

# Ethnography of Imagined Communities: The Cultural Production of Sikh Ethnicity in Britain

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## Background

This paper challenges traditional ways of conceiving of immigration incorporation in modern nation-states.

- The cultural politics of immigration and citizenship in the global era requires a shift in ethnographic perspective.
  - Multi-sited ethnography enables researchers to illuminate the culture politics within which immigrants become citizens.
  - This brings into question the traditional assimilation models of immigrant incorporation.
  - While ethnographers traditionally attend to localized everyday experience, immigrant incorporation involves the interplay of transnational, national, and local processes.
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## Nationalism

Questions of nationalism and of the making of nationalist identities have largely been absent from sociological literature on becoming American.

- Nationalism has been a taken-for-granted and is thus a largely under-theorized backdrop for analyzing assimilation and acculturation.
  - The imagined community of the “nation” and of “nationalism” limits our ability to explain fully the cultural dynamics of immigrant incorporation.
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## Multi-Sited Ethnography

What is needed is a multi-sited ethnographic analysis of how national boundaries and ethnic identities are created, circulated, debated, and contested across social contexts and levels of scale.

- Ethnographic research should consider not only how immigrants are incorporated, but rather how incorporation is itself culturally produced.
  - Turning to issues of nation-building directs ethnographic attention to cultural politics where immigrant statuses are defined and debated, citizen rights and responsibilities invoked, structural inequalities challenged, and cultural identifications created.
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**Assimilation Paradigm**

Over the past fifteen years, studies influenced by developments in the new economic sociology have moved beyond single dimension models of “straight-line assimilation” and acculturation to explain the different levels of educational and economic success among immigrant populations.

- The development of a multidimensional model of segmented assimilation has been central to this advancement.
  - Contrary to models of the past, the segmented assimilation theory stresses heterogeneity, both within the immigrant population and the host society.
  - New immigrants can be distinguished along three dimensions critical to second generation adaptation:
    1. Individual features or human capital, influenced by educational background, occupational skills, financial resources, and facility with English.
    2. The host society’s reception of immigrants in relation to governmental policies, popular attitudes, and the presence of other ethnic populations.
    3. The composition of immigrant families.
  - The model stresses the interplay between background factors, intergenerational patterns, and external obstacles.
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**Second Generation Assimilation**

The central question is not whether the second generation will assimilate to U.S. society (or for any other society), but to what segment of that society it will assimilate.

- There are three external obstacles or challenges to the second generation’s educational attainment and future career success:
    1. Racial discrimination.
    2. Labor market barriers.
    3. Inner city marginalization and its influence on inner city youth.
  - Parental factors, modes of incorporation, family contexts, and intergenerational acculturation are all related to ways the second generation confronts these barriers and the resources they bring to these encounters.
  - Segmented assimilation thus results from the progressive narrowing of options for action brought about by the accumulation of past decisions and events.
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**Social Processes**

Immigrants become citizens through processes of social incorporation, processes that include the formation of social ties with the host society traditionally referred to as assimilation.

- Imagining the nation and defining the basis of national belonging involve a dual process of delineating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.
- Notions of national belonging and, in turn, national identities and citizenship statuses are continually redefined, negotiated and debated as they come to be articulated within different forms of nationalist discourse.
- In the context of cultural politics, immigrants are produced as subjects that classify them in racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, generational, and gendered terms – it is here where identities and subjectivities are made.

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**Cultural Politics**

The cultural politics of nation-formation is the battlefield upon which immigrants and their children fight for inclusion and to shift the boundaries of belonging.

- Citizens are not simply made, but actively participate in making themselves.
- There is an interplay between structural forces that act upon immigrant peoples, defining them in relation to particular minority statuses and with the acts of immigrants themselves.

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**Sikh Immigration**

The above dynamics can be illustrated through a discussion of Sikh immigration and British nation-formation.

- The story of Britain after empire is one of a nation struggling to come to terms with itself as a multiracial society as its ex-colonials of color challenge the basis of national identity and fight to truly belong.
- Immigration in general and the education and mobility experiences of immigrant children must be considered in relation to the dynamic tensions of nation formation in the global era.
- Immigrant incorporation is negotiated across shifting fields of power and cultural politics in the public sphere, where collective identities are produced in law and policy, education, and the media.
- The process of defining political statuses and determining minority rights is a matter of heated political, legal, and policy debate – collective identities and statuses configure the possibilities and the limitations of citizenship and national belonging.

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**Legislation**

The passage of increasingly restrictive nationality and immigration legislation has articulated an ideology of national belonging, delineated national boundaries, and determined new criteria for who could qualify as a citizen.

- The Sikhs racial or ethnic identity has been constructed in discrimination cases fought under the auspices of three British Race Relations Acts.
    1. The Sikhs were determined to be more than a religion and a culture – almost a race and a nation.
    2. Their civil rights were protected under the auspices of the Race Relations Acts.
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### **Politics of Difference**

The politics of difference in culturally plural nations brings into focus a fundamental contradiction inherent in modern liberal democracies: How can nation-states protect the moral community of the nation while accommodating the diverse and sometimes conflicting cultural beliefs and practices of members of its citizenry?

- It has brought to light a new political imaginary, a politics founded in notions of identity, difference, cultural domination and resistance.
  - Cultural recognition has displaced socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of the political struggle.
    1. Subordinate people gain the power to claim rights on the basis of cultural, religious or linguistic authenticity.
    2. Conflicts range from battles over indigenous land rights to language education policies.
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### **Education**

The cultural politics of education in Britain have produced quite distinctive positions concerning education's role in forging national unity, bringing about social integration and furthering social justice.

- At the heart of these debates is tension between nurturing national solidarity and protecting individual and groups rights to practice different cultural traditions.
  - Sikhs have found themselves positioned as culturally and linguistically different – as bilingual or bicultural within education policies.
  - Top-down political rulings are not the only way to get one's rights. In one school, as an example, the Sikhs organized to demand to have their heritage language taught as modern language curriculum.
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### **The Future**

The paradox of cultural pluralism in nation-states is central to debates over imagined future nations and corresponding visions for immigrant incorporation.

- Policies infused with things like “education for all” and “unity in diversity” cannot resolve the contradictions at the heart of the politics of difference.

- Contests over culture and the politics of identity will continue to test traditional notions of the homogenous national social order as the forces of capitalism deepen relations of inequality on a global scale.
- Processes of immigrant incorporation are influenced by not only national but also transnational forces, such as international politics, global networks, and the flow of people, commodities, media, and other cultural forms.
- Shifting the question to how “the mainstream” or “the nation” comes to be imagined challenges the tendency of assimilation and accommodation models to take for granted the inevitable reproduction of the dominant culture and social order.