When I first became the user of an American suburban apartment kitchen in California, I was completely struck by the uniformity of its design. Complete with a range of modern, efficient, labour-saving appliances such as the dishwasher, this kitchen design had become a ubiquitous American reality after World War II. The design of my kitchen – from the colour of the walls to the types of appliances and the overall plan – was identical to that of my friends’ kitchens in California, as well as in other regions of the country.

I was aware that the invention of standard modern kitchen equipment coincided with the historical moment in which the United States Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated immigration quotas, and thus encouraged a vast number of Indians to emigrate from India to America. More intriguing, however, was my somewhat uncomfortable realisation that this standardised design imposed on its Indian immigrant users certain uniform rules of behavior.

Structured around a series of biographical narratives comparing domestic kitchens in India and the US, this essay explores how Indians from disparate regional and socioeconomic backgrounds alter their ethnic identities in response to the spatial
environment of American domestic life. It examines the complex strategies of adoption, adaptation and invention that operate in Indian immigrants’ construction of transcultural identities. Through these strategies, Indian immigrants transcend the rigid boundaries of cultural difference (gender, class, caste, regional and religious) that define them in their home country. Being different in a new society actually erases the conventional differences among Indian immigrants, allowing them to create a singular national Indian community in the US and identify with the notion of ‘Indianness’, a concept that Indians living in India rarely experience. The concept of transculturalism not only illuminates the affinity between two different cultures, and relationships based on shared cultural values, but also new parameters of identity, such as long-distance nationalism.

Perhaps it is true after all, that “[…] To see things plainly you have to cross a frontier”.

Today, approximately one million Indian immigrants of diverse religious and regional backgrounds reside in urban and suburban apartment houses across the United States. Adaptation to the modern kitchen design of their American domestic spaces has become one of the primary factors binding these immigrants together in order to support their need to form an exclusive social group within America’s multicultural society. For instance, most Indian families living in apartments in the US, especially in situations in which both men and women are working, modify and adapt their cooking styles to the microwave oven. This is a result of their fast-paced lives in the US, and the lack of domestic help for kitchen-related activities. In India, even the families who purchase a microwave rarely use it except for warming food, because they believe that Indian meals cooked in this manner do not taste good.

This seemingly inconsequential behavioral change, along with other assimilationist efforts of Indian immigrants to adapt to the American domestic environment, illustrates the larger cultural phenomenon postcolonial theorists refer to as “transculturalism”. Since Indian immigrants’ adaptation to modern American kitchens is accompanied by their simultaneous desire to maintain their local Indian customs and behavior, the concept of transculturalism helps to explain Indian immigrants’ desire to “transcend their initial culture, in order to examine and infiltrate foreign cultures”, and simultaneously to preserve their local native
distinctiveness. In such transcultural scenarios, neither globalism nor localism dominates; rather, a two-way situation of global localism prevails.

Indian immigrants to the US encounter a condition that Homi K. Bhabha describes as “unhomeliness”, which should not be mistaken for the state of being without a home. Rather, it represents a condition of displacement where “borders between home and world become confused, and private and public become a part of each other”5. In this context the domestic kitchen, a private area in immigrants’ homes in India, increases in significance because it becomes a social space in their American apartments. The communal bonding that occurs everyday in this space is much more powerful than the bonding that normally happens in Indian homes only on special occasions, and not necessarily in kitchens. Although women hold conversations or assist other women in kitchens in India, they rarely cook meals together unless they are a part of the same family. In the kitchens of Indians in America, however, the bonding happens regularly, and not just on special occasions. In addition, the family bonds with guests while working together on a common task such as cooking, rather than bonding by simply conversing with guests, as is the typically the case in India. This practice allows many people in the US to get know each other quickly.

Enclosed by walls on four sides, kitchens in India are cut off from the rest of the residential space. This closed planning serves to isolate the individuals working in these spaces from the other activities of the house. Visitors in other activity areas also normally do not enter the kitchen because the heat, fumes, and odours cause extreme discomfort in these spaces that are often under-ventilated. Consequently, in India, the users prefer to spend a minimum amount of time in their kitchens.

The open plan (elimination of walls, low partitions) of the apartment kitchens in the US, on the other hand, provides easy accessibility and visual openness toward other activity areas (entrance foyer, living room and dining room). In this scenario, the kitchen not only becomes an extension of other living spaces of the house but also serves as a potential spillover area during large gatherings. Despite their busy work schedules and hectic lives in the US, Indian immigrants spend a significant amount of time in their kitchens, cooking and socialising with their families and friends. The Indian users respond positively to this open design because it does not isolate them from the rest of the activities of the house. They can watch television or interact with other family members or friends over the low counter wall.

Liberated from the isolation of the Indian kitchen, Indian immigrants, especially women, develop a new interest in this open-planned cooking space and its related activities, despite the few social disadvantages such as the absence of a private space where these women can easily hold personal conversations with their other female family members.

Inspired by the functionalist models of the 1920s and 1930s, the open design of the modern American kitchen features built-in cabinets and modern appliances flush with each other and the walls. This provides a uniform visual aesthetic characteristic of contemporary suburban apartment kitchens everywhere in the US.6 In the interiors of these spaces, turning in any direction, one encounters the same spatiality, with each activity area clearly
demarcated and incorporating fixed modern machines. In India, apartment dwellers and homeowners purchase their own appliances, which are neither fixed nor flush with the cabinets, and customise their kitchens according to their personal needs. In America, the kitchen, of all the domestic spaces, is most ‘foreign’ to Indian immigrants in terms of both its planning and design. Indian immigrants have to adapt, not only to the openness and centrality, but also to the high-tech appliances and the overall standardisation of their apartment kitchen designs. In many suburban American apartments, electric stoves replace the direct gas stoves, dishwashers substitute for the sinks where utensils are washed by hand, and electric exhausts replace the window-mounted exhausts of Indian kitchens.

Confronted by such a profound cultural, aesthetic and technological difference, Indian immigrants become more aware of their own differences from the ‘locals’. For instance Ria, one of my subjects who had never done any kitchen work or cleaning in her Indian home because her upper-class family had full-time domestic help, now performs all the household chores considered menial and performed for the most part only by servants in Indian society. At the same time, she has internalised the fact that Americans do not consider this mode of work to be below one’s dignity.

An example of difference in space utility can be seen in the fact that most Americans use the low counters in their kitchens as breakfast or dining tables. Unaccustomed to eating their meals on such narrow counters, Indians rarely use these for dining. Rather, the counters are used for displaying decorative objects such as photo frames, or as a place for more functional things such as key stands and letter holders.

Inspired by American cooking shows, one of my subjects had organised all her daily cooking ingredients in a basket next to the stove in her American kitchen. To store and pour oil she now uses a fancy glass container. She has learned to display her regular cooking ladles in a jar and her spices in glass containers in a stand placed next to the cooking range, in order to facilitate her cooking process. In her Indian kitchen, she placed all the cooking implements in a drawer to prevent accumulation of clutter on the counters, and put spices in a steel box inside a drawer.

Another subject covered the counters of her kitchen with brown contact paper to prevent spices such as turmeric from staining the white surfaces. Accustomed to the easy-to-clean granite counters in her Indian kitchen and unwilling to compromise on her cooking ingredients, this was one of the first adaptive measures she took in her American kitchen.

Since an electric stove does not facilitate the proper making of chapatis, a staple food, many Indians place a griddle on top of the heated coils so that it becomes possible to make this item. Similarly, even after learning to use the dishwasher efficiently, many Indians clean bigger utensils such as pressure cookers by hand, as is the practice in India.

The conflict that arises out of this awareness concerns alternative strategies of adaptation: should the Indian families adapt American kitchens to their Indian style of living, or should they instead adapt their ‘Indian practices’ to those spaces? By adopting American cultural practices while simultaneously adapting their typically Indian practices to American
kitchens, and thus inventing new, “hybrid”7 practices, Indian immigrants redefine the use of these spaces and construct a flexible social behavior that enables them to resolve the conflict of adaptation; it is a resolution that manifests itself in the formation of their transcultural identity.

The flexible, adaptive behavior of the Indian users of American kitchens in the US is also formed and informed by the performance of roles that transcend the rigid boundaries of gender, class, caste, regional and religious identities that exist in their home country. One distinguishing feature of Indian society as a whole is that it is a conglomeration of various units that emphasise particularity. While there are pockets of fusion and syncretism, by and large the individual groups keep their separate cultural identities. Many of these cultural differences manifest themselves in domestic spaces. For example, class differences are communicated through the types of furniture placed in the bedroom and the living room, while in the room housing the altar, the fact of religious difference becomes more evident. However, it is the kitchen where the principal axes of cultural differentiation become apparent simultaneously.

To demonstrate how these differences operate among Indian immigrants in the US, I chose subjects from diverse cultural backgrounds. Sociological, class and religious differences serve as lenses for the scrutiny of specific “transcultural” behaviour in relation to specific “transcultural” kitchens.

One Step In or Out of Modernity? Reinventing Class Status and Religious Traditions

Ria and Ajay are an example of an Indian couple compelled to reinvent both their class status and religious traditions in response to their move to America.7 Ria moved to the US after marrying Ajay, who emigrated from India in 2003 to work as a business manager in a cigarette company in Richmond, Virginia. Ria and Ajay are both Hindus from upper-class backgrounds, and theirs was a love marriage, not an arranged one as is typically the case throughout much of India.

Excited about decorating their new home in the US, Ria brought decorative objects with
her from India on her very first visit to America. A wind chime suspended from the ceiling adds colour to the dull interiors of their American apartment kitchen. A bronze art object composed of Ganesha symbols and tinkling bells dangles down the narrow wall that defines the entrance of their open kitchen, expressing the couple’s Indian heritage. None of these objects however, reflects the couple’s privileged backgrounds. In fact, one significant factor in Ria and Ajay's immigration to America is their involuntary shedding of the economic status conferred upon them by virtue of their class.8

Ria’s affluent family lives in Jaipur, in the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan. Several elements in the kitchen of Ria's three-storey house in India signify the wealth and high status of the family. A kitchen island opposite the range contains a sink that facilitates faster cooking, and an exhaust built into the storage cabinets above the gas stove indicates that the kitchen has been remodelled according to the latest Indian kitchen design. Most of the construction materials and equipment, from red galaxy granite stone for flooring, polished Udaipur green marble counters, golden-yellow glazed ceramic tiles used both above and below the counters, and solid teak wood storage cabinets, to the double-door refrigerator, are expensive choices that only privileged families can afford in India.

Although Ria’s family members own a microwave, they never really use it except for warming food. According to Ria, upper-class status in India demands levels of consumption and practices that are in tune with the times and maintain a higher standard of living. An important reason that household goods like microwaves have become ‘requirements’, even when many families hardly use them, is that status competition demands that the family own such possessions.9

Further expensive and stylish objects, for example, the silver trays hanging on the kitchen walls and the traditional brass equipment, are signifiers of the family's high status.10 In formal gatherings, Ria’s family honours its guests by serving their meals in brass
kitchenware, which is unavailable in local markets. According to behavioral scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and sociologist Eugene Rochberg-Halton, such status symbols (objects that are rare and expensive) are “a global measure of the owner’s standing in the community”\textsuperscript{11}, and become an integral part of self (the person one feels oneself to be in relation to one’s community) as well as the means by which people derive their identities. In Ria’s home in Jaipur, the expensive material possessions in the kitchen become one of the means of self-actualisation through which the family exhibits its affluent status and derives a part of its identity.

In contrast, when Ria and Ajay moved to the US they brought no antiques from India, nor did they buy expensive household goods and decorative items once they were here. Instead, like other Indians in the US, Ajay and Ria buy bargain goods or shop from outlets such as IKEA, which markets mass-produced household goods at comparatively reasonable prices.\textsuperscript{12} This shift in status is even clearer when looking at Ria and Ajay’s American kitchen, which is not very different in terms of its planning, design materials, and basic equipment from the apartment kitchens of several other Indian immigrants (who belong to different economic classes in India). Ria has no choice but to adapt to the materials in her modern American kitchen. The white plastic laminated counter surfaces contrast sharply with the easy-to-clean dark green marble counters in her Indian kitchen. While chopping vegetables in her American kitchen she places newspapers on the counter, which expedites her clean-up process and prevents scratches. In Ria’s Indian kitchen, the domestic help cleans the red granite floor twice a day. In her American kitchen, Ria has placed a rug on the white vinyl floor in order to keep it clean longer. Ria comments,

> Out here, it does not matter which class background you belonged to, how rich you were or whether you had two or ten servants in India. Everyone, including people like me, who did not even clean the kitchen counters in India, are now down on our knees cleaning up our domestic spaces.

Ria, who is accustomed to working barefoot in the kitchen because of her Indian religious beliefs, explains that the rug also protects her feet from dirt and the cold. To maintain hygiene in their Indian kitchen, Ria and her Hindu Marwari\textsuperscript{13} family forbid anyone, including one another, to enter their kitchen wearing shoes. During winter, when the kitchen floor becomes very cold because of the extreme climate of Jaipur, the family wears socks or special indoor slippers (not permitted to be worn outside). Many Hindu Marwari families do not allow shoes in the kitchen because they consider it to be a sanctified place. In addition, families offer their bounty first to God before serving it to others or eating it themselves. The couple explains, “Similar to many upper-class families in India, our families are modern in outlook; however, they still conform to their particular Hindu Marwari religious practices every day”.

Religion is another arena in which the move to America has forced Ria and Ajay to substantially tailor their traditional practices. For example, in India, Ria used to sit and pray in the traditional Hindu style in front of her altar on a regular basis. Like many Hindu families who position their altars in private rooms or in semi-private spaces, Ria’s family has set up
its altar in a special furniture cabinet in one corner of the lobby, isolated from the other living spaces of the house.\textsuperscript{14}

In contrast, in their American apartment Ria and Ajay pray in a public space, standing in front of a built-in kitchen cabinet in which they have placed items necessary to render it a religious shrine. Living in the constricted space of a one-bedroom modern American suburban apartment has inspired these immigrants to invent a new use for their kitchen cabinet, and to invent a new place and new style of worship that dissolves the conventional boundaries between the secular and the sacred. They have become flexible not only in relation to American kitchen design by using a kitchen cabinet to meet their cultural needs (as Indians) to worship, but also in relation to their religious cultural traditions by worshipping a shrine embedded in a kitchen cabinet. The couple explains, “We have already moved twice in the past one year. Buying a separate piece of furniture for the altar is not a practical decision”.

Despite the presence of an altar in their kitchen, Ajay and Ria, who are extremely fond of buying shoes, have mounted their big shoe rack behind the door of the laundry space attached to their American kitchen. They comment, “We could not find any other place for this shoe rack in our apartment and do not like the idea of seeing shoes while spending private moments with each other in our bedroom”\textsuperscript{15}. Ria further defends their choice: “We always keep the door to the laundry closed because we do not need to enter the laundry space on a regular basis”. Unlike other Indians who use the laundry space in their kitchen to store dry goods, she has consciously stored all her food items in the built-in cabinets in her kitchen. However, the presence of a dustpan, some kitchenware on top of the dryer in the laundry room and the basic ingredients of Indian meals – such as onions, which Ria uses regularly – indicate her pragmatic negotiations of available space in the interest of convenience and utility.

By inventing a new use for the laundry space attached to their kitchen, the couple has defied two of their traditional religious beliefs: first, of bringing shoes into a sacred space; and second, of storing them in a space where food is cooked and kept. In addition, they have violated their specific Marwari tradition of not wearing shoes in the kitchen. Although Ria is habituated to working barefoot in the kitchen, it does not imply that she conforms to her religious belief. She and Ajay often put on their shoes in the kitchen itself when they have to go out.

In fact, since moving to the US, the couple does not abide by many of the religious customs or traditions observed by their Hindu Marwari family in India. Living away from their families and the cultural and traditional environment of their home country gives Ria and Ajay relative freedom to live life on their own terms. For example, according to Marwari customs, the family does not sit down to eat until they have ladled food onto the plate of each guest. In their American apartment, Ria and Ajay do not even set the table formally – instead, their guests help themselves to food directly from the kitchen.

Nevertheless, all these transformations do not necessarily result in a decrease in
religious observance and practice. Praying in a standing position in front of their kitchen cabinet does not make Ria and Ajay less religious than other Hindus living in India, who sit and pray in a specifically furnished separate altar room. In fact, Ria took special pains to bring heavy accessories (lamps, idols) from India for her altar space in America. She strategically placed her altar in a storage cabinet next to a power switch to light up the space with electric bulbs embedded in an ethnic lamp. Similarly, many Indian immigrants living in America pray regularly in their homes or visit temples (or other religious places) but do not tend to consider their religion as a set of strict dogmas and proscriptions. By becoming flexible in their specific religious traditions in the US, Ria and Ajay identify themselves as Indians rather than as Hindu Marwaris.

This does not imply that Indians who are non-religious and do not observe traditional customs are less Indian. As long as they identify with other Indians on the basis of a common behavioural trait (not necessarily religious or cultural), or unite with the community for common purposes, they would be considered as Indians. At the same time, Indians who conform to American cultural practices are not less Indian, as long they do not culturally differentiate or discriminate against other Indians on the basis of those practices.

Other than providing symbolic value, and raising questions about the ‘authentic’ self, one crucial effect of “hybrid” rituals is that they make Indian immigrants more consciously aware of their original culture. The previously unspoken cultural norms of ‘home’ are suddenly absent, and cannot be reflexively reproduced in the new space; ingrained habits now require careful scrutiny before expression. The kind of mimesis demanded by transcultural assimilation processes may push the subject to a point when he/she realises that the rupture and distance from the ‘pure’ source is now permanent; that he/she is now irreversibly “hybrid”. And once such a radical divestiture is accomplished, can the signifiers be re-aggregated to produce the same, or a different composite of ‘India/Indianness’?

Cultural historian and theorist Raymond Williams, in describing the universalising trends that are underway among Indian immigrants in America, notes:

The strength and growth of sectarian and regional forms of Hinduism and the secularisation of the Asian-Indian community are threats from opposite sides... What results from the tension will be a redefinition of what ‘Hindu’ means in the United States and the redefinition of boundaries through the manipulation of
symbols and the expansion of their cultural contextualisation, so as to include as many Asian Indians as possible under a single religious identity.  

Hinduism, a religion practiced by the majority in India, is just one minority faith amongst others in America. This awareness of ‘religious pluralism’ has affected the way Indians from diverse religious backgrounds practice their religious beliefs in the US. Instead of conforming to the everyday practices associated with their particular religious faith in their domestic spaces, many immigrants pursue their specific religious traditions only during festivals or the ceremonials of births, marriages and deaths. In India, Ria and Ajay would not allow people to enter their Indian kitchen wearing shoes, a fact that makes them easily identifiable as Hindu Marwaris. In the US, they are identified as Hindu Marwaris only if they perform their particular religious ceremonies at the temple.

This identification with an overall ‘Indianness’, rather than with a specific caste/branch of canonical Hinduism or other religious sects, differentiates what it means to be an ‘Indian’ in the US from what it means in India. In India, ‘Indianness’ as a category does not actually exist. It is inseparable from the expression of religion and culture. Practicing one’s particular religious, social and cultural customs is an integral part of daily life in India. In their daily lives, Indians living in India negotiate their identity through a volatile mix of cultural influences, and identify themselves more with their particular subculture than with any national category. The notion of Indianness or a unified Indian culture emerges only at the time of national crisis when citizens from different regions unite for a common cause, or on special occasions such as national holidays or victories in international sports.

Paradoxically, it is only upon leaving their home country for a foreign nation like America, where Indian immigrants modify their specific caste, class, regional, and religious beliefs and traditions in order to more easily connect with Indians from different cultural backgrounds, that they begin to identify with the notion of ‘Indianness’. Constructing and performing ‘Indianness’ everyday in America has the potential to make these immigrants
even more ‘Indian’, because they suppress their cultural distinctions in order to form a singular national Indian community.\textsuperscript{18}

It is not enough to recognise that these religious and other cultural boundaries no longer exist between Indian immigrants. One must also examine the circumstances under which such boundaries are ignored. In contemporary Indian society, attempts by the government to diminish the gap between different cultural groups have resulted in an increase of tension and conflict between them.\textsuperscript{19} On the contrary, in America there has actually been a decrease in tension and conflict between Indian immigrants because their cultural differences have diminished in response to their strategies of assimilation within a demanding and new cultural and spatial environment.

Living as ‘Indians’ in the US, these immigrants construct their identity through the influence of both Indian and American culture. Despite Western influences, and even while these immigrants reinvent their Indian traditions, the sense of ‘Indianness’ remains strong. It no longer exists merely at psychological levels or comes into existence only at the time of national crises or on national holidays. Rather, it is manifest in the practices that Indian immigrants construct every day in their domestic spaces. In his description of the process of identity construction, sociologist Don Slater notes, “The membership of a particular social order or identity as a member of a specific culture is produced and reproduced through culturally specific consumption”\textsuperscript{20}. The habits, customs and social practices enacted in the American suburban apartment kitchens around cultural issues such as gender, class, caste, and religion are first redefined and then codified into ‘Indianness’ or ‘Indian identity’ in the US.

The creation of Indianness in America, however, suggests more than long-distance nationalism. It proposes that our ethnic identity need not be our totalising identity; and that our identity could be situationally reconstructed. One respondent of my study comments, “I am an Indian here, but essentially I am a Hindu Brahmin because I was born into a Brahmin family”. Though many Indian immigrants anchor the parameters of their identity to an originary locus within the subcontinent, their circumstantial construction of a transcultural ‘Indian’ identity in the US has challenged this notion. In this sense Indianness becomes transnational, as it refutes the limits of nationalist geography. Both India-born Indians who have created an Indianness upon moving to the US, and America-born Indians who practice this ‘Indianness’ everyday in their domestic spaces, can perform this transnational identity – which is accomplished not only by the material crossing of national borders, but also by the resilience and innovative will of the person performing the self.

Notes
2. Indian immigrants’ creation of a singular Indian community that overrides their ethnic differences helps to
keep them from becoming further marginalised in multicultural America, and is essential in their struggle to avoid being racialised as non-white Americans.

3. Renowned postcolonial theorists who have formulated the concept of transculturalism include Homi K. Bhabha and Sneja Gunew.


7. According to Homi Bhabha (op. cit., p. 2), authorised power in a hybrid culture “does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through conditions of contingency and contradictoriness”.

8. Class in India is determined solely by finances, and not by birth, inheritance or ownership of property, as in the US.

9. Ria Sharma, personal interview with the author, 27 December 2004, Richmond, Virginia. All quotes in this essay are from the same interview.

10. Commenting on the idea that real function of goods is to signify status, Jean Baudrillard asserts that people no longer consume things but signs. See Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings, (ed.) Mark Poster (Stanford University Press, 1998, Stanford). Similarly, sociologist Don Slater argues, “...People buy the most expensive version of a product not because it possesses more use-value than a cheaper version but because it signifies status and exclusivity”. See Don Slater, Consumer Culture and Modernity (Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997, Oxford), p. 158.


12. Many Indians such as Ajay and Ria, who are in their mid-twenties, migrate to the US soon after college with the intention of earning their own money rather than relying on the wealth of their families in India. Once in America, they lose their privileged status and have to put in years of committed work in order to reach their former level of economic security.

13. The four original castes of the Hindu religion have been subdivided over many centuries, each region having its own distinct sub-castes and groups, defined by profession and fixed by custom. ‘Marwaris’ refer to the merchant and traders communities originating from Marwar, an old state of Jodhpur in Rajasthan. Many Marwari families originally come from the districts of Jhunjhunu and Shekhawati in Rajasthan and are now settled in Calcutta and other cities in eastern India.

14. In India, ‘lobby’ is an architectural term that refers to a semi-private common area ideally designed as a family meeting room.

15. In urban Indian homes, shoes are considered unsightly because they are carry dirt; in more orthodox
settings they are considered polluting. They are usually kept in closed cabinets, closets, or corners obscured by furniture.

16. Illuminating the altar space is a tradition followed by Hindus and some Christian sects in India.


18. See note 2 above.

19. For example, Harijans (often referred to as ‘untouchables’ in Indian society) were discriminated against by all four Hindu caste groups and segregated from many areas of social life. Today, discrimination on the basis of caste is against the law, and Harijans (now known as ‘Dalits’/‘backward’ or ‘scheduled’ castes and tribes) are taking opportunities to organise themselves politically. However, doing so has resulted in violent confrontations with many sections of upper castes, who still do not willingly accept them as equals.