Constructing identity, exercising agency in the diaspora: Narratives of Indian women migrants in Melbourne.

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Abstract: *Constructing identity in the diaspora can be fraught with dichotomy, division, and dissent. This paper draws on the migration narratives of Indian women in Melbourne to focus on how they exercise agency to create worthwhile lives for themselves and their families. The narratives suggest dynamic shifts in how the women present themselves to the migrant community as well as how they navigate the networks of mainstream Australian society. By exercising agency the women rationalize hardships, meet challenges, seize opportunities, and build on available support.*

From the standpoint of being from the same cohort group I argue that the Indian woman migrant's identity in Melbourne is a fluid entity. Its construction is based on factors that emanate from who she is: middle-class, English-educated, Western-oriented. Other factors extend to where she comes from and where she now finds herself. These include issues of class and autonomy, race and colour, ethnicity and multiculturalism in India and in Melbourne. Still other factors reflect how the women wish to conduct their lives on a daily basis. All derive from intervening influences such as the impact of technology, the gendered nature of household activities and community expectations regarding socio-cultural reproduction.

I suggest that the Indian woman migrant uses negotiation, compromise and tolerance to be autonomous while fulfilling community expectations, flexible while actually being in control of her life, and self-reflexive while being continuously engaged with her environment.

India-born migrants are significant among the numbers of Skill Stream arrivals that Australia's immigration policy currently favours. Most Indians – particularly migrants in the post-White Australia Policy period – possess the skills to operate in a technologically-advanced environment.[1] Like their spouses, Indian women migrants also tend to be 'upper caste and possess all the attributes of solid middle-class status'.[2] On migration to Melbourne they are seen as migrant women of colour, which historically, is a lower class position in a largely white society.[3] One way of managing this downshift in social status in order to carry on with their everyday lives in a new environment is by constructing personal narratives. By their very nature these narratives re-shape and re-structure experiences into forms that may be inaccurate representations of the reality, yet make sense and become real to the narrator.[4] In this paper I examine the migration narratives of a sample of Indian women migrants from the standpoint of being one myself, and show that individual experiences and social discourses from their time in India are crucial to their day-to-day lives in

Melbourne. As Avtar Brah says, 'the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively'.[5]

Earlier studies have presented an overall view of the Indian community.[6] Others have focused on certain groups such as second generation Indian-Australian women, Hindus and Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, professionals, doctors, and IT professionals.[7] Still, others have focussed on earlier waves of Indian migrants.[8] But apart from Vijaya Joshi's study, none have focused on Indian women migrants. This paper is situated within the gaps in the literature on migrant agency and the experiences of middle-class Indian women migrants in contemporary migration flows to Australia. Here the Indian migrant community is relatively small, recently settled and largely unorganised as compared to Britain, Canada and the US.

The Background

Migration from India to Australia began 150 years ago with small numbers of Indians who arrived with the earliest settlers and the convict ships.[9] The women in this study are migrants from the second wave of Indian migration, which began with the dismantling of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s and continues to this day. It includes Anglo-Indians and 'ethnic' Indians, almost uniformly middle-class and English-educated. They are in sharp contrast to the Italians, another migrant group that was also favoured by Australia's immigration policies in an earlier migration flow. The Italians of the 1950s were the main element of the working class Southern European migrants of that era. During the post-World War II period between 1950 and 1961, 200,000 Italians arrived in Australia.[10] The rural and working class backgrounds of these migrants were reflected in the work that over 80 percent found as labourers or in skilled and semi-skilled jobs.[11]

On the other hand, contemporary Indian migrants come from urban backgrounds and have white-collar jobs, and are representative of the skilled cohort favoured by Australia's current immigration policies. In the 2001 Census of Australia, 95,452 India-born migrants were identified as the second largest group from Asia after the Chinese, and the fifth largest group of migrants overall. This figure is set to increase given that in 2005-2006 Australia's Skill Stream intake, which favours Indian

migration, increased to around 97,000 or 68 percent of the Migration Programme. This was its eighth consecutive increase from 34,600 or 33.6 percent in 1997-1998.[12] Between 1996 and 2001 the India-born population in Victoria increased by 26.3 percent. This represents an annual average growth rate more than four times higher than the 1.1 percent growth for the total Victorian population.[13]

Like other women migrants in Australia most Indians migrate as brides, wives, and/or mothers. Their main purpose is to join husbands in creating homes and raising families with ideals and values similar to their own. Like their spouses, contemporary Indian women migrants are English language educated and technologically-oriented. Unlike the Italian women that Ellie Vasta studied, they are not tied to unskilled work because of low educational levels.[14] Learning English for the Italian women was difficult not only because the jobs they did sapped their energy, but also because the educational background of many immigrants – about half had received a primary education or less – made study difficult.[15]

Census data shows that overall educational levels of Indian women outstrip women in the general Victorian population by more than six times at the post-graduate level and two times for undergraduates.[16] But for diplomas and certificates that are usually career-oriented, Indian women (2.7 percent) are only on par with Victorian women (1.8 percent) at the post-graduate level and below par at lower levels.[17] This could suggest that career progression is not the priority of most India-born women in the labour force.

Table 1: Educational levels: India-born and all women in Victoria

Educational levels	India-born women	All women in Victoria
Post-graduate degrees	11.4%	1.8%
Bachelor degrees	23.6%	10.6%
Grad. diplomas & certificates	2.7%	1.8%
Diplomas, etc.	18.7%	20.7%

Source: Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs, 2003

However, economic activity seems important as reflected in income levels and labour force participation. India-born migrants, both women and men, are fewer than the

general Victorian population at annual income levels below $26,000. But India-born women (6.7 percent) and men (20.7 percent) at income levels of $52,000 and above are more than women (5.4 percent) and men (16.1 percent) from the general Victorian population.[18] Additionally, data sets for India-born women and for all women in Victoria show very little difference with regard to labour force participation, if persons under the age of 15 and non-respondents are excluded. Indeed, there are less India-born women (41.4 percent) who are not in the labour force than there are Victorian women (44.6 percent). Besides, it is unclear how many of the small number of 5.3 percent 'unemployed' India-born women are actually 'hidden' employees in family-run catering and/or grocery businesses. Like South Asian women in the UK who are unpaid workers with unregulated hours, they could be responsible for serving customers, supervising employees and checking stock.[19] Ironically, many of the Italian women whom Vasta studied deskilled from seamstresses and lace-makers, one even losing clerical skills.[20] Others managed businesses for husbands who held down day jobs at factories.[21]

Table 2: Labour force participation: India-born and all women in Victoria

Labour force participation*	**India-born women**	**All women - Victoria**
In the labour force	58.7	55.4
- Employed	*(53.4)*	*(51.9)*
- Unemployed	*(5.3)*	*(3.5)*
Not in the labour force	41.4	44.6
Total	**100**	**100**
Total N	**12,998**	**1,825,569**

*Applicable to persons aged 15 years and over. Persons aged under 15 years and non-respondents not included.
Source: Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs, 2003

The Problem

In this paper I examine the narratives of 24 married women migrants, eight from each of three Indian ethnicities, the Sikhs, the Tamils, and the Anglo-Indians, now living in Melbourne. In Australia's mainstream networks, ethnicity is determined formally as in immigration department regulations, by country of birth, and informally as in social interaction, by country of ancestry. However, in India the elements of 'ethnicity' as understood in the Australian context refers to 'community' and includes groups with common attributes such as language, religion, and region of origin. Hence what is

'multicultural' or 'multi-ethnic' in Australia is called 'inter-communal' in India. The Indian migrant community in Melbourne embraces 'ethnic' differences that are classified as 'communal' in India, 'ethnic groups' that are called 'communities' in India, and individuals of Indian 'ethnicity' who are described as belonging to the Sikh/Tamil/Anglo-Indian/Bengali/Gujarati/Parsee/etc. 'community' in India. In this paper, therefore, this largely semantic problem has been resolved by describing such an individual as being of Sikh/Tamil/Anglo-Indian ethnicity within the Indian migrant community. Differences of language, religion and region of origin are important for the Indian migrant community's ethnic associations and other issues of religious and social culture, which are outside the scope of this paper.

The selection of these particular ethnic groups is based on their migration histories and their large populations according to 2001 Australian Census data. As the history of India and Indic civilisation shows, the Hindu religion has retained its overwhelming position as the majority religion of India through two processes. It manages challenges from other religions through assimilation as sub-cults, which occurred with Buddhism and Jainism. Alternatively, it adopts tolerance towards beliefs and practices of religions such as Islam and Christianity, which resist assimilation. The Hindu religion is able to achieve both assimilation and tolerance due to its own diversity and inclusiveness. Thus oriented, Hinduism has assimilated a range of religious beliefs and practices all bound together by mutual tolerance and a code of ethics, which Indian mass media generally promotes. Hence multiple religious identities as evident in Hindu practices across ethnicities and religions are not unusual among individuals both in India and in the diaspora, but are beyond the scope of this paper.[22] Suffice it to say that for these reasons the differences across ethnicities and religions among Indian women migrants are often limited to cuisine, rituals and to a diminishing degree, language. Similarities are largely linked to 'Hindu' practices, if not beliefs.

The Study

In exercising agency in order to construct identities for themselves, the women often come up against the patriarchy within the Indian migrant community. Much of the input for challenging this patriarchy emanates from the women's networks in India and elsewhere in the Indian diaspora. As the interview evidence suggests these include family and friends, India-based connections that include ties to alumni

institutions and former employers, and websites specifically tailored to their issues, such as the fusion of Indian foods and fashions with Western conditions like those in Australia.

Additionally, Australia's immigration policies and India's emphasis on egalitarian education have played a part. Australia's Skill Stream migration is directed at skilled migrants thus privileging achievement over ascription. In theory, this means that an attribute of birth such as caste with its associated religious sanctions, social status, and political influence count for nothing, whereas achieved characteristics such as educational level become crucial. But class and caste privileges have been traditionally linked to educational advantage.[23] According to Sucheta Mazumdar, where educational level has determined immigration from India, as is the case in Australia and the United States, the politically and socially prominent section of the immigrant community – the patriarchy – is dominated by upper-caste, middle-class men.[24] But increasingly the nexus between class and caste in India is unravelling such that Dipankar Gupta's advice is 'to put phrases like "upper caste" and "lower caste" in inverted commas'.[25] Changes are occurring across education, politics and economics where affirmative action, adult franchise and urbanisation respectively are making a difference and shifting the connections between caste and class.[26]

These developments – one in destination country, the other in sending source – challenge the traditional patriarchy within the community. Increasingly, newcomers to the Indian migrant community in Melbourne are beneficiaries of affirmative action policies in Indian higher education. They are skilled high-achievers who cut across caste lines. Inevitably, a challenge to the established patriarchy creates an environment of dichotomy and dissent. This is what the women tap into when they challenge patriarchy in the context of their own issues in order to test the limits of its hegemony. For those women who left India in the 1970s and the 1980s, this challenge resonates with their experiences of gender, class and caste in the socialist environment of that period.

The history of feminism in India reflects the praxis between class and caste beginning with the early gains of the women's movement. The contested sites of Indian feminism within which these migrant women were reared were embedded in

class/caste issues rather than gender. This was due to the movement's success in crossing the gender divide and forming a partnership with men during India's independence struggle. Second-wave feminism that thrived in India's socialist environment in the 1970s succeeded in straddling class divisions to include women, rural and urban, as well as academics and grass roots activists.[27] It was buoyed by India's female prime minister and secular government at that time and grounded in a left tradition in which religion was rejected as 'patriarchal'.[28]

The 1970s focus was replaced by another in which the feminine principal/goddess empowered women to adopt 'an ideology of radical pragmatism' and introduce into the 'public' space issues from the 'private', such as domestic violence.[29] Thus 'stri shakti' (woman power) was born and 'the liberation of women and men through the awakening of women's power' was its slogan.[30] Women were no longer seen as victims. This movement has succeeded in straddling class.[31] It has also crossed the gender divide to draw women into wider social movements such as 'the new farmers' movement, the anti-caste movement and the environmental movement'.[32]

One outcome of this activism is greater autonomy for women in general, which is at the heart of their agency. While agency is 'autonomous action by the individual or collective subject', autonomy is the freedom to position oneself according to one's choice.[33] This implies the right to choose or not to choose to integrate with, or ally oneself to, any other individual or group according to either set standards or new, self-created ones. In simple terms, agency could be described as the action that springs from positioning, which itself is derived from autonomy.[34] Migration causes shifts in the individual situation and the social setting that open up opportunities for new forms of autonomy. In this paper I have focused on three areas of the narratives to demonstrate this: in cyberspace, the impact of technology; in the family home, the assignment of household activities; and within the migrant community, socio-cultural reproduction. [35]

Impact of cyberspace

The women use digital technology as the means, and cyberspace as a site for contesting patriarchy. They seek stimulation, support and solace from networks at home and abroad specifically focused on their issues such as juggling career choices

with family and community commitments. Having the skills and the means, they are well-placed to make use of low-cost international phone calls, cheap internet access, discounted pay TV and satellite dish subscriptions, as well as easily available Bollywood DVDs and CDs. Besides, using their familiarity with travel to India and their internet skills they can buy cheap off-season fares to visit relatives at home and elsewhere in the Indian diaspora.

Clearly, agency and ability are involved as is illustrated by S5's decision to re-marry. S5 arrived in Melbourne as a young widow in order to escape the social stigma attached to her marital status in India. Her decision to re-marry almost 20 years later by which time her children were adults and she was a senior IT executive was a radical step 'in the Indian mentality'. She realised this and applied single-minded practicality to achieve success. At first the response from her extended family in Melbourne was positive:

> *(laughing)* Everybody, originally, all of them said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah you should get married' and 'We all support you.' But once the time came on: 'It's a bad idea.' No. *(becomes serious)* They didn't say, 'It's a bad idea,' but I guess they were trying to cope.

But S5 persisted with her plan. She 'surfed' internet sites targeted at Indians seeking 'arranged' marriages, made her choice and presented her family with a fait accompli:

> When I made the decision I looked at options – how do I find somebody? OK. So whereas you maybe consider ads in the papers, and you can ask your friends, considering there are internet sites available where you can go there.
> I looked at the avenues and whatever, different places. I then self-advertised, whatever. Then so many people responded, and I spoke to a few people, and then I said 'OK, I'll talk to him,' or whatever. And I said, 'Oh well! He sounds good. Similar background he has got. And similar culture'.

> So I thought, 'Well, maybe this will work out.' Then we actually spoke and it was really good and I found that he's likely to be suitable so we decided to get married.

Assignment of household activities

The women negotiate new roles for themselves after coming to terms with the lack of support from live-in help and extended family. Almost all agreed that this involved a significant measure of adjustment on their part and a range of strategies tailored to family budgets and involving negotiation with husbands. Some employ cleaners on a regular basis and outsource more elaborate food preparations when entertaining. Others, like N5, serve traditional Indian fare with all the connotations of labour–intensive effort and insist, 'It's not an issue'. But they rely on non-traditional technologies such as a state-of-the-art microwave and slow cooker to defrost, cook and reheat food taken from the freezer or bought readymade.

Still others have chosen downshifting to semi-skilled administrative functions or part-time work, or even unemployment, which allows time for family and community responsibilities. As N2 explained:

> my husband said, 'either we have' – he is of the old Indian thought – 'like, either you have a family, or you have a career'. He said, 'I do not believe in pressures'.

But she is quick to add:

> he would never, if I had said that 'Look, I want a career and I want to, you know, work', he would <u>never</u> have come in the way.

Many use the appliance-driven component of housework in Melbourne in one of two ways. The first is derived from its veneer of gender neutrality and invites involvement from husbands. N4, young and economically productive, spelt it out thus:

> I do have some ground rules like the vacuum I won't do, even if I am dead or dying. If the house has not been vacuumed for a

> week, I would not pick it up. It's his job, he has to do it. And if he is not doing it, we will get this lady, this cleaning lady to do it. So it's no big deal. But I'm not doing it.
> There are some things that I draw a line at. The garden I won't touch. But then that's where we've got this male/female divide in our chores. Ah he draws the line at the kitchen. He'll do pretty much everything but cook.

Such articulated positions are motivated by the gendered assignment of domestic duties these women witnessed growing up in India. N4 explained:

> I put a lot of focus on the fact that (my husband) has to help me with certain chores whereas I noticed with Mum and Dad, it was like Dad could get away with just about not even getting a glass of water.

However, older women migrants often set housekeeping standards that their husbands do not share. For instance, S8 is particular about cleaning her kitchen:

> I am more fussy about how (the) kitchen is. If I hoover the floor, the floor has to be mopped, whereas the men don't think that way. 'It's hoovered, it's clean. Why do you have to mop it?' That doesn't go with a woman. So then I'd rather do it myself. Then I do it my way, very neat and tidy.

As a result they work alone relying on every available house-keeping prop – from machines, to cleaning agents and micro-fibre wipes – for help. They assign only nominal duties to their children but resolve, as S8 did, to offer practical advice:

> I will tell my daughter that she has to pull (her husband) to do, because I find that when you don't do it in the initial years, they get too used to it and it is too late to get them to do anything later.

The second way in which these women make the most of the housekeeping differences between India and Melbourne is to retain pivotal roles, such as maintaining the family's food regimen, for themselves. For instance, S7 is a Tamil Brahmin vegetarian who does not allow meat in her home. Her two sons, one in high-school, the other at university, 'don't even like eggs because I have never introduced them to it'. But it seems that this is a flexible canon as she explained:

> I don't eat eggs. I don't like eggs. But I love cakes so I don't mind having eggs in cakes. So I buy readymade cakes. Or if I am baking a cake I will buy some eggs and make it in the cake. But I don't cook an omelette or anything like that.

The narratives suggest that husbands are generally willing and often eager to help with children, regardless of ages or duties. While they may be ready to volunteer at school events, they are generally unavailable for housework. That responsibility lies with the women, who rationalise the drudgery it involves as part of the personal pride and independence that migration brings. Their motivation is summed up by S7:

> Maybe I've got a lot of work at home. As you say, in India we have servants to do everything. Here I have to do everything on my own. But I like it. OK. I don't feel, 'Hey, I'm like a servant working here'. At the end of the day this is my home and I'm not doing it for anybody else but for my own self. That's how I view it. OK. And there is a certain pride in me, in doing it the way I want to do it. So I like the independence here of, you know, wanting to do what I want to do.

Socio-cultural reproduction

The narratives suggest that while migration has seismic repercussions on all aspects of the women's lives, the socio-cultural reproduction of values, ideals and basic beliefs is their biggest challenge. In this information age contemporary and convenient updates of traditional Indian costumes, cuisine and customs are easy to access and imperceptibly slip into everyday living. Traditional cuisine, though regularly consumed, is rarely prepared in the traditional way. Cooking is done on

weekends often with readymade spice mixes, always with the help of machines such as blenders, and usually frozen for the week. Even when relatives and extended families come together for festive fare, A8, who is the doyenne of a large family network in Melbourne, confesses that her usual elaborate *biryani* is in fact, 'Such a simple recipe, I use the packet mix *(laughs)* and believe me it comes out excellent!'

Traditional dress is transformed for fashion and practicality, and traditional fabrics now come with polyester mixes. In this, the women take their cue from India. There, internationally recognised fashion designers are re-inventing traditional Indian costumes to suit contemporary life-styles, and Bollywood films are making them acceptable to middle-class women. In any case, Australian workplaces often require the use of uniforms, and for leisure most women confess to choosing the 'comfort' of Western dress over the 'cumbersome' and 'cold' Indian *sari*. That dress is reserved for special occasions and Indian community events. Then, too, convenience wins over tradition, and the Punjabi *salwar/kameeze* (pant/shirt) is often the preferred choice across ethnicities.

On the one hand, rituals, including marriage ceremonies, are abbreviated to suit time constraints. Prayers are recited with the help of car CD players on the school run. Canons such as vegetarianism are reconstructed for convenience. On the other hand, some women, especially if buying an off-the-plan home, set aside a prayer room for daily worship. The significance of such actions is that the women steadfastly focus on the big picture where symbols and symbolism that include value-based education and religious awareness are important. But on a daily basis they maintain traditional practices only to the extent that is possible within their social setting and individual situation. The result is a form of 'practical symbolism'.

The women resort to a range of strategies on an on-going basis, but the universal strategy they adopt is to keep their children close. Many miss the reinforcing and re-assuring presence of extended family, particularly grandparents, in their children's lives. To compensate, they make time for cultural education and events that keep their children rooted in the community and comfortable with their ethnicity. Some resort to immersing them in an Indian environment by enrolling their daughters in classical Indian dance classes and their sons in traditional Indian music schools.

Others like A4 admit, 'I talk to my daughter like my mother would have spoken to me', even though the daughter responds by telling her friends at school, 'Don't listen to my Mum, after all she's from India'. Still others like N4 are finding their way. On the one hand this Sikh mother says, 'I'm going to teach my son to be so proud of his turban and be able to stand up for himself'. Yet in the next breath she acknowledges, 'It's more important that my son has peace of mind and enjoys his schooling experience without worrying about these things'.

For older children the concern centres on marriage, and here the women tread carefully but firmly as S7 did with her son:

> all I said to him is 'Marry the person of your choice. But, you know, you have to make sure that we all can gel together. A little bit. I can't gel 100 percent yes, that's not important. But, you know, I must be able to converse'.

Cultural difference in everyday living is accepted even if not articulated as such, and socio-cultural reproduction is promoted but only within practical bounds. A2, an Anglo-Indian, learnt from her father in India 'to be proud of the fact we were Indian, but also to recognize where our heritage was, and, of course, being an individual in the Anglo-Indian community'. In Melbourne, she raised her own children, now adults, to believe that:

> it didn't matter whether you were dark or not. It didn't matter whether you were short or tall, whatever. Be proud of the fact that you were different.

Major Findings

The women who came soon after the dismantling of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s were too distant from India for interaction on a regular basis. Their sense of loneliness and isolation resonated even with those who came in the 1980s. As S4 noted in India 'there was no question of being alone'. The women were also coloured strangers in a largely white society. S6, who was a student in Perth before she married and returned to Melbourne as a migrant, recalled:

> people would just stare, they had not seen coloured people, they would just stop and stare. *(pause)* Stare.

The narratives of the Indian women migrants in this study suggest three broad responses to their migration experiences. Clearly, individual situation and social setting, such as government policies in Australia and living conditions in India at the time of migration, are important.

'They still hold on to their traditions' – S3

Most of the early arrivals ended up conducting their lives in Melbourne as they did when they were still living in India. S3 who arrived in the 1980s, recounted fastidious adherence to rituals:

> Early morning, 4.30 they had to wake up and have your oil bath. And all those were tedious I thought. *(laughs)* And like you're so far away and it really didn't matter here. Who's going to find out whether you woke up at 4.30 or 6 o'clock!

Some even settled in areas of the city that reminded them of their Indian neighbourhoods. For A8 that meant St. Kilda because:

> (it) reminded us of Calcutta where you had the trains, the trams, the schools, the buses, the shops. It was like home away from home, everything was so central. We couldn't live further than St. Kilda like in Springvale or Dandenong because it would be so isolated. At least in St. Kilda it's busy there, you saw people during the day.

'I rediscover India every time' – N3

Others responded by plunging into Melbourne life and prioritising assimilation into mainstream Australian culture. Most gained their understanding of it through workplace networks to which their English language fluency gave them easy access. These women are now ideally placed to re-enter 'Indian space' very much as the rest

of multicultural Melbourne does. For some like S4 this has meant re-discovering Indian spirituality through Western interpretations and contemporary psychology, which would not have been possible in India 'because I would have been very sheltered and caught up with all the festivals and the rituals'.

Others, like N3, are similar to outsiders looking in at Indian food, fashions, and Bollywood films:

> I come from that country, I come from that culture and I always find it interesting and nice and uplifting to think about that culture. I still feel connected to it because I understand what they're talking about. I'm not up to date. I'm dated. But that doesn't mean that I can't enjoy it. I just enjoy everything about it.
> I love the clothes, the beautiful embroideries that come out of it. The music is fun ah some of the films are nice, and the food is absolutely glorious!

'It's (about) me doing what I want in consultation with my parents (in India)' – A3

Internet technology now enables all Indians to be in regular and frequent contact with developments back home. For more recent arrivals this means that family, friends and society in India can still set priorities for their lives in Melbourne. Current influences in India such as consumerism and Westernisation are due to the opening up of a closely protected economy in the 1990s, and the pervasiveness of the information revolution. These have transformed middle-class Indian society and are in stark contrast to the austerity and nationalism that the earlier arrivals grew up with while they lived in India. However, they are close to the influences impacting migrant lives in Melbourne.

Given India's diversity, the women can align themselves with one or more 'Indias'. At one end is the conservative, traditional India that N6, a young Sikh IT specialist, is happy to identify with. While her 'arranged' marriage raises eyebrows among colleagues at work she says, 'I've done it, and I'm happy about it'. At the other extreme is contemporary Indian society focussed on consumerism and

Westernisation with which many Indians in the diaspora connect. In Melbourne, contemporary migrants like N4, the mother of a toddler, admit to a 'super woman syndrome'. Her friends are 'those like me, who want to have the name, the fame, the game, everything, as well as look after the child well'.

While older migrants note that new arrivals are 'quite different', there are similarities across arrival times and ethnicities. For instance, S8's argument for 'education that earns you money' could be located in almost any group focussed on consumerism, including contemporary India where education is still a priority. She said:

> If you don't have money you have no living. So you need the money. You can say money doesn't buy you everything. But when you don't have it you only sit and say, 'Those people made the money. These people made the money, those people…' But whereas when you earn it, what other people do does not matter.

Achieving Coherence

The narratives indicate that across ethnicities, the women rely on individual experiences and social discourses that they grew up with in India to attain coherence in their lives in Melbourne. For instance when discussing racial discrimination (which the women reluctantly acknowledged), they were quick to point to the Indian discourse on colour. As A2 said, 'you don't have to come to Australia to face that. That happens in your own country'.

The women fall back on their 'inter-communal' experiences in India to navigate the networks of multicultural Melbourne. Back there, religion, language and other elements of group culture were strictly adhered to, despite intermingling across all 'communities' at school, work or play. S1 described her own experience when she arrived in Melbourne at the height of 1980s multiculturalism thus:

> It reminded me of when I used to go to school in India when my father used to get transferred all over India. My father was in the railways so every time we went to school we met, saw, a whole lot of faces who spoke different tongues at home. So although we

> all spoke English at school, each one of us had a different language in the house.

Even the gender segregation that these women experienced in India makes sense for them as women migrants in Melbourne. Through it they learned first-hand, and by close observation of other (and often older) women, crucial skills in negotiation, compromise and tolerance. These skills empower them with agency. On migration this translates into three significant attributes of autonomy, flexibility and self-reflexivity that enable them to achieve coherence in their lives.

Autonomy

The women display autonomy while fulfilling community expectations. All recognised that migration had given them opportunities for personal growth and independence. Yet they maintain a commitment and attachment to their ethnic group as well as to the extended Indian migrant community, which they manage and modulate according to their means and their need. Sometimes this may involve supporting an event through attending rather than organising it, or accepting hospitality more frequently than returning it. S5, the independent-minded widow, explained this autonomy thus:

> my principle is: if I follow what I want to do at least I'm happy. I don't care about other people. At least I'm happy. So at the end of the day I'm satisfied. *(laughs)* So, that's the way I look at it. So I'm not going to follow just because somebody tells me.

Flexibility

The women are flexible while actually achieving coherence in their lives. They are generally skilled in avoiding confrontation so as to facilitate negotiation, seeking compromise so as to achieve a more lasting solution, and accepting the outcome so as to work within it. On the whole, these attributes serve them well within the home as with S7's cake-baking or when N4 negotiates her husband's housekeeping responsibilities. They are also useful socially and at work, as N5's narrative about her husband's experience of racial discrimination suggests:

> he has feeling like, 'See, the Aussies have been given preference than me because I'm an Indian'. He does say that sometimes. I have heard it from him but I just ignore it. I just make him understand, 'No, it's just your thinking, you're just thinking in your mind because once you have that in your mind, you're gonna always think like that. You shouldn't think like that when it's not proved. Why should you think like that? The more you think, the more you'll feel. So better not to think like that.' *(laughs)*

Self-reflexivity

The women are self-reflexive while being continuously engaged with their environment. All accepted that migration had enhanced their opportunities for personal development. Some, like A3, further acknowledged achievements in Melbourne 'mean more to me than what it would have meant in India'. Most of the women admitted that in general they 'go with the flow' in most aspects of their lives. But they do so fully aware of and consciously bearing in mind the consequences for their families and themselves. In short, the choices they make and the options they exercise are carefully thought through, and fully informed. A3 articulates the process thus:

> I have worked for my merits, I haven't got it on a golden plate, so when I came into this country anybody at that stage would have said 'Oh, she's from India, from a Third-World country' – as India's still known as a Third World country – 'come here to make a life'.
>
> So I have struggled for, I didn't ever have anything easy. I, I've struggled every step of the way so whatever I have achieved to date it's probably, it will definitely, it's got everything to do with the last 20 years of my life that I was in India and I couldn't forget that. I couldn't say, 'Oh yeah, I'm in Australia for four years, I'm an Australian now.' I wouldn't say that.
>
> I am respectful and I appreciate the fact that the country has given me the opportunity. I will always be grateful for that but on

> the other hand I have worked for it. I have not got anything easy and nothing for free.

Conclusion

Focussing on their use of technology, the assignment of household tasks and their involvement in socio-cultural activities, I have shown that individual experiences and social discourses from their time in India are crucial to how first generation Indian women migrants conduct their lives in the diaspora. Across ethnicities the women's narratives reflect lives based on individual experiences and social discourses that extend to issues of class and autonomy, race and colour, ethnicity and multiculturalism. I argue that the women weave these intrinsically into their daily lives, judiciously using them to challenge the diasporic patriarchy. Further, the identities that they construct for themselves are fluid entities which vary on a day-to-day basis depending on individual situation and social setting, and emphasising 'practical symbolism.' Using narrative evidence I have focused on three areas – the impact of technology, the assignment of household activities, and socio-cultural reproduction – to show that the women create coherence in their lives through flexibility, autonomy and self-reflexivity. In conclusion, the personal narratives of Indian women migrants in Australia, drawing on individual experiences and social discourses that straddle India and Australia, set them apart from women in India, women elsewhere in the Indian diaspora, and other migrant women in Melbourne.

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[35] I have used codes rather than pseudonyms to circumvent the arbitrariness of assigning names to subjects without consultation. Codes are assigned to reflect the significance of ethnicity as the basic principle of interviewee selection. Thus Anglo-Indian interviewees, who are Eurasians of primarily

British and Indian ancestry born in India, carry the code A, Sikhs code N, and Tamils code S. Informed consent was obtained from each interviewee in accordance with the regulations for ethical research set out by Monash University.