

HISTORY OF THE SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

In the brief overview that follows, I think it's important to explicitly recognize the lenses through which I've constructed this narrative, in other words the history I've focused on because in the course of this training they will provide us with some of the most salient and relevant themes as we move into a discussion of issues facing the South Asian community in the post 9/11 era and political and social formations within the community.

Throughout the history of South Asian immigration to the United States, patterns of immigration and community have been largely affected by two pressures - racism, on a cultural and institutional level, and our value in the labor market. Whether with regards to the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 or the current INS registrations, racist government restrictions on South Asian migration to this continent has affected who has been allowed into this country - using gender, socio-economic class, region of origin, and other factors to determine right of entry.

Similarly restrictions placed on the entry of South Asian women into the States in the first half of this century or a precarious immigration status based on a high-tech bracero program of H1-B visas illustrates another theme that pervades South Asian immigration history. We have been admitted into this country based on our perceived worth as workers - whether that has been as cheap, exploitable labor in lumber mills or quick, easily expendable trained tech workers. Our status and legitimacy in this country has always depended on our labor value, and this has been a consistent pressure on the South Asian community.

The impacts of state and institutional racism targeting South Asian people as well as our labor value as the source of our legitimacy in this country effects us - as individuals, organizations and communities living in the post-9/11 era. Furthermore, race and labor are familiar factors in the history of any immigrant community in the United States. Drawing out these parallels and common experiences becomes increasingly relevant as people of color organize across communities and as coalitions form.

These factors directly feed a perception within the South Asian community which can be called the "sojourner mentality." Many leave South Asia with the expectation of saving money and returning to their native land quickly with their carefully saved earnings - an expectation which is paralleled in many Latino and Asian communities. Racial hostility and status as restricted-entry laborers serves to accentuate this mentality - whether or not the immigrant ever returns to his or her native country. The perception that he or she is not a full and legitimate member of American society is a perception that pervades not only South Asian community but also their position in this country.

Finally, I'd like to stress the diversity of the South Asian communities. Representing seven major religions, 33 languages, thousands of dialects and an international diaspora, the South Asian experience is diverse and is formed by an array of inter-connected communities.

Dividing South Asian immigration into two distinct waves (1) 1900-1924 (2) Post-1965

1900-1924

- * total number of immigrants in entire period - about 5,000 to 6,000 (small in comparison to other Asian immigrant groups)
- * the vast majority (over 85%) were Punjabi Sikh men
- * Initially recruited by Hong Kong agents to work in the lumber mills of British Columbia, Washington and Oregon
- * Met with extreme hostility - similar to the Chinese laborers who worked on the Western Pacific Railroad lines, the small South Asian community was targeted by white laborers who feared that increased competition for jobs in the lumber mills and iron foundries would lower wages and leave them without work
- * Organizations such as the Asian Exclusion League quickly formed to fight against what newspapers called the "Hindoo invasion" and "turbaned tide"
- * These organizations, often surreptitiously supported by employers, focused on pitting one easily identifiable group against another, instead of blaming the employers for low wages and poor working conditions.
- * A series of race riots occurred during this early period in towns where lumber mills employed groups of South Asian workers. One of the largest such incidences took place in Bellingham, Washington in September 1907. A mob of between 400-500 white men attacked Bellingham's Hindu colonies. Many of the South Asians were beaten and a few escaped and sought refuge on the tide flats on the city's outskirts. Others were driven toward the city limits or jailed. During the course of the disturbance, the indignation of the crowd was fanned to action by speakers who addressed impromptu audiences on the street corners and incited citizens to "help drive out the cheap labor."
- * Racism and racial violence was one major factor that drove the early Sikh immigrants away from the lumber mills of the Pacific Northwest. Another factor, however, was the opportunity to work in the rich farmland of California. Since most of the early immigrants were skilled in agriculture in their native land, the chance to work as hired field laborers was preferred by the vast majority of the South Asian immigrants.
- * The South Asian immigrants, upon migration to California, usually formed ethnic work groups, appointing a "boss man" as their representative to contract work for the group. They began in the Sacramento Valley, working in the orchards, vineyards, and sugar beet fields, moving on to the vineyards and citrus groves of the San Joaquin Valley in central California, and finally to the Imperial Valley in the south working in the cantaloupe and cotton fields. The work groups kept up informal contact with each other throughout the state.
- * The early period of South Asian immigration was almost exclusively male - immigration policies severely restricted the entry of Asian women and families into the United States. This policy of exclusion, was a source of bitterness for many South Asian men.
- * Furthermore, anti-miscegenation laws, which existed in California until 1948, prohibited intermarriage between races.
- * For the majority of South Asian immigrant men, immigration policy as well as restrictions against inter-racial marriages created a dominant lifestyle of bachelorhood, dormitory-style, frugal living.
- * They lived in groups of seldom more than thirty, created labor crews, pooled resources, leased land collectively and lived in shared residences.
- * This lifestyle - so different from the world they had left behind - served to emphasize the immigrants' initial goals in traveling to the United States. Most arrived with seed money loaned from a family member, and intended to work in the States for a time, save money, and return home to purchase land. This was a long and frustrating process, and many never returned to their native country or family.

* Some South Asian men did marry, and in California a growing group of Sikhs married Mexican immigrant women in the rural communities of the Central Valley and Imperial Valley. While these marriages were technically between different races, and so violated state law, most civil authorities sanctioned them, giving the same race on the marriage registry for both bride and groom - "brown," "black," or "white."

* The question of racial status in the United States is an interesting facet in the South Asian immigrant experience. While South Asians faced racial hostility and violence from the outset of their arrival in the United States, the American legal system was largely unprepared ideologically to deal with this group.

* During the first two decades of this century, the issue of whether South Asians should be given naturalization rights was tossed back and forth. In the 1913 case of Kuman Mazumander, the Supreme Court ruled that Indians were eligible for citizenship. In 1923, the Court reversed itself in the case of Bhagat Singh Thind.

* Bhagat Singh Thind, a native of Punjab, immigrated to America in 1913. Working in an Oregon lumber mill he paid his way through University of California, Berkeley and enlisted in the United States Army in 1917, when the United States entered World War I. He was honorably discharged in 1918. In 1920 he applied for citizenship and was approved by the U.S. District Court. The Bureau of Naturalization appealed the case, which made its way to the Supreme Court. Thind's attorneys expected a favorable decision since the year before in the Ozawa ruling the same Court had declared Caucasians eligible for citizenship and Thind, as a North Indian, was by scientific race classifications, Caucasian. However, the Supreme Court found it necessary to qualify "Caucasian" as being synonymous with "white," according to the understanding of the common man of the time. Justice Sutherland expressed their unanimous decision, denying Thind citizenship, "It is a matter of familiar observation and knowledge that the physical group characteristics of the Hindus render them readily distinguishable from the various groups of persons in this country commonly recognized as white. The children of English, French, German, Italian, Scandinavian, and other European parentage, quickly merge into the mass of our population and lose the distinctive hallmarks of their European origin. On the other hand, it cannot be doubted that the children born in this country of Hindu parents would retain indefinitely the clear evidence of their ancestry ... This racial difference is of such character and extent that the great body of our people instinctively recognize it and reject the thought of assimilation."

* Because of the Thind decision, many Indians who were already naturalized had their citizenship rescinded. The Thind decision also meant that the Alien Land Law applied to the many Indian immigrants who had already purchased or leased land.

* In 1920 South Asians owned 2099 acres and were leasing 86,340 acres of farmland. This land was almost exclusively in the Imperial and Sacramento Valleys. After the Thind ruling many landowners lost their property. The actual loss of land at that time of the Thind decision is not easy to estimate since official records, of necessity, hid rather than revealed the true owners.

* The Thind ruling, the ineligibility for land-ownership as well as several other immigration restrictions placed on South Asians in the early 1920s created an exclusionary trend which put South Asian immigration at a virtual standstill by the mid-1920s.

* In fact, the years from 1920 to 1930 saw a numerical decline in the South Asian population in the United States. This trend continued into the 1930s, and was magnified by the economic downturn and later, World War II. In the 1940s, only 400 Indians entered the United States.

Post 1965

* Although the 1946 Luce-Celler Bill loosened restrictions on South Asian immigration as well as allowed South Asians to become naturalized citizens, own property and bring relatives to the States, it is the Immigration Act of 1965 that is a watershed year in the history of the South Asian community, as it is for most Asian communities.

* The Immigration Act of 1965 revised the nature and basis of immigration in America. It basically divided the world into Western and non-Western hemispheres, allowed the latter an annual quota of 170,000 immigrants. Preferences were given to individuals related to United States citizens, political religious or ethnic refugees and, extremely important in the experience of South Asian immigration, to those individuals in possession of special skills determined to be needed by the U.S. labor market.

* The immigration wave pos-1965 differed greatly from the early immigration patterns. First, the number of immigrants was exponentially greater. Immigration after the 1946 Luce-Celler Bill had increased, and between 1945-1965 7,000 Indians and 1500 Pakistanis were allowed entry into the States. After 1965, that number jumped incredibly. From 1971-1980, 164,000 Indians immigrated to the States. Current estimates of the South Asian population in the United States is 1.6 million.

* The previous wave of immigrants had come primarily from Punjab - post-1965 the came from all over South Asia.

* Previously, women accounted from only 1% of the immigrants, now the number of men and women entering the United States from South Asia was roughly equal.

* While the early immigrants preferred the West Coast and rural areas, the new immigrants settled all over the States, with major communities in urban areas in New York, New Jersey, Chicago and the Bay Area.

* While most of the early immigrants had come from rural areas and had been farmers, the majority of the new immigrants came from urban centers and from the educated middle and upper classes. Due to the preferences given to educated technical workers, many were scientists, engineers and doctors in their home country.

* While the early immigrants settled mainly in the agricultural industries, the new wave established careers in the same area of expertise that they practiced in their home country, concentrating in medicine and engineering.

* In the 1990s, under the H1-B visa system, young South Asians were admitted into the United States to fill specific job vacancies at specific companies, many in the high-tech industries. Many times, they were hired as contract workers, through a hiring service based in their home country, and were not offered the same benefit packages as their U.S. born counterparts. Often, the hiring service would take a garnishment of their wages during the period of their employment.

* While their wages were relatively high, especially compared to opportunities in South Asia, many of these workers were over-qualified for their positions and overlooked for promotions. Often, a group of Asian and South Asian workers would be managed or supervised by the lone American-born employee in the department.

* Such an obvious glass ceiling was difficult to fight considering that their status in this country was tied to their continued employment - a situation which became precarious when the dot-com economy soured in the late 1990s. Most U.S. based companies first laid off contracted foreign-born workers before laying off regular employees, which meant that South Asians who had entered under H1-B visas were amongst the first to be laid-off and had to leave the country soon after they lost employment.

* A significant percentage of South Asians change occupation after arrival in a States - especially those who were able to change status from a H1-B visa to a greencard or other

permanent status. Some immigrants enter the independent job market in order to escape discrimination from American employers, becoming entrepreneurs such as restaurant, hotel, gas station owners or taxi drivers.

* A study of New York taxi drivers found that 40% were of Indian or Pakistani origin and many have college and professional degrees in their home countries in fields such as engineering, science and business administration.

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additional questions:

given that immigration legislation affected all Asian groups pretty uniformly, why are we on the whole a much younger immigrant community in terms of time in States (aside from the first 'wavelet') as compared to many (tho not all) Asian communities?

in terms of 'sending' countries / regions: why are immigration patterns in the U.S. so lopsided not only towards certain South Asian countries (i.e. large numbers from India and Pakistan), but also regionally within India (i.e. towards Gujurat and Punjab, (Banglore more represented recently due to computer tech needs – that part's clear))?

what do patterns of immigrant communities from other S. Asian countries or communities look like? what are the settlement-in-the-u.s. patterns? have they clustered in same or different urban centers and states? (many sri lankans, for example, tried to come as refugees from the civil war; u.s. said no so they went to Canada/mostly Toronto (which i think we should include))

info on wave of relatives of initial post-1965 immigrants who came and (if i remember correctly) are the ones who went into motels, electronic stores, gas stations, truck drivers, etc. (sasha – pl. fill in; i'll also ask rekha about this if i can, she knows the businesses stuff well)

have vawa protections opened an immigration channel (i.e. are they substantive enough?)