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ABSTRACT

**SIKH IMMIGRANT STUDENTS IN NEW YORK CITY:
NEGOTIATING DUAL CULTURES**

BY

Bindu Chawla

This ethnographic study investigated how Sikh high school students manage conflict and make decisions that affect their current and future lives, particularly those that have to do with choosing a career and getting married. In view of the widespread misconception that students who come from a different culture and language don't do well educationally, this study also investigated what motivates these young people to follow the rules and work hard in school. Thus this research provides a framework for addressing the adjustment and acculturation issues that arise for immigrant students when they must deal with their native culture at home and the American culture at school, with their peers, and in society at large.

This research focused on the attitudes and responses of four Sikh high school students who were interviewed individually and six who were interviewed as a group at a gurdwara (Sikh temple) in New York City. Four areas that are at the center of their interests were investigated: popular culture and media and literacy, expectations of parents about school, the family versus friends and independence and decision-making.

**RESEARCH ON SIKH IMMIGRANT STUDENTS
IN NEW YORK CITY: NEGOTIATING DUAL CULTURES
BY BINDU CHAWLA**

In metropolitan New York, I conducted two kinds of interviews:

(1) individual interviews with four students

(Jasleen, Balli, Tejinder, Ansana)

(2) a group interview with six students

(Sukhi, Sheru, Harmeen, Rajani, Preet and Sarah)

All these students are enrolled in American high schools, belong to Sikh immigrant families who have migrated from Punjab to the United States and were willing to talk with me about their beliefs, experiences, and school-family conflicts within this country.

Using the interviews, I have constructed oral portraits that “give voice” to these students. The dynamic process of “remembering and telling” that they have engaged in uncovers various dimensions of their lives: the fundamental orality of their inherited culture, the linguistic duality they live out on a daily basis; the dual cultural framework in which their experiences are embedded; the social adjustments they have made, and the various ways in which they have negotiated conflict between home and public institutions such as the school.

I have conducted the introductory part of the interview in Punjabi as an ice breaker and then gave the students the choice to speak in

Punjabi or English. I found they mostly answered the Appendix B in English as well as all three vignettes in English. The reason for this being that I identified more with being an Indian American and kept them informed that they could speak in Punjabi if they needed to do so being a fluent speaker in Punjabi. They related this to their school and home environment particularly since they knew that I was familiar with their home background and culture and understood their dual cultural framework.

Jasleen

In the introductory part of the interview, I learned that Jasleen had migrated to the United States at the age of ten and started schooling in this country in the fifth grade. Like other immigrant children she faced the challenges of a new life, a new culture, a new system of education, and feelings of being lonely and different. As Igoa (1998) states of immigrant children, they tend to have a feeling of being different, since they once belonged to a collective culture and shared a common language. At the time of my interview, Jasleen was in the tenth grade in Rose Hill High School in New York City.

In appearance, Jasleen is of medium height with her long brown tied in a braid; she was wearing jeans and a shirt. She was accompanied by her younger sister who looked more Americanized than Jasleen

herself. Although she [Jasleen] spoke fluent English, she had a Punjabi tone to her way of talking and would use Punjabi words sometimes to express herself.

Popular culture and media literacy

I started by asking Jasleen if she watches TV shows.

B: Jasleen, what TV shows do you watch most of the time?

J: American or Indian.

B: In general, which ones do you watch most?

J: American.

B: Which TV shows do you like most?

J: “Charmed,” “Friends,” “Popular,” “Gilmore Girls.”

B: What do you like most about them and which one is your favorite?

J: “Charmed” (I noticed that she didn’t answer the first part of my question and so I recycled it with respect to “Charmed”).

B: What do you like most about it?

J: Witchcraft—you know, it’s cool; it’s magical.

I observed that she was exposed to American media youth culture which profoundly influences the thinking and behavior of high school students.

As for music, Jasleen stated that she liked both American and Indian music. As for American music, she mentioned that she liked “the

different bands, like the Back Street boys or Blink 182 or N sync.” As for Indian music, she said that she particularly liked Punjabi music: for example, she mentioned Dhaler Mehndi, a Sikh singer and dancer, who she said was “pretty good.”

While Jasleen has kept connected with her own culture, she was not oblivious to the host culture. She watches “Charmed,” a show about three young girls who fight evil with their powers of witchcraft. It is not difficult to understand why she likes watching these girls fight evil with magic. Clearly she is in admiration of these young girls and the kind of lives they lead. In being exposed to the media culture, she has crossed cultural boundaries; and yet a show like “Charmed” allows her to keep connected to her culture of origin. Jasleen does not perceive this show as a threat to her own culture. It is interesting that neither do her parents think so, since she is allowed to watch and enjoy most shows that an American teenager in New York would watch. Obviously she has a certain comfort level with not only the host language, but also American culture at large.

Expectations from parents about school

Jasleen came from a small family with only two sisters. Both of her parents were educated in India; her father owns a surgical supplies business and her mother, who is a college graduate, works as a travel

agent. They expect her to become a doctor and she explained that she would like to become a pediatrician. So her parents were not, as she put it, “likely to limit support for higher education.” During one of the vignettes she told me that they would, however, not encourage or support her if she were to pursue some other kind of career such as being a fashion model. “You see,” she said, “fashion models don’t really stay because it’s all beauty and age. Doctors and lawyers, you can fall back only like you know, you can go on for a while.”

I took advantage of this opportunity and asked her:

B: So how is a fashion model viewed---is it a profession that girls are willingly supported in or more for doctors and lawyers? Do your friends tell you something similar or do they have different stories?

J: No, they are similar to this [that a fashion model is not an appropriate long term career]. They know what’s good and what’s wrong. We discuss it and we have similar views.

B: Are these Indian friends or American friends?

J: Both. Like you know, they know if you want to do, you should do it. But you should have two kinds of skills; like if you want to be a fashion model, learn something else so that if it doesn’t work out as a fashion model, you can fall back on that.

She also voiced to me that her parents held high expectations for her in terms of school grades. They expected her to study hard and “become something in life.”

B: What do they expect from you in terms of academic achievement?

J: Like, umm, excellent marks, good at studies; you know, good test grades.

As far as numbers, they expected her to get grades in the 90s. Their expectations about her schooling, she believed, should not preclude her having friends; she felt that she should feel comfortable socially at the same time that she is working hard in school.

Her parents also believed that school would prepare her for dealing with real-world issues after her graduation.

B: How can you make the most of your school life?

J: Work with it (I understood this statement as referring to eventually getting a good job); use it for everyday problems and make life easier for yourself.

She pointed out that English and Math were her favorite subjects and thought that extracurricular activities helped her in socializing and gave her something to do after school such as playing softball and basketball.

Of immigrant families, Gibson (1988) states that the value they assign to schooling arises in part from the recognition that only superior

educational credentials will overcome discriminatory barriers to advancement. As Olneck (1995) explains, this attitude results from the identification of education with opportunity in America.

In Gibson's (1988) study of Sikh students in California, she remarked that they were teased and discriminated against a great deal. Hence, the general negative atmosphere between Valleysiders and Punjabis affected the latter in their social, emotional, and academic development. Being aware of this, I heard Jasleen explain that while in school the most misunderstood part of her culture was the fact that she wore long hair; other students didn't understand why she couldn't cut it. Sometimes her peers in school asked her why she kept her hair long. When she replied that it was because of her religion, they would say "cool."

In general, Jasleen felt that she did not face any hostility toward herself from either her Indian friends or her American friends. The multicultural population of metropolitan New York apparently contributed an atmosphere that protected her from discrimination: this cultural diversity was not only in the community but also in the school curriculum. Jasleen pointed out that her school had an International Club where students from different cultural backgrounds could mingle and interact with each other.

Family versus friends

Regarding relationships with family and friends, Jasleen pointed out that she comes from a family of only two sisters but that she has many cousins and relatives in the United States. Comparing her own family relationships with those of her friends at school, she said: “Yeah, my friends, they are not that close with their cousins and stuff. But over here we are very close with them; we consider them as our brothers and sisters or something, but they [her friends at school] just consider them as cousins. So, you know, we are more close or more open.”

At another point, I asked her, “How do you find home and friends different?” She answered, “Well, at home you feel free to do like, you know, stuff, and you can do whatever you want to do. But with your friends, I guess you have to hide some things.”

With regard to socializing, she had both American and Indian friends. For other immigrant children like herself, her advice was that they should “learn English, like you know, the basic language, because some people don’t understand and stuff, so you have to learn a little bit to fit in.” I noticed that throughout the interview Jasleen often highlighted language difference as an important “barrier to overcome” in order to achieve the goal of socialization. While she acknowledged the basic importance of understanding language differences, she also pointed out that understanding cultural differences was equally important.

As a first-generation immigrant herself, Jasleen had grown up in New York, and as a result of socialization she had come to like Christian holidays such as Christmas that celebrated the spirit of giving gifts; and as an further emulation of her friends, she said that she liked wearing American clothes. Clearly not being too different from their peers is a major concern of teenagers and even younger children as well.

Jasleen described her friends as both American and Indian and talked about the differences between them. Her Indian friends, like herself, lived in a dual cultural framework and had learned to negotiate the conflicting messages they received from home versus peers at school and public media such as television. These latter messages tend to be very powerful for a teenager, and she had encountered them even before her family came to the United States. Now she was working with cultural differences in the host society and attempting to deal with them without opposing her family.

B: Do you and your parents think differently about customs and traditions?

J: Ummm...depends on the custom and tradition, like some of them I feel differently about and they don't...Yeah, that happens.

Apparently there are a number of cultural differences that her parents feel uncomfortable about: for example, dating, a sleepover at a

friend's place, going out late in the evening. In a traditional Punjabi family, girls are the pride of a Punjabi family and thus are usually raised in a very protective environment.

On the subject of arranged marriages, Jasleen was somewhat ambivalent:

B: Would you have an arranged marriage ?

J: Umm...it depends like if I want to, I will....If I don't want to, I don't think I will.

B: What about your friends, would they have similar situations or would they have different situations?

J: Well, for my American friends, they wouldn't do it because I mean they think arranged marriage is so old fashioned. But the Indian friends, it depends how they were brought up; like if they think arranged marriage is how you are supposed to get married, then they would do it.

Independence and decision-making

In response to one of the scenarios, Jasleen expressed that "her parents showed her what's real, what's going on in the real world, like what kinds of situations there are." She remarked, "I don't think we are dependent on them [the parents]; you know, we can do what we want....If we need a little guidance, we go to them; we are not totally

dependent on them.” She further elaborated that “we can make decisions ourselves, but if we need advice, we can always go to them.”

B: So you think being dependent is helpful?

J: It is helpful sometimes, but we can make decisions for ourselves. If we need a little bit of help, we can always ask them.

She said that her friends felt differently because it really depended on their family situation and that some of them really wanted to get away from their families and be independent. On inquiring further, I discovered that she was primarily talking about her American friends. It almost appeared as though, for Jasleen, to be independent was interpreted as negative. She did not view being independent as being self-sufficient or self-supportive. This attitude is not unusual for Punjabi daughters, since they tend to listen to their father and do as he “says” or as “he likes” in keeping with the cultural norms. And later on when they are married, they listen to and do what the husband likes.

This pattern has been the traditional way for girls in Punjabi families, but when I talked with Jasleen’s mother, she told me that her younger daughter who was born in the United States was quite different and believed in being more independent and was less likely to ask her parents’ advice in most matters. It seemed that Jasleen had managed to negotiate what she thought might be a conflictual situation with respect to

independence and decision making. She had managed to work within the two cultures, just as she had managed to work with the two languages, Punjabi and English.

B: In view of the language and cultural differences at home and at school, because school is all American and at home you have a different culture, how do you cope with that? Do you find any difficulties?

J: No, because like you can talk in English here; at school they speak English too, and at home you can speak Hindi/Punjabi. So you have two ways; I don't feel any different—it's fine with me; I am comfortable.

Jasleen had recognised and accepted the fact that she “could participate in two cultures and two languages” while not losing her own cultural identity. According to Ogbu (1995), migrant minorities do not necessarily perceive learning the attitudes and behaviors required for school success as threatening to their own language, culture, and personal identities. Instead they interpret such learning instrumentally as additive. In effect, they acquire resources in addition to those that they already have. It is within such an additive framework that Jasleen makes decisions about herself and her independence. Using this kind of an approach, she is able to cross language and culture borders and feel comfortable about it.

Balli

Balli is 17 years old and is a senior in an inner city high school in New York City. He has one younger sister and two younger brothers. His father is a construction worker who has a high school diploma from India. His mother has no formal schooling. While his father migrated to the United States in 1975, his mother only migrated in 1996 with her three children under the “family reunification priority.” Balli started in an American school in the sixth grade, then attended middle school, and finally enrolled in Brownsville High. He has thus been in American schools for the past six years.

In appearance, Balli is light-skinned and wears his black hair cut short without the traditional turban. He wears one earring in his left ear, dresses in American-style clothes, and looks very much like an American teenager, but when he speaks, it is clear that his first language is Punjabi.

When I conducted the interview with Balli, he had taken a break from his part-time job. He works part-time waiting tables and working the cash register in a Dunkin' Donuts store. He is also preparing to graduate from high school in May, 2001, and has made plans to study computer science at the New York Institute for Technology.

Popular culture and media literacy

Balli is both educated and entertained by TV. His social interests are reflected in his choice of TV shows. During my conversation with him, I asked:

B: What TV Shows do you watch ?

Ba: Most of the time Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Steve Harvey, and the Jamie Fox show.

B: Which one is your favorite?

Ba: I don't have a favorite, whatever I am in the mood for.

B: Why do you like these shows?

Ba: Because I like comedy and action.

It appears that while Balli likes the action in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, he relates to African American males and enjoys their humor. He attends a school mostly populated by African American students, and his adaptation to this school is reflected in his choice of the Steve Harvey show which is about a schoolteacher in a high school. His exposure to American culture is mostly from television and his school. With television as the teacher, Balli has come to understand "the commonplace in American culture," making what might have at first seemed strange become gradually familiar.

Balli's interests in reading revolve around science fiction books, and when I asked him about his favorite book, he replied: "I don't have a

favorite book, but when I read a book, I imagine myself in it, like I am the actual character in it, so that is why I like reading.”

It was clear that Balli had overcome the language barrier, although he continued to speak Punjabi fluently, sometimes breaking into it even during the interview. To him, learning English was clearly additive and along with English he had also learnt new skills, which enabled him, while still retaining his own language and culture, to comprehend the larger society he is living in.

With regard to culture, Balli has closely identified with another minority culture; yet he does not view learning English as “subtractive,” as do many African American students in an inner-city high school. As Ogbu and Simmons (1998) state of home-born minorities, they often do not possess the tourist-like attitudes toward learning that immigrant minorities seem to have.

Expectations from parents and school

I asked Balli what his parents consider to be the goals of schooling. His answer was “No idea,” and he went on to explain that he never really talked to them about school. I probed further:

B: What do they expect from you in terms of academic achievement?

Ba: They expect me to be a lawyer or a doctor, but I am more interested in computers.

I then asked Balli: "What are your expectations from school?" He replied that he expected to get the highest grades he could possibly get and to graduate on time. I followed up with another question:

B: What do you think should happen in school?

Ba: I think there should be more education and less fighting, and kids against each other...all the gang stuff....They should do something to control that.

He went on to state that school was supposed to prepare him for the future and that he will make the most of school by trying to do his best; his favorite subjects are English, history, and math. Both he and his parents hold high expectations for his work not only in school but also out of school. Balli comes across as a "hard working, follow the rules" kind of guy who believes that getting good grades will lead to good employment and thus economic success in America. Many immigrants view school success as a major route to such economic success within the United States. Children of voluntary immigrants, in this case Sikh immigrants, tend to share their parents' positive attitude and commitment to school (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998).

As for extracurricular activities and to what extent they are important, Balli said, "Extracurricular activities I think are good...umm...they can

show other people that you are an energetic person, that you are active and you are capable of doing things.”

When I asked him what difficulties he faced in school, he replied that he had none. Probing further, I asked:

B: You said there are lots of gangs. Do you have any problems with communicating with other students?

Ba: Yeah, there are gangs, but not with me. I am friends with the whole school but some kids get beat up and I don't like seeing those things, but I have no conflicts in school.

Family versus friends

With regard to relationships with people at home and with friends at school, Balli felt there was a vast difference.

B: Like your experiences at home, your environment at home, your relationships at home—are they different from your relationships with your friends?

Ba: Yes, very different.

B: Can you give me an example of how it is different?

Ba: At home I can't really open myself. I have to listen to my parents, but with my friends I can really bug out and have fun.

B: How do you feel about these differences? Do you prefer one over the other?

Ba: Yeah, I like the feeling when I am with my friends instead of when I am home.

Balli went on to say he thought very differently from his parents; as he put it, “they are stuck in the past with all the old Indian teachings, and they don’t want to accept the modern world, so you see a lot different.”

I could see the manifestation of this conflict with his parents in various points that he made throughout the interview. Bearing this potential conflict in mind, I asked about his social life and whether he liked dating. He replied that he was not allowed to date, but he did it anyway.

Balli stated that he generally preferred American customs, because they allowed more freedom. To illustrate this point, he discussed Sikh customs around marriage: “An example that I can give you that most kids [Sikh] have problems with...is like arranged marriage. People at home want you to marry a person of their choice. I think that is totally wrong because they are not the one who are going to spend the rest of their life with that person....The person who is going to spend the rest of his life should have the choice to pick who they want to marry and not get forced into it.”

Balli explained that if his sister did not want to marry someone his parents chose, then he would help her to marry someone she wanted to. “It is her choice,” he said. I then asked him the following question:

B: If you had one wish to change anything, what would you like to change?

Ba: I would like to change the whole world so that everyone would live in peace instead of all this fighting going on; everyone would have the same beliefs as everyone else.

B: What would you recommend to a young person like yourself who is migrating to this country ?

Ba: Don't let other people get to you or make fun of you; just mind your business and do good in school, and you will survive.

He emphasized the importance of school in helping young people to navigate within a host society.

Balli responded to a question about gender differences by describing the different ways that his parents treated him and his sister. As he put it, "Yeah, to my sister they wouldn't allow her to do certain things, whereas to me they wouldn't care because I am a guy."

This answer led me to ask whether his friends had similar or different stories to tell.

Ba: Yeah, some people have similar problems when their parents don't let them do things.

B: Are these Punjabi friends?

Ba: Yeah, and some people I also know who are Punjabi, but their sisters and brothers, they are allowed to go out. They can do what American girls can do and their parents don't care.

Although Balli came from a fairly restricted cultural background, he was open to having a less gender-biased attitude toward his sister.

Independence and decision-making

As for being independent, Balli acknowledged that at this stage of his life he was dependent on his parents for various things. But he said, "I like being independent; I like doing things on my own and I like supporting myself instead of bugging my parents. Because they have done enough by raising me so now it's my chance to take care of myself and in addition take care of them. Later on in life when I have a job and everything, they won't have to take care of themselves. I will take care of them."

I inquired during the vignettes whether his friends think the same as him or whether they think differently. He replied, "Yeah, some friends are dependent on their parents; they are so lazy they don't do jack. Some friends are independent....Me, I am independent; I like being independent."

Balli did not believe his parents would be making decisions for him later in his life. He believed that once he was an adult, he would be making all the decisions himself. However, he will still be working

within a dual cultural frame when he makes these decisions. His decision making will also be dependent on his interpretations of the host culture, any minority culture he may identify with, and the culture of his own community. His eclectic commitments were illustrated in his response to the following question:

B: Do you like American music or Punjabi music?

Ba: I like both; whatever I am in the mood for, I listen to that.

B: What is your favorite American music?

Ba: Rap and reggae.

B: What is your favorite Punjabi music?

Ba: The *Bhangra* [a dance to Punjabi folk music that puts people in a happy mood].

His cultural eclecticism was also illustrated in his responses to the following set of questions:

B: Do you celebrate any Sikh festivals?

Ba: Yeah, we go to the Sikh day parade and attend all the Guru's birthdays.

B: What is your favorite festival in the Sikh religion?

Ba: Hmmm, I don't have a favorite. I am the type of person I don't have a favorite anything; whatever fits the picture, I go along with it.

This answer gave me a sense of the ways in which Balli has adapted to American society. His decisions seem to be made on “whatever fits the picture.” At another point he said to me that he liked Christmas—and he liked Halloween, especially “because you could do so many crazy things.” Yet behind this declaration of his own adaptability and independence, I was left with the feeling that he was struggling to overcome a residual commitment to his own Sikh traditions. It will be interesting to see how Balli handles these traditions once he becomes an adult.

Teji (Tejinder)

Teji is a 17 year old boy who attends Hillside High School in New York City. He has only one sibling, a younger sister who is 11 years old. His parents migrated from India to the United States in 1980 and since then have resided in New York. Teji’s mother and father both have an undergraduate degree from India and presently own and manage four sneaker stores. Of these one is in Brooklyn and three are in Long Island. His mother works in one of them along with his father.

Teji is a second-generation immigrant as he was born in New York and attended both elementary school and middle school in New York. Currently he is in the 10th grade. He has no first hand memories of India because he only went there when he was six months old. Hence, his

comparative frame of reference of 'back home' which immigrants usually have is not from his own experiences. Instead his knowledge of 'back home' and dual frame of reference stem from his parents experiences and the stories they and his extended family have to tell him.

When I first met Teji, I was struck by his appearance: he is tall, light brown in color, and wears a beard with his long hair tied in a knot over his head covered with the *patka* (a scarf wrapped around the head). Clearly he maintains a traditional appearance in conformity with Sikh religion and customs. On the other hand, Teji was dressed in American clothes and spoke fluent English. He told me he lived with both his parents and grandparents in the same house, as is customary for Sikh families.

Popular culture and media literacy

I learned that Teji was raised in a very conservative family environment that strictly adheres to Sikh customs and religion. Therefore, according to him, watching TV was an important time of the day for him, since it allowed him to escape from the confines of traditional Sikh culture. As he put it, it gave him something to do at home that was more closely related to his school culture and the culture of his friends. He remarked that it also gave him time to unwind from his familial duties and obligations. I followed up by asking him what his favorite TV show

was. He replied that his favorite show was “The Simpsons” because it was very funny. I gathered from him that he enjoyed the humor in the show and particularly liked the character of Bart Simpson. His reason for liking this character was that he could do all the things Teji wanted to do but was not allowed to do.

It was apparent from his conversation that he did not have to go to India to have a dual cultural frame of mind. A positive dual cultural model existed for him right here in New York between his home culture and the host culture as mediated by TV and school. His immense enjoyment of TV was indicative of his comfort with American culture and the English language. I then asked Teji what languages he spoke. He stated he spoke Hindi with some Indian friends, Punjabi with his parents, and English with his sister.

Returning to the subject of TV, he said that that he enjoyed watching all comedy shows and cartoons. I observed that he did not mention watching any Punjabi movies or plays that are commonly available for rent from Indian video stores in Jackson Heights. To this he gave no reply.

Regarding music I inquired:

B: What music do you like, American or Punjabi?

T: I like American music.

B: What kind of American music?

T: I like punk, hip-hop, and rhythm and blues.

I followed up and asked what he liked most about American culture. He remarked that he particularly loved American food. I learned from him that he liked school, the culture at school, his peers in school and mostly appreciated his exposure to American culture. He elaborated by telling me that he preferred wearing American clothes rather than Punjabi clothes.

Expectations from parents about school

Teji said that his parents expected him to be “at the top of the class.”

When I asked him what that meant, he explained that it meant his getting very high grades like 95 or 100. This is how he explained his own expectations:

B: What are your expectations from school?

T: To be the best student.

B: What do you think should happen in school?

T: Learning.

B: What does school prepare you for?

T: For the future, for your job and all.

B: How can you make the most of your schooling?

T: By studying very hard.

I understood that his parents had very high expectations of him and they held him responsible for his academic performance. They trusted the institution of school, the teachers, and the authority they represent, unlike certain immigrants who are mistrustful of mainstream institutions. This is the kind of “pragmatic trust” that a Sikh family will have in the hope of giving their children a better education than they can receive “back home.” Sikh parents generally believe they have more educational opportunity in the United States and would like their children to have an “American education” and careers that they might not otherwise have been able to have.

Teji’s cultural model originates not only from his home but also from the Punjabi community his parents belong to. Within this community, Teji has a number of Sikh friends who are in the same situation he is. Within this community are also cousins in his extended family with whom he and his parents attend the *gurdwara* (a Sikh temple) religiously every Sunday. These families listen to Sikh teachings, religious hymns, and have *langar* (eating a meal together with the community). The children and their parents participate in the distribution of *langar* and mingle and interact with each other. Such is the home and community influence that contributes toward his behavior and attitudes, which are in sharp contrast to his school environment.

A powerful symbol of this difference is the long hair tied in a turban that attracts a good deal of attention at school. Teji said that he just did not know what to say when students in school asked him why he wore his hair long in a turban. He generally replies without any real explanation: "I just have to keep it this way."

With regard to expectations from home, Teji remarked that his parents anticipate that he will graduate from high school and go on to college. They want him to be a computer programmer but he has already taken a computer class and didn't like it. He is willing to try computer graphics before making a decision. I could see that he had a mind of his own with regard to his career.

This drive toward independence was, at least to some degree, stimulated by the tight controls his parents placed on him. In a further discussion of his future career, Teji responded that his parents would never allow him to consider a career such as a fashion model; as he put it, "they would just head me in a different way." He set up his relation with them as reflecting a good deal of conflict: if he wanted to do one thing, they would want him to do another thing.

Family versus friends

Teji loved to hang out with his friends most of the time. He said if they came home with him, there were too many restrictions that came in

the way of having fun. He told me, for example, that if friends came home with him, they would have to follow rules like taking their shoes off at the entrance, walking tiptoe in the house, talking in whispers, and refraining from making any noise. It all added up to a restrictive environment, whereas if he went out with his friends, they could just relax and be themselves.

Teji strongly believed that the basic aim of schooling was socialization, as indicated by the following exchange:

B: What do you think of extracurricular activities and to what extent are you involved in them?

T: They are good because with them you can make friends; you can learn your social skills and learn to do a lot of stuff.

Teji explained that while he had a few American friends, most of his friends were Sikh and were in a situation similar to his own: "They are from the same cultural background as me." Like Teji, they were also not allowed to go out on dates or sleep over at their friends' homes or attend parties held by their American friends.

Given this restrictive home environment, I asked Teji the following question:

B: In view of the different messages you get from home and from school, do you have any difficulties?

T: No. I don't have any difficulties. I can switch at home and at school to the different cultures and different languages. Like I am used to dealing with them at the same time. I know I have to keep switching which means I have to remember where I am.

This response suggests that Teji is able to maintain a dual existence with respect to languages and cultural values: he simply has to be always mindful of the situation that he is in. Such monitoring requires self-control on his part and could lead to a great deal of stress. Teji came across to me as very quiet and subdued. I wondered what his advice for other students like himself would be and so I asked him the following question:

B: What kind of suggestions would you give to a student who has just come to this country?

T: Umm... suggestions...wear appropriate clothing. If you wear weird tight stuff, they can always make fun of you.

It was clear that Teji didn't like being different and so focused on the need for a new student to dress like other students as much as possible.

Independence and decision-making

During the vignettes, Teji discussed with me at length his views on being independent. He stated that he was still dependent on his parents because they provided him with food, clothing, and money. But he

claimed this situation would not last for long; as he said, “It’s just to get me started on my job.”

When I asked him if his friends thought in a similar manner, he replied, “My American friends are probably different; they will get started without their parents and stuff.” But his Sikh friends were in a situation similar to his own and thought like him. He responded by saying, “They are going to be independent too..., at least most of them.” He expressed this point with a great sense of satisfaction and achievement.

I asked whether his sister would be allowed to be independent and he said he wasn’t sure about her. He said that the difference between them was very pronounced because of her gender. Boys were allowed to be economically independent because when parents retired in their old age, they always lived with the son rather than the daughter. So it is not considered relevant for her to be economically independent as she has to get married and go away to her husband’s house who, in turn, is the person who is economically independent and will one day care for his own parents.

Therefore, Teji visualized himself as being independent when his parents retired; his parents would then live with him and he would be making all the decisions for them as well as for himself. For Teji,

becoming independent meant a role reversal between his father and himself: the role of the breadwinner would shift from the father to the son.

As Teji indicated to me his desire to make independent decisions through his exposure to American culture. I asked him about his views on Punjabi customs:

B: To what extent do you believe in having an arranged marriage?

T: To no extent. I don't like it....It is the worst thing.

B: Would you be asked to have an arranged marriage?

T: No, I already talked to my parents about it and they said I can pick whoever I want.

This response showed that Teji would assert himself in matters that were of importance to him in decision-making. It also reflected that he would make decisions based on his preference for the American cultural model. Clearly he preferred American clothes, American music, American food and American TV. As indicated earlier, his advice to other young people like himself was to be like American students.

Since Teji's attachment to Punjabi traditions seems to stem only from the influence of his parents and the Sikh community, one wonders how long this attachment is likely to endure as he becomes increasingly independent. His social identity does not seem to be threatened by American culture in any way: the ease with which he has crossed

language and culture boundaries may well point toward an increasing Americanization as he pursues his future career.

Ansana

Ansana attends school at Lakeview High School in the Queens borough of New York City. She is 18 years old and is presently in the 11th grade. She was born in India, later moved with her family to London, and in 1992 her parents came to the United States. She started school here when she was in the 2nd grade.

Ansana's father owns a watch business and her mother used to work there. Presently her parents are separated (which is not common in Punjabi families) and her mother now works as a makeup artist at Bloomingdale's and supports herself and her daughter in this way (her older daughter is old enough to support herself).

Ansana has one sister who is 25 years old and works as an accountant. At present she lives with her older sister and mother in an apartment building. When I met Ansana, I noticed that she is tall, light brown in complexion, and wears her hair cut shoulder length. She was dressed in jeans and a shirt and wore nothing that associated herself with traditional Sikh culture.

During a warm up session before the interview, I learned that Ansana's mother had been raised in London and this western influence

was reflected in her appearance and style of speaking. It was a surprise when she told me that she and her family visited India every year or two.

Popular culture and media literacy

I began our conversation by asking her what her favorite TV show was. She answered that her favorite shows were “Felicity” and “Dawson’s Creek.” I followed up by asking what she liked about them. She replied: “I like how they portray teenage life...how the characters in the show are in our age group and we can relate to them.”

Ansana remarked that she watches TV enthusiastically and looks upon it as a great source of fun and recreation. Observing that she was a great fan of mainstream teen shows, I inquired whether she also preferred American music to Punjabi music. She replied:

A: No, I wouldn’t say that. I don’t think I prefer either one, I like both of them equally. There is a certain Punjabi music which I absolutely love and there is some American music that I love to listen to as well.

B: What American music do you like?

A: I like the bands such as the Goo Goo Dolls, 3rd Eye Blind...even teen music like the Backstreet Boys.

I then asked Ansana further about her interest in Punjabi music and she responded by saying: “There aren’t certain groups that I like....A lot

of times I listen to songs at parties to which we dance. I just like a bunch of Punjabi hits like *Bhangra* [music that puts people in a happy mood]. Ansana reflected her dual cultures in her choice of music, but it is noteworthy that she did not mention watching any Punjabi movies or even Hindi movies. She consistently watches American mainstream TV.

Given this tendency to watch TV only in English, I wondered what language she speaks at home. She said that she speaks both Hindi and English with her mother, although when her father is present, he usually speaks in Punjabi. When she and her sister are alone, they usually speak in English. She indicated that she liked being bilingual to the extent that she even enjoyed music in two different languages. It is clear that Ansana moves easily from one language to another and takes pleasure in crossing language borders without any difficulty.

Expectations from parents about school

Ansana and her mother maintain quite similar expectations about school. She stated that her mother's expectations were "her own: they were no higher or lower." Her mother knows that she is very hard working in school and aspires for her to be a well-educated person so that she can make something out of her life.

Ansana expected school to give her a solid foundation so that she would be able to deal with the outside world. She said that once she got

accepted to college, she would become a “well-rounded individual.” In terms of academic achievement, she thought she was doing “pretty well” as her GPA in the 9th and 10th grades had been 3.9. Furthermore, she told me that her favorite subject was AP Biology and that her goal was to become a doctor. Her parents expected the same from her.

In order to achieve this goal, Ansana knew she had to be accepted into a good college and participate in extracurricular activities. She described such activities as “very important because school is more about academics; it should include other activities as...how to interact with people. Certain clubs such as AIDS awareness, breast cancer awareness — they are very important. Cultural awareness...people need to be informed about certain things. A lot of children are very sheltered by their parents, and these clubs allow us to work with the current problems in society.” Ansana further explained that her parents felt the same way as she did about school. As she explained, “They feel school should help me become knowledgeable in certain areas, not only education.”

Regarding difficulties in school, I asked Ansana the following question:

B: What are some of the difficulties you are facing in school?

A: Umm, well, trying to keep my grades up, I have to work hard. I am not one of those people who if I don't study will do well.... I need to work really hard in order to do well. So just I am

trying to keep my grades up and keep involved in activities so I get into a good college.

I also asked Ansana whether there was anything at school that led to any misunderstandings about her culture or religion. She replied, “Umm, the hair...you know how we have long hair. I don’t have the long hair; you can tell my parents are fine with me cutting it.” Her western appearance was a result of her mother having been raised in London and consequently Ansana had had more exposure to western culture than the other Sikh students whom I interviewed.

Family versus friends

It was apparent that Ansana was very close to her mother and talked a lot with her about school and friends. “All the same.” she said, “there is a difference in your relationships with your family and with your friends.” She emphasized that this difference is larger because her friends are the same age and so are very attentive to her problems and so she can relate easily to them.

On the other hand, Ansana emphasized that she maintained a very close relationship with her mother. “There are certain differences but there are some similarities,” she explained. I probed about the differences and she described them in the following way: “Like your friends are your age: even in school they are going through the same

experiences as you are. Like basically in school they are trying to balance out school and social life, picking out colleges and stuff.”

As regards her own social life, Ansana replied that she does not date and the reason she doesn't is because “her mom trusted her not to.” In Sikh families, a topic like dating is not discussed overtly, but it is still clear what the expectations are. She explained that she was, unlike many of her Sikh friends, allowed to sleep over at a friend's place:

Yeah, I am usually allowed to sleep over if my mom knows that other friends are going to be there....She is more comfortable with me sleeping over at Indian friends' houses; I must admit that I am allowed to sleepover.

Ansana went on to say that she had both American and Sikh friends and that one of her best friends was an American. As she put it, “I have quite a few American friends and my mom is fine with that as long as she knows the person...like she trusts me enough.”

I learned that Ansana particularly liked Christmas but was not sure if it was an American or a British holiday. I explained that it was better understood as a Christian holiday than the holiday of any particular nation. Upon hearing this explanation, she remarked, “Well, you see, my mother, she has always celebrated it because she grew up in London.” Her diverse background had given her an exposure to western and eastern influences. Keeping this in view I asked:

B: If you had one wish, what would you change?

A: It's a very hard question....I don't know. I think I would probably wish for people to have more tolerance.

B: What kind of suggestion would you give to a child just migrating to this country?

A: Well umm...I think one should always be firm with your roots, like where they have come from....that's always going to be a part of you and they should never try to change it. On the other hand, I don't think a person should be too conservative.

Ansana's answer was reflective of the multiculturalism she has internalized to such a degree that she doesn't even seem to be aware of it.

Independence and decision-making

Ansana made the important decisions in her life by consulting with her parents, especially her mother. I asked her about Sikh customs of marriage and whether she would have an arranged marriage. She replied, "I know my mother has always told me that marriage is a big decision, and you have to make sure you are married to the right person....I don't think my parents would ever arrange a marriage for me or impose something like that upon me....My parents have to agree with me on the person I am going to get married to....They might suggest people, but I

know they would never pick someone out and tell me I have to get married.”

It may well be that her parents’ separation, unusual in Sikh culture, had contributed to their more liberal view approach to marriage. Given that their own marriage had not worked out, the parents might well have been reluctant to arrange a marriage for their daughter. It is also likely that her mother’s western background had contributed to such a point of view about marriage.

In certain respects, Ansana remained quite traditionally Sikh. In contrast to her statement about marriage, she expressed to me that she feels quite dependent on her parents and saw no reason why she should be independent. As she put it, “I am independent in that I do my schoolwork on my own and other matters. In other ways though, I am dependent on my parents and I am fine with that. I feel that you need to have your parents around you, for you to know they will support you; that you can depend on them as you need that to grow and to nourish you when you are young.”

Ansana also stated that she did not consider it good to be independent at a very early age. She felt that that her parents had faith in her, but they were still willing to guide her and help her. When she had been younger, her parents had been much stricter with her than now and she had been a “pretty good kid.” As she put it, “I have never done

anything to make them question their trust in me so far; they have never defined my choices; they have allowed me to make them myself.”

Like most Sikh parents, Ansana’s parents held high expectations about her performance in school and believed that she should become a doctor. Ansana held similarly high expectations about what her performance should be. She used her parents as her guides in school matters, but in personal matters such as marriage, she voiced her thoughts independently.

To some extent, Ansana, like Jasleen, does not view being independent as altogether positive. The reason for this attitude is that Sikh girls are raised in a family with a certain closeness to their mothers. And they maintain with their mothers a gendered friendship based on mutual trust.

It is uncommon for a Sikh girl to have a similar relationship with her father. The mother protects the daughter from the father since he is the more distant and dominant member of the family who is followed by his son. Hence, Ansana’s mother has had the major influence on her daughter which has resulted in the liberal views they share on marriage.

During one of the scenarios as Ansana discussed her Indian friends, she tended to identify with those friends whose parents she says are like her own. As she described such parents, “not very liberal and not very conservative. I think that is best because the child doesn’t need to

rebel or have a need for more freedom, and they don't feel like their parents haven't been with them or supported them or even cared for them.”

Group Interview with Sukhi, Sheru, Harmeen, Rajani, Preet, and Sarah

This final section presents a group interview that I conducted with six Sikh students: three boys (Sukhi, Sheru, and Harmeen) and three girls (Rajani, Preet, and Sarah) who are in the 12th grade in President High School. Among these students, Sukhi, Sheru, Harmeen, Preet, and Sarah were all born in the United States and are thus second-generation immigrants. Rajani was the only one who is a first-generation immigrant: she came to the United States with her family when she was in the third grade. She has only a very faint memory of India and the only thing she remembered of schooling there was that the “teachers hit you with sticks if you were bad.”

The other five could not, of course, have any first hand memories of India, but their perceptions of the host society were strongly colored by the experiences that their parents and other elders in their extended families had brought from India. Members of this older generation had come to the United States seeking a better life than the one they had back

home, and thus even though they were committed to traditional Sikh culture, they maintained a rather positive attitude toward the host culture.

Among the three boys whom I interviewed, two of them—Sukhi and Sheru—maintained beards and wore their hair tied in a *patka*, a turban wrapped around the head in the traditional Sikh way. Harmeen was the only boy not maintaining a beard and not wearing a *patka*. Instead his hair was cut short and he looked quite Americanized. All three of them, however, wore American-style clothes and as they told me later, they were more comfortable in such clothing. Although Sukhi and Sheru were both light brown in complexion, Harmeen was even lighter. All three boys were 17 years old.

As for the three girls, Rajani, Preet, and Sarah were all dressed in *salwar kamiz* (pants with a long shirt and a long scarf wrapped around the neck), the traditional Sikh clothing for both women and girls. Both Rajani and Preet wore their long hair tied in a braid, while Sarah wore hers cut shoulder length and straight, falling on her shoulders in an American style. While Rajani was dark brown in complexion, Preet was tan colored and Sarah was light colored. Both Rajani and Preet were 17 years old and Sarah was 18 years old.

Popular culture and media literacy

We had an initial warming up session in which we all introduced ourselves. Then I began the interview by asking the students, “What TV shows do you watch most frequently?”

Sukhi: “ER” [he told me he wants to become a doctor].

Sheru: I like “Friends” and “The Simpsons” mostly comedy and stuff.

Harmeen: I like “Friends” and “Seinfeld.”

Rajani: I like “Friends” and “The Simpsons” too.

Preet : I like “Friends” and “Doug.”

Sarah: I like “Friends.”

As can be seen, “Friends” was the most popular TV show for these students. One of the reasons for their attraction was that the show represented an urban life style which was familiar to them. Moreover, since this show dealt with teenage issues, it was relevant to their own lives. The characters of Ross, Joey, Chandler, Monica, Phibi, and Rachel were all leading an American style of life, and it was apparent that these young Sikh Americans admired them. They could relate and compare their own everyday experiences with those portrayed on the show: for example, the characters on the show had the freedom largely to do what they wanted to do. They were able to live independently without having any admonishing parents, elders, or members of an extended family present to tell them what to do.

In their television preferences, these Sikh students were clearly identifying with mainstream American culture. They were not in opposition to it, as certain immigrant groups are, but rather admiring of it. By watching programs such as “Friends,” they were able to learn a great deal about the ways of dress and mannerisms while enjoying the humor in the show. These teenagers were products of the postmodern world who had grown up under the influence of TV which gave them powerful messages. These messages tended to conflict with those transmitted by their Sikh families and communities and these students were thus forced to figure out ways of negotiating cultural differences. They had to find ways to integrate the larger American world mediated by TV with the traditional Sikh world transmitted by their families and communities.

The students also expressed a liking for the “Simpsons,” which addresses issues of freedom, social life, and religion. They were particularly attracted to the character of Appu, who is portrayed as the stereotypical Indian immigrant adjusting to American society. They liked the sense of humor behind the show and the way in which it used animated characters to satirize American cultural patterns and speech styles.

Some of them also mentioned watching “Seinfeld,” a sitcom about the everyday lives of young people in urban America (indeed, New York

City itself which made the show even more attractive to these students). Incidentally, none of these six teenagers mentioned watching an Indian TV show, whether in Punjabi or Hindi.

When I asked them what kind of music they liked, they again favored American music over Indian music. They mentioned different kinds of American music, but their favorite kinds tended to be Rap and Reggae. The students like Rap because its loud and upbeat music similar to the *Bhangra* and Reggae is popular as it uses West Indian English (which is not the standard English) that minorities find easier to relate to.

I then turned to what kinds of books the students read outside school and asked them the following question:

B: What books do you read? Give me some examples.

Sukhi: Horror stories.

Sheru: I read business books like *Millionaire Minds* and *The Dynasty of the Trumps*.

Harmeen: I read the *Physicians Desk Reference*. Seriously, I do read the PDR [he wants to be a doctor]. I also read mysteries.

Rajani: Mystery books.

Preet: I read mysteries too.

Sarah: I read mystery and horror books.

I inquired whether any of them read books recommended by the school itself. They answered that they prefer to read books of their own personal

liking when they are away from school. The books they mentioned were just extra reading that they do for fun and to escape from the kind of reading they have to do at school.

While discussing the different language barriers they had to surmount, Sukhi commented that he spoke 50% Punjabi and 50% English in his house. Harmeen said he speaks Punjabi three-quarters of the time and English one-quarter of the time at home. Then Preet added, “If I have my American side of the family over—like my uncle is married to an American and my cousin has an American girlfriend—then we speak English. If no Americans are in my house, then we speak Punjabi.” Sarah said she spoke both Punjabi and English, and Rajani said she spoke English in school and at home with her siblings, but shifted to Punjabi when speaking with her parents. I noticed that they seemed to have no difficulty in crossing language boundaries and seemed comfortable about being bilingual. Since learning standard English is a requirement of the school, the students seemed eager to acquire control over it; and through watching TV and reading popular books they substantially increase their exposure to both spoken and written English.

Expectations from parents about school

As Ogbu (1992) observes, students from voluntary immigrant families tend to share their parents’ expectations and positive attitudes

toward schooling in the United States. All these students expressed great respect for their teachers and apparently none was disruptive in class. Keeping this Sikh respect for schooling in mind, I asked the students, “What are your expectations from school and what do you think the purpose of school is?” Here are some of the responses they made:

Sukhi: It provides a good foundation for life.

Sheru: I guess you need it to get a good job.

Harmeen: Pretty much that is the basis of what you want to do when you get older. It gives you structure and like helps you decide and gets you on your way.

Rajani: To learn.

Preet: You need to learn.

Sarah: You need school to get educated.

I followed up this question with another: What do your parents consider the goals of schooling? Sukhi said his parents thought along the same lines as he did (i.e., providing a foundation for life). Sheru and Rajani replied that their parents considered getting a good education as the goal of schooling. Preet, Sarah, and Harmeen agreed with them and refrained from making any individual comments. Their answers to this question depict the Sikh community’s collective values with regard to schooling. Sikh parents believe schooling to be the way “to make it” in the United States and are also aware that their children would not be

getting comparable opportunities to build their professional careers back home.

I then asked the students, “What do your parents expect from you in terms of academic achievement?”

Sukhi: To be a doctor.

Sheru: Pretty much anything I want to be as long as I am not wasting my life.

Harmeem: To be a doctor.

Rajani: They want me to get good grades and get into college.

Preet: To be a doctor.

Sarah: To become a pediatrician.

It was apparent that these students’ parents held high aspirations for them. Furthermore, they gave me the impression that they work hard, get good grades, pay attention in class, and do their homework regularly. It is also true that Sikh immigrant parents have good control over their children’s time, supervise their homework, and make certain that they are regularly doing it, even if they are not in a position to help them do it.

During the interview, I asked them what grades they expected to get. Sukhi, Sheru, Rajani, Preet, and Sarah all said they expected to get grades in the 90s while Harmeem said he expected to get grades 95 and above.

In order to follow up their school performance with their academic interests, I next asked them: “What are your favorite subjects?”

Sukhi: Math and science.

Sheru: Sciences and math.

Harmeen: Psychology and math.

Rajani: Social studies and gym.

Preet: Social studies and math.

Sarah: Math and science.

The heavy emphasis on math and science is clearly related to the fact that several of the students are aspiring to become a doctor. It is remarkable that the school system in New York with its ethnically diverse student body and multicultural curriculum can nurture in immigrant students such high academic aspirations.

Clearly great importance is placed on education by Sikh families. They believe economic hardships are only temporary and that education and hard work can overcome any difficulties they face in society. Their cultural model permits them to accept school discipline and instruction without criticism, unless they feel there is a situation in which their children are being discriminated against or treated unfairly; such situations are, however, relatively rare among Sikh immigrants.

In order to probe further into their interests beyond academic studies, I asked the students: “What do you think of extracurricular

activities and to what extent are they important?” Here are some of the responses they made:

Sukhi: They help you become well rounded instead of concentrating on one thing.

Sheru: I guess it keeps the stress low.

Harmeen: I guess it makes you well rounded. You do other things instead of just academics.

Rajani: They are good for your health, like gym which is good for your body.

Preet: It is important because it helps you get into college.

Sarah: Helps you get into college.

It became apparent from my discussions with these students that the Sikh community has a large number of strategies to enhance school success. According to research by Ogbu (1992), “the greater the number of strategies” used to pursue school success, the greater students’ chances are of succeeding in an immigrant setting. Successful students become role models for the rest of the community.

I was curious to know what kinds of difficulties these students had to overcome in school in order to achieve their goals and so I asked the following question: “What are some of the difficulties that you are facing in school? Give me some examples.” This question brought forth a wide

range of responses and led to a vigorous discussion. Here are some of the points that the students made.

Sukhi: Some people are uneducated and they don't know about our religion, and they go up to you and, like say we are Sikh, they call us *Hindoo* or *Paki*. They are racist.

Sheru: Some people think Gandhi is a religion. They ask, "Are you Gandhi? Or do you speak Gandhi?"

Harmeen: Some ask, "Do you speak Indian?" People are just dumb!

Rajani: There are like a few Indian people in my school so some white person goes up to them and says, "Does your Dad drive a taxi?" Not all Sikh people drive taxis. They are not all seven-eleven owners. There are a lot of Sikh people that are doctors, businessmen and lawyers. But Hollywood shows Sikh people as taxi drivers.

A great deal of discussion went on about this topic and several students raised questions such as "Has anyone asked you about this?" Others would answer with responses such as "I haven't been asked, but I know others who have." It was a part of the group dynamics that various students felt the need for expressing personal feelings and therefore narrated various kinds of incidents that they had observed. In this sense,

the group interview brought about more intensive discussion than the individual interviews did.

Family versus friends

For immigrant students, peer pressure can be of a positive nature since their peers “support school success so that they experience minimal pressures detrimental to academic achievement” (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). Therefore, when I inquired about their experience of family versus friends, Sukhi stated there was definitely a divide between the two “since you act differently with your friends and your family.” Sheru claimed that with his friends he is free, but with his family he has a lot more restrictions. Harmeem declared that “when you are at home, you are more closed in and when you are outside you are freer.”

Among the girls, Rajani complained that she did not get along with her parents saying, “I fight with them. I get along with my friends.” Preet explained that she communicated better with her friends than with her parents and Sarah confirmed this point as well. In effect, all the students preferred being with their friends for reasons of freedom and better communication.

As for other reasons, Harmeem made the following point: “I have an Indian friend whose parents won’t let him sleep over a friend’s house until he is 18, but you don’t see Caucasian people having that problem.”

Rajani responded that there was a difference between their Indian friends and their American friends. Preet pointed out the gender difference saying, “My parents are stricter with me because I am a girl. My brothers are allowed to do more things than me.” Sarah elaborated that her parents were not that strict (because she had no brothers she had no way of comparing). In general, gender roles are sharply differentiated within traditional Sikh culture, since the son represents the future authority figure, inheriting this role from the father. By way of contrast, the daughters inherit the mother’s role which is more submissive.

In view of their own experiences in this country, I asked the students the following question: “What suggestions would you give to other children coming to this country?” Here are some of the responses they made.

Sukhi: To expect a lot from a lot of people. It’s not like where you came from. Its going to be totally different so don’t get all upset about what people say because you are going to get a lot of it.

Harmeen: You have to blend in. It takes a while.

Rajani: Don’t start smoking and drinking.

Preet: Don’t smoke or drink. Don’t cut class. Be good.

I took note of Sukhi’s comment and wondered whether I should inquire further about what he meant. I finally decided to pose the

following question: “Which aspect of your culture or religion is not generally understood? He responded: “Everyone has been asked similar questions and you get used to it. For 15 or 16 years you are asked stupid questions like “why do you have long hair?” You just get used to it or people stop asking you such questions. I don’t get asked this anymore.” The other participants all nodded in agreement, confirming they had been through the same experience and felt the same way about it.

Independence and decision-making

In a Sikh family it is accepted that since the father has more authority, he will have more independence and make the important decisions in the household; that is to say, the family pattern is dominantly patriarchal. Consequently, the sons also have more independence and decision making opportunities than the daughters. Hence, when I asked these students about who makes decisions about marriage, Preet answered: “My dad won’t let my mom speak about it.” Apparently the father will make the decision and then inform his wife and daughter about it. Rajani responded to this same question by saying: “If I am bad [meaning do things they don’t approve of], my parents threaten me by saying, “We are going to get you married when you are 16.”

In contrast to what these girls said, the boys tended to take an opposing point of view. For example, when Rajani was discussing her

parents' attitude toward, marriage, Sukhi intervened and contradicted her. During the group interview, I could observe a general tendency for the boys to take an authoritative stance toward what the girls said (it was as if certain aspects of traditional Sikh culture were being played out in the group dynamics).

As a boy, Harmeen expressed an altogether different point of view when he discussed marriage during one of the vignettes:

My parents tell me that if I find a girl and I like her, I can get married to her. They say if you are like 19 and you find the girl to marry, go ahead and get married as long as you can support her yourself.

Once they left the subject of marriage, the boys, too, made complaints about too much parental authority. All of them spoke of American friends who had much greater freedom. As Sukhi put it during one of the vignettes, "My friends have their own lives, but I am pretty much wrapped around my parents." Sheru commented that "our American friends don't have to face these issues." And in much the same tone, Harmeen complained:

Well, I am applying to colleges, and a lot of my American friends are going to Alabama, Texas and California; I am just applying to colleges in the tri-state area, because my parents want me to stay at home.

Clearly these Sikh boys view themselves as having much less independence and opportunity for decision making than their American counterparts.

It is interesting to compare the Sikh girls' point of view with respect to independence and decision making. Although they, too, chafed at certain restrictions, they also were more willing to recognize the need for parental guidance. Here is how Preet expressed this need:

You need your parents to back you up because if you don't have their support, you might totally collapse and have no place to go and do nothing. You always need an experienced person's opinion so that you don't make the biggest mistake of your life or something.

It is important to mention here that all these students actively participated in various Sikh activities. For example, they all make regular visits with their families to the *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) which is located at various sites in Queens and Long Island. They attend religious services there on a regular basis, participating every Sunday in the *langar* (communal meal eaten together). They also attend Punjabi language classes there. These classes are held to keep students up to date in Punjabi reading and writing activities. They are taught by elders from the community and the classes are structured by grade levels. From 10 a.m. to 1.00 p.m., these classes are continuously taught, and the students are

placed in the classes based on their level of knowledge of the language (tests are given to determine their various levels). Here the students mingle with Sikh peers with whom they have a common background.

It is within this complex setting of school, home, and community that these young people view the differences between themselves and their American peers. As they become aware of these differences, they are in a better position to identify the language and culture barriers they need to overcome if they are to achieve their academic and socialization goals. Many of these barriers have to do with greater restrictions on their freedom and decision making. It is within a bicultural environment that they must learn to acquire greater freedom and to make more decisions while at the same time showing proper respect for their Sikh families and communities.