Shilpa S. Davé


*Image courtesy of University of Illinois Press.*
Shilpa Davé’s *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* explores how media representations of South Asian American identity register combinations of privilege—such as access to education, capital, and US culture—and difference through racial, ethnic, and national signifiers. *Indian Accents* methodologically attends to performance by examining brownface renditions of the South Asian/American body alongside “brown voice,” or sounds and vocal markers that have become associated with Indian cultural difference in the US imaginary. Bringing together theories of Orientalism with Asian Americanist critique, Davé mobilizes the “accent” as an analytic to argue that monolithic portrayals of South Asian Americans as assimilated outsiders facilitate the classed, US Exceptionalist discourse of the “American Dream” as its racial decorations.

The six core chapters of *Indian Accents* trace two related intellectual arcs through histories of media forms and South Asian American racial representation. The first four chapters form the primary arc of interrogating colonizing understandings of India and white supremacist ideologies within representations of Indian Americans. Chapter One takes on brownface and brown voice in early to mid-twentieth century US film, which culminates in Peter Sellers’ performance of Hrundi Bakshi in Blake Edwards’ *The Party* (1968). Sellers as Bakshi transitions South Asian/Americans from the “native” of British colonialism to the American immigrant, even as Orientalist portrayals of India continue to reflect US geopolitics. Chapter Two uses Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the friendly proprietor of Springfield’s Kwik-E-Mart in FOX’s long-running animated comedy *The Simpsons* (1989–present), to theorize brown voice racial resemblance in animation, and South Asian American visibility after the post–1965 ascent of the model minority myth. Davé analyzes how narrative deployments of Apu’s identity manufacture familiar South Asian/American racial formations as model minority, national outsider, and spiritual guide to the white protagonists.

Chapter Three examines the character Gandhi—loosely based on the historical icon—of MTV’s animated comedy *Clone High* (2002–03) as a non-accented and class-mobile minority emblematic of the South Asian sidekick figure. His reimagining reveals the parasitism of the model minority narrative for second-generation South Asian Americans, as Mohandas Gandhi’s mass civil disobedience evinces for *Clone High* the character Gandhi’s asexual passivity. Chapter Four compares and contrasts Marco Schnabel’s Mike Myers-vehicle *The Love Guru* (2008) and Daisy von Scherler Mayer’s *The Guru* (2002) as critiques of New Age appropriations of Indian spirituality. After creating a history of Indian spirituality in US culture, Davé illustrates how *The Guru*, which stars Indian Briton Jimi Mistry and not a brown-voiced Mike Myers, uses