

BINDI-FYING THE SELF: CULTURAL IDENTITY AMONG DIASPORIC SOUTH ASIANS

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ABSTRACT This article examines changes to cultural identity when South Asians move around the globe. It focuses specifically on the humble bindi as a marker of one specific South Asian woman's agency and comes up with wide-ranging suggestions about the scope for using such bodily adornments as a tool for skilled cultural navigation in diaspora. It also suggests avenues for further research.

KEYWORDS: *Asians, bindi, culture, diaspora, dress, globalisation, Hindu, modernity, Singapore, South Asians*

Introduction: Bindi-fy me!

What people wear and how they decorate their bodies may tell us a lot about them. Dress or clothing enables individuals to create and express their identity. It could also serve as a visual representation of one's identity (Davis, 1992: 25). It is a key constituent of the 'everyday experience of embodiment' (Entwistle, 2003: 134). Negrin (2008: 3) has argued for more research on the impact and effects of bodily adornments on cultural identity:

Rather than being treated merely as a form of aesthetic embellishment devoid of significance, the role of bodily adornment as a carrier of meaning needs to be recognized and more fully embraced. Only then can it serve as a genuine expression of identity rather than as a substitute for it.

The present article seeks to analyse in what ways cultural identity changes when people move and follow different patterns of behaviour and dress code. Cultural identity is generally defined here as a shared identity of people linked by a common history and ancestry (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1990). It may apply to groups of people, or individuals. One important question raised here is whether such changes always

have to be attributed to physical movement? What do they tell us about the person that moved? To what extent does the nature of change depend on the circumstances of the move undertaken?

Increasing global forces and greater mobility of people have exposed more and more people to an even greater variety of cultural practices and choices. This process has, meanwhile, created a very diverse global South Asian diaspora, with many different local characteristics, and also different terms for such people in various places.¹ The notion of cultural identity has been widely deployed to understand how such diasporic and migrant communities construct and reconstruct their lives (for example, Ballard, 1994). Nation-states have always questioned, and often challenged, the cultural practices of 'others' as individuals or communities, and the resultant potentially separate or 'parallel' identities to ascertain their position of power. Theoretical rhetoric of diasporic and migrant communities has previously assumed diasporic South Asians to be caught 'between cultures' (Watson, 1977), an approach that can be dismissed (Ballard, 1994: 31). Rather, it is necessary to acknowledge the potential for young people of South Asian parentage to act as 'skilled cultural navigators, with a sophisticated capacity to manoeuvre their way to their own advantage both inside and outside the ethnic colony' (Ballard, 1994: 31).

In this wider context, the present article focuses on the *bindi*, a dot worn 'traditionally' by Hindu women, in round shape and red colour, in the middle of their forehead. Its use and appearance varies regionally. In north India, it is worn mostly by married women to signify their marital status, while in the southern states, women of all ages wear it (Subramanian, 2014).² Today, as a fashion item, a *bindi* can take any shape and colour. Besides being seen as a 'third eye', it is thought to balance one's internal energy (Antony, 2010: 347). The appropriation of the *bindi* into mainstream popular culture has led some observers to assume that diasporic South Asians have now neglected its 'religious' and 'cultural' meaning and are simply donning it as a fashion accessory. This article focuses on the use of the *bindi* as a cultural symbol and presents a case study involving one single diasporic South Asian woman and her embodied everyday experience of using the *bindi*. The article interrogates the significance of the *bindi* as a marker of cultural identity for this young woman and seeks to draw wider conclusions about the use of such body ornaments amongst diasporic South Asian females.

While the study of dress choices, especially *shalwar kameez* (also spelt as *salwar khameez*), amongst South Asian diasporic women in the United Kingdom (UK), Canada and the United States of America (USA) (Hansen, 2004: 379) has gained currency in recent scholarship, much remains to be done in studying the *bindi*. Using Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, as cited in Erel (2010: 643), I suggest that it includes bodily comportment as markers of distinction. The *bindi* is considered to be part of one's dress, which includes garments, jewellery and accessories (Eicher, 1995). The article examines the potential and extent of the *bindi*'s salience as part of one's embodied dress as a marker of cultural identity.

The Bindi as a Cultural Marker in Diaspora

Bates (2001: 9) has noted that most literature on the South Asian diaspora originated from the UK (see Ballard, 1994; Ballard & Ballard, 1977; Clarke et al., 1990), while studies of identity amongst migrant South Asian communities elsewhere are few and far between. By now, however, much ink has also been spilt in America about the South Asian diaspora and Indian migrants there. Bates (2001: 10) also posited that most academic work on South Asian communities abroad tended to focus on such areas as migrants' links with labour markets, but failed to adequately address the various cultural impacts. More than a decade later, we have a plethora of work on South Asian diasporic communities and their identities, particularly in the UK and the USA. Still, though, most of this literature largely remains Eurocentric (Kothari & Laurie, 2005) and there remain lacunae in the study of South Asian communities in other regions, including Southeast Asia.

In the limited literature on South Asians in Southeast Asia (Rai, 2008; Sandhu & Mani, 1993; Tinker, 1990) and especially Singapore (Mani, 1993; Rai, 2006), most research tends to focus, from a historical perspective, on the labour-related settlement of Indians to various Southeast Asian countries. Rai (2008) examines the settlement of the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia in four sections ranging from pre-colonial to post-war settlement, while the country coverage concentrates on Burma, Malaysia and Singapore. The position of the Indian communities in these countries is presented through the lens of official state policies. Writing about Singapore's Indian community, Rai (2008) draws attention to the emergence of 'new' Indian migrants and distinguishes the 'old' diaspora, namely, the settled community from the colonial period, from more recent 'new' Indian migrants, mainly Indian professionals or non-resident Indians (NRIs) mostly recruited into the information technology (IT) sector in Singapore. While the 'old' diaspora have yet to be fully examined, due to the emergence of the new 'professional' migrants, it has become timely to undertake detailed ethnographic work about different migration trajectories and experiences.

While other studies on Indians in Singapore include the role of language (Purushotam, 1998; Rai, 2009a) and the development of Hinduism (Rai, 2009b; Sinha, 2006), there remains lack of attention on questions of cultural identity and tastes in music, dress and food. Chua (2000) investigates the role of 'ethnic' Chinese and Malay dress in Singapore, with regard to how the process of re-ethnicisation has impacted on their clothing style. There has, however, been a dearth of studies on South Asian 'ethnic' dress and the embodiment of cultural identity. Murthy (2008) is the first study to focus on 'ethnic' Indian dress in Singapore and examines the use of the sari among diasporic Indian women, outlining their choices and tastes from the 1950s until the 1980s. While not based on detailed ethnographic work, the study uses oral history interviews with women who had donated their saris for a display in the National Museum. More directly empirical ethnographic study would greatly enrich our understanding of both diasporic and recent transnational Indian migrants in contemporary post-colonial Singapore.

Most studies on South Asian 'ethnic' dress have emanated from the UK. Niessen et al. (2003) examine the rising popularity of 'Asian' dress within Asia, their diasporic 'communities' abroad as well as in the global markets of Europe and North America. This edited volume asserts that the international attention given to 'Asian' dress has re-Orientalised Asia and Asians. Bhachu (2003a) writes on the shalwar kameez and on South Asian women in the UK as entrepreneurs, designers and consumers. Another core publication, written by female academics of South Asian background, is a volume edited by Puwar and Raghuram (2003) in which Raghuram (2003) examines dress forms from an entrepreneurial angle. Since ethnic South Asian dress became 'Indo-chic' (Puwar, 2002), there has been an increasing focus on the study of dress choices among the diaspora (Hansen, 2004).

Across the Atlantic, the study by Maira (1998) on Indian American youth has been pivotal in addressing the mainstreaming of the bindi in Hollywood and popular cultures. Bahl (2005) discusses the bindi as an object of hate for 'dotbusters' and 'doheads'.³ This study, written as an activist response challenging post-modernist focus on South Asian women's experiences with their everyday clothes, also seeks to address how Indian women try to cope with 'contradictory' demands, though there are points of contention with some of her simple assertions. Antony (2010) devotes her article to examining the bindi as a 'performative identifier' of the Indian way of life. She uses discourse analysis of print media, Internet websites and films. While she has attempted to explore the use of the bindi as a symbol of conformity and resistance, by drawing heavily on media sources, her study fails to fully accomplish this, as it lacks the authenticity of an embodied experience of using the bindi. At the same time, Antony (2010: 350) rightly notes the 'significant absence of academic literature that examines the ways in which the bindi is used to express solidarity toward Indian culture and spirituality by domestic and international populations'.

Case Study: Exploring the Embodied Everyday Experience of Priya

The research for this article addresses the gaps in our understanding, identified earlier, by employing a case study method (O'Reilly, 2009). This involved semi-structured interviews coupled with some participant observation, carried out with one key participant, a South Asian diasporic female from Singapore, who was living and studying in Brighton, UK, in the summer of 2012. Devised from the start as a small case study, only this one participant was recruited, a 30-year-old female Singaporean national of Indian Tamil descent. She was pursuing a postgraduate degree in the local university. We first met through the university's student association for Southeast Asian students and subsequently shared occasional dinners and coffee.

Priya was working as a secondary school teacher prior to coming to the UK.⁴ She was born, brought up and educated in Singapore, where she had also completed her first degree. She informed me that her parents, both Tamil Hindus, were also born and brought up in Singapore, while two of her grandparents were born in

Malaya (present-day Malaysia) and the others were from south India and had come to Singapore at an early age. Priya stated that her roots were all in Singapore and Malaysia, with no ties to India. She had visited India as a tourist and identified herself as a Hindu.

In Brighton, Priya also taught hip-hop dance on campus to undergraduates once a week. In terms of reflexivity and positionality, having met her previously and being an 'insider' myself, a diasporic Indian Singaporean, made this case study at times easier. Priya was comfortable as a respondent and spoke with ease, sometimes assuming that I as an 'insider' could understand and relate to her better. Ganga and Scott (2006: 2) define 'insider' research as 'social interviews conducted between researchers and participants who share a similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage'. In this case study, I was an 'insider', connected not by religion but by the same nationality, ethnicity and linguistic heritage. Being aware of my position as an 'insider', I was careful not to allow my own thoughts and views to influence the interview process, allowing the participant to speak freely as I listened.

The consented interview was held in English, in a café on campus. The participant was interviewed using an interview schedule consisting of seven exploratory, open-ended questions. The schedule started with questions regarding ethnic origins and identity, followed by questions on the meaning behind wearing the bindi, her experiences of wearing it, her reflections on wearing and not wearing it and her thoughts on the recent popularity of the bindi. Although the interview schedule was used as a guide, Priya was encouraged to speak freely and openly about her thoughts and experiences. The interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim later. Interview notes and participant observations were maintained in my research diary.

Meeting her socially over occasional dinners, coffees on campus as well as during her dance practices enabled me further to observe her use of the bindi. She wore it on all occasions before and after the interview. The transcript itself was read over many times to understand and interpret it as accurately as possible. As this case study is examining the participant's embodied experience, it uses the grounded approach where themes were conceptualised from the interview data itself. These emergent themes were the bindi as a marker of cultural identity and bindi as a gendered marker.

Bindi as a Marker of Cultural Identity

When asked what wearing the bindi meant for her, Priya responded:

Okay, the Bindi means [emphatically]⁵ a lot to me... it's a way of me signalling to everyone that despite the mini-skirt and the low-cut tops and everything, that I am a good Indian girl. Haha [laughs] Not a good Indian girl, but I am Indian. I think when you live overseas or even when you live in Singapore, right, especially when we are so westernised... I am not, I am not anglicised but I am a bit of a cosmopolitan Indian. So it is very easy to get swept up and have other people think of you as one of them. And I am not against that [emphatically] but I always liked being Indian and wherever I am, right I want to be an

[emphatically] Indian girl in wherever it is. And a bindi is part of signalling to everyone that I am an Indian girl, look at me... You know?

The given extract quite clearly depicts the choice of an Indian identity exercised by Priya. Despite coming from the cosmopolitan city state of Singapore and now living in another place, in the West, she uses the bindi as a marker to identify herself as an Indian girl. She does not at this point tell the interviewer what more this means, but displays her agency by choosing to wear the bindi and not 'to get swept up'. It is not completely clear what that expression means to say, but there are indications of a resistance to complete Westernisation. Thus, Priya uses the bindi as a visible marker to signify her 'cultural identity', as she perceives it, outwardly to everyone. Priya also stated:

Then it has religious significance as well. Well philosophically it is supposed to help you think about keeping your baser desires in, you know anger, lust and greed and things like that. Because it's considered a third eye...in a metaphorical sense, it's supposed to be your third eye, which is the basis of anger. So they say that when you put your bindi on it, you sort of stop getting so emotional, especially angry and things like that.

The above-mentioned statements run contrary to the popular view that contemporary South Asian women are now donning the bindi as a fashion commodity (Maira, 1999: 32) as opposed to using it with a sense of religious awareness (Ashok, 2000). This statement indicates that Priya, as a contemporary diasporic youth, is using the bindi while appreciating its religious significance. She also recounted her initial practice of wearing it as a child and how she had later stopped wearing it for a few years when she was a youngster. This illustrates that Priya has consistently utilised her agency in using the bindi to signify her cultural identity, be it through rejection or actively wearing it again. Asked when she started wearing it, Priya's response was:

I used to wear, like when I was a kid, of course I had to wear it. Then I went through my 'I am not Indian' phase, where I like rejected it. Then after that, yeah like whatever, I don't want to be like Indian...As I grew older and I saw Indian culture as very, very different... You know then I really saw Indian culture for what it is. I was a classically trained dancer and singer. So I saw the classicism of Indian culture and it was a lot easier to accept my Indian-ness...then I started wearing it again, because I got religious.

The last sentence by Priya shows how she associates wearing her bindi with being religious. Parallels of this can be seen in Claire Dwyer's (1995) study of young British Muslim women and their use of the veil. Asked how old she was when she started wearing the bindi again, Priya's response was that this was at age 19–20, and she confirmed that this was in Singapore. Asked if she wears the bindi every day, her response was:

Yeah, yeah. I wear it everywhere. If I go to the temple, I wear a super happening one.⁶ Haha [laughs] on a normal day I just wear the black one, usually I just wear like this type [points to her bindi on her forehead], small black.

As opposed to the somewhat naïve and premature claim that professional Singaporean Indians 'are no longer Indian in a deep, cultural sense' (Tinker, 1990: 55), Priya has shown that professional Singaporean Indians can still be Indian in a deep cultural sense. Their mobility or professionalism does not need to have a bearing upon their cultural identity, though Priya went through early phases of rebellion against being 'Indian'. Unlike Baljit, the British-born Punjabi participant discussed by Jaspal and Coyle (2010), who was a 'passive recipient' of a language she did not identify with, Priya, on the other hand, makes a conscious choice. The above-mentioned extract suggests that she is simply not a passive recipient of a culture that she does not identify with. She actively identifies with Indian culture, significantly after being exposed to classical Indian dance and music. Another interesting point to note here is that though she associates the bindi with Hindu religion, she does not state Hindu identity but rather invokes a unitary (Baumann, 1996: 165) Indian culture and identity. This reiterates the prominent role of the bindi as a marker of her cultural identity rather than a specific religious identity.

Priya professes that it is natural for her to wear it every day, and then elaborates about two different types of bindi worn by married and unmarried women. As stated earlier, Priya said that she wears a simple black dot everyday and chooses the 'happening' ones when she goes out or to the temple. Here, I assert that though the bindi has evolved greatly or 'mutated', as stated by Rachel Dwyer (2000: 189), from being a simple vermilion powder to the 'Swarovski' crystallised bindis, and is now readily available in pre-packaged units (Antony, 2010: 351), this does not render the bindi devoid of its 'traditional' and 'religious' meanings.

Priya was always observed to wear a simple black bindi on campus and during her hip-hop dance classes, thus demonstrating a 'cultural fusion' of her various practices. This also brings across the point that despite her donning mini-skirts and dancing hip-hop, these practices do not prevent her from being 'religious'. She is able to fuse all these different aspects together, illustrating Baumann's (1996) notion that people do practise 'culture' according to how they find meaning and make sense of it.⁷

Priya also acknowledged that the bindi initially became popular in the mainstream media with American singer Gwen Stefani wearing it first.⁸ Besides this comment, she did not seem to have any issue or felt uncomfortable, as did some Indian women in America (Maira, 2002), with the mainstream appropriation of this religious symbol by non-Hindus. Neither did it stop Priya from wearing it.

Antony (2010: 361) states that Indian diasporic women face a dilemma in their interaction with host cultures, thereby, at times, causing them to reject some performative acts which emphasise their 'otherness' to fit in. Contrasting this assumption, Priya, also a diasporic woman, performs the act of wearing the bindi precisely to emphasise her 'otherness' and pride, fully displaying that she is different. Priya claimed, however, that while she wears it in Singapore and in the UK, she would not wear it often if she was in India: 'I just feel like, it's my way of being Indian, in places where people are not Indian. If I was in India, maybe I wouldn't feel the need

to wear it every day.’ When queried why, her response was: ‘I am in India right, I am Indian, I don’t have to wear a bindi to be Indian. But in Singapore and here [refers to the UK] especially, I want, I am very proud of being Indian’.

Her view on not wearing the bindi in India is thought-provoking, as it shows that her cultural identity becomes context-specific, as in India she no longer feels the necessity to assert her cultural identity. Though this may seem contradictory, this illuminates the prominent role attached to the bindi in the display or non-display of her cultural identity. It further reiterates her primary association of the bindi as a marker of her cultural identity rather than her Hindu religious identity. Contrary to the interpretation by Antony (2010: 361), depicting an Indian woman who wore her bindi amongst her non-Indian American classmates as ‘Orientalising’ and thus exoticising herself, Priya’s wearing of the bindi is her way of signifying her Indianness amongst non-Indians. What she means by this remains to be explored.

This performative act by Priya distinctly exemplifies the notion that ‘culture only exists insofar as it is performed’ (Baumann, 1996: 11). Priya said she does not feel the need to wear the bindi in India as she does not need to present or assert her cultural identity there. Thus, by wearing it in non-Indian places, she is performing her cultural identity and asserting it actively vis-à-vis non-Indians.⁹

The Bindi as a Gendered Marker

When asked if there was any gender difference between women wearing the bindi and men not wearing it, Priya replied: ‘I have no idea why, though. I think it’s oppression as well.’ Her reply resonates with the statement by Maira (1999: 49) that ‘[w]omen are expected to carry the burden of embodying unsullied tradition, of chaste Indian womanhood’.

Julia Leslie (1993: 210) noted that ‘[a] man without his sectarian mark is a man without a god. A woman without her *tilaka* is one whose god is dead’. Though there have been different types of bindi for men (Groning, 1997), often referred to as *tilak*—with elaborate rules for them to wear it every morning (Leslie, 1993:209)—it has not been culturally expected to be worn by men all the time. As emphasised by Yuval-Davis (1997), women have always been expected to be bearers of culture and tradition. Indian diasporic women are no exception. The bindi on the forehead of a woman is seen as a symbol of ‘auspicious Indian womanhood’ (Thapan, 2004: 428).

Two types of bindi exist, differentiating a married woman from an unmarried one, thus expecting the former to embody both their marital status and religious identification (Leslie, 1993). Here, the use of the bindi becomes a highly gendered expectation. This perennial entrapment of women as disseminators of culture can be seen in the literature studied about Indian/South Asian diasporic culture, too. Bates (2001: 28) observes that ‘the discourse on women since the end of indenture has turned to emphasizing the character of “the ideal woman” based on an imagined and invented purity of a “classical Indian culture and patriarchy”’.

The above-mentioned discourse, pertinently observed still, remains dominant. While carrying out research for this article, almost all literature found on ethnic dress and culture is shown to have been carried out through a feminine lens, largely analysed through the practice and consumption habits of women. Research on the ethnic dress–culture nexus (Bhachu, 2003b; Dwyer, 2000; Jackson et al., 2007) still remains gendered. On occasions when people are no longer donning certain ethnic dress, women are held solely responsible, with emphasis simply placed on their rejection (Bahl, 2005).

Reflections on the Discourse

Bahl (2005: 106) observes that in the wake of new international divisions of labour, and opening of national borders, increasing numbers of Indian people are settling abroad. Following such migrations, she maintains that the search for ‘authentic’ Indian clothes and exclusive fashion does not stop at the borders of India. In fact, it becomes more intense when Indian women migrate to the West, whether to the USA or the UK (Bahl, 2005). Such assertions seem to point to the Eurocentric and gendered nature of work written in the field of South Asian diasporic communities, despite the call by Bates (2001) and some others to differentiate on both fronts. Hence, I asked Priya further questions about wearing the bindi in the UK:

Interviewer: When you came to the UK, were there any differences, did you feel any difference in terms of wearing it or not wearing it?

Priya: In the same way, I wear it, my face is my face. When I don't wear it, it's a bit strange. Nobody has ever reacted or asked, which is kind of weird, because Indians in England don't wear it. I am the only Indian who I know does.

Modood et al. (1997: 328) reported that 35 per cent of Hindu women in the UK were wearing the bindi and this study actually saw more East African Asian women wearing it as compared to Indians. As this research is now dated, it should be empirically updated to reflect contemporary experiences and choices. So, I asked Priya whether she has seen any women from India wearing it in the UK.

Priya: [Exclaims] No! Which is even weirder, I think they don't wear it because they want to dissociate themselves with being too Indian. They want to try and fit in here more. And so I think that's why they don't wear it. Because by right, where they come from right, they should [emphatically] all be wearing it, it should be a part of their cultures. Like waking up and putting on your clothes, you know. But they don't. I am wondering, I rarely see other Indians wear it. I think it is because they haven't figured it out what it means to be Indian to themselves. While I already know what being Indian means to me...it is a way to tell people, like I said despite the way I dress or the American accent, or the cosmopolitanism or everything right, I am an [emphatically] Indian girl. And an [emphatically] Indian girl in a western society. I am not a [emphatically] Westernised Indian girl!

This points to the importance attached to her cultural identity of being an Indian and the need to distinctively mark this, despite participation in increasingly 'global forces'. This also highlights that it is no longer valid to simplistically claim that diasporic South Asians 'hated' (Bahl, 2005: 114) or 'rejected' their traditional dress and culture. Without sound empirical data, such claims sound contentious. While Bahl (2005), on the one hand, speaks of the challenge faced by immigrant women brought up in India who move to America, having to 'adopt American regimentation', on the other hand, she fails to recognise the complexities involved in the identities of diasporic people living abroad. Antony (2010: 361) displays a more nuanced understanding of this challenge. During the early colonial period, it was not uncommon for Indian women in Malaya and Singapore to adopt forms of the local Malay dress (Hamid, 2006: 107). Often, diasporic women born abroad have to negotiate to assimilate and might shed their 'traditional' clothes as they were considered 'backward with a stigma attached to it' (Modood et al., 1997: 326). This point is shared when Murthy (2008: 32) writes: 'As a minority ethnic group, for the Singaporean Indian women, dressing poses several dilemmas. For clothes can either highlight and assert one's foreignness and ethnic identity or by the same token, alienate the group from the larger population'.

While these statements demonstrate the intricate negotiations facing diasporic South Asians in their clothing choice, this does not mean that culture is always upheld only back in the homeland—in this case, in India (Antony, 2010: 348). These situations conspicuously depict the assertion by Gupta and Ferguson (1992: 10) that even people who remain in 'similar ancestral places', find the supposed link between 'their' place and its culture broken.

Concluding Discussion

Quite what does this mean for Priya? Why did she make the emphatic distinction between 'an Indian girl in a Western society' and 'a Westernised Indian girl'? Do we find here a form of 'protest against the ubiquity, significance and manifestations of the sexual self' (Kakar, 1996: 268)? While acknowledging the drawback of this research in being based only on a single 'insider' case study, and accounting for the fact that there are possibilities for different participants to have different experiences and interpretations, this article illustrates the need for further in-depth ethnographic work on the embodied experiences of South Asian diaspora women wearing the bindi. Larger-scale ethnographic research also ought to examine if there is a greater need amongst South Asian women in diaspora to display their cultural identity amidst 'others' who are non-South Asians. It should also be examined, in more depth, how women associate the gendered implications of wearing certain items like the bindi.

This kind of research should include men and their gaze, too, as the study of culture and cultural identity has long been dominated by a focus on women, largely excluding men and their experiences. With the exception of Modood et al. (1997), the first

detailed study on ethnic minorities in Britain, men have been rarely included. Hopkins (2004, 2006) worked on Muslim men of Pakistani descent in Scotland. Alexander (2000) focuses on young Bengali men in London. Still, in comparison, men have mostly been on the periphery in the analysis of South Asian diasporic experiences. Therefore, it is timely to examine their everyday embodied experiences, too, as there remains a notable void on what cultural identity and ethnic dress mean to men.

The present case study also highlights the need to study the varied experiences of diasporic South Asians further ashore, beyond the UK and the USA. Including other geographical regions, and men, will offer rich resources for cross-cultural examination as well as comparison between genders. Such studies would also provide deeper insights into the role of intergenerational change within diasporic communities. Examining comparatively across religions of diasporic communities, too, will show points of convergence and divergence on diasporic identity and how religious identity and cultural identity configure within it.

The present study confirms that it has, by now, become cogent that the adoption of more than just two cultures by individuals is increasing. Priya's case of a young woman wearing an Indian bindi, with a 'Western' mini-skirt and dancing hip-hop (an African-American dance style) while she remains Singaporean in the UK, illustrates that culture and cultural identity can no longer be viewed as being 'suspended between two cultures', where all forms of agency 'seem to be absent' (Baumann, 1996: 1). Through this case study, it has become apparent that it is no longer sufficient to study diasporic cultural identity through the binary of 'home-land' and 'host-land'. Neither is the widespread assumption valid that cultural practices in 'ancestral places' will be maintained authentically (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992), while those abroad are the first to shed or reject such cultural identity and practices.

Through Priya's use and non-use of the bindi, she has demonstrated the trajectory of her agency in selecting when to display her cultural identity as well as how to display it. This shows that Baumann's (1996) distinction between the dominant and demotic discourses still serves as an important tool to reflect on the cultural identity of contemporary diasporic South Asians. Priya reified what she perceives as Indian culture by using the bindi to assert her Indian cultural identity, while at the same time, remaking it by wearing it with non-traditional clothes such as mini-skirts and low-cut tops. This clearly illustrates the salience of demotic discourse, that culture is made as one tries to find meaning and it exists when it is performed (Baumann, 1996).

In diasporic contexts, this process becomes ever more hybrid. Nayak (2003: 106) notes that '[i]t is possible for some young people to draw upon the signs and symbols of multiculturalism to refashion their ethnicities beyond the spatial limits of the local'. Hence, '[l]ocal cultures are no longer immune from international cross-fertilisation' (Nayak, 2003: 106). Culture and identity derived from it are not static entities, nor is culture always authentic and fixed. In fact, it is highly fluid and other forces such as globalisation increasingly have a bearing on its evolution. The view of Anthias (2001: 628) that a 'pick and mix of cultural elements' does not necessarily equate to a shift in

identity can be acknowledged. However, in contemporary reality where global forces have a marked influence on cultural practices (Bhachu, 1995, 2005), it leaves one to ponder about individuals who adopt various different cultural practices. Priya's cultural practice flows across several cultures and this fluidity across multiple cultures can best be captured by the term 'cultural fusion' (Nayak, 2003: 105). Priya is able to merge her various cultural practices and does not need to be 'two different people' (Ballard & Ballard, 1977: 46). The present article thus supports the notion of 'cultural fusion' as an alternative lens to understand cultural identity.¹⁰ Quite what happens in such processes of joining, and why and how different people react differently, needs to be further analysed through detailed ethnographic studies.

In conclusion, the analysis of Priya's case study has shown that cultural identity does not always change when one moves. Changes of cultural identity can no longer be merely attributed to a change in physical location or migration. The bindi still does hold prominence and relevance in the cultural identity of South Asian diasporic woman abroad. I have shown here how the bindi can be used to signify a woman's affiliation towards Indian culture. Despite 'Western' mainstream appropriation and it being 'Indo-Chic', the bindi still serves as a valid marker of identity to South Asians, displaying one's cultural and religious practices and values.

The present case study has also shown that it is inaccurate to assume that cultural practices and traditions are discarded by diasporic South Asians living abroad. In fact, as illustrated by Priya wearing her bindi in the UK, vis-à-vis students from India not wearing it, this clearly illustrates that at times it is diasporic South Asians who hold onto these practices and values more passionately as compared to those from the 'home-land'. Despite her adoption of multiple 'cultural practices', Priya used the bindi to assert her dominant cultural identity as an 'Indian girl in a western society', clearly distinguishing herself from a 'Westernised Indian girl'. This particular choice of words, I suggest, points to more than merely the conclusion that despite increasing global forces and fusion of cultural practices, cultural identity does still occupy a place of prominence in the psyche of diasporic South Asians. It can also be read as reflection of the agency of a young woman who clearly signals that she is aware of modernity, but not willing to adopt all of its features. Seen from this perspective, the decision to bindi-fy the self is also a strong statement of moral and religious values. More detailed studies than the present one should seek to identify the strength of such links and the accompanying convictions and lifestyle choices.

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Notes

1. For example, diasporic Indians in the United Kingdom (UK) are referred to as South Asians or Asians in the literature, while they are referred to as Indians in Singapore. Both terms will be used interchangeably in this article and they mean the same here.
2. According to my informant, Priya, black is today the most common colour used by unmarried women in southern India.
3. This was a hate group of white men in America who attacked Indian women ('doheads') in New Jersey for wearing the red dot on their forehead in 1987.
4. Her name has been changed to ensure anonymity.
5. Words that were emphasised by the participant have been highlighted; all emphases were the participant's own, unless stated otherwise.
6. This is Singaporean slang for elaborate, shiny things.
7. Ballard's (1994) concept of the 'skilled cultural navigator' has already been mentioned. Baumann's notion of demotic discourse as opposed to the dominant discourse will be discussed later.
8. It was Gwen Stefani who wore it first in the mid-1990s before Madonna popularised it (Maira, 1998).
9. One of the peer reviewers suggested that similar research about the symbolism of the burqa and/or other religious symbols might yield related results.
10. Fusion is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary of 2012 to be 'the process or result of joining two or more things together to form a single entity'.

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