

# From an Indo-Guyanese Woman to a Guyanese-Canadian Woman: Immigration and Identity in the 1980s

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## Research Question

How did adapting to life in Canada during the 1980s shape the identities of female immigrants from Guyana?

## Abstract

During the 1980s, Indo-Guyanese women emigrated from Guyana to escape economic and political hardships. My mother, Nirmala Mahabir, was one of those women. I conducted an oral interview with her in order to learn about her experiences as a young, immigrant Indo-Guyanese woman living in Canada. Since secondary sources on the history of the Indo-Guyanese community are limited, I used articles and books relating to South Asian and Caribbean immigrant women. Grouping Indo-Guyanese women with South Asian women or Caribbean women, however, erases the distinct culture and history of the Indo-Guyanese community. Taking a historical approach, I examine how changes in family structure, diet, space and community shaped the identity of Indo-Guyanese immigrant women in Canada, focusing specifically on the intersections of gender, race and class.

## Thesis

Experiences based on the intersections of gender, race and class shaped the way that immigrant, Indo-Guyanese women constructed an identity that incorporated aspects of both their country of origin and of Canada.

## Methodology

The main source of my research is an oral history interview conducted with my mother. Secondary sources provided information on the lives of South Asian and Caribbean populations living in Canada in addition to historical context of Guyana and Canada during the 1980s.

## Findings

### Family Structure and Home Life

With a change in her family structure, my mother held a more independent role within the home. She was no longer dependent on the income of her family's business, but relied on her own wages.

### Food as Identity

As a blend of both traditional and non-traditional Indo-Guyanese food, my mother's new diet altered the social meanings of food in regards to gender and ethnicity. Cooking was no longer about her role within the family. Instead, the types of food she ate reflected her new socioeconomic status within Canada.

### Leisure Activities, Space and Community

My mother challenged traditional gender roles by entering spaces that were prohibited to women in Guyana, such as bars and nightclubs. Without a visible Indo-Guyanese community in Canada, however, my mother saw herself more as a 'Canadian' woman rather than a 'Guyanese' woman. Adapting to life in Canada was also a way to combat discrimination.



Flag of Guyana

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag\\_of\\_Guyana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Guyana)

## Conclusion

My mother's immigration experiences constructed an identity that incorporated values from her life in both Guyana and Canada. Immigrant women constantly negotiate their identity in order to build a new life in Canada. By sharing her experiences, my mother gives a voice to the Indo-Guyanese women whose stories have been silenced throughout the history of Canada.



Guyanese-style roti

<http://www.inner-gourmet.com/2012/03/paratha-oil-roti.html>



Guyanese-style dhal

<http://www.inner-gourmet.com/2011/08/guyanese-staple-dhal.html>



Fry bora and potatoes

<http://www.inner-gourmet.com/2012/05/fry-bora-with-shrimp-and-potatoes.html>



Pasta and chicken

<http://www.inner-gourmet.com/2010/03/cheesecake-factorys-louisiana-chicken.html>