

# Negotiating assimilation, exoticism, and global Indian modernity : transnational subject-making of second generation Indians in Switzerland

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# NEGOTIATING ASSIMILATION, EXOTICISM, AND GLOBAL INDIAN MODERNITY: TRANSNATIONAL SUBJECT-MAKING OF SECOND GENERATION INDIANS IN SWITZERLAND

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## *Abstract*

Second generation Indians socialized in Switzerland are confronted with manifold cultural norms and modes of cultural belonging to Switzerland and India, which they do not easily conform to. This paper tries to explore how second generation Indians negotiate these—often contradictory—disciplinary cultural norms, create alternative subjectivities, and carve out biographic niches in their transnational environment. Engaging two case studies based on ethnographic, biographic and discursive data, it is argued that second generation Indians are gravitating between the dominant forces of assimilation, exoticism, and Indian modernity. These processes are highly dynamic and take place at the conjuncture of biographical logics, transnational experience, and discursive and institutional changes. Further, it is argued that the transnational practices of second generation Indians are embedded in the global logic of social exclusion, which connects ethnicity and class to the productivity of global capital. The paper, thus, accounts for the processes of construction, deconstruction, and re-construction of cultural norms and modes of belonging in the context of cultural globalization.

## Introduction

Sonia is a 33-year-old investment banker. She grew up in a patrilineal joint family in a middle class residential area of a metropolitan Indian city. When she was seven, her father was offered a job as an engineer by a Swiss multinational company and the family moved to Switzerland. After her primary and secondary education, Sonia received an MBA in accordance with the expectations of her parents and then started to work for an international bank. At university, she was dating a Swiss man she knew from high school, but after one year she broke up with him. At the same time, she intensified her contact with Rahul, the brother of a school friend from India, who belonged to the same community as her family. After two years of e-mailing and a three-year long-distance relationship, they

married in India. They now live in a condominium in Switzerland. Chatting about her job, she told me:

Far relatives of Rahul are in Dubai and they are very conservative. These are families in which only men work and women never had a job, and these people have enough money and they feel that when a woman has to work the couple is in financial trouble. Rahul's grandmother once told me, "you shouldn't work, really, we are well off, you don't have to work for us", so I told her that I am working for myself.

Sonia rejects the model of gender division put forward by her in-law's family as conservative and emphasizes the value of work for herself as an individual. Referring to an empowering gender discourse in high school, she is convinced that only by growing up in Switzerland has she been able to develop material and intellectual independence as a woman. She distinguishes herself from her female cousins in India, who despite having earned college degrees do not work, and she is proud to be able to look after herself. Despite her assertive critique of her conservative family abroad, however, when it comes to marriage, she appropriates norms she herself calls "traditional Indian—and not at all Swiss". Towards her Swiss peers, she justifies having married at the early age of 24 by arguing that she does not agree with the rather permissive love relationships in Switzerland. At the same time, wanting to alleviate the suspicion of an arranged marriage, signified in the Swiss discourse as a patriarchal practice, she assures hers having been a love marriage.

In her account Sonia perceives her transnational life as dominated by contradictory cultural norms of Swiss peers and her Indian family. On the one hand, concerning her professional career, she appropriated a gender norm which she considers as typically Swiss and which upset her extended Indian family abroad. On the other hand, she identifies with the endogamous marriage rule of her community, considered by her peers in Switzerland as conservative. Moving in transnational networks and orienting herself towards multiple cultural frames of reference, Sonia has incorporated perspectives and expectations on gender performance and professional careers which do neither conform to the dominant cultural norms of her peers in Switzerland nor to her transnational family's in India and Dubai. While for her peers and her family abroad Sonia's life is full of contradictions, abnormalities and confusions, Sonia continually makes sense of these contradictory norms and expectations, trying, as she calls it self-assuredly, "to take the best of both the worlds".



It is the aim of this paper to shed light onto the transnational subject-making of second generation Indians socialized in Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, I want to show how they are subjected to contradictory dominant cultural norms, modes of belonging and narratives of “Indianness” in Switzerland and India into which they do not easily fit.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, I want to highlight how second generation Indians negotiate these dominant narratives and norms and use them to develop alternative subjectivities. The paper thus accounts for the processes of construction, de-construction, and re-construction of cultural norms and modes of belonging in the face of the contemporary world of globalization.

### Theoretical Perspectives: Transnationalism, Subjectivities, and Power

Migration research in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was—and often still is—dominated by the framework of assimilation.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, it implicitly or explicitly answers the question of how migrants, over generations, are incorporated economically, socially and culturally into Western receiving societies. As Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller highlight,

- 1 “Second generation Indians” are defined as children of at least one Indian immigrant, who were socialized in Switzerland. As I am interested in the influence of biographical and historical change in the making of subjectivities, I focus on adults and late adolescents. This group is comprised of about 600–800 individuals. The notion of “second generation” is not used as an analytical but rather as a discursive term in Swiss public and political language. Terms such as “diasporic youth” are similarly used in the Indian context. Through these discourses on “second generation”, “diasporic youth” and the constitutive trope of “roots” a common experience is produced and negotiated among my informants.
- 2 “Indianness” in my understanding is not a fixed set of cultural characteristics or skills, but a symbolic resource used to organize social life. As the anthropologist Frederik BARTH puts it: “The ethnic boundary defines the group not the cultural stuff it encloses”, BARTH, 1996: 300. Narratives and cultural norms of “Indianness”, then, are inscribed in powerful discursive and institutional regimes and they mark the dominant ethnic boundaries, which second generation Indians have to negotiate in order to make sense of themselves.
- 3 Assimilation theory was introduced by the pioneers of the Chicago School at the beginning of the 20th century. For the consolidated version in the discussion of “new immigration” after World War II, see GORDON, 1964; ESSER, 1980.



the preoccupation of postwar migration studies was to measure and to scrutinize the cultural differences between immigrants and nationals and to describe pathways into the national group, in short, to deliver a description of the mechanics of a successful nation-making process".<sup>4</sup>

In a fundamental way assimilation theory thus corresponded to a social ontology, which equated society, with nation, territory and culture. Individuals as social beings were, thus, "rooted" in, and subsumed to, the collective entity of the national society.<sup>5</sup>

This approach to belonging and cultural norms, though, would not be very helpful in understanding Sonia's transnational aspirations and the entangled cultural frames of reference she negotiates day by day. In line with the growing scholarship on transnationalism, I argue that second generation Indians grown up in Switzerland construct their subjectivities, and imagine themselves and the social groups, which they belong to, within transnational social fields, using resources and discursive elements from multiple settings.<sup>6</sup> As they do not entirely conform to dominant cultural norms neither in Switzerland nor in India, they transcend a common-sensical essentialism of belonging which is epitomized in the question "Where are you from?" Therefore, they are fundamentally exposed to a transnational space of imagination, performance and opportunity. While some might engage in transnational practices like going on holiday to, working or even living in India (or other diasporic places), others engage in rather emotional and imaginative patterns of transnationalism. In the ontological narrative of "roots", family histories and imaginations of the ancestral place become irreducible points of reference:

in the process of the learning more about their family histories and ancestral homes, [they] incorporate elements of these narratives and experiences into their own self-concepts.<sup>7</sup>

The salience and way of transnational engagement is a highly dynamic process, reflecting individual life-plans, social expectations, pragmatic opportunities as well as changes in discourses and institutions.

4 WIMMER / GLICK SCHILLER, 2002: 310.

5 MALKKI, 2007.

6 LEVITT / WATERS, 2002b: 9.

7 LEVITT / WATERS, 2002b: 22.

The extent to which the ‘second generation’ takes advantage of these resources changes over the life-course. Some social relations and skill sets remain latent. Others are activated when someone faces a particular occupational or social challenge.<sup>8</sup>

To analyze these transnational processes of subject-making, a genealogical approach seems to be useful. According to Michel Foucault a genealogical analysis “accounts for the constitution of the subject in a historical framework”.<sup>9</sup> He suggested that subjectivities are specific modes of experience and practice which are produced in historical fields of knowledge and power. A genealogical point of view then allows for a conceptualization of the fragmented nature of subjects, as they are embedded in manifold social fields of power and knowledge. As Stuart Hall argues,

[subjectivities] are never unified and increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, “because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’” there is a feeling of a unifying self.<sup>11</sup> As I tried to show with the case of Sonia at the beginning of the paper, second generation Indians are not able to easily appropriate dominant narratives of the selves neither in India nor in Switzerland. But, as Homi Bhabha proposed as a trope for the diasporic condition, they are inevitably exposed to a “third space, which enables new positions to emerge”.<sup>12</sup> Steadily negotiating and translating manifold and often contradictory cultural norms, they try to make sense of themselves. That is to say, they create alternative and meaningful “narratives of the self”. Departing from a genealogical point of view, Aihwa Ong has highlighted that these diasporic processes of subject-making are by no means voluntary but embedded in entanglement of national and transnational configurations of power.

Indeed, even under conditions of transnationality, political rationality and cultural mechanisms continue to deploy, discipline, regulate, or civilize subjects in place or on the move. Although increasingly able to escape localization by

8 LEVITT, 2009: 1226.

9 FOUCAULT, 1986: 208.

10 HALL, 1996: 4.

11 HALL, 1992: 277.

12 RUTHERFORD, 1990: 211.



state authorities, [transnational] subjects are never free of regulations set by state power, market options, or kinship norms.<sup>13</sup>

Understanding the subject-making of second generation Indians then means that one must trace the effective norms and modes of belonging in the manifold geographical, historical and social fields of power which shape their transnational lives. At the same time, one has to explore how second generation Indians internalize, appropriate, and reject these manifold dominant interpellations and find ways to create new narratives of the selves. How do, then, dominant cultural norms in Switzerland and India shape the subjectivities of second generation Indians? Which are the discursive and institutional sites of the production and negotiation of these subjectivities, of “Indianness” and cultural belonging? And which alternative narratives of the selves emerge in these processes?

In the case studies presented below based on multi-sited ethnographic<sup>14</sup>, biographic<sup>15</sup>, and discursive<sup>16</sup> material, I argue that second generation Indians are embedded in three regimes of subjectification, produced by the powerful institutions of state, popular culture, capitalism, and family: (1) In the *assimilation* regime of the 1970s and 1980s in Switzerland, ethnic self representation was publicly sanctioned and therefore for second generation Indians “Indianness” was projected onto the family and community organizations. (2) From the 1990s onwards, an increasing multicultural consumerism and an India boom re-evaluated ethnicity as exotic commodity. This regime of *exoticism* then allowed for manifold ways of public recognition and self-representation of “Indianness”. (3) At the same time, in liberalizing India since the 1990s within a regime of “global Indian modernity”, produced amongst others by the state diaspora policy and Bollywood cinema, Indians abroad are re-imagined as national subjects and new legitimate ways of transnational cultural belonging are produced.

As I want to show in the following chapters, second generation Indians, socialized in Switzerland, are subjected to these regimes of assimilation, exoticism, and global Indian modernity. Therefore, they reflect the cultural changes taking place in the contemporary processes of globalization, while also carving biographical niches into their transnational environment.

13 ONG, 1999: 19f.

14 MARCUS, 1995.

15 ROSENTHAL, 1995.

16 JÄGER, 2004.



## History and Social Constitution of the Indian Diaspora in Switzerland

Following India's independence in 1947, the Indian migration to Switzerland has been a small branch of the brain drain, which led millions of middle class Indian professionals and students to the USA, Canada, Europe and Australia.<sup>17</sup> In Switzerland, Indians were mainly recruited as engineers by Swiss multinational companies like ABB, Ciba-Geigy or Ascom, they visited the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich or the one in Lausanne, served in the international organizations in Geneva, or were employed by Indian companies establishing branches in Switzerland. Mostly male students and professionals from lower to upper middle class families came to Switzerland pursuing a transnational strategy of social mobility. Often, they went back to India to marry, and then returned with their wives to Switzerland. Some male students, however, were married to Swiss women, which explains the considerable amount of bi-national couples. From the beginning, the Indian community in Switzerland was quite small, ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous and geographically scattered. From the 1950s onward, Pan-Indian Cultural Associations were founded in different Swiss cities in order to celebrate cultural and religious events, socialize, and provide social support. Simultaneously, informal regional networks were maintained. In 1980, the Federal Office for Statistics counted 2,229 Indians living in Switzerland, and in 1990, 5,770. In the last ten years, the migration of students and highly skilled Indian professionals in IT, finance or engineering has increased, and now around 15,000 people of Indian origin are living in Switzerland.

The social and cultural mapping of second generation Indians reveals a diverse picture. While some were born in Switzerland, others migrated to Switzerland as children, while still others were the offspring of bi-national couples. Furthermore, their class background varies from lower middle class to upper middle class, they live in urban and rural environments, and hail from different linguistic, ethnic and religious communities in India. While some have a good command of their parents' native language, and sometimes of English, others grew up speaking German, French, or Italian. In their childhood, most second generation Indians were in contact with the Indian community through the informal networks of their parents, or when attending events hosted by the Indian associations. Since the community was quite small, scattered and regionally diverse, the networks were loose, and typically get-togethers took

17 For a general overview on the history of Indian diasporas, see BROWN, 2006.

place on weekends. From adolescence onwards, second generation Indians mingled mainly with peers in their neighborhoods, or at school. Thus, there is only a very loose and selective network of second generation Indians, which explains why the negotiation of “Indianness” and cultural belonging was a very individual endeavor for most of them.<sup>18</sup> This historical and social background sets the stage for the following chapters in which I present two case studies illustrating the processes of negotiating assimilation, exoticism, and global Indian modernity by second generation Indians growing up in Switzerland.

### Maya: Oscillating Between the Assimilated and the Exotic Other

In the 1970s and 1980s in Switzerland, when most of my informants were growing up, migration was framed in political, social scientific, and demotic discourses by the prevalence of ethnic difference and therefore as a problem of assimilation.<sup>19</sup> As was stated in a Swiss government commission report in 1964, the foreigner’s “thinking and feeling in a Swiss way” was a necessary condition for naturalization and, therefore, the settling of the “foreigner issue”.<sup>20</sup> In order to secure a culturally hegemonic Swiss nation, naturalization was complicated by a long bureaucratic procedure of disciplinary practices. As Aftab, a 44-year-old business consultant remembers, during the two-year-long procedure of naturalization government officers asked their neighbors, whether his family was clean and polite, they had to prove their language skills and their knowledge of Swiss history and politics, and Aftab himself was observed at the school yard. Looking back he says “during these two years, we were confronted with great vehemence with our being foreigners”.

For the purposes of governing the foreign population, the “second generation” was construed as a new subject of state assimilation policy.<sup>21</sup> Especially

18 The situation in Switzerland might be comparable to the experience of the early second generation of the post-1965 South Asian immigrants to the USA. Later in the USA, as the South Asian population grew, there were considerable diasporic public spaces and second generation networks; see BACON, 1996; MAIRA, 2002; SHANKAR, 2008.

19 For a history of assimilationism in the case of Switzerland, see WIMMER, 2002; WICKER, 2003; NIEDERBERGER, 2004.

20 NIEDERBERGER, 2004: 57.

21 KARAKAYALI describes for the USA and Canada how assimilation theory constituted the “second generation” as a specific “problem group” in accordance with the state project of nation-making: As early as 1894 the American statistician Richmond Mayo-Smith wrote



school was seen as the main institution of assimilation, intent on making the second generation Swiss, in order to solve the “foreigner’s issue” in the long run. In contrast to the school, the migrant family was framed as an ethnic, foreign—and one might add non-modern—realm, which obstructed the assimilationist passage.<sup>22</sup> As 36-year-old Pooja remembers, in her primary school the parents of all children with a migrant background were summoned to the principal and told to stop speaking their native language at home. Instead, they were told to speak Swiss German as, otherwise, it was assured, their children would not perform well at school.

But even if the assimilation regime was rooted in the modern project of building the nation state, it gained its hegemonic power rather through diffusion and in popular culture and everyday life. As Ong argues,

hegemonic ideas about belonging and not-belonging in racial and cultural terms often converge in state and non-state institutional practices through which subjects are shaped in ways that are at once specific and diffused.<sup>23</sup>

How much the migrant—and especially the “Oriental”—family was looked at with ethnocentric and assimilationist anxiety is suggested, for example, by the huge success in Switzerland of Betty Mahmoody’s book *Not Without My Daughter* (1988). Despite the manifest will to control the assimilation of the second generation, the family realm—out of full reach of the state—was a black box, imagined by state and public with horrified fascination.

Maya, a 33-year old Yoga-teacher, was raised in a largely Swiss middle class neighborhood. Her biographical account of her early childhood strongly reflects the subtle power of the “ethnic family narrative” prevalent in the assimilation regime.

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that “the second generation immigrants [...] stand half-way between the native and the foreign element [...]. They represent the process of assimilation in the act”. And also more than forty years later the historian Marcus Lee Hansen writes in his his classical essay, “The Problem of the Third Generation” (1938), “how to inhabit two worlds at the same time [...] is the problem of the second generation”. KARAKAYALI, 2005: 326, 331.

22 NIEDERBERGER, 2004: 61f.; 71f.

23 ONG, 1996: 738.



Once in first or second grade I gave a party at my home. There was a huge discrepancy. Some [Swiss] girls came, and they were all in miniskirts, very cool, they moved differently from me, and I was standing there in my princess dress—like in a dream.

Opposing herself in the “princess dress” (by which she means Indian clothes!) to the cool and elegant Swiss girls wearing miniskirts, she expresses a deeply gendered experience of Otherness produced at the interface of the Indian family and the Swiss peers. This experience of difference—even of remoteness—is pursued in the whole account of her childhood and adolescence. She remembers that, while in high school, her parents wanted her to be a “nice Indian girl”, and she was not allowed to stay at school for lunch or to go out to meet friends at night. Increasingly, she started to rebel against her parents, to reach the much-desired world beyond the “Indian family”. Once, she ran away from home to stay for several weeks with a friend and his mother. Discussing her situation with them, she gained a lot of sympathy and support for her self-determined resistance against her “conservative Indian family”. After many battles with her parents during high school, she moved out to live on her own. Otherwise, she assures, she would not have been able to find access to Swiss mainstream society. Having adopted the assimilationist narrative of the “patriarchal oriental family”, she rejects the norm of the “nice Indian girl” entailing sexual discipline and family solidarity and chooses an emancipatory and individualist life-plan.

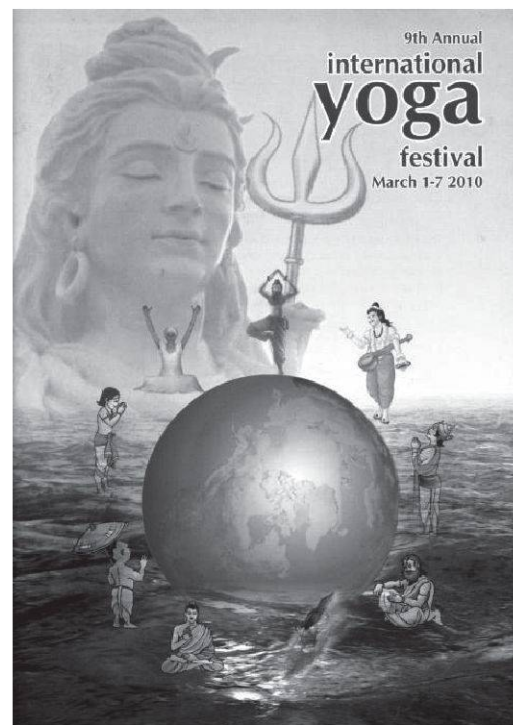
Not judging the actions or values of Maya, her parents or her peers, my aim here is to understand the discursive and institutional conditions under which Maya’s account of her childhood and adolescence—and therefore her subjectivity—was socially made possible. Hence, I suggest that the dichotomy of the modern Swiss public and the “patriarchal oriental family”, and the subsequent narrative of “cultural conflict” Maya engages in, is not a cultural given. Instead, they seem to be technologies in the Swiss assimilation regime for othering migrants—and thus defining the homogenous nation. By equating the symbolic boundaries of public / family with Swiss / Indian and modern / traditional the interplay of state policy, popular culture and family experience produces a cultural essentialism, which frames Maya’s experience of “cultural conflict”. Although Maya has deeply embodied the assimilationist narrative of the “cultural conflict”, when she quitted home, her sense of cultural belonging is more complex than the dichotomy implied by the narrative itself.

After high school, on a trip to India, Maya discovered the practice and philosophy of Yoga. This turned out to be a crucial biographical turning point. During her studies of pedagogy and social anthropology, she kept practicing,

eager to focus solely on Yoga. After finishing her studies, Maya traveled 15 months as Yogini and tourist in South East Asia and India, during which time she developed her own individual perspectives on India—transgressing her experience of the “Indian family”. In the idiom of Yoga, Maya is able to follow her individualist life plan while—interestingly—re-articulating “Indianness”. On her Yoga homepage she quotes the US-author Neale Donald Walsch:

Life is a never ending, continuous process of creation. You create yourself over and over again, striving after the highest ideal of yourself.

Using the spiritual logic of self-development in the Yoga idiom allows her to find a legitimate framework for her individualist life-plan, and a tool with which to actively balance India and the West, instead of being trapped in dichotomy and “cultural conflict”.



Illustrations 1a/b: Yoga as a global industry: Yoga Festivals in Zurich and Rishikesh in 2010

As Sarah Strauss argues, the phenomenon of Yoga is itself a modern product of cultural contact between India and the West.<sup>24</sup> Appropriated in the romantic-orientalist discourse of *fin de siècle* Europe, Yoga was perceived as epitomiza-

24 STRAUSS, 2005.



tion of age-old Indian spirituality, which promised to overcome the disenchanting Western modernity. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different traditions were fashioned through establishing transnational schools, the amalgamation of Western and Indian scientific and spiritual knowledge and practice,<sup>25</sup> which, in turn, created a global Yoga community. Entering this universe allows Maya to pursue a continuous and active biographical and professional translation between India and the West.

Interestingly, Maya's appropriation of Yoga as a way of life falls in line with changes in the representation of ethnicity in Swiss public space. While the Italian migrants, who were recruited after Second World War, were socially excluded and disdained till the early 1980s, the 1990s saw a "mediterraneanisation" of the public space.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the new minorities from Sri Lanka, Ex-Yugoslavia and Africa, Italians were now considered as a model minority, who spiced up the Swiss public space through Italian music, food, life-style and temperament.<sup>27</sup> This set the stage for a growing multicultural consumerism in the middle class urban space. As has been widely argued, the commodification of ethnicity—for example in multicultural cuisine, world cinema, ethnic wear and music—is a salient feature of neoliberal globalization.<sup>28</sup> The public representations of cultural difference in advertisement and consumption allows to make sense of globalization through the local imagination and consumption of the "global". In the recent decade, in the Swiss public—especially for a consuming urban middle class—Yoga, along with Bollywood cinema, Indian cuisine and British Asian Underground music, emerged as in-demand commodities of "exotic Indianness". For Maya, coming back to Switzerland as a trained Yoga teacher, the consumerist "India boom" promised an unknown public recognition of "Indianness" and new professional avenues.

25 ALTER, 2004.

26 MAIOLINO, 2010.

27 WESSENDORF, 2007.

28 COMAROFF / COMAROFF, 2009; HA, 2005; HALL, 2001.





Illustration 2: Exoticising India: Flyer for a Bollywood Dance Musical in 2008

The new multicultural consumerism produced a totally different way of subjectification if compared to the assimilationist regime. While the latter disciplined second generation Indians in Switzerland to avoid ethnic self-representation in public, the former gratifies the self fashioning of the “exotic Other”. Intended or not, the following self-representation as “Indian” on Maya’s homepage is very well embedded within a multiculturalist idiom of authenticity, or as it has been called “the specter, which haunts the commodification of culture everywhere”<sup>29</sup>:

As direct result of my dual heritage, I have encountered many dialogues between the age-old wisdom that has sprung forth from the various Yoga traditions and the modern Western sciences and the cultures that have nurtured it. My bilingual upbringing and intimate understanding of both cultures enables me to assist effectively in such dialogues.

Indeed, Maya’s disciples appreciate her Yoga classes as having a more authentic flavor than classes by other teachers, linking her “Indianness” intrinsically to the Yoga tradition. So, increasingly, multicultural consumerism and its desire for the authentic “exotic Other” regulate Maya’s subjectivity. While for Maya, the consumerist “India boom” opened up new professional opportunities and arenas of recognition of “Indianness”, she is also caught up in the contradictory politics of

29 COMAROFF / COMAROFF, 2009: 10.

representation around the negotiation of assimilation and exoticism. On the one hand, she is confronted with the common exotic stereotype that Yoga is “running in her blood”. On the other hand, she has to defend herself against the narrative that “she is only cashing in on her Indianness”, a blunt sanction of ethnic self-representation in accordance to the assimilationist discourse. Both stereotypes – the assimilationist and the exotic –, though, devalue her qualification as Yoga teacher and her individual efforts to develop in Yoga. Hence, she oscillates between assimilation and exoticism, denial and recognition, autonomy and othering.

The case study of Maya exemplifies how the subjectivities of second generation Indians in Switzerland are embedded in different modes of subject-making, produced in the powerful realms of state, market, popular culture and family. While Maya is a very lucid case, I argue that the subjectivities of most second generation Indians are oscillating between assimilation and exoticism. The negotiation of the assimilationist experience in childhood and the emerging instances of public recognition by way of a multicultural consumerism can take many forms. Like Maya, some have carved out professional avenues, e.g., by opening Indian restaurants or extending their dance activities. Others, through watching Bollywood movies, wearing Indian clothes and collecting Indian art or kitsch, are performing nostalgic Indian life styles. Again others avoid the public representation of “Indianness”, either because they have internalized the assimilationist sanctions, or because they reject the exotic stereotypes of multicultural consumerism. But for all, the growing presence of the exoticizing idiom—compared to the hegemonic assimilationism in their childhood and adolescence—rearranges their meaning of “Indianness” and cultural belonging. More often than not, multicultural consumerism has allowed for the performance and experience of a sort of nostalgia and “symbolic ethnicity,”<sup>30</sup> which in childhood and early adolescence was loathed, avoided, or contained within the private realm of the family. As I want to show in the following section, this nostalgic experience and the increasing practices of symbolic ethnicity of second generation Indians are entangled with a fundamental global re-configuration of Indian modernity since the beginning of the 1990s.

30 GANS, 1979.



## Akash: Negotiating Nostalgia and Social Mobility in the Global Indian Modernity

Up until the 1990s, a nationalist discourse with anti-colonial and socialist underpinnings defined India's ambivalent relation to the West. While the West was identified with technological and material progress manifested in colonial rule, the Indian nation imagined itself on the moral grounds of family values and spiritual, predominantly Hindu, superiority.<sup>31</sup> Hence, the diasporic subject was an ambivalent figure, being in danger of Westernisation, of losing the uniquely spiritual quality of "Indianness", while at the same time participating in the Western material pursuit of wealth. Subsequently, in the narrative of brain drain, emigrants were often represented as leaving the national body and abandoning the national project of development. In the early 1990s India—paralleled by a growing Hindu nationalism—embarked on the project of neoliberal globalization and selectively opened up its markets for foreign goods and investments. Since then its economy has grown by up to 9% per annum. As an important sociological consequence of the economic reforms, a new urban middle class has emerged, which has negotiated its aspirations within a globally oriented consumer and media culture.<sup>32</sup> Within the Indian enclaves of the upper and upper middle class, the appropriation of Western lifestyles and consumer goods created new cosmopolitan representations, allowing to fashion a "global India" as both materially and technologically potent, as well as culturally confident. As the anthropologist William Mazzarella argued,

under the sign of global consumerism, the commodity image brought together [...] the voluptuous sensuality of India, and the 'progressive' agenda of modernity.<sup>33</sup>

Economic growth and the consumerist aspiration of the middle class in this liberalized re-configuration of a "global Indian modernity" promise "a new national model of development, with a global outlook that will allow to successfully compete with the advanced industrialized countries".<sup>34</sup>

The liberalized re-configuration of "global Indian modernity" is deeply entangled with the middle class Indian diasporas, mostly based in Europe, North

31 CHATTERJEE, 1993.

32 FERNANDES, 2006; BROSIUS, 2010.

33 MAZZARELLA, 2003: 144.

34 FERNANDES, 2006: xxvii.



America and Australia. On the one hand, the diasporas displayed the Western consumer culture during their visits back home, fuelling the social aspirations and consumerist imaginations of the growing Indian middle class. On the other hand, the success story of the Indian entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley offered an important narrative to showcase world-class Indians abroad, and along with it India as an emerging super-power. In the 1990s, in Bollywood cinema particular narratives about diasporic subjects were created, catering to both the nostalgic feelings of the diaspora, as well as displaying a globalizing India; combining Western material wealth, while still nourishing Indian culture.<sup>35</sup> Since the late 1990s, the government of India began fostering an active diaspora policy with a dual citizenship scheme (Overseas Citizenship of India) and the establishment of a Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs. With this policy the Indian state created an inclusive narrative of the “global Indian family” in order to mobilize persons of Indian origin to participate in India’s economic growth story.<sup>36</sup>



Illustration 3: Engaging the “global Indian family”: Stall at the 8th Pravasi Bhartiya Divas (“Day of the Indians abroad”) organized by the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs 2010 in Delhi

Reflecting on these changes in India, one could fairly speak of a neo-nationalist project based on economic growth and global outreach of the nation:

35 BROSIUS / YAZGI, 2007.

36 MANI / VARDARAJAN, 2005.

As urban India experiences the optimism of an economic upswing, and the diaspora increasingly engage in it, an ideology of ‘global Indianness’ has crystallised—a set of beliefs and practices that are at once tied to a global lifestyle and to a deep sense of belonging to the Indian nation.<sup>37</sup>

These economic, political and cultural shifts brought about by neoliberal globalization changed in many ways how “Indianness” was articulated and experienced by second generation Indians who had grown up in Switzerland. 31-year-old Akash, who grew up in Swiss middle class suburbia, is managing director of a Swiss industrial company in India. In 2006, after going to high school in his hometown and gaining his MBA from a Swiss university, he took the opportunity to work for a Swiss company in India. His temporary re-migration was embedded in the growing economic engagement of Switzerland in India in the last decade. In Switzerland, the economic opportunities and social changes in India following the liberalization politics were not very much realized in the 1990s. Only after the Indian IT-boom in the last decade, induced by the fear of the millennial crash of computers known as Y2K, many Swiss companies, along with the Swiss government, started to focus on India as an emerging market. For Akash, these discursive and institutional changes opened up new career pathways, and possibilities for a re-articulation of “Indianness”. As his boss told me, Akash had the right professional profile to establish a new production hub in India. But being Indian, thus knowing the local language and supposed to know how to deal with India people, was decisive. Also, being an Overseas Citizen of India, there would not be any problems in getting a work permit. It would seem that Akash, as a second generation Indian, represented the ideal go-between in the imagination and the practice of an expanding Swiss economy at the Asian frontier.<sup>38</sup>

Akash’s decision to go to India was surely influenced by the job opportunity itself, as well as a love of adventure. Yet it was also embedded in the urban consumer culture in India which emerged within the context of neoliberal globalization. In childhood and early adolescence, holidays in India were mostly dedicated to family visits and the experience of an “exotic Other” beyond Western modernity. As one of my informants, who lived in India in the 1980s as a teenager vividly remembered, even urban India at that time seemed to him provincial, isolated from Western technology and public culture. So he decided to

37 RADHAKRISHNAN, 2009: 9.

38 See ONG, 1999, for a similar narrative of diasporic subjects as facilitators of Chinese capitalism.



return to Switzerland. When he visited India in 1995, he was flabbergasted to see public spaces full of neon signs and advertisements for Western brands. Suddenly, urban India seemed to be compatible with the aesthetic and material habits of second generation Indians from Switzerland, and it also promised the benefits and experiences of the dynamic social and cultural change and economic opportunities in contemporary Asia.

Having grown up in a family that strived for social mobility re-migrating to India for Akash was a strategy to improve his status, without abstaining from the consumption pattern and the individualistic lifestyle fashioned in Switzerland. Earning a Swiss salary, Akash is able to lead an exclusive life in the metropolitan context of liberalizing India. As a common upper middle class narrative states, in liberalizing India one can get all the benefits in consumption and lifestyle of the West, while still being able to afford servants. Akash socializes with a bunch of upper class Indians and expats in the exclusive enclaves of urban India, where clubs, restaurants, golf clubs and shopping malls have mushroomed in the last decade.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, living in a flat above his grandparents, he is much more subjected to the expectations and norms of his transnational family. His parents from Switzerland often visit him and he has duties concerning the property management and care of the grandparents. Often he has quarrels with his parents about his lifestyle he did not have when he was living in a flat in Switzerland on his own. In Akash's case, living in the country increases his sense of being an Indian, and, at the same time, seems to re-articulate his "Indianness" as a part of a cosmopolitan subjectivity. As he is moving in global business networks, traveling to Switzerland and many other places for holidays, he cultivates the aesthetic of an *aficionado*, who appreciates the diverse flair of local cultures, while at the same time following an universalist ethic.<sup>40</sup>

For many second generation Indians in Switzerland, contemporary metropolitan India has become the ideal location to combine both nostalgic dreams of re-migration, social mobility, and the creation of an exclusive lifestyle. Embedded in the cultural pessimist Western discourse about the new Asian superpowers China and India and the neo-nationalist narrative of "global India", returning to India, or at least being part of "global India", has a strong appeal. Akash is one of the first second generation Indian re-migrants from Switzerland, but more are heading to India. As another second generation Indian mentioned,

39 FERNANDES, 2006; BROSIUS, 2010.

40 HANNERZ, 1990.

living in India, while earning a Swiss salary and getting Swiss social security is “the Swiss-Indian-Dream”. Not by accident, Bollywood, the cinematic sub-consciousness of the Indian modernity, has been increasingly representing the topos of second generation re-migration. And also the Indian government is offering educational trips for “diaspora youth” to showcase India.

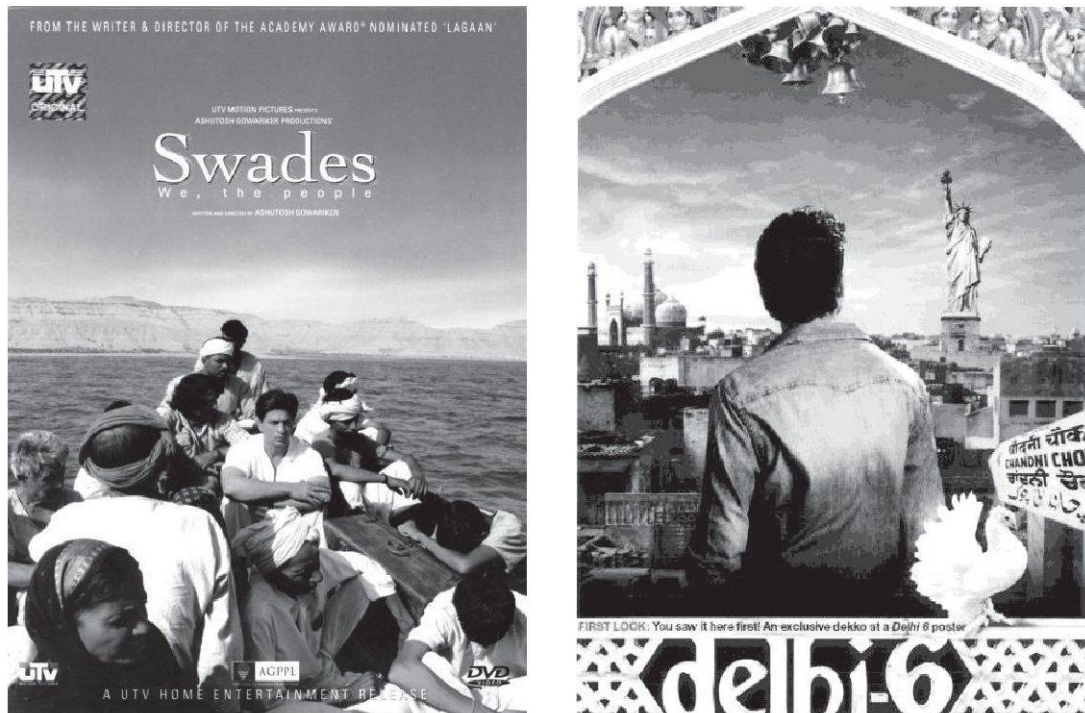


Illustration 4a/b: Imagining the return of the “second generation”: Bollywood movies “Swades” (2004) and “Delhi 6” (2009)

The narrative of return seems to be omnipresent, but the decision to re-migrate depends on biographical opportunity and also allows for many different trajectories. Some like Akash and Maya enter new professional avenues in globalizing India, working with Swiss companies and other Swiss institutions there, or doing consultancy work for businesses wanting to enter the Indian market, expanding their cultural activities, or working on scientific projects. Others strengthen their transnational family ties through discovering India as tourists, stage their dream wedding there, or building a second home. While the practices do vary, the image and experience of globalizing India changes the way second generation Indians construct and perform “narrative of the selves” in their transnational lives.



## Conclusion:

### Cosmopolitanism, Global Capitalism and Social Exclusion

As I wanted to show with the case studies of Maya and Akash, second generation Indians, in the course of their lives have been subjected to the three different hegemonic regimes of assimilation, exoticism, and global Indian modernity. While oscillating between these dominant forces, they are able to carve out alternative subjectivities. Maya translated experiences of the “patriarchal Indian family” in the context of assimilationism into a radical-individualist life plan of Yoga, which allows her to negotiate her subjectivity and “Indianness” in a global community. Akash, as a representative of the “transnational capitalist class” re-articulates “Indianness” as a cosmopolitan attitude, in which conspicuous consumption and intercultural ethics coincide. With a transnational way of life, they are able to overcome the local dominant regimes of othering in Switzerland, the diasporic community, and India. This allows them to adopt a non-essentialist position pursuing an ongoing negotiation of their subjectivity and their cultural belonging. But again, these processes have to be embedded in new regimes of power, which enable Maya and Akash to do so. Maya is linked to the global Yoga ecumene, subjecting her to bodily discipline and regimes of spiritual authority and morality. Akash, through re-migrating, is much more exposed to the authority of the transnational family network, as he looks after his grandparents and is managing the family property. Also, as manager of a new plant in India, he is at the heart of the economic expansion strategy of his company at the Asian frontier. Playing golf and hanging out with his boss in the intimacy of the expat life, he is increasingly subjected to the disciplinary logic of his multinational corporation.

While the global Yoga industry as well as the multinational corporation may differ in many ways, there seems to be an interesting similar entanglement of ethnicity and capital, when we look at them from the perspective of the transnational subject-making of Maya and Akash. In Akash’s case, “Indianness”, and his role as go-between, have become a sort of a qualification in the Swiss job market within the context of a new global division of labour and emerging Indian markets. It was an ethnic code which linked him to the expansion strategy of his company and allowed him to develop a cosmopolitan attitude in the “transnational capitalist class”. For Maya, pursuing her life as a Yoga teacher is connected to the global Yoga industry and its take-off with the recent emergence of multiculturalist consumerism and its fascination for authentic “Indianness”.

Looking at subject-making of second generation Indians, an ethnic signature is inscribed into the state, capitalism, and popular culture, which seems to be at the core of current globalization processes. As Stuart Hall argues, neo-liberal globalization, instead of erasing cultural difference, stages and commodifies cultural difference as a way of linking global capital to local places. The commodification of the “exotic Other” enables one to make sense of globalization, while identifying with a cosmopolitan ideal.<sup>41</sup> Hence, being produced in the global logic of consumption and production, the subjectivities of second generation Indians are also embedded in technologies which produce and reproduce patterns of social inequality and segregation hidden at first sight.<sup>42</sup> In the case of Switzerland, the public representation and self-fashioning of the second generation is divided by class. Second generation youths with middle class backgrounds in advertisement, political debate, and cultural production are often looked at as “cool cosmopolitans”, representing a liberal globalizing Switzerland. In contrast, working class Ex-Yugoslavians and Muslims, especially in political debate and the news, are represented as the “unassimilatable, criminal Oriental”.<sup>43</sup>



Illustration 5a: Cool Cosmopolitans vs. unassimilatable Others: Cover of the book *Among Us* (2007) portraying 13 successful “secondos” ...

41 HALL, 1991.

42 MOLLENKOPF / CASTELLS 1992; SASSEN, 2001.

43 WESSENDORF, 2007.



**Die SVP setzt sich ein für sichere Schulen, Quartiere und Strassen**

Die SVP will:

- **Wiedereinführung der Landesverweisung:** Kriminalisierte Ausländer müssen wieder des Landes verwiesen werden können.
- **Einbürgerung auf Probe:** Eingebürgerten Ausländern, die in den ersten fünf Jahren eine Straftat begehen, wird das Bürgerrecht wieder aberkannt.
- **Entzug der Aufenthaltsbewilligung:** Ausländischen Eltern, die nicht auf ihre kriminellen Kinder aufpassen, wird die Aufenthaltsbewilligung entzogen, und sie werden ausgewiesen.

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**Wahlzettel**  
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**SCHWEIZER QUALITÄT**  
**SVP**

Die Linken und Grünen holen immer mehr gewaltbereite Ausländer in unser Land. Sie verharmlosen die Gewalttaten von ausländischen Jugendlichen und die Vergewaltigungen von Kindern. Sie machen die Täter zu Opfern.

**Gewalt durch ausländische Jugendliche +185%**

Anzahl ausländischer Straftäter\*

Sexuelle Ausbeutung	12.7%
Sexualstraftaten	12.0%
Schwere Delikte gegen Leib und Leben	22.0%
Raub	13.3%
Waffenbesitz	10.2%
Immigrationsdelikte	13.2%
Schwere Körperverletzungen	14.0%
Strafen von Bewährungsstrafen	41.3%

\* Von 1990 bis 2005 stieg die Zahl ausländischer Straftäter um unter 18 bis über 180 Prozent an.  
\* Kriminalstatistik des Kantons Zürich 2006

Illustration 5b: ... and election campaign of the national-conservative Schweizerische Volkspartei 2007 stating “violence committed by foreign youths up by 185%”

In India, the cosmopolitan public culture and the residential domain of the upper middle class are built and maintained by a huge strata of a subaltern work force like drivers, waiters and maids, which are economically, socially and discursively excluded.<sup>44</sup> Also, the aforementioned Indian diaspora policy grants rights to the more recent Western middle class diasporas, which promises high investments and lobbying work, while the older—mostly working-class—diasporas in the Caribbean, Africa, and South East Asia are neglected.<sup>45</sup> The transnational subjectivities of second generation Indians in the contemporary historical moment seem to represent a “global modernity” which, actually, only a well-to-do middle and upper class is able to access, while all the others are excluded and disciplined economically, politically, and culturally. Second generation middle class Indians are imminently entangled within the contradictions of a neoliberal logic of social division. On the one hand, multiculturalism and transnational belonging open up new arenas of recognition and allow for the pursuit of new professional global pathways. On the other hand, they are embedded in global processes of political disempowerment, representational omission and social exclusion of the “non-cosmopolitan Others”.

44 WALDROP, 2004.

45 MANI / VARDARAJAN, 2005.

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