RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Putting the Trans in Transnational: How Young Queer Indian Americans' Political Identities are Impacted by their Parents' Domestic Indian Affiliations

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, queer identity formation among diasporic communities has become a critical site of inquiry across sociology, gender and sexuality studies, and diaspora studies. Within South Asian, particularly among Indian Americans, questions of gender, sexuality, diaspora, religion, family obligation, and cultural belonging intersect in uniquely complex and understudied ways. While scholarship exists on South Asian queer migrant adults, much less research has examined younger generations, especially Gen Z and Millennial queer Indian Americans, whose social worlds are shaped not only by migration histories and traditional family structures but also by online queer communities, shifting U.S. racial politics, transnational media flows, and evolving discourses around mental health and intersectionality.

This study proposes to address this gap by examining how queer Gen Z and Millennial Indian Americans navigate identity, belonging, and cultural expectations across U.S. and Indian cultural contexts. Specifically, it seeks to understand how younger queer South Asians construct meaning around queerness and Indianness simultaneously and how they navigate intergenerational cultural pressures.

The project employs a qualitative methodology centered on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10–15 queer Gen Z and Millennial Indian Americans. These interviews will illuminate the processes of identity formation, community creation, and emotional navigation within a population that remains underrepresented in existing research. The goal is to produce a multidimensional account of queer diasporic subjectivity that challenges existing assumptions and expands the scholarly conversation around South Asian diasporic life, queerness, and intersectionality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Diaspora, Identity, and Transnational Belonging

Foundational diaspora theory emphasizes how migrants and their descendants negotiate belonging across multiple cultural contexts (Hall 1990; Brah 1996). Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity frames diaspora as a continual process rather than a fixed state, while Avtar Brah's "diaspora space" concept highlights the intersections of race, gender, and nation in diasporic subject formation. For South Asian Americans, studies have shown that identity formation is shaped by racialization in the U.S., intergenerational cultural tensions, and ongoing connections to the homeland (Maira 2002; Prashad 2000).

However, such frameworks often assume heteronormativity. Scholars like Gayatri Gopinath (2005) argue that dominant diaspora studies have historically rendered queerness invisible. Gopinath demonstrates how queer South Asian subjects disrupt national narratives, opening diasporic "elsewheres" that destabilize normative constructions of the diaspora. Her work lays the theoretical foundation for examining queer diasporic experience as a site of cultural negotiation and resistance.

Queer South Asian Diaspora Studies

Queer South Asian diaspora scholarship, though growing, remains limited. Gopinath (2005), Puar (2007), and Reddy (2005) illustrate how queer identity complicates diasporic narratives of family, nationalism, and belonging. Reddy's work on South Asian lesbian and queer communities in the U.S. foregrounds how cultural expectations around gender, family, and respectability shape queer subjectivity. Puar's analysis of homonationalism reveals how queer South Asians are positioned within broader U.S. racial and political discourses.

Yet most existing research focuses on adult migrants, not those who grew up within the U.S. as second-generation immigrants. Younger queer South Asians are negotiating identity in an era shaped by the internet, heightened visibility of queer identities, and shifting family and cultural norms. Studies on youth and diaspora (Maira 2002) and studies on youth and digital queer culture (Gray 2009; Banet-Weiser 2018) offer useful frameworks but have rarely been applied specifically to queer South Asian Americans of Gen Z and Millennial cohorts.

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality provides a lens for understanding how multiple identities shape lived experience. For queer South Asians, intersectionality operates through race, gender, sexuality, class, immigration history, and cultural expectations. Research shows that queer people of color navigate distinct pressures around coming out, family acceptance, and community belonging (Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2004). Within the U.S. racial landscape, South Asians occupy a complicated position, often racialized as "model minorities," which shapes queer identity formation. Queer South Asians may encounter both racism within queer spaces and homophobia/transphobia within South Asian cultural spaces (Dasgupta 1999). These tensions are especially pronounced for younger generations, who face expectations of cultural authenticity online and in-person.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Gen Z and Millennial queer Indian Americans navigate their identities across Indian and American cultural contexts?
2. How do they understand and articulate the relationship between queerness and Indian-ness?
3. How do intergenerational family expectations, cultural norms, and diaspora-specific pressures shape their experiences of queerness?
4. How were their political beliefs and identities shaped by their parents' understanding and experience with Indian domestic politics? How did that experience impact their queer identities?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This project employs a qualitative, semi-structured interview design to explore the lived experiences of queer Gen Z and Millennial Indian Americans. Qualitative methods allow for capturing the nuance, complexity, and emotional texture of identity formation that quantitative approaches cannot adequately address.

Participant Recruitment

Participants will be:

- Queer (self-defined)
- Indian American (first- or second-generation)
- Aged 18–35
- Gen Z or Millennial

Recruitment strategies:

- Instagram/Twitter calls
- Outreach to queer South Asian organizations
- University South Asian and LGBTQ+ groups

The target sample size is 10–15 participants, which allows for depth while enabling pattern identification.

Interview Procedure

Interviews will be:

- 20-30 minutes
- Conducted via Zoom or in person
- Audio recorded and transcribed

Interview themes include:

- Experiences of queerness within South Asian families
- Cultural expectations around gender, marriage, and respectability
- Racialization in U.S. queer spaces
- Connections to India or transnational identity

Data Analysis

Following transcription, interviews will be coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). Coding will proceed in three phases:

1. Open coding
2. Axial coding to identify relationships among categories
3. Selective coding to synthesize key themes and theoretical insights Nvivo or Atlas. It will be used to support coding and data organization.

HYPOTHESES

Primary Hypothesis (H_1)

H_1: Queer Gen Z and Millennial Indian Americans whose parents strongly identify with or support conservative political actors in India (e.g. the BJP) will report higher levels of political divergence from their parents and a stronger personal alignment with progressive or pro-LGBTQ+ political positions in the United States.

This hypothesis builds on research showing that (1) diaspora political orientations influence second-generation political development, and (2) queer youth often form political identities in direct response to familial and cultural pressures around sexuality and gender. The expectation is that homeland conservative politics, especially those imbued with heteronormativity or Hindu nationalist rhetoric, will intensify intergenerational political conflict and push queer youth toward progressive U.S. political identification.

Null Hypothesis (H_0)

H_0: There is no significant relationship between Indian immigrant parents' political affiliations in India and the U.S. political identities of their queer children.

Under the null hypothesis, parental homeland political beliefs would have no meaningful effect on the political development of queer second-generation Indian Americans. Identity formation, voting behavior, and political attitudes would instead be shaped by other factors like peer networks, education, U.S. social environments, or queer community engagement, rather than by inherited or transmitted political values from India.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_2)

H_2: Queer Gen Z and Millennial Indian Americans whose parents hold progressive, secular, or non-nationalist political affiliations in India (e.g., Indian National Congress, Left parties, regional secular parties) will report political *continuity* and not divergence. This would indicate stronger alignment with their parents' values and less intergenerational political conflict.

Unlike the primary hypothesis, which predicts divergence for children of conservative parents, the alternative hypothesis predicts harmonization of political values where parents' homeland politics are already more inclusive, pluralistic, or critical of majoritarian social norms. In this model, queer Indian American political identity development is shaped by inherited political frameworks that make space for minority rights and personal autonomy.

SIGNIFICANCE

This project contributes to several fields:

Queer Diaspora Studies: It expands queer South Asian studies by focusing on younger generations, a group rarely centered but shaped by ever-emerging trends of immigration and cultural rebellion.

Gender and Sexuality Studies: The project challenges monolithic understandings of queer experience by foregrounding intersectionality in its work.

South Asian American Studies: The study provides a nuanced account of how queerness reshapes diasporic belonging, family dynamics, and generational difference within Indian American communities.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample is small and non-representative; findings will not generalize statistically.
- Participants recruited through activist/online networks may skew toward more "out" or community-connected individuals.
- Self-reported experiences may be shaped by memory, perception, or concerns about privacy.
- As with all qualitative work, researcher bias influences interpretation.

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