

# FORGING POLITICAL IDENTITY: SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS IN AMERICAN POLICYMAKING

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Ushering in 2003, Jagdish Bhagwati, the esteemed Columbia University Economics professor, calls on governments to "reorient their policies from attempting to curtail migration to coping and working with it to seek benefits for all."<sup>1</sup> America's economy has already benefited greatly from the contributions of South Asian immigrants, who, in turn, have prospered financially. It is now time for these same immigrants, many of whom have become Americans in the truest sense of the word, to direct their energies and talents toward enriching the U.S. political landscape.

U.S. policymaking in both the domestic and foreign arenas stands to gain from incorporating insights of the South Asian American community. South Asians Americans can make meaningful contributions to debates over domestic issues such as immigration, healthcare, civil rights, and economic policy, to name a few. As a relatively recent immigrant group to the United States, peoples from the Indian Subcontinent are also in an ideal position to help shape more informed foreign policies. The close ties that many South Asian Americans still maintain with their native countries puts them in a unique position to educate policymakers and advance stronger bilateral relations between the U.S. and the nations of South Asia.

All of this can only be achieved, however, by obtaining a greater role in the political process. Doing so will require building inclusive coalitions and developing serious, well-thought out viewpoints. As Italian, Irish, Jewish, and Latino immigrant groups did and continue to do, the time has come for South Asian Americans to forge a coherent political identity.

South Asian Americans have begun making inroads. In 1996, Indian Americans alone contributed \$7 million to political campaigns.<sup>2</sup> And

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since its founding in 1993, the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans has grown from eight to over 150 members. There is now also a Bangladesh Caucus and a Sri Lanka Caucus in Congress. South Asian Americans have begun to show their political muscle, as evinced by the exponential growth of South Asian American candidates and organizations<sup>3</sup> and the increased role played in key elections, such as the Majette-McKinney congressional race in Atlanta.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the growing interest in South Asia and South Asian Americans, however, there is a dearth of accessible research and analysis of relevant issues. Many policy papers published to date lack rigorous statistical analysis or overly rely on ethnic newspapers for research.

There are obstacles within the community as well. The South Asian American community today speaks with many disparate voices. These viewpoints are often organized along old divisions and rivalries that may have made sense in South Asia, but that hinder the formation of a political identity needed to gain the attention of U.S. policymakers. A serious, inclusive forum to discuss identity formation must emerge. For these reasons, this introductory issue of *The Subcontinental* investigates identity formation and its implications on the role of South Asian Americans in U.S. policymaking.

## **Identity Formation in Policymaking:<sup>5</sup>**

### *A Brief History:*

Since their first arrival to the United States and Canada, South Asians have been a well-networked, but divided community. The first wave, starting in the late 1800s and early 1900s, consisted largely of Sikh migrant farmers from the Punjab region of India. Most of their political efforts went to supporting the Indian Independence movement. This first wave of migration was curtailed following a Supreme Court ruling denying citizenship rights to East Indians. (See Srikanth, Rao, and Chhabra for more.)

In 1964, the INS changed its regulations to a first-come first-serve system, removing many barriers to the entry of South Asians into the United States. The late 1960s and 1970s saw a second wave of South Asian immigration to the U.S. Many of those permitted entry were professionals, such as engineers and doctors. Significant portions were entrepreneurs who went on to build successful businesses, mostly in the retail, service, and hospitality industries. Influential trade organizations like the American Association of Physicians of

Indian Origin (AAPI) and the Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA) were born from these successes.

America's 1990s technology boom fueled the third wave of South Asian immigration, which included both technology professionals and entrepreneurs. The Indus Entrepreneurs (TiE), an international organization of South Asian entrepreneurs with over 8,000 members, has among its ranks heads of some of the world's leading New Economy companies. TiE members have successfully leveraged their network to support disaster relief for South Asia, and to influence policymaking. Members of the two most recent immigration waves demonstrated their ability to exert political influence in helping organize President Clinton's trip to South Asia.

This historical narrative accounts for the bulk of Subcontinentals in America. It also provides the basis for the stereotypes of South Asian Americans as a model minority of doctors, engineers, and small business owners. The true picture is more complex, of course. In the early 1970s, following the Pakistani Civil War, many refugees from Bangladesh arrived in America. Starting in the late 1980s, many Indo-Caribbean immigrants began to arrive in New York. Many South Asians also came to the United States through family reunification visas. These intermediary immigration waves were more diverse than previous ones, including higher proportions of working class individuals. The formation of a coherent political identity necessitates the inclusion of all such South Asian communities.

### *Culture in Policymaking:*

Sunil Khilnani, Director of South Asian Studies at Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies, made an observation about modern Indian democracy that is equally applicable to the current state of South Asian American identity formation. He writes:

*The relation between politicians and their supporters includes a larger cultural connection, a felt sense of identification and trust. Democratic politics seems to require that identities and perceptions of interest are stable; but political identities and interests do not have a pre-political existence - they have to be created through politics. Thus, paradoxically, democratic politics must itself produce the very identities and interests which it presupposes in order to function in the first place. And this process of identity creation is dangerous business, more akin to conflict than competition.<sup>7</sup>*

South Asian Americans have achieved only a marginal cultural connection to their politicians. Our conversations with South Asians across America have also uncovered a mistrust of U.S. politicians.

Part of this comes from the sense that American politicians have exploited tensions between India and Pakistan to raise campaign contributions. While the Indian American Center for Political Awareness estimates that 10% of Indian Americans contribute to political campaigns,<sup>8</sup> many of these contributors complain that representatives only give lip service to the community.

That the identities of the various South Asian American groups are unstable further complicates efforts to gain a political voice. There is

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a great debate within the community today on whether to identify as ethnic Indians or South Asians.<sup>9</sup> Others, such as novelist Bharati Mukherjee, choose to identify as Americans of Indian origin, effectively denying the role of culture in politics.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the landscape of South Asian American involvement in United

States politics is extremely diverse. Political organizations are forming all over the country, including IAPAC in Seattle and Houston, Project-Impact on the East Coast, South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT) focusing on Civil Rights, the newly formed Indian American Policy Institute, the Indian American Republican Council, Sikh Media Watch and Resource Taskforce (SMART), and the Indian American Leadership Incubator, to name a few. These are in addition to the Indian American Forum for Political Education, Indian American Center for Political Awareness, and the National Federation of Indian American Associations.

While Indian Americans certainly have the most well established organizations and largest population among the South Asian American community, the voices of South Asian minorities have become loud enough to demand inclusion (see Mohaiemen). Additionally, several groups of Indian American minorities (including Indian Muslims, Indian Christians, West Bengalis, Sikhs, Indo-Caribbeans, working-class Indians) favor the more inclusive "South Asian American" identity. The need for a South Asian American coalition thus arises both from activists working to build inclusive organizations, as well as demands from growing subgroups of South Asian Americans.

While the identity-based violence that has occurred recently in India has not been seen in America, the vigor of the label debate is perhaps second only to discussion of Kashmir and Nuclear Proliferation in South Asian American circles. It is almost certain that this debate will continue. The Subcontinental provides an inclu-

sive, intelligent forum within which to intelligently engage in this debate and others, including those surrounding coalition-building and issue identification and analysis. As Bhagwati suggests, it would behoove America to promote such a forum.

### **A Forum:**

The Subcontinental is a publication unlike any other. Readers of The Subcontinental will have access to cutting-edge research and analysis, which will allow them to hold lawmakers accountable, build stronger coalitions, and rally issue-based support. Political leaders will be given invaluable insights, empowering them to enact more informed and sustainable policy. The Subcontinental will also provide an invaluable forum for voicing the multitude of viewpoints within the South Asian American community.

### **The Articles & Essays:**

The essays and articles featured in this inaugural issue were chosen based on conversations with various individuals from politics, business, and academia.. The works selected represent some of the most prominent voices in the identity debate, as well as perspectives of communities that are often neglected in this conversation. We made a particular attempt to be inclusive and provide a more comprehensive view of South Asian American perspectives on the notion of identity.

#### *The Essays:*

**Rajini Srikanth** and **Ramesh Rao** present the central debate amongst those looking to develop a political identity for the peoples of the Indian Subcontinent in America. Srikanth, an Asian American Studies scholar at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, argues that South Asian Americans need to build inclusive, lasting coalitions in the post-9/11 world. Rao, a prominent speaker and scholar at Truman State University in Missouri, argues that Indian Americans would be better served by steadfastly adhering to the "Indian" identity, rather than by building coalitions across divisions that he argues cannot be bridged.

**Sunaina Maira** and **Natasha Warikoo** examine the diversity of the South Asian American community by presenting research on the youth of some of the more marginal South Asian American communities. Maira, Associate Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has been studying how 9/11 has affected South Asian Muslim students at Cambridge High School. Warikoo, a doctoral

candidate at Harvard, has been researching Indo-Caribbean students in New York City. She presents a unique look at a community that is racially and ethnically India, but generations removed from South Asia. These communities, while small and localized, represent the complexity of political identity formation and perhaps depict future trends.

**Vijay Prashad**, noted activist and Associate Professor at Trinity College, calls on South Asian Americans to look beyond their individual experiences and identify issues around which to build coalitions needed to enact change. Specifically, he discusses racial profiling of South Asian Americans after September 11th and recent Department of Justice reforms.

*The Articles:*

**Marina Budhos**, author of *House of Waiting* and *The Professor of Light*, compares the Jewish and South Asian American experiences. As one of the most successful ethnic communities in the U.S., South Asian Americans are often compared to Jewish Americans. Such comparisons often lack historical perspective. Budhos identifies valuable lessons South Asian Americans can draw from the experience of the Jews in America.

**Naeem Mohaiemen** and **Vikram Chhabra** complete the issue with suggestions for building truly representative South Asian American organizations. Mohaiemen, a long-time activist and Director of Shobak.org, discusses the role of Bangladeshis in New York-based South Asian American. Chhabra, a volunteer for Sikh Media Watch and Resource Task Force, discusses the state of the Sikh American community in both the Indian American community and the larger South Asian American community. He sheds light on a pioneering community that first arrived in the United States over one hundred years ago.

Politically active South Asian Americans need to take a greater role in shaping America's future. We at the Subcontinental Institute hope that this journal will serve as a key resource for those looking to meet this challenge. Thank you for your support. We encourage your feedback.

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1. Bhagwati, Jagdish, "Borders Beyond Control," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2003, 82:1, pg. 99.
2. Hathaway, Robert, "Unfinished Passage: India, Indian Americans, and the U.S. Congress," *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2001, 24:2, pg 24.
3. Rodríguez, Cindy, "South Asians work to make voices heard," *Boston Globe*, November 2, 2002.
4. Basu, Moni, "Pro-India Lobby cited in McKinney drubbing," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, August 23, 2002.
5. Over the past year, the staff of the Subcontinental Institute has spoken with upwards of three hundred individuals across the United States, including professors, political leaders, business leaders, students, professionals, and activists. These observations are based on the compiled notes from these meetings.
6. Many of the Trustees of TiE are also the Trustees of the American India Foundation (AIF) and the Indian American Policy Institute (IAPI). AIF has given extensively to disaster relief in the Gujarat Earthquake and to the 9/11 fund.
7. Khilnani, Sunil, *The Idea of India*, 1997, pg 49.
8. Available on like at the IACPA webpage,  
<http://www.iacfp.org/census2k/iapol.htm#campaign>
9. Wildman, Sarah, "All For One," *The New Republic*, December 13, 2001.
10. Mukherjee, Bharati, "American Dreamer," *Mother Jones*, January/February 1997.
11. We would like to express our appreciation for the time and consideration extended by all those with whom we spoke. You have been instrumental to this publication.