Cultural reorientations: how Indian mothers and daughters in Canberra are renegotiating their ‘hyphenated’ identities

Aruna Manuelrayan

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to get a sense of the current profile of Indian mothers and daughters in Australia by analysing data collected from a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews undertaken in July 2009. This preliminary analysis is the first step in a nationwide study of the migration experience and lifestyle of Indian women in Australia and the impact of migration on their culture and identity. The analysis I present here forms part of my doctoral study, for which I draw inspiration not only from the lived experiences of the Indian mothers and daughters but also from my own migration experiences.

Introduction

The Indian diaspora has in the past three decades comprised more than 20 million people spread all over the world. Although that figure is small compared to the more than a billion inhabitants in the homeland, it has reached a critical mass in various host countries. (Safran, Sahoo and Lal 2008)

---

1 Aruna Manuelrayan is a PhD candidate in the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, University of South Australia. This paper was presented at the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Conference ‘Cultural ReOrientations and Comparative Colonialities’, Adelaide, 22–24 November 2011.

© 2012 Aruna Manuelrayan
Very little is known about women’s migration and their lived experiences of leaving their homelands to settle in another country. Several questions can be asked about their experiences, but the one that is most pertinent to this study is whether migration leads to improvements in the status of women. For example, do they think their experiences of migration and Australian society dilute Indian patriarchal structures to some degree and enhance women’s autonomy or do they perpetuate dependency (UN-INSTRAW 1994: 1)? In my doctoral study I intend to begin to answer this question and more about the experiences of Indian mothers and daughters in diaspora communities.

Some researchers who study migration experiences claim that ‘women in the diaspora remain attached to, and [are] empowered by, a “home” culture and a tradition … as strategies for survival in a new context’ (Clifford 1994: 314) and ‘the challenge for these women … is to evolve an outlook more consistent with modern city survival – without seeming to lose anything of their essential “Indianness”’ (Mitter 1991: 54). Further research suggests that the challenges that confront mothers are not very different from those faced by their daughters (Joshi 2000).

In 2007 I embarked on a project to study the trials and triumphs of the Indian diaspora in South Australia, which provided me with first-hand evidence about the views of Indian migrants on their migration experience and their life in Australia. The evidence, though anecdotal, prompted me to explore further through a doctoral study how Indian mothers and daughters in different states in Australia are coping with or embracing the impact of migration. Given that the male-to-female ratio of the 120,000 Indian-born in Australia (ABS 2006) is 1:1, it is significant to research women in the Indian diaspora and their experiences as migrants in Australia. As a woman and migrant myself, with an adult daughter and a migrant mother, I am personally aware of the impact that migration has on the socio-cultural and economic aspects of our lives and thus chose to investigate this further.

In this paper I present an overview of the literature on the Indian diaspora, outlining previous studies and research on migration, and shedding light on the experience of Indian women.
migrants in Australia. I will also outline my study plan, discussing my research method, explaining the challenges and efforts to minimise or overcome obstacles, and taking into consideration the limitations of my method. I will then analyse the data collected from a sample of Indian mothers and daughters in Canberra. I will draw only a preliminary conclusion on the basis of my findings so far.

**Literature review**

As Indians move from their home country to settle in many parts of the world, they have cause to re-evaluate their traditional roles as practised in India and the socio-cultural adjustments that may be required in their new homeland. It is inevitable that some foreign values and beliefs have been accepted by traditional world cultures. Although western and non-western cultures should not be viewed as dichotomous, they do differ in some aspects and history shows that subtly prevailing traditions can lose their significance under the guise of modernisation (Sundaram 2006). However, culture is dynamic, a way of living in a given community. It is the amalgamation of one’s language, literature, religion and way of life. Therefore by its very nature culture is adaptable and to be adapted. One of the aims of my doctoral study is to explore this dynamic culture through the lived experiences of Indian mothers and daughters in Australia.

Although extensive research has been conducted on migrant communities and their experiences, it is still lacking with respect to women as strongly evidenced by the scarcity of literature on Indian women in Australia. Mukherjee confirmed that ‘not much is known about these women [and] their experiences while establishing themselves in the Australian environment’ (1992: 51). Anderson and Jack added that one of the reasons is that Indian women ‘often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions’ (1991: 11). As an ethnic entity they are a very close-knit group and as such are threatened by outsiders. This means that personal or lived experiences are not made public, as Mukherjee affirmed:
Stories are private and personal and, according to their cultural traditions, should normally remain in their family and not be published in the wider community, especially not in an adopted country ... Matters related to their family and their kin which have been expressed in their life stories may become available to the public and ... be a source of ‘gossip’ which may threaten their family status and respectability. (1992: 55)

Further, men have higher status than women in traditional Indian society, where ‘Indian men retained the authority accorded to them by a patriarchal, extended family structure’ (Ramusack and Sievers 1999: 43). This means that, by the very nature of Indian culture and society, women are presumed subordinate to men and therefore may be ‘muted’ to some extent in expressing their views.

Kannan and Joshi did seminal work in the 1970s and 1980s on Indian mothers and daughters in Victoria (Kannan 2002; Joshi 2000). They conducted interviews with one specific generation; Kannan focused on mothers while Joshi’s study was on daughters. Their findings show that mothers and daughters had dissimilar experiences of migration and living in a diasporic community. What is notable in these two studies is the evidence of the issues that second-generation Indian women faced within the process of settling and living in Australia; these included identity, career, language and religion.

**Methodology**

Given the nature of getting information about the experiences of Indian mothers and daughters and the personal and privacy issues interwoven into their lives and that of their family, it is imperative that the methodology used is sensitive and appropriate for collection of such data.

I used a qualitative research methodology with auto-ethnography as a participatory research tool. Auto-ethnography is the study of the awareness of the self within a culture and as such the intent of auto-ethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural. It is a genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the
cultural, placing the self within a social context, often written in the first person and featuring dialogue, emotion and self-consciousness, telling relational and institutional stories that are affected by history, social structure and culture (Ellis and Bochner 2000, cited in Holt 2003: 2; Reed-Danahay 1997a). When the dual nature of auto-ethnography is apprehended, it is a useful term with which to pose the binary conventions of a self–society split, as well as the boundary between objective and subjective (Reed-Danahay 1997b: 2). Auto-ethnographers, as insiders, ‘possess the qualities of often permanent identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognised both by themselves and the people of whom they are part’ (Hayano 1997: 100). They therefore challenge conventional wisdom about silent authorship, where the researcher’s voice is not included in the presentation of the findings (Charmaz and Mitchell 1997). As a ‘boundary crosser’ the auto-ethnographer assumes a dual identity of researcher and the researched, thus exploring new ways of writing about the multiple, shifting identities of participants (researcher included), bearing in mind that questions of voice and authenticity are not to be overlooked.

Wall (2006: 1) claimed that auto-ethnography as an emerging qualitative research method grounded in postmodern philosophy allows the researcher to draw on her experience and write in a personalised style about socio-cultural phenomenon that have hitherto only been addressed in conventional academic terms or from anthropological perspectives. The stories narrated and presented here are women’s stories of migration and, to understand them, I who have gone through migration have a vantage point and have taken into consideration the ‘indigenous’ method of storytelling and construction of self, as a result of the shared experience. By juxtaposing my experiences, therefore, I am able to show how our stories are similar or different and why, thereby authenticating the accounts (Brettell 1997: 226–228).

The researcher’s voice is only validated when the question of who speaks on whose behalf and under what authority is answered satisfactorily. So while an ethnographer studies and systematically records human cultures that she is not part of, as an outsider, an auto-ethnographer does the same as an insider and practitioner of that culture. I want to be the ethnographer of my own culture by telling my story along with those of other Indian women.
migrants in Australia. This genre of writing allows me to include myself as the narrator of my story and the stories of the participants. As can be seen from the above, auto-ethnography differs from ethnography in that it is an insider’s view, and as such it takes into account socio-cultural overtones when analysing and telling the stories of the participants. Therefore I am in a position to foreground the lived experiences of the researcher and the researched. I was willing to be a vulnerable participant-observer. I was ready to focus on my experience as a means to access knowledge that will shed light on the experiences of Indian women migrants in Australia.

In this study I document the stories and perceptions of Indian mothers and their daughters about being an Indian migrant in Australia and their continual ties and relationship with their homeland. I recorded their stories through interviews which were based on a semi-structured questionnaire on issues such as the challenges they face in their newly adopted country, their coping mechanisms, their achievements as well as ways of maintaining their ties with their homeland. This study consists of five sets of mothers and daughters. I capture and analyse their stories here as they were told to me to look at the differences of perceptions between the first and second generations of Indian women in Australia.

The women interviewed do not represent a cross-section of Indian migrants. They are all upper middle class. They are south Indians of Hindu background. They were friends of an acquaintance.

I began each session by explaining the aim of the interview. I chose to open with a summary of my migration story as I had invaded their homes not only as a guest but also as a researcher and it was only right and fair that they got to hear my story before I got to hear theirs. I treated each set as one case (one mother and at least one daughter). This paper is based on the preliminary findings of five cases of Indian mothers and daughters residing in Canberra. In total, 15 participants were interviewed in their family homes. I asked the following questions of each case:
1. What were/are the push and pull factors?
2. What challenges did/do you face in terms of practising and transmitting your culture such as language and religion?
3. What challenges did/do you face in terms of settlement and employment?
4. How did/do you cope with or overcome the above challenges?
5. What achievements and/or contributions have you made since migrating?
6. Were you able to fulfill your aspirations?

In this paper I will address and develop the first three questions.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed; and were then sent to each case for approval of what they said in the interview. It was only after their approval was given that I began to analyse the interview data.

Preliminary findings

Setting the scene: general observations

Even before the front door was opened, in nearly 80 per cent of the cases I was made aware that I was about to enter an Indian home. The tell-tale signs were either an icon, a picture of a deity or the smell of Indian incense. In 100 per cent of the cases I also noticed an altar or Indian paintings or decor or heard bhajan (Indian chants) playing as I entered the house. I offered a clasped palm greeting to the recipient at the door, the mother and daughter, who were awaiting my arrival. In 80 per cent of the cases it was reciprocated by the mothers. None of the daughters returned my Indian greeting. Sixty per cent of the mothers were dressed in salwar khamis (traditional Indian dress) and had a bindi (dot on the forehead). One hundred per cent of the daughters were in jeans or pants but 10 per cent of the daughters also had a bindi. In all cases the husband was within sight when I entered the house. They were introduced to me and in 80 per cent of the cases my presence was acknowledged with a nod and a smile.
**Characteristics of all cases**

All cases were practising Hindus and regularly visited the temple to pray. All the mothers had a bindi on their forehead and all participants could speak at least one Indian language. All five of the mothers had Indian husbands, as well as 40 per cent of the daughters, with the remaining 60 per cent stating that they would prefer to marry Indians in the future.

*Religion:* All of the cases professed to be born Hindus, with 10 per cent practising Christianity as well and 10 per cent taking an interest in Buddhism.

*Language:* In terms of languages spoken at home and in the diasporic community, 80 per cent of the mothers could speak at least two Indian languages and 60 per cent of the daughters could speak at least two Indian languages.

*Profession:* The mothers had professions ranging from teaching to working for the government to being a homemaker and a carer. Of the mothers with a profession, all said that they did not have too much trouble getting a job in their field or in a related area when they came to Australia. The exception was Case 5 who was a practising doctor in India. She chose not to pursue her profession as she found the pathway to gaining recognition to practice in Australia too rigorous at her age, so she chose to become a carer. The daughters have either studied or were studying a tertiary course in Australia. Those who were working were working in the civil service.

Table 1 summarises additional characteristics of the cases.
### Table 1: Characteristics of the cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Case 1</th>
<th>Case 2</th>
<th>Case 3</th>
<th>Case 4</th>
<th>Case 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Push factors</strong></td>
<td><em>1st gen</em></td>
<td>Husband’s decision</td>
<td>Husband’s decision</td>
<td>Husband’s decision</td>
<td>Children’s education, conditions in India</td>
<td>Conditions in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>2nd gen</em></td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>2nd gen</em></td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
<td>Accompany parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td><em>1st gen</em></td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>2nd gen</em></td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indian language</strong></td>
<td><em>1st gen</em></td>
<td>Kannada, Telugu</td>
<td>Kannada, Telugu</td>
<td>Malayalam, Tamil, Punjabi, Tamil, Hindi</td>
<td>Tamil, Telugu</td>
<td>Tamil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>2nd gen</em></td>
<td>Kannada, Telugu</td>
<td>Kannada, Telugu</td>
<td>Malayalam</td>
<td>Punjabi, Tamil, Hindi</td>
<td>Tamil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current profession</strong></td>
<td><em>1st gen</em></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Public servant</td>
<td>Executive officer</td>
<td>Carer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>2nd gen</em></td>
<td>Auditor</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Doctor/dentist</td>
<td>Undergrad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Push/pull factors**

For the purposes of this research, ‘push factors’ refer to what was happening in India that led them to leave, and ‘pull factors’ are the reasons for deciding to migrate to Australia and not America or England, the other two traditional destinations. Traditionally Indian women do not leave their parents’ home until the day they marry, and they have rarely been the instigator of an overseas move. So it was no surprise that 60 per cent of the women migrated to Australia because their ‘spouses wanted to’, and 100 per cent of them said the move was also to give their children a ‘better life’. Eighty per cent of them were career women and did not see the need to leave India, and 40 per cent reported that unfavourable conditions in India made them leave. Eighty per cent have lived in Australia for at least 20 years and 20 per cent migrated first to the UK and then decided to settle in Australia. All five cases said that the main reason for migration to Australia was to provide a better future for their children and family.
Case 1’s husband wanted a new experience. Her ‘husband was adamant’, so she took unpaid leave from her job as a vice-principal. Within two months she got a job as a teacher. Her husband could not find a job in his field, so he went to university to pursue a course that eventually secured him a job.

Case 2’s husband, a practising doctor, wanted to go to UK, where they had settled first, to continue his studies. Then he wanted to achieve his dream of having the ‘letter MRCP behind his name’, so the family had to re-migrate, this time to Australia.

Case 3 came to be with her husband who was already working in Australia. She also said that in India it was a trend to go overseas to live and work.

Case 4 came to Australia to give her children a better future. She confessed that, because of the ‘quota system’ in India that privileged the ‘untouchables’, she feared her children might not have the chance to get a place in university and/or a profession such as medicine. She had also gone for a briefing at the Australian High Commission in India which led her to decide to migrate. One other account she narrated that she strongly believes was the final reason for their migration was an incidental meeting. She happened to be sitting next to a girl in the bus when the girl started sobbing. When asked why, the girl had responded that she did not get a place in college (university) to study commerce. This led Case 4 to think of her daughters who had ambitions to study medicine.

Case 5 said that, although her ‘husband had plans to migrate’, he did not impose. She left because of unfavourable conditions in India. She wanted her family to have a better quality of life and to give their children a better education.

In my case I, too, came for a better life for my daughter. I knew that she was unlikely to get a place in university because of her average grades, which would in turn lead to dim career prospects. Therefore my husband and I thought it best to leave Singapore after she had finished Year 12 and to enrol her in tertiary education in Australia. Besides, we also were aware that life after retirement in Singapore
would be boring and unfulfilling. Although my husband and I were doing well in our careers and had family in Singapore, in our late 40s we felt that Singapore was not the place to retire. So my husband opted for early retirement and I resigned in anticipation of a more enjoyable and productive post-retirement. We had travelled to England and New Zealand wanting to migrate there but found these countries to be rather cold and the former too crowded and the latter too sparsely populated.

**Indian culture and continuity**

A heterogeneous race like the Indians is bound to have cultural variations within the diaspora that reflect different origins, for example Indians from India and Indians from Fiji and so on. However, in this paper I do not dwell on the differences. It is indeed a challenge to label this rather diverse community of people accurately. For the purposes of this research, the term diaspora means

any sizeable community of a particular nation or region living outside its own country and sharing some common bonds that give them an ethnic identity and consequent bonding. However, what constitutes ethnic identity is fluid and changes over time. It means different things to different people at different points of time, place and circumstance. (Sharma, Pal and Chakrabathi 2004: xi)

However, there is evidence to suggest that a group-ethnic consciousness is emerging, sustained by a sense of a common history and the belief in a common fate, forging the unity of a divided people as a ‘diasporic discourse’ in the construction of ‘otherness’ in a white-dominated democracy like Australia (Parekh, Singh and Vertovec 2003). The elements that provide this commonality are ‘the markers of identity – food, clothes, language retention, religion, music, dance … customs of the individual community … [and] the impact of the culture of the adopted country’ (Sharma, Pal and Chakrabathi 2004: xi).

When asked to comment on what Indian culture meant to them, all of the participants concluded that Indian culture is synonymous with universal values such as being honest, respectful and showing kindness to people regardless of their colour, creed or age. When
asked whether they thought they had passed on their religious heritage, 100 per cent of the mothers felt that they had indeed made an attempt to keep their religion alive. This, they said, was done by performing poojas or prayers or taking their children to the temple or to India for short holidays. Although the daughters either came to Australia at a very young age or were born here, from my observation and conversation with them they seemed to have a good balance of traditional Indian and Australian values. All of them could speak or understand at least one Indian language; they were able to sing traditional carnatic songs or dance the baratha natiyam or the kuchi pudi (classical music and dance).

About 40 per cent of the daughters were already married to Indian men from their language group. One of the two was expecting her second child. Two of the three unmarried daughters said they would prefer to marry an Indian or at least a man who would not stop them from practising their religion and upholding their tradition and values. The reason for preferring to marry an Indian was, according to them, it would be easier for their spouses to understand them and in turn help to pass on their culture and identity to their children. One hundred per cent of the daughters wanted their children to learn their language and tradition. All bemoaned the fact that they were not as well versed or steeped in their culture as their mothers were and they were afraid that they would not be effective at imparting it to their children. However, 60 per cent said that there was nothing wrong in partying late or engaging in social drinking, as long as they did not go overboard.

When questioned about their identity, without reservation all cases stated they were Indian Australians or, for those born here, Australian Indians. To them their heritage was as important as their nationality. In my observation and their responses to the interviews, it is obvious that all cases have, to a large extent, maintained their cultural heritage, including religion, language and the arts.

Case 1 was concerned about cultural conflict, although she believed that all cultures are ‘welcome’ in Australia. She pointed out that even in India there is resistance and even rejection of cultures within states. She is a trained carnatic musician and teaches it as a hobby.
She goes to the temple on a regular basis. She had organised ‘Friendship Fair’, a nine-day event in which cultural groups from interstate were invited to participate. Her daughter had an arranged marriage to an Indian man from their language group. The daughter said she prays at home and performs Indian dances. She was keen to pass on her culture to her own daughter and the yet-to-be-born child. She also wanted to impart the significance of the key Indian festivals to her children. She believed that ‘children should be open to other cultural patterns’.

Case 2 confessed that she is not a ‘zealous Hindu’. She went to an Anglo-Indian school where she attended bhajan classes while the Christian girls went to scripture classes. She sneaked into scripture classes as she was attracted to them. She said she grew up reciting the rosary and still prays to St Anthony. She has an altar where she has her Hindu deities and the Christian god. According to her, ‘all gods are one’. She recalled a time when her children, who went to Catholic schools in Australia, made the sign of the cross in front of her altar. She told them it was not wrong but Hindus do not do it. She proudly claimed that her husband and children often request that she pray to St Anthony on their behalf. She has observed a ‘double standard in the social norms’ between [Indian] boys and girls. This she says has been ‘instilled from young’. She has always encouraged her children to speak her mother tongue. One of her daughters wanted to be introduced to a suitor from her language group and has since married him. She thanks her parents for taking her back to India every two years. This, she says, has helped her to keep her language and religion alive. She did admit that she struggled with what her culture was when she was younger, but soon realised that the curfews that her parents imposed were nothing to do with culture but their way of ensuring her safety. She said social drinking and clubbing are very Australian but these were not against Indian culture. She said young people should know their limit. She left home to go interstate to do a degree in Medicine but did not lose her identity. She is proud of her origin and says she is an ‘Indian plus an Australian’. She was concerned that she might not be able to teach her children her language well because she does not speak it well. But she was steadfast about passing on her language and religion to her children. She says this can be done more
easily now that she is married to an Indian than if she married an Australian or someone from another religious or language group.

Case 3 is sceptical about religion. She is a Hindu by birth, knows the philosophy behind her religion, and speaks Hindi and Punjabi. She has taken an interest in Buddhism. She strongly believes that ‘we [meaning those in the diaspora] are the guardians of our culture [more] than those in India’. She calls herself an ‘Indian-born Australian’. Her daughter would prefer to marry an Indian as she believes it will be easier to pass down her language, culture and religion. She is steeped culturally; she does a couple of Indian dances, sings and plays the piano. She admitted that she has a fascination with western ways but is very grounded in her Indian ways. So she claimed she is a product of two cultures.

Case 4 believed that one should be ‘comfortable in one’s own skin’ and therefore one does not have to renounce one’s culture, language or religion in order to live in Australia. She says in Australia ‘you can be what you want to be’. Both her daughters left home to study medicine interstate. They do not have boyfriends. They speak their language. They practise their religion by doing poojas and going to the temple. They therefore do not think they have lost their culture but are happy that they have the opportunity to live in two cultures.

Case 5 equates the values and ethos of Hinduism to universal values. She says she keeps the religion alive by doing poojas and going to the temple once a week. She explained that, while her elder daughter has internalised Indian values because she is older, the younger one who is 8 ‘goes to school here [Australia]’, enjoys attending Indian religious classes and likes to wear Indian outfits.

In my case I am a practising Catholic but I grew up in a predominately Hindu neighbourhood. As such, I was aware of my dual identity from a young age, and later appreciated and now cherish it. Given that my daughter and I are bilingual in my mother language Tamil and English, we are able to appreciate culturally steeped practices that hail from Indian tradition as well as those of ‘western’ Christian practices. We are proud of our heritage and new nationality. Thus we call ourselves
Singapore-born Indian Australians. I have a passion to sustain and, where possible, promote my language and religion, so I have been instrumental in starting a monthly Tamil Catholic mass.

**Professional development**

For the purposes of this study, professional development refers to both professional (meaning career-related) progress, and personal or self-fulfilment type of development. This can be formal learning requiring ability and commitment or a practical process of learning, adapting and succeeding in something other than a career-oriented goal. In this respect, all the mothers have succeeded in the area of professional development.

From the Canberra data, 40 per cent of the mothers seem to have had a smooth transition into their profession. They have also found ways to contribute to their host nation as well as the Indian community. They seem to have created a better Australia by striking a balance.

**Case 1** is a high school teacher. She works as an English tutor and teaches carnatic music from home. Her daughter studied and is an auditor in Australia.

**Case 2** has always been a homemaker. After her children grew up, she decided to do some voluntary work with St Vincent de Paul. She said this was something she would never have been able to do in India as her husband was a doctor and she was not ‘allowed’ to do any form of work. Both of her daughters have an Australian degree. Both are practising doctors.

**Case 3** took up a part-time job in a bank and soon got a full-time position. Then she became pregnant and could not go back to her bank job, so she sat the entrance test for an Australian Taxation Office position. She got the job but had to give it up as they had to move to Darwin where her husband was posted. She had a ‘laid-back life’, taking care of her children until she felt the need to do something to ‘stimulate her mind’. So she became interested in IT. Soon her husband was posted to their present state where she applied for a position as a research assistant and her application was rejected. This led her to do a degree in IT and since then she
has been employed as a director in a government department. Her elder daughter is a practising doctor while the second is finishing Year 12.

Case 4 was working in a manufacturing industry that dealt with fabrics. However, she could not get a job in her field because of the recession in Australia. So she worked as a volunteer with a government research agency for some time. Having proven herself, she was offered a job and later she was promoted to Executive Officer. Both her daughters have an Australian degree. One is a practising doctor while the second is studying dentistry.

Case 5 came to Australia as a practising doctor but was told that she had to sit for the Australian Medical Council Examination in order to qualify to practice. While finding out how to go about doing it, she got a voluntary job in an aged care facility which soon recognised her potential and encouraged her to take up a certificate in aged care and provided her with free aged care training. This led her to realise that she was good with the elderly and she found satisfaction. So she has given up her plans to sit the medical examination. Her daughter is studying a degree in psychology. She is also working part-time in a supermarket.

In my case Although I was a high school teacher for more than 20 years when I resigned to migrate to Australia, I had to apply to be registered with the Teacher’s Registration Board to be eligible to teach in South Australia. As soon as my application was processed, I applied to the Department of Education and Children’s Services for a teaching position. I was told that I was unlikely to secure a job in the immediate future as they ‘were inundated with 12,000 applications which had been lodged 6 months’ prior to my application’. So I enrolled to do a Master of Education in TESOL. Just as I was about to start my studies, I was offered a six-month contract to teach in a high school. I accepted it as I was afraid that I might not be offered another job should I decline it. Thus I had to balance my job, family and studies. On completion of the contract and my studies, I was successful in getting a job teaching adult migrants. I tried it for six months and realised that it was not what I wanted to do, so I resigned. Then I got a job teaching international students in a private tertiary college. While teaching there, I applied to do a PhD, which I am currently pursuing. My daughter completed Year 12 and went on to do a degree in psychology. Within two years of that, she decided to leave home. She went to Tasmania
to work and study. After two years she returned, started a business from home and is now undertaking another course of study.

Discussion

In Indian culture, traditionally men were the sole breadwinners and decision makers and what they said had to be accepted unconditionally by the female members of the family and the children. Women were conditioned and expected to be submissive and at times subservient to the male members of their family and community. However, the situation changed when women were given the opportunity to go to school, have an education and the choice to seek employment. An increasing number of Indian women sought employment within ‘women’s domains’ such as teaching or nursing. Moreover, Indian women had the freedom to become professionals in formerly male-only domains such as medicine and engineering. This is evidenced by the women who were interviewed. Women who had no choice but to leave their homeland because their husbands wanted to pursue their career or follow their dream in Australia soon found an avenue to assert their identity. They did not remain at home as homemakers and caregivers only, but also became breadwinners. Their unflinching loyalty to and support for their husbands did not stop them from showing their incredible strength and resilience in a foreign land. The sacrifices they made were out of the boundless love and affection they had for their family, particularly for their children. The courage and vision of these women should not go unnoticed.

My interviews confirm that the values parents imbibe in their children when they are young help mould them. Indian society has deep-rooted values, such as respecting elders, having faith in God, caring for the extended family, and so on. Both mothers and daughters seem to believe that these values should be preserved in a foreign society. At the same time mothers are willing to allow their daughters to adopt Australian values which encourage independence, freedom of expression and a ‘fair go’ for all. While 40 per cent of the daughters resented ‘curfews’, they realised in hindsight that it was for their own good. Forty per cent of the daughters also spoke about drinking alcohol and ‘partying till the late hours’ as an accepted Australian way of life, which has to be done in moderation. As for the mothers, only
10 per cent admitted that they did not drink alcohol but added that it was a choice. All of the mothers were steeped in their language, religion and culture while all of the daughters admitted that they were not competent enough to pass on all they have learnt from their mothers as they live in a dual culture. However, they were confident that they would not let their culture die as the long-practised values would ensure its survival in Australia.

The women and their daughters who were my interviewees were not very different from my mother, my daughter and myself. My mother passed down our language, culture and tradition to me and I have passed them on to my daughter. Since coming to Australia she has learnt in order to survive here she has to learn to be more sociable than an Indian girl was expected to. I was a school teacher and still am but since coming to Australia I have done a postgraduate degree to work in academia. I have also taken the opportunity to stand for local government. It was my initiative to migrate and my family had no objections. My husband was so supportive that he resigned from his job and, when we came to Australia, went to university to get a degree in IT. I vividly remember being told that there were three Indian groceries, two in the city and one in the east. Six years later there are more than three of them in my suburb. In the last three years I have witnessed the formation of Indian community-based organisations and an increase in the number of Indian magazines. There is no denying that there are likely to be some differences between the first and second generations. While the mothers had to work harder and had a steep learning curve, the daughters have different challenges and opportunities.

Conclusion
In my observation, both the first and second generation women came across as strong willed, fiercely independent, extremely intelligent and very well integrated. They thought that there was no such thing as ‘Indian’ culture, although they were quick to give examples of Indian cultural manifestations in the form of classical music and dance and going to the temple. One of the most interesting ideas they had for maintaining their tradition is frequent visits to India, where they get to meet up with their relatives and mingle with the locals. They foresaw the day Indian culture will be subsumed by a universal culture or perhaps a hybrid culture,
but said it was not a bad thing. The reason was they were in agreement that Australia is the ‘lucky country’ and will give everyone ‘a fair go’; and as such their children will have freedom of expression and ample opportunities to practise or keep their tradition alive, even if it were to be watered down. These women, both mothers and daughters, have also found ways to contribute to all communities, not just the Indian community. Therefore, they seem to have created a better Australia for themselves and future generations by balancing their Indian ancestry and their Australian citizenry.

The women are the unsung heroes, the champions of their culture; for it is they who are instrumental in passing it down and at the same time embracing and instilling the importance of respecting the culture of the host country. From the experiences of the women interviewed, the role, status and aspirations of Indians, in particular Indian women, have changed dramatically since their arrival in Australia. However, in the words of a famous Afro-American writer, when it comes to migrant women, ‘at each arrival … we begin a new analysis, a new departure, a new interrogation of meaning, new contradictions’ (Davies 1994: 5). Thus the migration experience and lifestyle of Indian women in Australia and the impact of migration on their culture and identity will continue to change.

References


