9

South Asian Americans

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In this chapter, I explore major trends and characteristics of the contemporary South Asian American experience. Two analytic themes run through my discussion. The first is the question of pan-South Asian political solidarity and the shifting interplay of unifying and divisive dynamics that mark it. What are the forces that bring South Asian Americans together and, conversely, what hinders the development of pan-South Asian American political formations? The second issue is the stereotypical image of South Asian Americans as a "model minority." What are the socioeconomic realities behind this image? And how have South Asian Americans themselves responded to their image as a model minority?

In my discussion of these and other issues, I attempt, whenever possible, to incorporate and acknowledge the diversity of South Asian American life. But I am limited in my efforts to do so by the fact that much of the available research is on the numerically largest group—Indian Americans—and, more specifically, on middle-class immigrant Indian Americans. There are, to date, few studies on the more recent South Asian immigrant groups, such as Bangladeshis, Nepalese, Pakistanis, and Sri Lankans, as well as on working-class and nonimmigrant South Asian Americans. But even with these limitations, my exploration highlights the deeply diverse character of the South Asian American experience, marked by national origins, religion, and social class as well as many other axes of differentiation.

HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION

The history of South Asian immigration to the United States can be broadly divided into three phases. As we will see, with the progress of these phases, the South Asian American population has grown in size and also become more diverse in its national origins, social class background, and immigrant generation.

The first phase involves the migration of Sikh men from the state of Punjab in India who were recruited to work as railroad and farm laborers in California and Washington during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As did other Asian immigrants of this era, these early South Asian settlers encountered hostility and vigorous opposition to their presence and settlement in the

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United States. They were restricted in their ability to acquire naturalized U.S. citizenship and, along with that, the right to own property in the U.S. These inhospitable conditions, coupled with the passage in 1924 of immigration laws that restricted Asian entry into the United States, ensured the limited migration and settlement of South Asians in the country at this time. According to Hing (1993, pp. 70, 73), 7,000 Asian Indians entered the United States between 1881 and 1917. By 1940, an estimated 2,400 Asian Indians remained in the country. As vividly described by Karen Leonard in *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (1992), many of those who remained in the U.S. lived in isolated agricultural communities in California, where they chose to marry and form families with local women of Mexican origin.

The second phase of South Asian settlement is marked by the watershed of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and the dramatic growth in opportunities created by it for Asian-origin immigration to the United States. The Act eliminated the 1924 restrictions to entry based on national origins and also instituted a preference system under which immigrants were able to enter on the basis of employment-based skills or family reunification. In this second phase, which stretched across the first decade-and-a-half that followed the passage of the act, South Asian immigration was of primarily Indians and Pakistanis and relatively few persons of other South Asian nationalities.[1] Reflecting the barriers to U.S. entry that had been in place before 1965, the South Asian American population at this time was very much a first-generation immigrant one. It was also marked by an overwhelmingly middle-class profile, involving as it did the entry of persons with technical and professional skills under the employment-based provisions of the 1965 Act. Thus Prashad (2000, p. 75) notes that between 1966 and 1977, 83% of Indians coming to the U.S. entered under the occupational category of professional and technical workers; the entrants of this time included many scientists, doctors, and engineers.

The third phase of South Asian immigration begins in the 1980s and continues to the present time. In continuity with the second phase, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act remains the basic legal framework, informing South Asian movements to the United States at this time. But the third phase is also marked by important shifts in the legal and sociopolitical environment, resulting in new patterns and dynamics in South Asian immigration. Perhaps most important, in the third phase, a larger proportion of South Asians have entered the U.S. under the provisions of family reunification rather than occupational skills. In 1996, for example, 9,910 Indians, 1,694 Pakistanis, and 711 Bangladeshis came to the U.S. under employer-based preferences. The comparable figures for those who came under the family reunification scheme are far higher: 34,291 Indians, 9,122 Pakistanis, and 8,221 Bangladeshis (Prashad, 2000, p. 79). With this shift in mode of entry, the socioeconomic profile of South Asian Americans has become more variegated and less exclusively middle-class than it had been in the immediate aftermath of the 1965 act.

Further contributing to the growing complexity in the socioeconomic profile of South Asian Americans in the third phase is the expansion of highly skilled temporary labor programs under the Immigration Act of 1990. Under a category known as H-1B, 3- to 6-year visas have been given to foreign workers whose specialized skills are sought by U.S. companies. Almost half of all H-1B employees have been Indians recruited for technology jobs (Rai, 2003).

Also marking the third phase of South Asian immigration is greater diversity in national origins. Whereas Indians and Pakistanis continue to dominate the influx, growing numbers of persons from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are entering the United States. The wider scope, in terms of national origins, of South Asian immigration today is clearly related to processes of globalization and the resulting intensification of social linkages between and across societies. More specific conditions include the decline in the early 1990s of

labor migration opportunities in the Middle East, driving a search among Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, and Sri Lankans for alternative economic venues. Also relevant is the emergence and use by South Asians of legal means of entry into the United States that are alternatives to those of family reunification and employer-based preferences. These include those of refugee status and applications for political asylum. Following the passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), some undocumented South Asians were able to regularize their status in the U.S. through applications for amnesty.[2] Another program for legal entry has been the 1990 Diversity Visa Lottery, popularly known as the Green Card Lottery. Reflecting its purpose of achieving diversity from countries with low levels of immigration to the U.S., the lottery is open only to those from countries that have sent fewer than 50,000 people to the U.S. in the past 5 years. The immigration lottery programs of the 1980s were informally dubbed "the Irish Sweepstakes" because of their heavy use by Irish immigrants (Bernstein, 2003). Somewhat unexpectedly, however, the major beneficiaries of the program in the 1990s were Bangladeshis. In 1991, of the 10,676 Bangladeshis legally admitted to the United States, 4,290, or 40%, had entered under the Green Card Lottery (Baluja, 2003, p. 58).[3]

In the aftermath of 9/11—the 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S.—the legal and political context of South Asian immigration has once again shifted in some important ways. South Asian immigrants, especially men from the majority Muslim countries of Bangladesh and Pakistan, have been subject to a variety of surveillance measures instituted by the U.S. government, including mandatory special registration and interviews with immigration authorities. While the full implications of these conditions for patterns of South Asian immigration to the United States is not yet clear, there are some signs of a possible decline, at least in the immediate future, in rates of South Asian, especially Bangladeshi and Pakistani, movement and settlement in the U.S. There have been reports of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis moving away from the U.S. in the aftermath of 9/11 to other receiving countries, in particular to Canada (Sachs, 2003). In an article on the post-9/11 legal and political environment for South Asian Americans, journalist Naeem Mohaiemen (2003) quotes from an interview with a young middle-class man who has decided to return to Bangladesh:

> The Patriot Act has made a patriot out of me. . . . I had never considered myself as belonging to any country. The closest thing to home for me was the U.S. I've lived here longer than any other country. . . . When the choice was offered to fingerprint myself and put myself in a criminal database or go back to my "home country," I had to go back to the place my parents were born.

Patterns of Growth and Settlement

Table 9.1 shows the period of 1990–2000 to have been one of sharp growth in numbers for persons of South Asian origin in the United States. Between 1990 and 2000, there was more than a doubling of the total South Asian–origin population in the United States. While population increases have occurred across all the groups, they appear to be particularly dramatic for Bangladeshi Americans. In terms of absolute numbers, Indians are clearly the largest group, numbering 1,899,599 in 2000 and constituting 88% of the total South Asian origin population. They are followed in size by Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, and Nepalese.

Figure 9.1 offers information on population numbers in four states of major South Asian concentration—California, New York, New Jersey, and Texas. We see that California and New York are the most popular areas of settlement for many of the South Asian American groups. For example, 28.6% of Sri Lankans and 18.7% of Indians were found in 2000 to live in California. New York was home to 21.2% of Pakistanis and 49% of Bangladeshis. But even with these concentrations, it is notable that with the exception of Bangladeshis (49% of whom live in New York), the top two ranking states tend

Table 9.1 Increase in South Asian Populations Between 1990 and 2000

South Asian Group	1990	2000 (Alone)	2000 (Alone and Mixed)	2000 Population as Percentage of All South Asians	Percentage Increase 1990–2000
Indian	815,447	1,678,765	1,899,599	88.2	106.0
Pakistani	81,371	153,533	204,309	8.0	88.6
Bangladeshi	11,838	41,280	57,412	2.0	248.7
Sri Lankan	10,970	20,145	24,587	1.0	83.6
Nepalese	n/a	7,858	9,399	0.4	n/a
Total	921,616	1,901,581	2,195,306	—	—

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002.

NOTE: Numbers for 1990 are total population figures as reported by the 1990 U.S. Census. The category *Alone* represents the census category *Asian Alone*. The category *Mixed* represents *Asian in combination with one or more other races*. See U.S. Census 2000 Brief "The Asian Population," February 2002. The numbers for *2000 Population as Percentage of All South Asians* include only those who marked the *Asian Alone* category. The numbers for *Percentage Increase 1990–2000* include only those who in 2000 marked the *Asian Alone* category.

to contain less than 40% of the total populations of each of the national origin groups. This suggests that the settlement patterns of South Asians today are quite varied, involving different regions and states in the U.S., as well as varied levels of proximity to large concentrations of fellow ethnics.

As suggested by their emergence in cities across the United States, from Chicago to Boston, South Asian neighborhoods and business enclaves are an increasingly common and visible part of the contemporary urban landscape. Among the most prominent and well studied of these South Asian enclaves is the neighborhood of Jackson Heights, in the borough of Queens in New York. In an extensive study of Jackson Heights, Khandelwal (1995) notes that the first Indian business (an electronics store called Sam & Raj) opened there in 1976 on 74th Street. By 1990, there were about one hundred stores, and Jackson Heights had become known as "the leading national and international stop for the Indian diaspora" (p. 188). Customers of these Jackson Heights businesses (an estimated 10,000 people weekly) include both local South Asians from adjoining neighborhoods as well as those traveling for a special shopping spree from the suburbs and other parts of the country. The clientele also include not just Indians but also Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Indeed, among the notable characteristics of these businesses is their emphasis on a pan–South Asian consumer identity, as exemplified by the frequently seen storefront sign: Indo-Pak-Bangla Products. A 2003 *New York Times* article (Zoepf, 2003) on the gold jewelry stores in Jackson Heights also notes their clientele to be of varied South Asian origin:

> For more than 15 years, the intersection of 74th Street and 37th Road has been the heart of South Asian Queens, so much so that local residents call it the Indian mall. And among stores that offer the latest Bollywood spectaculars on DVD and sweet shops selling stacks of syrupy, spiral-shaped jalebis, the most eye-catching places are the gold jewelry shops. A decade ago, there were only a handful, but today dozens of gold jewelry shops are clustered within a two-block radius of this intersection. Because late winter is the high season for South Asian weddings . . . Jackson Heights has been flooded with shoppers on a quest for the specialized jewelry ensemble required in traditional Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani wedding ceremonies. (p. 14-4)

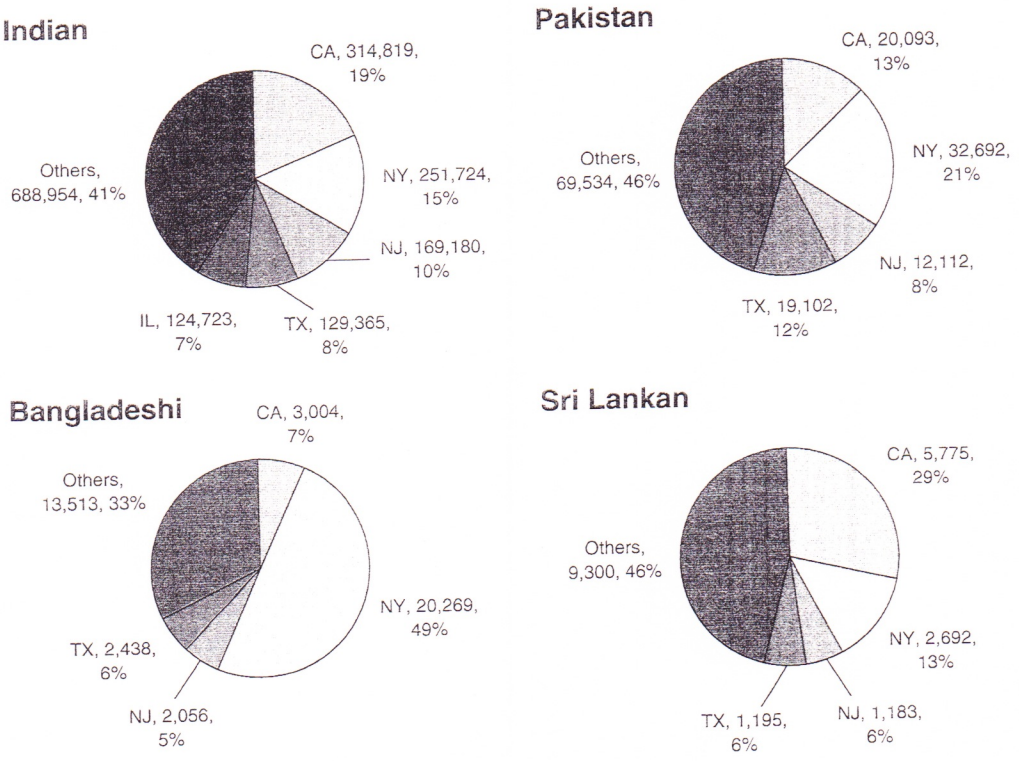

Figure 9.1 Major South Asian States, 2000

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000.

NOTE: The numbers refer to those reporting the Asian Alone category. The percentages refer to the proportion of those of the total population of the national-origin group who are residing in the state.

Socioeconomic Adjustment

Among the popular images that have surrounded South Asian Americans in recent times is that they are a model minority. In what follows, I explore some of the socioeconomic realities that underlie this image. As we will see, South Asian Americans do tend to compare favorably to the general U.S. population on a variety of standard economic measures. At the same time, a detailed look at the available information reveals a complex and uneven picture, marked by important differences in the socioeconomic situation of the different South Asian national origin groups.

MEASURES OF EDUCATION, OCCUPATION, AND INCOME

Table 9.2 shows information on the educational attainment of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi Americans. For all three of these groups, the percentage of college graduates exceeds that of native-born whites. The educational level of foreign-born Indian men is particularly high—41.9% are postgraduate or professional degree holders. This reflects perhaps the operation of the H-1B program and the entry of large numbers of skilled Indian technical workers through its auspices.

There are some noteworthy differences in the educational attainments of South Asian

Table 9.2 Educational Attainment of South Asian Americans (25–64 Years Old) by Ethnic Group, Nativity, and Gender, and Compared to Native-Born Whites, 2000

		Percentage of High School Graduates	*Percentage of College Graduates*	*Percentage of Postgraduate & Professional Degree Holders*
FB Indians	Men	91.0	71.2	41.9
	Women	86.1	59.7	27.7
NB Indians	Men	90.0	61.5	31.9
	Women	89.7	61.0	30.2
FB Pakistanis	Men	86.5	58.5	28.8
	Women	78.7	48.3	17.1
NB Pakistanis	Men	82.8	60.8	13.5
	Women	96.7	53.8	27.2
FB Bangladeshis		81.4	52.7	25.4
NB Bangladeshis (N = 153)		82.4	39.9	25.5
NB Whites	Men	91.0	30.4	11.0
	Women	86.1	28.7	9.6

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 5% Public Use Microdata Sample of Census 2000.

NOTE: *FB* indicates the foreign-born population and *NB* denotes the native-born population.

Americans by nativity and gender. As suggested by the percentages of college graduates, among Indian American men, rates of educational attainment are less for the native born in comparison to the foreign born. Although this pattern appears to hold true for Bangladeshis as well,[4] it is slightly reversed in the case of Pakistani Americans. Among foreign-born Pakistani American men, 58.5% are college graduates in comparison to 60.8% of native-born Pakistani American men. The patterns shift, however, when we look at the combined effects of nativity and gender. Native-born Indian American women have somewhat higher rates of educational attainment than their foreign-born counterparts. An even sharper difference in favor of native-born women is evident among Pakistani Americans. For example, 27.2% of native-born Pakistani American women are postgraduate or professional degree holders in comparison to 17.1% of foreign-born Pakistani American women. While requiring further exploration, the data suggests greater educational opportunities for South Asian–origin women born in the U.S. in comparison to immigrant South Asian women.

Table 9.3 presents data on the economic status of South Asian Americans. In terms of median earnings, that of South Asian Americans tends to be higher than that of native-born whites, with the exception of foreign-born Bangladeshis, for whom the figures are considerably less. Across the South Asian national origin groups, the median earnings of Indian Americans is the highest. That of native-born Indian Americans is less than that of foreign-born Indian Americans. Among Pakistani Americans, it is the same across nativity status and among Bangladeshi Americans, the native born may have higher median earnings than their foreign-born counterparts.

Table 9.3 Indicators of South Asian Americans' Economic Status by Ethnic Group and Nativity, 1999

	Median Earnings ($)	*Median Household Income ($)*	*Percentage of Families Below Poverty Level*
FB Indians	45,000	68,500	6.4
NB Indians	40,000	53,000	11.6
FB Pakistanis	37,700	49,400	13.8
NB Pakistanis	37,000	32,000	19.9
FB Bangladeshis	24,000	40,000	15.9
NB Bangladeshis (N = 85)	58,500	54,000	0.0
Native-Born Whites	34,000	53,400	5.2

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 5% Public Use Microdata Sample of Census 2000.

Turning to median household income, we see that the figures for foreign-born Indians are the highest, at $68,500. Of note is the fact that with the exception of foreign-born Indians and perhaps native-born Bangladeshis, the median household income of South Asian Americans tends to be lower than that of native-born whites. The negative discrepancy is particularly sharp for native-born Pakistani Americans, who have a median household income of $32,000. For both Indian Americans and Pakistani Americans, the median household incomes of those who are native born are less than the foreign born.

Among all of the South Asian American groups, poverty levels are higher than those of native-born whites. The lowest rates of poverty are found among foreign-born Indian Americans: 6.4% of foreign-born Indian families are below the poverty level. The percentages are highest for native-born Pakistanis (19.9%), followed by foreign-born Bangladeshis (15.9%), foreign-born Pakistanis (13.8%), and native-born Indians (11.6%). As generally suggested by many of the economic indicators analyzed here, the native born seem to fare more poorly than the foreign born.

Table 9.4 offers information on the occupational characteristics of South Asian Americans. With the exception of foreign-born Bangladeshis, we see that a greater percentage of South Asians, in comparison to native-born whites, are working in professional and related occupations. Confirming a pattern that has appeared throughout these analyses, foreign-born Indian men are the most likely to have jobs in the professional sector. While there are fewer native-born Indian men than foreign-born Indian men in professional occupations, the reverse is true among Pakistani men. As far as Indian American women, the percentage of those in professional occupations is similar for both the foreign born and native born. Among Pakistani American women, however, a higher percentage of the native born are working in these occupations in comparison to the foreign born.

The figures for work in managerial/business occupations show the general presence of a negative gap between South Asian American men and native-born white men. That is, with the exception of native-born Indian men, 18.3% of whom are in such jobs, South Asian American men are less likely to be involved in them in comparison to native-born white men. Whereas fewer of the foreign born than the native born are in managerial/business occupations among Indian American men, the reverse pattern holds for Pakistani American men. Among both foreign-born and native-born Indian Americans, the representation of women in the managerial sector is comparable, only slightly lower than that of men. For Pakistani Americans, the gender gap appears to be more substantial and also sharply differentiated between the foreign born and native born. Whereas foreign-born Pakistani American women are less likely

Table 9.4 The Occupational Characteristics of South Asian Americans by Ethnic Group, Nativity, and Gender, and Compared to Native-Born Whites, 2000

		Percentage of Workers in Managerial and Business/Financial-Related Occupations	*Percentage of Workers in Professional & Related Occupations*	*Percentage of Workers Self-Employed*
FB Indians	Men	14.6	46.4	12.2
	Women	13.3	40.1	7.6
NB Indians	Men	18.3	42.5	8.9
	Women	17.4	40.2	5.8
FB Pakistanis	Men	15.1	29.6	17.1
	Women	8.8	32.0	9.6
NB Pakistanis	Men	10.0	33.3	9.9
	Women	15.6	50.7	7.2
FB Bangladeshis		8.9	23.2	10.1
NB Bangladeshis (N = 84)		16.7	29.8	0.0
NB Whites	Men	17.7	18.0	14.0
	Women	11.9	26.7	8.2

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000.

NOTE: South Asian Americans who were 25–65 years old in 2000 and who worked at least 35 hours per week for at least 35 weeks in 1999 were included in the sample. Figures on native-born Bangladeshis are not reliable because they were based on a very small sample.

than foreign-born Pakistani American men to be in managerial/business jobs, the opposite seems to hold true for native-born Pakistani Americans. Of note is the fact that for both foreign-born and native-born Pakistani American women, the percentage of workers in the managerial/business sector is higher than among native-born white women.

As we see in Table 9.4, rates of self-employment among South Asian Americans tend to be somewhat lower than those reported for native-born whites. The notable exception to this are the rates for foreign-born Pakistanis. Among foreign-born Pakistani men, the percentage of workers who are self-employed is 17.1%, in comparison to 14% for native-born white men.

Overall, then, the socioeconomic findings that I reviewed provide some explanation for why the model minority image has been quite successfully applied to South Asian Americans. Many South Asian Americans today are college educated, hold white-collar jobs, and have median earnings that compare favorably to the general figures for the native-born white population. Perhaps the most consistent pattern to have emerged from the findings thus far is the particularly favorable socioeconomic status of foreign-born Indian Americans.

If the model minority image affirms and highlights the privileges in the socioeconomic location of South Asian Americans, it also ignores and makes invisible the complexities of this location. In general, the socioeconomic profile of South Asian

Americans appears far less positive when we look at not only foreign-born Indians but also a wide range of groups. For example, in terms of median household income, that of Pakistanis and of foreign-born Bangladeshis is far less than that of native-born whites. Of note also is the significant percentage of South Asian American families who live below the poverty line. Finally, despite the high percentage of South Asian Americans who are in professional occupations, relatively few, in comparison to white men, are in managerial professions.

Ethnic Economies

Perhaps nowhere is the heterogeneity of South Asian American economic life better illustrated than in the growth of South Asian American ethnic economies, or clusters and networks of businesses that draw on the ethnic ties of South Asian Americans. As described by Light and Gold (2000), ethnic economies often involve the use by ethnic entrepreneurs of family members and fellow ethnics, especially new immigrant arrivals, to staff their businesses. Ethnic economies may bring together fellow ethnics at varied ends of the socioeconomic spectrum—from middle-class entrepreneurs to undocumented immigrants with few resources. But, for both the entrepreneur and the worker, involvement in the ethnic economy is typically seen as a strategy for coping with barriers to participation and success in the dominant society economy.

The ethnic economies of South Asian Americans today include not only the various stores and businesses that cater to South Asian needs, but also those that provide services to the larger U.S. population. For example, South Asians, specifically Cujarati Indians, are a presence in the motel industry. And in the New York metropolitan area, South Asian American niches have emerged in the business of subway newsstands,[5] retail discount stores, auto shops,[6] and taxicabs.

According to the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, an estimated 70% of the city's 100,000 cabbies are from the Indian subcontinent (Zoepf, 2003). Khandelwal (1996) notes that the South Asians who drive taxicabs are typically young, single, college-educated men, often with temporary[7] or undocumented legal status in the United States. Their entry into the cab-driving business, driven by limited occupational alternatives, is facilitated by networks of coethnic friends and kin. A common strategy among them is to coordinate day and night shifts with other cabdrivers to make maximum use of the cab rent they pay for 24 hours. The visibility of South Asian American cabdrivers has made them a focal point for expressions of hostility against South Asian immigrants. A newspaper article titled "Pariahs of the City: 24 Hours in a Cab" makes the following observations:

> The typical New York City cab driver is now more likely to be from the Punjab than from Long Island City. But some New Yorkers aren't celebrating. . . . South Asian cab drivers are stereotyped by some customers as rude and unable to speak English, disparaged by fellow drivers as vicious competitors who cause accidents, and blamed for what some drivers say is a steady decline in wages and respect in what once was one of New York's prized working-class professions. (Rohde, 1997, p. 13-1)

RACIAL IDENTITIES, RELIGION, AND SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE AFTERMATH OF 9/11

The emergence of racial identities among immigrant groups involves ascription or the imposition of racialized meanings and structures upon the immigrant group by the dominant society. It can also be shaped by the responses to ascription of the immigrants themselves—their own identity-making efforts. The history of South Asian American racialization highlights the complex interplay of identity ascription and self-assertion dynamics. Racialized marginality in relation to the dominant U.S. society has been a consistent feature of the South Asian American experience, both in the past and today. South Asian Americans have responded to their position in the U.S. racial order in shifting and varied ways.

As described in a previous section, the earliest South Asian American settlers encountered hostility and discrimination from the dominant U.S. society. In response to these conditions in the early twentieth century, a number of Indian Americans turned to the courts in an attempt to gain the privileges that had been denied to them on the basis of race. In these court battles, Indian Americans asserted their "Caucasian" and thus white racial origins. The legal strategy then was not one of challenging the discriminatory laws on their own terms, but rather of pushing for a racial reclassification of Indian Americans as "white." Although the strategy was successful for a period of time, by the early 1920s it had been decisively struck down.[8] In the 1923 Bhagat Singh Thind case, the courts ruled that as reflected in popular usage and understandings, Asian Indians were not white. They were thus ineligible for naturalized citizenship and other privileges (Jensen, 1988).

In contemporary times, the politics of South Asian racial classification have been quite different. Since the 1970s, the dominant political strategy of Indian Americans has been to push for the official inclusion of South Asians under a broader umbrella Asian American category. In 1974, the Association of Indians in America (AIA) successfully lobbied to have Asian Indians reclassified from *Other* (as they had been in the 1970 Census) to *Asian American.* Analysts of this lobby have noted a desire for official minority status to have been a driving factor behind the efforts of the AIA leadership (Espiritu, 1992; Fisher, 1980). Among the perceived benefits of minority status were official protection and resources for South Asians under affirmative action legislation, including the opportunity to participate in the "set-aside" programs that funnel government contracts to minority business owners. Of note is the fact that although the movement for inclusion as Asian American was focused on and spearheaded by members of the Indian American community, its impact has been wide-ranging, affecting South Asian Americans in general. Along with Indian Americans, other South Asian national origin groups have also been granted official minority status and included under the umbrella *API,* or Asian Pacific Islander, category.

As described thus far, the movement to include South Asians under the API racial designation began as a "top-down"effort of Indian American political elites. The manner and extent to which the rank and file of South Asian Americans have actually accepted this designation remains to be investigated. Available studies of race identification among South Asian Americans today emphasize the prevalence, especially pronounced among middle-class immigrant South Asians, of a strategy of disengagement from the racial order of the United States. Rosemary George (1997) writes that South Asian immigrants resist "the very idea of being raced" (p. 31) or of thinking of oneself in racial terms. South Asian immigrants themselves tend to understand this disengagement as a reflection of the novelty and unfamiliarity for them of U.S. racial discourse, which is different than that prevalent in South Asia. There is the idea, for example, that for South Asians, skin color is different from race in contrast to their conflation in popular U.S. thinking. Thus, an Indian American interviewed by Fisher (1980) in the 1970s makes the following comment, to emphasize the diversity of skin color among Asian Indians as well as the lack of relationship for him between skin color and race: "My uncle is very dark and my aunt is very fair. Their son is very fair and one daughter is very dark; one is in the middle. Their colors are different, but the race is the same" (p. 126).

But disengagement from popular U.S. racial thinking may also be part of a strategic effort to resist incorporation into the U.S. racial order, in particular to incorporation into it as nonwhites. A number of scholars argue that South Asian Americans have actively worked to draw attention toward their national and/or religious affiliation and to deflect it away from questions of their race identity in order to establish separation from other racial minorities, particularly blacks and Latinos (Fisher, 1980; George, 1997; Prashad, 2000).

However, the strategy of racial disengagement is, I believe, being challenged by social and political developments that are a part of the third phase

of South Asian American immigration. This includes the growth in numbers of low-income and working-class South Asian Americans who, as in the case of the New York City cabdrivers described earlier, do not have the socioeconomic resources to shield themselves from racism. Rather than disengagement, young South Asian Americans growing up in less class-privileged settings may actively strive toward identification with other racial minorities. In general, racial disengagement may be less prevalent among the growing ranks of second- and third-generation South Asian Americans given their often attenuated ability, in comparison to immigrants, to effectively assert national origins as a counterpoint identity when confronted with a racial one.

The contemporary racialization of South Asian Americans is also being shaped by the rise, as the twenty-first century begins, in hate crimes and other expressions of hostility against South Asian Americans. Against the backdrop of a more general surge of anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation in the country, job losses in the U.S. economy have been blamed on the outsourcing of jobs to India as well as the influx of technically skilled H-1B workers from India. Hostility toward South Asian Americans has also risen in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (2001) reports that in the 3-month period following the September 11th attacks, there were nearly 250 bias-motivated incidents and two murders targeting Asian Pacific Americans. South Asian Americans, regardless of national origin or religion, have been specifically targeted on the basis of their perceived physical resemblance to and affinity with the terrorists. This has been especially the case for Sikh Americans. As reported in a *New York Times* article published on September 19, 2001:

> The nation's Sikhs, conspicuous in turbans that resemble the head wrap of suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden, have suddenly found themselves particularly vulnerable. By yesterday afternoon, more than 200 Sikhs had reported incidents to a Sikh anti-defamation group. Newspapers around the country have reported that Sikh temples in Cleveland and West Sacramento were vandalized and, in San Mateo, California, a gasoline bomb was thrown through the window of a Sikh family's home. (Goodstein & Lewin, 2001)

If 9/11 and its aftermath clearly mark a watershed in the history of South Asian Americans, its precise impact is not yet clear. The environment of heightened hostility may, on the one hand, spur political solidarity and organizing along pan–South Asian lines. That is, as in the case of the Vincent Chin murder of 1982 that spurred pan-Asian American solidarity, the current rise in hate crimes targeting South Asians may generate consciousness among South Asian Americans about their shared fate. On the other hand, the post-9/11 era may also be a polarizing period, as some South Asian Americans use strategies of disidentification or assertion of difference from Muslim South Asian Americans in an effort at self-protection from the widespread distrust and suspicion of Islam that exists in the United States and has been exacerbated by the 9/11 attacks.

The possibility of a growth in polarization rather than unity among South Asian Americans receives some support from the available scholarship on religious divisions in South Asian American life. The importance of these divisions, especially in relations between Hindu and Muslim South Asians in the United States, has been widely noted: "While many differences among Indian immigrants such as region, language and caste are in the process of weakening, religious differences and tensions seem to have been exacerbated in the immigrant context" (Kurien, 2001, p. 264). Explanations for this trend include the politics of the Indian subcontinent in which religion has played such a visible role, both in the past and today. But also relevant are conditions that emerge more directly out of the U.S. context. This includes, as Warner (1998) notes, an established tradition in the United States of immigrant organization along religious lines. That is, religion in the United States

is a well-accepted vehicle for community formation and ethnic expression among immigrants.

Some analysts, focusing in particular on the rise of Hindu nationalist organizations in the United States, have argued that religious identity can be, for South Asian Americans, a strategic response to racism in the U.S. or a means "to sidestep the issue of their racial marginality" (Rajagopal, 2000, p. 490). That is, in ways that make use of Orientalist constructions of India prevalent in the United States, Hindu nationalist groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad[9] of America assert their spiritual and cultural superiority. Prashad (2000) argues that this strategy facilitates their efforts "to be positioned in such a way that they are seen as superior to blacks, a social location not unattractive to a migrant in search of some accommodation to a racist polity" (p. xi).