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# Knotted strands: Working lives of Indian women migrants in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

While the burgeoning field of ethnic identity has been fuelled by the changing demographics of nations, such scholarship has given more concentration to general life contexts with much quantitative research done in America and Europe, and more recently in Australia. In this context the Indian Diaspora and ethnic identity have been studied, but there is a dearth of research on ethnic identity and Indians in New Zealand. This article draws on evidence from qualitative interviews with ethnic minority Indian women in New Zealand to illustrate ethnic identity negotiation. Three strands of experience were explored: 1) entry into the world of work; 2) staying in the world of work; and 3) the impact of work experiences on ethnic identity. The evidence indicates the difficulties encountered in entering the workforce and in sustaining work, creating knotted strands in the lives of the women. It seems to take approximately two years to start integrating experiences and coming to terms with life in the new country as minority ethnic women. The implications of such knotted strands in ethnic identity are discussed and situated in the wider context of policy development and diversity management that encourages and creates relevant and timely work for ethnic minority migrants.

KEYWORDS

ethnic identity ▪ Indian ▪ migrants ▪ minority ▪ New Zealand ▪ women ▪ work

## Introduction

The last few years have seen the emergence of new nation-states and the increasing population mobility across national borders. Migration due to wars, work and worship is a process that often engenders changes in the people who have migrated and the receiving countries. The changing demographics of nations have resulted in a multicultural workforce in many parts of the world, with a growing number of ethnic minorities in different countries. Fuelled by recognition of such global movements, research on ethnic minorities is a budding field.

Immigration has been a significant driver of population change in New Zealand, with the highest gains recorded in the current century (Bedford, 2003). Over the last 150 years, migrants have flocked to New Zealand, primarily from the United Kingdom and Europe, with a sprinkling of individuals from the British colonies, or far flung parts of the Empire. This is how a few Indians, primarily from Gujarat and Punjab, set foot on New Zealand soil in the 19th century (Zodgekar, 1980; TheoRoy, 1981). The Census of 1881 records six Indians and that of 1896, 46 Indians (Zodgekar, 1980).

The immigration policies of New Zealand since 1987 have resulted in a wave of Asian people, differing from the traditional source countries of Britain and Europe. Thus New Zealand now has representatives from more than 200 nations (Statistics New Zealand, 2003). In the rich ethnic mix of New Zealand's population of 4.09 million, net immigration during the June 2003 year contributed 42,500 to population growth (Statistics New Zealand, 2003). The 2001 Census reports that close to a quarter of a million people identified with one or more of the Asian ethnic groups, and this comprised 6.6 percent of the usually resident population in 2001 compared with 3 percent in 1991 (Statistics New Zealand, 2003). Within the broad category of 'Asian' there are many individual ethnic groups with distinct characteristics, with Chinese accounting for 44 percent of the Asian population, followed by the Indian ethnic group at 26 percent. The population increase of the Indian ethnic group[1] between 1991 and 2001 increased by 102 percent. Indians now constitute 1.7 percent of the New Zealand population, with around three in every ten people in this ethnic group born in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2003). National Asian population projections with 2001 as the base note that the Asian share of the total population will increase to 13 percent in 2021 (Statistics New Zealand, 2003).

It is laudable that in 2003, the New Zealand Government agreed to a New Zealand Immigration Settlement Strategy for migrants, refugees and their families (New Zealand Immigration Service, 2003). The Strategy's six goals for migrants and refugees are:

1. obtain employment appropriate to their qualifications and skills;
2. are confident using English in a New Zealand setting, or can access appropriate language support to bridge the gap;
3. are able to access appropriate information and responsive services that are available to the wider community (for example, housing, education, and services for children);
4. form supportive social networks and establish a sustainable community identity;
5. feel safe expressing their ethnic identity and are accepted by, and are part of, the wider host community; and
6. participate in civic, community and social activities.

The overarching question guiding this study is: does work impact the ethnic identity of Indian women in New Zealand? This article explores the working lives of first generation Indian women migrants in New Zealand, with emphasis on the influence their working lives have on their identity negotiations. The theoretical underpinnings are grounded in the scholarship of ethnic identity, with the aim of understanding the unique stories and the particular dynamics of the Indian women, as they weave the strands in the tapestry of their lives. After a review of the literature on ethnic identity, the article presents the methodology of the study, the emergent research findings coupled with their discussion, ending with implications for theory and research.

## Theoretical constructs

Ethnic identity becomes significant when immigrants enter a new society, and may be of considerable importance when the migrant is a minority in the host society. Broadly ethnic identity refers to an individual's sense of self in terms of membership in a particular group, with value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Chavira & Phinney, 1991; Orbe & Harris, 2001; Phinney et al., 2001). It is that aspect of acculturation that focuses on the subjective sense of belonging to a group or culture, and is encompassed in the broader construct of acculturation (Phinney et al., 2001). Acculturation is a social process that is longitudinal and dynamic, and refers to a range of behaviours, attitudes and values that may change when there is contact between the migrant and the host culture (Keefe & Padilla, 1987; Marin, 1992; Triandis, 1994; Sam, 2000). Individuals who have acculturated possess their minority culture and some majority cultural elements, with the possibility of accepting or modifying certain aspects of the new culture and that of their original culture (Romero, 2004).

Acculturation has been seen to consist of the four strategies (varieties or resolutions), of integration or biculturality, assimilation, separation or rejection and marginalization or deculturation (Berry, 1990, 1997). An individual who retains a strong ethnic identity while also identifying with the host society is considered to have an integrated identity. A person who has a strong ethnic identity but does not identify with or rejects the new culture has a separated identity. One who gives up their previous ethnic identity and identifies only with the new culture has an assimilated identity. The individual who identifies with neither and is decultured has a marginalized identity. Research implies that some contexts support the possibility of integration and make it easier to develop a bicultural identity, whereas other contexts make this resolution difficult (Berry, 1990; Phinney et al., 2001). Some contexts may foster separation rather than integration; further when immigrants are not encouraged or allowed to retain their own culture while integrating into the new society, some are likely to feel forced to choose between separation and assimilation (Berry, 1990; Phinney et al., 2001).

Ethnic identity is perceived as being fluid, dynamic and socially constructed (Porter & Washington, 1993; Pilkington, 2003), with the adoption of a specific identity depending on the circumstances (Banton, 2000). It is contact and competition with the outside group rather than confinement in one's own community that leads to ethnic awareness, with a heightened sense of solidarity occurring among minority immigrant groups who have achieved considerable socio-economic assimilation but whose pathway to total acceptance and equality remains blocked (Portes, 1984; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Morawska, 2003; Dunstan et al., 2004). A surrogate for ethnic identity is psychoethnicity, described as the psychological identification as a member of a particular racioethnic group (Friday et al., 2004), which serves as an important determining factor in whether or not an individual will share the attitudes and behaviours of members of his or her identified racioethnic group (Ethier & Deaux, 1994).

In an interesting study of Asian-Americans as a model minority, it has been suggested that they are a test case for the willingness of American society to allow ethnic minorities to self-define as they choose to view ethnicity as central or peripheral to personal identity (Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997). Research suggests that ethnic identity is a useful construct for understanding the impact of ethnicity on individuals, and is helpful in explaining individuals' perceptions and intentions during the job recruitment process (Kim & Gelfand, 2003), and in personnel careers (Ross, 2004).

Research findings also indicate that personal, but not ethnic self-esteem is the single major predictor of immigrant psychological health, with importance being given to individual accomplishments and achievements, with

immigrants feeling worthwhile as members of particular ethnic groups to the extent that they feel they have achieved some success in the new country (Phalet & Hagendoorn, 1996; Nesdale et al., 1997; Kim et al., 2003; Negy et al., 2003; Nesdale & Mak, 2003).

We live in a world where 'so much of our personal well-being and identity rest on our jobs' (Ciulla, 2000: 21). Moreover, referring to immigrants who came to America in the early 1900s, Ciulla (2000: 74) writes that they were 'willing to suffer inhuman working conditions because of the dream . . . and hope for an upwardly mobile life, if not for himself, then for his children'. Almost a century later, in the context of New Zealand, the inhuman working conditions have disappeared, but the dream and hope for an upwardly mobile life, if not for the parents, then for the children remains with Indian migrants. For the migrant women there is an increasing complexity not only due to her ethnic minority migrant status and seasons of her life (Sheehy, 1976, 1996), but also because 'women still carry the brunt of . . . emotional labour' (Ciulla, 2000: 123) and juggle 'the balance between love and work' (Gallos, 1995: 110).

In surmounting challenges and yet maintaining one's personal self-esteem there is an abundance of self talk to come to terms with various experiences on the path to work, and the lore of the labour market (Pio, 2004a, 2004b; Middleton, 2005). In the constant dialogue that takes place there is a monitoring of one's self-presentations and as a result individual and collective identity is open to continuous reassessment, and is a work in progress, a negotiated space between the self and others (Pio, 2005a; Taylor & Spencer, 2002). 'Terms such as "black", "brown" or "white" are political and social boundary markers . . . and function in an interlocking fashion to raise or lower boundaries, exclude or unite' (Taylor & Spencer, 2002: 2). In such circumstances 'white remains the key organising centre against which racial differences are noticed and seen as inhabiting a symbolically peripheral area . . . it stands for the standards which are not seen precisely because they are standard' (Pickering, 2002: 92). Hence it is that 'racialized lived experiences' play a crucial role in self perception (Orbe & Harris, 2001).

The study uses the author's imagery of knotted strands in consonance with the Indian women in this study who have been brought up (in India) with a tradition of 'needlework' in school which involved knitting, crochet, embroidery or weaving. In such activities it is the quality and quantity of strands and their utilization that make up the final form of the fabric. This study superimposes the 'strands imagery' to explore and understand the patterns, dyes, and designs of knots in the women's experiences in the host country. One of the aims of this research is to give voice to a group often under represented in academic writing. The study also has a politico-social

motive to bring to awareness the employment experiences of educated English-speaking experienced migrant women. Finally the study endeavours to add a strand to the literature on ethnic minority identity with specific reference to Asian Indians.

In unravelling the complex questions surrounding these ethnic minority women in New Zealand, the research questions are: does work bring an awareness of ethnic identity for migrant women? If yes, what are the factors in the understanding of the work experiences which impact ethnic identity?

## Methodology

Situated within the broad framework of qualitative inquiry, this study emerges from the interpretive and post positivist genres wherein the world is constructed through meaningful interpretations. As interpretive *bricoleur* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), 'research is an interactive process shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting' (p. 6).

To explore the working lives of Indian women migrants in New Zealand, and enable participants to tell their own specific stories in defining and representing themselves, open ended questions were used in face-to-face in-depth interviews. The sample consisted of $12^2$ women as a pilot run. Data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) took place after approximately 10 interviews. The occupations (held at various times in New Zealand) of the women in the sample varied widely and included a retail assistant, teachers, administrative assistants, crèche assistants, a call centre operator and mental health professionals. All the women eventually moved up in their jobs, after approximately 18 months to 30 months, often by leaving their first job and seeking work elsewhere or by setting up their own enterprise.

Participants were recruited for this study using the author's network of contacts within the Indian community, snowball and criterion sampling. Snowball sampling facilitated the identification of Indian women who could participate in this study. Criterion sampling ensured that the participants fitted the criteria of:

1. Age group 40–50 years (recent migrants to New Zealand after the changes in the Immigration Policy in 1987 have generally tended to come as a family unit, and the research has sought to explore women who have been in employment in New Zealand for more than a year, as well as with work experience of at least 10 years before they entered New Zealand. None of the women came to New Zealand looking for

a career; rather they were interested in quality of life and better opportunities for the children).
2. Born outside of New Zealand (Indians born in New Zealand may have a different experience as compared to those born overseas).
3. First generation migrant in New Zealand (second generation migrants may have different experiences).
4. Husbands working in New Zealand (sometimes the husbands work overseas and this may variously affect the employment search of the participants).
5. Indian ethnicity (this is a focal point of the study).
6. Married to an Indian man (where the Indian women is unmarried or married to a 'non-Indian' man her employment experiences may be different).
7. Resident status in New Zealand (in contrast to a visitor's visa, work visa or refugee status).
8. University graduate – fluent in spoken and written English, with English as the medium of instruction for their education following on from India being a part of the British Empire (hence a fairly well-educated woman).
9. Working woman (to see if work impacted ethnic identity).
10. Living in an urban setting (since New Zealand is a small island nation, work is more likely to be available in an urban setting).
11. Having at least one child (women with children may view employment differently in comparison with those who have no children).
12. Child/children studying in New Zealand (since the child is physically present the demands on the woman are likely to be different as compared to children who are studying or working overseas).

In consideration of the minority ethnic issues in this study, it is relevant to note that the author, who also conducted the interviews, is from the same ethnic minority community as the participants interviewed for this study. This facilitated an understanding of the roots of the women as well as the complex context within which Indian women operate in a new country. Such conduct of interview is in line with the outlook that data collection by an interviewer who shares the ethnicity (and gender) of the participants allows the deep exploration of the ethnic minority experience (Mirza, 1992). Perhaps such data collection is also a route to reinforce Gayatri Spivak's subaltern speak in order to matter, to be worth listening to, and to be understood when one is heard (Beverley, 2000).

Data were collected from the participants, assuring them of confidentiality, using a semi-structured interview protocol that included the

following: tell me the story of how you entered the workforce in New Zealand. How did this compare with your work experience before you came to New Zealand? What were your experiences in securing work? What is the nature of your work? How did these experiences impact you? How would you describe your feelings and thoughts during your initial entry into the world of work in New Zealand? What were some of your challenging experiences? How do you see success? Please describe how you see yourself in New Zealand. While these issues relate to employment, it was felt that asking questions directly about ethnic identity may not be culturally sensitive, particularly considering the fact that these women only become aware of their ethnicity when they leave the shores of India.

The interviews varied in duration, but fell in the range of 45–120 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped, along with extensive note taking. The tapes were transcribed (amounting to 80 pages of transcription and 14 pages of notes) and the data analysed for emerging themes initially using open coding or grouping data into categories. Repeated readings of the transcriptions led to axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and the identification of key events, relationships between categories and a more concentrated understanding of the categories. Member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were utilized to double-check that the findings correctly represented the women's stories. This was done at the end of each interview by summarizing what the woman had said, as well as sharing the emergent themes and seeking comments on them from the participants, once the analysis stage of the data had started. It is relevant to note that this study is part of a larger project on Indian women in work and enterprise in New Zealand, resulting in prolonged and substantial engagement coupled with persistent observations over a three-year period. Peer debriefing through 'extended discussions with a disinterested peer, of findings, conclusions, analysis and hypotheses' (Mertens, 2005: 254) has also been done to enhance credibility. There is also a strand of catalytic authenticity or the extent to which action is stimulated by the inquiry process as evidenced by the coverage of the New Zealand media on employment and ethnic minority migrants (Middleton, 2005).

The teasing out of categories from the data led to a pattern of experiences detailed in the emergent research findings.

## Emergent research findings

> The product of the interpretive *bricoleur's* labour is a complex, quilt like *bricolage*, a reflexive collage or *montage* – a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations. This interpretive structure is like a

> quilt, a performance text, a sequence of representations connecting the parts to the whole.
>
> (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 6)

The individual stories of these women are intimately connected with their previous life experience and are finely knotted into the current embroidery of their lives. In India, there was status primarily through birth, marriage and social networks and secondarily through work; but as a migrant work became the route for accomplishment and recognition. All the women were united by their common orientation to succeed in the new country. They were also united by the brushing aside of their years of experience by employers in New Zealand who primarily wanted Kiwi[3] experience. These experienced, English-speaking, university graduates had initially believed that they would integrate quite easily into the host society. However their lived-in and lived-through reality, particularly at work belied this belief. Hence, many of the women saw such experiences as preparatory processes or rites of passage[4] to the new strands they would now need to weave in the host county.

The research findings are detailed utilizing five patterns of experience that emerged from the data. These preliminary patterns appeared to represent the essence of the employment impact on the ethnic identity of the women. The 'struggle of how to present qualitative data has sometimes been framed as a question of whose voice is represented in the written report' (Mertens, 2005: 433). The voice throughout is that of the women interviewed, though the 'strands imagery' superimposed on the women's voices is that of the researcher.

### 1. Initial entry into the world of work is an extremely challenging experience

All the women interviewed had spent a few months searching for a job after their entry into New Zealand, often getting a shock when told that they were over-qualified, or when employers did not want to meet them. *'As soon as they hear an Indian accent, it's like the door gets shut in our face. And a typical Indian name means it's even more difficult to get called for an interview . . . leave alone being short listed,'* is an extract from a woman with 12 years' work experience. This is echoed by another woman with work experience of 14 years who says: *'I think they find us strange. They do not seem to understand Indian migrants. We seem to be strangers in our new homeland.'*

Without exception all the women interviewed had the experience of

employers asking them for Kiwi experience, as well as the non recognition of NZQA (New Zealand Qualifications Association) certified documents. One woman (10 years' work experience) said: '*It was like a blank slate. I have had to start all over again. It took me three months to get my first job . . . Initially I tried to get something in the same field that I worked in back home, but after repeated regret letters, I decided to settle for anything.*' Another woman (13 years' work experience): '*In any case, I had decided to take any job and do any kind of work, even before I came into this country. But one always hopes that one's experience and qualifications will be recognized.*'

For some women (approximately 75 percent of the sample used in this study), this meant sending applications to at least 50 organizations, with more than 30 regret letters, as the experience has been that all organizations do not reply to applications sent to them. Some women (approximately 80 percent), unable to get into the occupational level of their choice, expressed as '*at least equivalent to or a bit lower than in the home country*' started getting desperate and were then prepared to take any job, particularly as finances were running low. Thus some women became crèche helpers, teaching aides, strawberry pickers and cleaners. Approximately 40 percent of the women took such challenging experiences in their stride, which seemed to instil in them a determination to succeed. An extract: '*I would not take "No" for a reply, so I went personally and knocked on doors, made cold calls, and insisted that I be met. I am proud of my experience and abilities. Eventually this led to me getting work, and paved the way for many good things in my career.*'

### 2. The initial 18–30 months in the host country generally means being underemployed with low pay and a struggle to maintain a healthy self-esteem

An extract from a woman who had held senior positions in India is as follows:

> *I worked with some of the top multinational companies back home in a senior post, but here after the usual collection of regret letters, I managed to get work as an entry level assistant . . . When they found I could sort out many of their problems, including complex customer demands, I was asked to handle all the demanding jobs, and my boss was very satisfied with my work. However despite being there for more than one year, I remained in the same position, and many of my juniors were promoted. While the customers were generally pleasant, many were shocked that they had to deal with 'an Indian lady' and some even refused . . . I learnt to shrug my shoulders . . . I was determined*

> *to get the relevant Kiwi experience and understand how business is done here . . . I was often corrected about my English, and then when 'they' went to the dictionary to check out the words, they would find that my spelling was correct, as was my grammatical usage. Yes, our accents differed, but are all the flowers in the field the same?*

All the women initially found it very difficult to adjust to their work experiences, particularly because such adjustments included accepting work at many levels lower than what they had been used to. When this was topped with the dashed hope of the NZQA certified qualifications being rejected by employers, and the subtle and not so subtle 'corrections' by the host society it often meant *'curling up into myself and licking my wounds'*. This wounding was expressed by all the women in this study.

Some women (approximately 50 percent) were very angry about their initial work experiences. One woman, who came from a business family in India, said:

> *I was taken on as a casual, as a retail assistant, though I used to do 40 hours a week. They made me the weekend supervisor, but continued to keep me as a casual. I applied for the job of supervisor when they advertised, but was always turned down . . . Ah well, it's a new country and it's a learning curve. Back home I was a manager, but somehow experience in India doesn't seem to count here in New Zealand.*

Another woman (11 years of work experience) was both angry and depressed because: *'My colleagues at work do not mix with me. Often I am not invited out for coffee and when I enter the lounge area, there is silence. I have repeatedly asked my boss for feedback, but he always postpones it.'*

In general, the women seemed prepared to learn to adjust to the new country, but the initial experiences of perceived ridicule made such adjustments more difficult. Some of the women (approximately 60 percent) became resigned to an acceptance of their 'fate', for this meant less of an internal struggle. *'I decided it was too hard to get a permanent job, so I became a temp. For some time I did strawberry picking, and cleaning as well, but by God's grace, I now have a permanent job.'* Another participant (15 years' experience), in reminiscing about her early experiences in employment in New Zealand said: *'Oh yes, I got passed over, though many of the senior people asked me for advice and suggestions, even though I was positioned at a junior level.'* All the women mentioned a period between 18–30 months when *'my luck changed'*, or *'I got more appropriate opportunities'* or *'I started my own business'*.

### 3. Balancing family responsibilities with negotiating one's identity is particularly difficult in the first two years in the host county

In general, Indian men do the work outside of the home, and the Indian woman does the house work, which includes cooking, cleaning and child/elder care. Where there are servants, as in the case of all the women in the sample for this study, the woman supervises the housework. In India, even when the woman works outside the home she generally still has the lion's share of responsibility for the housework. Sometimes this responsibility is mitigated by a network of family members. In New Zealand, the situation is totally different, and the woman finds that she is both without servants and her family network. She also has to cope with the stress of finding work in an environment that is still struggling to accept migrants into its fold.

An extract from a woman with two children: '*In New Zealand, I obtained work before my husband, which made the dynamics at home very difficult. In India, he was the primary bread winner, and here I seem to wear the pants*.' All the women had come to believe that every Indian woman coming to New Zealand necessarily had to go through regret letters and entry at very low levels in the initial stages of entry into the world of work. Another extract:

> *No doubt, I went through the usual rites of passage of immigrant women, including being a paper runner. I think that as a woman I am more flexible, and so have been able to pick up any job . . . After all money is necessary to keep the home fires burning, and put food on the table.*

This woman had 15 years of work experience.

In India, there is no social security system, unlike in New Zealand; hence Indians must fend for themselves. As migrants without jobs when they land in New Zealand, Indians generally have a cache of funds to manage the initial period. The longer the funds last, the easier it is for the woman to take her time in picking up a job. Fund flexibility also allows her to spend time with her family, to help them through the initial migratory experience, as well as to adapt, accept and align her to the experiences in the host country as she strives to balance family responsibilities and her own identity negotiation. An extract from a woman with 14 years' experience which represents all the women in this study:

> *While we Indian migrants come to New Zealand for different reasons, all of us do bring in some amount of money to tide us over the initial months. But with the dollar and rupee value this does not last very*

*long . . . Of course we do not want to stretch our hands out to the government and be on the dole – but we do want jobs that befit our qualifications and experience. This is however easy to say, but very challenging to achieve.*

Interestingly, all the women in this study had entered into low level jobs, but within a few years (on an average two years) they had reached mid- to senior level positions. As one woman (representing approximately 90 percent of the women in this study) put it:

*Yes, I have been frustrated, disgusted and depressed after the initial euphoria of being in New Zealand evaporated . . . Much water has passed under the bridge for me to get back to my usual cheerful self. I have struggled with a low-paying, very low-level basic job, but then moved to both a higher salary and better position. In the intervening period, I learnt to work on my feelings, particularly because my family was around me, and I wanted them to see me like I used to be back home – cheerful! Today, I am happy to be in New Zealand, and now I would not like to go back and live in India.*

### 4. There is a strong realization of one's ethnic identity and status as a member of a minority group, leading to much soul searching and with it certain adjustments

In India, Indians do not think of their ethnicity, but when they step onto New Zealand soil, their realization of being different is accentuated by them being a minority in a largely white culture. An extract, representative of all the participants in this study:

*I have never felt more Indian than in New Zealand. I think because we are different, we somehow stand out . . . Of course today there are many more Indians than a few years ago, and people here are beginning to realize our worth. I think some Indians cling to their sense of Indian-ness, especially after experiencing various forms of discrimination.*

All the women believed that integration was crucial for migrants. Extract:

*I think that while it is important to be with Indians in New Zealand, one also has to integrate with the host culture – of course this means making the effort, and taking the first step despite rebuffs. I think this makes a difference, and then there is more receptivity by the host*

*culture. It's strange that in India, while there are many forms of discrimination in evidence right through the centuries, I was never discriminated on the basis of my colour . . . In any case we have chosen to migrate to this country, so we have to make the best of what happens to us here. I do get pleasure in seeing other Indians doing well, particularly because we are a minority group here. I wonder about my children and their meshing of the two cultures of India and New Zealand. I have heard of Indians who have been born here, but are still considered Indian, and in many cases, this means less. Less understanding and less abilities. But more struggles! Yet in some ways I am lucky, because my colleagues now respect me and we socialize and I now feel a part of this society, but yes I am always 'the Indian'.*

When the Indian women adjusted to ways of dress including make-up, hairstyles and jewellery, more use of Kiwi phraseology and pronunciations, less Indian food and more European/Continental food in their breakfast and lunch at work, the route to acceptance was easier and smoother. Hence development of a bicultural identity paved the way for coming to terms with life as a member of a minority group in New Zealand. The motto for success seemed to be (extract): *'Don't lick your wounds, just go, go, go!'*

## 5. Work is 'the' defining factor in identity negotiation

While all the women in the sample mentioned the importance of a *'stable family life',* the husband *'holding a job'*, and the children *'doing well in school',* work was the defining factor in identity negotiation. In the initial period in New Zealand, the women in this sample tended to live primarily in neighbourhoods with other Indians, thus increasing contact with Indians but reducing contact with the majority host society, except during working hours. The nature of work and perception of treatment in the organization thus assumed significance. Though employment contracts were adhered to by employers, it was the unwritten aspects which occupied the minds of the women in this sample. Such unwritten aspects included comments by the host culture on ways of dress, food, music and behaviour. Behaviour included questioning the ability to work in a team, to chair/co-ordinate meetings, to resolve interpersonal problems at work, to draft a letter and to write up the minutes of a meeting. Where such comments were perceived as genuine interest they were welcomed. However, for most of the women comments in the first two years were generally perceived as put downs, leaving the Indian women to struggle with feelings of inferiority and questioning of one's cultural mores and behaviour.

Yet work gave meaning, money and movement into the host society. Access to the host society, in contrast to mixing primarily with Indians in New Zealand, meant ease in moving between cultures. It also meant acceptance and understanding of the host culture, and the development, in many cases of a mutual respect for each other. The first two years seem to function as the crucible for identity negotiation. The women who were able to integrate and develop a bicultural identity, were also more positive about the host culture and themselves, and seemed to enjoy life in New Zealand. Extract:

> *My work has given me meaning . . . It has helped me understand this society, to make adjustments and in some ways to love this land. I am an Indian, and will always be one. I am also in many ways a New Zealander, with a New Zealand passport, but I think it will take a long time for full acceptance. Today I feel fulfilled in my work.*

This woman came to New Zealand with 12 years' work experience.

While all the women held onto their ethnic identity, and none had an assimilated or marginalized identity, some of the women seemed to cling to their ethnic identity with a minimal acceptance of the host culture or more akin to a separated identity. While there were numerous reasons for such women to continue to stay in New Zealand (as for example '*the children now refuse to go back to India')*, their *'unpleasant experiences'* in the world of work seem to have scarred them. However, since the main modus operandi for mixing with the host culture seemed to be in the world of work, learning about culturally relevant behaviours and practising them takes place at work. While all the women in this study eventually had friends from all ethnicities, in the initial stages, the majority of friends and significant others were Indians. Further, in the initial stages of entry into New Zealand the women tended to live where there were other Indians, and use them as a sounding board for their initial experiences. Extract: '*Getting into the world of work is considered as a sort of status symbol, and it means that one is now sort of on the way to success in the new country.'* This woman had 10 years' work experience in India and had been in the New Zealand work force for four years.

Another woman, reflecting the experience of all the women in this study, said:

> *By learning how to deal with my co-workers, most of whom are Kiwi, I can now understand better the ways that Kiwi people think and how they act . . . it has helped me to see myself and also how they might see*

*me . . . outside of work, the people I mostly socialize with are Indians . . . and having work means I can now get a few more things and change my clothes according to the seasons like the Kiwis do. Besides, if I did not have work, I would have been more depressed as I have very strong memories and miss home (India) . . . it is better to have the initial problems at work, because at least you have work and that means you have Kiwi experience and hence employment opens up . . . I do not think if I did not get employment, irrespective of my negative experiences, I would be so positive today, about New Zealand.*

It is important to note that all the women in this study had either moved up in the organization or had started their own successful enterprise. Thus for example teaching aides had become senior teachers and administrative assistants were managers.

## Discussion

This study, through qualitative inquiry, has sought to unravel some of the complexities in the life of ethnic minority women in New Zealand by seeking to find answers to the following questions: does work bring an awareness of ethnic identity for migrant women? If yes, what are the factors in the understanding of the work experiences which impact ethnic identity?

Ethnic identity is an organizing construct around which individuals manoeuvre their sense of who they are, particularly when such individuals are immigrants and members of minority ethnic communities in a new country. While for many people of colour, racial/ethnic identity develops during early socialization (Orbe & Harris, 2001), in the case of the Indian women, they had not considered themselves coloured or ethnic until they arrived in New Zealand. However based on encounters with the host country, their ethnic identity emerged and was reinforced. Research on Asian Indians in America (Morawska, 2003) reports that:

> encounters with racial discrimination by host-county institutions especially marginalization and 'glass ceilings' experienced in immigrants' mainstream professional careers, enhance the Indian ingredient of their bicultural identities but at the same time mobilize their sense of membership in American society which they express by taking a public stance for a 'just pluralism' as an ethnic group at local and national levels.
>
> (p. 139)

Indians in New Zealand are yet to gain momentum in mobilizing their 'Kiwiness' at the local and national levels.

The crucible for ethnic identity negotiations was the work place. As the *New Zealand Herald* reports: 'For many job-seeking skilled migrants, there is nothing more frustrating, humiliating and esteem-sapping than the words "no New Zealand experience"' (Middleton, 2005: A16). Apparently lack of Kiwi experience is a code for a number of uncertainties like fit or social acceptance in the organization, employers being unsure in hiring someone different from themselves, and the perception that migrants are high maintenance (Middleton, 2005). Furthermore, 'India, China and the Pacific Islands in particular were perceived as offering poorer standards of living, producing negative attitudes likely to work against the job seeker' (Middleton, 2005: A20). There are also assumptions made about English language level based on someone who looks different and whose name is different from employers, 'because there is an intolerance in New Zealand of people who speak with accents or speak English as a second language' (Middleton, 2005: A20). It is also significant that 75 percent of the clients dealt with by 243 recruiters in New Zealand discriminate when they describe what they want in an employee (Middleton, 2005).

Furthermore, in a pilot study by the Department of Labour on 1240 migrants in New Zealand, findings showed that employment rates improved for all migrants between six months after arriving (53 percent), and 18 months after (62 percent) (Dunstan et al., 2004). However, people from the UK, South Africa and North America do better in the job market than those from Asia (Dunstan et al., 2004). And 'despite the rhetoric that New Zealand as a country believes in social justice, the reality is different . . . New Zealanders don't always give migrants the "fair go" trumpeted as a national characteristic' (Middleton, 2005: A16).

Hence the value and emotional significance of ethnic membership (Phinney et al., 2001), was variously knotted and dyed with the many hued shades experienced in the host society, thus underscoring the aspect of emotional labour (Ciulla, 2000). Where such encounters were seen as a learning curve in the rite of passage for migrants, there was an adjustment to one's ethnic identity and a developing sheen from engaging with the new culture. This foregrounding of work experiences contributes to the literature of minority ethnic identity. A feeling of success and esteem in the ethnic minority individual was necessary for integration, however further examination is required to see if ethnic identity directly correlates to self-esteem. Some studies have shown that self-esteem is independently influenced by both individual difference variables (i.e. personal identity), and reference group orientation (i.e. ethnic identity), and the relationship between these two

factors may be stronger at some stages of ethnic identity development than at others (Negy et al., 2003; Nesdale & Mak, 2003).

In this study, the nature of work and the experiences of interactions in the work place were the prime determining factors for the women's movement towards integrating her ethnic identity. Such movements were steps towards continued appreciation of one's own ethnicity (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Ethier & Deaux, 1994), eventually interwoven with an understanding and admiration, of many aspects of the host culture. While none of the women in this study developed an assimilated or marginalized identity, a few of the women, particularly those who were still angry about their work experiences, tended to favour the development of a separated identity. Research seems to indicate that regardless of race, individuals with higher levels of ethnic identity made more positive socio-emotional inferences about the nature of work life in an organization and had greater job pursuit intentions when recruited with a brochure that contained a diversity initiative than when recruited with a brochure without a diversity initiative (Kim & Gelfand, 2003). This area of diversity management is another noteworthy domain for future studies, and would alert practitioners in the field to the possible initiatives that could be utilized when recruiting (Ross, 2004; Pio, 2004b, 2005b).

There were many individual designs in how the women wove the knotted strands into the fabric of their identity. Yet, the overall pattern seems to be that of approximately two years was necessary to start integrating such experiences and coming to terms with life in the new country. This throws open a number of questions, which could have potential for future research: two years to start on the process of integration begs the question, why not a shorter time frame? And what is needed to quicken this process? Does two years mean wasted energies, experiences and unnecessary knots in the strands of a migrant's life? Would such knots remain so permanent that they create obstacles to integration? And would such obstacles or the perception of such obstacles colour the views of the families of such women? Would policies serve as band-aid solutions or crutches? Or would policies facilitate the careful and meticulous weaving of employment opportunities for migrants, particularly ethnic minorities? And how would such policies be monitored – in terms of money dished out, a tick mark in the number of people who sought help, or would the proviso be self-esteem and successful employment?

Undoubtedly New Zealand is a new country (as seen from the European point of view[5]), and is younger than two centuries. A youthful country opens up the possibility of exploring, adapting and implementing policies from the agony and ecstasy of other countries with a mix of migrants (for example, Oyserman & Sakomoto, 1997), like Canada or the United

Kingdom, both of which have a British heritage. Such explorations would help to equip global politics within the local politics of identity, to understand the unique histories and sites of identity (Taylor & Spencer, 2002), and facilitate moving beyond surface level diversity markers (e.g. colour), in whose permanent embrace many minority ethnic women reside. Such attempts are 'work towards a world where no other is any longer the Other' (Pickering, 2002: 105). The New Zealand Immigration Settlement Strategy (New Zealand Immigration Service, 2003) is a step in this direction. Such a strategy is also recognition of the pivotal role and subtle interplay of political, social and economic forces intersecting in the lives of migrants and the host country. The Equal Opportunity Trust and the recent appointment of a Human Rights Commission's Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner are other steps in the direction of settlement of migrants.

This study has concentrated specifically on the work context of women between the ages of 40 and 50 years. Thus limitations involve the retrospective nature of the study as well as selection effects and the small sample size. It is probable that the age of the women was a significant factor in how they choose to negotiate their ethnic identity (Sheehy, 1976, 1996), as well as being married and balancing work and family (Gallos, 1995). In fact the issue of ethnicity may be a peripheral factor for younger unmarried Indian women (Pio, 2004a), whereas for the mature women the strong psychoethnicity or racioethnic identification, ensures that ethnicity plays a substantial role in identity. Longitudinal studies would help to clarify some of the questions raised, as would comparisons between different countries. Studies highlighting the impact of pre- and post-migration experiences in particular occupations and their relevance to specific policies can function as building blocks in understanding ethnic minorities. It would also be pertinent to find out if the identity achievement, once it occurs is largely stable and the kinds of changes necessary at the institutional levels to meet the needs of individuals (Banton, 2000; Kim et al., 2003). Varying the sample mix to include different age groups, gender and ethnicity, as well as triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) of the research, would facilitate a more rounded picture of minority ethnic identity. Another fruitful strand could be inter-racial communication (Orbe & Harris, 2001), as well as rites of passage in work (Van Gennep, 1960/1909).

In-depth exploration of the psychological well-being of the immigrants is an additional strand for study (Sheehy, 1996; Phinney et al., 2001). It would also be worthwhile to compare Indians in New Zealand with Indians in the USA, taking into account that Indians in the USA are considered the wealthiest minority, who have had a major impact on business, medicine and technology (Corliss, 2004). Such studies would aid the refinement of the

constructs of ethnic identity and in the process encourage hope in the relevance of policies that reach out to migrants as they entwine their hopes and dreams in a new country.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study has presented the concept of ethnic identity by exploring the experiences of working Indian women in New Zealand. Such ethnic minority women, in the age group of 40 to 50 years have by far and large been able to move towards integration and a bicultural identity. However, it takes approximately two years to move towards this integration. The chief defining factor in this negotiation is work. The nature of work, and the abundance of various experiences at the work place, served as the various strands, many of them knotted, with which the women intertwined their ethnic identity, and with it the fabric of their existence in the host country. A theoretical implication of this work is foregrounding the importance of the work place and emotional labour in minority ethnic identity. These findings were situated in the broader context of policy development and diversity management and point to the need to work towards a world where there is no 'other' in the form of migrant strangers. It is a sobering thought that our everyday life is strange and rests on fragile foundations, requiring among other things, better designed international rules and institutions, with much needed human ingenuity, so that nations no less than individuals can regard strangers as honorary friends (Seabright, 2004).

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## Notes

1 Today, Indian migrants to New Zealand also come from other places in India like Bombay (Mumbai), Hyderabad, Madras (Chennai), Kerala and Pune. It is worthwhile to note that the current Indian population is 1.3 billion with a diverse cultural heritage, somewhat equivalent to the mix of countries in the European Union. This

diversity is reflected in the different languages, accents, foods, modes of behaviour, educational, work and monetary resources that Indians bring to New Zealand.

2 Examples of small sample sizes include seven interviews (Barber & Galasinski, 2001; Pio, 2005c).

3 Kiwi is synonymous with New Zealand.

4 This is a phrase used by one woman in this study, though it resonates with the experiences of the entire sample.

5 The Maoris, or indigenous people of New Zealand, are believed to have inhabited the land a few centuries before the arrival of Europeans.

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