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## Treading Identities: Second-Generation Christian Indian Americans Negotiating Race, Ethnicity and Religion in America

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

TREADING IDENTITIES:

SECOND-GENERATION CHRISTIAN INDIAN-AMERICANS NEGOTIATING  
RACE, ETHNICITY AND RELIGION IN AMERICA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN THE CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

SOULIT CHACKO

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For the young women and men in my study

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## ABSTRACT

In this master's thesis, I examine the lives of young second generation Malayalee Christian Indian Americans. I focus on their religion, racial as well as their ethnic identities. My main findings center on the thesis that my participants as brown Indians are dually marginalized not only because of their race as brown Indian Americans but also because of their presumed religious identity of being a Hindu. Drawing from detailed interviews and participant observation with thirty young second generation Malayalee Christian Indian Americans, I find that my participants are struggling to frame their Christian identity in America. Participants described being racially labeled by their peers' during high school years, including being called a Hindu. In this paper, I argue that, along with their racial-ethnic status of being brown and Indian, the presumed religious status of Indians as Hindu 'dually marginalizes' my participants. I find that my participants work towards affirming their American Christian identity while navigating through their religious, racial and ethnic identities, Here, I argue that by objecting to their imposed, assumed Hindu identity, my participants counter prejudice in America.

I situate my study within the discourse on how religion and race operate in the United States. My study shows that, similar to race, religion is an important, interactive analytical category when understanding the lives of ethnic racial minorities in the U.S and how they are positioned within the U.S. racial hierarchy.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH METHODS

With the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the United States witnessed a growing number of non-white immigrants from diverse racial, religious and ethnic groups permanently migrating to the U.S. (Warner and Wittner 1998; Tuan 1998; Kibria 2002; Purkayastha 2005; Kurien 2007). These diverse immigrant groups not only changed the racial composition of the United States, but also broadened the ethnic, racial and religious American landscape, bringing drastic cultural changes (Warner and Wittner 1998:4; Kibria 2002:1)

Non-white immigrants in the U.S. are positioned as ‘the other’ due to their race and ethnicity (Omi and Winant 1996; Tuan 1998; Kibria 2002; Wu 2002). These scholars point to saliency of race and racial politics in the U.S. that locates non-white minorities as the other. In recent years, the interaction of race and religion to structurally position minority groups as outsiders has garnered much attention in the sociological literature surrounding race and religion.

We know that in past, in the U.S., groups such as Baptists, Quakers, Mormons, Catholics, and Jews at one time were defined as the religious ‘other’ due to their difference in religious practices (Williams and Vashi 2007:271; Joshi 2006:118). Post 9/11, social scientists studying Muslims have argued that race and religion get intertwined for groups such as Arab Americans, categorizing them all as Muslim

irrespective of any ethnic, racial and religious differences (Selod 2012; Purkayastha 2005: 42-45). Selod (2012) points to the pejorative stereotype of Muslims as terrorists that has emerged in the minds of Americans post 9/11. This deleterious image groups all Arab Americans as non-American, delegitimizing their American status. These studies show that Islam as a religious category becomes a racial category for Arab Americans complicating their position as Americans.

Recent studies have largely focused on the pejorative image of Muslims in America. However, this discussion is relevant even when we examine the experiences of other minority groups such as Indian-Americans, for whom religion and ethnicity/national identity is often conflated (Purkayastha 2005; Maira 2002; Joshi 2006; Kurien 2007). In the U.S. among Indian-Americans, Hindu religious groups form a majority (Kurien 2007). Due to this majority status, Americans often perceive that Hinduism represents the Indian culture, identifying all Indians as Hindus. Mainstream American society characterizes Hinduism as an exotic and oriental religion that is overtly ritualistic, involving chants and the worship of deities and idols (Joshi 2006:116)<sup>1</sup>. These non-western, non-Christian religious practices gets defined oriental and as ‘the other’ in America (Prashad 2001:18; ch 3; Joshi 2006:122). Therefore, I argue that minority religious groups such as Indian-Americans because of their non-Christian religious status get structurally positioned as ‘the other’ in a majority Christian nation like the U.S. While there are studies of Indian ethnic religious groups in America, they have mostly focused on the ethnic religious participation of first generation (Williams 1981;

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<sup>1</sup> Joshi (2006: pp126-133) describes the role of popular culture such as Madonna’s pop-rock *Ray of Light* album featuring adapted version of Hindu prayers or movies like the *Indiana Jones and the Temple of*

Rangaswamy 2000; Kurien 2001) and second generation Indian Americans (George 1998, Kurien 2004; 2007; 2012 and Joshi 2006). Not many studies have examined how Christian Indian-Americans negotiate their majority religious status of being Christian and their minority ethnic racial status of being Indian and brown in America.

In my study, I examine this complex phenomenon and I analyze how religious and racial statuses complicate the lives of second-generation Christian Indian-Americans. I use ethnographic method to investigate how second-generation Christian Indian Malayalee Americans negotiate their Christian religious identity and their ethnic racial identity as Indian-American. I also examine what challenges they face in this negotiation process. I frame this study within the larger sociological understanding of how religion and race intersect for middle class racial minority groups.

In the next section, I examine different theoretical frameworks describing lives of non-white second-generation groups in the U.S. I argue that similar to race and ethnicity, religion influences the positioning of minority groups within the exclusionary category of the other in the U.S. In chapters three and four I analyze and discuss my data to show how second-generation Malayalee Christian Indian-Americans negotiate their Christian religious and Indian racial identities, and the struggles they undertake to frame their Christian identity in America.

### **Literature Review**

In sociology there has been an ongoing discussion on post 1965 second-generation immigrants in America. In this section, I will discuss two relevant theoretical frameworks that have been widely used to describe their lives: the segmented

assimilation model and the racialized ethnicity model. As I provide a summary of these frameworks, I also include current perspectives provided by different scholars. I focus on illustrating how besides race, ethnicity and class, religion plays a complex and an integral role when discussing lives of second-generations groups in America.

### **Segmented Assimilation**

One of the widely debated frameworks within sociology focused on second-generation immigrants is the 'segmented assimilation model' (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). The proponents of this framework argue that children of new immigrants are undergoing a process of 'segmented assimilation', where the 'outcomes vary based on group's race, class, immigration status, context of reception and timing of arrival to the host country' (Portes and Zhou 1993:82-87; Portes and Rumbaut 2001:45). According to this model children of post-1965 will experience one of the three proposed paths of assimilation. First, some second-generation immigrants will retain ethnic network while following the traditional incorporation into American culture and assimilate as members of the middle class. Second, children of immigrants who lack ethnic community support will adapt to American underclass culture and thus face downward mobility. Lastly, others will follow a trajectory where the second-generation and their parents will lack the support from the ethnic community, but together they will confront external challenges while assimilating to the American society. The segmented assimilation model draws on the classic assimilation argument <sup>2</sup>of immigrants becoming American while considering the diversity of the new immigrants. However, this model

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<sup>2</sup> Classic assimilation argument as discussed by Warner and Srole (1945) discusses the inevitable, linear integration of immigrants to the American society (Kim 2006: p 4)

describes the structural assimilation of the second-generation immigrants in the U.S.

Segmented assimilation scholars contend that some second generation immigrants who have ethnic community support and maintain ethnic culture will follow a path of upward assimilation (Zhou and Bankston 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). As per this argument, immigrant groups such as South Asians and Asians who meet these criteria of bilingualism, education and occupation mobility should be experiencing upward mobility and assimilating to white middle class section of the society. Compared to other ethnic/racial minorities such as Latino and Black Americans, Asian and South Asians perform better socio-economically. However, research done on South Asian and Asians also show that they face the glass ceiling due to their race and ethnicity, which limits their ability to move to the uppermost tier of American corporate business ladder (Wu 2002; Kibria 2002; Ch 5). These scholars point to the stereotyped image of Asian Americans as “hardworking but not leadership material,” prevalent in the corporate sector (Kibria 2002:133).

Purkayastha (2005), Min (2002) and Tuan (1998: ch 6) also discuss how second-generation South Asian and Asian Americans identify themselves using hyphenated labels such as Indian-Americans, Filipino American and Chinese American. These scholars point to the emergence of an ethnic identity among their respondents. They argue that structural and symbolic boundaries due to the difference in their race, ethnicity and class, affect how groups such as Asians and South Asian Americans choose labels such as Indian-American, Filipino American to identify themselves (Purkayastha 2005:169; Min 2002:11). Purkayastha (2005: ch 3) also describes the role of

transnational family networks influencing how South Asians frame their ethnicity and form an ethno-national identity in the U.S.

While the critics of segmented assimilation argue that this model does not closely examine the complexity of class and ethnicity illustrated earlier, another important phenomenon that is not analyzed is the role of religion (Warner 2007). Studies show that highly educated and upwardly mobile second-generation Korean American Christians assert their ethnic religious identity as Korean Christians more than their American identity (Chong 1998; Min 2010). Chong's study (1998:266) shows that the preservation of ethnic religious identity among her upwardly mobile respondents stems from the marginalization experiences they face within the larger American culture. She describes the racism, prejudices and discrimination her respondents faced in their college years and during their work experience (268). She contends "the development of, and commitment to, Christian identity for second-generation Koreans, often coincides with the emergence of a stronger ethnic identity which results due to their marginalization experiences" (265).

Similarly, Min (2010) finds that his second-generation Korean Americans respondents stress their religious identity as their primary identity and their ethnic identity as their secondary identity over their American identity (176). Min's (2010) finding supports Chong's (1998) argument that experiences with racial prejudices and discrimination play a primary role in how second-generation Korean Americans build on their Christian and ethnic identity (199-200). These scholars point to the formation of an ethno-religious identity among second generation immigrants. They identify this identity

formation as a defensive mechanism against the perceived marginal status Korean Americans have as non-white in American. Chong (1998) and Min (2010) also point to the connection between ethnicity and religion for their second generation Korean American respondents. They argue that second-generation Korean Christian Americans create their sense of belongingness in the American society by being active in their ethnic church and forming an ethnic-religious life (Chong 1998:284; Min 2010:114). These studies show that in spite of experiencing upward mobility, groups such as Korean Christian Americans emphasize framing their ethnic-religious identity in the U.S.

While Chong (1998) and Min (2010) discuss the formation of ethnic religious identities among middle class ethnic minorities such as Christian Korean Americans .It is also important to understand the racial, ethnic and religious challenges minority groups experience in America and how these influences their lives. In the next section, I discuss the studies that describe how racialized ethnic religious groups frame their lives in the U.S.

### **Racialized Ethnicity**

Sociologists of race have discussed at length the role of race for immigrant groups in the United States. While Bonilla Silva (1997) argues that it is pertinent to examine how race becomes an organizing principle of social relations in a racialized society. Others like Omi and Winant (1994) emphasize analyzing how race shaped by the socio-historical processes impacts individuals at a macro level and shapes their social spheres at a micro level. These scholars draw attention to the racial discourses manifested within the existing social system. An important contribution that Omi and Winant (1994) make is

identifying the effect of racialization in the formation of racial categories. They point to the preconceived notions of specific racial groups shaping one's racial experience in the U.S. (Omi and Winant 1994:59-61).

Crenshaw (1989), King (1988) and Collins (2000) among other feminist scholars introduced the concept of intersectionality. They diverted attention to 'interactive oppression' (King 1988:42) or how oppressive structures of race, gender and class intersect to create multiple locational disadvantages for minority groups, particularly black women. King (1988) was one of the first scholars to use the framework of 'double jeopardy' in empirical research to show the systemic (double) disadvantages that Black women face due to their race and gender. Since then this framework has been adopted by scholars such as Raijman and Semyonov (1997) and Banerjee (2007) among others, who in their work have discussed the oppressive structure of race, ethnicity, gender and class when studying women of color, especially immigrant women. I build on the concept of 'double jeopardy' in this research to show how religion and race might work together to create dual marginalization for my participants.

Scholars such as Waters (1999), Tuan (1998), Kibria (2000), Wu (2002), Min (2002) and Purkayastha (2005) have offered additional explanations to show the interplay of race, class and ethnicity for immigrant groups contributing to the formation of ethnic-racial categories. These scholars point to the formation of boundaries by ethnic groups through which they position themselves within the racial structure in the U.S. For instance, Tuan (1998) in her work on third generation and later Chinese and Japanese Americans, describes the formation of emerging ethnic identities. She discusses the

ascription of ethnic or racial labels that mark Asian ethnic groups as the ‘the other’ within American society (157)<sup>3</sup>. While she points to the saliency of external racial labels for these groups, she also describes how they actively resist and challenge this positioning by drawing boundaries and shaping their identity, honoring their ethnic as well as their American identity (151). Kibria (2002) and Espiritu (1992) also find similar phenomena among Asian ethnic groups. Both these scholars discuss the formation of a pan ethnic identity among second-generation Asian ethnic groups. They identify the formation of this identity as a strategy to resist their racial positioning as non-whites in the U.S (Kibria 2002: 204).

Kibria’s (2002) study of second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans describes the distinct marker of model minority for Asians in the U.S and how this marginalizes them. She speculates that the model minority ideology emerged within a global context following the economic success of the Asian economies such as South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China (26). But more importantly she critiques the socioeconomic advancement of Asians in the U.S. preconceived as their cultural predisposition emphasizing strong work ethics and higher education (131, 147). She argues that this cultural predisposition marginalizes Asian Americans perpetuating racist attitudes towards them. In describing the implication of this image, Kibria argues that the model minority ideology frames a ‘double-edged position’ for Asian Americans (157). It presents a yardstick of expectations for immigrant groups in the U.S such as Asian Americans as they try to integrate into American society and become part of the middle

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<sup>3</sup> Tuan (1998) points to the prejudices (East) Asian Americans face having an Asian sounding last name or due to their Asian type physical features.

class section of the society but it also perpetuates their ‘Asianness,’ also marginalizing them (Kibria 2002:157; Dhingra 2003:125).

Studies on racial and ethnic identity argue that model minority representation overlooks the discriminatory experiences Asian Americans face (Tuan 1998:79; Kibria 2002:139-140; Purkayastha 2005:30-31). These scholars contend that this politicized ideology creates a distinction in public culture between good, deserving model minorities such as Asians versus the undeserving minorities like Latinos or African Americans (Kibria 2002:134, 157; Tuan 1998:162; Omi and Winant 1994:71).

### **Second-Generation: Forming Boundaries and Framing Their Ethnic American Lives**

In the racialized ethnicity literature, scholars like Purkayastha (2005) and Maira (2002) illustrate how second-generation racialized minority groups use ethnic tools to construct boundaries and assert their differences within mainstream American culture. Purkayastha (2005) and Maira (2002) describe how their second-generation respondents negotiate racial and ethnic boundaries to frame their lives in America. Purkayastha (2002) examines the formation of hyphenated identity among her South Asian American respondents. She discusses the external imposition of racial boundaries and describes how her respondents construct ethnic boundaries to frame their identity in America and setting themselves apart from other racialized groups (115). Both Purkayastha (2005:114) and Maira (2002:120) describe how South Asians actively pick and choose ethnic tools to reconstruct their ethnicity within situated context. They discuss ways in which ethnic minority groups such as South Asian use ethnic tools to form boundaries and frame their

racialized American life in the U.S. Their studies shows how middle class ethnic, racial groups such as South Asians have to negotiate multilayered ethnic and American image to “balance their sets of opportunities and constraints being middle class racialized ethnics” (Purkayastha 2005:171).

The racialized ethnicity literature suggests the fluid formation of ethnicity among minority groups and it describes their negotiation process with structurally imposed boundaries. This framework gives insight to the marginalization experienced by non-white minority immigrants in the U.S. Though this model centrally focuses on race, ethnicity and class as analytical points, a crucial element that remains yet to be fully explored is the role of religion.

### **Second-Generation: Forming Their Ethnic Religious Lives in America**

Kurien (1998, 2007, 2012), Williams and Vashi (2007) and Kim (2006) discuss the complex process second-generation ethnic Americans undertake to negotiate their ethnic, American and religious lives. For example, Kim (2006) in her study on second-generation middle class evangelical Korean Americans (SGKA) finds her respondents gathering to form separate ethnic ministries in the U.S that are different from their parents Korean ethnic churches. She finds that even though these newly formed second-generation Korean American evangelical ministries embrace the dominant white evangelical practices and rituals the young women and men still choose to interact with their fellow Korean American (87). She describes the racialization experiences of grouping all Asians together (102); and their experiences of marginality due to the ‘model minority’ perception about them (109). Kim’s (2006) study shows that structural

boundaries separate her respondents as the other in America pushing them to form separate ethnic evangelical ministries.

Similarly Williams and Vashi's (2007) study of second-generation Muslim Americans finds respondents negotiating their social and religious identity to frame their autonomous Muslim identity in America. They examine the symbolism of the hijab in the lives of young American Muslim women that they argue becomes a cultural and religious symbol for them (285).

Kurien's (1998; 2007) study of second-generation Hindu Americans also describes the formation of a separate Hindu identity among second-generation Indian-Americans. An important point she makes is the parallel image of Indian with Hindu. She cites Maira (2002) who contends that Hinduism and 'Indianness' becomes significant for second-generation Hindu Indian-Americans because the multicultural perspective in the U.S "demands a performance of authenticity" (215). This demand thus encourages ethnic religious groups such as Muslims and Hindus to work on forming their ethno-racial-religious identity in the U.S.

The scholarly works discussed above describe how racialized ethnic minority groups in the U.S. negotiate their structural boundaries and use their ethnic and religious tools to respond to the marginality experienced by them as non-white Americans. All these scholars describe how groups such as Korean Christian Americans, Muslims Americans and West Indians use their cultural tools to frame their ethnic American identity. However, for groups such as Christian Indian-Americans who are largely as

identified as Indians first and thus Hindu, this process of framing their American Christian identity clashes with the hegemonic American white Christian culture.

In this study, I examine the lives of second-generation Indian-Americans who are also Christians. Segmented Assimilation model argues that as immigrants attain middle class status and move towards upward mobility, their children assimilate into the middle class American culture. However, this model does not describe what exactly they mean by American culture nor does it develop what becoming American mean for ethnic and religious groups who are largely seen as ‘the other’ within the larger American society.

On the other hand the ‘racialized ethnic model’ moves away from an assimilation focus to understand the complex lives of ethnic groups in America. This model provides helpful clues to understand the complicated process by which racialized ethnic religious groups such as second-generation Christian Indian-Americans frame their lives in the United States. This framework also discusses the complex negotiation process groups such as middle class second-generation Christian Indian-Americans undertake to negotiate their religious, ethnic and American identities.

In my study I follow the racialized-ethnicity model. Besides, exclusively focusing on the race and ethnicity aspect, I also include the role of religion to understand and illustrate the complicated process of growing up as second generation Indian-Americans and Christians in the U.S. I use the ‘double jeopardy’ concept discussed earlier to describe the marginalization that my second-generation Christian Malayalee Indian American’s face in the U.S. I use this framework to describe the marginalization experienced by my participants due to their brown-Indian race and assumed religious

identity of being a Hindu. I use the terminology of ‘dual marginalization’ to describe this in second my chapter. While describing this marginalization, I also discuss the complex negotiation process undertaken by my participants as they form boundaries and emphasize the Christian Indian-American identity to their peers in America.

### **Who Are Christian Malayalee Indian-Americans?**

Sociologists as well as historians have discussed the presence of Christians in India since British pre-colonial times (Kurien 1994; Williams 1996; George 2005 and Mallampalli 2004). Christianity in India consists of three principal branches: Syrian or St Thomas Christians, Roman Catholics, and Protestants and each branch contain many subgroups (Mallampalli 2004:6). George (1998:271) points to the different denominations of the Indian Syrian Christian groups that emerged in later years. These groups were Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants. Kerala is one of the states in India with the largest percent of Christians in India (George 2005, Williams 1996). Malayalam is the official regional language of Kerala and therefore people from Kerala identify themselves as Malayalees (George 2005; Kurien 1994). One of the widely discussed aspects of Kerala within sociology is the migration of nurses to the U.S post 1965 (George 2005; Banerjee 2012). With the 1965 immigration Act and demand for professional healthcare workers in the U.S, the majority of all nurses from Kerala migrated to the U.S. bringing their families with them (Williams 1996:14; George 2005; Banerjee 2012: 53). Majority of the nurses in India are Christians and from the state of Kerala. Therefore, many Indian nurses who migrated to the U.S were from the Kerala Christian community (Williams 1996:14). The participants in my study are children of

these first generation immigrants who migrated from Kerala. Since they grew up in a Malayalee Christian community, they are identified as Christian Malayalee Indian-Americans.

### **Research Questions**

In my study I focus on the lives of second-generation Christian Indian-Americans who are brown, Indian-Americans yet Christians. I specifically ask the following questions: a) how do second generation Christian Indian-American negotiate their race, ethnicity and religion in America; b) what are some of the structural challenges they face when forming their racial-ethnic -religious identities?

### **Data and Method**

I focus on analyzing the lives of second-generation Indian-Americans who are mostly middle class. I specifically focus on describing how their religious identity intersects with their assumed racial religious identity. In other words, I show how groups such as Christian Indian-Americans have to negotiate their presumed racial religious identity of being Hindu in America.

This study is based on participant observation and semi- structured in-depth interviews with thirty second-generation Christian Malayalee Indian-Americans. My sample of participants was non- random because I recruited them using snow ball sampling. I conducted my observations from January 2012 until August 2012. I did field observations in the formal church settings as well as in informal group settings. The informal group settings included café's, restaurants and church youth basketball and volleyball games that were sponsored and funded by the church. I took extensive field

notes during my observations and at times when I could not take notes such as during religious services, I voice recorded my observations immediately after leaving the service. The non-Indian churches that I visited with my participants were either non-denominational Taiwanese evangelical churches or non-denominational white American churches.

### **Description of Study Participants**

I did in-depth interviews with thirty (N=30) second generation Christian Indian-Americans. I interviewed (N=15) women and (N=15) men for this study. The participants in my study were second and 1.5 generation, between the ages and 18 and 30. All my participants grew up in Chicago and went to schools located in the Chicago area. Except for a few (N=3), all of the participants in the sample went to public schools in the Chicago suburbs. A majority of the participants in this study was either still in college pursuing their studies (N=15) or had graduated and were working full time (N=15). Among the participants in my sample who were still in college, a majority of them was pursuing professional degrees ranging from medicine to business. A minority of the participants (N=6) in my sample who were in college went to universities located outside Chicago but still within the Midwest. I was able to recruit many of these young women and men because they were home with their parents in Chicago for their summer break. The rest of my participants who were still in college were enrolled in programs at different public and private universities in the Chicago area. Almost all the participants who were still in college lived either in dorms or apartments near their universities. Among the ones who were employed full time, a majority of them had recently started

working (less than 2 years) and were employed in various professional roles. A majority of my participants lived with their parents.

In the Indian Malayalee Christian community, marriage is identified as an entrance to adulthood. Before marriage children mostly live with their parents and marriage is seen as an important step that helps them transition from adolescent to adults. In my study, almost all the participants who lived in Chicago lived with their parents. A few of the participants who were studying in universities located in different cities far away from their parent's home, lived in either dorms or apartments with roommates but made trips back to their parents' homes on weekends or during holidays.

My primary site for this study was the Indian Syrian Christian church. I also visited one Taiwanese American and two white American evangelical churches along with my participants. The majority of the participants in this study are members of the Indian Syrian Christian church (N= 18). Through snowball sampling I interviewed six participants who were from the Indian Malayalee Catholic church, one was from the Indian Syrian Orthodox church and five were participants who had left their Indian Christian church to become members of an evangelical church. Table 1 and 2 is the data representation of the church membership and current education or occupation profile of the participants. Table 4 is the church membership of the participants.

**Table 1. Study Participants**

Study Participants				
	Malayalee Syrian Christian church	Malayalee Orthodox Christian church	Malayalee Catholic church	Total
Women	10	1	2	13
Men	10	3	4	17

**Table 2. Education or Occupation Profile of the Participants**

	Pursuing their Undergraduate degree	Pursuing their Graduate degree	Working- (full time)
Women	4	4	7
Men	3	4	8
Total	7	8	15

**Table 3. Participants who Left the Church**

Formally Exited the Indian Malayalee church for: (Total N=5)	
Taiwanese American evangelical church	3
White American evangelical church	2

**Table 4. Church Membership of the Participants**

Indian Malayalee Syrian Christian church - Total (N= 20)	
Attend only Indian Malayalee Protestant church	4
Attend Indian Malayalee both Protestant and Non-Indian Church	14
Left Indian Protestant church	2
Indian Malayalee Orthodox Christian church - Total (N= 4)	
Attend only Indian Malayalee Orthodox church	1
Left Indian Malayalee Orthodox Church	3
Indian Malayalee Catholic church- Total (N= 6)	
Attend only Indian Malayalee Catholic church	2
Attend both Indian Malayalee Catholic and Non-Indian church	4

### **Description of Setting**

The Indian Malayalee Syrian Christian church: The criteria for selecting this church as my research setting was based on methodological factors such as ease of access into the community, a Indian Christian denomination church that had a large Indian Malayalee membership (>200) and finally a church that had youth programs and worship. This Indian Malayalee Syrian Christian church is one of the many Indian churches in Chicago land area. It is primarily made up of members from the Indian Malayalee Christian community and from the St. Thomas reformed orthodox denomination that links them and their church to Kerala, India. It has approximately 500 members; the majority of them are first generation immigrants who according to the church priest came to the United States post 1965. The church has various traditional religious services including Sunday liturgy service in Malayalam as well as an English service. The liturgy

service lasts up to two hours and resembles the religious cultural tradition of Indian churches. In recent years the church also started another English worship for the youth that was held every other weekend and focused on reading the Bible, preaching and singing.

The weekend Sunday service often felt nostalgic and reminded me of India. For the Sunday worship women came dressed in traditional Indian clothing. Women would either wear a 'saree' (strip of long usually 4 to 9 yards draped around women's bodies) or 'salwar kameez' (long shirt with loose trousers and long scarf draped around the neck usually) - both of which are traditional Indian dresses. During my visits to the church I saw very few men wear traditional Indian clothes. There were a few older men who wore 'mundu' (a traditional sarong worn by men around their waist) and some wore 'kurta' (long shirt). The church also offered Sunday classes and youth religious classes for its second-generation. These classes were mostly taught by the elders, many of whom were first generation parents. The Sunday youth classes consisted of youth members between ages between 18 and 35. These youth group members were mostly unmarried except for two members who were a married couple.

The Indian Syrian church has religious classes, choir practice and various religious, cultural events that usually start on Fridays and go until Sunday. The priest of this church is from Kerala and speaks fluent Malayalam. He presides over Sunday liturgy service in both Malayalam and English. Priests in many Indian Malayalee Christian churches come to the U.S. for a given time period which usually ranges from 3 to 5 years.

Malayalee Indian churches bring Indian priests from Kerala by immigrant visa to fulfill the shortage of Indian priests in the United States (George 1998).

### **Access to the Community**

The priest of the Indian Malayalee Syrian Christian church was a key informant in my study. In my initial conversation with him, I found out that he is also from the same town in Kerala as my family. During a Sunday liturgy service, the priest introduced me to church members and also requested that the parents as well as the young church members help me in my research. I started attending regular Sunday services and cultivated a rapport with few of the younger men and women. They invited me to the worship that took place every Friday in the church. Very soon I was attending this worship on Friday's, observing the choir practice on Saturdays and participating in the Sunday worship service and subsequent prayer meeting. I chose five participants from this group and they then referred me to other young women and men.

### **Interviewing Participants**

I interviewed 15 women and 15 men. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were voice recorded. They lasted anywhere from one to four hours. My interview guide was constructed for one hour long interviews but conversations with participants often went beyond my interview guide. These long conversations were either about their experiences growing up in the Indian Malayalee community, their religious beliefs or about dating and marriage. I did two of my initial interviews in participants' homes but in those interviews I found my participants hesitant in talking in depth about their experiences. During all of these interviews, their parents were also home and they

were very welcoming of me into their homes and let me interview my participants in separate rooms. But I could sense my participants were hesitant to talk about their experiences. They would talk very softly and often seemed conscious of somebody standing near the door. After this experience, all subsequent interviews were conducted outside of the home. I met the rest of my participants in café's or restaurants often near where they lived.

### **Data Coding**

For the data analysis process I did demographic and thematic coding. My demographic coding included data on age, generation (second or 1.5 generation), education and occupation if they were employed, religion and family information and church participation. The thematic coding focused on specific research questions and included whether they experienced discrimination growing up in America and how they responded to it; growing up in the Indian Malayalee community and views about the Indian church; their participation in other churches and how they found out about the other churches; their religious views and their views on dating, marriage and sexuality.

### **Insider-Outsider Status**

I first became interested in doing this study after a trip to one of the Indian churches in the summer of 2011. I was assisting a friend and colleague who was conducting research on first generation Indians. During my visit to the Indian church I noticed that there were proportionately more parents (first generation) in the church during liturgy services than the younger church members were. I observed the same phenomenon even after repeated visits with my friend to this particular church. I was

curious to know where the young church members were. During one of my casual conversations with the church priest he told me that many of the youths had left the Indian church for other American churches. That was the beginning of my quest to understand this exodus of the youth from their Indian church to a non-Indian church and what influenced this movement. However, after close examination of my interview data, my study took to a different turn. During the interviews, I found my study participants talking about being called a Hindu by their American peers. Their narratives directed me to explore how these men and women respond to being called a Hindu by their peers and the complexity of this phenomenon. I discuss this more in my analysis chapter.

While conducting this study I was often an insider as well as an outsider. I was born into a Christian Malayalee family and growing up I did go to a ‘few’ Sunday classes and choir practice. Church was an integral part of our family life but it was limited to Sunday mornings only. My parents did value learning Malayalam in order to converse with my extended family in Kerala (south India) where Hindi is not a common language. However, I grew up in North India, where I hung out with my Hindi speaking friends and ultimately became more fluent in Hindi than Malayalam. My experience growing up in an Indian Malayalee Christian family made me an insider since I knew the language and the culture and traditions but at the same time my growing up in north India, being fluent in Hindi and choosing to marry to a Hindu individual as well as my role of a researcher made me an outsider.

My role as an insider gave me easy access to the community. Since I was born in India I was also often seen as a first generation by the older adults and parents of the

church. However, my age and my status as student in United States did not fully qualify me as a first generation. My experiences as a student made me more similar to the second generation. This status of being between the first generation and the second-generation immensely helped me. The parents in the church including the priest would often use me as a mediator during church meetings that included the priest, parents and their children. During one of the church meetings, which quickly became a heated argument between the church elders and the youths, three middle aged women who were in the meeting came up to me after the meeting ended and one of them said '*mole (daughter in Malayalam) you should tell our kids that this is part of our culture and we are not really fighting, we are just giving everyone a voice to talk about their concerns, they don't understand this*'. The priest had given the impression to everyone that he knew me well since my family was from the same town in Kerala as he was. This helped me gain the confidence of the parents/first generation.

During my visits to the church, the priest would often come up to me and converse in Malayalam. Since I am not very fluent in Malayalam, I would respond back with a mix of English and Malayalam peppered with few long pauses as I tried to form the correct Malayalam sentences in my mind. The youths would often give me polite look and sympathetic smile during my language ordeal. Very soon I knew that this embarrassing experience was helping me form a bond with these second generation younger church members who themselves were not very fluent in Malayalam and struggled to keep up with the Indian culture and language. They would often joke about my Malayalam and when introducing to other youth would sometimes add in 'she is like

us, even she does not know Malayalam'. Even though the priest and parents often conversed with me in Malayalam, my weak Malayalam skills and my status as a student also helped me build my rapport with the participants. More interestingly after my interviews often my participants, especially the women asked me whether I was married. My non-traditional marriage to a Hindu man often took them by surprise and many of my participants asked me questions that resulted in our conversation lasting up to 2 hours or more.

Many participants would ask me about my relationship with my parents and if choosing to marry a Hindu man affected the family relationship. Our conversation would be around how did I get away from my parents wrath for dating a Hindu man, how did they react to my marriage and what religion would my kids follow when I have them. A few of the women would also ask me for dating advice and would talk about their relationship and the promises that they believed were necessary to keep before marriage. Women were also very keen on helping me with my study and willingly agreed to an interview. Men on the other hand were difficult to have a conversation with and even recruit. My interviews with men lasted from 1 hour to 2 hours. Unlike the women they did not have any dating questions and rarely asked me about my Hindu husband but they often talked about Christianity and importance of being a believer and being saved. A couple of men also expressed their concern about my marriage to a Hindu man. They asked me questions about how the different religious status would affect the religion identity of my children, when I have them. They also asked me if I gave up my Christian faith after my marriage to a Hindu man.

My insider – outsider role helped me immensely in my study and helped frame my research questions. Even though being a Malayalee gave me the access to the community, my role as a researcher and my marriage to a Hindu helped me be an outsider. My methodology helped me to find multiple themes that I describe in the analysis section in chapter two and three.

CHAPTER TWO  
RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES: GROWING UP AS  
INDIAN-AMERICANS

Molly: I used to take the bus to and fro from school. It was me and another close family friend and we went by bus together. They lived close by and were Indians as well. So, there were kids on the bus who would make fun of us. They would call us Hindu, brown shit and names like that. Or they would be like ‘oh where do your parents work, 7-Eleven, or Dunkin donuts’. There was one time when we had gotten off the bus and [the other kids] did something like that again, and this time [Molly and her friend] decided to say something back. Usually after getting off the bus we [Molly, her friend and the other kids] would walk in opposite ways [because our houses were in opposite direction] and so we did not know where they lived. So this one time they said something again and we turned around and we were like “you are talking about us, what did you say?” And they were still talking and saying stuff while they were walking in their direction. So me and my friend, we started following them and we were just asking them, ‘why don’t you say that to our face, we are not Hindu, we are Christians’. And we followed them up to their doorstep and I think they had a dog, so their dog started barking and you know then they were like ‘oh our dogs don’t like brown people’.

Racial marginalization experiences of non-white groups such as Indian-Americans influence the way they situate themselves within the larger American society. Scholars such as Bonilla Silva (2004) and, Omi and Winant (1996) have argued that racialized experiences shape formation of racial identity among minority groups. Omi and Winant (1996:60) argue “Racial ‘subjection’ is quintessentially ideological and through racially coded experiences or racial classification, everybody learns about their racial identity. This process of classification therefore inserts us in a comprehensive racialized structure”. Molly’s narrative supports this argument. The prejudicial incident as described by Molly was an encounter she had when she was in 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Even

though Molly is now 29, she still clearly remembers details of this incident.

Purkayastha (2005:27) and Tuan (1998:76) argue that early encounters with racial labels during elementary or junior high school years make racial minorities aware of their race and reinforces their non-white status in America.

Molly and other participants in my study told me about several disturbing racialized encounters. However, when examining Molly's narrative an important and puzzling aspect emerges: in spite of being racially labeled (as 'brown shit' or working at 7-Eleven or Dunkin donuts), why did she choose to only confront the epithets concerning her religious identity? What meanings were attached by Molly and other participant's when they were called 'Hindu'? What did it mean for the participants' in my study to be both Indian-American as well as Christian? And most importantly, how do they use their religious identity as Christians to separate themselves from such experiences' as Molly seems to have done in this story?

In this chapter, I present an analysis of the externally imposed labeling faced by second generation Christian Indian-Americans due to their race and ethnicity as Indian-Americans. I discuss the prejudicial experiences described by the young men and women in my study and how this contributes to the formation of a *religious* identity that is bound up in the racialization process and is part of resistance to it. I focus on two main themes in this chapter. First, I discuss the prejudicial experiences faced by the second-generation Christian Indian-Americans and describe how young men and women frame these experiences differently. This discussion focuses on the formation of their racial status as non-white Americans. Second, I analyze how participants negotiate their externally imposed ascriptions and what cultural tools they use to challenge these experiences. Here

I focus on the formation of the religious ethnic identity among the second-generation Malayalee Indian-Americans.

I use the framework of ‘boundary work’ as discussed by Purkayastha (2005), Waters (1999) and Williams and Vashi (2007) to illustrate how second-generation Indian Malayalee Americans use religion as a cultural tool to negotiate their marginalization experiences in the U.S. This chapter shows how second-generation non-white racial groups such as Indian-Americans negotiate their race, ethnicity and religion to shape their lives growing up in America.

### **Becoming Aware of Their Race**

Molly was born in the United States and grew up in a predominantly white, affluent suburban neighborhood. Growing up in a middle class household, she attended a private school where she and another Indian friend were the only ‘people of color’ in her class. This lack of diversity in her class and neighborhood influenced Molly in making sense of her childhood experiences that she described as being “treated differently”. Segregation in the U.S. by race and class is a widely discussed topic among sociologists. Scholars studying immigrant groups have described the residential patterns among these groups and their contribution to the experiences living in the U.S. (Alba and Logan 1993; Kibria 2002; Tuan 1998; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Tuan (1998: ch 4) and Kibria (2002; ch 2) describe the differences in struggle and marginalization experiences faced by their Asian ethnic participants due to their residential patterns. They argue that neighborhood composition plays a significant role when understanding the experiences of second-generation immigrants groups.

Research on middle class immigrant groups describe their move to the largely white suburban areas as a way of achieving class status (Kibria 2002:12; Purkayastha 2005:18). Alba and Logan argue that as members of minority groups attain middle class status through socio-economic factors, “they attempt to leave behind less successful members of their groups and convert socio-economic and assimilation progress into residential gain, by "purchasing" residence in places with greater advantages and amenities” (1993:139). This move represents upward mobility for the first generation, but for the second generation, this often results in “emerging consciousness of their racialized exclusion from their mainstream American identity” (Kibria 2002:40)

#### **‘Bound To Be Bullied’: Boundaries of Exclusion**

Susan: When you have all these Indian characteristics, you are bound to be bullied. In school I remember people used to call me stupid Hindu and names like that. I mean mostly I would just walk away but you know there were times I would answer back.

Susan is a 22 year old young woman. I first met her through another participant who knew her from their Bollywood dance group. When I met Susan, she was pursuing her degree in nursing from a private, well-known university. Due to her hectic class and dance schedule, she decided to live near the campus and share an apartment with her two other Indian church friends. In spite of her busy schedule, Susan was also one of the youth leaders in her ethnic church and she helped organize events for youth group. She also visited other nondenominational American and Asian Evangelical churches with her Indian ethnic church friends.

I interviewed Susan when she was visiting her parents, who lived in the suburbs. Located in a predominantly white neighborhood, Susan’s home looked similar to other

detached single-family houses nearby with a yard and a front entry garage. However, once I got in, I was pleasantly surprised by the Indian feel in the house with the elaborate interior furnishing. The living room had wooden, artistically carved (Victorian) furniture, an intricately designed (Persian) rug under the coffee table, and bright red silk draperies adorning the windows<sup>4</sup>. On the wall was a large family portrait that had Susan, her siblings and parents, photographed dressed in Indian traditional clothes (saree and salwar kameez).

Born in India, Susan came to the U.S when she was seven years old. When I asked her about her school, she said:

Susan: it [high school] was difficult. The school had a bunch of rich white kids who thought that they were better than everyone else. It was so hard for me to find friends. For a long time, I was so angry [being in that school] that I would not even try and make friends.

This experience of feeling excluded was an experience that was commonly described by study participants who grew up in suburban neighborhoods that were predominantly white. Susan also describes her anger that she experienced due to the exclusion in school and racialized incidents that stemmed from her being different due to her Indianness.

Similar to Susan's description, Joby, a 20 year old young man who I met in the Indian ethnic church, described his experience growing up.

Joby: I have never had an experience where anyone was like- 'okay you are an Indian so we don't want to be your friends', but you know, as guys we joke. We want to be tough, so we don't really show our feelings. I mean, kids in my school

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<sup>4</sup> The Victorian style furnishing in Indian houses also represented (middle) class status within the colonial identity (Desai and Lang 2012)

would ask me ‘so do you own a 7-Eleven?’ or they would be like ‘Joby go home and get some curry’, and all that was okay. I remember one guy from my class used to call me slumdog, well I gave him a nickname too. But then sometimes they would be like ‘oh you smell bad’, common stuff like that is sometimes just way too much.

Joby also grew up in the suburbs. During our interview, he described being called a ‘7-Eleven’ or ‘slumdog’, experiences similar to others whom I interviewed. But unlike Susan and Molly, Joby did not really show his frustration when describing these experiences. This difference in talking about their experiences in school was evident between the men and women in my study. While Susan, Molly and other women expressed frustration and often angrily described these encounters to me. Joby and other men on the other hand showed ambivalence when they talked about such incidents. Joby’s response of ‘all that was okay’ supports this point. As evident from his description, for Joby, dealing with these prejudices without being angry about it was part of his ‘masculine identity’ (Pascoe 2007). By engaging in an exclusionary and derogatory discussion and insulting each other Joby was also engaging in masculinizing practices that asserted his masculine self (Pascoe 2007:156).

Jacob, a 28 year old young man, described his ambivalence when I asked him about his experiences in school. He says:

Jacob: In school, calling names [racial epithets] was so normal. Oh yeah, that is like a norm (laughs). I mean they [American peers] would make fun of my name and everything. Like in middle school and elementary school I remember, I was always called a 7-Eleven, Gandhi or Hindu. I mean they think because I am an Indian, I have to be a Hindu that is just so annoying

Jacob described his reaction recalling the experiences he had in school. Similar to Joby, Jacob did not express frustration or anger when describing his experiences in

school. One explanation about this difference in ways men and women described their experiences might be that because of my gender identity as a woman, women participants felt comfortable expressing themselves, while the men did not. But when thinking sociologically, this difference also contributes to our understanding of how gender is expressed and reproduced through social interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987).

It is interesting to note that, even though Joby and Jacob normalize the prejudicial encounters to assert their masculine selves of 'being tough', at the same time they also describe feeling hurt or annoyed. This negotiation between their 'masculine self' and being identified as 'other' contributed to shaping their lives as Christian Indian-Americans. The young men and women in my study emphasized their religious identity to negotiate this contradiction. I describe the formation and emphasis of this religious identity among my participants in my next chapter.

### **Being Brown, Indian and 'Not' a Hindu**

Stereotyped images about Indianness create markers of differences between Indian-Americans and their American peers that I analyze in this chapter. In my study, I found that these markers of difference informed the racial position of my participants in the U.S. Through my participants' narrative, I find that the epithets of '7-Eleven', 'curry', 'slumdog', 'Gandhi' for Indian-Americans and describing them as 'smelling bad' structurally positions these groups as 'the other' in America.

During the interviews, many of the participants described incidents when their American peers apart from calling them epithets like '7-Eleven', 'curry', 'slumdog', 'Gandhi' also called them 'Hindu'. For these second-generation Indian-Americans, who

grew up in America and in a Christian community, encounters of being called a Hindu become an imposed boundary that complicates their identity as Christian Americans. Williams (2012:8) points out how white Christian American seems like a natural fit for most Americans which puts groups such as Indian-Americans in a complex position of being ‘the other’, where they have to constantly explain their statuses.

Studies about second-generation immigrants in America describe the role of racial labeling and stereotypes shaping the lives of second-generation immigrants (Tuan 1998; Wu 2002; Purkayastha 2005; Kim 2006). Tuan (1998:156) in her study on third and later generation Chinese and Japanese Americans argues that irrespective of successive generation, Asian ethnics face societal expectations to be ethnic and feel pressured to identify themselves along ethnic lines. In my study, I found that my participants faced the pressure to be aware of their ethnic identity as Indians. These experiences were further complicated, because they were also characterized as a Hindu and thus the ‘*mysterious other*’ due to the ‘Oriental’ image attached to Hinduism (Prashad 2000:18). A sampling of these experiences further describes these exclusions.

Priya: Students would ask me, where are you from? And what do you speak at home and questions like that. They knew something like rice goes together with Indian. A lot of them thought I was a Hindu. Actually a lot of them thought I was a Hindu. That was actually frustrating. Why would they think I am a Hindu? That used to make me so angry.

[Question: How did it make you angry?]

Priya: Because that is not what I believe in. I am a Christian.

A common point in all the narratives included in this chapter is the frustration participants expressed when called a ‘Hindu’ and being referred to as ‘brown’. Participants described that they were labelled as ‘7 –Eleven’ or ‘Gandhi’ and many

described encounters when they were asked questions about the Indian culture because of their Indianness. However, what struck me was that while participants like Priya, Jacob, Molly and Susan described their prejudicial experiences growing up, the label that got them most annoyed was being called a 'Hindu'. Majority of my study participants (N=19) described this resentment.

My findings point to two explanations for their frustration of being called a 'Hindu'. First, for these young men and women growing up in their Christian ethnic religious community reinforces their religious identity as a Christians, which they hold onto as they shape their identity in America. Due to the difference in faith and religious practices, they resist being identified as a Hindu. Secondly, due to differences in food habits (not consuming beef) and language<sup>5</sup>, participants in my study found themselves to be different from their Indian Hindu peers. Priya's narrative emphasizes the religious and cultural difference.

Priya: If I was eating a burger, they (American peers) would be like 'oh why are you eating a [beef] burger, don't you worship that [cow]'? And I would be like, 'what are you talking about', that would get me so angry. This whole cow thing gosh, and I am not even a Hindu.

Priya describes her frustration when she was questioned for eating beef. Since she was 'assumed' to be a Hindu by her American peers, consuming beef was seen as disrupting the Hindu religious practice<sup>6</sup>. The conflict with the religious cultural practice attached to Hinduism and its conflation with Indianness was exemplified for my

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<sup>5</sup> Hindi is a national language in India but is predominantly spoken in North India. In South India, the regional language holds prominence. Malayalam is the language widely spoken in the state of Kerala.

<sup>6</sup> In Hindu religion, cow is identified sacred and thus many Hindus refrain from slaughtering cows or consuming beef (Kurien 2007; p 126)

participants because of their Christian religious identity. Unlike Hindus, Christians and Muslims consume beef. However, the pervasive image that the cow is worshipped by everyone in India frames all Indian-Americans as either vegetarian or not eating beef. For my study participants who grew up in America, being framed with this image caused confusion and frustration.

Another important aspect that needs to be pointed out is examining the formation of 'Hindu' as a racialized label in the U.S. Maira (2002:5) argues that to perceive the formation of 'Hindu' as derogatory label, it is important to examine it within the history of migration of South Asians as colonial subjects of the British. Migration of Indians to the U.S. is not a recent phenomenon. However, Indians who arrived in the United States prior to 1965 Immigration Act were often British colonial subjects (Prashad 2000:71; Kurien 2007:42). Mostly men and overwhelmingly Sikhs, these immigrants were often identified as 'unacceptable migrants' (Prashad 2000:72; Kurien 2007:42- 43). Maira (2005:5) points out that initially this label 'Hindoo' as a (racial) category was used to identify all Asian Indians and its rampant use in succeeding years has reinforced the stereotype image that all Indians are Hindus. Scholars such as Maira (2005:3-6) and Purkayastha (2005:99- 100) have briefly described the marginalization that second generation non-Hindu Indian-Americans experience from the hegemonic version of Indians being Hindus.

In the United States, apart from being used as a racial epithet, 'Hindu' was also used by the U.S. census until around 1960 to classify all those who identified as 'Indian' to be groups as 'Hindu' race (Kurien 2007:251; Gupta 1999: 86). Kurien (2007: 42)

argues that despite the fact that among the early migrants only 5 percent had Hindu backgrounds, by grouping all South Asians as Hindu signified that religion, language, culture were not important markers.

During the interviews it became apparent that participants were aware of the hegemonic religious assertion of Hindu as coterminous with Indian identity and its resulting pejorative use. They talked about their school years and reading books that described Hinduism as mystical, exotic religion representing India. Others also talked about the popular TV cartoon series *The Simpsons* and the character Apu depicted as a heavily Indian accented, Hindu immigrant owning a 7-Eleven. According to my participants, these derogatory representation of Indians as mythical, heavily accented Hindu immigrants framed the public perception of all Indians as Hindus. Thus, in spite of being Christian, my participants faced dual marginalization within American society because of their Indian ethnic status their and presumed Hindu identity. I found that while participants expressed their frustration when called a 'Hindu', they also took upon themselves to draw boundaries between their Indianness and the assumed Hindu image by emphasizing their Christian identity to the larger American society.

I met Jibin through snowball sampling. Jibin is a 30 year old young man, he finished his Master's in Business Management and now works in a firm at a manager level. Due to his busy schedule, I did the interview during my ride with him to his nondenominational church. Similar to other participants, Jibin also described incidents in his middle school when he was called a 7-Eleven, Gandhi and Hindu. When I asked him what it was about being called a Hindu annoyed him. He explained:

Jibin: It is not that being called a Hindu is bad, I respect other religions, but here, kids in this American culture, don't see Hindu as a different religion, they use it as a derogatory term. They relate Hinduism as worship [ing] of gods like Shiva and Ganesh and other stuff and they see all Indians as Hindu. They use it derogatorily, which is offensive. For me being called a Hindu is like calling a German as Hitler.

Jibin pointed to the offensive way 'Hindu' label has been used in the U.S. He describes his awareness of stereotypes Americans have about Indians as being Hindu. However, what remains striking is that, while Jibin correctly describes Hinduism as a religion that worships Shiva and Ganesh, he also attempts to separate himself from this religious practice because he does not worship those Gods. For Jibin, his Christian teachings and beliefs are in opposition to the religious practice of worshipping Shiva and Ganesh (idol worship), which is why he finds being called a Hindu 'offensive'. Thus, Jibin objects to being called a 'Hindu' on religious grounds. This shifting of boundaries between religious, ethnic and racial identities is a prominent phenomenon that shapes the lives of second-generation Indian-Americans.

Jibin, similar to many of the participants is a devout Christian. While he grew up in an Indian ethnic church, Jibin had become a member of a nondenomination Evangelical church. As described earlier, for Jibin, one of the reasons for his frustration at being called a Hindu was also because of the clash of religious practices. During the interview Jibin stressed his identity as a 'believer', which he formed through his participation in American evangelical Christianity (Busto 1996). The increasing participation of second-generation Asian ethnic and Indian-American groups in American evangelical fellowship and ministries, has been discussed by scholars such as Kim (2006); Kurien (2012) and Min (2010), who describe the formation of ethnic religious

identity among second-generation groups. However, the important aspect that I point to in my paper is how participants use their identity as ‘believer’ to negotiate racialized experiences. I talk in detail about the formation of this new religious ethnic identity in my next chapter.

### **I Am a Christian: Challenging the Imposed ‘Hindu’ Identity**

Binil: They would call me a Hindu and I would be like “dude I am wearing a freaking rosary man” and I am a Catholic, and I have a tattoo of a cross on my arm too

Jisha: Lot of the people assumed I was a Hindu. It was weird in the beginning. But I knew later on that it was because I was an Indian that they assumed I was a Hindu. So, I started wearing a cross, so they know that I am not a Hindu.

Challenging their prejudicial experiences by affirming their Christian identity was a prominent finding in my study. While participants expressed their frustration and ambivalence when called a ‘Hindu’, they also actively tried to challenge these experiences by affirming their Christian identity. Priya defended herself as, ‘Not being a Hindu’, by asserting her faith. Others like Binil and Jisha, emphasized religious symbols such as the cross worn around their neck to form boundaries and separate themselves from the imposed Hindu identity. In their work on examining religious identity and the practice of wearing hijab among American Muslim women, Williams and Vashi (2007) describe hijab as a religious and cultural symbol that American Muslim women use to negotiate their religious, cultural identity as imagined by the larger society. They further argue that hijab as a symbol also informs the formation an autonomous self for these Muslim women, who actively participate in resisting assimilation to create an identity for themselves (283).

While Binil and Jisha emphasized their identity of Christianity through use of religious symbols such as a cross, other participants such as Bindu, George and Susan took steps to dramatically assert their primary Christian religious identity.

Bindu: I remember one time my [Indian church] friends and I were having this conversation with our parents. We asked them [parents] whether they would want us to marry a white Christian or a Malayalee Hindu. Some of the parents said Malayalee Hindu and that was so disturbing [for us]. We were so taken back, I mean they really don't see the difference. They are only about traditions and I don't really like it. I mean how can you marry someone who is not a believer?

George: I was in relationship before I became a believer. I was dating a Gujarati girl and she was a Hindu, so she was not a believer, and I was culturally a Christian because I grew up in our [ethnic Indian] church, and I did not know what it was to be a follower of Jesus. But after I became a believer, I ended my relationship with her and started focusing on Lord in my life. At that point of time I did go through the painful breakup time but I knew it was the right thing to do. There was more peace in my life after doing that.

Susan: I don't think my brother can marry a Hindu girl. Oh no that's not even like a possibility. I am sure my parents would not be okay with that but I don't think that it is possible. Also in the Bible it is written that you are not supposed to marry someone of an unequal yoke. It is not good for your relationship to have somebody different.

In my interviews, men and women who were active in either campus ministries or nondenominational evangelical churches used religious ideologies to separate themselves from other non-Christian groups, especially Hindu Indian-Americans. Bindu and Susan both are active members of the campus ministry in their respective universities but they also attend their Indian ethnic church when they are visiting their parents in the suburbs. George on the other hand has moved out of the ethnic Indian church and is now an active member of a nondenomination evangelical church.

To exemplify this further, I want to point to an oppositional narrative used by Bindu and Susan to describe how they felt about marrying a Hindu man. They both use

religious narratives and ideologies while describing themselves as ‘believers’ and Hindus as ‘unequal yoke’<sup>7</sup>. However, during my field study both Bindu and Susan along with other young women often curiously asked me about my own marriage to a Hindu man and were curious to know how I got away from my parents’ wrath for dating and marrying a Hindu man. Their curiosity shows how my study participants as devout Christians were entrenched in their social location of being ‘a believer’ that it was almost inconceivable for them to meet a Christian woman who was married to a Hindu man. Since these women remained within the social control of their ethnic community it was also hard for them to conceive how I as a Malayalee Christian woman could date and marry a Hindu and still successfully escape my parent’s wrath.

Busto (1996) discusses the growing influence of American evangelism and the ideology of becoming a ‘believer’ among Asian ethnic groups. Scholars such as Kim (2006) and Kurien (2012) have further discussed the attractiveness of American denominationalism in recent years that enables many second-generation Christian immigrants to frame a religious identity for themselves. These scholars point to the use of evangelical ideologies by these groups to assert their religious identity, while separating their religious from their ethnic identity.

Kurien (2012) also describes how her young Indian-American Christians participants influenced by American evangelism form a Christian identity and come together as a group. She argues that by forming a group, her participants resist identifying themselves in racial terms (4). She argues “The contemporary second-generation

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase ‘Unequal yoke’ comes from the Bible passage that talks about ‘unbelievers’ (<http://bible-truths.com>)

incorporates into U.S. society by maintaining their ethnic identities in secular contexts, but they adopt a de-ethnicized, individualized, religious identity and practice” (19). Both Kim (2006) and Kurien’s (2012) work supports my argument that my study participants as racial-ethnic groups emphasize their religious identity and shape their lives to adopt a religious-ethnic identity in America. My study shows that my participants use religious symbols to assert their individualized religious identity and thereby to challenge their position within the American racial hierarchy. I would argue that as brown and not black, and as Christians, along with their middle class status, my participants by forming their individualized religious identity are responding to their racial positioning in the U.S.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Anthias (1992) defines racialization as “the process by which a population that is regarded as having an ethnic commonality becomes imbued with a fixed character” (434). This argument supports my finding that the Christian Indian-American participants in my study are racialized when called a Hindu because of their Indian ethnic identity. My participants are middle class and as Christians can be considered part of the dominant American religious group. However, in their interactions with the American society their Indianness and the presumed Hindu religious identity takes precedence over their middle class and Christian identity. This is often perceived by my participants as what I refer to as “dual marginalizing”. My participants’ narratives about their experiences with race and racism in the U.S. reveal that as Indians they are racially marginalized by their American peers. They are weighed down with negative racial stereotype such as working in a Dunkin Donut, 7-Eleven or being called a slumdog. At the same time, the conflation of

Indian ethnic identity with Hindu identity subjects them to being marginalized further. My participants were often jeered for worshiping cows and deities – negative connotations that are associated with being a Hindu in the popular discourse. These form of racial marginalization as a consequence of their presumed religious and ethnic-racial identity leads to dual marginalization. My participant’s narratives show that they actively resist the Hindu identity, an identity that they don’t own and hence can deny. As Christians they work towards separating their religious identity from their ethnicity and their presumed Hindu religious identity that is attached to it and emphasize forming an American Christian identity. My study participants thereby challenge their position as the ‘other’ ascribed due to their presumed religious identity.

Sociologists discuss how new ethnic groups challenge conception of the other defined in America because of groups’ race or religion. For example, in her work on West Indian immigrants, Waters (1999) describes the evocation of ‘ethnic options’ by her participants as a way of contesting meaning attached by the larger American society that identified them within the binary racial categorization of white and black in America. Similarly, Williams and Vashi (2007) describe wearing of hijab, by second-generation American Muslim women as a way of “creating cultural space for the development of autonomous selves” (285). These scholars describe how ethnic minorities resist their positioning as the other in America. In my study, participants draw symbolic boundaries to separate themselves from their racialized image of an Indian-American universalized as Hindu. The young men and women interviewed, claim their Christian identity by wearing religious symbols like a cross or the rosary. This boundary work describes the

efforts my participants make toward separating themselves from their presumed Hindu religious identity. I argue that my participants stress their Christian identity as an attempt to distance themselves from their image of 'the other' in so far as they can claim to be part of the dominant identity as Christians in America.

In this chapter, I argue that my participants as Indian-Americans though Christian and yet presumed to be Hindu face dual marginalization within the American society. I argue that my participants are not passive sufferers. They actively resist being dually marginalized by using their religion as an effective cultural toolkit to do boundary work. I describe how my study participants stress their American Christian identity to navigate their marginalization experiences. To further examine this navigation process and how my participants negotiate their ethnic and religious identity, it is imperative to understand how they frame and strengthen their religious identity. I discuss this in my next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “I DON’T WANT TO THINK OF MY CHRISTIAN LIFE AS MY RELIGION, I JUST WANT IT TO BE MY LIFE”: SECOND-GENERATION INDIAN-AMERICANS

#### FRAMING THEIR RELIGIOUS LIVES

Gini: I don’t agree with the liturgy [in the ethnic church]. Maybe because I don’t understand why we do what we do. I guess we need to understand what is going on, that might help, but then I don’t know. Like the liturgy, the achen (priest) says it and then we repeat after him and that is all to it. There is one point in the liturgy when he says ‘Peace be to you or something like that’ in Malayalam and we like repeat the same thing around six time, just for the service. Just the one stanza, can you imagine that. I think it is pointless at least to me to say things like that [be]cause I just don’t understand what the purpose of it is, it really does not build my faith. If we are going to keep repeating it and not know why we are doing it then it is pointless. Like okay, maybe you can say it three times and get over with it but six times, really. Maybe our parents understand this chanting process better, but we don’t.

Gini came to the United States when she was 2 years old and from a young age she became an active youth member in the Indian Malayalee Syrian Christian church youth group because her parents were already members there. She is now 22, currently pursuing her degree in physiotherapy and lives in an off-campus rental unit with two other roommates who are also from the same Malayalee Indian ethnic community.

In her narrative, Gini was ambivalent when describing the religious practice of ‘repeating biblical words’ in her ethnic church. This sense of doubt and disconnect was described repeatedly by many of the participants who identified such practices as ‘their parents’ ethnic religious practice’. Scholars such as Williams (1996:104), Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000: ch 6), Min (2010: 115) and Warner and Wittner (1998) have described the

emphasis on ritualized religious practices in immigrant religious organizations that allows first-generation immigrants to maintain and reproduce ethnicity for their next generations. Repeating biblical words and syntaxes is part of this ritualized religious practice is customary for first generation immigrants (Williams 1996:192). However, for the second-generation participants like Gini who grew up in America, such practices become a representation of their parents' home country's ethnic religious practices, which they find outdated and culturally strange.

During the interview Gini discussed how being away from her parents allowed her to take time to visit other churches. She said "School was when I was discovering what Christianity is". Similar to Gini, other participants also described their college years as formative years when they built on their Christian faith. Studies done on second-generation Korean Americans have pointed to the rise of American evangelism among these groups. For example: R. Kim cites Jeung (2002) who argues that "contemporary evangelism gives Asian Americans a chance to escape the undesirable aspects of their racial status by making Christianity the locus of their identity" (2006:8). Along the same lines, I find that for my study participants their participation in American evangelism allowed them to focus primarily on their Christian lifestyle. At the same time it also allowed them to separate their religious identity from their Indianness to form a Christian identity that is more popular in America.

Warner and Wittner (1998:23-27) and Chong (1998:280-281) have discussed the intergenerational conflict that exists in ethnic immigrant churches. These scholars have attributed the generational conflict to the cultural differences between the two generations. For example, Chai (1998) argues that first generation immigrants see

Christianity as an ascribed characteristic that accompanies family church membership. On the other hand, the second-generation stress Christian ethics and evangelism. She contends that unlike the first generation immigrants who are deeply connected with their ethnic church, the second-generation are more adjusted to American culture. They can choose from more organizational options that allow them to not be restricted to their ethnic religious organization like their parents are (309-310).

Kurien (2012), Min (2000:141-143) and Kim (2006) have also emphasized the role of American evangelism in the lives of these second-generation Indian and Korean Americans. These scholars argue that the newly formed religious ideologies among these second-generation groups are modeled on American evangelical values that encourage them to build a Christian identity purified of the ethnic cultural traditions (Kurien 2012:2; Kim 2006:9). These two sets of views provide the framework to understand the formation of an evangelical Christian status among Indian-Americans. However, an important aspect that the existing literature does not discuss well and what needs more attention is examining how the life experiences of growing up as second-generation Indian-Americans encourage these young men and women to frame their American evangelical Christian identity that is in contrast to their parents' Christian image.

In this chapter, I describe some of the experiences second-generation Christian Indian-Americans have in their ethnic church. I focus on illustrating how the conflicts with their ethnic community encourage these young men and women to pursue alternative American evangelical ways to build an American Christian identity that is different from their ethnic Christian image.

### Playing the Christian Game

Kurien's (2004) work on second-generation Christian Indian-Americans describes dramatic conversion experiences among her participants (170). She points to the Christian revival religious meetings organized by schools that encourage young men and women to focus on having a personal relationship with Christ. Other scholars such as Kim (2006:42- 48) and Min (2010:142- 145) also illustrated the influence of American evangelism through campus ministries and fellowships on second-generation Korean Americans. A common aspect that these scholars illustrate is ways in which second generation Indian and Korean Americans use American evangelical ideologies to express their alienation from their parents' ethnic church. Philip, a young man, described his experience

Philip: For most of my life I regularly attended St. Luke church. I would regularly come and sit in the front [for the liturgy service] when in the church. Sunday school competitions and in everything I always got first position. Doing all these things kind of engraved into me that this is what Christianity is all about. But as I grew older I realized that I was not really a true Christian.

Q: How did you have this realization?

Philip: I realized this when we had our regional conference and we had this Asian pastor who talked about the importance of being a true Christian. That really opened my eyes. I really understood what Christianity actually was and it wasn't about things I can do or how good I can be, because in the end we all are sinful, no matter how good we are. That is when I learnt like it is not about religion anymore, it is about the relationship with my Lord, the Savior.

Philip in his narrative points to two important aspects of being a true Christian.

First is the emphasis on achievements that ethnic communities use to reproduce through ethnic religious practices, such as Sunday school competitions. Second is the realization of being a true Christian that Philip points to, which he attains from attending the regional conference. Examining these two aspects illustrates how the model minority status and

identity for these young men and women are tied to their Indianness and their American Christian religious identity.

### **Being Number One in Competitions**

Philip and other participants described the pressure they faced from their ethnic community to achieve academic and occupational success. In his narrative, Philip illustrates how this message influenced his understanding of what an [Indian] Christian should be. Philip and others in my study described this emphasis on high achievement a cultural tradition that they said represented their parent's home country values and beliefs. While describing this expression on achievement within an Indian cultural context allowed the second-generation participants to express the intergenerational conflict with their parents, they also identified it as one of reasons for feeling disconnected with their ethnic church.

As Jacob, another participant describes similar feelings of being disconnected. He says

Jacob: I was baptized in this church. You are born in this church so you are automatically in there, it is not a choice. I guess growing up in an immigrant church, I feel like we get molded to play the Christian game where you have to do certain things and not think about whether we are being saved or not. Here you have to go to Sunday school, participate in all competitions, go to the church and only then God will love us. That is our understanding. It is like we are saved by our own efforts by being number one in competitions and things like that. That was what the perception or the idea I had, growing up. So as long as you keep up with the church activities you are a Christian.

Philip and Jacob's narrative describe a manifestation of the model minority status that was prominent in their ethnic community. They both point to the reinforcement of high achievements as a characteristic of their ethnic community. Kibria (2002:53) and

Purkayastha (2005:93) note that this emphasis on achievement among Asian and South Asian Americans is often explained with reference to cultural traditions that promote formation of an ethnic identity that is different from the American identity as well as a racial minority identity. Purkayastha (2005:93) argues that within the South Asian community, some parents insist on high achievement for their children so that they become better than their white peers and also superior to other racial minorities.

In their work on second-generation Vietnamese, Zhou and Bankston (1998:105) also discuss the mechanism of social control that is imposed on the second-generation. They point to various channels of community and family networks that directed second generation Vietnamese Americans to form constructive patterns of behavior and ‘adapt to American society the Vietnamese way which is by not becoming too American’ (151). Similar forms of social control through religious and ethnic practices were described by participants like Philip and Jacob. However, unlike their ethnic community that emphasized social control as part of their ethnic religious identity, the second -generation viewed these practices as ‘cultural’ that established their ethnic identity but not their religious identity. Also, for second generations, who are more acclimatized to the American lifestyle, with independence to individuals, these cultural traditions with focus on high achievement and forming an ethnic identity remain at odds with their American identity.

Having the ambition to do well academically and occupationally is a focus that many immigrant parents have for their children. This focus emerges from their own experience of immigrating to a foreign country, their struggles, and working towards

adapting to the host country lifestyle (Kibria 2002:53). Unlike their parent's life experiences, the second generation faces different sets of experiences growing up as Indian-Americans and thus feels conflicted between their ethnic community views and the larger American culture. Joshi (2006) in her study of second-generation Indian-Americans finds a similar trend. She described how her young Indian-American participants felt caught up between their ethnic religious ideologies and the Christian American religious views. She argues "Because of the contrast between what religion 'should be' (the American Christian view) and what their religions looked like, and because of deficiencies of their own religious self-understanding, many Indian-Americans began questioning their home faith late in high school or college years" (29). Gini, Philip, and Jacob's narratives point to this complex process that Christian Indian-Americans undergo growing up in America.

For many immigrant communities academic and occupational achievement is idealized because it supports being better minorities in America (Kibria 2002; Purkayastha 2005). Since the ethnic church is an important ethnic space for Indian immigrants this emphasis was also laid out within their ethnic church. This mixing of emphasis on being a Christian, an Indian as well as doing well in academic and career wise allowed the second-generation to view their ethnic Indian church more as a cultural space than as a religious space.

### **Realizing What 'True' Christianity Is**

Philip and others in my study described their active participation in college campus ministries. Similar to Philip who previously pointed to the influence of a regional

conference, other participants also described similar realizations after they attended

revival religious events or after they visited a non-ethnic church. As George describes:

George: Our church is very different, it is very different hmm.. like it is very much same thing every week. It is very mechanical. I knew it was not making any impact on my life. So I was looking for an option at that point of time. That is when a friend of mine invited me to her church, they had like a Wednesday night youth ministry. So I started going there and I really started growing. The worship spoke to me.

George compares his experience in both the ethnic as well in the American youth ministry. By negatively describing the liturgical religious practices of his Orthodox Indian church and identifying it as ‘mechanical’, George compares it with the evangelical church worship that he now attends where the focus is on singing and reading the Bible. Unlike the ritualized worship in ethnic churches, American evangelical churches focus more on contemporary forms of worship that include live music with a band playing drums, electric guitars and keyboard (Kim 2006:45-46). The American evangelical services were also “informal, anti-liturgical, anti-ceremonial, which was different from the service practiced in ethnic Indian churches” (Kurien 2012:p4). Several participants also focused on their need to “spiritually grow”, “be saved” and “build their Christian life”. By stressing the building of these aspects of their life, these young men and women, not only described their “individualist perspective of contemporary spiritualism and evangelism” (Kurien 2012:p17), they also focused on forming their Christian identity which was in parallel with the American Christian image (Williams 2012).

The rise of nondenominational evangelical Christianity among second-generation Asian and Indian-Americans has been described by scholars such as Kurien (1998; 2012), Min (2010) and Kim (2006) who point to the adaptation of evangelical praise and

worship style to focus on forming a Christian identity as a prominent characteristic among second-generation Asian, Indian Christian Americans. For the young participants in my study finding a non-Indian religious space was an important step for them to separate their ethnic lifestyle from their religious image. Deemphasizing their ethnic identity by practicing their religion in a non-ethnic evangelical church was also a way for them to emphasize their Christian image.

Even though many of the young men and women in my study participated in both the ethnic as well as American nondenominational evangelical church, some (N= 5) (see Table 1-c) had left their ethnic church to become members of an American nondenominational church. Interestingly the five participants who left their ethnic church were men. This suggests that there may be gendered boundaries of exit that exists for men and women within religious settings.

### **Strategically Navigating Gendered Boundaries**

During my interviews, I found that both men and women expressed their desire to leave their ethnic church and move to a non-ethnic church where they could strengthen their Christian identity. However, unlike the men who actively participated in their non-ethnic church when compared to their ethnic church, I found that women tried to balance their participation in both ethnic and non-ethnic church and at the same time held leadership positions in their ethnic church. Among the men whom I interviewed, five of them had already left their ethnic church for their nondenominational church. However, I did not come across any women who had left their ethnic church. On the other hand, what I found was that women expressed their desire to leave their church once they got

married. For instance Priya who attends service at other non-ethnic churches, is also an active member of the ethnic church. In the interview she talks about her commitment to her ethnic church and expresses her thoughts on leaving it. She says:

Priya: The thing that makes me stay is the youth group and the younger kids; they need us to guide them through to the Lord. These kids, as they are growing up, they see this as the church only [and not a place to learn about Christianity] and that is not what church should be about. Also my parents, they want us to go to the church as a family until we are married off to whoever we are married but till then they want us to worship together as a family. And I completely understand that.

Priya's narrative reveals two important arguments that describe how women navigate through conservative religion and the agency that they have in this approach (George 1998; Banerjee 2007; Avishai 2008). Priya as an active youth group member describes her commitment to the youth group. The obligation that Priya mentions about 'guiding the younger youth through the Lord' also describes her commitment to the leadership role she has in the church. Priya was not only an active youth member, but she was also a member of the choir group. Thus, her leadership roles and commitment encouraged Priya to stay in the ethnic church.

Another important point that Priya talks about is the possibility of her leaving the ethnic church when she gets married. Many of the women participants during the interviews talked about the possibility of leaving their ethnic church and avoiding the condemnation from their community by marrying a man who is active in a nondenominational church. Even though these women expressed their desire to marry an Indian Christian man, they were determined about marrying a man of their choice. Thus, I found that the women strategically navigated through the expectation of their parents, ethnic church and community. While they held leadership positions in the ethnic church

giving the confidence to their ethnic community about their dedicated involvement to their ethnic church, they also participated in nondenominational evangelical American churches. But more interestingly unlike the men who left the ethnic church for a nondenominational American church and were often condemned for it, the women on the other hand had an exit plan which none of the men talked about during the interviews.

### **Framing Their Christian Image: Being a Believer**

Jaya: I don't like the word religious. I don't want to think of my Christian life as my religion. I just want it to be my life. Religion is just the ritual aspect of doing things but my Christian life is about serving the Lord.

Manuel: Growing up I really did not have the relationship with Jesus Christ. I did not know what that meant. I did not see it well. I kind of saw it as something that is done because it is a tradition, so just do it. It is like you have been raised to do it. I mean people make it all complex but it is really simple being saved you know, it is like science, you connect all the dots and that is it. I mean Jesus did not just die for us; he died so he could live through us. That is why I am not just someone who just goes to church and that is it. I am a believer.

The comments above point the emphasis Jaya and Manuel put on building a Christian identity. A common aspect that the young men and women in my study describe is the importance of building this Christian life that is separate from their ethnic community Christian practices. My study suggests that building this image is important for these men and women for two reasons. First it allows them to separate themselves from an Indianness that is imposed on them by the larger American culture that identifies them as Hindus. Second, building on this image allows them to establish themselves as Christians that is largely supported in America due to the rise in nondenominational evangelical Christianity (Kurien 2012:2) and gives them some separation from their parents that is part of growing up. Kurien (2012) describes this phenomenon as becoming

“de-ethnicized” (p 16). She defines becoming ‘de-ethnicized’ as “shedding ethnic languages, theologies, and worship cultures, to adopt the theology, music, and worship practices of white, upper-middle- class evangelicals” (2012:19).

Kurien (1998), Min (2010) and Kim (2006) have described the influence of American evangelism in the lives of second-generation Indian and Korean Americans. These scholars have pointed to the intergenerational, cultural differences and contemporary American spiritual seeking views as primary reasons for this shift in religious orientation between the two generations. However, there is a larger argument that needs to be addressed when we discuss this growing phenomenon of American evangelism among non-white racial, ethnic groups such as Indian-Americans. This argument is about examining how racial identity for Indian-Americans is intertwined with their religious identity. Being considered a Hindu and thus “the other” leads second-generation Indian-Americans to negotiate their American status order by asserting their American Christian religious identity.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Williams (2012) argues “while racialized conceptions of the other continue to matter in American culture and politics, it is pertinent to examine how these racialized images are bound up with religious and cultural identity and a civil religious sense of who is really American” (15). In the previous chapter I discussed the dual marginalization experienced by my participants due to their Indianness and presumed Hindu identity. In this chapter I described how the young Christian men and women in my study felt disconnected from the cultural emphasis in their ethnic church. I argue that

they felt disconnected because unlike their parents, they were more acculturated to the American lifestyle and practices. Even though my participants were more adapted to the American lifestyle, they were still distinguished for their Indianness by the friends and peers during their high school years. My data suggests that this form of prejudice influenced their lives growing up in America. For these young Christian men and women it became important to identify themselves as American Christians to resist being identified as the other due to their presumed religious identity of Hindu. They latched to their American Christian identity and separated it from their Indianness. My participants, through this negotiated process worked towards affirming their autonomous identity as Christian Malayalee-Indian-Americans

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RELIGION AND RACE IN AMERICA: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, I examined middle class, second generation Christian Malayalee Indian-Americans negotiate their ethnic, racial and religious identities in America. While I explored how middle class racial minorities such as second generation Indian-Americans frame their ethnic, religious and American identities, I focused on understanding the constraints they face being Indian Christians in America. My study shows that religion along with race becomes an important marker of exclusion for my second generation Christian Indian-Americans. My main finding is that my study participants form and emphasize their American Christian identity. The young Indian-American men and women in my study resist the mainstream American perception of being identified as Hindus. I find that they separate their religious and ethnic identity and prioritize their American evangelical Christian identity.

In her work on ‘connecting race and ethnic phenomenon within a multiculturalist context,’ Floya Anthias (1992) argues:

“Race categorization divided population in terms of stock or the collective heredity of traits. Although a common boundary marker for race categorisation is phenotypical difference, such as colour of skin or physiognomy, this need not always be the case. A group may be regarded or regard itself as a separate ‘race’ by using its culture, history, language, territory or *religion* as the boundary marker. Racialisation as a concept therefore is only useful if it depicts the process by which groups become socially constructed as ‘races’”(433).

Anthias's argument guides the framing of the racialization framework when studying racial minority groups in the U.S. In my study, I use racialized ethnicity model as described by Anthias (1992) and illustrated by Purkayastha (2005) and Kibria (2002). Both Purkayastha (2005) and Kibria (2002) demonstrate how middle class racial minority groups such as Asian and South Asian Americans are racialized in the U.S. due to their phenotypes or cultural stereotypes. Both these scholars discuss how their participants negotiate multiple layers of identities as racial, ethnic minorities to form their identity as racialized ethnic Americans. In my study, I extend this analysis to include how religion becomes a marker of difference categorizing groups as 'the other' in America. My participants as Indian-Americans are ethnic, racial minorities in the U.S., however, as Christians they are part of the majority religious groups identifying American. Thus, the examination of religion as a marker of difference for racial ethnic groups describes the structural constraints middle class minorities such as Christian Indian-Americans face in spite of holding a majority religious status.

In this section I describe how religion and race complicates the lives of second generation Christian Indian-Americans. I begin by briefly summarizing the findings and analysis from my study. I then proceed to discussing the theoretical implication of the experiences shared by my participants and present some of the limitation of my study. I conclude by describing the contribution my study makes when examining the integration of second-generation ethnic racial minorities in the U.S. and point to some possible future directions for this research.

I started this qualitative study to examine the role of religion and religious organization in the lives of second generation Malayalee Christian Indian-Americans.

However, during my interviews I came across my study participants describing feeling frustrated when called a Hindu by their peers. My analysis shows that since my participants were Christians, being labeled as a Hindu by their peers, not only structurally positioned them as the other due to their assumed religious status in the American society but it also conflicted with their Christian religious identity. I argued that as Christian Indian Americans, my participants were dual marginalized due to their racial-ethnic status of being brown and Indians and due to their presumed Hindu religious identity.

### **Summary of Findings and Analysis**

In chapter two, I described how second generation Christian Indian-Americans in spite of being Christian and middle class American, were grouped as ‘the other’. I argued that for my study participants, apart from being brown and Indian in America, their exclusion was also based on their presumed religious identity of being a Hindu which was associated with their Indianness. To illustrate my argument, I used previous studies done on Muslims Americans (Williams and Vashi 2007; Selod 2012) as a framework to describe how religions such as Hindu(ism) becomes ‘the other’ in America. I argued that this exclusion occurs because Indians and Hindus and as non- white, non- Christian don’t fit into the larger cultural understanding of who an American is- ‘white Christian American’. In my study, I also discuss how my study participants negotiate these multilayered identities of being an Indian, Christian and an American. I have shown that even though my participants were labeled as ‘the other’ due to their presumed Hindu religious identity and their Indianness, they opposed it by accentuating their Christian identity and forming an American evangelical Christian identity.

To illustrate how my study participants emphasized and formed their American Christian identity, in chapter three I discussed the role and influence of nondenominational American evangelism in the lives of second generation Indian-Americans. I described my study participants separating religion from ethnicity while laying emphasis on forming a Christian image purified of ethnic cultural traditions. I argued that this identity is not only similar to an American white- middle class Christian image but more importantly for my participants this Christian identity is different from their parent's ethnic Christian image. I discussed the generational and cultural conflict participants had with their ethnic community. I pointed to the emphasis on model minority status in Indian-American ethnic communities. Since my participants were acclimated to the American lifestyle and practices, they viewed this emphasis on high achievement and becoming model minority from their ethnic community as a cultural practice. Further, feeling disconnected from their ethnic church due to their language and cultural barrier pushed my study participants towards American evangelism that preached forming an individual, non- ethnic Christian identity.

### **Theoretical Implication**

My study describes the complicated intertwining of race and religious identity for my participants. Through my interviews, I find that second generation Malayalee Christian Indian-Americans are struggling to form a Christian identity in America. Because of their racial and ethnic image of being a brown Indian my study participants get racially labeled by their peers. During their school years, they describe being called epithets such as '7-Eleven', 'curry', 'slumdog', 'Gandhi' and 'Hindu' by their peers.

Even though such pejorative labels are used by their peers my participants describe being most frustrated when called a Hindu. Through analysis, I illustrate two primary reasons for this frustration. First, because my study participants grew up in a Christian ethnic religious community, it reinforced their Christian religious identity, allowing them to embrace evangelical Christian theological knowledge that preached against practices like idol worship, which is a Hindu religious practice. Secondly, as ethnic Christian Americans, they resisted their Indianness and thus objected to being called a Hindu and counter prejudice in America.

In chapter two, I pointed to the blanket image of Hindu that exists for all Indians in America. The categorization of Hindu as a racial identity for Indian-Americans can be traced back to the census, which until 1960's grouped all Indian in the U.S as Hindu, irrespective of their difference in religion such as Sikhs, Jains, Buddhist and Christians. The census removed this categorization sometime after 1960. However, this image remained because large influx of Indian immigrants who migrated since 1960 are also from the Hindu religious background. Though the formation of Hindu identity with Indianness can be attributed to census and the migration pattern, I argued that such stereotyped image has to be framed within the larger sociological understanding of how Hindu as a religion gets portrayed a racial category in America. The frustration described by my participants when called a Hindu and the emphasis they put on forming their American Christian identity supports my argument that for these young men and women, their presumed religious identity of Hindu acted as a racial category. Thus my

participants were structurally positioned as the other in the American society not only because of their race but more importantly because of their presumed religious category.

Only in recent times have scholars started focusing on how religion and race interact to complicate the lives of ethnic, racial and religious minorities. Development of multiple identities among Arab American Muslims and Black Muslims illustrate the complex structural boundaries these groups face due to their racial and religious identities. However, such identities depend on the larger racial and religious discourse prevalent in the United States. My study suggests that religious discourse in America is very much centered on Christianity representing middle class America. This hold true for the men and women in my study who even though they were members of the ethnic Christian community, worked towards separating their ethnicity from their Christian religious identity. Instead of following their ethnic Christian practices, they stressed ideologies of American evangelism.

Limitation: In my study my participants belonged to middle class section of the society thus my study does not capture the complexity class bring in when examining this complex phenomenon of how second generation tread identities. The other critical element that remains to be further explored is how gender operates when examining the negotiating of identities.

### **Theoretical Contribution**

My study contributes to the sociological understanding of how religion and race operates in the United States. I describe how my second generation Christian Malayalee Indian American participants' in spite of being Christians' are dually marginalized in

America. I argue that along with their racial-ethnic status of being brown and Indian, their presumed religious status of being Hindu marginalizes my participants. Within sociology, much of the current discussion about the lives of second-generation ethnic, racial minorities has focused on their integration and assimilation to the American society. Only in recent times have scholars such as Kibria (2002), Purkayastha (2005), Kim (2006) and Williams and Vashi (2007) examined the challenges and limitation second generation middle class ethnic, racial minorities face as they negotiate and frame their ethnic, racial, religious and American identities. My work is a contribution to this emerging literature. Rather than limit myself to the examining the race and ethnicity phenomenon, I include the analysis of religious as an analytical category. My study shows that like race, religion is an important interactive analytical category. I argue that it is imperative to include religion to understand the lives of ethnic racial minorities in the U.S and how they are positioned within the U.S. racial hierarchy.

For future research, I would extend this study to include gender and class within this framework to examine how religion, race, class, ethnicity and gender structurally positions the lives of second generation Indian Americans in the U.S. I would also want to do an intergenerational study and include the parents of my participants to examine the issues of belonging from a generational perspective.

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## VITA

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