

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Sandhya Shukla. *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/56w280nm>

Journal

Comparative Studies in Society and History, 47(3)

ISSN

0010-4175

Author

Leonard, Karen

Publication Date

2005-07-01

DOI

10.1017/s001041750524029x

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Sandhya Shukla. *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Sandhya Shukla has written a highly interdisciplinary comparison of Indian diasporic cultures in Britain and the United States. Specializing in Anthropology and Asian American Studies, she is particularly strong on historical and literary text analysis. She says, "The relational aspects of a range of texts and experiences, which include historical narratives, cultural organizations, autobiography and fiction, musical performance and films, are of paramount importance in this critical ethnography" (20). Contending that the Indian diaspora confronts "a simultaneous nationalism and internationalism," she is celebratory about India and "formations of Indianness," and uses phrases like "amazing force" and "wildly multicultural" (17). Her exploration shows "the tremendous impulse to multiple nationality that Indianness abroad has made visible" (14) and, "the amazing persistence of Indian cultures in so many places" (22).

Shukhla covers Indian immigrants in both sites from before World War II.

The postwar part of the subtitle is not really taken up analytically, as she structures her historical material more along the lines suggested by changes in immigration law and successive waves of immigrants from India in each country. Her method is selective: she says, “there is no singular history, but a set of stories about the past . . .” (27). Discussing “Little Indias,” she focuses on Jackson Heights, New York, and Southall, London. Comparing diasporic literature about the United Kingdom and the United States, she focuses on Krishnalal Shridharani, Dalip Singh Saund, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Abraham Verghese, and Urmila Mohapatra. Examining immigrant newspapers, journals, and films, she focuses on *India Abroad* and *News-India* in the United States, and *India News*, *India Weekly*, *Asian Times*, and *India Mail* in the United Kingdom.

Shukla’s contrast of the Indian diasporas in Britain and the United States is compelling and convincing. She examines early diasporic writers to show that “Ideologies of America . . . gave new ideas of nationality, of Americanness and Indianness, a flexibility unmatched by British national discourses” (137). Comparing *Bhaji on the Beach* and *Mississippi Masala*, she remarks, “The stories for ethnicity in these cultural occasions, then, are differently informed, in Britain by antiracism and in the United States by multiculturalism, and lead to very different senses of nationality and identity, in a contemporaneous set of representations” (245). She also discusses Apache Indian and other bhangra and cosmopolitan music developed by the second generations, and the ways in which “India is a metaphor that can do all sorts of work in a conceptual space far removed from the nation-state” (230). Surprisingly, her examination of newspapers and journals finds “how little the self-appointed cultural representatives of each of the national communities knew about one another, and how differently they saw themselves . . .,” throwing into question “the presumed diasporic connections among Indians around the world” (205). Here some ethnographic work, perhaps on global distributions of family members and marriage arrangements, probably would have shown strong connections (as my own ethnographic work demonstrates).

Looking at race, generations, and gender, as well as ethnicity, Shukhla has brought together an engaging range of interdisciplinary work and used it well to make points “about the subjectivity of nation and nationality, in which India and Indianness are deeply fissured, heterogeneous, and yet tremendously powerful” (177). Readers already familiar with much of the material will appreciate the ways in which Shukhla engages with it, and the section on immigrant newspapers and journals presents new material. Undergraduates may find the range and complexity of her observations somewhat daunting. One could wish for more attention to non-Hindus and, paradoxically, more interrogation of diasporic Hindu religious and cultural nationalism. Shukla seems to consider “traditionalist and politically conservative ideas in the name of cultural celebration” to be “static definitions of community,” while she is investigating “a more

complicated and hybrid set of identities,” “vital and dynamic cultures” (246–47). Unfortunately, Hindu religious and cultural nationalism is anything but static (and others are investigating this). There is no bibliography, and a few minor errors (of agreement, and non-words like “identificatory” and “narratival”) suggest that the editing could have been more rigorous.

———Karen Leonard, University of California at Irvine