

Switchovers: Indian American Drinking Culture at Cornell

Trice Award Submission
5/1/06

Samir Patel (shp27@cornell.edu)
Nausheen Rokerya (nr55@cornell.edu)
Maneka Singh (ms442@cornell.edu)

Table of Contents:

Introduction.....3

Outside Research.....4

Methods.....9

Findings.....11

Analysis of Ideology Change.....18

Causes of Ideology Change.....22

Conclusions.....32

Works Cited.....35

Appendix.....37

Introduction

Cornell University is an Ivy League school with a large population of Indian students. Despite their conservative family backgrounds, these students exhibit a tightly cohesive sub-culture at Cornell, which is characterized by heavy drinking. A sub-culture is defined as a distinctive cluster of ideologies, cultural forms, and other practices, that are shared by a smaller group of people within a larger, dominant culture. The Indian sub-culture at Cornell has values that differ slightly from that of mainstream Cornell culture. These values derive from the conservative Indian upbringing that most of these students received. An example of a difference between the main culture and the subculture is the Indian student's tendency to strictly preserve the week for studying, as opposed to mainstream Cornell culture, in which the weekend often begins on a Wednesday or Thursday night. These differences have led to the emergence of a smaller group within the Indian community at Cornell. We interviewed a sample of this group, which consisted of 12 Indian American students (hereinafter referred to as "switchovers") who abstained from alcohol during their first year at Cornell, but later began drinking, after undergoing an ideological change. This group of switchovers faced a unique assimilation dilemma in which they were forced to balance two opposing cultures: traditional Indian culture and mainstream Cornell culture. In our paper, we will argue that these switchovers adopted mainstream Cornell culture. The adoption of this culture and consequent ideological shift was caused by a combination of socialization needs, avoidance of fears, and academic pressures.

Outside Research

Origins of traditional view on alcohol

Drinking in the Indian community is looked down upon. This aspect of traditional Indian culture can be traced back to the days of British colonization, when Indians often only had access to “English alcohol”. This type of alcohol was typically associated with British rule, and therefore unpopular (Bennett et. al 1998: 3). Accordingly, in contrast to other countries, alcohol consumption was not considered central to normal social life or daily meals in pre-colonial India. As a result, alcohol remains relatively taboo today. This is strongly supported by the existence of an underground alcohol market in India, commonly found in poor Indian villages in which desperate drinkers make their own alcohol at home (World Health 2004). Thus it can be inferred that while there is in fact some heavy drinking among Indians, these instances are repressed due to cultural and religious norms, and the lower class stigma attached to it.

Alcohol in Hinduism

The Indian aversion to alcohol is not only influenced by its political history, but by its religious history as well. "Perhaps the first religion to prescribe abstinence from alcohol" was Hinduism. “Drinking...is deemed to be a sin of alarming proportions” (Dua 1996:3). According to an excerpt from the World Health Organization’s World Health Forum titled, *The Most Sensible Thing is Not to Drink*, “abstinence from alcohol is a value which is deeply rooted in Indian culture and religion, and as such is the only approach to drinking that could be called ‘sensible’ in this country. Hinduism has the largest following in India, and in the Hindu scriptures drinking is referred to as one of the

five heinous crimes, which include murder and adultery” (Ranganathan 1994: 3). The abstinent culture of the subcontinent can therefore be largely attributed to the strong presence of Hinduism in India. Many Indians perceive drinking as sinful and morally unacceptable. This is illustrated by the fact that “it is illegal to advertise alcoholic beverages in India, and [drinking does] not have a cultural role to play in religious and social activities” (Ranganathan 1994: 3). Alcohol does not have a strong presence in Indian culture since it is not in the media or readily available at social events. This sharply contrasts alcohol’s pervasive role in western culture, where alcohol is advertised in television, magazines, and movies. As a result, alcohol consumption in India is relatively lower (.82 liter of pure alcohol per capita per year) than most of the world, as illustrated below.

WHO Global Status Report on Alcohol 2004

Table 3: Total recorded alcohol per capita consumption (15+), in litres of pure alcohol

Country	Total	Country	Total	Country	Total	Country	Total
Iran	0.00	Brunel Darussalam	0.49	Kiribati	1.66	Jamaica	3.37
Kuwait	0.00	Bhutan	0.57	Mozambique	1.67	Bolivia	3.43
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (the)	0.00	Syrian Arab Republic (the)	0.62	Fiji	1.69	El Salvador	3.45
Saudi Arabia	0.00	Micronesia (Federated States of)	0.64	Côte d'Ivoire	1.71	Seychelles	3.61
Somalia	0.00	Tunisia	0.65	Maldives	1.72	Cuba	3.65
Bangladesh	0.00	Turkmenistan	0.77	Kenya	1.74	Cameroon	3.66
Mauritania	0.01	India	0.82	Lesotho	1.83	Cape Verde	3.72
Pakistan	0.02	Solomon Islands	0.86	Mongolia	1.96	Philippines (the)	3.75
Algeria	0.03	Equatorial Guinea	0.90	Israel	1.99	Ukraine	4.04
Nepal	0.08	Ethiopia	0.91	Ecuador	1.99	The form. Yugoslav Rep. of Mac.	4.12
Comoros	0.08	Togo	0.95	Dem. Republic of the Congo	2.01	Lebanon	4.13
Yemen	0.08	Papua New Guinea	1.01	Gambia (the)	2.27	Antigua and Barbuda	4.24
Indonesia	0.10	Malaysia	1.06	Honduras	2.28	Burkina Faso	4.38
Egypt	0.10	Djibouti	1.08	Congo	2.36	China	4.45
Niger (the)	0.11	Vanuatu	1.11	Namibia	2.39	Belize	4.50
Jordan	0.11	Benin	1.22	Georgia	2.41	Guam	4.50
Guinea	0.14	Armenia	1.23	Albania	2.51	Mexico	4.62
Sri Lanka	0.18	Oman	1.32	Nicaragua	2.53	Peru	4.68
Iraq	0.20	Viet Nam	1.35	Bahrain	2.63	Zimbabwe	5.08
Chad	0.23	Madagascar	1.38	Singapore	2.73	United Republic of Tanzania	5.29
Sudan (the)	0.27	Samoa	1.42	United Arab Emirates (the)	2.75	Brazil	5.32
Cambodia	0.36	Malawi	1.44	Guinea-Bissau	2.76	Botswana	5.38
Myanmar	0.36	Turkey	1.48	Kazakhstan	2.89	Costa Rica	5.45
Morocco	0.41	Uzbekistan	1.52	Angola	2.91	Kyrgyzstan	5.50
Tajikistan	0.41	Eritrea	1.54	Zambia	3.02	Dem. People's Republic of Korea	5.68
Qatar	0.44	Ghana	1.54	Liberia	3.12	Iceland	5.74
Senegal	0.48	Guatemala	1.64	Mauritius	3.16	Norway	5.81
Mali	0.49	Central African Republic (the)	1.66	Trinidad and Tobago	3.22	Suriname	5.82

Country	Total	Country	Total	Country	Total
Guyana	5.84	Gabon	7.97	Hungary	11.92
Colombia	5.92	Belarus	8.12	Denmark	11.93
Chile	6.02	Canada	8.26	Spain	12.25
Panama	6.04	Thailand	8.47	Lithuania	12.32
Sao Tome and Principe	6.07	United States of America (the)	8.51	Slovakia	12.41
Dominican Republic (the)	6.11	Argentina	8.55	Portugal	12.49
Haiti	6.51	Bosnia and Herzegovina	8.62	Austria	12.58
Slovenia	6.55	Poland	8.68	Croatia	12.66
Saint Vincent and Grenadines	6.58	Venezuela	8.78	Germany	12.89
Sierra Leone	6.64	Italy	9.14	Bermuda	12.92
Paraguay	6.66	Australia	9.19	Reunion	13.39
Cyprus	6.67	Dominica	9.19	France	13.54
Barbados	6.70	Bahamas (the)	9.21	Republic of Moldova (the)	13.88
Lao People's Democratic Republic (the)	6.72	Greece	9.30	Ireland	14.45
Malta	6.74	Latvia	9.31	Czech Republic (the)	16.21
Rwanda	6.80	Burundi	9.33	Luxembourg	17.54
Sweden	6.86	Swaziland	9.51	Uganda	19.47
Azerbaijan	6.94	Netherlands (the)	9.74		
Uruguay	6.96	New Zealand	9.79		
Bulgaria	7.13	Estonia	9.85		
Japan	7.38	Netherlands Antilles	9.94		
Grenada	7.39	Nigeria	10.04		
Saint Kitts and Nevis	7.62	Belgium	10.06		
Romania	7.63	United Kingdom (the)	10.39		
French Polynesia	7.68	Finland	10.43		
Republic of Korea (the)	7.71	Saint Lucia	10.45		
South Africa	7.81	Russian Federation (the)	10.58		
New Caledonia	7.83	Switzerland	11.53		

Sources: FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), World Drink Trends 2003

Note: Several African countries (Burundi, Nigeria, Swaziland and Uganda) appear in the list in the top 30 positions of adult per capita consumption. This is because the calculations were based on FAO data which included fermented beverages and estimates of beer produced locally from sorghum, millet and other agricultural products.

Traditional Indian culture places enormous value on scholastic success and hard work, leading to a large Indian presence on most competitive college campuses. According to an article in *The Statesman*, “Ivy-League colleges bear an indelible Indian stamp, with a majority of Indian students dominating the sciences especially, statistics, mathematics and engineering. Each of these individual disciplines boasts of a maximum of Indian PhD students, and even among the faculty most Indian Americans have obtained their doctorates from US universities” (Chattopadhyay 2005: 1). This emphasis

on educational attainment underlies another central cultural belief held by Indians that financial success is life's main goal, and that hard work is the way to attain it.

Cultural Norms

Traditional Indian culture is characterized by strict cultural norms. A norm expresses the behaviors that are expected by others and are culturally acceptable ways of achieving outcomes. Norms are essentially rules and regulations. Because of the community's tight adherence to these norms, any deviation from them leads to serious consequences. In one example, "behavioural guidelines were issued by local [Indian] magistrates following complaints from locals upset by foreigners who failed to respect local custom and tradition... The guidelines represent[ed] a conservative view of public etiquette...particularly with reference to cigarettes and alcohol" (Foster 2005: 1). This example of community backlash illustrates the extreme conservative nature of Indian culture. Traditional Indians are less tolerant of Western infiltration into their tightly preserved way of life.

Parental Values

When looking at the educational expectations of many Indian immigrant parents, it is important to look at the motivation behind their journey. There is much evidence supporting a primarily educational immigration motive. According to studies at Hamline University, "poor and uneducated Indians aren't allowed to migrate to the United States" (Ligon, et. al. 2002). This illustrates why most Indian parents view the educational opportunities available in the US as a privilege, and insist that their children take full advantage of them. For this reason, Indian parents tend to place high amounts of pressure on their children to succeed academically. Additionally,

“most who come are motivated by career advancement. Nearly two fifths of the foreign doctors in the United States are Indian or Pakistani” (Ligon, et. al. 2002: 5). Furthermore, most of these immigrants “work as engineers, academics, and scientists or in the medical profession” (Ligon, et. al. 2002: 5). When looking at the types of professions typically pursued by these Indian immigrants, one will notice that most if not all of them are ones that require continued education and extensive training. This trend is reflected in the distribution of career fields chosen by our students, all of which are either engineering majors, or pre-medicine.

Filial Piety

Indian culture has traditionally held strong to the concept of filial piety, defined as blind respect for parents under all circumstances. In a study on Indian mothers, “maternal valuing of Filial Piety was associated with greater exertion of parental control...Positive associations were found among [filial piety and authoritative parenting] for Indian mothers, reflecting Hindu beliefs” (McHale et. al. 2003: 476).

Closing the Gap

One of the difficulties our group encountered in its quest for outside research was a gap in information directly discussing alcohol consumption among Indian college students. We believe that there are several reasons behind the existence of this gap, having to do with the nature of the topic itself. Alcohol, as we have discussed, is still considered taboo even in today’s Indian communities. Because it is taboo, there seems to be little interest in researching this topic. Our research has made one of the first strides toward filling this gap with its investigation of Indian drinking at Cornell.

Methods

To gain insight for our study, we used the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. This method allows for formulation of the meaning of certain behaviors by individuals or groups. The basic techniques used in this method include simultaneous data collection and analysis, in addition to comparison and contrast of information obtained from interviews to identify themes, and direction for our research.

We selected 12 Cornell undergraduates, all Indian students, who began drinking only after their freshman year of college. Of our interviewees (hereinafter referred to as “students”), five were male and seven were female. Demographically, nine were from the northeast, one was from the Midwest, one was from the west, and one was from the south. When questioned about their religious affiliation, three students identified themselves as being Jain, and nine as Hindus. We conducted each interview with either one or two group members present, depending on the student’s comfort level and preference when discussing this topic. In certain instances, we felt that students would be inclined to more thoroughly answer the posed questions if in the presence of only one interviewer. For those interviews where two group members were present, one group member primarily asked questions and took some notes, while the other took detailed notes. After each interview, the two interviewers discussed their observations, combined their notes, and composed a memo conveying the general themes of the interview. (In interviews where only one interviewer was present, the interviewer compiled his/her field notes to construct a memo.)

After all the interviews and memos were completed, our group began a preliminary analysis of the data. We formulated a chart to help us categorize our data,

making trends more apparent. We then compiled a list of additional follow-up questions to ask our students. These questions then helped fill in gaps in our data that had become noticeable only after our preliminary analysis. Based on the interviews, our group then brought these questions to certain students (to whom our new questions were applicable,) making sure to explain to them the purpose of this additional questioning.

Following this round of questioning, we edited our original chart with this additional data. We then used our outside research in conjunction with our data to formulate our thesis.

Findings

Original Student Ideology

Traditional Indian culture places enormous value on scholastic success and hard work. This value underlies the cultural belief among many Indians that financial success is life's main goal, and that hard work is the sole way to attain it. In our interviews, this cultural value was cited as helping to shape our students' original ideologies. One subject described his parents as being "work-a-holics" and said that every day all his dad did was "go to work and come home." According to these students, parents did not particularly value the importance of "having fun" or "being a kid". This work-focused attitude was extreme in some cases, and manifested itself in all spheres of life for our students. In fact, one subject said that her parents "didn't want her hanging out with guys, because they thought it would be distracting...and [negatively] effect [her] schoolwork." She was even prohibited from watching TV on weekdays, unless she had finished her homework for the next day. One household norm described by all of our subjects was obedience. Above all, our students were always expected to (and did) listen to their parents. They abided by the "work-first; play only if you have extra time" mentality instilled in them by their parents.

These students had grown up with immigrant parents from a country where "drinking by young adults, especially students in school, college or university or even in jobs, particularly in small towns and the countryside, is deemed to be a sin of alarming proportions." (Dua 1996: 3). To say the least, alcohol was strictly prohibited. It is important to note that while growing up, this home culture was shared by the entire Indian community, for each of our students. In one case, the subject said the "Indian

community was so tight, that anything [he] did could get back to his parents [via his friends].” Disobeying parents was a highly consequential mistake for our subjects and their friends to make. Some of their non-Indian friends did go out to parties and drink, but because the abstaining group was so large, our subjects never felt pressured or left out enough to drink.

Cornell Culture

Upon entering college, our subjects realized that the culture found at Cornell was different from that which they were used to at home. They were particularly surprised that this culture, which so heavily promoted drinking and partying, was so willingly embraced by the Indian community (unlike at home). One subject did not “expect that this many Indian kids would drink” and was stunned as to how much Indians did drink. They found that this new culture assigned significant value to “having fun” and recreation, as well as doing well in school: the “work-hard, party-hard” mentality that many of their non-Indian high school friends embodied, was also a value for many Cornell Indians. This new culture recognized that college was not only about working and studies, but also on “experiencing the college life”: dating, going to parties, and of course, drinking. Some of the immediate friends our switchovers made (all except for one) drank frequently and went out to parties on the weekends. In this culture, it was expected that Monday thru Thursday was for working, and the weekend was for going out. In an attempt to avoid becoming an outsider, our subjects attended parties, partially socializing into the night scene, but still refused to drink. One reason for this was that they still had a strong group of abstinent friends with which to attend parties. The presence of this group at parties made remaining abstinent much easier. One student

found herself in vaguely familiar circumstances. Similar to her situation back home, she still had a network of people who shared her values, so she did not feel completely left out. Another said that his first group of friends did not drink at all, and because of this, he too remained abstinent. Instead, he “watched movies and ate popcorn” on the weekends with his friends. Another subject said that he felt somewhat pressured by upperclassman that drank, and because of this, made a pact with his core group of friends never to give in and start drinking.

Ideology change

When Indian American students enter Cornell, many bring with them the mentality that drinking is wrong. This idea that drinking is “socially, religiously and morally unacceptable” (Dua 1996: 3) is a commonly held belief among Indians. A belief expresses cause and effect relations, meaning that certain actions will lead to certain outcomes. In Indian culture, it is believed that drinking is unacceptable and will inevitably impede one’s ability to succeed. This includes social drinking, or drinking “in moderation”. One of our students said that her “parents didn’t want [her] doing things that would get in the way of school, like dating [and especially drinking].” The belief that alcohol is unacceptable agrees with the Indian belief that academic excellence is a student’s number one priority. These and other beliefs comprise the traditional Indian ideology. In their book, The Cultures of Work Organizations, Trice and Beyer define ideology as a “shared, interrelated set of beliefs about how things work” (Trice and Beyer 1993: 33). This ideology was shared by all of our switchovers upon their arrival at Cornell. On the rare occasion that they had actually been exposed to a more liberal, alternative ideology, decisions were influenced by both parental expectations and

internalized beliefs. For example, one student recalls her thought process in high school with the quote: “Some of my friends would drink, but I never did because I did not want my parents to find out and I didn’t really think it was worth getting in trouble for.” Although there were alternative ideologies present in their social networks, our students were often denied access to these ideologies by parental restrictions, such as curfews. Restricted access to the outside world, combined with high academic expectations, is what shaped the traditional Indian ideology shared by our students. At home these Indian students dealt with rigid family values that molded their ideology, so it was only natural for them to begin rethinking their ideologies upon coming to college and being faced with a different set of circumstances.

Many of the students interviewed changed their life goals between the time that they entered college and the time that they began drinking. This indicates a shift in ideology. One student’s goal during her freshman year was to do well in school so that she could prove to herself and her parents that she could in fact handle a Cornell workload. She never anticipated partying and socializing as being a big part of her life, but “the people [she] lived with went out to parties a lot so she went with them once in a while” and became exposed to alcohol. Similarly another student’s goal was to maintain a primarily academic focus. His goal was to excel academically, compensating for the fact that he did not get into MIT. During his freshman year, he placed “an emphasis on school work, not being social,” going out to parties only occasionally. Another male student said that his goal during freshman year was to “do well academically and get a high GPA.” A third male student’s goals were “not to get kicked out of Cornell, not to drink, to make good friends, to have a girlfriend, and to socialize.”

These goals reflect the belief prevalent among the South Asian community that a strong work ethic is the only avenue to success. This work-focused attitude was extreme in some cases, and manifested itself in all spheres of life for our students when they were teenagers. In fact, one subject said that her parents “didn’t want her hanging out with guys, because they thought it would be distracting...and [negatively] effect [her] schoolwork.” She was even prohibited from watching TV on weekdays, unless she had finished her homework for the next day.

One household norm described by all of our subjects was obedience and filial piety. Only a few students thought that making friends was an important thing to do at college. Since all of these students came from very religious and strict families where the parents were against drinking, this perspective made logical sense. One female student described her parents as being extremely overprotective and sheltering during her freshman year. Her parents often called her to check up on her and make sure she was doing her schoolwork. The continued presence of her parents in her college life was primarily why she felt school had to be her main focus freshman year.

We also proposed open ended questions meant to stimulate our students’ own thoughts and reflections on the current ideology held by so many Indians at Cornell. When asked why she thinks so many Indians drink at Cornell, one student said, “in general Indian parents are conservative, so kids probably felt restricted before and when they got to college they feel that they could let loose and not live under parents’ rules.” For these students, college represented a first experience away from home while on their own, and therefore their first chance to make their own decisions and not worry about what their parents would say or think. Trice and Beyer support this idea, stating that,

“when the old understandings do not seem applicable to new circumstances, new edifices may be constructed without explicitly taking the old ideologies into account” (Trice and Beyer 1993: 36). When these Indian students came to college they tried to apply their old understandings to the drinking culture on campus and succeeded for some time, but eventually came up with a new understanding to make sense of their new surroundings.

Our next set of questions dealt with the student’s goals, post ideology change. By sophomore year, these students had indeed altered their goals and put in place a new ideology that allowed them to begin drinking alcohol. One student said that her goals changed during her sophomore year when she realized that “it is important to have fun in college” before she has to go into the real world. For her, school was still significantly important, but socialization had moved up a few steps on the priority ladder as well. Another student said that he was more social during his sophomore year, and was willing to accept a slight drop in grades in return for being able to make more friends. He realized that school was not everything and that balance between work and play was important. A third student says that his goals now, after starting to drink, place less importance on getting good grades. Now, his academic efforts have been reduced, as he just tries to “get by” with B’s instead of striving for A’s in all of his classes. He too prioritized, discovering that being social was more important to him than getting good grades. A male student says that his goal not to drink has changed. As a common denominator, all of these students explicitly commented that they now thought that drinking was not as big a deal as they thought it was before they started drinking. Trice and Beyer explain this phenomenon: “After being acted upon and further articulated, the ideology begins to be taken for granted as an inevitable part of ongoing social life” (Trice

and Beyer 1993: 38). After being at Cornell for a year these students were exposed to a new set of beliefs.

For these four students the belief that doing well academically leads to success was replaced by the belief that a balance between work and social life is necessary. With this new ideology in place, drinking became an acceptable practice. Their old ideology left no room for alcohol, which serves to explain their abstinence during their first year. Coming to Cornell introduced a new ideology changed the beliefs they had coming in to Cornell. As they adapted to the Indian culture at Cornell, they embraced the ideology of most college students that drinking is an acceptable practice. After internalizing this new ideology, these students then allowed themselves to begin drinking.

Analysis of Ideology Change

What forces fuel this ideological and cultural transition? Trice and Beyer suggest that there exist certain variables that affect how difficult it is to change a given culture. They identify three factors that are likely to affect cultural persistence: 1) the fluidity of current ideologies, 2) members' commitment to them, and 3) the availability of alternative ideologies. Cultural change is more likely to occur when fluidity is high, availability of alternative ideologies is high, and members' commitment to existing ideologies is low (Trice and Beyer: 1993). This framework for cultural change clearly explains our "switchover" phenomenon.

Each of Trice and Beyer's three factors is present in this traditional culture, and is supported by the findings of our interviews. Let us start with the fluidity component. The rigidity of values of traditional Indian culture is strictly superficial. The older generation wants to believe that the values and morals of their parents have been strictly preserved and are fully adhered to today. However, this is simply false. In reality there exists an underground world full of Indian alcoholics. Because rumors travel so quickly and reputations are so easily damaged, these cases, although common, are labeled as rarities. In other words, the values are more fluid than is publicly acknowledged. This is supported in our interviews with accounts of parents who were caught indulging in an occasional drink when they "thought no one was looking", or of older siblings who were seen by the community as "Indian superheroes by day", but were heavy drinkers by night. Fluidity of current ideologies was high, but continuously concealed by the elders of the community.

Alternative ideologies are introduced when Indian teenagers first enter college, representing the popping of the “bubble”. The child is now free to experiment with a new ideology that sanctions drinking. This is where the “confusion” arises. How can a teenager whose family essentially shuns the outside world effectively assimilate into Western culture, while still holding onto his roots? The teenager tries to find a middle ground, finding instead that there are very few compromises to be made between cultures that are so oppositional by nature in their values and norms. This is further complicated when the newly arrived college student sees his older Indian peers drunkenly deviating from the traditional norm of abstinence, and yet still otherwise embracing their culture. (i.e. Joining dance teams, serving on cultural committees, etc.) The newly emerged adult now finds himself trying to justify his peers’ drinking with new ideologies, while still characterizing them as “Indian” in all other respects.

In our interviews, there was a consistent contrast between goals and personal ideologies from the abstinent period, and those from the drinking period. This shift in values signaled a weak commitment to the original culture’s ideologies. Let us first examine the abstinent period. All interviewees came from households with strict religious and cultural values. The parents and families of most of these students did not drink, nor did they openly sanction drinking. All came from tightly knit Indian communities where others did not drink. The lack of exposure to alcohol left them with little alternatives to abstinence, making their parents’ ideologies easier to accept. Because this dominant culture was the only one they knew, they assumed that other Indian students at Cornell would generally be abstinent as well. All of the interviewees reported shock upon arriving to Cornell and seeing the heavy drinking atmosphere at

Indian parties. Initially, their parents' voices rang in their heads and the thought of doing something out of what they had thought to be the norm was unappealing. Additionally, they all had their parents' hard work ethic, and as a result, academic focus was a commonly cited reason for remaining abstinent. These students felt as though alcohol would shift focus away from what they (and their parents) valued most, the academic experience. More importantly, the number of students remaining abstinent at this point was higher, and the presence of this group at parties made peer pressure easier to handle.

However, as Trice and Beyer would have predicted, their commitment to the abstinent lifestyle faded, as time away from home weakened ties to their families' cultures. They all gave in after (a maximum of) two years of socialization into the Indian community, which included the completion of other various assimilation processes, namely social and academic. During freshman year, social circles within the community had not yet developed. Students generally lived with strangers, and it was not until sophomore year that stronger ties within the Indian community were built. Peer pressure became more visible, and internal conflicts increased. For example, during his sophomore year one student started dating an Indian girl who drank heavily. Although his girlfriend did not match up to his typology of a "proper Indian girl", they both identified themselves as Indians, and he felt as though their relationship itself was acceptable. He soon began to equate her drinking habits with a new type of Indian typology. In other instances, students began drinking after using the first year to assimilate into the academic lifestyle at Cornell. One student spent 1 ½ year confused about his identity while on campus, waited until winter break, when he had proven to himself that he could get good grades, and then started drinking. All interviews indicated

a struggle between a desire to maintain roots and yet still get the full experience of college life.

Causes of Ideology Change

Socialization

One of the main reasons our students chose to begin drinking after their first year at Cornell involved the establishment of strong friendships. At this point in time, they had developed close friendships which enabled them let their guard down in social settings. One student said she never wanted to drink because “[she] didn’t like the feeling of not being in complete control of [her] actions.” Another said

I kept a lot of things to myself, about the guys I liked and stuff like that. I saw that when people got drunk, they would say things that they would normally never say. Like when [my friend] told [another friend] that he had a crush on her for a while. Everyone was shocked, and I remember thinking I would be so embarrassed if I were him.

For the most part, our students were afraid to drink because they did not want to ruin their image, reputation, or the impression their friends had of them. The only people our students felt comfortable drinking with were close friends whom they knew they could trust. For these students, freshman year provided a chance to make new friends and begin to solidify relationships. After these relationships were solidified, some students felt that they could begin drinking because they now had people around them who they knew would take care of them if they needed it. One student expressed this when she described her first drinking experience. “The only reason I felt comfortable drinking was because [my best friend] was there with me to watch out for me or to make sure I didn’t do something I would regret.” The presence of trustworthy friends provided these students with a sense of security. With the comfort of having good friends around them they felt that they could drink and not have to worry about any negative consequences.

Socialization occurs when one imparts to another “how to think and behave to conform to a social group's needs and to attach emotional significance to those thoughts

and behaviors" (Trice and Beyer, 1993: 10). Drinking afforded our students a way to conform to the "work hard, play hard" ideology shared by many members of the broader Cornell community. As college went on, they found that an increasing percentage of their friends had started drinking, leaving them to feel like outsiders. One switchover made a pact with his friends not to drink at college. However as time wore on, he found that many of them had abandoned their pledge not to drink. Another subject found herself and just one other person as the only remaining "two who didn't drink in [her] close group of friends". One student recalls an instance in which he felt left out when his (drunken) friends were laughing at a "dumb joke", but he didn't because he wasn't drunk and didn't really find it funny. The students began finding themselves having less fun at these parties because they felt more and more like outsiders. One of the students grew apart from his freshman friends during the first few months of his sophomore year, and soon made new friends who drank. He soon began going out to parties and drinking. In this sense, alcohol consumption served as a rite of integration. This rite "enables...subgroups...to interact socially and thus receive shared feelings that bind and commit them to the organization" (Trice and Beyer, 1993: 120). Students stated that they became more integrated within their group of friends after they started drinking. One person said, "Everyone said 'welcome to the club' [after taking his first shot]." Another student felt as if he became closer friends with his new group of friends, as he could now partake in their "[crazy] weekend adventures."

Another reason that some of the switchovers chose to start drinking was because they wanted to live up to the expectations of their peers. This was especially true for the males. Some male students began drinking because the girls they were interested in

drank and they wanted to impress them. One student said, “I found out that my girlfriend [who does not attend Cornell] started drinking, and I started drinking so that I would know what it was like before I went and visited her. I didn’t want to look stupid in front of her, so I decided to try drinking at Cornell first.” One of the reasons this student chose to drink was to preserve his image. Another male switchover said that, “when [he] was having problems with his girlfriend and she started drinking, [he] decided to try it as well.” This student thought that his drinking would help place him on the same page as his girlfriend, enabling him to better solve their relationship problems. Another male student said that one reason he wanted to start drinking was because he observed that “guys who drink have a better chance of getting girls. Girls seem to equate drinking with being cool...like the time at [a friend’s house party], [a Cornell student] was beer pong champ and he had a ton of girls all over him”. For this student, drinking seemed to be an avenue for meeting girls and improving his image. For several male switchovers, the need to impress girls was a factor that influenced their decision to start drinking.

After our students had switched over, they found themselves to be better assimilated into the Cornell culture. Whereas before our students often preferred to stay at home on weekends to study or relax, they now blended in with the rest of Cornell's Indian drinkers, often starting their weekends off on a Thursday or even a Wednesday night. One student said that now he frequently “goes to the bars on a Thursday. Sometimes, [he’ll] even go on a Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday, if [he doesn’t] have anything due the next morning. Once, [he] even went out the night before a test...” The students, after switching over, now find themselves to be almost indistinguishable from their Cornell counterparts. This is supported by the difficulties experienced by our group

as we tried to identify these switchovers within the broader Indian community at Cornell. Many a time, we could not tell who had been abstinent at first, and who had started off their freshman year drinking. Although our switchovers still possess elements of their traditional culture, these elements are now much more, if not fully consistent with those values held by other "mainstream" Cornell students. For example, our students still maintain their original, fundamental respect for their parents' wishes. The post-switchover difference in attitudes towards parents lies in our students' willingness to treat their parents wishes more as guidance, as opposed to strict rules, incorporating their own opinions into the decision making process. One of our students said that "my parents wanted me to get a single in the dorm [for my senior year], so I would be more likely to study. I told them I wanted to live with my friends, and after a big fight with my mom, I finally won." The ideological change experienced by our students, leading them to switch over from abstainee to drinker, has afforded them an opportunity to more fully integrate into Cornell's drinking culture. As a result, to an uninformed observer, our switchovers are indistinguishable from other Indian drinkers at Cornell, whereas before, they could be easily identified as the kids who were not as outgoing and talked amongst themselves at parties.

Escaping Fears:

Another reason our student's began to drink was because their fears about drinking were quelled after freshman year. One fear that our entire sample initially exhibited was that of doing poorly in school. In many instances, this was a result of watching their high school friends who drank do poorly in school. One switchover described this when she said, "Lots of kids in my high school drank, but not many that

were in the honors or AP classes." Another student said that he felt he "never would have gotten into Cornell if [he] partied in high school." One student said that the people who drank and threw all the parties were the same ones who "would come to [her] for help in many of [her] classes." However, during freshman year they saw many of their peers drink and still manage to do well in school. One switchover said, "I was always afraid that if I started drinking I'd do badly in my classes. But then I looked at some of the people in my major and some of my friends, and they would do better than me on prelims or projects, and then go out on the week-ends and get trashed!" Another student said, "every time I saw [name withheld] he was wasted, and I always thought 'What a dumb-ass.' But then [name withheld] told me he was ranked #1 in his major. I couldn't believe it." The success of drinking Indian students assuaged the fears of our switchovers about not being able to do well, while still drinking. One student said upon the start of his sophomore year, "When I found out that [my new friends] would drink and still be able to finish their work, I realized maybe it wasn't as bad as I thought." He went on to say that he would never have drank had it not been for his new friends.

Another fear that was eased throughout the course of freshman year was that of losing control over their actions. Our students felt that alcohol would inevitably challenge their ability to maintain control of themselves. "[Name withheld] was always wasted. I remember once he was at Mama T's, dropped his pizza on the floor, picked it up and ate it like nothing happened. This was before I was friends with him, and so I thought he was the dirtiest kid alive." Another explained how "it scared me when my friends would say they didn't remember things from the night before." A few of the females said they were fearful of doing things they wouldn't normally do. One female

student said, "I'm pretty crazy as it as. I was afraid of the things I would do if I got drunk." However, the experiences of freshman year provided the necessary learning experience to make our student's realize that drinking didn't always turn people into a "raging lunatic." A student promptly summed this up in her description of the Indian drinking scene at Cornell. "There were times when people got drunk, but most of the time, people were just buzzed. At a typical party, you'd see a couple of kids that were wasted, and everyone else would be pretty normal." Another student recalls that even when he thought his friends were very drunk, they could act normal when they had to. He remembers, "Once my friend's mom called him while we were walking home from a party. I thought he was going to say something stupid, but he played it off pretty well. She still doesn't know that he drinks." As our students realized that drinking didn't mean eating dropped pizza, proposing to random people on the street, or professing their love for their friends, our students overcame their fear of not being able to maintain self-control.

The biggest alcohol-related fear that our students had was that of their parents finding out. When discussing her freshman experiences, one student said, "my parents would call every weekend night, at around 11 [pm], to see what I was doing. If I was at a party, I'd have to run to the bathroom or a quiet place and pretend I was in my room studying." For one of our students, this fear caused severe anxiety, since one of his close family friends went to Cornell. He said, "if [family friend's name] ever found out that I drank, he would blab it to everyone back home. My parents, grand-parents, uncles, everyone would find out and my reputation would be ruined." Much to their surprise, our students began to realize that their parents were not as big of a threat as they had

originally thought. One student remembers being surprised when his "mom told [him] she didn't want [him] to drink, but told [him] to do it in moderation if [he] was going to do it at all." Another said that upon finding out, his parents "were disappointed in [him], but really didn't give [him] too much trouble about it. They just told [him] to be careful." One female switchover used freshman year to learn how to hide things from their parents. She had a boyfriend throughout the latter half of freshman year, despite not being allowed to date. She said, "I realized that my parents weren't here with me, and that they didn't have to know everything I did. I mean, as long as I didn't get into trouble or do badly in school, they wouldn't have a reason to ask questions." She later used this technique to drink without her parents finding out. By concealing their drinking habits or coming to the realization that parent's did not care as much as our student's thought, the experiences of our students during their freshman year helped eliminate this fear of parents as a reason not to drink.

Academic Pressure

Academic pressure was another factor that influenced the switchovers' decision to drink. All of the students talked about doing well in school as being their main goal when they entered Cornell as freshman. Their cultural background taught them to place a great deal of value on academic excellence. In retrospect, several of our switchovers believe their year of waiting was necessary. Their first year at Cornell was used to become acclimated to their new environment and rigorous course load. One switchover said that freshman year she "had no time to think about drinking. Either [she] was studying or she was working at the hotel school. When [she] had free time, it was used to sleep or hangout in [her] dorm with friends." For her, drinking was not even an option

because she was too busy worrying about how she was doing academically. Another student said that his "freshman year consisted of watching movies in [his] dorm with friends and studying for classes. [He] was worried that [his] grades would drop and did not want to have to face [his] parents if they did." This student was content with hanging out with friends and not going to parties and drinking. He wanted to do well in school and was not about to let anything get in his way. For him, "drinking was just not appealing. Why go out, act retarded, and be hung over the next morning, when you could have just as much fun chilling with friends and be able to do work when you wake up?" Since doing well academically was this switchover's priority, drinking was not an option because it could interfere with his ability study. The traditional Indian belief that doing well academically was of utmost importance inspired these switchovers to do well in school and not drink during their freshman year at Cornell.

By the time these students had completed their freshman year, they had become accustomed to the heavy workload at Cornell, and began to realize that a balance between work and play was not only desirable, but necessary. One student described this realization when he said:

I did really well my freshman year, and so I felt I could let myself go a little bit during sophomore year. I didn't want to be one of those kids that just did well in school and had nothing else going for him. I began to go out more on the weekends [Friday and Saturday], stayed out later, talked to more girls, and did the kinds of things I wouldn't have done before. I still studied, of course, but not as much as before. My grades dropped a bit, but I didn't really care; I still did well.

Another student matched this sentiment when she said that her parents stopped calling her after freshman year, "probably because [she] did well enough that they trusted [her]

more..." serving to reinforce her perception of her own performance. "I figured it would be okay to go out more and [try drinking] because I felt like I deserved it." One student admitted that the first time he drank was after a hard prelim. "The guys in my study group got together and all took a shot [after the exam]. I didn't want to drink at first, but I had done well so I figured what the hell." The students reiterated that they considered academics to be the most important thing at school, and had it not been for their good academic performance during freshman year, they would not have chosen to take that initial drink. One student said, "I would never drink before a big test or paper." Another said, "If I do poorly on a test or fall behind with problem sets, I won't drink until I know the material well enough so I can do better next time." Conclusively speaking for our switchovers, it is clear that academic success throughout their initial semesters at Cornell gave them the confidence needed to start drinking without ruining their academic futures.

Freedom from Inhibitions

Freedom from inhibitions was another reason that many of our switchovers found drinking appealing. Drinking gave them the ability to do and say things that they would normally feel uncomfortable with. One switchover held that before "[she] began drinking [she] would sometimes wish that [she] could be as open as some of her friends were when they drank. [She] especially wished that she could get up enough nerve to tell boys that [she] was interested in them." The desire to be more free and open is what enticed this student to drink. She wanted to be able to say what was on her mind without worrying about the consequences. Many of the other switchovers felt the same way. A male switchover said, "One of my friends started drinking a couple months before I did and I saw how much more relaxed he was at parties. He went from standing in the corner

at a party, to actually dancing. That was the first time I found myself wondering what I would act like if I was drunk.” This student’s sentiment was echoed by many other switchovers. They saw how alcohol gave people an excuse to act in ways they normally would be afraid to. Talking to members of the opposite sex and dancing were what sparked several students’ curiosity when it came to drinking. On the one hand, they were afraid, as mentioned before, and on the other hand they were excited about the idea of being able to temporarily escape their inhibitions. One student said, “I liked the way I acted after a few drinks. I’m glad I began drinking.” The allure of freedom from self-consciousness is one factor that made drinking so appealing to these students. It afforded them an opportunity to do things that they would not do in a sober state.

Conclusion

Our group explored a new frontier with its study on drinking among Indians at Cornell. We focused our research on a group of students who underwent an ideological shift during college that caused them to re-analyze their values and begin drinking, after at least a whole year of abstaining from alcohol altogether. Through their descriptions of home and college experiences, our own knowledge of both traditional Indian and Cornell culture, and outside research, we were able to identify themes that led up to the ideology change, and consequential adoption of mainstream Cornell culture. These emerging themes were socialization needs, avoidance of fears, and academic pressure.

Our method of constant comparative analysis involved questioning 12 students who provided us with deeper insight into this part of the Indian community. Upon gaining this insight, it became apparent that all of our students had started off their college careers with strong familial ties, and the traditionally strict Indian ideology that ensued. By the end of the abstinent period, all of our students exhibited similar signs of having undergone various assimilation processes, encompassing a shift away from this traditional ideology.

These various assimilation processes occurred primarily between the start of freshman and end of sophomore years. They assimilated both academically, and socially. The initial few months of freshman year represented the academic assimilation process, in which students familiarized themselves with the high academic standards at Cornell. During this year, our students' goals were mainly academic in nature, and revolved around meeting both personal and parental expectations. Doing well in school took priority over socializing for all of our students.

Freshman year also induced a social assimilation process. Socially, our students used the year of abstinence to find a group of trustworthy friends. It is during this time that our students found their niches amongst such a large crowd, and made friends that they would later describe as providing them with a sort of safety zone when drinking. Any changes in social networks generally took place during freshman year. Many of our students were able to overcome alcohol-related fears during this period, leaving them with a newly discovered freedom.

Our students reported changing goals as a result of both of these assimilation processes. Generally speaking, our switchovers' goals shifted from being primarily academic in nature, to ones that placed socializing slightly higher on the priority ladder. Our students still maintain many of their original morals, including parental respect, and valuation of education, but are now able to better balance two opposing cultures. By the end of this assimilation, our once easily identifiable abstainees had fully integrated into the rest of the Indian drinking community at Cornell. They have grown, re-prioritized, and completely socialized, becoming indistinguishable from their Indian drinking companions.

Future Research

Future studies may be able to use our research when examining the differences among other Indian sub-groups, such as those students who continue to abstain from alcohol. In this case, our study could be used along with a study of current abstainees to help identify exactly what it was that caused some abstainees to become switchovers, while others did not.

Works Cited

- Bennett, Linda A., Campillo, Carlos, Chandrasheker, C.R., & Gureje, Oye. (1998).
Alcoholic beverage consumption in India, Mexico, and Nigeria. *Alcohol Health
and Research World*. Washington. Vol.22, Iss. 4; pg. 243.
- Chattopadhyay, Shibani. (2005). Blood and Sweat. *The Statesman (India)*. Retrieved
December 7th, 2005 from The Financial Times Online website.
- Dua, M.R. (1996). Viewpoint: Drinking by India Youth Less Than in U.S. *India Abroad
(New York Edition)*. New York, NY. Vol. XXVI, Iss. 28, pg. 3
- Foster, Peter. (2005). Guide to behaviour that's a touch too Western for India. *The Daily
Telegraph*. London: Telegraph Group Limited.
- Frances, Richard J., Mack, Avram H., & Miller, Sheldon I. (2005). *Clinical Textbook of
Addictive Disorders*. New York: Guilford Publications.
- Ligon, Courtney, Leaf, William, & Turk, Fred. (2002). Teacher's Resource Guide to
Asian Indian Culture. Retrieved December 6th, 2005 from Hamline University
website.
- Trice, H.M. & Beyer, J.M. (1993). *The Culture of Work Organizations*. New Jersey:
Prentice Hall.
- McHale, James P., Pearson, Emma, Rao, Nirmala. (2003). Links between socialization
goals and child-rearing practices in Chinese and Indian mothers. *Infant and Child
Development*. Vol. 12, Iss. 5, pgs.475-492.
- Ranganathan, Shanthi. (1994). Alcohol in the Third World. *World Health Forum*.
Retrieved December 6th, 2005 from Unhooked Science Readings website.

World Health Organization Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse. (2004).

Global Status Report on Alcohol 2004. Retrieved December 6th, 2005 from World Health Organization website.

Appendix A

General/Background Information

1. When were you first exposed to alcohol?
2. Do any of your close friends drink?
3. Do the people you live with drink?
4. At what point in your college career did you start drinking?
5. Describe your drinking habits now.

Pre-College

1. Do your parents drink?
 - a. Why? Why not?
2. Did your friends drink?
 - a. Why? Why not?
3. Describe what you did in high school for fun
4. What were your goals in high school? Your friends? Other classmates?
5. Describe the community you grew up in (culture, values, etc)
6. What was your family upbringing like?
 - a. Describe your family
 - b. Describe your friends
 - c. What kinds of values did your parents impose on you?

College- Freshman Year

1. Describe a typical weekday's activities night at Cornell before you began drinking.
2. Describe a typical weekend night's activities at Cornell before you began drinking.
3. Describe your personal goal during freshman year.
 - a. Describe your lifestyle [how much did you study, work, etc]
 - b. Describe your typical weekday [how many hours doing what?]?
Weeknight?
4. Describe a typical Cornell Party that you attend.
 - a. [What did you do?]¹
 - b. [Who did you do it with?]
 - c. [Describe the party]
5. Describe the friends you went to these parties with.
 - a. [Drinking habits]
 - b. [Did you stay with them at the party? What did they do?]
6. What were your impressions of friends that drank? Other Indians that did? Others that didn't.
7. What were your friends' impressions of you?

¹ [] indicate notes for interviewer

The Incident

1. Describe the first time you ever drank a significant amount of alcohol (enough to get buzzed)
 - a. [Who]
 - b. [What]
 - c. [Where]
 - d. [When]
2. Why did you do it? What made you change your mind?
3. Describe how you felt after you had done it.
4. How did peer pressure play into your decision to drink?
5. Did your parents find out? Did you tell them? Why/Why not? What was their reaction? How did you feel about their reaction?

College – Post Freshman Year

1. Describe a typical weekday's activities night at Cornell after you began drinking.
2. Describe a typical weekend night's activities at Cornell after you began drinking.
3. Describe your personal goals, now.
 - a. Describe your lifestyle no [how much do you study, work, etc]
 - b. Describe your typical weekday [how many hours doing what?]?
Weeknight?
4. Describe the typical Cornell Party that you attend.
 - c. [What do you do?]
 - d. [Who do you do it with?]
 - e. [Describe the parties]
5. Describe the friends you go to these parties with.
 - f. [Drinking habits]
 - g. [Did you stay with them at the party? What did they do?]
6. What were your current impressions of friends that drink? Don't drink? Other Indians that drink? Others that didn't.
7. Describe the role alcohol plays amongst your friends.
8. Describe the way you think those friends think of you now that you drink.
9. Describe the way you feel about yourself now that you drink
10. Describe you're typical drinking behavior.
 - a. [Quantity]
 - b. [Quality]
 - c. [How you do it? Drinking games, etc]
11. How do you think drinking has affected you? How has it changed you're outlook/values/ beliefs?
12. What are your favorite benefits of drinking? Why do you do it now?