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Apu, Neela, and Amita
Stereotypes of Indian Americans in Mainstream TV Shows in the United States

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1. Introduction

It is human to think in stereotypes. They help us comprehend an increasingly complex environment. Through the pre-construction of images of the "other" cognitive processes of perception can be reduced to an assortment of clichés. Ethnic minorities are particularly prone to being the subject of stereotyping. Specific ethnic markers such as the color of the skin, a foreign accent, or certain modes of clothing and behavior become projections for a pre-constructed set of character. Indians and Indian Americans in the United States have often been subject to such stereotypes. Their skin color and distinct accent have set them apart from the American mainstream. Additionally, saris and *bindi* have been ethnic markers for Indian American women. Most of the stereotypes are centered on the alleged character of the ethnic minority and usually have a negative connotation, such as Indians being passive and docile on the one hand and mean and deceitful on the other hand. Such preconceptions are often racist and offensive. However, the Indian American community[1] has also been subject to positive stereotyping, being frequently referred to as a "model minority" that works hard and is economically independent.

[1] The application of the word community to describe NRI and PIO in the United States is highly problematic. The term assumes a sense of commonness and belonging among Indian Americans while totally ignoring internal differences. Neither the linguistic, religious, and cultural heterogeneity of Indians in the United States nor their diverse socioeconomic profile is acknowledged. While being aware of these implications, I nevertheless use the term community in this article for the sake of readability and for the lack of viable alternatives.

Many of these clichés are reflected in the portrayal of non-resident Indians (NRI) and persons of Indian origin (PIO)[2] in American TV shows. This paper will analyze the stereotypes in the characters of three of the most well-known Indian Americans on TV. The main example used will be Apu Nahasapeemapetilon from "The Simpsons". He is probably the most popular Indian TV character worldwide. At the same time, Apu is often referred to as the "gold standard of derogatory stereotypes" (Timmons 2008). His character traits have been defining "Indian-ness" to mainstream America for twenty years. Although first constructed as an obvious and broad stereotype, Apu has developed into a key character in the TV series with a more and more multidimensional personality and biography. This transformation coincides with the economic, social, and cultural coming of age of NRI and PIO in the United States and renders even more importance to this TV figure. Not surprisingly, the role and significance of Apu is discussed in a most controversial manner even within the Indian American community. Indian American TV characters of the 2000s have been less obviously clichéd though many stereotypes are still used. Examples discussed will be Neela Rasgotra from the TV series "ER – Emergency Room" and Amita Ramanujan from the TV show "Numb3rs". Both characters reveal many prejudices of the "model minority" myth.

This paper is divided into two sections: In the first, the foundations for the case studies are laid, including a short discussion of the theoretical approaches used, a general assessment of stereotypes of Indians and Indian Americans with special emphasis on the "model minority" myth, and the presentation of the hypothesis and the case study selection. In the second main section, the case studies of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, Neela Rasgotra, and Amita Ramanujan are described and analyzed. A conclusion summarizes the argument.

2. Prejudices and Stereotypes

2.1 Theoretical Considerations

Often, the terms prejudice and stereotype are used synonymously. In colloquial use, both notions describe the categorization of people on the basis of specific markers and alleged characteristics. However, while a prejudice

[2] Non-resident Indians (NRI) are Indian citizens who live abroad but retain Indian nationality of. Persons of Indian origin (PIO) are people of Indian descent who are citizens of a country other than India. Both terms are official categories used by the Indian government to describe the overseas population of India (see Singhvi et al. 2001: viii).

or preconception is by definition an a-priori-belief, stereotypes are constructed as generalizations that build on the interplay between a prejudice and selected experiences perceived to support the preconception:

> A stereotype is an exaggerated belief, image, or distorted truth about a person or group. It is a generalization that allows for little or no individual differences or social variations. Stereotypes are based on images passed on by the media, or beliefs and attitudes passed on by parents, peers, and other members of society. (Danico & Ng 2004: 121)

Clichés are the result of a constant process of stereotyping that is usually carried out subconsciously. Here, a certain easily recognizable outer marker such as gender, age, color of skin, or language is connected to a prefabricated scheme of presumptions and expectations. The person that is stereotyped is categorized as belonging to a specific group with a-priori ascribed character traits, beliefs, opinions, and behavior patterns. In his famous book 1922 on public opinion, the philosopher and media critic Walter Lippmann coined the phrase "pictures in our heads" to describe the results of stereotyping. Lippmanns diagnosis of the reasons for stereotyping is probably even truer today than in the 1920s: Using clichés and stereotypes helps us to cope with complexity in an environment that is increasingly characterized by stimulus satiation. Pre-shaped generalizations help us deal with an ever-growing stream of information. A stable frame of reference such as culture serves as guidance and shapes the expectations and assumptions that become inflexible stereotypes and clichés:

> In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture. (Lippmann quoted in Hinton 2000: 9)

Of course, the "insights" gained through stereotypes have little connection with reality. In fact, Lippmann concluded that stereotypes are always largely incorrect and false. This dilemma still exists: A stereotype that is constructed through the questionable generalization of isolated indicators is totally detached from the real world and cannot deliver reliable information. On the contrary, relying on stereotypes may lead to momentous misperceptions and wrong decisions. However, despite their counterfactual nature, stereotypes are being maintained even if their use does not make any sense and is largely irrational. Through a system of selective perception, counterexamples are being ignored while cases that seem to support the cliché are exaggerated. Here, we find a classic case of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The persistence of stereotypes can hardly be explained monocausally: approaches include such phenomena as frustration and aggression, misguided authoritarian personalities, or intergroup competition. Common to all is the attempt to analyze the

persistence of stereotypes according to the underlying motivations assumed. An alternative approach looks at the cognitive part of human nature. Here, the faultiness of human thought processes and inherent deficiencies in our information processing schemes are seen as the major reasons for the use of clichés (Hinton 2000: 8–19).

The main characteristic of stereotypical thinking is the categorization of people into specific social groups. Within these units, individual differences are not recognized. A group member is associated with the superordinate features of the category and by definition cannot deviate from these attributes. Such pre-constructed identity assumptions are never based on direct experiences but always reflect narratives of the "other" within the own culture (Berting & Villain-Gandossi 1995: 14–15). Often, stereotypes function as an instrument to re-affirm the own collective identity. Positive self-identification is connected to the existence of a segregated minority group. A stereotype that was originally just a complexity-reducing prejudice now becomes a self-affirming value judgement: "[W]e are what we are because *they* are not what we are" (Tajfel & Forgas 2000: 55, emphasis in original). This is particularly important with regard to national and/or ethnic identities. The construction of a self-image in opposition to a real or imagined "other" implies a segmentation along the categories of "insider" and "outsider" or, in extreme cases, of "good" and "evil" (Berting & Villain-Gandossi 1995: 22–25). Of course, this holds especially true for immigrant societies like the United States. But not all stereotypes involve a friend/foe-scheme. They do exist beyond such simplistic dualisms and are applied to national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities. The process is always the same: Specific character traits, attitudes, and behavior patterns are attributed to a certain group. This pre-fabricated image is applied to all members of this community who are easily identifiable through a particular outer marker such as color of skin, clothing, language, or religion. Although stereotypes are to a high degree inflexible and rigid, there may be adaptations over time. In rare cases, an assumed feature with a largely negative connotation (e.g. "Indians always save their money and are thrifty. They are mean.") might be transformed into a positive cliché (e.g. "Indians always save their money and are thrifty. They are prudent."), but the specific characteristic, ascribed to the group ("Indians always save their money and are thrifty."), remains the same. It is important to note that not all stereotypes have a negative implication. NRI and PIO are a prime example of both negative and positive stereotyping.

2.2 Stereotypes of Indians and Indian Americans

Indian Americans have developed into one of the most important ethnic minorities in the U.S. The groundwork for the current community was laid only after the reform of immigration laws and naturalization practices in 1965. After that all-important year, Indian immigrants started coming in greater numbers, and the Indian community grew from a mere 5,000 in 1960 to approximately three million in 2010. During this span of fifty years, NRI and PIO have become one of the most successful and affluent ethnic minorities in the United States. Most of them are very well educated and work in high-paid positions in the fields of science and technology (particularly IT), medicine, engineering, accounting, and management (Bloch et al. 2009; Gottschlich forthcoming). Additionally, many Indian immigrants have found an economic niche in the retail or hotel and motel business. Hence, it is not surprising that they have the highest household income of any group in the U.S., nearly double the average income. Apart from their economic success, the Indian American community has recently also become politically active and visible (Gottschlich 2008: 156–168).

Ever since their arrival in the United States, Indian Americans have been subject to stereotyping. In order to be activated, stereotypes and clichés are dependent on an ethnic or social marker which has to be easily recognizable. Only if such an indicator is found, can the chain of associations and prejudices begin to unfold. The most obvious and common marker for NRI and PIO is the color of their skin, which sets Indian Americans apart from the white majority in the U.S. However, this is not necessarily a clear-cut marker since time and again Indians are confused with Hispanic and Latino Americans. Hence, other identification marks such as clothes are needed. Usually, the most important ethnic marker for first-generation Indian immigrants is their distinct South Asian English accent, the so-called "brown voice" (Davé 2005: 316–319). As for Indian women, saris and *bindi* have become the most obvious ethnic identification marks.

Like other immigrant groups from Asia, Indians are immediately associated with certain character traits that are somehow inherent in what is often called the "Asian nature": They are perceived as being passive, humble, shy, docile, and generally submissive. At the same time, they are also said to be reliable and dutiful. Hence, Asians in general and Indians in particular are regarded as very loyal and efficient employees. However, their alleged passive and conflict-avoiding nature has led to an image of a "team player" without the leadership qualities necessary for an outstanding career. This is frequently seen as one reason for the persistent existence of a so-called "glass ceiling" that limits the upward mobility of Asian immigrants. In an interesting contrast, the assumed passivity and lack of emotion is also con-

nected to being heartless and cold. Furthermore, it is sometimes linked to deceitfulness. While acting docile and polite outwardly, Asians in general and Indians in particular are suspected of not showing their true intentions and of being calculating and manipulative. Often, this is linked to alleged character traits of being cheap and greedy. Socially, Indians are considered to be reclusive and voluntarily isolate themselves. Like most other immigrant groups from Asia, they are said to be extremely family-oriented and not interested in too much interaction with the host society. Occasionally, this cliché leads to the assumption that Indians reject integration (Danico & Ng 2004: 121–138).

The immense economic success of NRI and PIO in the United States has shaped and changed the way stereotypes of this group are constructed. Most obviously, they are associated with certain professions such as shopkeepers, motel owners (the well-known catchphrase "Hotel, Motel, Patel" comes to mind), or IT experts (the so-called "computer Indians"). More importantly, while many other ethnic minorities such as Hispanic or African Americans are mostly subject to purely negative clichés, Indian Americans have the attribution of being a "model minority". Indians (and other Asian immigrants) are said to embrace certain values that allow them to thrive economically, particularly in comparison to other groups. Among those alleged traits are an insatiable hunger for education and a tireless work ethic. Self-discipline, diligence, and persistency are other so-called "Asian values" that enable immigrants from India to achieve their goals. These attributes are hardly new. Not only have they been applied to other immigrant groups from Asia before, particularly to Japanese in the 1960s and to Chinese in the 1980s, but they are also re-interpretations of much older clichés ascribed to, for instance, Jewish Americans. It is no coincidence that NRI and PIO are sometimes referred to as the "new Jews" (Prashad 2000: 170; Egan 2007). Members of the Indian American "model minority" are supposed to excel on all levels of education ranging from kindergarten to graduate school. In their professional life, outstanding success is expected. Unemployment is almost unthinkable, and of course there should be no reliance on any form of government assistance. In fact, it is a very important part of the "model minority" myth that upward mobility is attained without dependence on outside support or welfare programs (Teranishi 2008: 1).

Obviously, this image of an Indian American "model minority" is very problematic. It completely ignores the fact that the Indian American community is largely a pre-selected "diaspora by design" (Visweswaran 1997) with significantly better qualifications (e.g. language skills, education) than, for instance, immigrants from Latin America. As one immigrant from India famously stated, these new arrivals "were already assimilated in India,

before we came here" (quoted in Takaki 1998: 445). Furthermore, reality does not always live up to the image. While there is some truth in the notion that the children of NRI and PIO do very well in school (the recent dominance of Indian Americans in the "National Spelling Bee" contests comes to mind), it is by no means a general pattern. On the contrary, Indian American children are often subject to exaggerated expectations of their parents to live up to the distorted picture of the Indian American language genius and math whiz, sometimes with tragic consequences such as affective disorders or even suicide attempts. An example shows the demands faced by many young PIO:

> Through high school it was an episode from the twilight zone in our house every day. Id come home with a 96 on a test and it wasnt good enough because I didnt get a 100! Id come home with a 100 and it wasnt good enough because I didnt work on the extra credit! I bagged the Catholic Teachers Association scholarship given to one kid in each high school but it wasnt good enough because it wasnt as much money as Mrs. Patels sons scholarship! I missed salutatorian by .06% and so I had to go to graduation alone as a punishment for not doing so well. #3 didnt count even if your class had 725 kids… (Gawle 1999)

Also, not all members of the community do very well economically. In fact, there is a sizable number of NRI and PIO that work in lower professions or are unemployed. Frequently, they find themselves under heavy internal pressure to conform to the "model minority" myth. For some Indian Americans, less successful community members are seen as an embarrassment to the group: "These fellows are our stupider brothers and cousins" (quoted in Lessinger 1995: 14). The acceptance and internalization of the "model minority" stereotype by many Indian Americans often undermines the cohesion and ethnic consciousness of the community and can also make inter-ethnic cooperation very difficult (Prashad 2000: 157–183). In sum, the "model minority" myth, while by no means accurate, shapes the image and, to a great extent, also the self perception of the Indian American community. It is probably the most powerful and influential stereotype applied to Indian immigrants in the United States.

2.3 Hypothesis and Case Study Selection

Media representations can be a valuable indicator for the status of an ethnic minority or an immigrant group. They reflect both the recognition and the level of integration of such a group. TV series are particularly interesting, since they usually require an appealing storyline and authentic characters in order to become "mainstream" TV. The mere fact that a TV show spans and "survives" several seasons proves that it has consistently captured the inter-

est of a wide audience. Unlike movies or works of literature such as novels, the longevity of a TV show requires constant adaptations to the wishes of a mass audience and can therefore be subject to changes which may reflect greater societal developments. In a simple linear development model one can distinguish different stages of the integration of ethnic characters in recurring TV shows: At first, ethnic characters are usually one-dimensional figures and mere clichés, which reflect their strangeness and difference compared with the majority population. They are reduced to their ethnic markers and act in a stereotypical way. In an interesting intermediate step, these characters are often portrayed as heroes. These representations tend to reflect a very strict and exaggerated sense of political correctness. Finally, ethnic characters are fully integrated into the storylines of a TV show and are shown as multidimensional personalities. While the ethnicity of the figure is recognized, it is not exploited through stereotypes and clichés. Occasionally, the ethnic background of a character becomes completely irrelevant and dispensable.

Indian Americans crossed the TV recognition threshold in the 2000s when they acquired a TV profile unprecedented in their five-decade old history in the United States (Padmanabhan & Khanna 2006: 39). NRI and PIO characters have since played prominent roles in some of the most successful American TV series of the past decade, e.g. "House" or "Crossing Jordan". An assessment of the roles Indian Americans play in such shows can give valuable hints about their general perception in the United States. This is particularly interesting when the characters undergo changes over time that may reflect societal developments outside the TV realm. It is thus not surprising that the first case study is Apu Nahasapeemapetilon from "The Simpsons". Apu has been the typical Indian American TV character in the United States for more than twenty years. "The Simpsons" are the longest-running prime time entertainment show in the U.S. and have drawn some of the highest ratings in the history of its TV network, reaching as many as 33.6 million viewers for an episode in 1990. The longevity of the character of Apu and the fact that it has been featured in one of the most popular TV shows in the U.S. over an unprecedented period of time make this figure an essential case study. A TV series that even surpassed the success of "The Simpsons" is the medical drama "ER – Emergency Room". This TV show regularly reached more than 20 million viewers in the United States, peaking at an audience of 47.8 million. Only one season narrowly failed to reach more than ten million viewers on average. The PIO character of Neela Rasgotra has been part of the series from 2003 until its finale in 2009. During six seasons, Neela developed into one of the main characters of the series and arguably became the most important recurring female

Indian American on TV, making her an ideal second case study. Without question, Apu Nahasapeemapetilon and Neela Rasgotra are unique in terms of impact and popularity. Considering the emergence of more and more NRI and PIO characters on American TV shows in the late 2000s, a third case study might reveal developments that go beyond the groundbreaking TV roles of Apu and Neela. An example that fits both criteria of longevity and popularity is Amita Ramanujan from the crime show “Numb3rs”. This Indian American character has been featured during the complete span of six seasons from 2005 until 2010. “Numb3rs” averaged more than ten million viewers, making it one of the most successful TV series in U.S.

Although there is an overlap between “The Simpsons”, “ER”, and “Numb3rs”, one can argue that Apu, Neela, and Amita represent Indian Americans TV characters from different time periods. Their personalities can be seen as reflections and manifestations of developments outside the TV world, particularly with regard to the exploitation of stereotypes and clichés. The TV roles mirror a growing acceptance of Indian immigrants in the United States and show their integration. The three case studies describe the respective NRI or PIO characters, their roles and functions, and their development in the course of the TV series. Special consideration is given to the reflection of general stereotypes and clichés. Additionally, changes and adaptations over time are assessed where applicable. Each case study concludes with a table illustrating the main characteristic of the respective TV role and is designed to enable a comparative analysis.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Apu Nahasapeemapetilon

Apu Nahasapeemapetilon has been a constant feature of the extremely successful TV show “The Simpsons” since the eighth episode of the first season in 1990 (“The Telltale Head”, production code 7G07). In fact, he appears more often than any other figure except for the Simpson family itself, making him the “first regular South Asian character on a prime time show outside the [Indian] subcontinent” (Francis 2005). At first, Apu was constructed as a mere cliché of a South Asian shopkeeper, and not much thought was given to the idea of making him a permanent character. Hence, he was marked as a foreigner in a more than obvious way. Of all inhabitants of Springfield, the home town of the Simpson family, Apu is the one who is probably most easily recognizable as an immigrant (Tuncel & Rauscher 2002: 162). His skin color, haircut, clothing, and name are strong ethnic markers. The name Apu refers to the famous movie trilogy by the Bengali director Satyajit Ray and is clearly Indian. Nahasapeemapetilon, by contrast,

is just a play on the name of a school mate of one of the authors of the series and has no deeper meaning. In addition to his outer appearance, Apus heavy accent ("brown voice") clearly marks him as an immigrant from South Asia (Davé 2005: 319).[3]

With all these outer markers, Apu would have been predestined to remain a perfect cliché figure without any depth. However, this is not what happened. Apus development from an insignificant side figure to a rounded, multidimensional character is truly remarkable (Turner 2005: 354–355). During the course of the series, his biographical background becomes more and more detailed: We learn that Apu speaks Hindi, so he seems to be from North India. There are hints that he might be from West Bengal; in one episode he is explicitly referred to as "the jolly Bengali" ("22 Short Films About Springfield", 3F18).[4] Also, he graduates from the fictional CalTech (Calcutta Technical Institute) in West Bengal with a degree in computer science. Being the best of seven million graduates in his class (sic), an absurd play on the stereotype of a hopelessly overpopulated India, Apu is chosen for a doctoral scholarship in the United States. He comes to America, where he earns a PhD at the Springfield Heights Institute of Technology (S.H.I.T.[!]). In order to pay back his student loan, he begins to work at the local Kwik-E-Mart. Even after settling his debts Apu stays on and, through hard work and long hours, becomes the manager and finally the owner of the store ("Much Apu About Nothing", 3F20). This back story is an obvious variation of the "American dream" cliché, coupled with references to the "model minority" myth. In many respects, Apu embodies classic "model minority" stereotypes: He is very well educated and, in fact, extremely overqualified for his job. Additionally, his studies place him in the group of "computer Indians", and he also has some "nerd qualities": Apu knows, for instance, the number Pi to the 40,000th decimal ("Marge in Chains", 9F20). Apus most important "model minority" characteristic is his untiring work ethic which can be "self-destructive" at times (Tuncel & Rauscher 2002: 162).

Despite his work commitments, Apu is very well integrated into the social life of Springfield: He is a member of Homer Simpsons bowling team, sings in the barbershop group "The Be Sharps", and is also actively involved in the local fire brigade. The cliché of the shy and socially isolated immigrant does not apply to Apu at all. In one episode, he even becomes the

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3 It is particularly interesting to note that this unmistakably South Asian voice of Apu is spoken by a white actor of Greek-Jewish origin, Hank Azaria.

4 To a certain extent this clashes with Hindi being Apus mother tongue, as one would expect a clichéd depiction of an immigrant from West Bengal to be Bengali-speaking. There are, however, significant Hindi-speaking minorities in West Bengal; and Hindi is a commonly used language in that Indian state.

most coveted bachelor in Springfield and has a number of dates ("The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemapetilons", 5F04). This, however, ends rather abruptly when Apu is married to Manjula in a wedding that had been arranged when both were children. Here, Western stereotypes about arranged marriages and dowry negotiations come into play. The marriage, however, is a happy one, and the Nahasapeemapetilons become the parents of no less than eight children ("Eight Misbehavin", BABF03). This is not only a manifestation of the cliché of an extended immigrant family but also another dig at overpopulation in India and the alleged particular fertility of Indian women (Tuncel & Rauscher 2002: 163). Close family bonds are a very common stereotype about Indian immigrants, and Apu fulfills this cliché as well through his brother Sanjay who is his partner and most important associate at the Kwik-E-Mart.

Religion also plays a prominent role in Apus life. He is portrayed as a devout Hindu and as a worshipper of the Hindu god Ganesha. A statuette of Ganesha is featured prominently in the Kwik-E-Mart, and the inappropriate reactions of Springfields inhabitants (particularly Homer Simpson and Reverend Timothy Lovejoy) clearly show their ignorance and their religious intolerance. Here, the probably most important function of Apu in the TV series becomes visible: He is an ambassador of Indian religion, philosophy, and culture, "a cultural and spiritual spokesperson for India" (Davé 2005: 324). Apu educates Springfield about such things as reincarnation or vegetarian diet and also embodies values like tolerance and pluralism (Czogalla 2004: 111). Furthermore, he serves "as a vehicle to introduce current views and debates about minorities in the United States" (Davé 2005: 323). Apu is both a symbol of American multiculturalism and the focal point of its immigration debate (Tuncel & Rauscher 2002: 161–162; Gray 2007: 136). The aforementioned episode "Much Apu About Nothing" is an interesting case in point: Here, Apu is in danger of being deported. He has never renewed his student visa and has for years been an illegal alien. In a desperate attempt to stay in the United States, Apu buys forged documents from the local mafia. For a short time, he loses all his ethnic markers (his religion, his clothing, and his work ethic) and even talks without any accent. Instead of being obviously portrayed as an Indian foreigner, Apu is now "acting the part of a stereotypical American" (Beard 2004: 283). He cannot, however, overcome his guilty conscience, and exclaims: "I have brought shame to my parents, to my homeland, and to myself. I cannot deny my roots, […]" (quoted in Turner 2005: 356). It is important to note that there is no identity conflict here. Apu can never be torn between India and America. He loves the United States but will always remain Indian. His story is about integration, not assimilation (Francis 2005; see Kurien 2007). This also holds

true if one considers an incidence that seems to point in another direction. When Springfield is swept away by a wave of patriotism and gives itself the new name “Libertyville”, Apu quickly renames his eight children and substitutes their Indian names with the names of American icons (“Bart-Mangled Banner”, FABF17). Anoop, Uma, Nabendu, Poonam, Priya, Sandeep, Shashi, and Gheet now become Lincoln, Freedom, Condoleezza, Coke, Pepsi, Manifest Destiny, Apple Pie, and Superman. This strange form of immigrant overcompensation is, of course, a cliché in itself. More importantly, the renaming is undone almost immediately. Apus family retains their Indian names.

The magnitude of Apus impact on the perception of NRI and PIO in the United States can hardly be overestimated. The question whether this character has helped or harmed the Indian American community still seems to be undecided. The Canadian journalist Chris Turner, author of “Planet Simpson”, writes:

> Apu is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, he is a broad stereotype with a cartoonishly thick accent […] – reinforcing any number of prejudices about South Asians. On the other hand, Apu is a bona fide pioneer: he was the only recurring South Asian character on a major American sitcom when he first took his place behind the Kwik-E-Marts till in the early 1990s. And he remains the most prominent South Asian on primetime TV, an iconic part of one of Americas most important cultural institutions – strong evidence that South Asians have become a significant segment of the social fabric of the West. (Turner 2005: 345–346)

There are, without any doubt, a number of negative aspects about Apu. As a cliché figure, Apu has indirectly led to many insults to Indian Americans. There is even a specific word for that: The newly-coined verb “to apu” means that someone is acting but particularly speaking like the character from “The Simpsons” (Timmons 2008). The picture of a greedy Indian shopkeeper who cheats customers just to earn a few more cents is viewed as very problematic (Lal 2007: 319). For instance, Apu states at one point: “I love this land – where I have the freedom to say and to think and to *charge* whatever I want” (quoted in Turner 2005: 356, emphasis in original). Many other details of the figure have been criticized, especially the oversimplified portrayal of Hinduism (Czogalla 2004: 113). On the other hand, one has to acknowledge that the very point of the TV series “The Simpsons” is to depict stereotypes (Francis 2005). Among all these clichés, Apu stands out in a very positive way. His figure has experienced a complete makeover from an insignificant stereotype like the hillbilly Cletus to a rounded, multidimensional character that is not only fully integrated in the series and in the life of Springfield but has become an essential part of it. In one episode (“Team Homer”, 3F10), Homer Simpsons bowling team competes against a squad

named "The Stereotypes" which consists of Cletus, Captain McCallister, the Italian restaurant owner Luigi, and janitor Willi. Apu, however, plays in Homers team, which again shows his development away from a mere cliché towards a fully integrated character (Turner 2005: 448–449).

TABLE 1: Apu Nahasapeemapetilon

TV show	"The Simpsons" (1989-ongoing)
Character featured	1990-ongoing
Status	NRI, first generation
Origin	North India (West Bengal?)
Language	Hindi, English
Education	PhD (computer science)
Profession	Retail sale, self-employed shopkeeper (Kwik-E-Mart)
Traditions & values	Religion: Hindu, devout Marriage: endogamous, arranged
Integration/assimilation	Integrated
Identity conflict	No
Stereotypes	Positive: "model minority" Negative: materialism, greed, trickiness

Apu Nahasapeemapetilon is an ambivalent figure. At first, his character centers exclusively round his ethnicity. All his longer appearances in the early seasons of "The Simpsons" have a connection to his Indian origin and his NRI identity. Almost every imaginable stereotype is employed, ranging from his "brown voice" to an arranged marriage. Apu is shown as a talented and hard-working immigrant who is an exemplary member of the Indian American "model minority". What is more, he has strong connections to his motherland India. His origin is very important to him and can be seen in every aspect of his life and daily routine. In the course of the TV series, however, his character undergoes significant changes. Although most biographical details of Apus life that are revealed in later seasons still center around India and his Indian American identity, there are more and more episodes that deal with issues unrelated to his ethnicity. While Apu is still undoubtedly marked as a South Asian immigrant, his function in the series has been modified and broadened. He has become a regular citizen of Springfield who is fully integrated and no longer defined by clichés.

3.2 Neela Rasgotra

In 2003, a PIO became part of the staff in the TV medical drama "ER – Emergency Room". Neela Rasgotra, played by the actress Parminder Nagra, is at first just a medical student coming from London to Chicago. Later, she becomes a medical doctor and one of the main characters in the series. In contrast to Apu, Neela is marked as being from India only by her skin color and her name. She does not wear Indian dress, and she speaks accent-free English. Interestingly, the biography of the figure who was originally supposed to hail from South India was changed after an intervention by the actress (Padmanabhan & Khanna 2006: 38). The character of Neela was now constructed round the real experiences of Parminder Nagra: Just like her family, Neelas parents came to Great Britain from Punjab, and she herself later came to the United States as a twice-migrant. Just like Parminder Nagra, Neela has a Sikh background, but does not practice the religion of her parents. Years later, Parminder Nagra explained the reasons why her personal life had such a strong influence on her role:

> I'm very proud of my Indian heritage, but I didnt want it to become a cliché. I wanted [the authors] to be clever about it. The challenge was to make me grow as a character, and I think I did. (quoted in Carter 2009)

Consequently, there are not many obvious stereotypes and cheap clichés in the figure of Neela. Once again, of course, she represents the "model minority". Intelligent, hard-working, and fairly ambitious she follows a clear career path. In contrast to Apu, Neela has no strong connections to India and her origins. Her mother tongue is English, not Punjabi (which she understands, however). She is removed from the religion and traditions of her family. Still, Neela does experience phases of identity conflict and self-doubt. When her parents try to push her away from her daily work as a medical doctor into an academic career at a prestigious university, she experiences a period of confusion and disorientation. Neela quits her work at the hospital but at the same time rejects an employment offer from the University of Michigan. Being temporarily unemployed, she is forced to take up a job at a local super market, for which she is obviously extremely overqualified. Here, we not only find an often-used cliché (an immigrant being forced to work in a profession far below his or her qualifications), but also a clear parallel to Apu Nahasapeemapetilon and his job at the "Kwik-E-Mart" in Springfield. In contrast to Apu, however, Neela does not stay in the retail business but returns to the hospital where she now follows her career as a surgeon with even greater determination. Here, one could argue that the external expectations and internalized personal ambitions of a "model minority"-Indian American have finally triumphated over an individual, freely chosen lifestyle. In another important question, however, Neela decides

to break with all clichés: She never considers an arranged, endogamous marriage but weds an African American doctor. After his untimely death, she has a number of affairs and ends up in a steady relationship with a white former colleague. She shows no interest in sustained contacts with members of the Indian American community. Her ethnicity is just one of many features of her character and not the sole all-encompassing attribute. Accordingly, the play with clichés and audience expectations that is such an important part of Apus character is almost never applied to Neela.

TABLE 2: Neela Rasgotra

TV show	"ER – Emergency Room" (1994–2009)
Character featured	2003–2009
Status	PIO, second generation, twice-migrant from Great Britain
Origin of family	North India (Punjab)
Language	English, Punjabi
Education	MD
Profession	Surgeon
Traditions & values	Religion: Sikh, not practicing Marriage: exogamous
Integration/assimilation	Widely assimilated
Identity conflict	Yes
Stereotypes	Positive: "model minority" Negative: self-doubt

The character of Neela Rasgotra is more than an assortment of clichés. However, her Indian origin is an essential part of the series figure. There can be little doubt that the introduction of an Indian American character in the TV series "ER – Emergency Room" was primarily used to create a certain ethnic diversity among the staff of the hospital. This is something that can be observed in many TV shows in the United States, particularly in series that involve some sort of team work as in medicine or crime investigation. The inherent sense of political correctness in bringing in minorities is also underlined by the fact that Neelas work as a surgeon encompasses some hero qualities which are typically seen in an intermediate step between a stereotypical depiction and a fully integrated character. As the plot further unfolds, however, the role involves only occasional connections to Neelas PIO identity. Many topics and conflicts that would be expected in a stereotype character are only hinted at or not touched upon at all. This is particularly striking in the question of marriage. Neelas relationship to an African

American doctor and the potential confrontations between and among the families involved are not presented in a way that might include discussion of the question of endogamy within the Indian American community. Such "ethnic topics" do not seem to matter for the further development of the character. Here, it becomes clear that there is a fundamental difference between Neela Rasgotra and Apu Nahasapeemapetilon: While Apus whole character evolves out of and around his ethnicity, Neelas Indian origin is just one aspect of her personality, and more often than not, it is not even shown as a very important one.

3.3 Amita Ramanujan

The third case study is the character of Amita Ramanujan from the TV show "Numb3rs" played by Navi Rawat. Navi Rawat has a PIO background herself (she is the daughter of an Indian-German couple and grew up in America) which was an important reason why she was cast (Kamath 2005). Amita Ramanujan is of South Indian origin. Her family comes from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Amita, however, was born and raised in the United States which makes her an ABCD, an American-Born Confused Desi.[5] Just like Neela Rasgotra, Amita Ramanujans sole ethnic markers are her skin color and her name. The name Ramanujan was chosen in honor of the famous Tamil mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan who spent some years as an NRI in Great Britain. Amita is a mathematics PhD student and later a professor at the fictional California Institute of Science (CalSci) in Los Angeles. In the series, she assists a colleague who helps the FBI solve criminal cases using scientific methodology. Amita Ramanujan is not the main character of the show but appears in almost every episode. Her academic career depicts the classic pattern of the "model minority". Ambition, diligence, and thirst for knowledge reinforce the stereotype of the excellently educated PIO academic. Since Amita is a designated IT specialist she also fulfills the "computer Indian" cliché. From time to time, she is pictured as a "nerd" who spends much time playing a multiplayer online role-playing game (here her avatars name is "Kali Goddess of Destruction"). Nevertheless, Amita is by no means socially isolated but is integrated in many activities.

[5] The acronym ABCD is often used in the (self) description of second-generation South Asian Americans. In contrast to their parents, they have been born in the United States, thereby acquiring the citizenship of that country and becoming PIO. Despite their American nationality, the color of their skin marks them as *desi*, meaning from (our) country (derived from the Hindi word *desa* meaning land). Identity conflicts and the ambiguity of their status frequently make ABCD confused.

Amita does not show great interest in her ethnic origin or in her Indian heritage. In many ways, she is completely assimilated into American cultural life. It is only when, in a specific episode, Amita is confronted with the hardship of female Tamil immigrants who become the victims of trafficking that she questions her own ethnic identity. From this moment on, Amita becomes more aware of the problems and identity conflicts of a second-generation immigrant. The dilemmas of an ABCD are hinted at more frequently. Particularly the question of marriage becomes a special field of conflict between Amita and her parents: When Sanjay and Tapti Ramanujan arrange a marriage for their daughter she rejects the groom, a banker from Goa, calling him "a total ass". Later, a second parental attempt to arrange a relationship fails. Meanwhile, Amita has started dating a non-Indian, white professor (the TV shows main character Dr. Charlie Eppes). Here, we find a rather subtle stereotype: Asian men are seen as cold and emotionless. A happy life with them seems to be impossible; a marriage must be considered undesirable. Hence, only a white "prince charming" can offer an Asian woman the love, affection, and attentiveness which she cannot find in a relation with a countryman (Danico & Ng 2004: 127). For a long time, Amita does not have the courage to tell her parents about her liaison with a white colleague. After the Ramanujans finally give their blessing to the relationship, Amita marries Charlie in the very last episode of the series.

TABLE 3: Amita Ramanujan

TV show	"Numb3rs" (2005–2010)
Character featured	2005–2010
Status	PIO, second generation, ABCD
Origin of family	South India (Chennai, Tamil Nadu)
Language	English, Tamil
Education	PhD (mathematics)
Profession	University professor
Traditions & values	Religion: Hindu, not practicing, not believing
	Marriage: exogamous, rejects arranged marriage
Integration/assimilation	Widely assimilated
Identity conflict	Yes
Stereotypes	Positive: "model minority", "computer Indian"
	Negative: "nerd", self-doubt

In comparison to Apu Nahasapeemapetilon and Neela Rasgotra, Amita Ramanujan embodies yet another type of an Indian American TV character. Her PIO background is a mere side aspect of her figure, not the all-defining attribute. Amita is not an Indian American who happens to be a mathematician; she is a mathematician who happens to be of Indian origin. She is shown as a widely assimilated figure. Her inner conflicts mostly evolve around issues completely detached from her ethnicity. Amitas difficulties in adapting to her life as a university professor have no relation to her parents home in India. Only on rare occasions does her PIO and ABCD identity play any role at all. Stereotypes and clichés are hardly to be found.

4. Conclusion

The appearance of more and more Indian or Indian American characters in mainstream American TV reflects their growing significance. The Indian American community has crossed the TV perception threshold. The portrayal of NRI and PIO mirrors their integration into the host society. While they were nothing more than shallow cliché figures at first, more recent characters are rounded and multidimensional. Ethnicity and the Indian heritage which used to be the sole defining traits are now for the most part just facets of an Indian American characters personality. Apu Nahasapeemapetilon from the TV series "The Simpsons" embodies this development like no other figure. For twenty years, he has been the most prominent and influential Indian American character on TV, not only in the United States but also in many countries all over the world. During this span, Apu has undergone a remarkable change from a one-dimensional stereotype to a complex and rounded character and has earned the respect and admiration of the Simpson family and all inhabitants of Springfield. Through overcoming the cliché, Apu is more than a role in a TV show. He is a symbol of the integration achievements of Indian Americans.

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