsciously showing signs of contradictions. In order to explore their learning in the social field of the classroom, I used the mesoscopic lens of analysis. I examined how Asian Indian students used their agency to interact with classroom structure, accessed resources, and shaped/reshaped their identities as high achievers. Simultaneously, I examined how Asian Indian students

experienced social life and how covert contradictions appeared in the classroom structure. In this meso analysis I employed microscopic and mesoscopic lenses to analyze how Asian Indian students interacted with the classroom structure. At the meso level I analyzed how they experienced social life.

*Vignette 1. Building Identity of a Model Student: Doing Class Work, Following Classroom Rules, Maintaining Order and Solidarity in the Group, and Earning Social Capital*

In this vignette the teacher was praising the students for their good conduct on the previous day while she was absent and a substitute teacher ran the class. While she was talking, students were supposed to finish their “do now.” Shital was the first one in the class to finish her work. She stood up quietly, went to the board, and wrote her work on the board. Although Anil and Prakash finished their work and put their pencils down, they did not volunteer to write their work on the board. I noticed all of my respondents finished their work very quickly and sat quietly while the teacher examined and discussed the problems on the board. However, Prakash started playing with his pencil, and Anil started yawning while Shital wrote her work on the board. The teacher praised Shital for doing good work. While the teacher was going over Shital’s and other students’ work, Prakash, Anil, Deepa, and Faiz smiled and checked their work. Their smiles indicated that their problems were correct. Sanam did not smile and he looked at Anil and tapped his pencil on his notebook. Although he did not speak, Anil understood his gesture and pointed out his own notebook. Sanam looked at Anil’s notebook, smiled, and nodded his head and started writing in his own notebook. All this happened without verbal interaction. Sanam was having trouble solving the math problem. He signaled Anil who

was sitting next to him and asked for help. Anil showed him his notebook and pointed out how he solved the problem. With Anil's help Sanam solved the math problem assigned for "do now."

In this vignette it was evident that my respondents have developed a social network and support system. Anil helped Sanam to finish his class work and earned symbolic capital in the form of Sanam's appreciation and gratitude. Sanam's social capital (his positive relationship with Anil) helped him accessing Anil's help. The Asian Indian students have developed a structure in which they use their agency to access resources with each other's help and that structure enables them to earn social capital in the math class. Shital finished her work within a few minutes the teacher thanked her for doing good work. Thus with her cultural capital she earned symbolic and social capital in class. In this vignette it was evident that Asian Indian students build their identities as model students by following classroom rules, doing their work and earning social capital.

*Vignette 2. Using Agency to Access Resources of the Math Class Structure, and Trying to Conceal Tedium*

In the second vignette, the math teacher reviewed the point-slope form of the equation of a line and had assigned a few problems to solve in class. While she was reviewing the concept, all of my respondents were sitting quietly on their seats and listened to the teacher attentively. During the lesson, Prakash raised his hand and asked a question; the teacher responded to his question. While the teacher asked questions related to the concept she was explaining, Anil, Prakash, Faiz, and Shital raised their hands to answer. The teacher picked another boy and asked him to answer the question. During the

second question, again all my respondents, except Sanam and Vineet, raised their hands. The teacher pointed to Sakim and he answered the question.

While the teacher was engaged with other students, Anil was constantly yawning; Shital started to write on her pencil box with her pencil; Prakash was tapping his pencil on the desk without making a sound, and he took a piece of candy from his pocket and inserted it in his mouth; Faiz rested his head on his hand on the desk; and Sanam started gazing at the posters and their work on the bulletin board. Although Prakash was eating candy it was hard to tell that he was eating something. The math teacher seemed unaware of their actions because they were sitting on their seats silently, were not disrupting the class, had finished their class work, and were participating in class—which demonstrated they were attentive to the teacher.

In this meso analysis of vignettes I explored patterns and contradictions because they are dialectically interconnected and they are important parts of social life. In this vignette the role of students was to do the class work, write their work on the board voluntarily, listen, take notes, ask questions, and reflect on the teachers' questions. In the math class the expectation of the teacher was that students would sit quietly in their assigned seats throughout two periods unless they were instructed to do otherwise. The teacher expected them to finish their "do now" work and write their work on the board. The Asian Indian students met the teacher's expectation. Shital was the first one to write her math work on the board. However, it was evident from their actions that they were trying to conceal their tedium and wanted more challenging work. It is possible that if they had to do harder math problems they would not have bored in the math class.

## A Window in the Science Classroom

### Field Notes

#### *The Day of Test Results*

*Today the science teacher handed out earth science monthly test results. She allowed a few minutes for the students to go over their test papers. The teacher called Faiz to the board to do a few problems from the test, because he had a perfect score. Anil and Prakash also had perfect scores. However in general students did not do very well on this test. All white students were very angry because they thought a few questions were not marked right and they should have scored higher. They were very demanding and for the full period they kept asking her questions and indirectly blamed her that she was not clear and her marking was confusing. Although Sanam, Sakim, Nisha, and many other students had lower scores, they did not complain and sat calmly. During the lunch period I asked my respondents about their reaction to this incident, but they said they did not want to give a hard time to the science teacher and they did not want to treat their teachers like that. Anil said “She is a good teacher but she is not structured and she forgets many things and students who complained had a point. But we do not like to do those things in class [argue with their teachers].”*

This next vignette is selected from the videotapes of the day after this incident. This vignette is two-minutes long. During the third vignette the science teacher distributed the Earth Science Reference Table and students examined the physical properties of minerals. This lesson was part of the preparation for the Regents exam.

*Vignette 3. Signs of Resistance and Contradictions*

In this vignette my respondents seemed involved in classroom activity. Anil was explaining something to Sanam. Faiz was whispering to Anil. Vineet was trying to hide her smile and exchanging gestures with Deepa. During all this the science teacher was explaining to them properties of minerals. While she asked a question Faiz and Anil raised their hands to answer. While Sakim was examining a rock Vineet whispered something to Deepa. Although my respondents were taking notes and examining minerals, they were looking at each other, smiling, and whispering. Anil finished his work and seemed restless. Prakash raised his hand and the teacher invited him to write his work on the board. Sakim was tapping his fingers on the desk while he was taking notes. Nisha started fixing her hair. All this time the class was louder than other days and the teacher was constantly asking them to be quiet. However, compared to other students in the class the Asian Indian students seemed quieter and disciplined, but covertly there were a lot of things going on among them. Every time the teacher made a “hush...” sound (a signal to be quiet) they looked at each other and smiled. However, overtly it seemed they were engaged in learning and were playing the role of good students, accessing resources by being involved in classroom discourses. But signs of contradictions were in their interactions.

## **Shaping/ Reshaping Identity: Positive Interactions, Synchrony, and Solidarity in the Math and Science Classrooms**

At the meso level it was apparent that Asian Indian students responded to their teachers' expectations, followed the classroom rules, and shaped/reshaped their identities of high-achieving good students. They earned cultural, symbolic, and social capital in the classroom field by pleasing their teacher with their scholastic performances. Overtly they participated in class work and scored high on tests. Although they were not verbal and seemed passive, it was evident that they had a network of interactions in the classroom. They had positive interactions with their math teacher. It was evident that they were using their cultural capital to gain symbolic capital in the classroom. They finished their class work on time and earned the teacher's admiration.

At the micro level there were overt signs of synchrony in math class. Asian Indian students synchronized their learning practices with their math teacher. They interacted with each other mostly nonverbally, and a few times verbally, by helping each other while doing assigned class work with eye contact and facial and physical gestures. Anil helped Sanam in math and science classes.

By analyzing vignettes I was able to identify signs of solidarity among my respondents as a group. During the science class, they indicated group solidarity by their eye gazes, smiles, head nods, exchange of whispers, and positive emotional energy. In the science class, during the class work, while Asian Indian students were examining minerals and taking notes they were interacting with each other and there was a high level of positive energy among them. It seemed that they were using their identities as

Asian Indians collectively by working together. Although they were instructed by the teacher to control the noise level and whisper, they were interacting with each other positively to support collective achievement.

### **Contradictions and Resistances**

The video analysis enabled me to catch hidden contradictions and resistances that were expressed by high-achieving Asian Indian students consciously and unconsciously in math and science classes. Most of my respondents had expressed that often they were bored in math class because the content was not challenging. They expressed boredom and frustration by their gestures, unconscious actions, and body movements.

If the principal of the school or any visitors would have walked into the math classroom at the moment I was videotaping Asian Indian students in the class, they would have praised them for their orderly conduct and their class performance. All of my respondents were playing the role of good students. However, at the same time they were showing tedium and restlessness in the math class. Although their cultural and social capital mediated their positive interaction with their teacher, they could not conceal their boredom. I assume that the math teacher was aware of the contradiction of their behavior, but she was pleased with their performance and their behavior and overlooked contradictions.

The vignette from the science class enabled me to identify signs of resistance. Although there was solidarity among the Asian Indian students, there was lack of solidarity among my respondents and the science teacher. My respondents viewed her as a teacher who lacked structure. They did not express their evaluation of their science

teacher verbally but their actions reflected their critical perception of her. Overtly they were playing the role of model students by doing their class work, taking notes, and answering to the teacher; however, signs of resistance were evident. Many of my respondents were unhappy about their low scores on the science test but they were not as vocal as other students. However, they expressed their resistance through their gestures and body movements, continuing side conversations, facial gestures, and reluctance to answer the teacher's questions. The solidarity they experienced was limited to their group; it did not include their teacher.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **Research Findings, Implications, Future Research Possibilities, and Conclusion**

#### **Summary of the Focus of the Study**

Asian Indians constitute an upwardly mobile ethnic group created by new immigration. This phenomenological ethnography focuses on the lifeworlds of a second-generation Asian American youth, who are trying to fulfill their parents' dreams. The participants of this study are representative of second-generation Asian Indian youth who are trying hard to keep a balance between family and peer pressures, and achieve material and academic success in mainstream society. The purpose of this study was to explore the complexities of the schooling experiences of second-generation Asian Indian students within the context of the model minority discourse. In this study I argue that the model minority is a myth, supported by stereotyping. It might not hold credibility in the near future because, as Asian youth go through the Americanization process and assimilate in the dominant culture, their achievement rate declines. The increasing diversity within the Asian Indian population and the variability in students' school performance suggest that second-generation Asian Indians might not be able to hold on to their ascribed model minority status.

Participants in this study are from an urban middle school and two specialized high schools. For this study I used a cross-generational design; thus the parents of

participants are also participants. The youth were selected to participate in the study intentionally and serially on the basis of variability of test scores, homogeneity of ethnicity, and diversity of gender. In the fall of 2005, I was in the Mango Grove Middle School for three months as a participant observer. During this time I observed ten 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in science and math classes every day. I interviewed them, audiotaped their interviews, and videotaped their participation in math and science classes. I informally interviewed the participants from the specialized high schools several times at their homes in the summer of 2005. I collected data through participant observation, informal interviews, audiotapes, field notes, and videotapes.

### **Revisiting the Research Questions**

This study focused on the complexities of school experiences of Asian Indian students, how their school experiences shaped their racial and ethnic identities, and how they constructed their identities within the meritocratic ideology of school and family. In addition, in this study I explored how Asian Indian students and their parents deal with the complexities of school experiences. The framework of this study is guided by two themes: how the complexities of positive stereotyping mediate the school experiences of Asian Indian students; how their cultural and social capital enable them to achieve academic success despite their marginal status in mainstream society. In this study I paid special attention to how Asian Indian students constructed social relationships in school and how they negotiated their model minority images in school.

I began the first chapter by addressing the issue of positive stereotyping and complexities of school experiences of Asian Indian youth. Throughout this study, the school performance and experiences of Asian students were examined from the vantage point of their cultural and social capital, and their positively stereotyped image. This study led to an understanding of lifeworlds of Asian Indian students, and how they use the capital they bring from home to construct new capital and expand their agency (capacity to act) in different fields within the school.

The sociocultural view has enabled me to make sense and gain a deeper understanding of Asian Indian students' school experiences and their academic achievement. In addition, the sociocultural perspective has been helpful in examining how cultural production and social reproduction occur in urban classrooms, and how Asian Indian students use their agency to access and appropriate resources to achieve their goal of academic success. Agency and structure have a dialectical relationship, so that classroom structures mediate each student's agency and student agency can change classroom structure. Additionally, this framework has provided me the means to explore how Asian Indian students' cultural, social, and symbolic capital expand their agency in school settings. I have come to understand that what happens in different fields of classroom structure is mediated by the cultural practices of students and teachers. Bourdieu's ideas of habitus, and cultural and social capital have helped me to understand how Asian Indian students' habitus shapes their attitudes toward learning and schooling, and restricts or broadens their school success.

Asian Indians are an immigrant minority that migrated on their own will, and are viewed by the mainstream society as an exemplary ethnic group. The conventional belief

is that they are a model minority and they experience comparatively less adversity than many other ethnic groups. While the data of this research support the assumptions that Asian Indian students use their capital as an asset for academic success in the mainstream culture, it illuminated the fact that they use strategies of silence to maintain their image of a gentle and exemplary minority.

### **What I Learned**

*What problems and conflicts emerge from the social relationships produced by the model minority positive stereotyping of Asian Indian students?*

The ethnographic data in this study speak for diversity in school experiences and demonstrate the complexities of Asian Indian students' school experiences. The popular media and scholars project Asian Indian students as high achievers and a model minority. However, the data in this study point out that not all Asian Indian students are high achievers, and some face academic and behavior problems in school, but these stories stay hidden behind the shadow of the success stories. Many low-achieving Asian Indian students never receive appropriate assistance and resources from the school and their families, and so they stumble in school. The common assumption that all Asian Indian students are well behaved and are high achievers works against low-achieving and needy students. They are judged by the model minority standard and are covertly castigated by schools (e.g. administrators, counselors, and teachers) for failing to meet high meritocratic standards. Thus, schools use the model minority standards to impede the agency of average to low-achieving Asian Indian students. Schools expect all Asian

Indian students to excel in math, science, and technology, and schools are not sensitive to those students who do not fit the model minority standard.

I found out that high achievement generated peer envy and a few high-achieving Asian Indian students surrendered to peer pressure, and failed to use physical and symbolic resources to accomplish their goal. I used activity theory (Engestrom, 1991) to analyze how individuals use rules to guide their actions, employ tools and resources to access new resources of a field, and divide their participation within a field to reach their individual and collective goals. Contradictions appear if individuals cannot use their agency to follow rules, use tools, and cannot participate in a given activity. For example, Raj was a high achiever but his agency was impeded by peer pressure, and he deviated from his goal for high achievement. Engestrom considers activity or goal achievement as a collective act in which rules, resources, and division of labor mediate individuals' goal attainment. Individuals' cultural and social capitals are resources that they use to access further resources in order to accomplish their goal. Often conflicts and contradictions in the negotiation of rules, tools, resources and division of labor (participation) mediate failure and low achievement. For example, Raj a high-achiever became a low achiever because his agency was constrained by his peers and the teacher's attitude. He lost his identity of high achiever because his cultural capital was not valued by his teacher and his peers. His peers were jealous of his academic achievement and pressured him to act like them. His teacher did not intervene or helped him to fight against peer pressure. As a result Raj could not use the rules, tools and resources of the classroom to maintain his status of high achiever. Engestrom (1991) explains that when in a given activity participants worked together contradictions are eliminated, allowing participants to

achieve their collective and individual goals. However, Raj could not maintain his image of high-achiever; instead he turned into a low-achiever.

Stories of my high-achieving respondents revealed that their school experiences were not very smooth either. They experienced covert and overt prejudice from their peers and teachers. They felt pressured constantly by the high expectations of their schools and families. They lived with identity insecurity: fearful of losing their identities as high achievers. Although most of my respondents had internalized their parents' and teachers' high expectations, a few complained of high pressure from parents and teachers. However, they have a sense of obligation to their families and expressed that their parents have sacrificed for them and it is their duty to repay them by achieving success in school.

My high-achieving respondents used their academic successes to expand their agency in different fields of school structure. As a result of their academic achievements, they earned prestige and teachers' appreciation, and created positive social relationships in school. Their exemplary academic achievements and behavior provided them prized status and privileges in school. However, they dealt silently with contradictions and barriers that arose from their positive stereotyping in order to shield themselves from trouble. They expressed that overt and covert racial and ethnic prejudices were part of immigrant life, and they tried to negotiate these prejudices with silence.

Specialized high school respondents expressed that they liked their high schools because all the students gained entry through a competitive admission exam and there was no partiality in acceptance to these schools. Rehana said, "I am happy to be in this school because I competed with everybody and passed the entrance exam with a high score." My respondents expressed that the meritocratic norms and tracking system were

fair because these standards did not differentiate on the basis of race or ethnicity. One of my respondents said that in the classroom situation “teachers can discriminate against you, and you can get a lower score on a test, but on standardized tests nobody could change your score on the basis of personal biases.” They realized that their good grades are their assets against racism and prejudice and a key to privileged positions in mainstream society.

*What is the relationship between parents’ educational, cultural, and social capital and Asian Indian students’ academic achievement?*

Data from my ethnography reveal that Asian Indian students use their cultural and social capital to construct cultural, symbolic, and social capital in school. Parental educational, cultural and social capital plays a vital role in their children’s academic achievement and future life success. Educated Asian Indian parents have higher human capital and they expect their children to do well in school, while their children consider them their role models. Parental high expectations motivate children to achieve high scholastic performance. Students who demonstrate high academic achievement in school are expected by their schools to maintain that high level of performance. All of my respondents expressed that their parents wanted them to excel in school and had told them that it was their sole responsibility to achieve academic success in school and college. I noticed a strong relationship between professional parents’ aspirations for their children and their children’s future education plans. Although all of my respondents expressed a strong desire for higher education and professional degrees, students coming from professional homes had more realistic future plans and they had a better “know-

how” of the education system. While less-educated, lower-class Asian Indian parents also had high aspirations and expectations for their children, they are unable to help their children because they do not have a good knowledge of the American education system.

Although parental high expectations and aspirations often become sources of pressure, on the whole, my high-achiever respondents spoke positively of parental expectations and aspirations. They expressed that their parents motivated their high achievements and their parents’ strict rules for homework and study were for their benefit. Asian Indian students are not only expected to go to college, but to get admitted to elite colleges; they consider a bachelor’s degree to be a minimum educational requirement. Asian Indian parents push their children towards math, science, and technology because they know that in order to be a doctor, engineer, or computer scientist, one needs a good background in these subjects. Also, professional Asian Indians know that elite high-ranking colleges require students to have good scores in math.

*What role does cultural capital play in the identity shaping of Asian Indian students in school?*

High-achieving respondents of this study revealed that academic achievement was central to their identity, and their academic success was very important for their parents because they expressed that their sole purpose for migration was for a better future for their children. Asian Indian students use their cultural capital to earn better grades in school, and with the asset of their achievement they cultivate a higher volume of symbolic and social capital in school. My respondents constructed identities of high achievers based on their cultural capital. Their parents’ preimmigration cultural norms of

education and learning constitute a core of their identity. Asian Indian students' cultural capital provided them with a structure that expands their agency and affords them success in school. The structure provided by their parents relates to students' agency and dispositions to respect education, their teachers, and school authority. The ethnic culture of Indian families teaches children to respect authority. The "message to respect authority" is a resource for Asian Indian students and they use this resource to access different forms of capital in a school setting. Different forms of cultural capital are different resources in a particular field, and individuals possessing different resources are able to apply their agency to access the resources of another field. Individuals apply resources of intersecting fields to another field. This process can be exemplified by Asian Indian students' use of their resources of their family (cultural capital) for academic achievement in school. In this study this is exemplified by Nisha, Trihita, Alok, Anil and other high-achieving students' use of their cultural capital resources to access school resources and thus gain success in different fields of school.

Culture is enacted in fields with porous boundaries. Each field has a distinct culture and fields have porous boundaries, so that each field is structured by the culture of other fields. Since fields have porous boundaries, the culture of those fields outside school and those in school overlap or intersect. For example, the culture of Deepa's home (a field) teaches her to work hard, respect her teacher, listen to her teacher, and to follow the classroom rules. Also the culture of her home mediates her culture production in the classroom. Simultaneously, Deepa participates in Gurudwara (religious temple), Sunday school, and Punjabi language class and the cultural production occurs in each field. Since boundaries that separate school from the other fields in which she participates are porous,

practices associated with those fields are enacted by Deepa in the classroom and school both consciously and unconsciously, affording her production of symbolic and social capital. Due to the porous boundaries, the culture of those fields outside school intersects with the culture of the classroom (a field) and mediates her academic performance in classroom. By enacting cultures associated of other fields in her class, Deepa earns symbolic and social capital in class. Deepa works very hard and earns good grades, she respects her teachers and she follows classroom rules. According to her teachers she is a model student. She earns symbolic capital in the forms of teachers' admiration, her excellent grades, and her status of a model student. With her symbolic capital she has been able to develop positive social interactions with her teachers and has earned social capital. She participates in different fields of school such as peer tutoring class, library, and Debate team, and because fields with porous boundaries overlap, the culture she produces in the classroom field can be used to meet her goals in the other fields. Deepa participates simultaneously in different fields and uses her capital that she produced in those different fields (e.g. home, Gurudwara, Punjabi language class, classroom) to achieve her goal in a particular field or different fields in school. Resonance between Deepa's cultural capital and the structures of a field or many fields in which she is involved afford her access to and appropriation of the resources in one particular field or in many fields. For instance, Deepa's capability to tutor seventh graders in peer tutoring class affords her the reputation of a good tutor (symbolic capital) and this reputation earned her a position as a student assistant in the school library.

In the context of identity formation of youth, their upbringing, and socially mediated experiences. I assert that their motivation and positive emotions enable youth to

expand their agency and construct their identities. In the classroom situation students' cognition and learning are driven by their motivations and emotions. As Roth (2006) explains, emotions and motivations are characteristic of personal identity and experiences that are mediated socially. Individuals learn motivations and emotions in the course of their upbringing. Hence, emotional possibilities and identity construction take place at individual and collective levels. Asian Indian students' actions of respecting the teacher, getting good grades, and obeying classroom rules produce and reproduce their identities on an individual level. Simultaneously, Asian Indian students' motivations to learn or not to learn and their attitudes towards their teachers produce collective emotions that also play an important role in their identity construction. Individuals are recipients of perceptions of people around them. Identities are constructed by how individuals perceive themselves and how others perceive them. An Asian Indian upbringing conditions children to internalize their parents' cultural capital and motivates them to convert their capital into a higher level of capital in school. Consequently, Asian Indian students feel motivated to earn good grades and high reputations in school and to be perceived by their teachers as good students. Their identity construction in school is mediated by their teachers' and their peers' perceptions of them. Simran, Trihita, Megha, Sanam and my other respondents expressed that they were motivated by their parents' success and earned the reputation of high-achievers by scoring high grades and winning their teachers' admiration. This process can be explained by transposability of agency; viewed as the ability to augment new resources in a new field. Simran utilized her agency and the resources of her family to take advantage of opportunities offered by the specialized high school in order to accomplish her goal. She won a presidential scholarship, an internship

to work with a renowned surgeon, and many other awards, all by using her agency. On the other hand, Maganjot's enactment of his agency to "fit-in" (in American popular culture) earned him a lower reputation in school and resulted in lower grades.

My high-achiever respondents were aware of their ethnicity and of the racial prejudice that exists in American society. Messages from their families regarding education, ethnicity, and racial prejudice guided them in their educational pursuits. Asian Indian parents pressure their children to practice their ethnic culture at home, and in school to abide by the norms of the dominant culture. They teach their children to ignore prejudice because they believe "it is a fact of life." Many of my parent respondents said that they tell their children that they can overcome prejudice in American society if they attain higher education. The idea that education is a tool to escape racial discrimination is not a new concept. In a similar fashion the earliest African Americans also perceived education as an asset for emancipation and to overcome discrimination.

An important message many parents relayed to their children was that in American society one can gain power and economic success through education. Second-generation youth are told by their parents that they should take advantage of the education system of American society and take the path to upward mobility. Of course, there are many Asian Indian students who reject their families' meritocratic values and move in the opposite direction. Most of my respondents, however, affirmed their families' additive message of school performance. Professional parents conveyed to their children that they enjoy middle-class status in American society because of their education, and higher education will enable them to maintain or upgrade their lifestyles;

less educated parents told their children that they can move up in the mainstream society with education.

Many of my middle school respondents said that they did not learn much in the classroom because they learned the content at home, or because the curriculum was easy. This is a contradiction because learning in the family lessens the value of learning at school. Most of my Special Placement students earn good grades in math and science classes, listen to their teachers, demonstrate docile behavior, and construct their identities as model students. However, low-achieving Asian Indian students were ignored by their teachers. Ramjeet, Puja, and Rupa's stories exemplify teachers' tendencies to ignore Asian Indian children who face academic problems because of their low English language proficiency. Only the ESL teacher was concerned about their school performance; all other teachers expressed that they were unable to reach out to these students, and could not help Ramjeet, Puja, and Rupa.

## **Race and Class Factors That Mediate Model Minority Stereotyping**

The complex school experiences of Asian Indian students in my study are mediated by race and class factors. Socioeconomic and sociocultural dynamics consciously and unconsciously shape the model minority discourse and habitus of Asian Indian students. The concept of habitus helps us to understand Asian Indian students' positionality in the web of social realities. Asian Indian students conceptualize their dispositions toward learning, knowing, and social relationships by internalizing their habitus which is shaped by their history, socioeconomic status, and racial identities in

mainstream society. Asian Indian students' negotiation of their marginalized position in school, their social relationships, and their academic performance is guided by their habitus. Habitus embodies culture that is mediated by race and class. Simultaneously, individuals embody their habitus as they negotiate their position, their predetermined roles, and expectations. One's habitus enables him/her to make sense of the world and make career choices. The ways positively stereotyped Asian Indian students view school, academic achievement, learning, career choices, and social interactions are shaped by their habitus. For example, my middle-class participants' college and career choices are guided by their families' social and economic status. In order to have a secure career and maintain their model minority status, these middle-class students plan to attend elite colleges and become professionals. Their families' practical inspirations and resources enable them to achieve academic success in school. My respondents of working-class families demonstrate various forms of resistance and rejection of school's White middle class norms. Because their habitus does not provide them with the tools to negotiate the White meritocratic norms of school these students often express their frustration in abrasive classroom behavior. To explain students' resistance and their marginalized position I draw upon the work of Joe Kincheloe (2001). Kincheloe argues that schools and their mainstream education norms reward those students "who are already successful and whose culture most accurately reflects the mainstream," while most lower-economic class and racially marginalized students are neglected by schools. My research revealed that schools rewarded and positively stereotyped those Asian Indian students who met the White meritocratic norms, and penalized those Asian Indian students who were unable to conform to the academic standards of school and did not fit the model minority image.

Model minority norms and standards are set according to White socioeconomic and meritocratic norms. The economically successful Asian Indians perpetuate the privileged White middle-class cultural norms. Consequently, often Asian Indian students of middle-class family internalize the White norms and values of their habitus and successfully negotiate their model minority image. The Asian Indian youth in my study attend urban schools with racially and economically diverse populations. Although Mango Grove middle school has the reputation of a good school, many Asian Indian students are failing because the school's cultural and academic norms favor those who adapt to White Middle-class norms. Since schools are structured to serve the White middle-class, the school experiences of working-class students become complicated. My respondents of working-class Asian Indian families struggle to negotiated model minority norms and their racially marginalized status in school. Unlike their counterparts from the middle-class, their habitus does not provide them with resources to be successful in school.

The school experiences of Asian Indian students as a model minority can be understood in the context of the way race intersects with class and in the way each relates to the another. The hegemonic nature of model minority discourse can be studied by examining the intersection of class and race. The way Asian Indians understand and experience their model minority status and their marginalized position is contingent with the intersection of their race and class status. Their ascribed and achieved model minority status denotes both subordination and privilege. By gaining economic success in the mainstream society they have economic privileges, but as a model minority they have a subordinate position. Racial and class dynamics shape the school experiences of all Asian

Indian students, and their school experiences can be viewed in the interrelation of race and class.

The model minority discourse is a racial divide. The positive stereotyping of Asian Indians as model minority implies that they are better than African Americans and many other minorities. The model minority rhetoric designates Asian Americans as a better population than African Americans and considers Asians as honorary Whites (Tuan, 1998). I point out that this designation of honorary white creates tension and increases complexities of school experiences. Racial categories are socially constructed and are driven by economic status and stabilities. Although Asian Indians are not categorized as White or Black and because they are perpetuated as honorary White they prefer to identify with “Whiteness” and prefer to associate with Whites. My respondents and their parents revealed their preference for White norms. For them American culture meant White culture and they viewed whiteness superior to blackness. In my research study Asian Indian youth and their parents preferred schools with higher percentage of White population. The middle-class Asian Indian students and their parents prefer White norms because whiteness has higher status in mainstream society. I noticed that the class factor played an important role in racial identification and racial representation of Asian Indian students. My high achieving Asian Indian participants of middle-class social status tried to be Americanized in good way and maintain and reproduce their positively stereotyped image. The fact that Asian Indians have achieved the model minority status because of their economic success and higher education and have gained the status of honorary White signifies the mediation of class and race in their positive stereotyping.

## Implications

### Implications for Policymakers

I point out contradictions that emerge under the model minority and are ignored by the policymakers based on two assumptions: First, Asian Indians are a model minority and therefore do not need assistance; second, Asian Indians do not ask for services they need and remain quiet about their problems. The stories of success should not create the illusion for policymakers that all Asian Indian students are math and science nerds and are excellent students. The results of this study indicate that in urban schools many Asian Indian students are struggling with language barriers and are not provided with adequate assistance. Although the number of Asian Indians with low English language proficiency is very small compared to the Hispanic population, there are students who are failing because they need help in learning English. There is no bilingual education for Asian Indian students at Mango Grove School or in the Lotus Valley School District. The argument is that the ESL program can serve Asian Indian children experiencing a language barrier. The ESL teacher expressed that students like Ramjeet and Rupa would benefit more from a bilingual program. At schools like Mango Grove Middle School, students are expected to meet the meritocratic norms of the dominant culture, but students who struggle to meet meritocratic standards are ignored and the policymakers overlook their needs and associate their failure with lack of effort or lack of motivation. The ideology of meritocracy expects individuals to rise above their social position by working hard and achieve knowledge and special skills. In a meritocratic system individuals are

solely promoted and hired on the basis of their educational level and specialized skills. Meritocratic ideology rewards individuals according to their abilities and educational achievements. In schools meritocratic values reward competence and achievements, and rank students according to their grades. Meritocratic norms of school motivate students to work hard and achieve at their highest level.

The Eurocentric urban curriculum is geared to maintain hegemony and contribute to the isolation of ethnic minorities in social and political arenas of the mainstream society. The urban curricula promote only dominant cultural values and are means to control the minority population through education. The curricula of urban schools need to be more democratic and sensitive to ethnic minority cultural values. Presumably, the dominant curricula add to the marginalization of minority students. In schools like Mango Grove with a 53 percent Asian Indian population, there is a need to incorporate ethnic studies. One of my middle school respondents pointed out that it would be nice to study about India in school. She suggested that Indian studies should be introduced as an elective because the incorporation of such a course in school would promote better cultural understanding between non-Asian Indian and Asian Indian students. Curriculum designers and policymakers need to consider that the increasing Asian Indian population demands a rethinking of education policies and urban school curricula. The incorporation of ethnic studies would expand Asian Students' energy in the structure of school.

### **Implications for Schools**

A school like Mango Grove that has a high concentration of Asian Indian students neglect to offer their students a forum to express their ethnicity and construct a positive ethnic identity. My middle school respondents expressed that school was a place to hide their ethnic identity because school did not acknowledge their ethnic heritage. School is not providing them a structure enabling them to be engaged in their cultural practice. Cultural practices refer to utilizing existing cultural symbols to accomplish goals. Cultural practices are attached to symbols that have particular meanings, and the meanings of symbols are specified by progression of practices. For Asian Indian students, Indian outfits, Indian arts and Indian holidays are symbols of their culture, and these symbols have special meaning. Because they cannot locate these symbols in the structure of school, their agency is impeded by school.

The idea of triple quandary is able to capture and explain the Asian Indian students' complex experiences in school. The idea of triple quandary denotes that the minority children simultaneously negotiate in three domains: mainstream White culture, ethnic culture, and minority culture. Boykin (1986) examined the social and psychological positioning of African American students in the mainstream society and their navigation of three cultures. Similarly, I find that Asian Indian students are negotiating a triple quandary. Like Boykin's African American youth, Asian Indian students use their agency in three different cultures. They are centered within mainstream culture, their minority culture (status), and their ethnic culture. The latter is overshadowed by mainstream and minority culture, but the students use their agency to

balance the resources of the three fields to succeed in each field. Boykin pointed out that African American students' schooling was mediated by clash between their ethnic cultural values and belief and Euro- American culture values and belief. According to Boykin school experiences, motivation, and achievement are influenced by compatibility or incompatibility of ethnic and minority culture with mainstream culture. Often conflicts and contradictions arise when students cannot simultaneously negotiate the three cultures. I noticed that while a majority of Asian Indian students tried to maintain their positively stereotyped image, they suppressed their ethnicity in school. Most of my middle school respondents said teachers do not respect their ethnic culture. These students seem to live a double life, living by white norms in school and living their ethnic life at home. The dichotomy between ethnic life at home and alien school life is counterproductive for many newly arrived second-generation Asian Indian students. They start by distancing themselves from their own ethnicity and cultural heritage because they see that their ethnicity is not valued in the mainstream society, and they try to identify with other ethnic groups. In the process of shifting identity they often become "misfits" in their own ethnic culture, and frequently they adopt oppositional behavior. If schools were to provide opportunities for Asian Indian students to cultivate their ethnic identities, a smoother school experience might be the result. The irony is that Asian Indian students are praised in school for their cultural traits such as respect for the teacher, docile behavior, and respect for education, but their ethnicity is frequently marginalized and subjugated. My specialized high school respondents expressed that their high school experiences were better than their previous school experiences, because in high school

they had an ethnic forum to express their ethnicity. They felt that the school valued their ethnic culture.

The principal of Mango Grove acknowledged the cultural conflict and cultural misunderstanding among minority students and dominant White teachers. The school principal said that many discipline and behavior problems arise because of cultural misunderstandings between teachers and students. My assumption is that the school can reduce the number of these incidents by arranging multicultural educational activities in school. By educating teachers about Asian Indian culture, Indian history and the contributions of India to western society, and encouraging them to value Indian knowledge (that is subjugated in the mainstream society), schools can promote cultural understanding. In order to understand students' success and failure in school it is vital for teachers to recognize and honor differences. Simultaneously, they should try to value students' ethnic culture, and critically analyze why they succeed or fail in school. I assert that the dominant middle class are not familiar with Asian Indian culture, and a majority of teachers, school officials who belong to the dominant class are reluctant to learn about the culture of their students because minority culture is viewed by the dominant class as inferior culture and their knowledge is considered subjugated. My high school respondents said that in comparison, high school teachers were more interested in Indian culture than their elementary and middle school teachers.

Many of the Asian Indian parent respondents (mostly newer immigrants) expressed that they were intimidated by schools and felt that the school did not welcome them. On the other hand, many teachers and administrators complained that Asian Indian parents were not interested in everyday school affairs and stayed away from school.

School should address the issue of parental involvement in school and consider the question of why Asian Indian parents do not get involved in school activities, asking what role the school should assume to improve relationships with their Asian Indian parents. In addition, what strategies can school apply to involve Asian Indian parents in everyday normal school life and activities, so that they are not threatened by school and feel comfortable to discuss their children's schooling with school authorities?

In the school system that I studied, the percentage of Asian Indian teachers is very low. The presence of more Asian Indian teachers in schools might be helpful in instilling a positive identity among Asian Indian students and in improving relations among Asian Indian parents and school administration. At Mango Grove school there are only two Asian Indian teachers. My conversation with them revealed that Asian Indian parents felt comfortable discussing their children's educational issues with them. Many Asian Indian parents (recent immigrants with a language barrier) preferred to talk to the teachers in Hindi on Parent-Teacher Conference days. Asian Indian parents felt comfortable with Asian Indian teachers because they possessed comparable cultural and social capital. Individuals with similar habitus share comparable values, dispositions, and cultural practices. In order to increase Asian Indian parents' minimal involvement in school and improve their distant relationship with school personnel, it is important that schools employ more Asian Indian teachers in school. Hiring of more Asian Indian teachers might be effective in filling the existing cultural-gap and cultural-conflict among teachers, students and parents. Asian Indian teachers might be able to understand the life world of Asian Indian students and their parents and may provide a structure in which Asian Indian students as well as their parents may access resources successfully.

Multicultural education and multicultural teacher preparation programs are needed to minimize cultural conflict and cultural misunderstandings. Multicultural teacher preparation programs can enable mainstream teachers to understand the lifeworlds of their culturally different students. Simultaneously, a multicultural discourse enables teachers to look beyond the stereotyped images of their students to recognize and respect diversity. Multicultural pedagogical practices empower teachers to be reflective, evaluate their teaching practices, address contradictions, and to be more sensitive to needs of their students and their parents. There is a need for teacher preparation programs that prepare teachers to deconstruct the dominant hegemonic powers and stereotyped assumptions of race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality, and instead value marginalized experiences.

Cultural-conflict appears when students, teachers, and parents cannot align, adapt, and step into each others' culture. In other words when a significant cultural-gap or cultural difference exists between teachers' and students' culture cultural conflict is inevitable.

Non-Indian teachers are unfamiliar with Asian Indian culture and often misinterpret cultural symbols, characteristics, and dispositions of their Asian Indian students and their parents. Often culturally different students and their parents are unable to establish a link with school. Many of my respondent parents (specifically new-comers) expressed that it would be better for them and their children if there were more Asian Indian teachers at Mango Grove School. They expressed that it might be easier for them to communicate with Asian Indian teachers because they would understand them better. The Asian Indian parents implied that in the absence of cultural difference it would be easier for them to

reach-out to teachers. In a given condition where teachers, students and parents share cultural understanding chances of cultural adaptivity increases.

The White middle class teachers at the Mango Grove School are racially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically different from Asian Indian students and a majority of them find it difficult to recognize and understand their students' lifeworld who are different from themselves. Simultaneously, they have difficulty approaching their students' parents. For example, Rupa's, teacher complained that she does not know how to approach Rupa's parent because they are not fluent in English and are different than the majority of other parents. On the contrary, Rupa's mother said that she is not familiar with "American ways" and she can not talk to the teacher or the principal of the school about her daughter's academic problems. This teacher was unable to establish communication with Rupa's parent because of the cultural gap. Although there are many answers to reduce cultural gap, cultural conflicts, and cultural adaptivity I suggest that hiring more teachers of Asian Indian origin might be one of the answers.

Teachers at Mango Grove Middle School assume that all Asian Indian students are good students and are high achievers. They are unaware of the contradictions that appear due to academic and social stress, peer envy, cultural differences, and the academic and social needs of Indian students in school settings. Simultaneously, many teachers are not sensitive to the needs of Asian Indian students. They stereotype Asian Indian students as high achievers and are ignorant of those students who do not meet the model minority standards. I assert that if teachers understand the lifeworlds of Asian Indian students and become sensitive to their cultural characteristics, they might be able to eliminate many unpleasant experiences for Asian Indian students. Teachers might evaluate their own

teaching practices and examine the cultural misunderstandings that cause problems and conflicts for many Asian Indian students. When teachers and students are from different cultural, ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds their cultural practices are not aligned, and because of cultural-conflict teachers and students asynchronous conditions appear in the classroom. Learning is a sociocultural activity and requires the mutual adaptation of cultural practices between students and teachers.

At Mango Grove School and at the specialized high school, students are taught by teachers who are ethnically and culturally different than Asian Indian students. Cultural misunderstandings occur because of the differences in cultural capital and cultural practices, and most of the time each fails to adapt to the other's cultural practices and cultural capital. In the absence of mutual cultural understanding, a meaningful learning environment does not exist. Teachers should consider that for enactment of learning practices, they need to create resonant conditions for their students, and to relate to the cultural practices of their culturally "other" students. In the absence of mutual cultural exchange, minority students experience marginalization and exclusion. Teaching practices that are not adaptive to minority students' cultural and social capital impede students' agency in the different structures of classroom field. Teachers need to structure an environment in which students create resources and learn as much as possible.

Asian Indian parents teach their children to respect their teachers because they are the students' "Gurus." Sanam, Vineet, Anil, and many other respondents expressed that this is the reason why they respect their teachers. However, in many cases the concept of "Guru" failed because Asian Indian students did not feel the respect of their teachers in return, and in the absence of mutual respect, students could not respect their teachers.

Teachers need to adapt to the cultural capital of their students and students also need to adapt to the cultural capital of their teachers. Without this exchange of cultural capital, for many ethnically-other students, the learning environment becomes “dysfunctional”. The data of my study revealed that many low-performing Asian Indian students experience learning difficulties in the classroom because of cultural differences between them and their teachers. Although most teachers praised high-achieving Asian Indian students, they had little respect or sympathy for low-performing or failing Asian Indian students. As a result these students perceived their teachers as unsympathetic to their needs and they misbehaved in the classroom. Teachers can earn their students’ respect by respecting them, by listening to them, and expressing their concerns about the articulated needs of their students. Many low-achieving Asian Indian students expressed that their teachers did not care for them. At Mango Grove Middle School the ESL teacher respected her students, and she was successful in creating a social network with her low-performing Asian Indian students. Consequently, a few Asian Indian students, who were labeled by other teachers as disruptive, demonstrated exemplary behavior in the ESL classroom. I noticed that many of my high-achieving respondents were able to step into their teachers’ cultural fields and created positive relationships with their teachers and positive experiences in the classroom and in school. The irony is that although most high-achieving Asian Indian middle school students complained that they did not learn much in their math or science classes, their teachers took credit for their high grades, their success on standardized tests and their subsequent admission to specialized high schools.

### **Implications for Asian Indian Students**

Model minority discourse characterizes Asian Indian students as high achievers and exemplary students. However, despite their better school performance and academic high achievements, Asian Indian students remain marginal in the dominant culture of schools. Asian Indian students tend to follow their parents' advice and limit themselves to safe and secure career choices. Thus, in the mainstream society they marginalize themselves. Asian Indian students are not represented in nonacademic fields and confine themselves to traditional Asian fields. Asian Indian students should diversify their career choices and not marginalize themselves as “math and science nerds” and “computer whizzes.”

My high-achieving Asian students support the model minority stereotype and believe that in general Asian Indian students are good students. Most of these model minority students are unaware of the fact that not all Asian Indian are good students. Although a few Asian students acknowledged that some Asian Indian students were having academic and behavior difficulties, they expressed that Asian students who try to be Americanized and try to “fit-in” often experience academic problems. Often they try to stay away from these students who are “Americanized in a bad way.” Sangeeta expressed that in her specialized high school only a few Indian students were part of the “Gothic Club,” and most of the good Asian Indian students had minimum contact with these Asian Indian students. Sangeeta explained that students who could not “fit in” in any of the academic and challenging clubs became members of the Gothic club. In general most of the Asian Indian students in her high school avoided members of the

Gothic Club because these students “act weird,” try to be somebody who they are not, and had poor academic records.” Sangeeta implied that those Asian Indian students did not follow the norms of appropriate social behavior and were not respected by most of the high-achieving Asian Indian youth at her school. Many Asian Indian students who are low-achievers or identify themselves with youth of other races or ethnicities are not accepted by high-achieving Asian Indian students. I suggest that that the high-achieving model minority Asian Indian students should try to understand the problems and conflicts of low-achieving Asian Indian students and their oppositional behavior, and maintain solidarity within the Asian Indian student community of their school.

In general the model minority Asian Indian students constantly demonstrate behavior that is appropriate for “model minority Indian children” and often suppress their desire to confront their teachers or peers, thus negotiating conflicts with silence. An implication to consider is that Asian Indian students learn to assert themselves and resist the hegemonic model minority discourse. In this context, my study brings awareness to Asian students of the conflicts and contradictions of school experiences, possibly enabling them to cope with the complexities of these experiences and helping them to understand that they need to seek assistance from their parents, teachers, and school administrators in dealing with problems and concerns related to their schooling.

### **Implications for Indian Parents**

Although most Asian Indian parents are very involved in their children’s schooling, scholastic performance, and planning of their children’s future academic paths, they are not a visible presence in the school—they don’t get involved.

Consequently they have little voice in the schools' Parent-Teacher Associations. Very often parents are not aware of local school politics or resources and services that are available to their children. They do not demand services for their children, and their children's educational performance suffers because of their submissiveness. Often, Indian parents are not aggressive and a common outcome is that Indian students often do not raise their voices against racial prejudice, and instead bear it silently. Asian Indian parents' tendency to stay away from school does not serve their children well, and adds complexities to their school experience. Students like Raj, Sanam, Rupa, and many others like them feel insecure in school; with increased parental involvement in school affairs their school experiences might be smoother. In the context of schooling of Asian Indian children, the relative lack of parental involvement in school is a marker of the school's reluctance to accept immigrant parents and encourage them to express their perspectives. My study provides parents with insights into the school experiences of their children. Awareness of their children's complex educational experiences at school may motivate parents to become more involved in school, become familiar with the school culture, and create a better rapport with schools in order to ensure the well-being of their children.

### **Implications for the Asian Indian Community**

Without exception, participants in the Asian Indian community celebrate the success stories of the second-generation Asian Indian youths. Most participants in the Asian community are not aware of the contradiction and complexities of the school experiences of Asian Indian youth. Unfortunately, school failures, complex school experiences, and racial prejudices are obscured by success stories, because Asian Indian

parents tend to be silent about negative experiences. The Asian Indian community needs to be aware of the complexity of schooling experiences of the second-generation and 1.5 (children who migrated with their parents) Asian Indian students, because these youth “hold the key” to the social, economic, and political future of the Asian Indian community in the United States.

The study provides the Indian community with insights into the complexities of school performance and enables it to assist schools in developing better outreach programs to educate Asian Indian parents about American education, thus helping them to improve relationships with their children’s schools. At the same time, the Indian community will be able to organize community-based programs for parents and children to teach them essential skills to communicate with schools.

### **Possibilities for Future Research**

In this section I discuss the future research possibilities in the area of positive stereotyping of Asian Indian students and their school experiences. Most of my respondents experienced the negative effects of positive stereotyping in different forms. Many issues related to the school experiences of second-generation Asian Indian students are beyond the scope of this study. In the context of schooling of Asian Indian students, issues of gender/sexuality, race, achievement and social class could be central investigations. Race, gender, and social class are vital elements of one’s identity construction, and they mediate school experiences of Asian Indian students. Although my

respondents did not confront racism and prejudice, they used individual and collective strategies to deal with race issues.

### **Gender, Sexuality and Race**

While I addressed the complexities of school experiences and the negotiation of positive stereotyping in this research, I did not address the issues of gender roles and sexuality within the framework of the model minority discourse. None of my female respondents mentioned that their parents wanted them to opt for semiprofessional careers because of their gender. Although in traditional Asian Indian homes women have subordinate positions, surprisingly Asian Indian parents in this study recommended equal career choices to their sons and daughters. A question that arises is how schools perceived Asian Indian girls. Did the girls experience gender bias in math, science, and technology classes? Trihita said that a few of her high school teachers always teased Asian Indian girls about arranged marriages and asked if they would agree to one, or if they were going to get married after completing high school.

All of my high-achieving middle school female respondents expressed that their close friends were girls. They told me that they did not want to develop close friendships with boys because it would go against their parents' wishes. My female specialized high school students did not touch the issue of friendship or involvement with boys. On one occasion Rehana and Trihita mentioned that their parents would not approve of their involvement with non-Indian boys. Simran, Megha (female) and Alok (male) said that their parents were open about their friendships with non-Indians and would not mind

their friendships with Asians or whites, but they would not like them to be involved with African Americans. The question arises, how do ethnic identity and racial considerations mediate Asian Indian students' intimate social experiences?

This study showed how Asian Indian students negotiated the race issue in school, but the study did not explore how students of other races perceived Asian Indian students, or how their perceptions of Asian Indians structured race relations in high school.

Although the data in this study suggest that Asian Indian students are aware of racism and race relations in elementary and middle school, high school students have more to say about race issues. I believe it is important to explore how contradictions mediate race relations, and how high school Asian Indian students deal with race issues in school.

### **Achievement and the Social Class Issue**

Although in this research I have examined the relationship between academic achievements and class differences, further research is needed on how class differences mediate academic achievement. My ethnography suggests that Asian lower-class families are unfamiliar with the American education system but they have high aspirations for their children. Respondents from the middle and upper classes had higher career aspirations than those Asian Indian students who belong to the lower middle or working classes. Class factors play an important role in achievement variability within an ethnic minority community. Simran, Megha, Faiz, and Nisha are from middle-class families and their school performances and future plans are different than those of Rahman, Puja, and Ramjeet, who are from working-class Asian Indian families. Class distinction plays a

major role in shaping school performance and academic aspirations of Asian Indian students.

An examination of the experiences of Asian Indian students enrolled at inner-city urban schools and not fitting the model minority stereotype was beyond the scope of this dissertation. Not all Asian Indian students get into specialized high schools or have the opportunity to attend elite suburban schools. The school experiences of these Asian Indian students need to be studied.

## **Conclusion**

As the number of Asian Indian children increases in schools across the United States, it is vital for researchers, schools, and the Asian Indian Community to hear Asian Indian students' voices, examine their school experiences, and provide explanations for their academic and social difficulties. In general, Asian Indian children experience upward mobility despite their marginalized position in the mainstream society. However, repetition of success stories and the ascribed status of model minority serve merely to label and evaluate. This labeling is a way of controlling Asian Indians because it differentiates students on the basis of their school performance, their abilities, and their cultural capital. Model minority discourse is a process of labeling. Rather than understanding Asian Indian students' complex school experiences and their lifeworlds, the discourse objectifies them. The students are viewed as objects bringing prestige to school and teachers. Participants in this study who represented the model minority stereotype and who refuted the model minority stereotyped image voiced that they are

different than White, African American, and Latino students. They are aware of their “otherness” in the mainstream society and they expressed their otherness in their own ways. I conclude this dissertation with their words. Anil, the representative of the model minority, said:

*Indians are different. I do not like to behave like those students who give a hard time to their teachers in class. All teachers are not the same. My math teacher is more structured than the science teacher, but it does not mean that I act mean in science class. I like to be on the honor list and I focus on my studies. I like to do my work and get good grades. My teachers like me because I work hard and I do not give them a hard time. All my friends [Indians] study and do not waste our time. My parents tell me that Indians have to work harder than others....I agree with my parents. I believe if you work hard and become successful people will like you.*

Raj, who is a contradiction to the model minority, declared:

*I do not like to be bullied in school every day. My parents ask me to work hard and behave in school. They do not know that I have a hard time in school. I was beaten up everyday at school because I am an Indian [person]. I tried to be good in my classes, and I have an Indian name. If a*

*white or black student is beaten up in school it becomes a big thing [issue] but if an Indian boy is beaten up it is not taken seriously. I was punished for things I did not do. I do not like to be a scapegoat. My teachers do not understand why I do not behave like many other Indians. I guess they never try to understand. The only thing they like to do is to complain about me to my parents. My parents blame me for bad grades and my bad behavior.*

Rupa, a newcomer in middle school, expressed her desire to be a model minority student and said:

*I am new in this school. I want to get good grades but my English is not very good. My ESL teacher is very good to me. If I would have had more teachers like the ESL teacher it would be a lot easier for me. However, I am sure I will learn English and do a lot better in the future.*

My research highlights the complex school experiences of second-generation Asian Indian youths like Anil, Raj, and Rupa. Anil's learning practices are expanded by the structure of his home and school, Raj's agency deviated from the school norm, and Rupa is motivated to employ his agency to achieve higher academic success.

Asian Indian youths like Anil, Raj, and Rupa are the future of the Asian Indian community in the mainstream society. As the second-generation youth of my research

come of age, they negotiate different ways of “being American” and in doing so they will reshape the Asian Indian community. How Asian Indians will be viewed in future and whether they will be able to hold onto their ascribed model minority image depends how the second-generation use their agency to meet the academic, social, and political challenges of the mainstream society. Their academic and economic success is very much mediated by how they use their agency in different fields, and how well they access resources of a particular field with existing resources. The second-generation decline theory proposes that children of minority immigrants tend to experience relative downward mobility because the second-generation youths distance themselves from their ethnic culture, and in the process of “becoming American” they deviate from the path of success.

### **Reflection**

Three weeks ago Trihita surfaced on MSN messenger while I was writing chapter six of this dissertation (the data analysis) and she informed me that her younger sister who attends Mango Grove Middle School competed for and was accepted into the top Specialized High school. Trihita graduated from the same school. She was very excited about this news and she wanted to share it with me because I did my fieldwork in that school. About the same time I heard from Megha’s mom that her daughter had been accepted by Harvard, Yale and Brown. They have decided that Harvard would be best for Megha because her sister Simran is at Harvard and it will be better for both sisters to be in the same college. My intention is not to catalogue the colleges or schools my respondents are moving toward, but I am very happy to hear that they are on a path that might enable them to fulfill their dreams. I am equally interested in my low-achieving

students' academic endeavors. I hope that they will be able to use their agency to negotiate the conflicts and problems of different fields and use their cultural capital to earn symbolic capital and create social capital in school. I hope these low-achieving youth can use their agency to meet the challenges of school and attain their goals for productive social life.

### **Final Thoughts**

While I was conducting this research I wondered about my insider status. My identity as an Asian Indian enabled me to understand the cultural perspectives, cultural values and dispositions of my respondents. I wondered how my respondents perceived me. Although I did not illuminate my ethnicity, neither did I try to hide it. During the course of the study I realized that my ethnicity and familiarity with Asian Indian culture created a comfort zone for many of my respondents. Ramjeet, Rupa, and Puja were able to relate to me because I could converse with them in Hindi. As an ethnographer I felt that respondents were aware of my insider status: they felt comfortable with me and perceived me as one of them. They would often ask me about my background, and wanted to know about my home life. While I was interviewing Sanam, he said "I want to know about you". Rehana, one of my high school respondents, told me "I wish my mom would go back to college and finish her study like you are doing." Rehana's statement made me wonder how she perceived me as an "example for her mom" or was she implying that all Indian women should achieve higher academic degree and try to maintain the model minority image in the mainstream society?

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