

For members of other large subgroups, the Indian-centric connotations of the term did not deter them from seeing themselves as South Asian. X1 (second-generation, Pakistani) describes how he identifies himself in conversations with others, “I’ll tell them I’m South Asian and come from Pakistan.” Thus, for participants from larger and more visible national groups, “South Asian” functioned as a recognizable, externally validated category that required little explanation or negotiation. This relative alignment between national and panethnic identity contrasts with the ambiguity and misrecognition expressed by participants from smaller communities, highlighting how panethnic identification is structured by visibility and dominance.

In sum, the findings suggest that many South Asians inherit the internal hierarchies that are characteristic of South Asian identity. Through their social interactions with members of society and various institutions, they come to reproduce the external constructions of this identity and attempt to determine their own positionality within these constructions. For members of larger subgroups, particularly Indians, the Indian-centric construction of this identity made associating as South Asian relatively easy. For members of other dominant national groups, the Indian-centric nature of the identity was something they were aware of but did not hinder their own use of the term. However, for members of smaller, less visible subgroups, identifying as South Asian resulted in dissonance and raised questions of legitimacy both explicitly (by other South Asians around them) and implicitly (regarding whether they belong to this group or not). These dynamics raise questions around how people navigate South Asian identity amid multiple other identities they inhabit.

5.3 Navigating Multiple Belongings: How Participants Move Between Ethnic and Panethnic Identities

For participants, identity was not fixed but something they moved through and adjusted depending on context. Many shifted between ethnic, panethnic, and racialized identities, sometimes describing themselves by national origin, other times using broader terms like *South Asian*, *Desi*, or *Brown*. These shifts were not arbitrary, but reflected ongoing assessments of recognition, misrecognition, and belonging across different social settings. Drawing on ethnic identity theory, such movements can be understood as part of an iterative process shaped by both internal attachment and external categorization (Phinney, 1990; Turner and Tajfel, 1979).

Within Canada's multicultural and racialized landscape, participants continually assessed how their identities were perceived and what those labels allowed or limited. This section examines identity negotiation as a strategy of coexistence, showing how participants managed overlapping and sometimes conflicting forms of belonging. While broader collective labels were often mobilized to signal connection, visibility, or solidarity, ethnic identity remained a central and stabilizing reference point through which participants made sense of difference and hierarchy within the diaspora.

5.3.1 Ethnic Identity

When asked about their ethnic identity (defined during the interviews as "one's cultural background or descent based on factors like shared ancestry, religion, language, cultural traditions, etc.), most participants used terms tied to either their own or (in the case of second-generation immigrants), their parents' country or ethnolinguistic origins. These references, such as "Bangladeshi," "Bhutanese," "Indian," or "Nepali", were deeply grounded in personal heritage

and functioned as emotionally grounded anchors of belonging and were often preferred over panethnic categories. As A19 (first-generation, Bangladeshi) explained, panethnic categories were not part of her everyday vocabulary: “I don’t like [to] identify like whenever [someone] asks, I don’t normally say I’m from South Asia. I just say I’m Bengali or I’m from Bangladesh.” Similarly, Neha (second-generation, Nepali) emphasized that “Canadian” functioned more as a legal or civic marker rather than a source of identity, “For ethnic identity... definitely Nepali. I actually never say Canadian... in my head, saying Canadian wouldn’t make any sense.” This highlights how ethnic identity offered clearer recognition to one’s personal identity than national or panethnic labels. By centring ethnolinguistic or national-origin identities, participants actively delineated who they are and (implicitly) who they are not by drawing boundaries that separate in-group members from others. In this sense, the preference for ethnic labels reflects not only personal attachment but also a strategic narrowing of boundaries to ensure comprehensibility and belonging on one’s own terms.

Religious and gendered markers further complicated these dynamics of ethnic identification. For Muslim women in particular, visibility in response to their head coverings brought additional challenges that made them susceptible to Islamophobia in addition to feelings of misrecognition (being seen as Middle Eastern instead of South Asian). F1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) recounted being misrecognized because of her clothing (a burqa), “I just didn’t look typically Sri Lankan, I guess, so automatically they would group me into being Pakistani. I’d have to convince people, like, ‘No, trust me, I’m Sri Lankan.’ I’d even tell my dad, ‘Can you talk to them in Tamil?’” On the contrary, for Sabera (first-generation, Bangladeshi), not wearing a hijab

also produced dissonance, “I'm not super religious like I'm kind of agnostic but the pre-supposition of me being Muslim comes with me saying that I'm Bangladeshi. So I've had questions about why I don't wear a hijab or like assumptions that I will be fasting the whole month of Ramadan. Things like that they come up or that you know that I pray 5 times a day. These assumptions kind of get associated with me being Bangladeshi”. In this way, the stereotypical images of what it means to be Sri Lankan and/or Bangladeshi determine the types of experiences these Muslim women experienced, where on the one hand, wearing a hijab raised questions regarding the legitimacy of F1's Tamil identity, and not wearing one raised questions regarding Sabera's Bangladeshi identity. In this way, wearing the head covering or not is a visible expression of ethnic cultural practice.

SK (first-generation, Pakistani) describes how wearing hijab can produce mixed feelings,

It's just that I don't have a choice in how I'm identifying when I wear a hijab. It's kind of like a public image and everyone kind of imposes certain kinds of conversations, kinds of ideas, stereotypes, of what they can think of me. It's a very disempowering experience because you know the affiliations with that are also not the best but it's tricky but it's also good time to mobilize and so sometimes it's there's also that power in kind of seeing that.

Here, SK describes how wearing a hijab can function as both empowerment and disempowerment. Wearing a hijab puts her at risk of Islamophobia and increased surveillance, and can result in feelings of disempowerment where she does not have control of the perceptions people have of her. Yet on the other hand, her ability to make the decision of wearing the hijab altogether also

produces empowerment. These reflections show differing ethnic experiences of being a Muslim woman³².

For some, the boundaries of ethnic groups become complicated due to the history of Partition. As H1 (first-generation, Kenyan-born Indian) describes, “I would say I'm Indian from Kenya. But then I realized at some point that there's, we don't have any understanding of what would have happened to our family during partition. So yeah I will either say that I'm South Asian from Kenya or I would say I'm from Kenya.” Since her family migrated to Kenya before the Partition, she is unsure whether they would have resided in India or Pakistan if they had not migrated. Consequently, this impacts her sense of attachment to a strictly Indian ethnic identity and shows how a larger panethnic identity may evoke less confusion about geopolitical borders.

For twice-migrated participants and those with parents from two or more different ethnicities, ethnic identification can be complicated. B21, for example, was born in the U.K, his mother was born in Kenya, and his father was born in India; nonetheless, he identifies himself as Punjabi.

When I discuss my ethnicity, most likely, like, when people ask me, I'll say I'm like Punjabi... I wear the turban, so that I follow some things within my culture and religion. To express that I'm Punjabi and I'm Sikh like, you know, I follow certain things. It wasn't just for the appearance purposes. I will just explain like my background and culture and what we do and things like that to express the fact that I am a Punjabi individual.

These everyday cultural practices help foreground Punjabi ethnicity as the everyday ethnic identity that he draws upon despite having a unique and multi-faceted family history.

³² While gender is considered in this section, it did not emerge as a consistently central factor shaping intergroup relations across participants and is therefore not developed as a primary theme in the broader analysis.

Ethnolinguistic identities were also central to these constructions. For example, “Punjabi” was often preferred over broader national or panethnic labels because it felt more authentic and recognizable. This was also the case for some who did not feel a sense of belonging to the national title due to geopolitical tensions. For example, J1 (second-generation, Indian) says that she does not identify herself as Indian anymore because of the tensions between India and Sikhs,

So, when I was little. Like growing up until like even university, like I've never had a problem identifying as like either [Indian or Sikh]. But then more recently there's been like a huge issue within India where it's like the Sikh... not all the people from the community, but like some people. They, they want to form like their own country because of whatever reasons and so because of that there's been a lot of tension between you know the different religions of India like Sikhs and Hindus. So a lot of the Sikhs are not identifying themselves as Indians anymore because of this reason."

In this sense, identifying as Sikh instead is not just a form of ethnic identification but a political stance taken in response to recent geopolitical tensions, allowing distance from national identities associated with exclusion or violence. Here, boundaries are constructed to create distance between one's ethnic identity and their national identity.

Preference towards ethnolinguistic identities was also seen among Tamil participants. Their history of geopolitical conflict against the Sinhalese was found to impact their sense of belonging to Sri Lankan identity. As V1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) describes,

It's the tension cause of like the civil war and the Sinhalese people coming into power after the British rule. And them [the British] giving power to Sri Lankans, I mean the Sinhalese...the life that the Sinhalese people live in Sri Lanka is better than the life of the Tamils because of the politicians being Sinhalese, and in their favour.

Here, V1 associates the national identity “Sri Lankan” with Sinhalese people and not Tamils because they have historically been excluded from political power. This, in turn impacts his own sense of belonging to the Sri Lankan identity. Among Tamil respondents, there was a noticeable

effort to maintain a distinct cultural identity, with many also resisting broader “South Asian” classifications. This distinction is closely tied to their complex history with both India and the Sinhalese-majority government of Sri Lanka. As E1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) explained, “A lot of us Tamils don’t feel like we belong with the Indian community. There’s too much history and politics that separates us.” This sentiment reflects a broader sentiment among some Tamils to construct boundaries of exclusion and differentiate themselves from other South Asian groups. As E1 continues, “It’s a matter of pride—we have our own identity, and we don’t want to be lumped in with others just because we’re from South Asia.” In this way, affirming a distinct identity served both as a form of cultural preservation and political resistance.

Other reasons behind using ethnic identities were due to recognizability. C1 (first-generation, Indian) and B21 (first-generation, Indian) used the ethnolinguistic identity “Punjabi” when describing themselves within diasporic spaces, suggesting that the growing Punjabi community in Canada has made this identity more recognizable to the wider public. A similar sentiment was also echoed by M1 (second-generation, Indian),

I think earlier, I would say, I would just say Indian, right? But then I think there was a very brief period like when I was on like dating apps and stuff. I would say South Asian. But throughout the pandemic. I kind of shifted towards, not wanting to say Indian. I'm okay with South Asian, but I would want to say like if I know the person is like, from like a diverse place that they would know who Punjabi people are, then I'll say Punjabi.

This excerpt not only highlights the situational nature of ethnic identification but also the specific use of each identity dependent on context, audience and intended purpose. Thus, recognizability allows for the use and choice of multiple possible identities.

Yet, this experience was not the case for smaller subgroups, such as Bhutanese or Nepali participants, who often relied on broader terms like South Asian for recognition. Some suspected

that even their countries of origin would not be familiar to the broader Canadian public, let alone their specific ethnolinguistic identities as B20 (second-generation, Bhutanese) explains, “Yes, when I was growing up, I didn’t find myself identified. I didn’t see myself identifying as a Bhutanese. Because [back] then calling yourself a Bhutanese makes you feel more separated, discriminated” (B20). In this case, the lack of presence of other Bhutanese people made her feel different from others around her and dissuaded her from identifying as a Bhutanese. Similarly, SR2 (first-generation, Nepali) explains, “So when I tell, hey, I’m Asian and so they say what type of Asian and then that’s when I say hey South Asian I’m Nepali. When I say Nepali they don’t know where my country falls so that’s also like when I say South Asia, like India.” These examples demonstrate how ethnic identification can be complicated for members of smaller subgroups who deal with the challenges of recognition. In these situations, identifying panethnically can help to easily locate one’s background around those who are unfamiliar.

Overall, these reflections demonstrate how ethnic identity is not simply inherited but continually affirmed through everyday practice and self-definition. Across all groups, ethnic identity represented a connection to lineage and culture rather than just nationality. While “Canadian” described citizenship, “Nepali”, “Bengali”, or “Tamil” captured emotion and cultural belonging. Findings from discussions with participants also reveal that ethnic identity expression is shaped by visibility and recognition. This allows some identities to be confidently asserted, while others require translation through broader, more public categories. In this sense, ethnic identity served as both a personal anchor to distant homelands and a relational construct used to better understand internal diversities within the broader multicultural state.

5.3.2 Panethnic Identities

Asian Identity

While ethnic identities were often self-defined and rooted in heritage, broader regional labels such as *Asian* were largely shaped by external recognition rather than self-identification. As outlined in 5.2.2, participants noted that in Canada, the term *Asian* is most commonly associated with East and Southeast Asian groups; Chinese, Korean, Japanese, or Vietnamese communities, leaving South Asians ambiguously placed within the boundaries of the category. This produced confusion, hesitation, and even mild frustration for many, who described *Asian* as a category that “doesn’t quite fit.” As I1 (first-generation, Indian) describes, “The term Asian, you can’t call everyone from Asia, that they are Asians. Yeah, so it’s like a complicated term in itself. Yeah, the meaning is like quite different as compared to the geographical place.”

As discussed in 5.2.2, SK (first-generation, Pakistani) shared that she only began identifying as *South Asian* after realizing *Asian* in Canada referred to someone else entirely, “I found out only when I got here that I’m not Asian... people would say, ‘they don’t mean you,’ so I just identify as South Asian. That geographically makes sense.” Here, having experienced exclusion from the Asian category, SK was determined to find her position within Canada’s racial order, which is how she came across the term South Asian. Here, South Asian operates as what Cornell and Hartmann (2006) describe as assigned identity: categories produced through institutional and social contexts rather than personal choice. For many participants, “Asian” was a label they were expected to fit into but found misaligned with their lived experience. This sense of exclusion highlights how some regions within the continent of Asia are clearly included within Canadian constructions of Asian identity, while others (those part of the Indian subcontinent) are seen as ambiguous or excluded. Interestingly, some participants mentioned being more easily

identified as East Asian compared to others (in particular Nepali and Bhutanese participants). This was attributed mainly to their phenotypical features, which more closely matched East Asians than their South Asian counterparts. For example, Jo (second-generation, Bhutanese) described facing anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic due to his appearance,

You'll always, you will always find those questions when you, you know, you're having small talk with anyone, they ask you, are you?.... well, mainly they'll confuse you with, you know, Korean and Japanese, then you'll have to correct them. No I'm not Chinese, I'm Bhutanese blah, blah, blah. Most people are curious. Then there are people, especially after COVID-19 around 2021, those people who blamed the Asian people for COVID, so it was a bit hard back then.

This demonstrates how similar to South Asian identity, the boundaries of Asian identity are constructed based on geography, phenotypical differences, and cultural markers. While South Asian identity centres on India as its reference point, Asian identity centres on East Asians. Those who fit the dominant stereotypes (including visual phenotypical characteristics) are more readily included and accepted as Asian by Canadian society; for those who do not, their credibility is questioned, resulting in feelings of exclusion and ambivalence.

This is not to say that participants did not identify as Asian altogether. In contrast, participants such as Z1 (first-generation, Maldivian) occasionally used Asian strategically in contexts where distinctions between subregions were not recognized or required for that matter (e.g. in professional settings). As J1 (second-generation, Indian) explained, “Sometimes it’s just easier to say Asian because people don’t really know what South Asian means.” This pragmatic use aligns with what Alexander, Norman, and Pat (1977) describe as situated forms of identification, in which individuals deploy identity categories strategically in response to context, rather than through a sense of affective belonging. Overall, *Asian* identity is shaped by Canada’s racial hierarchies of visibility, where East Asian groups are seen as the prototypical “Asian,” while South Asians occupy a peripheral and sometimes confusing space. For participants, navigating this

gap highlighted both the limits of public recognition and the shift toward more specific, self-affirming panethnic identities such as *South Asian*, *Desi*, or *Brown*.

South Asian identity

Among the broader identity terms participants engaged with, “South Asian” was the most familiar and widely used within the Canadian context. Unlike Asian, which many found too distant, or misaligned with how they were recognized, South Asian offered a closer “fit” geographically and culturally. Yet participants’ experiences revealed that even this category carried its own complexities. It was recognizable and often used in everyday life, but also bureaucratic, unevenly inclusive, and at times externally imposed. For some, South Asian felt like an umbrella term that flattened their specific histories and identities; for others, it provided a shared sense of visibility and collective belonging within a racialized landscape.

Importantly, participants’ narratives suggest that “South Asian” rarely operated as a primary site of affective belonging in the way ethnic or ethnolinguistic identities did. Instead, it emerged as a situational category of identification (one that was adopted, resisted, or strategically deployed depending on context, audience, and purpose). While a small number of participants described moments of cultural connection or solidarity under the label, most accounts framed “South Asian” as a practical means of positioning oneself within public, institutional, or racialized contexts rather than as a deeply internalized identity. The following subsections explore these tensions, showing how South Asian functioned simultaneously as a limiting classification, a cultural reference point, and a basis of solidarity.

Broad and Imposed: The Limits of South Asian as a Category

Many participants described South Asian as a vague or bureaucratic label that failed to capture the specificity of their identity. As Y1 (second-generation, Afghan) describes, “It puts a blanket term on everyone... it does take away from the diversity.” A1 (second-generation, Indian), similarly reflected, “South Asia is so big... I might as well adopt the Indian identity and then explain.” Thus, while the term may offer convenience in terms of recognition, the boundaries surrounding this category are too loose, which often masks the complex, national, linguistic and religious distinctions that participants viewed as central to who they are.

Several participants highlighted how *South Asian* circulates primarily through institutional or bureaucratic contexts, such as government forms, workplace diversity initiatives, or demographic surveys, rather than through organic community-based identifications. Z27 (first-generation, Bangladeshi) described it succinctly: “It’s basically just for paperwork... other than that, it doesn’t really have any impact in my life.” C1 (1.5-generation, Indian) echoed this: “I wouldn’t say South Asian unless I’m checking off a box on a form.” In these accounts, South Asian functions less as a self-defining identity and more as an administrative classification required for institutional legibility.

For some participants like SR (first-generation, Indian), this external categorization was not occasional but persistent: “If I don’t identify myself, people will keep identifying me as South Asian—and they will keep reminding me.” These experiences exemplify how, for many people, South Asian has become an assigned identity (Cornell & Hartmann, 2006): one that is externally

defined yet internalized through repeated social interactions. Such accounts emphasize how *South Asian* operates as a socially recognizable but imprecise label, which is geographically accurate yet emotionally distant.

Visible and Cultural Belonging: Affirming a South Asian Identity

Despite these critiques, participants also recognized *South Asian* as a practically useful means of identification, particularly in racialized contexts where visible and cultural markers shaped how they were read by others. A5 (1.5-generation, Indian) explained: “My skin is brown. That’s about it. Physically, I look South Asian. But mentally I don’t feel it.” Similarly, B21 (first-generation, Indian) similarly stated: “When you look at me, you can tell I’m South Asian.” In these cases, the label functioned less as a reflection of internal identification and more as a means of naming racialized embodiment as it is perceived in public life. These reflections demonstrate how in public life, racialized visibility often precedes cultural nuance, what Phinney (2003) calls the external dimension of ethnic identity formation, where self-concept evolves in response to others’ perceptions.

For some, *South Asian* served as a flexible umbrella category that could accommodate complex ancestries or transnational family histories. As described in 5.3.1, it was sometimes preferred over ethnic identities because it masks the geopolitical divides and complex family histories that can sometimes complicate claims to a particular identity. J1 (second-generation, Indian) explained: “My ancestors are not just from India... my dad’s side was from Pakistan. South Asian accurately disguises my ancestry.” Here, the label became a way to locate oneself within

broader diasporic or regional belonging, without having to reconcile politically or historically fraught national distinctions.

Second-generation participants in particular described using *South Asian* as a bridge between inherited heritage and contemporary life in Canada. Natalie (second-generation, Indian) stated, “I would never want to take away that identity from myself and my family... it plays a huge role in how I am and my experiences.” Similarly, T7 (first-generation, Bangladeshi) reflected, “There are some features in my everyday life that remind me... at the end of the day I will always be a South Asian by heart.” This is because their experiences with their homeland culture are primarily through the diasporic context. Many described limited visits to the homeland, and as Chapter Six will highlight, they are less connected to relatives in their homelands as compared to first generations. Consequently, for many, their attachment to their culture is largely shaped by the diasporic experience, where cultural similarities help position these as panethnic cultural practices. In this way, what first-generation immigrants come to conceptualize as cultural expressions and transnational connections to their homeland, second-generation immigrants see as practices tied to the broader South Asian culture.

This is not to say that this experience is the same for all members of a generational group. For participants whose ethnic or ethnolinguistic identities were already well-established (perhaps through parents who have taught them about their background and culture at an early age and participation in particular ethnic activities, e.g. language classes, ethnic dance classes, attending religious institutions), “South Asian” did not offer much additional symbolic or affective value. For them, the category remained primarily bureaucratic or situational, activated for institutional

legibility rather than self-understanding. This suggests that “South Asian” becomes intrinsically meaningful when it fills a representational gap, particularly when other identity categories are either unavailable, unstable, contested, or insufficient for making sense of one’s position within racialized social space.

In this sense, “South Asian” acquires meaning when it provides coherence across fragmented experiences of belonging, visibility, and exclusion. Where such coherence is already achieved through ethnic, linguistic, or national identities, “South Asian” remains peripheral. These dynamics help explain why “South Asian” functions for most participants as a conditional and situational point of connection, while becoming a more central aspect of self-understanding for a smaller subset whose social positioning renders the category as both useful and symbolically significant.

South Asian as Collective Identity and Solidarity

South Asian was also described as a panethnic category that could enable cross-ethnic alignment and limited forms of solidarity, particularly in contexts where participants encountered one another as racialized subjects rather than as members of distinct national or ethnolinguistic groups. M1 (second-generation, Indian) stated, “We have way more commonalities... I feel more connected than disconnected with them, so that’s why I like the term South Asian.” Some such as Sparrow (second-generation, Maldivian) distinguished South Asian from other relevant panethnic identities such as Brown by noting that it felt more coherent and rooted: “It has that strong sense of identity, compared to Brown... South Asian means something more specific.” These accounts

suggest that, despite its limitations, “South Asian” could function as a recognizable frame for collective reference in particular social and institutional spaces.

In this way, “South Asian” operated as a symbolic resource that allowed participants to express connections across differences, especially when such connections were situationally useful. These reflections align with Espiritu’s (1992) notion of panethnicity, which describes the formation of broad collective identities in response to shared goals and experiences. Although participants were aware of internal diversity and hierarchy, they recognized the South Asian identity label as one that could facilitate empathy and mutual recognition across national, religious, or linguistic divides. When discussing cultural practices that could be considered “South Asian”, participants mentioned shared practices like clothing, food, languages and shared spaces where they could engage in cross-cultural or inter-religious practices. As F1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) explained, “I would say more of like the clothing that we wear. It's all pretty common, like salwar kameez, sari. It’s all pretty a common thing and I feel like it's in almost all the South Asian countries.” Religion in particular was seen as a factor that brought shared cultural practices across different origin groups, as G1 (second-generation, Afghan) describes, “So I guess I, mmm, a lot of Muslim practices are like pretty common across the subcontinent just because it's a pretty Muslim dense region. So I'd say like fasting, praying, stuff like this, just because it's so spread out throughout the subcontinent.” Such similarities bring forward a shared culture which can encourage panethnic identification. Moreover, participants expressed that these similarities were often celebrated as “South Asian” by clubs, associations, and non-profits, further institutionalizing these points of connection. As E1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) explains,

My school had a very Caucasian population. Literally the only club that they had that represented all brown people or all South Asians was South Asian Alliance. I was in that team and we organized like Brown events. So any Brown, or like South Asian cultures, whether it was Diwali or even Eid like we would celebrate all of it. Like we would have to put together events for all of them. So like. So it's very generalized. But it was still like the closest thing I had to feel like I belonged.

Overall, these findings show that the meaning and use of “South Asian” as a panethnic identity vary systematically across subgroup size and generation. Participants from larger and more visible subgroups were more likely to experience the label as imposed and homogenizing, often associating it with bureaucratic classifications or dominant, India-centric representations that masked internal diversity. In contrast, participants from smaller or less visible subgroups more often described “South Asian” as a practical category that enabled recognition and inclusion in contexts where their specific ethnic identities were less understood. Generational differences further shaped these orientations: first-generation participants tended to prioritize ethnic or national identities and treated “South Asian” as situational, while 1.5- and second-generation participants more readily mobilized it as a flexible cultural or racial identifier, particularly in contexts of shared racialization. Across these variations, however, “South Asian” emerged as a relational boundary that participants moved in and out of depending on context.

At the same time, many felt it lacked the emotional depth and cultural intimacy they associated with belonging. As a result, they often turned to other terms such as *Desi* or *Brown*, which felt more expressive of shared experience, humour, or generational belonging. These labels, though less formal, carried their own complexities: they could signal community and solidarity but also evoke tension around class and authenticity. The following sections examine how participants understood and negotiated these more fluid identity expressions, revealing how cultural and racial belonging are lived and reinterpreted across contexts.

5.3.4 *Desi*

The term “Desi” emerged in participants’ discussions as a community-embedded and colloquial identity marker that carried emotional and cultural relevance rather than institutional legitimacy. While definitions of the term may vary, Shankar (2008) describes it as follows,

At first glance, the term Desi, the Hindi word for “countryman”, is simply the newest in a long line of names used to refer to South Asians living outside of the Indian subcontinent. Upon closer examination, however, Desi marks the inception of a particular type of diasporic, racially marked, generationally influenced consciousness... the emergence of the term signals a defining moment in the South Asian diaspora, during which a population that has steadily grown is emerging as a strong public presence. (p.1)

Unlike *South Asian*, which circulates mainly through bureaucratic and public domains, *Desi* belongs to the diaspora and is used within South Asian circles, but is rarely employed in formal, public, or cross-cultural settings. Participants consistently described *Desi* as casual, familiar, and intimate, a term best suited for cultural conversations among those who “get it.” As K1 (second-generation, Indian) explained, “Desi you usually use when someone understands what Desi is... something I would for sure use with my Indian friends.” Similarly, SR2 (first-generation, Nepali) emphasized, “Desi is more used within the community, by the community, for the community.” In this sense, *Desi* functions as an in-group identifier which is chosen and lived, rather than assigned.

Participants noted, however, that the meaning and use of *Desi* varied by geography, nationality and migration history. H1 (first-generation, Indian) remarked that Desi is more common in the UK and other former British colonies than in Canada, “Desi, South Asian, Brown people will have claim to it in England... but maybe not so much here.” Others pointed out that, unlike *South Asian*, *Desi* also circulates within the subcontinent itself. Sabera (first-generation,

Bangladeshi) noted, “It’s used all the time. It translates exactly as Deshi in Bangladesh.” Still, participants differed on whether it held the same connotations in Canada as in South Asia. J1 (second-generation, Indian) observed, “There’s a negative connotation with Desi sometimes [in India]—they’re not very modern. But now in Canada, it’s used differently.” These accounts highlight how panethnic identifications can shift, especially when they come to represent diasporic communities. Through migration and settlement, these identities gain new meanings which can also shape identifications with these labels.

Generational differences also shaped *Desi*’s use and significance. A19 (first-generation, Bangladeshi) described it as “a word Canadian-born South Asians use all the time,” while Ray (first-generation, Indian) characterized it as a trendy expression: “It’s a more Western thing to say instead of Indian. Desi sounds cooler.” Many participants echoed this sentiment, noting that they used *Desi* with peers or younger relatives who immediately understood its meaning. As V2 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) explained, “I say Desi more because when I say that, they know exactly what I’m talking about.” This generational usage suggests that *Desi* operates as a marker of diasporic youth culture, part of what Phinney (1990) might describe as the *exploration and affirmation* stage of ethnic identity development, where individuals experiment with expressions that feel both culturally authentic and socially resonant. Here, the use of Desi reflected proximity to diasporic peer cultures and shared reference points. These constructions may also shape the boundaries of who can and cannot use this identity (e.g. seen as culturally acceptable among younger members of the diaspora but not older members).

Still, participants drew clear boundaries around where and when *Desi* could be used. Its meaning depended heavily on audience recognition. Many were reluctant to use it in formal or cross-cultural settings, where its meaning would likely be misunderstood. V2 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) explained, “If I say *Desi* to anyone who isn’t Brown, they’re just gonna be confused and I don’t want to bother.” For most, *Desi* belonged to the private sphere and was used when referring to food, language, celebrations, humor and shared cultural practices. Moreover, its use was restricted to members of the Indian subcontinent (Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans and Nepalis). Participants from Bhutan, the Maldives and Afghanistan were largely unaware of the term.

Despite these limitations, several participants valued *Desi* for its inclusivity and affective power. SK (first-generation, Pakistani) described it as “a marker of shared heritage and culture.” H1 (first-generation, Indian) similarly noted, “*Desi* ties you to community in terms of ritualistic things... like Eid or mehndi. It gives you a space in South Asia.” In this way, *Desi* represents an emotional community, an identity grounded not in state recognition but in everyday acts of cultural continuity. Overall, *Desi* stood out as a flexible, in-group identity that emphasized belonging and shared experience over bureaucratic categorization. Its use reflected a desire for cultural intimacy and agency, a way for participants, particularly younger generations of the Indian subcontinent, to reclaim and reinterpret heritage on their own terms.

While *Desi* invoked cultural familiarity and shared heritage, *Brown* marked how participants were seen and positioned in broader Canadian society. It captured not only physical appearance but also the lived experience of being racialized, visible, and sometimes stereotyped.

The following section explores how participants used and interpreted *Brown* identity, revealing how it functions as both a source of solidarity and a reminder of social boundaries.

5.3.4 *Brown*

The term “Brown” functioned as a racialized and informal identifier, used most often in casual conversations, humour, or when discussing experiences of racialization or cultural stereotyping (Sandhu, 2014). Participants described Brown as a shared shorthand for visibility and racial experience. As Neha (second-generation, Nepali) explained: “We kind of use the overworking term of just like, we’re Brown... way more often.” SR2 (first-generation, Nepali) echoes this, “Yes, yes, I do use them... like we just joke around, and say things like ‘Did you say that because I’m Brown?’” In these accounts, “Brown” operates as a relational category, one that names how participants are seen and treated, rather than who they are genealogically.

Like *Desi*, *Brown* was frequently used in informal or familiar settings, but it carried stronger racial undertones. V2 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) reflected, “I use South Asian when I’m teaching... but talking to my friends, I’ll say Brown person or Brown people.” Similarly, Y1 (second-generation, Afghan) summarized the distinction: “South Asian is more formal... Brown is what people actually say.” Some participants even associated the term with earlier life stages or youth culture, like the term *Desi*. A5 (1.5-generation, Indian) noted, “Brown, yeah, that’s outdated. I used that in my teens, not so much anymore.”

For many, though, *Brown* identity was more than just a colloquial term. It was a label that surfaced when discussing race and marginalization. Neha (second-generation, Nepali) reflected,

“Especially when we describe experiences like me and my friends talking about racialization or how we’re treated differently—I really think *Brown* encompasses that because it’s a racial marker.” Participants also used *Brown* humorously or ironically to reference stereotypes about food, family, or cultural norms. Sabera (first-generation, Bangladeshi) joked, “All my utensils are yellow because I eat curry [laughs]... I’m Brown.” Similarly, B21 (first-generation, Indian) added, “Brown parents, stuff like that—it just comes automatically.” These moments of self-parody demonstrate how humour operates as a form of everyday resistance, allowing participants to reclaim and reframe racialized tropes through self-parody and shared recognition. This echoes many of the satirical constructions of South Asian identity within social media and other entertainment platforms. Celebrities like Russell Peters, Lilly Singh, and JusReign have developed their careers from making light of the very stereotypes that plague this diaspora (Venkatraman, 2022). As insiders of this diaspora, they helped shed a comedic light onto the very constructions that have been used to demean and belittle members of this community. These are examples of resistance entertainment made by the community, for the community. In this way, Brown emerged as a lived expression of racialization within the diaspora, acknowledging shared experiences of visibility, difference, and solidarity, while fostering a sense of collective familiarity.

Moreover, it was more inclusive than Desi and South Asian due to legitimacy based on phenotypical features rather than shared culture, geographical borders, etc. Yet, its breadth also means that Brown identity can encompass people from different continental regions (e.g. Latin Americans, Middle Easterners), not just South Asians (Silva, 2010). Overall, Brown functioned as a flexible, affective shorthand for racialized belonging, less concerned with ancestry or origin and

more focused on shared experiences of being seen and stereotyped. Where *South Asian* provided institutional legibility and *Desi* offered cultural intimacy, *Brown* named the racial dimension of diaspora most directly, capturing how participants understood and narrated their place within Canada's racial landscape.

Finally, participants compared *Brown*, *Desi*, and *South Asian* altogether, assigning each a distinct tone and function. A5 (1.5-generation, Indian) summarized: "Desi is more endearing. Brown is a bit more condescending. South Asian is neutral." H1 (first-generation, Indian) observed generational differences: "Brown is for young people... it gives you space in South Asia but distances you from older generations." Similarly, M1 (second-generation, Indian) explained, "Desi is a more Brown way of saying South Asian... I use Brown for any friends, but Desi with my specifically Desi friends." These distinctions illustrate how participants moved fluidly across labels, selecting terms based on audience, setting, and the aspect of belonging they wished to draw upon (whether that be shared racial experience, cultural intimacy or institutional recognition).

Across participants' narratives, *South Asian*, *Desi*, and *Brown* emerged not as fixed or interchangeable categories, but as layered and context-dependent identities that reflect the multiple scales of belonging in the Canadian diaspora (see Figure 2 in Appendix A for a diagram examining how participants decide to identify based on different points of consideration). *South Asian* operated as the most institutionalized and externally defined category, shaped by bureaucratic visibility, census classifications, and multicultural discourse. *Desi* provided a sense of cultural intimacy and community ownership, grounded in everyday practices and shared diasporic reference points, while *Brown* articulated the racialized dimensions of belonging, focused on

visibility, difference, and common experiences of marginalization. Together, these terms reveal how participants continually negotiated between imposed and chosen forms of identification, rather than inhabiting any single label consistently. These shifting usages illustrate that identity within the South Asian diaspora is relational, performative and strategic, allowing individuals to navigate visibility, solidarity, and belonging across social, cultural, and racial boundaries.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined how participants understood and engaged with the category of *South Asian* within Canada's multicultural and racialized landscape. The findings reveal that *South Asian* identity is a dynamic construct shaped through institutional frameworks, media narratives, and lived experience. South Asian begins as an externally assigned identity, produced through state multiculturalism, census classifications, and racialized visibility. Yet, through everyday practice, it becomes a term of both constraint and creativity. Participants' reflections reveal that to be "South Asian" in Canada is to live identifying with a term that is constantly reinterpreted through the politics of belonging, visibility, and recognition.

The chapter has shown that the label "South Asian" operates along multiple, sometimes contradictory logics. At one level, it functions as an assigned identity (Cornell & Hartmann, 2006), a bureaucratic category that simplifies difference under the premise of multicultural inclusion. At another, it becomes an asserted identity, a flexible and strategic expression that diasporic subjects adopt in specific contexts. Participants drew upon a spectrum of panethnic identifiers (*South Asian*, *Desi*, and *Brown*), each mobilized to articulate distinct facets of belonging: institutional, cultural, and racial. These shifting usages illustrate what Hall (1996) and Brah (1996) describe as the

production of identity through discourse: an ongoing negotiation between how people are seen and how they see themselves.

Through these negotiations, we see the evolution of panethnicity from a bureaucratic shorthand into a lived, affective, and sometimes political formation. Echoing Espiritu's (1992) notion of panethnicity as both imposed and reclaimed, participants used "South Asian" not only to navigate visibility but also to signal solidarity, especially in response to shared experiences of racialization and marginalization. Yet this solidarity was uneven. The dominance of Indian representation in public discourse revealed how panethnic categories can reproduce internal hierarchies, pushing smaller or less visible groups to the peripheries even within supposedly inclusive frameworks. In this sense, "South Asian" operates as a site of both unification and erasure, and serves as a reminder that collective identity is always constructed through difference.

At the same time, the more informal and self-constructed identities (*Desi* and *Brown*), demonstrate how diasporic youth, in particular, rework inherited categories into forms that better capture their lived hybridity. These terms express what Bhabha (1994) calls the "third space" of cultural production: a zone where inherited traditions and racialized experiences intersect to generate new, hybrid forms of belonging. "Desi" grounds identity in community connection, while "Brown" articulates a shared racial consciousness forged through everyday encounters with visibility and difference. Together, they mark a shift from institutional recognition to affective self-making, where the politics of identity move from the census to the social world.

Ultimately, this chapter has argued that the meaning of "South Asian" in Canada cannot be understood solely through demographic or policy lenses. It must be seen as a dynamic and negotiated identity which is cultural, political, and racial. Participants' narratives reveal an

oscillation between being seen and being self-defined, between inclusion in Canada's multicultural mosaic and the persistent struggle for authentic representation. In this way, the chapter frames panethnicity as an evolving practice of relational belonging and a mode of claiming space in a landscape that both celebrates and constrains difference.

As the next chapter explores, these negotiations extend beyond the level of categorization into the everyday politics of coexistence. Where this chapter has examined how South Asian identity is *constructed* and *claimed*, Chapter Six turns to how it is *lived* by exploring how historical divisions, homeland politics, and diasporic diversity are managed, contested, or reimagined in the intimate spaces of Canadian life.

CHAPTER 6: THE POLITICS OF DIASPORIC DIFFERENCE: INTERGROUP RELATIONS AND THE LEGACY OF HOMELAND TENSIONS

6.1 Introduction

Over the past five decades, Canada's South Asian population has expanded and diversified, producing one of the most heterogeneous diasporic formations in the country. Migration from across the subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Maldives) has created a mosaic of communities that vary across national origin, religion, language, caste, and class. In metropolitan regions such as the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), these groups coexist in shared social, economic, and institutional spaces, yet bring with them distinct histories, memories, and political attachments. This diversity raises a central question: *How do the geopolitical legacies of South Asia (with its colonial histories, inter-state rivalries, and internal religious and linguistic divisions) shape intergroup relations and the everyday negotiation of difference within the diaspora?*

To explore this, I employ Oh's (2016) diasporic identity framework, which highlights how media, geopolitics, and intra-diaspora relations mediate belonging, and how public narratives about the homeland shape intergroup dynamics in local settings. While ethnic and transnational media remain central to this analysis, they are not just treated as information sources, but as diasporic public spheres where belonging and boundary-making are performed (Werbner, 2004). Consistent with Oh's (2016) framework, the chapter examines how participants' engagement with both homeland and Canadian media mediates their awareness of South Asian geopolitics and informs their everyday relationships with other South Asian subgroups. Previous research suggests that ethnic media strengthens diasporic attachment and collective identification (Viswanath & Arora, 2000; Bukhari, 2019) but also reproduces internal hierarchies and India-centric narratives (Banaji, 2011). In line with existing research, participants' accounts reveal differential patterns of

media consumption across generational groups and group size, and highlight the role of family networks in sustaining these connections. I later discuss the significance of these patterns within tensions in diasporic contexts and how South Asians manage these conflicts through strategies of co-existence.

Participants' accounts point to the continued salience of intra-national political conflicts rooted in homeland histories, such as Partition, the Khalistan movement, and the Sri Lankan civil war. As discussed in Chapter Five, I conceptualize South Asian identity as an unstable and situational boundary that is made, unmade, and selectively emphasized depending on political context, space, and interaction. In this sense, intra-national divisions do not simply fragment an otherwise unified South Asian community; instead, they expose how panethnic boundaries are continually negotiated amid the assertion of ethnic, religious, and national lines of difference.

Accordingly, the chapter proceeds through five sections. Section 6.2 explores how diasporic awareness of South Asia is cultivated through family narratives and media engagement. Section 6.3 examines how historical conflicts and homeland politics are reinterpreted in the Canadian context. Section 6.4 identifies common inter- and intra-group tensions that impact the South Asian diaspora. Section 6.5 analyzes the strategies of speech, silence, and selective spaces through which participants manage these differences. The chapter concludes with Section 6.6 by reflecting on how these dynamics collectively shape South Asian panethnicity in Canada, as a situational, multi-layered formation that is both cultural, political, and racialized.

6.2 Knowing South Asia from Afar: Connections to the Homeland through Family and Ethnic Media

Understanding whether homeland politics shape intergroup relations first requires examining how diasporic South Asians in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) connect to the homeland itself. This section explores the sources through which participants develop awareness of South Asia and Canada–South Asia relations, focusing on media engagement and family networks. Drawing on Oh’s (2016) diasporic identity framework, I view these as key sites of mediation where diasporic belonging and geopolitical knowledge are produced. Through these channels, participants encounter the histories, conflicts, and cultural narratives of the subcontinent, but in ways that differ by generation, national origin, language, and access to ethnic infrastructures. As I discuss next, these differences produce differential experiences of homeland connections, particularly between first versus 1.5 and second generation immigrants, and members of larger versus smaller subgroups, resulting in a diasporic South Asian identity that is based less upon homeland ties and more on shared similarities and Canadian ideologies of the identity (as also highlighted in Chapter Five).

News media played a key role in shaping participants’ geopolitical awareness of events and issues occurring in their origin country. According to Oh (2016), ethnic media are not passive information sources but mediating institutions that connect diasporic members to global politics and to one another. Participants’ accounts revealed three recurring patterns: active engagement, passive exposure, and limited access. Among the participants interviewed, first-generation participants most often demonstrated active and sustained engagement³³ with homeland news.

³³ Here I define “active and sustained engagement” as consuming news from their origin country (through social media, online news forums, family networks, etc.) either daily or multiple times a week.

Some first-generation participants even viewed homeland awareness as an ongoing obligation to their roots that stems from their lived experience. Moreover, linguistic fluency made it easier for this generation to stay connected to local news and stay tuned to the conversations happening back in the subcontinent. Sabera (first-generation, Bangladeshi) described how she did not pay much attention to local news when staying in Bangladesh, but now actively seeks out access to Bangladeshi news, “I subscribe to Bangladeshi newspapers now which I never did care about. And now I pay to subscribe for Bangladeshi newspapers and stuff.” When discussing their motivation behind consuming news media about origin country issues, they primarily mentioned concern for family members back home, as Participant 61 (first-generation, Indian) stated,

Yeah, so obviously like family connections, like I want to know, what's happening and you know how it would impact people living there. Also, just because I want like the general well-being of the country, so it's important that I just know what's going on. Maybe I'm not able to do anything right now, but just being aware of what's going on, it's important.

Many times, family members from back home also informed them of what was happening on the ground, as I2 (first-generation, Indian) states, “My parents will keep me updated on what's going on. Whenever I call them, they will always give me the update.” Ray (first-generation, Indian) prefers to get updates from family this way, as he suggests news media that are accessible in Canada can sometimes be sensationalized or can fail to cover certain topics.

I have been losing my hang on what's actually going out there in ground reality to be very honest. The news sometimes could be a little flawed to be very honest and what's actually happening in ground reality is a different story. Like I think there's an issue going on in like Ladakh [region that is divided between India, Pakistan and China] that's in the dark right now that is not being covered enough, that the only things I'm seeing right now is if I go out of my way and really search for it. And I did not even know something that was happening until my father sent me something that are you aware that this is happening?

Thus, although ethnic media (according to Oh (2016), are the institutions that help connect diasporic members to local issues occurring in the home country, family connections were found

to be the main driver behind accessing these institutions in the first place. Participants wanted to stay informed about what was happening due to loved ones still staying in those regions. Moreover, communication with these family members often brought up local news topics, which strengthened the significance of being up to date about local issues³⁴.

Interestingly, SR (first-generation, Indian) described how when she first immigrated to Canada she would still frequently consume ethnic media, but over time, she began to rely more on local sources, “Oh, initially I was following every day I was listening some debates and all that which I was liking in India, but now I'm getting disconnected, and more on CBC and all that.” This partly speaks to broader issues surrounding access to local news media. Despite living in an era of increased technology and digital communication, participants described challenges in terms of accessing news regarding local issues. Even social media, which is often considered to be an unfiltered, public-first source of information, can be limiting, as Ray (first generation, Indian) describes,

Even my phone to be very honest as soon as I've come in Canada the content that I see is different than the content I see back home for some reason. The algorithm changes completely I feel, so it's most[ly] stuff that's pushed to you is the stuff you see now. But I think before it [content about India] used to come on my feed, I used to be active on it. Now I have to go out of my way and find it out and figure it out, research on it and stuff like that.

Such a lack of access can produce differential outcomes in terms of knowledge of homeland events/issues. For first-generation South Asian immigrants living in Canada, part of the acculturation process involves learning the different outlets of information available to them, as well as actively seeking out additional information when previously such sources of knowledge

³⁴ It is important to note that these information flows about local news were not just one way, participants mentioned their family members back home also were aware of local issues happening in Canada and stayed up to date regarding these topics as well.

were easily accessible. While some rely on their family networks for information, others may simply have to rely on the limited sources of information available to them (e.g. online websites instead of local channels and radio stations). Ultimately, this impacts their access to information on homeland issues and, in turn, their connections to the homeland.

Like many first-generation immigrants, 1.5 and second-generation immigrants also often relied on family networks as sources for local homeland news. Many of these family networks consisted of parents or grandparents (first-generation immigrants themselves) who lived in Canada. For many of these participants, knowledge of South Asian politics and histories first came from family storytelling rather than formal sources. As Bhabha (1994) argues, diasporic identity emerges in the “in-between” spaces of memory and narration; in this way, familial accounts become a form of cultural pedagogy that shapes how descendants imagine the homeland. Several participants described how parents’ or grandparents’ recollections of conflict cultivated awareness and empathy. E1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) traced her engagement with Sri Lankan politics to her father’s experiences of displacement during the civil war, “I could see in the way that he talks... he was forced to leave... I’m very much like my dad... I want to learn more about what happened.” Similarly, V1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) reflects how his father taught him about Sri Lanka’s civil unrest, “Back in like 2006-2007. There was a protest in Canada and there was a video that surfaced and I think my dad got like a DVD or something and he made us watch the history. And being that young it was very like, the video is very like like bloody and stuff and was scary and it made you learn.” Here, V1’s father saw protests on the civil conflict in Sri Lanka coming into Canada and thought it was important to teach his children about the history. Thus, many of my participants had parents or grandparents who were their first sources of information regarding homeland conflict, many of whom were first-generation immigrants and had

experienced these geopolitical conflicts firsthand. Rather than considering these events as things of the past, they have brought these conversations with them into the diasporic space and have taught the newer generations about the conflict that they themselves have experienced, highlighting their continued significance. These memories illustrate how homeland histories are personalized through emotions and kinship. According to Hall (1990), diasporic identity here is a process through which memory and affect bind people to collective histories (that oftentimes they did not directly experience).

For some, these recollections translated into a deep interest in their ancestry and family legacies (like E1). Yet for most 1.5 and second-generation respondents, although these events brought a sense of empathy and respect for their parents' and grandparents' struggle, it was not enough to warrant a sustained connection to the homeland and its current events³⁵. Instead, most 1.5 and second-generation respondents described passive or situational engagement with current homeland events, often relying on Canadian or international outlets that occasionally covered South Asian events (e.g. CBC, Al Jazeera, etc). They often described learning about homeland events indirectly, through parents' conversations. For example, when asked if she pays attention to Nepali politics, Neha (second generation, Nepali) stated, "My dad and my grandpa actually, the grandpa that's in Winnipeg are really big news current event buffs and then so am I, so with them it's just sort of how we talk, it's like we kind of talk shop and I like to ask them about Nepali politics, cause it really, it really gets them going." Or as D1 (second-generation, Indian) describes, "My mom has the news running most of the time... so I do have knowledge about certain things, like the farmers' protest... but I'm not really into politics. Thus, for 1.5 and second-generation immigrants, engagement with local issues is often through family networks, sometimes passively,

³⁵ As I will discuss in 6.5, there were a number of rationales provided by participants as to why they did not strongly engage with homeland politics.

where information circulates ambiently, creating partial, fragmented awareness of homeland affairs. At other times, it is situational, such as during family gatherings, conversations with elders, etc. Following and discussing news about the homeland with relatives can also become a form of relational labour through which family ties and obligations are reproduced across borders. In this way, even sporadic engagement with homeland affairs functions as a meaningful mode of transnational connection rather than merely passive information consumption. For second-generation immigrants in particular, sharing and interpreting news within family networks operates as a key mechanism through which they can remain affectively and symbolically connected to places they may not directly experience themselves (Madianou, 2016).

Moreover, existing scholarship suggests that news and political engagement are often gendered, with men more likely to engage directly and women more frequently encountering news through relational or family-based sources (Norris, 2007; Poindexter et al., 2010). Nonetheless, such distinctions were not strongly pronounced in this study. Although a greater number of male participants reported regular engagement with news media, both men and women articulated disengagement primarily through shared logics of limited interest, stress avoidance, time constraints, and perceived irrelevance. Rather than clear gendered divides, participants' accounts point to everyday pressures and affective considerations as the main drivers that impacted news engagement.

Access also emerged as a structural divide, especially between members of smaller and larger subgroups. Accessing local news sources can sometimes be challenging due to firewalls and VPN requirements, consequently leaving many to rely on international news sources or news and radio channels in Canada tailored towards diasporic members. Looking at South Asian ethnic media representation in Vancouver, Canada, Bukhari (2019) has found that while her respondents

appreciate the establishment of “South Asian” ethnic media broadcasting within Canada, some South Asian subgroups (Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Gujarati, Indian community members) did not feel represented within ethnic media. She found that,

The smaller communities were offered time slots on broadcast media with limited options, largely for entertainment programmes, more specifically music programmes. Most of their radio shows did not have a live call-in option and they were not allowed to talk about political or social issues pertaining to their communities. (p.91)

Her respondents reported a lack of ethnic media in other languages and negative portrayals of particular demographics (i.e the negative portrayal of Pakistan by some media sources that sided with India’s political views). Thus, a lack of diversified representation can work to further embed hegemonic stereotypes that impact the diaspora. Broadcasting channels depend on limited resources and consequently focus primarily on serving larger groups of the diaspora in order to appeal to a greater number of audience members, resulting in many smaller subgroups facing challenges with accessing news in their local regions. Within the GTA region, there are a few radio stations and TV channels that are tailored toward the South Asian diaspora (see table 7 and 8 below for a list of radio and TV stations that deliver ethnic news within the GTA region). Of these, a majority of them serve programming in mainly Hindi or Punjabi. While there are some subgroup-specific ethnic media sources (e.g. Canadian Tamil Radio, Bangla Television Canada), these remain limited, and media sources focusing specifically on the Bhutanese and Maldivian community remained largely absent. Media sources for the Afghan community in the GTA were limited to online news websites (The Afghan Post and Farhany) (Canadian Minority Media Database, n.d.). Participants from smaller or underrepresented national groups described these limitations within their conversations. Jo (second-generation, Bhutanese) remarked, “It’s easier to access Al Jazeera and BBC than media from back in Bhutan.” In contrast, Indian and Punjabi-

speaking respondents talked about having Punjabi news channels playing constantly in their home. These disparities emphasize how panethnic categories like South Asian can obscure internal hierarchies. Linguistic dominance and resource inequality contribute to hegemonic constructions of South Asia, which impact the pathways of connection to homeland issues and sense of belonging to the regions over time.

Table 7: South Asian Radio Stations in the GTA

Broadcast Station	Linguistic Communities They Serve
Our FM 91.9	Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu,
Geetmala Radio 100.7	Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Pashto, Tamil, Telugu, Sinhala, Bangla, Gujarati, Marathi, Nepali
CJSA 101.3	Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi
The Region 105.9	South Asian, Farsi
South Asian Voice Toronto/ Radio Humsafar 1350	Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu
CINA Radio 1650 AM	Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati, Bengali, Indo-Caribbean
Radio Humsafar	Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu
East FM 102.7	Malayalam
Radio Saaz-o-Awaz	Urdu, Punjabi
Canadian Tamil Radio	Tamil
Sanjha Punjab Radio 1430	Punjabi
Watno Dur	Punjabi
Pot Pourri	Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu
ATN Radio	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, East & South Africa, The West Indies and more.
CJMR 1320	Bengali; Gujarati; Hindi; Punjabi; Urdu

Source: (Canada Minority Media Database, n.d.)

Table 8: South Asian TV channels in the GTA

Name of Channel	Linguistic Communities they serve
Omni Tv	Punjabi
Nandan TV	Bangla
CBN24	Bangla
Tamil One	Tamil
Jhanjar TV (Punjabi focused)	Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu
Canada One TV (Pakistani focused)	Punjabi, Urdu
Sanjha Punjab TV	Punjabi
Punjabi TV	Punjabi
Deshi TV	Bangla
NRB TV	Bangla
ATN	Bangla, Gujarati; Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu
Zee TV Canada	Hindi
BBC TV Gaunda Punjab	Punjabi
Desi Plus TV	Punjabi
Urdu TV Toronto	Urdu
Tamil Entertainment Television	Tamil
Rawal TV	Punjabi
Panorama TV	English; Hindi; Sanskrit; Urdu;
Bangla Television Canada	Bangla

*These lists are not meant to be exhaustive; for information on all South Asian ethnic media sources, see (Canadian Minority Media Database, n.d.)

Thus, these accounts highlight how family networks and ethnic media sources often serve as a micro-site of diasporic formation, which is mediated by generational ties, language and access

barriers, and shifting attachments to home and host nations. These patterns of engagement carry implications for South Asian identity formation. For first-generation participants, sustained consumption of homeland news reinforced transnational connections, situating them within ongoing political and cultural discourses of “back home.” In contrast, the more ambient engagement seen amongst 1.5- and second-generation respondents suggests a symbolic rather than affective attachment. For these participants, South Asia remains part of their identity, but not a central or actively cultivated one. Moreover, for members of larger subgroups, ease of access to news and current events occurring in the homeland makes it easier for them to foster diasporic connections and connect to their homeland on an everyday basis. Yet for members of smaller subgroups, there are challenges with getting access to unbiased, local news which can also have implications towards sustained connections to the homeland, ultimately producing distance and reducing the relevance of homeland events. As I discuss in the following sections, engagement with homeland events is a key aspect not only in reinforcing connections to the homeland, but also brings an awareness into the events that can sometimes impact intergroup dynamics of subgroups here in Canada.

6.3 Old Conflicts, New Contexts: The Persistence and Reworking of South Asian Divides in Canada

As discussed in Chapter Three, South Asia has experienced centuries of conquest and geopolitical tensions associated with the rise and fall of various ethnic and religious powers. What remains now are a series of nations that each house a great diversity of ethnic, religious and linguistic subgroups within them. In some cases, particular communities have more in common

with members from their neighbouring nation than they do with their neighbouring state³⁶. Post-partition residents of these countries have had to come to terms with changing geopolitical boundaries and what this meant for the regions in which they were living in. For some, this meant the painful separation of families across borders (i.e. the migration of Sikhs to Punjab, India), for others it meant living in close proximity with new ethnic, religious and linguistic minority groups, fostering a sense of multiculturalism. While my participants did not experience the partition firsthand, many of their parents and grandparents have lived through this experience, and as the beginning of this chapter has highlighted, they have passed on their stories to their subsequent generations. Against this backdrop, I was interested in exploring the potential impacts of these legacies of geopolitical tensions amongst South Asian subgroups in Canada.

While there has been some existing research on this topic (see Mohammad-Arif, 2007; Hyndman, Amarasingham, and Naganathan, 2023; Jhinjar et al., 2023), a renewed look into these dynamics is necessary for several reasons. Firstly, as highlighted in Chapter Three, Canada's South Asian population has expanded greatly both in terms of size and diversity over the past 15 years (see Table 2 in Chapter Three). This has resulted in the migration of new groups of ethnic minorities that have not previously migrated to Canada, bringing the potential of historical geopolitical tensions into new spaces. Moreover, the larger concentration of particular ethnic groups also brings new interest into intergroup dynamics. Existing research has found that geopolitical conflicts from the homeland are reproduced and transformed within diasporic environments (Wayland 2004; Brubaker 2005). These tensions typically are seen in specific social spheres (e.g. protests, social media), especially during periods of increased conflict or political

³⁶ For example West and East Bengal that are now East Bengal, India and the neighboring country of Bangladesh, members of both regions are called Bengalis and they both speak Bangla but the division of the region into two separate countries came primarily from religious differences.

tension (Hyndman et al., 2023). Moreover, engagement with homeland conflict varies by immigrant generation, migration pathway, and personal experiences of conflict (Nayar, 2004). My findings aim to provide a renewed perspective on how South Asians contend with geopolitical tensions and the impact of such conflict on their interactions with other subgroup members. This section examines how participants perceive and interpret homeland conflicts in the Canadian context, tracing how these narratives are remembered or forgotten in the diasporic context.

6.3.1 Historical Conflicts in Diasporic Spaces

Several participants described how homeland divisions such as the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, the Khalistani separatist movement, and India-Pakistan hostilities remain embedded within diasporic consciousness. As discussed above, many times these memories were remembered through family stories and/or strengthened by ethnic and social media, producing what Brah (1996) calls a “diasporic space” where past and present co-exist. A1 (second-generation, Indian) reflected on how her mother’s experience during 1984³⁷ shaped her perceptions of Hindu–Sikh relations and ongoing debates surrounding the Khalistan referendum:

A lot of people relegated it to the Sikhs for example, being victims, but like based on what my mom has told me and she’s lived through that, she’s, you know, she’s been in that situation. She knows what it was like. That it was actually a lot of Hindus who suffered too, but the narrative of that is always associated with the victims being Sikhs. But there were victims on both sides, like both sides were wrong that’s how I grew up knowing it.

In the previous section I suggest that these memories mostly did not encourage greater interest into homeland issues among my participants, however an important caveat is that in reference to periods of tension, like during the rise in conflict between Hindu and Sikhs in Canada due to the

³⁷ Tensions between the Indian state and the residents of Punjab over limited political autonomy and the establishment of a separate Sikh state (Khalistan), which led to the violent raid of the Golden Temple and the assassination of PM Indira Gandhi and subsequent anti-Sikh protests.

Khalistan referendum, participants (like A1) were seen to be drawing upon these stories in order to make sense of their positionality within these conflicts. Such conversations informed them of their positionality within these tensions (i.e. whose “side” were they supposed to be on, who they can discuss these topics with, who they shouldn’t discuss these issues with, etc).

While most participants did not find that these issues surface in Canada, many emphasized that when they do, they do so in muted or symbolic ways rather than as open conflict. J310 (first-generation, Maldivian) explained, “Yeah, of course it happens [here] also, just not as effective as when it happens in the home country.” Participants like H1 (first-generation, Indian) and Jo (second-generation, Bhutanese) described how “historical grudges” or subtle biases could appear in offhand comments or social divisions, illustrating the latent persistence of homeland hostilities. Events such as protests or political rallies, particularly around the Khalistan referendum or the farmers’ protest, often served as flashpoints that momentarily reactivated dormant divides, especially among youth exposed to both homeland and Canadian media coverage (RCI, 2024). In the previous section, I described how V1’s father saw the rising protests against Tamils in the early 2000s and thought it was important to teach his children about the history of genocide by making them view videos of the conflict. Here we see two patterns emerge: first, during periods of heightened tensions, elders (both within and outside of Canada) are seen recalling their own experiences of such tensions within the homeland. This can be seen not only as a coping mechanism (for a generation that witnessed these traumatic events firsthand), but also as a teaching moment for their children as they teach them strategies of coexistence (something they also had to do in the homeland). In this way, family stories and memories served as important resources when manifestations of such conflicts entered the diasporic space. This was the case for participants across all three immigrant generations (first, 1.5 and second-generation immigrants). Such

incidents exemplify Werbner's (2004) notion of diasporic "public spheres," where homeland conflicts are reimagined and debated in transnational settings. They also support Bhabha's (1994) argument that diasporic identity is marked by ambivalence, a constant negotiation between inherited loyalties and coexistence amid new contexts.

Some also noted that these issues have become more visible in recent years, citing increased student activism and online debates about the Khalistan movement. As W1 (1.5-generation Afghan Indian) describes, "Yeah, I think growing up there wasn't as much, now there's a little bit with international students coming in, I think there's a little bit more [pauses] I don't know the right term for it, but I'm sure you've seen like the Khalistan protest and stuff like that and you know, there's arguments and like fights that break down in public." A1 (second-generation, Indian) also describe this rise in tensions,

I would say yes, I thought that we were all very much together. But I'm finding that as things are happening, we're losing that sense of community. I don't know if it's a generational thing or religious thing or cultural, but I would definitely have to say that the level of community that maybe our parents had when they came here is not the level of community people our age are going to adopt in the same way. Let's say those who are pro- Khalistani, those who are against might be from the same religion. But are at clash with each other because of this difference in opinion or issues with Punjabi Hindus, Punjabi Sikhs, or issues between the older population of Punjabi Sikhs and the younger population of Punjabi Sikhs. So I feel like there that sense of community that may have existed before does not exist now.

In this way, participant discussions describe another pattern. According to the findings, first-generation immigrants are more attached to homeland issues than second or third-generation immigrants. Moreover, participants' discussions described how first-generation immigrants who have arrived in recent years (over the last five years) are more outward in their support for homeland issues compared to earlier first-generation cohorts who arrived a decade or more ago. This pattern aligns with scholarship showing that migrants who arrive during periods of heightened

political crisis or digital connectivity are often more actively engaged in transnational advocacy, while earlier cohorts may become less publicly expressive over time (Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Sökefeld, 2006). Thus, in addition to generational differences, these findings reflect cohort effects shaped by timing, political context, and modes of transnational connection.

Some even suggest that the tensions that are seen here are no longer being seen in the homeland itself. According to W1 (1.5-generation, Afghan Indian), “Again, I’m not too into politics. I don’t know how much it’s happening in India. But from conversations that I have with people and maybe they’re one sided and because I mostly talk to people that are the same background as me. I hear that it’s not so much in India. It happens more so here.” RS (first-generation, Indian) expresses a similar sentiment, “I think like in India, I think people are like living together happily, but the people here, I don’t know why like they’re acting like that, I think. We’re all like Indian. We live in India like we should like get along but I don’t know why they’re trying to like start like issues or problems.” This suggests a disconnect between events taking place in the home and host-land. Here, the media plays an important role in depicting what is occurring on the ground, where sensationalized versions can work to deepen conflict when the ground reality may be different. As J1 explains, “Maybe, but like even on the news and stuff, like, there’s like, a lot of negativity. And especially like culture-wise, like. I’m sorry, religion-wise in India. The divides are just becoming like bigger and bigger I feel.” In contrast, relying on sources like international media may produce less emotionally charged responses to what’s going on in the homeland as they may present a neutral perspective to the issues.

6.3.2 Not All Feel the Divide

While many participants had at least some idea of the geopolitical conflicts that impacted their origin countries, most dismissed the significance of these conflicts within everyday life in Canada. They emphasized coexistence, shared struggle, and motivations to move beyond inherited hostilities.

Even among first-generation participants who were seen as the most connected to homeland issues, many described the diaspora as a place where mutual respect and restraint were crucial. I2 (first-generation, Indian) reflected, “people learnt to adjust, compromise, and adapt. By living together, growing together, whatever impact, it stays in the country itself. So people try to avoid that and stay together and create a unity over here.” Thus, coexistence with “historical enemies” helps them to expand their group boundaries to see greater similarities rather than differences. L2 (first-generation, Nepali) emphasized that challenges associated with language barriers, employment insecurity, and navigating immigration systems created solidarity that outweighed political differences from the homeland, “Like everybody is from a different country. This is [a] second country to them, they are in that immigration phase, they're studying, they're working, so everybody's experiencing the same thing so yeah they get along.” Moreover, participants like T7 and Sabera (both first-generation, Bangladeshi) emphasized that overlapping cultural practices, such as shared food, festivals, or social spaces, helped bridge perceived divisions. This demonstrates what Chilvers and Walton-Roberts (2014) suggest that diasporic identities are produced through common struggles within host societies and in connection to symbolic or material ties with homelands. In this way, shared experiences and similarities in cultural practices produce new bases for unity that transcend inherited divides, resulting in the development of a shared panethnic identity (Okamoto and Mora, 2014).

Among second and third-generation participants, homeland conflicts were often seen as moments of history rather than active concerns. K1 (second generation, Indian) noted, “Without direct memory of Partition, it’s hard to feel connected to the hatred.” Although participants were aware of the tensions and their historical roots, they mainly used this knowledge to shape their strategies of coexistence. From an ethnic boundary-work perspective, this awareness shaped how participants managed, softened, or temporarily suspended ethnic and national boundaries in everyday interactions. For these participants, being South Asian was less about reproducing nationalist allegiances and more about developing hybrid forms of belonging situated in Canada’s racialized multicultural landscape.

This reframing was not just about coexistence but about ethical responsibility. Participants expressed discomfort with reproducing divisive narratives, emphasizing the importance of “not bringing those problems here.” Such practices reflect deliberate acts of boundary management, where neutrality, restraint, and selective disengagement function as moral strategies for regulating difference. In this way, diasporic life allows old divisions to be reinterpreted as lessons in coexistence rather than sources of renewed hostility. Consequently, South Asian diasporic identity must be understood within this current context, where there is a connection to the homeland and its issues, but the impacts of these tensions must be managed amid the more immediate concerns of survival and success in a foreign country where they are continuously seen as outsiders. It is through this everyday boundary work, rather than the erasure of difference, that collective awareness and recognition emerge, allowing members of the diaspora to move beyond inherited divisions and articulate shared struggles. This collective awareness, recognition, and ability to move beyond these divisions to see shared struggles characterize panethnic solidarity.

Overall, participants' reflections reveal that family histories and generational stories serve as important reference points through which participants came to understand their positionality amid historical and current geopolitical tensions. Yet, across most accounts, participants attempted to reduce the significance of these conflicts within their everyday lives. Instead, they emphasized shared similarities with their fellow subgroups in terms of cultural practices, and also shared struggles as members of a racialized minority in Canada. These reflections show that homeland divisions persist within diasporic consciousness, but their potential impacts on intergroup relations are part of dynamic processes that not only depend on how these events take place in the homeland but also in Canada. The following section will highlight this dynamic process in greater detail, paying particular attention to how homeland tensions manifest within the Canadian context.

6.4 Frictions and Fault Lines: Contemporary Sites of Diasporic Tension

The previous section highlighted how most South Asians participants in the study were aware of the historical tensions associated with their homeland, and yet they suggested that these tensions have limited impacts on their everyday life. Building on the previous section's discussion of perceptions, this section examines the manifestations of geopolitical tensions between different South Asian national or ethnic groups and within specific communities.

Partition Legacies and Indo-Pakistani Divides

Rooted in the trauma of Partition and reinforced by decades of geopolitical hostility (including multiple wars, ongoing disputes over Kashmir, and nationalistic rhetoric), the dynamics between Indians and Pakistanis were interesting to examine. This is partly because while many participants from these two countries did not mention any outward animosity towards members from either

India or Pakistan, these tensions were visible to other subgroups who are not directly involved in the conflict and observed it from a distance.

Z27 (first-generation, Bangladeshi) described, “I don’t know, but yeah, basically I do see that, not always...but I do see that there is a tension within India and Pakistan. I think personally Bangladeshis, they do not really have any problem with anyone specific.” This highlights how national rivalries can create visible divides that shape broader community dynamics, even among those not directly involved in the conflict. Awareness of such conflicts can impact interactions with members of these two communities, as even seemingly neutral members (Bangladeshis in this case) must navigate their positionality carefully. A19 (first-generation, Bangladeshi) reflected “ I’ve seen Indian people talking badly about Pakistani people, I’ve seen Pakistani people also speak[ing] badly about Indian people. So like, yeah, I noticed it....but like we [Bangladeshis] are the Switzerland of the subcontinent, like we don't really have beef with anyone, we like both Pakistani and Indians.” Here, A19 describes how when he witnesses tensions between Pakistanis and Indians in everyday contexts, he is careful to maintain boundaries that place himself outside of these tensions and which allow him to assume neutrality and not pick “sides”.

Amongst Indians and Pakistanis, these divisions are visible in both subtle behaviour and social distancing. As B1 (second-generation, Indian) shared,

In my high school like all the Indian people were separated from all the people from Pakistan like they didn't really interact with each other super closely, and that didn't have to do with religion, like if you were from India and you were Muslim, you were still in the Indian group...and then like even like in places where I've worked before, people who are like Pakistani will be like, oh you're Indian. Like, we should be friends because we're like the India and Pakistan like agreement contract, I forgot what it's called. So like, there's definitely, yeah, like awareness of the tensions.

This kind of ethnic self-segregation, even among youth in multicultural settings, reflects the persistent salience of imagined national boundaries within diasporic communities. Boundary-making in this sense is seen as a strategy for co-existence as it limits interactions between historically divided groups.

Khalistan Referendum: Unity or Division?

The Khalistan referendum (which calls for a separate Sikh state within India) emerged as one of the most polarizing issues within the Indian diaspora, illustrating how, despite intentions to move past historical conflicts in the diasporic space, intra-group politics can fracture communities along generational, ideological, and religious lines (Masson, 1989; CBC, 2023). Support and opposition often aligned with religious affiliation: Sikh participants were generally more sympathetic to the referendum, framing it as a matter of recognition and historical justice, whereas Hindu participants tended to view it as divisive or detrimental to India's unity.

Moreover, while generational and ideological lines were evident, support did not fall neatly along ethnic lines. Instead, generational trends were seen with some first-generation participants echoing pro-referendum sentiments grounded in human rights discourse, while others distanced themselves from what they saw as an outdated or divisive issue. As Respondent A1 (first-generation, Indian) pointed out, "The older generations are more focused on maintaining unity, while younger new immigrants are more radical in their view of Khalistan." Looking at how this impacted relations with friends and other peers, B1 (second-generation, Indian) remarked,

I think there are tensions and sometimes people are a little bit more direct, like for example [during] a recent election, my friend asked me whether or not I voted NDP and I just didn't answer the question. Because I didn't want my answer to change the way that she viewed me...at the time I think like Jagmeet Singh which is the leader for that team and was a little bit more vocal about his support for Punjab [and] I definitely know just from like the subtle

conversations that I've had with my friends that they're definitely in support of the separation between Punjab and India. So like because I don't engage in those conversations [about the referendum], I think her like asking me directly like did you vote NDP was kind of giving her a way to see what team I was on and so I didn't answer the question, but I like tiptoed around it basically when she asked and didn't acknowledge the question.

Such accounts reveal how larger geopolitical tensions make their way into the everyday lives of diasporic members and how they must navigate such interactions with other members of the community.

At the other end of the spectrum, protest-related violence demonstrated how deeply divisive this issue has become. Respondent W1 (1.5-generation Afghan) described altercations seen between Sikhs and Hindus in Malton during Diwali: “We saw people fighting in the streets, it was terrible. It’s like politics is tearing apart our community.” This has created a fragmented atmosphere, where these conflicts have crossed digital and intimate spaces and have made their appearance in the public.

Religious spaces became one of the prominent sites of contestation. RS (1.5-generation, Indian) described how certain Gurudwaras (Sikh temples) have established restrictions based on political affiliations, with some refusing entry to people based on their support or opposition to Khalistan. “It’s crazy, you’d think a Gurudwara would be a place of peace, but now it’s become a political battleground,” RS said. I1 (first-generation, Indian) describes how some prefer not to attend these religious institutions if they don’t align with their political views, “There was like a friend of mine that's said [pauses] like we all were going to the gurudwara to eat some good food. At that time he saw the Khalistani flag inside the gurudwara, and thought maybe they were a part of it [affiliated with Khalistan supporters]. So he said maybe I will not come here again. I'm only here this time”. These developments echo Oh’s (2016) point that diasporic identity is not only mediated through ethnic media but also shaped in sites of community production, like religious

institutions. When religious sites become politicized, they are no longer unifying spaces and instead serve as areas where competing visions of diasporic belonging are enacted and contested. Thus, events such as the Khalistan movement have exposed deep divisions within the Indian diaspora, fracturing community cohesion along political and generational lines. As tensions spill into religious and social spaces, they become sites of conflict, revealing how diasporic politics can extend divisions from the homeland.

Sri Lankan?: Tamils vs Sinhalese

Tensions between Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese people also emerged in discussions with members of the diaspora. These divisions are rooted in colonial legacies and the violence of Sri Lanka's civil war, which continue to shape diasporic memory. V1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) highlighted how state violence and exclusion created deep wounds that persist in the diaspora: "The government's policies systematically pushed us to the edge, it's a deep wound that hasn't healed." This marginalization has contributed to a deep sense of historical injustice that many Tamils carry with them into the diaspora. Participants also described the emotional toll of such conflicts. V2 (second generation, Sri Lankan) explained that online spaces can trigger trauma, "Sometimes if an instance if something happens in Sri Lanka, I'll notice like Sinhalese kids and Tamil kids will start fighting. I'm not really present on social media so I won't really engage in the fighting. But I'll just read it and it makes me really mad, so I'll have to close it because it's bad for my mental health. I can't read this stuff." As section 7.2.3 will highlight, online spaces are a particularly salient platform for ethnic divides to take place and require its own set of strategies to mitigate the stress associated with such tensions.

Discussing the position of Sri Lankan Muslims within the Tamil and Sinhalese conflict, F1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) states, “Muslims are often ignored in Sri Lanka. They're not really considered in policy discussions or, you know, like there's a conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamil and that's it, that's all that people focus on. Just the Sinhalese and Tamils, but nobody really considers the little guys that are collateral damage in the middle. This reaffirms the importance of considering minority experiences. In particular, whether geopolitical tensions also exist for smaller ethnic and religious minorities and if so, in what ways?

Other Tensions

Tension within the Bhutanese community provides insight into how conflict and intragroup divisions affect smaller subgroups. Considering Bhutan's history and the country's emphasis on maintaining Buddhism as the dominant religion, hearing about the experiences of religious minorities was an important way to gain insight into intergroup tensions within this community. Charles (first-generation, Bhutanese) described how he was originally Buddhist and his family converted to Christianity after coming to Canada and describes how other Bhutanese people may perceive of him and his religious background “As a Buddhist in Bhutan when you see a person just like you, who's a Christian. There's a way that they perceive Christians, that means horror to them.”, due to these religious differences he believes it would be difficult to connect with other Bhutanese people. He adds, “Maybe because of my difference in religion and my difference in culture [Canadian culture]. Maybe they've kept that Bhutanese culture, So as I said, I don't interact with them so much, maybe a few.” From an ethnic boundary-work perspective, religious conversion functions as a symbolic marker of difference that shapes social interaction, even in the absence of direct conflict. Anticipating negative perceptions associated with Christianity, Charles limits his engagement with other Bhutanese community members, demonstrating how boundaries

are maintained through selective interaction and withdrawal. J10 (1.5-generation, Bhutanese) describes the other side of the dynamic as a Buddhist interacting with Christians,

We usually meet Christian people [from Bhutan]. For me I'm not a Christian, so what I'm saying is even in conversations the way we interact, you know, in arguments and stuff like that there are differences. You can find that we are, you are not, you know, we are not in good terms most of the time because, you know, they see some feels like we should follow their religion. You know you should follow their beliefs, we should do things through how they usually do things, we should copy we feel like they have better ones you know stuff like that they are superior and all. So I usually find that I actually lose friends most of the times because of this.

This demonstrates how religious differences can impact intragroup interactions among Bhutanese individuals. Thus, intragroup tensions can persist even among smaller South Asian subgroups, but discussions of these dynamics are often overshadowed by other tensions in the diaspora that take up centre stage.

Afghan participants did not suggest any particularly strong intragroup divisions within their community, as G1 (second-generation, Afghan) explained,

I'd say most of the tensions within Afghanistan are restricted to Afghanistan. A lot of people here, especially second gens, their identity of being Afghan, loses the parts that create those tensions in the first place so like specific ethnic background or specific family names, stuff like that. It's sort of gets lost within the second generation and their commonalities become a lot more visible, they're Afghan Canadians, so their commonalities, you know increase and their differences that I feel like sort of decrease as they spend more time here.

The same was also true for Maldivian and Bangladeshi participants who came from different religious backgrounds (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity) but did not reflect on any outward divisions between different subgroups from their origin country due to religious differences or otherwise.

In sum, most of the divisions that exist in the diasporic context appear to be religiously based (Tamils vs Sinhalese vs Muslims, Hindu Indians vs Muslim Pakistanis, Hindus vs Sikhs)³⁸. Notably, the conflicts that emerged from partition (both the 1947 partition and the partition of Pakistan appeared to evoke the strongest tensions between group members and appeared to be the most long-lasting). While overt conflict is rare, historical and political tensions manifest in social distancing, symbolic clashes, and institutionalized divides within communities. Applying Oh's (2016) framework shows that these tensions are continually mediated through transnational flows, such as through media coverage, religious institutions, and social networks, that reanimate the politics of the homeland in the diaspora.

At the same time, these dynamics demonstrate the limits of panethnicity as a unifying framework. Shared racialization under "South Asian" or "Brown" categories does not erase older hierarchies or nationalisms; instead, it coexists with them in a hybrid field of belonging. The persistence of these tensions demonstrates how diasporic identity is a contested, multilayered formation shaped by both connection and difference. The next section examines how South Asians in Canada manage and negotiate these divisions; through speech, silence, and everyday acts of coexistence.

³⁸ While caste is an important dimension within South Asian communities, it did not emerge as a consistent factor shaping participants' accounts of intergroup tensions in this study. This may be partly due to the composition of the sample, which consisted primarily of 1.5 and second generation participants between the ages of 20–40, many of whom were Canadian citizens, whose social locations and experiences may have shaped the salience of particular identity markers in their narratives. As such, caste was not seen as a central dimension in the analysis presented here.

6.5 Speaking, Silence and Managing Difference: Everyday Strategies of Diasporic Cohabitation

While Section 6.4 explored how homeland divisions manifest within the Canadian South Asian diaspora, this section examines how individuals navigate and manage these divisions in their everyday lives. Participants' responses revealed that engagement with political and historical divides is not uniform; rather, they are contextual, strategic, and relational. Through open dialogue, intentional silence, or selective detachment, participants balanced their own emotional well-being with a desire to sustain social harmony and belonging. Drawing on Hall's (1996) and Cornell & Hartmann's (2006) insights about the situational and negotiated nature of identification and theories of ethnic boundary work, this section identifies three overlapping strategies through which participants managed difference:

- (1) navigating belonging through speech and silence,
- (2) practicing ethical detachment from homeland politics
- (3) selectively expressing tensions in bounded spaces.

Using the lens of ethnic boundary work, these practices illustrate how diasporic subjects actively regulate the significance of ethnic, national, and religious boundaries in everyday life. Rather than resolving differences, participants managed co-existence by selectively activating, softening, or containing boundaries depending on context, audience, and perceived risk. Through this, practices such as speech, silence, and selective engagement function as forms of boundary management allowing coexistence in light of differences.

6.5.1 Navigating Belonging Through Speech and Silence: Diasporic Youth and the Politics of Engagement

Participants navigated geopolitical tensions in complex and varied ways, shaped by their relationships, positionality, and personal comfort levels. For some, open dialogue about homeland politics was an integral aspect of diasporic belonging. For others, silence or strategic avoidance were deliberate strategies for preserving relationships and emotional well-being.

For many participants, political engagement was an active and meaningful expression of diasporic identity. They described how conversations about Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, or Afghan politics were opportunities for learning, self-reflection, and cross-cultural understanding. A5 (1.5-generation, Indian) explained, “I’m open to hearing opinions. I’m open to having my mind changed.” T7 (first-generation, Bangladeshi) described political openness as a marker of maturity: “We can discuss all political, any topics whatsoever under the sun... even if it’s slightly controversial, we can be flexible.” Similarly, E9 (first-generation, Nepali) emphasized that mutual openness among friends enabled candid discussion: “Yes, because my friends are open so we don’t have any problems to like [*sic*] talk about any kind of subject”.

For these participants, engagement in political dialogue was not only a personal preference but a political act, a way to challenge dominant narratives and bring South Asian contexts into everyday discourse. For example, Sabera (first-generation, Bangladeshi), described her efforts to introduce Bangladeshi politics into everyday conversations, hoping to unsettle Western-centric perspectives, “I try to bring Bangladesh into a lot of the conversations like which wasn’t the case when I was in Bangladesh. I wasn’t super into the local politics, but now I make an effort to bring that into the conversation.” While J1 (second-generation, Indian) described a deliberate etiquette of respect when approaching controversial issues: “Obviously I’m not disrespectful... Like with politics and everything like that, everybody has an opinion, right? So I like to preface the conversation—if you find this uncomfortable, let me know.” These accounts illustrate Hall’s

(1996) notion of identification as a process of articulation, where dialogue itself becomes a means of constructing diasporic political subjectivity. Participants insert themselves within these political topics by engaging in these conversations and claiming a stance. These decisions reflect deliberate acts of boundary calibration, where participants assessed when ethnic and national boundaries could be safely expressed and when they needed to be restrained. Speech, in this sense, becomes a boundary-activating practice. Through this, diasporic identity is actively reshaped through critical engagement, establishing a connection to South Asia and its issues, while still grounded in the Canadian multicultural context.

However, this openness was not universal. Rather, it was rare among participants. For many, political conversations, especially those on contested histories or current conflicts, brought up discomfort and posed perceived risks to social harmony. Due to this, many participants described political avoidance as a protective strategy in social and professional life. U1 (1.5-generation, Afghan) noted that while discussing Afghan politics with family felt natural, conversations with non-Afghan friends were often marked by misunderstanding: "Friends normally see Afghanistan as a war zone... So it's always easier with family that understands." Ray (first-generation, Indian) states he deliberately avoided discussing the topic of Khalistan with Punjabi colleagues:

So like there are a couple of Punjabis at my work but I don't discuss the topic of Khalistan with them. I don't really care of what their opinions [are] and I'm not really ready to have the conversation with them because I'm not learned [well-informed] about the conversation. Even to counterpoint them or even agree with them, that will just sound fake. So that's the reason I haven't had the conversation with them per se, but I feel like people have different opinions like at the end of the day I want to protect my country to the best of my ability... but for me to have a discussion or debate with somebody properly I'll have to know like the depths of it."

Here Ray avoids conversations about Khalistan for two main reasons, firstly because he does not know the nuances associated with the topic and does not want to make an ill-informed statement, but also secondly, his patriotism towards his country encourages him to best represent his country in a discussion about this issue, which he could not do at the time because he was not well-versed on the topic. Thus, we see that silence or avoidance of topics can also be a strategic move to manage conversations while also maintaining one's stance towards a particular issue.

For some, strategies of silence arose from fears of hurting others or jeopardizing relationships. B1 (second-generation, Indian) described intentionally steering clear of India-Punjab politics with Punjabi friends: "I don't talk about, kinda like the tensions between India and Punjab with my Punjabi friends or any of my friends really, because I don't want politics to be like a reason why I'm no longer friends with somebody, especially because like politics are so much bigger than just like ourselves." Similarly, RS (1.5-generation, Indian) mentioned the topic of the Khalistan referendum came up with her Sikh friend, but at the time she recalled advice from family who encouraged her not to speak about such issues, "My mom said not to talk about it....I think people just like they would start talking about politics and then if they don't agree with something they'll fight with you or something like that". From an ethnic boundary-work perspective, silence here operates as a mechanism for managing difference rather than avoiding it. By choosing not to voice political or national positions, participants limited the visibility of ethnic and national boundaries in shared spaces, allowing interactions to continue without activating conflict.

X1 (second-generation, Pakistan) provides another perspective behind why people may prefer to stay silent, "I feel like people don't wanna like get on the wrong side of the law. Some of those conversations might be like escalated and they don't want to break the law or something. Most of them are still struggling so they don't really have the strength to engage in the law." While

Canada is a country recognized for its freedom of expression, there is a hesitancy around expressing one's thoughts due to fears of getting in trouble with the law in a country where they are often seen as outsiders. This reveals a classed dynamic as well, where there are risks associated with engaging in geopolitical tensions, especially when they turn violent. Constructed as "outsiders" in this country, many do not feel they have the sense of protection they need in order to engage in these conflicts with immunity. They fear the repercussions such as imprisonment, loss of job, and the societal stigma that comes along with this. Due to this, the risks associated with engaging in intragroup tensions, particularly when it could turn violent, outweigh the potential benefits, especially when many feel their actions have little impact on the home country.

Overall, these accounts demonstrate that speech and silence function as strategic practices of co-existence. Through both expression and restraint, participants navigate competing demands of respectability and belonging in a multicultural yet politically charged environment.

6.5.2 Distant Roots and Ethical Detachment

The second method of negotiation exhibited by participants was that of ethical detachment, where participants limit political engagement due to generational distance, diasporic disconnection, or emotional fatigue. For some, detachment stemmed from questions of legitimacy; who has the right to speak about homeland politics? As B21 (first-generation, Indian) explained, "Unless you're from the roots... you won't really have a proper foot to stand on." Ethical detachment can be understood as a form of ethnic boundary work through which participants actively redrew the boundaries of diasporic responsibility. Rather than rejecting ethnic or national identities, participants redefined the scope of what those identities demanded of them, separating cultural affiliation and ancestral connection from ongoing political obligations.

C1 (1.5-generation, Indian) described filtering relevance through geography, with events that are occurring in distant spaces as less relevant, “Even though I identify as Punjabi, I don’t see [news from Punjab] as impacting me... I still see that as a geographical thing.” Through this process, participants rescaled ethnic and national boundaries, relocating their primary site of moral and political accountability from the homeland to the Canadian context, allowing participants to remain South Asian while refusing the expectation of continuous geopolitical engagement. This was seen amongst participants across subgroups (regardless of size) as Sparrow (second generation Bhutanese) suggested, “I’m usually open to it, [but] since it’s distant and it doesn’t concern us even if there is some controversy we don’t fight with each other about it, we are open minded.” Thus, even though there are differences in access to political information across different subgroups, participants across all groups expressed the sense that issues of the homeland would have little impact on their lives here in Canada and their influence on these issues was limited due to geographical distance.

Avoidance also functioned as a form of emotional and moral boundary-setting. A1 (second-generation, Indian) described how discovering subtle religious bias changed her perception of a friend: “I find it very odd that I let certain things go... If I find out someone’s an extremist... I tend to keep my distance because I just find that unacceptable.” Here, distance operates not as disengagement but as a moral stance and a refusal to reproduce hostility. Others described intentional practices to stay away from such topics due to the emotional stress it produces. For example, SR2 (first-generation, Nepali) states, “I don’t keep up with like Nepali politics because it’s so messy and just infuriates me further. And makes me so hopeless. When I see my country and how bad the state has gotten like all the fraudulent politics that’s going on there, it just makes

me mad.” Here, silence and avoidance operate as a moral stance and a refusal to reproduce hostility.

Detachment, however, was not universal. Some framed political engagement as a moral or ancestral duty, even if from a distance. M1 (second-generation, Indian) described how following events in Punjab is a way to “pay my respects to... my ancestors who fought so hard for me to have this amazing life.” U1 (1.5-generation, Afghan) echoed this statement, “That’s my roots, right? And it’s always going to be.” Such accounts illustrate Cornell & Hartmann’s (2006) notion of asserted identities, where selective engagement and symbolic participation can be an assertion of diasporic identities. As participants described above, their engagement with these issues was not because they felt it would impact their everyday personal lives, but out of concern for their familial connections in their homelands and due to patriotic, nationalist ties to their origin country.

A few expressed frustrations at what they perceived as apathy among younger generations of South Asians. SK (first-generation, Pakistani) criticized political disengagement, especially among youth,

I have a lot of generosity that I extend to like aunties and you know like uncles who you know like if they're doing their job they were doing like less than like living wages jobs, but if you have a cushy life and you know you have a car and your parents get you everything then kindly pick up a newspaper and read something so that you know like you don't have the same excuses that they do you just didn't make those choices. And that way I'm definitely a lot harder on diaspora folks.

Here, SK acknowledges the class limits associated with engaging in geopolitical issues, as I have discussed in the previous section. However, she suggests that there are generational dimensions associated with these class risks as well. While engaging with geopolitical issues may be risky for first-generation immigrants due to their immigration status (especially for those who are not permanent residents or are waiting to become permanent residents) and socioeconomic status (with

their immediate goals focused on establishing themselves in a new country), SK does not afford the same grace to second and third-generation immigrants. There have been existing studies that support claims that second and third generation immigrants are typically more financially secure than first generation immigrants (Schimmele et al., 2023), and since these immigrants also have citizenship, it eliminates risks of deportation that first generation immigrants may experience. However, we cannot assume that these risks are the same across each subgroup and generational group. Nonetheless, there may be other factors that may impact their lack of engagement with these issues. As the findings from this dissertation suggest, lack of appropriate knowledge on the topic, distance from the issue in the homeland, and lack of confidence regarding the impact of such efforts were the commonly cited reasons behind lack of engagement amongst my participants.

Overall, detachment emerges as an ethical and affective strategy. Ethical detachment highlights a reflexive and negotiated mode of identification, where individuals calibrate their sense of belonging through questions of legitimacy, distance, and emotional investment. For many, being South Asian does not require direct political engagement with the homeland but involves maintaining a moral or symbolic connection that affirms ancestry and heritage on their own terms. Thus, detachment itself becomes a form of ethnic boundary work. It reflects how diasporic subjects negotiate legitimacy (“whose voice counts”), scale (“which politics matter here”), and emotional sustainability.

6.5.3 Spaces Where Tensions Can be Expressed: Social, Religious and Online Venues

Having explored how participants spoke, stayed silent, or stepped back, this section now turns to where these negotiations occur. Participants emphasized that political expression and suppression were spatially situated; occurring in specific contexts that regulate visibility,

legitimacy, and risk. By confining political engagement to specific venues, participants limited the effects of ethnic and national divisions in spaces where ongoing relationships and coexistence were prioritized (e.g. professional and other social settings). As H1 (first-generation, Indian) describes, “I think that communities know about these tensions amongst themselves, but I don’t think they’re always visible. Yeah, I think they would only be visible like if something really extreme happened, right?” Here, H1 suggests that while these tensions do exist, they do not manifest in the everyday.

Online environments were framed as sites for witnessing and debating South Asian politics. Anonymity and detachment from public visibility enable individuals to voice contentious perspectives with fewer perceived risks. J1 (second-generation, Indian) observed “a lot of hate” online, between Hindus and Sikhs, saying, “Sometimes I just don’t understand the hate... so I just stay off social media.” V2 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) described social media as a “battleground”, “We kind of have to defend ourselves in TikTok comments.” Thus, digital spaces complicated participants’ ability to manage ethnic boundaries by collapsing distance and intensifying exposure to homeland politics. These examples show how online spaces amplify geopolitical tensions across geographical borders, while also heightening the emotional risks of engagement.

Offline, tensions were occasionally brought into public spaces through protests and community events. E1 (second-generation, Sri Lankan) recalled attending a Tamil protest in response to Sri Lanka’s independence celebration, “Had I come across any of those [Singhalese] people at that celebration, that would have definitely altered my perception of them.” Similarly, SK (first-generation, Pakistani) described deliberately compartmentalizing political activism, “There’s a place for me to teach and that’s the classroom. There’s a place for me to organize—that’s on the streets.” These accounts demonstrate how diasporic subjects learn where and when it

is safe and/or strategic to express political difference. Participants sustained coexistence by actively organizing where political differences could be expressed and where it needed to be muted. The regulation of speech across online, religious, and public domains reveals that diasporic politics are discursively, spatially and emotionally managed.

Across these three modes: dialogue, silence, and selective engagement, participants demonstrated what can be considered the ethics of diasporic co-existence. Managing difference becomes an everyday act of boundary work, where individuals balance personal beliefs, collective harmony and emotional sustainability. Drawing upon Hall (1996) and Brah (1996), these examples demonstrate how diaspora is not a space of consensus but of continuous negotiation, where hybridity and restraint are both strategies of survival.

These findings suggest that panethnicity among South Asians in Canada operates less as a shared political movement and more as a fragile, relational practice that is sustained through everyday acts of dialogue, empathy, and selective disengagement. In managing tensions through speech and silence, diasporic members enact an ethics of co-existence that redefines what it means to belong within a plural, postcolonial diaspora.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined how historical and contemporary geopolitics within South Asia and between South Asian states and Canada shape intergroup dynamics among South Asians in the Greater Toronto Area. Across the preceding sections, participants' narratives revealed that diasporic belonging is a negotiated process, one shaped by inherited memories, transnational media flows, and everyday encounters in a multicultural yet racialized society.

The findings from this chapter show that South Asian diasporic identity in Canada is continually reworked through everyday practices that manage, rather than resolve differences. Participants navigated inherited geopolitical divisions through dialogue, silence, selective engagement, and ethical detachment, balancing attachments to the homeland with the demands of coexistence in Canada. These practices did not signal the absence of ethnic or national boundaries; instead, they demonstrate how such boundaries are actively regulated in everyday life.

Generational and positional differences were central to this process. First-generation participants tended to sustain more affective and direct ties to homeland politics. In contrast, 1.5- and second-generation participants reframed homeland conflicts as historical facts rather than immediate concerns.

These dynamics reveal important implications for understanding panethnicity. Among South Asians in Canada, panethnicity functions less as a unified political project and more as a relational and contingent practice. While its origins may have come from ideological solidarity, its current relevance lies in shared experiences of racialization, immigration, and everyday negotiation within Canadian multiculturalism. As Espiritu (1992) argues, panethnicity is sustained through moments of external pressure and collective need. Yet, as this chapter shows, it is equally shaped by internal boundaries (national, religious, linguistic) that complicate solidarity. The South Asian case, therefore, extends the concept of panethnicity beyond its U.S.-based roots: rather than a fixed racial term, it operates here as a hybrid moral field where individuals alternately invoke, resist, or redefine collective belonging depending on their political affiliations and attachments to the homeland.

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that diasporic identity is not simply about where one comes from, but about how one learns to coexist with difference. Participants' narratives show that

homeland political crises do not merely introduce conflict into diasporic life; they actively reshape the boundaries of belonging by reinforcing ethnic and national distinctions while weakening panethnic ones. The persistence of intra-national tensions thus reveals the inherent instability of the South Asian category itself, particularly in moments when geopolitical histories are reactivated within diasporic spaces. South Asians in Canada articulate belonging through practices of negotiation; choosing when to align, when to withdraw, and when to speak, revealing that the politics of panethnicity are as much about managing intragroup dynamics as they are about asserting unity.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This dissertation set out to examine how people of South Asian origin in Canada understand and negotiate ethnic and panethnic identities within a context shaped by transnational political tensions, racialization, and the evolving politics of multiculturalism. Rather than treating “South Asian” identity as a stable or static category, the analysis has demonstrated that ethnic and panethnic identifications are situational, relational, and actively produced through everyday practices. Previous research has demonstrated how people draw upon different identities depending on their motivations, social environments, and sense of safety (Espiritu, 1992; Waters, 1990; Shankar and Srikanth, 1998). This dissertation extends existing literature on ethnic and panethnic identification by demonstrating how participants respond to difference or conflict; by actively managing it through strategies of coexistence that in turn shape the very boundaries of inclusion and exclusion of the ethnic and panethnic identities that they draw upon.

Thus, this dissertation argues that strategies of coexistence operate as forms of ethnic boundary work that shape how ethnic and panethnic identities become meaningful, viable, or constrained in particular contexts. Through practices such as strategic silence, ethical detachment, selective engagement, and humour, participants regulated the salience of ethnic, national, and religious differences within their everyday lives. These strategies do not eliminate boundaries; rather, they manage them in ways that make everyday coexistence possible, while simultaneously producing differentiated forms of belonging. Below, I summarize these strategies, demonstrating how they function as mechanisms through which ethnic and panethnic identities are constructed, negotiated, and limited.

7.2 Strategies of Co-existence and the Construction of Identity Boundaries

As the empirical chapters demonstrate, participants frequently engaged in strategic silence, ethical detachment, selective engagement, and humour as boundary management strategies. These practices allow individuals to acknowledge difference while avoiding confrontation, to maintain relationships without endorsing contested political positions, and to navigate sensitive topics related to religion, nationalism, or homeland conflict. Boundary work thus operates not only through exclusion, but through everyday acts of moderation, restraint, and ambiguity.

Across the interviews, participants often described everyday practices through which they managed difference and sustained social relationships across ethnic, national, and religious lines (e.g. discussing tense topics only with family and friends and avoiding online spaces and news media that could aggravate their frustration towards the situations in their homelands). Their discussions highlight how these practices are not incidental; they are deliberate strategies developed in response to the potential for conflict, discomfort, or exclusion within South Asian spaces. Altogether, these strategies illustrate how coexistence is actively produced within transnational contexts. They demonstrate that panethnic identity does not emerge simply from shared racialization or cultural proximity, but from everyday efforts to regulate difference. At the same time, they reveal the limits of panethnicity, as boundary work often reproduces hierarchies and exclusions as its members strive for belonging.

7.2.1 Strategic Silence

One of the most common strategies described by participants was strategic silence, which can be described as the deliberate avoidance of topics related to homeland politics, religious difference, or national conflict in everyday interactions. In doing so, participants do not suggest

that silence was not a sign of indifference or lack of awareness. Rather, it functioned as a practical means of preserving social cohesion in contexts where open discussion might threaten relationships or undermine a sense of collective belonging. By overlooking contentious differences, participants were able to remain within a shared multicultural space as “South Asians,” without requiring consensus or emotional alignment. In this sense, silence allowed for the maintenance of a broader identity while preventing the activation of more divisive ethnic or national boundaries. As Barth (1998) argues, ethnic boundaries persist not solely because of cultural content, but because of the ways they are maintained or muted in interaction. Strategic silence exemplifies this process by temporarily rendering certain boundaries (ethnic and religious) inactive.

However, silence was not neutral in its effects. While it enabled panethnic coexistence, it also placed uneven burdens on participants. Those whose identities were more directly implicated in geopolitical conflicts or religious marginalization often experienced dissonance between their positionality and their claims towards a particular identity (e.g. Tamils who wanted to distinguish themselves from Sri Lankans). In other words, it facilitated belonging for some while limiting the expression and recognition of others’ experiences. In managing difference through silence, participants reinforced a form of panethnic identity that was contingent upon the suppression of particular narratives.

7.2.2 Ethical Detachment

A second strategy through which participants navigated difference was of ethical detachment, characterized by a conscious distancing from homeland conflicts and nationalist attachments. Many participants framed this detachment as a moral or generational stance,

emphasizing a desire to avoid reproducing violence, hostility, or polarization within their social environments in Canada. Ethical detachment functioned as a form of boundary rescaling. Rather than denying ethnic or national affiliations, participants repositioned them as less central to their sense of self in certain contexts. This allowed individuals to participate in panethnic spaces without being drawn into transnational disputes that they perceived as emotionally draining or ethically problematic. In Brubaker's (2002) terms, groupness allowed identities to remain situational and variable (which were activated or muted depending on context and perceived stakes).

At the same time, ethical detachment revealed tensions between personal identity and collective responsibility. For some participants, disengagement from homeland politics was experienced as a source of ambivalence, particularly when conflicts affected family members or communities abroad. Ethical detachment thus enabled panethnic coexistence while also exposing the emotional labour involved in sustaining it.

7.2.3 Selective Engagement

While silence and detachment emphasized restraint, participants also described moments of selective engagement, in which ethnic or panethnic identities were actively foregrounded depending on social context. Identity was strategically activated in spaces where it was perceived as safe, meaningful, or advantageous (e.g. political protests, online spaces). Selective engagement highlights the situational nature of ethnic boundary work. Participants described shifting identifications across family settings, workplaces, community events, and digital spaces. In some contexts, emphasizing ethnic identity allowed for recognition and cultural continuity. In others, invoking a panethnic South Asian identity offered protection or solidarity in the face of racialization. As Wimmer (2008) argues, boundaries are not fixed lines but dynamic processes

shaped by power and opportunity. This strategy highlights the co-existence of ethnic and panethnic identities. Participants did not move linearly from one identity to another; instead, they navigated a repertoire of identifications, deploying them selectively. In doing so, they actively adapted around boundaries that made particular identities salient (e.g. ethnic identities more significant within family or friend settings, South Asian identity in bureaucratic, institutional settings).

7.2.4 Humour

A fourth strategy evident in participants' narratives was the use of humour to manage difference. This was particularly seen in the evocation of Brown and Desi identities. Jokes, irony, and deliberately vague language allowed participants to acknowledge tensions without directly confronting them. Humour functioned as a "boundary-softening" mechanism, reducing the emotional intensity of difference while preserving social ties. However, humour has its limits. This strategy is less effective in moments of heightened conflict or when differences become publicly salient. In such moments, boundaries hardened, and the capacity to maintain coexistence through humour is diminished. This demonstrates how boundary work is context-dependent and fragile, shaped by broader political and social conditions.

Overall, these strategies of coexistence demonstrate that ethnic and panethnic identities are actively produced through boundary work by South Asian Canadians. Strategic silence, ethical detachment, selective engagement, and humour do not resolve differences; they work to regulate it. Through these practices, participants create conditions under which panethnic belonging becomes possible, while simultaneously reproducing distinctions and exclusions that shape the limits of that belonging.

7.3 Inclusion, Exclusion, and the Limits of Panethnicity

In this dissertation, panethnicity is approached as an outcome of ongoing negotiation rather than as a pre-existing or unified identity. Participants' narratives illustrate that "South Asian" is often used strategically; in response to visibility and shared commonalities, while also being viewed as insufficient or inadequate for capturing internal diversity and political difference. The findings suggest salience of panethnic identification varies across generations, subgroup size, migration histories, and levels of engagement with homeland politics.

While strategies of coexistence enable panethnic identification in many everyday contexts, access to "South Asian" identity is not evenly distributed. Boundary work allows for panethnic belonging, but this is hierarchical, shaped by power relations among different national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups within the broader South Asian category. As a result, panethnicity does not function as an open or neutral space of inclusion, but as a differentiated field in which some subgroups are more recognized and accommodated than others.

Participants' narratives revealed that dominant national groups (such as Indians with greater demographic presence, cultural visibility, or institutional recognition in Canada) were more easily absorbed into panethnic South Asian spaces. In contrast, individuals from smaller or less visible South Asian communities, such as those from Bhutan, the Maldives, or Afghanistan, often described feeling peripheral to dominant representations of South Asian-ness. Their experiences highlight how panethnic identity is produced through boundary work that privileges certain histories, languages, and cultural references while marginalizing others.

Drawing on Wimmer's (2008) analysis of boundary making and power, these dynamics can be understood as processes of boundary closure within panethnicity itself. Although panethnic identity is often framed as inclusive, its boundaries are actively maintained through everyday practices that define who counts as recognizably South Asian. These practices include assumptions about language proficiency, religion, food, or geographical location, which function as symbolic markers of belonging. Those who do not easily align with these markers may find their claims to panethnicity questioned or their experiences rendered invisible.

Importantly, exclusion in this context does not necessarily take the form of overt rejection. Rather, it often occurs through subtle forms of erasure, misrecognition, or conditional inclusion. Participants from smaller communities described being subsumed under dominant national narratives or being expected to explain or justify their inclusion within South Asian spaces in conversations particularly with those outside of the diaspora. In interactions with those within the diaspora, it led to feelings of distinction and exclusion and in some cases ignorance which was seen to further draw ethnic divides. Such experiences illustrate how boundary work operates not only to include but also to rank and differentiate identities within a panethnic framework.

At the same time, strategies of coexistence sometimes masked these inequalities. As mentioned above, practices such as strategic silence or humour could sustain surface-level harmony while leaving underlying hierarchies unchallenged. In this sense, coexistence did not eliminate power asymmetries; it often depended on them as those with less symbolic or demographic power were more likely to adapt their self-presentation, remain silent, or engage ambiguously in order to remain legitimate within panethnic spaces. These findings highlight how boundary work involves negotiation under unequal conditions.

This uneven access to panethnicity complicates celebratory accounts of panethnic solidarity. While shared experiences of racialization can create the possibility for collective identification, they do not erase internal differences or hierarchies. As Barth (1969) reminds us, boundaries are maintained through interaction. The persistence of panethnic identity depends on whose identities set the terms of inclusion.

This is not to erase the potential advantages of panethnic identities. For those with complex family histories of migration, and/or who have been impacted by the legacies of Partition, a shared South Asian identity helps to stake a claim towards a homeland that has been segmented and divided in the post-colonial context. Existing scholarship has primarily conceptualized panethnic identification as emerging from shared experiences of marginalization in the host society. The findings from this study suggest panethnic identification can also function as a decolonial, diasporic identity focused upon historical continuity and regional re-connection, rather than solely as a response to marginalization and shared solidarity in the host country. Thus, the combination of 1) South Asia's distinct political history marked by partition, 2) shared experiences of racialization and cultural similarity, and 3) the institutionalization of South Asian identity by the state, allows this identity to be readily taken up by those it represents. It is not just an identity that is taken up in solidarity towards experiences of racialization and discrimination in the host state, but rather an identity they become *aware of* through its institutionalization by the state, *understood* through shared experiences and cultures, and *connected* due to its breadth, which subsumes many of the colonially constructed geographical divisions that marked this region. This suggests that "South Asian" becomes meaningful because it fills a representational gap when other identity categories are either unavailable, unstable, contested, or insufficient for making sense of one's position within a racialized social space.

7.4 Implications for Multiculturalism, Racialization, and Belonging in Canada

The findings of this study have important implications for understanding multiculturalism, racialization, and belonging in the Canadian context. While multiculturalism is often framed as a framework that recognizes and accommodates diversity, participants' narratives suggest that everyday experiences of belonging are shaped less by formal recognition and more by the informal boundary work through which difference is negotiated.

Participants' use of ethnic and panethnic identities must be understood against the backdrop of racialization in Canada. South Asian identity operates as a racialized category that is externally imposed and differentially experienced. Shared experiences of racialization (such as being read as "Brown," "Asian," or non-Canadian) often provided the conditions under which panethnic identification became meaningful. In these moments, panethnicity functioned as a resource for navigating exclusion and asserting collective belonging. However, this form of unity was contingent and situational, activated primarily in contexts where racial boundaries were explicit.

At the same time, this study demonstrates that racialization does not flatten internal differences. Rather, it coexists with and sometimes intensifies ethnic, national, and religious distinctions within the South Asian category. By treating groups as internally coherent and culturally bounded, multicultural discourse often conceals these internal dynamics. Participants' strategies of coexistence can also be read as compensatory practices (ways of managing diversity that multicultural policy acknowledges only superficially). In this way, the responsibility for sustaining harmony is shifted onto individuals, who must navigate differences without institutional support or recognition of internal hierarchies.

7.5 Identity, Boundary Work and a Shifting Moment

The strategies of coexistence examined in this dissertation must be situated within the contemporary moment in which South Asian Canadians are negotiating identity. Processes of ethnic and panethnic boundary work are unfolding amid intensifying global nationalism, digitally mediated conflict, and changing migration regimes. These conditions have heightened the visibility of transnational tensions while simultaneously expanding the arenas in which identity is performed and contested.

Digital media play a particularly significant role in reshaping boundary work. Online spaces amplify homeland politics, circulate nationalist narratives, and collapse geographic distance, making it more difficult to contain conflict within discrete contexts. Participants described how digital platforms increased exposure to transnational disputes, even when they sought to disengage from them in their offline interactions. In this environment, strategies such as strategic silence and humour become more fragile, as boundaries that are muted in face-to-face encounters are often reactivated online.

At the same time, the current political climate has intensified racialization in ways that can both constrain and enable panethnic identification. Shifting migration patterns further complicate these dynamics. The growing presence of international students, temporary workers, and other forms of precarious migration has altered the social composition of South Asian communities in Canada. Rising anti-immigrant sentiment and the resurgence of ethno-nationalist discourses have sharpened racial boundaries, increasing the salience of shared racialized experiences among South Asian Canadians. In such contexts, panethnic identity may emerge as a resource for solidarity and

mutual recognition. However, as this study demonstrates, such solidarity remains contingent, shaped by internal hierarchies and uneven access to panethnicity.

These dynamics suggest that the boundary-making practices documented in this dissertation are not static, but are likely to evolve as political, technological, and social conditions continue to shift. While some South Asian Canadians may increasingly avoid national or panethnic categories in order to manage conflict and fatigue, others may be drawn toward new forms of discursive and material solidarity in response to shared racialization, political mobilization, or collective vulnerability. The coexistence of these divergent strategies strengthens the central argument of this study: that identity among South Asian Canadians is shaped by changing contexts rather than fixed affiliations. In this sense, the findings in this dissertation offer a baseline for understanding how processes of avoidance, negotiation, and solidarity may be reconfigured in the present moment and beyond.

7.6 Contributions and Final Reflections

A key contribution of this dissertation lies in its attention to subgroup differences within the South Asian diaspora, which was made possible by the deliberate inclusion of participants from less-researched communities such as Bhutanese, Nepali, Maldivian, and Afghan backgrounds. Incorporating these perspectives revealed how subgroup size and institutional visibility shape access to diasporic resources, transnational information flows, and panethnic identification itself. Participants from smaller or less established communities often relied more heavily on broad panethnic categories such as “South Asian” for recognition and legibility within Canadian multicultural contexts, while simultaneously experiencing limited representation within dominant South Asian spaces. These participants also reported weaker or more fragmented access to ethnic

media, community organizations, and homeland political discourse, which shaped their more distant or selective forms of transnational engagement. In contrast, participants from larger and more established subgroups demonstrated greater access to diasporic infrastructures and more sustained engagement with homeland politics, alongside a greater capacity to resist or critique panethnic labels they perceived as flattening or misrepresentative. By highlighting these contrasts, this study demonstrates that South Asian panethnicity is not experienced uniformly, but is structured by unequal subgroup visibility, resources, and historical incorporation into the diaspora. Such dynamics have remained largely overlooked in scholarship focused primarily on dominant South Asian groups.

Conceptually, the dissertation advances an understanding of ethnic and panethnic identities as outcomes of ethnic boundary work. Through the analysis of strategies of coexistence (strategic silence, ethical detachment, selective engagement, and humour), this study demonstrates how boundaries are managed, enabling coexistence while simultaneously shaping inclusion and exclusion. This approach extends scholarship on panethnicity by showing how unity is sustained through practice, not presumed through shared origins or experiences alone.

Finally, this study offers insights into generational variations in ethnic and panethnic identification and intergroup dynamics within the South Asian diaspora. While South Asian identity emerged as a category that participants across generations came to recognize (either through migration or through growing up in Canada), clear generational differences shaped how this identity was interpreted and mobilized. First-generation participants more consistently relied upon ethnic or national identities and maintained stronger affective and informational ties to homeland politics, often viewing panethnic labels as secondary or externally imposed. In contrast, 1.5- and second-generation participants more readily adopted panethnic identifiers such as *South*

Asian, Desi and *Brown*, using them to articulate shared racialization, cultural familiarity, and generational belonging within Canadian contexts. These generational distinctions also structured patterns of transnational engagement, with first-generation participants demonstrating more sustained involvement with homeland issues, while later-generation participants more often expressed selective engagement or ethical detachment. By highlighting these differences, this dissertation shows how generational differences not only shape identity labels but also the ways South Asians navigate belonging, distance, and intergroup relations in the diaspora.

7.7 Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

While this dissertation provides important insights into the lived experiences of South Asian identification and belonging in Toronto, several limitations and directions for future research and practices must be acknowledged.

Participant Scope

This study excluded individuals with precarious legal status (e.g. undocumented migrants, refugee claimants, or those whose permits had expired) due to ethical and access constraints. As a result, the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of South Asians with more stable forms of residency. This exclusion limits the study's ability to capture the full spectrum of South Asian immigrant experiences, particularly the heightened vulnerabilities of precarious migrants, whose belonging, identity, and experiences of discrimination may differ significantly. In addition, precarious status may complicate ties to home countries, especially when migration is linked to displacement or fleeing. Future research should therefore seek to include these groups in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of South Asian diasporic realities.

Sampling and Recruitment

The use of snowball sampling and recruitment through personal and social networks facilitated access to a diverse range of participants, but also introduced the risk of selection and response bias. Additionally, recruitment was concentrated in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). As participants themselves noted, local demographics shape how participants understand who “counts” as South Asian. While the GTA region was an important research site, these findings should not be generalized to South Asians across Canada. Future work could expand beyond the GTA. Comparative studies across provinces, and in small to mid-size cities, will allow for better understandings of the role of geographical variation in South Asian identity expressions.

Demographic Boundaries

Participants were limited to individuals aged between twenty and forty years old, which provided consistency but excluded both older and younger generations. This age range narrows the analysis of identity formation across the life course, overlooking how older South Asians reflect on cultural change over time, as well as how younger individuals (particularly teens and young adults) navigate identity through digital diasporas and peer cultures. Future research should incorporate a broader age range to examine how South Asian identities are constructed and negotiated across different life stages and generational positions.

Additionally, the sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of education and social class, with most participants holding or pursuing at least a bachelor’s degree and being employed or in school. This limited the extent to which class-based differences could be examined. Future research should include participants from a wider range of occupational, educational, and migration backgrounds to better capture how class shapes diasporic identity and experience.

Data Limitations

The use of census data offered valuable demographic trends but was restricted to records from 1981 onwards due to limited earlier data. Moreover, census categories often homogenize “South Asians” into a singular category, often overlooking distinctions between subgroups. This, combined with the lack of detailed data on smaller South Asian subgroups, limits our ability to examine differences in immigration pathways, income, and educational attainment across communities. As a result, some subgroup-specific experiences remain invisible in both academic and policy contexts, which means census and archival records risk reproducing the very homogenous images this study critiques.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality as a 1.5-generation South Asian immigrant in the GTA shaped both access to participants and interpretation of the data. While my insider status fostered trust and rapport with participants, it also introduced the possibility of participants tailoring responses or emphasizing shared experiences. For example, phrases like “you know Brown people...” or “us South Asians, we love to...” reflected assumptions of shared background knowledge. At the same time, the insider/outsider dynamic is complex and situational; it is shaped by factors such as religion, nationality, age, and immigration status, making one appear as an insider based on one factor (e.g. nationality) but an outsider based on another (e.g. religion). This dynamic may have influenced responses to more sensitive topics, particularly geopolitical engagement. For instance, participants’ disengagement from homeland politics may not be a result of apathy or lack of interest, but hesitation to disclose views for fear of stigma or being perceived as extremist. Such dynamics highlight the need to carefully consider not only what participants say, but also what they choose not to say. Reflexivity was therefore crucial throughout this project. Future studies

could strengthen this dimension by adopting collaborative or community-based approaches that bring in multiple researchers or discuss these topics in focus group settings to better balance insider and outsider perspectives, ensuring broader representation while also empowering participants as co-creators of knowledge.

A further limitation of this study relates to the role of researchers in the production and normalization of analytic categories. While this dissertation critically examines the making and negotiation of panethnic and ethnic boundaries, it participates in these same processes by employing categories such as “South Asian” as frameworks for analysis. In acknowledging this, I recognize that my positionality as a researcher and the conceptual language used in this study are not neutral, but are embedded within broader academic and institutional contexts that shape how identities are made visible and understood. To mitigate this, I aimed to centre my participants’ own narratives and meanings, focusing on moments of ambivalence, resistance, and contestation around various categories of identity. Nevertheless, this tension remains an inherent limitation of qualitative research on identity, and one that highlights the reflexive challenge of studying boundary making while simultaneously contributing to its articulation.

7.8 Conclusion

In sum, this dissertation has demonstrated how South Asian identity in Canada is neither fixed nor uniform, but instead fluid, negotiated, and deeply shaped by both external constructions and internal community practices. By situating South Asian identity within the historical and political contexts of Canadian multiculturalism, this research has highlighted how a category that emerged from colonial legacies and state classifications has been reworked by immigrants as a resource for belonging, solidarity, and everyday navigation of difference. At the same time, this

identity remains contested; its homogenizing tendencies risk erasing subgroup diversity and reinforcing reductive stereotypes, despite continuing to provide recognition and connection for those who claim it.

In an era marked by intensifying polarization and shifting forms of belonging, this dissertation emphasizes the importance of examining how people live with difference. By focusing on strategies of coexistence, it offers a framework for understanding ethnic and panethnic identities as dynamic, negotiated, and deeply embedded in the conditions of contemporary social life.

Ultimately, the continued relevance of South Asian identity in Canada lies in this tension between its limitations and possibilities. By foregrounding the voices of underrepresented groups and attending to the generational and geographic shifts shaping this identity, this dissertation has highlighted the importance of examining panethnicity as a dynamic and situated process. Future work that expands on these insights will not only deepen scholarly understandings of diaspora and multiculturalism but also contribute to building more inclusive frameworks of recognition and belonging in Canadian society.

Thus, South Asians in Canada engage in an ongoing process of identity negotiation through which communities make sense of their place in a nation that both invites and resists their presence. To recognize this process is to see multiculturalism not as a finished project, but as a field of struggle where belonging must continually be claimed, redefined, and defended. South Asian Canadians, like so many diasporic communities, demonstrate that belonging is not about erasing difference, but about finding ways to live with it, with all of its tensions, contradictions, and possibilities.

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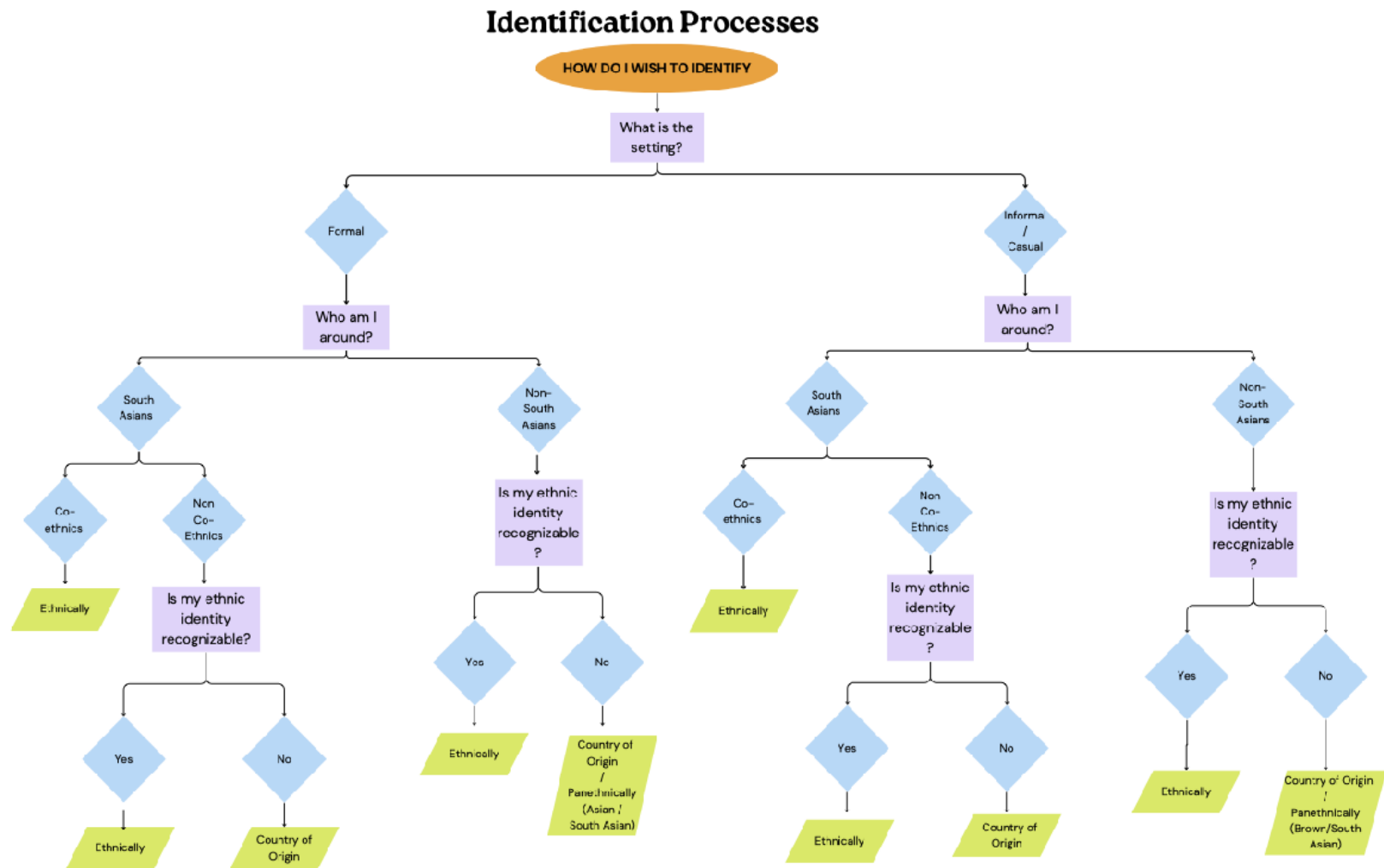
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APPENDIX A: TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 9: Participant Identities

Identity	Meanings
Asian	● Broad, Bureaucratic ● Used often in paperwork ● Often used to refer to “East Asians”
South Asian	● Broad, Bureaucratic, but less so than “Asian” ● Used often in paperwork
Brown	● Considered to be informal ● Racial identifier ● Used to demonstrate solidarity ● Also used to counter stereotypes
Desi	● Used in casual, colloquial settings ● Exclusive; roots of the word denote its geographical dependency
Ethnic identity	● Often referring to place of birth, or country of origin ● Preferred over panethnic identities across contexts, but also dependent upon subjective recognition of these identities within the wider public

Figure 2: Identity Negotiation Processes



APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Ad posted on Reddit for Participant Recruitment

Hi Everyone,

I am a PhD candidate looking for participants for my dissertation research.

Qualifying participants will receive \$30 cash via e-transfer or giftcard (depending on their preference) for their participation!

The study seeks to explore the experiences of different South Asian groups, participants will be asked to share their views regarding South Asian identity, their ethnic and national identity, and your experiences living and interacting with other South Asians in Canada (specifically the GTA).

The study will consist of a ten minute online survey and a quick one hour 1 to 1 interview (via Zoom or in person). They will receive \$30 via e-transfer or gift card for their participation.

To participate, participants must:

- Be between the ages of 20-40
- Currently reside in the GTA region
- Have ancestors/origins from one or more of the following countries: Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan

If you are interested, please contact mpoojary@yorku.ca indicating your interest!

This study has been approved by the York University Office of Research Ethics (certificate # STU 2023-141).



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To:

Monisha Poojary

Graduate Student of Sociology
mpoojary@yorku.ca

From: Alison M. Collins-Mrakas, Director, Research Ethics
(on behalf of You-ta Chuang, Chair, Human Participants Review
Committee)

Date: Wednesday, November 8, 2023

Title: **Navigating Ties Amid Divides: Exploring lived
experiences of South Asian Panethnic Identification and
Belonging in Toronto, Canada**

Risk Level: ☒ Minimal Risk ☐ More than Minimal Risk

Level of Review: ☒ Delegated Review ☐ Full Committee Review

I am writing to inform you that this research project, “**Navigating Ties Amid Divides: Exploring lived experiences of South Asian Panethnic Identification and Belonging in Toronto, Canada**” has received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University’s Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

Note that approval is granted for one year. Ongoing research – research that extends beyond one year – must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process by submission of an amendment application to the HPRC prior to its implementation.

Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research ethics (ore@yorku.ca) as soon as possible.

Certificate #: STU 2023-141

Approval Period: 11/08/23-11/08/24

ETHICS APPROVAL

For further information on researcher responsibilities as it pertains to this approved research ethics protocol, please refer to the attached document, “**RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE**”.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at acollins@yorku.ca.

Yours sincerely,

Alison M. Collins-Mrakas M.Sc., LLM Director, Office of
Research Ethics

RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE

Upon receipt of an ethics approval certificate, researchers are reminded that they are required to ensure that the following measures are undertaken so as to ensure on-going compliance with Senate and TCPS ethics guidelines:

1. **RENEWALS:** Research Ethics Approval certificates are subject to annual renewal. **Failure to renew an ethics approval certificate or (to notify ORE that no further research involving human participants will be undertaken) will result in the closure of the protocol.** No further research activities may be undertaken until such time as a new protocol has been reviewed and approved. **Further, it may result in suspension of research cost fund and access to research funds may be suspended/withheld;**
2. **AMENDMENTS:** Amendments must be reviewed and approved **PRIOR** to undertaking/making the proposed amendments to an approved ethics protocol;
3. **END OF PROJECT:** ORE must be notified when a project is complete;
4. **ADVERSE EVENTS:** Adverse events must be reported to ORE as soon as possible;
5. **POST APPROVAL MONITORING:**
 - a. More than minimal risk research may be subject to post approval monitoring as per TCPS guidelines;
 - b. A spot sample of minimal risk research may similarly be subject to Post Approval Monitoring as per TCPS guidelines.

FORMS: As per the above, the following forms relating to on-going research ethics compliance are available on the Research website:

- a. Renewal
- b. Amendment
- c. End of Project
- d. Adverse Event

Informed Consent Form

Date:

Study Name: Navigating Ties Amid Divides: Exploring lived experiences of South Asian Panethnic Identification and Belonging in Toronto, Canada

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Graduate Supervisor: Dr. Ann H. Kim

Purpose of the Research:

South Asians represent the largest, most diverse visible minority group in Canada and originate from a diverse range of ethnic, religious, and linguistic subgroups across present-day India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. In this study, I am interested in exploring the continued significance of South Asian identity within the current Canadian context. The purpose of this research is to explore how South Asian identity is shaped by events of the past and present, and the continued impact of these factors on South Asian identity construction and belonging. To do this my research will explore how the diversity of the South Asian population in Canada has changed over time and how South Asian identity is understood within the current Canadian context. It will investigate how internal national tensions within South Asian countries and geopolitical dynamics between South Asian countries and Canada, influence intergroup relations amongst South Asian subgroups in the GTA and will seek to understand how members of different South Asian subgroups in this region contend with these dynamics. Lastly, my research will attempt to gain insight into the factors and motivations behind ethnic and panethnic (Asian and South Asian) identities, and how these identities are invoked, understood, and given meaning by South Asian people.

This research will be conducted in the form of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and will be used in conjunction with archival research and census data for the purpose of a doctoral dissertation, with the potential of developing into journal articles and conference presentations in the future.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:

You will be asked to participate in a ten minute online demographic questionnaire and a one hour long interview, either through Zoom or in person (the format and location of interview will be of your choice). You will be asked to share your views regarding South Asian identity, your ethnic and national identity, and your experiences living in Canada (specifically the GTA) and interacting with other South Asians. For your participation you will be given a \$30 gift card of your choosing or cash.

Risks and Discomforts:

This study poses minimal risk to participants. During the questionnaire and interview process, participants may come across questions that may cause slight discomfort. To mitigate this, you will be provided a list of services you can reach out to, should you wish to speak to someone, or require any assistance with issues or concerns related to the topics addressed in the study (i.e. migration and settlement services, family services, crisis intervention, etc.).

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You:

Through this research you will have the opportunity to share your perceptions towards the South Asian diaspora and South Asian identity. You may learn about how you express your own identities and the practices you engage in that contribute to these expressions.

This research will work on understanding and conceptualizing South Asian identity and the forces and factors that contribute to its expression, maintenance and/or dismissal. It will also contribute towards deepening knowledge on the complexities associated with panethnic and diasporic identities more broadly.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researcher or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

If you stop participating, you will still be eligible to receive the \$30 inducement for agreeing to be in the project, even if you withdraw without completion of the research. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete.

Confidentiality: All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research

The researcher will keep a link that identifies you to your coded information, but this link will be kept secure and available only to the researcher. Any information that can identify you will remain confidential. Data from the research will be documented in the form of audio and video recordings, written transcripts and notes. Your data will be safely stored in a password protected USB that only the researcher will have access to. Hard copies of data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet that will only be accessible to the researcher. The data will be stored and archived for potential future use as secondary data for the purpose of journal articles and conference presentations. Recordings and interview transcripts will be destroyed, two years after the completion of the dissertation (by September 8, 2027). Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

The data collected in this research project may be used – in an anonymized form by the researcher in subsequent research investigations exploring similar lines of inquiry. Such projects will still undergo ethics review by the HPRC, our institutional REB. Any secondary use of anonymized data by the researcher will be treated with the same degree of confidentiality and anonymity as in the original research project.

This study will use Zoom (for interviews that are not conducted in person), which is an externally hosted cloud-based service. When information is transmitted over the internet, privacy cannot be guaranteed. There is always a risk your responses may be intercepted by a third party (e.g., government agencies, hackers). Further, while York University researchers will not collect or use IP addresses or other information which could link your participation to your computer or electronic devices without informing you, there is a small risk with any platform such as this of data that is collected on external servers falling outside the control of the researcher. If you are concerned about this, we would be happy to make alternative arrangements (where possible) for you to participate, perhaps via telephone. Please contact Monisha Poojary (mpoojary@yorku.ca).

Recordings (audio/video) will be saved in a password protected file on the researcher's local computer, not the cloud-based service.

Please note that it is the expectation that participants agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content of a meeting / data collection session.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me at mpoojary@yorku.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Ann H. Kim at annkim@yorku.ca. You may also contact the Graduate Program in Sociology at gradsoci@yorku.ca and/or 416-736-5013.

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Director, Research Ethics in the Office of Research Ethics, 3rd Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _____, consent to participate in Navigating Ties Amid Divides: Exploring lived experiences of South Asian Panethnic Identification and Belonging in Toronto, Canada conducted by Monisha Poojary. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____
Participant

Date _____

Signature _____
Principal Investigator

Date _____

Additional consent

1. Audio recording

☐ I consent to the audio-recording of my interview(s).

2. Consent to use of quotes

I consent to the use of quotations in any final reports/ publications of the research?
Y / N

Interview Guide

Project title: Navigating Ties Amid Divides: Exploring Lived Experiences of South Asian Panethnic Identification and Belonging in Toronto, Canada

Just a disclaimer this interview will be recorded but I will only be using the audio recordings and transcript from this interview, since there is no way to select only the audio recording, you can turn off their video to ensure you will not be recorded. Do you have any questions/ concerns regarding this?

Thank you for participating in the study, as described in the informed consent form, this study explores the diversity of the South Asian population in Canada and how South Asian identity is understood within the current Canadian context. During today's interview you will be asked to share your views regarding South Asian identity, your ethnic and national identity and your experiences living in Canada (specifically the GTA) and interacting with other South Asians.

Please know that your participation is completely voluntary and we can stop the interview at any point if you choose to. If you do not wish answer a question during the interview please let me know and we can skip it. Also any statements made today or information that you have provided in the demographic survey will be anonymized and will be stripped of any identifiers. You will be identified in the study using a pseudonym (letter/number or name) of your choice.

Have you read the informed consent form? Do you have any questions about the study or the form?

Before we begin I would just like to get your verbal consent, please answer yes or no:

- Do you consent to participating in this study
- Do you consent to the audio recording of this interview
- Do you consent to the use of quotes from this interview and data from the demographic survey in any final reports, publications and/or presentations?
- Do you consent to the collection of your contact information in the form of email address for the purpose of correspondence and providing the inducement

Background Questions

So we will be starting with a few questions about you, where you live and how you and your family came to be in Canada.

- 1) What is your current education/employment status?
- 2) Can you tell me about how you and/or your family came to be in Canada?

- 3) What city do you currently reside in and how long have you lived in the Greater Toronto Area?
 - a) Have you ever lived/studied or worked in any other part of the GTA or Canada? If so where, and how long?
 - i) Are there any differences between the neighborhoods you have lived in? (people, availability of ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, etc.)
 - ii) Are there any specific neighborhoods that you liked or would like to live in the future? Why?

Identity Expression

We will now discuss a little bit about how you identify yourself in your everyday interactions.

- 4) Have you ever been asked the following questions:
 - a) Where are you from? And
 - b) What is your background?
 - c) If, yes, how do you respond to such questions? Positive/negative experience
- 5) Are there any other ways you identify yourself? For example, based on your nationality, race, and/or religion.
- 6) Do these identities ever conflict with each other? If so, when? How do you navigate this?

Ethnic Identification

Now we will be discussing ethnic identification. Ethnicity refers to one's cultural background or descent based on factors like shared ancestry, religion, language, cultural traditions, etc.

- 7) When discussing your ethnic identity, what words, terms, or phrases do you use?
 - a) If they state multiple, ask them which one they use most often.
- 8) What are some ways you express your ethnic identity within your everyday life? (e.g. food, language, religious practices, clothing, activities, etc.) -what about activism, non-profits?
- 9) Have these ways of expressing your identity stayed the same since childhood or have you experienced any changes? This could mean adopting new practices, changing existing practices, or not partaking in practices you have in the past.
- 10) Do you have friends or acquaintances from the same ethnic group? How did you meet these friends?
- 11) Do you have friends/acquaintances from different backgrounds? If yes, how did you meet these friends?
 - i) Does having similar or different backgrounds impact the level of connection you feel with your friends?

National identity and perceptions

Next we will be discussing your views on national identity, and this could be in reference to your current country of residence or any other country that you hold ties to.

- 12) What is your current nationality?
 - a) Could you describe your experience so far living in the GTA as a X?
- 13) Has your nationality changed over time? If yes, what previous nationalities have you held?
 - a) Do you ever still identify yourself based on these previous nationalities? If so, when?
- 14) Do you have Canadian citizenship, would you apply for it if given the opportunity?
 - a) Would you still identify as X or Canadian at that point?

South Asian Identification

Now I would like to get your thoughts on the South Asian diaspora in Canada.

- 15) Which countries would you consider a part of South Asia?
- 16) Aside from X (previously mentioned in question 2), are there any other countries you believe you have ancestry from?
- 17) Have you ever lived in X (country indicated in question 15), if so for how long? (remove if redundant)
 - a. Why did you leave?
 - b. Do you ever visit X? If so, how often?
 - c. Do you see yourself visiting X more in the future?
- 18) Have you ever lived in any other country within South Asia? If so, where and how long?
 - a) Have you ever visited another country within South Asia? Do you find that it is similar or different from X? In what ways?
- 19) Are there people you keep in touch within X and Y (countries specified in question 16)? How?
- 20) Do you follow news about X and Y? What about news on South Asia? What type of news do you usually follow? Events, politics, everything?
 - a) Are there any particular events that you have discussed with your family, or is an ongoing political issue within X
 - b) Do you discuss things on the news about X or South Asia with family and friends?
- 21) Do you identify as South Asian? Why or why not?
 - a) Do you think South Asian is effective in representing you and other members of this population? Would you prefer to see a different term being used in gov't policies, news media, and if so what term?
 - b) Where do you hear the term South Asian most often?
 - c) What about your parents, would they identify as South Asian? Have you ever heard them referring to themselves as South Asian? If not, what other terms do they use instead?

- i) Is this a generational difference?
- d) Have you heard of the terms Brown or Desi? Do you use these terms in your everyday life? Between South Asian, Brown and Desi, is there a term you use more than others?

22) Are there any South Asian related events or practices that you participate in? If so, which ones?

23) What words or images would you use to describe Asians?

- a) Do you identify as Asian? Why or why not?

Perceptions of South Asians

24) Would you consider the South Asian population within the GTA to be diverse? Any particular groups that have a large presence in this region according to you?

25) Based on your experiences do you think members of different South Asian groups get along? Do you think they support each other during times of trouble? Why or why not?

- a) How would you define the term community?

26) Do events that have impacted dynamics between groups in X, does it have the same impact between groups here? Eg. the partition between India and Pakistan, the Khalistan referendum, the civil war in Sri Lanka,

- a) Do you engage in any political activism or community involvement based on issues in X? Any particular reason?

27) Do you believe the experiences of new South Asian immigrants in Canada is similar or different to yours?

28) How would you describe your sense of connection to other X, and other South Asians as a Y generation immigrant, do you believe it differs based on immigrant generation? Why or why not?

- a) First generation immigrants are born in a different country and immigrated over the age of 13, 1.5 came under the age of 13, second generation are people whose parents are born in a different country.

29) Have you experienced any form of racism/discrimination?

30) Are there stereotypes or misconceptions about South Asian identity that you've encountered from others?

Final Thoughts

31) Is there anything else that you would like to include in our discussion today that has not already been addressed?

Thank you so much for participating in the study!

Just a few things before you go...

Do you have a preference for a pseudonym? (letter/number or name) Do you prefer cash via e-transfer or a gift card?

If you know anyone else that may be interested in participating please forward the poster to them, and tell them to email me it would be greatly appreciated!!

Results of the study will be shared with everyone who has participated once it is completed.

Demographic Questionnaire

This questionnaire will be used to collect important demographic information about participants. Should you have any questions or concerns about the questions raised in this questionnaire, please contact Monisha Poojary (Principal Investigator) at mpoojary@yorku.ca

* Indicates required question

1. Do you currently reside in the Greater Toronto Area[1]? *

[1] The GTA region includes the city of Toronto, as well as the municipalities of Durham, Halton, Peel and York

Check all that apply.

- Yes
- No

2. What is your current city of residence? *

3. What is your current age? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ less than 20 years old
- ☐ 20 to 24 years old
- ☐ 25 to 29 years old
- ☐ 30 to 34 years old
- ☐ 35 to 40 years old
- ☐ more than 40 years old

4. What is the place(s) of origin[1] of your ancestors[2]? *

[1] Origins, also known as one's roots or heritage, can refer to the place of birth of one's parents, grandparents and/or ancestors

[2] An ancestor refers to someone who is more distant than a grandparent

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Afghanistan
- ☐ Bangladesh
- ☐ Bhutan
- ☐ India
- ☐ Maldives
- ☐ Nepal
- ☐ Pakistan
- ☐ Sri Lanka
- ☐ West Indian/Caribbean
- ☐ Don't know
- ☐ Other: _____

5. Gender *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other: _____

6. What is the highest level of education you have completed? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Elementary school
- ☐ Highschool diploma or certificate
- ☐ Registered apprenticeship/trades certificate or diploma
- ☐ College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Masters Degree
- ☐ University professional degree (law, medicine, etc.)
- ☐ PhD/Doctorate
- ☐ Post-graduate/ Post-doctoral
- ☐ Other: _____

7. What field of occupation do you currently work in? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Management
- ☐ Business, Finance and Administration
- ☐ Natural and Applied Sciences
- ☐ Health
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Law, Social, Community and Government services
- ☐ Arts, Culture, Recreation and Sport
- ☐ Sales and Service
- ☐ Trades and Transport and equipment operators
- ☐ Natural resources and agriculture
- ☐ Manufacturing and utilities
- ☐ Not employed
- ☐ Other: _____

8. Were you born in Canada? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

9. If you were not born in Canada, where were you born?

10. If you were not born in Canada, how old were you when you immigrated to Canada?

Mark only one oval.

☐ 0 to 10 years old

☐ 11 to 21 years old

☐ 22 to 31 years old

☐ 32 to 40 years old

11. Where was your mother born? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Don't know mother's place of birth

☐ Other: _____

12. Where was your father born? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Don't know father's place of birth

☐ Other: _____

13. Have at least one of your parents immigrated to Canada? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

14. What is your current residency status? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Canadian citizen

☐ Permanent resident

☐ Temporary resident (work permit, study permit)

☐ Refugee

15. Are you currently a citizen of any other country other than Canada?

If so, please specify.

16. What languages can you speak well enough to conduct a conversation? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ English
- ☐ Arabic
- ☐ Assamese
- ☐ Bengali
- ☐ Farsi
- ☐ French
- ☐ Gujarati
- ☐ Hindi
- ☐ Kannada
- ☐ Kashmiri
- ☐ Konkani
- ☐ Kutchi
- ☐ Punjabi
- ☐ Malayalam
- ☐ Marathi
- ☐ Nepali
- ☐ Odia
- ☐ Oriya
- ☐ Rohingya
- ☐ Sindhi
- ☐ Sinhala/Sinhalese
- ☐ Tamil
- ☐ Telugu
- ☐ Tulu
- ☐ Urdu
- ☐ Other: _____

17. Of the languages, mentioned in the previous question, which language do you speak most often?

18. What is your religious affiliation if any? * *Check all that apply.*

- ☐ Christian
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ Sikh
- ☐ Buddhist
- ☐ Hindu
- ☐ Jain
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Zoroastrian
- ☐ Not affiliated with any religion
- ☐ Other: _____

19. What is your ethnicity[1]?

[1] Ethnicity refers to one's cultural background or descent based on factors like shared ancestry, religion, language, cultural traditions, etc.

20. Do you identify as Asian? * *Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

21. Do you identify as South Asian? * *Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

22. Do you identify as Canadian? * *Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

23. Would you like to participate in a 1 hour interview, if so please provide your email address in the "other" section *Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ No, I would not like to participate



Other: _____

SOUTH ASIAN STUDY RECRUITMENT

ARE YOU:

BETWEEN THE AGES OF 20-40?

A LEGAL RESIDENT OF THE GREATER TORONTO AREA?

**HAVE ANCESTRY/ORIGINS FROM ANY OF THE
FOLLOWING COUNTRIES: AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN,
INDIA, NEPAL, BHUTAN, BANGLADESH, MALDIVES, AND
SRI LANKA ?**

**I invite you to participate in my study on South Asian
migration and ethnic identification in Canada**

What will you do?

- Participate in a 10 minute online questionnaire
- Answer questions in a 1 hour, 1 on 1 interview (via zoom or in person depending on your preference)
- You will receive a \$30 gift card/cash for your participation

How to participate?

For more information please contact:

Monisha Poojary (Principal Investigator)

mpoojary@yorku.ca

Approved by the York University Office of Research Ethics (ORE) Certificate # STU 2023-141

APPENDIX C: CODING FRAMEWORK

Round 1 of Coding	Round 2 of Coding
● Asian Identity ● Demographic Information ○ Education and Employment Background ○ Migration History ○ Regional Awareness ● Experiences in Canada ○ Canadian South Asian Demographic ○ Family Relationships ○ Friendships ○ Racism or Discrimination ● Generational Differences ● Group Dynamics ○ Intergroup dynamics ○ Intragroup dynamics ● Identity ○ Ancestry ○ Ethnic Identity ○ Expressions ○ Intrapersonal tensions ○ Nationality ○ Race ○ Religion ● South Asian ○ Connection to South Asia ■ Experiences in South Asia ■ Social networks in South Asia ■ South Asian news or events ○ Geographical Perceptions ○ South Asian identity	● Demographic Information ○ Education and Employment Background ○ Migration History ○ Regional Awareness ■ Preferential residence ● Experiences in Canada ○ Canadian South Asian Demographic ○ Family Relationships ○ Friendships ○ Interactions with locals ■ Group Dynamics ● Intergroup dynamics ● Intragroup dynamics ○ Racism and discrimination ● Generational differences ● Identity ○ Ancestry ○ Ethnic Identity ■ Asian Identity ■ South Asian identity ■ Other related South Asian identities ● Perceptions of South Asian identities ○ Expressions ○ Intrapersonal tensions ○ Nationality ○ Race ○ Religion

■ Other related South Asian identities ■ Perceptions of South Asian identities ■ South Asian expressions ○ Stereotypes and misconceptions	● South Asian ○ South Asian expressions ○ Connection to South Asia ■ Experiences in South Asia ■ Social networks in South Asia ■ South Asian news or events ○ Geographical Perceptions ● Stereotypes and misconceptions
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*codes developed and modified during the second round of coding