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The Other Asian: Reflections of South Asian Americans in Libraryland

Nisha Mody, Lalitha Nataraj, Gayatri Singh, and Aditi Worcester

Introduction

In 2016, the Association for Research Libraries and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Library hosted the National Diversity in Libraries Conference at the UCLA campus. The conference brought together librarians interested in diversity and social justice issues from around the country, including many librarians of color. At this conference Nisha Mody (NM), a health sciences librarian, met Gayatri Singh (GS), a fellow academic librarian. They kept in touch and sought each other out when the call for proposals was announced for this book. Nisha and Gayatri were particularly interested in exploring the professional and personal experiences central to South Asian American librarians that they felt were not adequately documented in official literature. They in turn reached out to Lalitha Nataraj (LN), a librarian with experience in public and community college libraries, and Aditi Worcester (AW), an archivist who has worked in community and academic special collections and archives. This is how four women of color...four South Asian American librarians...four *desis* came together to invite you to peek into our insights based upon our individual professional experiences at academic and public libraries and archives. One would assume the unifying theme is the commonality of our experiences, and yet, it took us a while to agree upon a vocabulary that held the same meanings for each of us. For instance, are we Asian or South Asian?

South Asian or South Asian American? Does a cultural grouping called *South Asian American* exist in reality, or is it a convenient way of categorizing people from a geographical region who otherwise have little in common?

Because aggregate classifications can be problematic, providing context may help explain why we found these questions particularly complicated to answer. The annual Asian population in the United States estimate for 2015 was approximately 21 million.¹ Stated differently, over 21 million people in the country have “origins in any of the original peoples of the East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.”² Essentially, “Asian-American” is an all-encompassing category applied to people with vast ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences. A 2014 Center for American Progress (CAP) report pointed out that the inherently diverse “Asian” grouping was created by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1990 and has no scientific basis³ (as is also the case for other racial classifications that have typically been political constructs in the service of racism).⁴ Rather, it is a result of the “interplay between Census categorization and the ways that various groups and institutions adopt, or seek changes to, those categories given historical legacies and new social and political

1 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race Alone or in Combination, and Hispanic Origin for the United States, States, and Counties: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2015*, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://factfinder.census.gov/>.

2 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *American FactFinder Help: Asian*, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://factfinder.census.gov/help/en/asian.htm>.

3 Karthik Ramakrishnan and Farah Z. Ahmad, *State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Series. A Multifaceted Portrait of a Growing Population* (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2014), 12, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/AAPISReport-comp.pdf>.

4 Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 197.

developments.”⁵ Takaki highlights the centrality of racial classification in serving the economics of White Supremacy in his discussion about how South Asians were historically viewed as distinct from the other Asians (the Chinese and Japanese) by the white American:

While white Americans wondered what should be done about the Japanese, they suddenly noticed another group of “strangers” -- the “Hindus.” “Tall of stature, straight of feature, swarthy of color,” they were unlike the Chinese and Japanese in an important way; they were “brothers” of “our own race,” “full-blooded Aryans,” “men of like progenitors with us.” But like the Chinese and Japanese, the “Hindus” were willing to work for “cheap” wages and able to “subsist on incomes that would be prohibitive to the white man.”⁶

Racial brotherhood notwithstanding, all the members of the “Asian” category were originally excluded from entering the country, starting with the Chinese in 1882 and continuing on to when Congress created the “Asiatic Barred Zone” with the Immigration Act of 1917.⁷ So if one were looking for a unifying thread, this would probably be it. Our discussion, however, is devoted to a small sliver of this pie — South Asian Americans. According to a 2015 demographic snapshot of South Asians in the U.S.,⁸ there are nearly 4.3 million South Asians tracing their roots to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and the diaspora, including but not limited to Trinidad/Tobago, Guyana, Fiji, Tanzania, and Kenya. The Pew Research Center Asian

5 Ramakrishnan and Ahmad, *State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Series. A Multifaceted Portrait of a Growing Population*, 12.

6 Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 296.

7 Gerald L. Neuman, “Immigration,” *The Oxford International Encyclopedia of Legal History*, ed. Stanley N. Katz (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

8 South Asian Americans Leading Together, “A Demographic Snapshot of South Asians in the United States,” SAALT, 2015, accessed December 20, 2017, http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Demographic-Snapshot-updated_Dec-2015.pdf.

American Fact Sheets (2010-2015)⁹ estimate that there are four million Indian-origin persons in America, making this the single largest South Asian-origin group.

Each of us has roots in India and appreciates the complexity of language, food, clothing, religion, traditions, and rituals within the country. We're also keenly aware that this internal diversity results in narrower affiliations—including regional identities (e.g., Punjabi, Tamil, and Gujarati) intersecting with religious ones (Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Islam, and Christianity, among others)—that take precedence over a national identity. Per Hall's definition of "cultural identity," our diasporic Indian-ness can be perceived as a collective representation among people with shared history or ancestry in common.¹⁰ Within "the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people,' with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning."¹¹

Three of us identify as second generation South Asian Americans and growing up, our conception of cultural identity was largely informed by our immigrant parents' static, nostalgic memories of India. But we are not our parents and therefore, do not have the same first-hand experiences; our Indian identities are complicated by our negotiation of American ones. Those granular categories related to geographic region, language, and even religion lack context when it comes to perceptions of Indians within the mainstream (read: white) cultural hegemony. When it comes to defining South Asians in the United States, this group transcends formal racial

9 "Fact Sheets on Asians in the U.S.," *Pew Research Center*, 2015, accessed 20 December 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/asian-americans/>.

10 Hall, Stuart, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990): 223.

11 Ibid.

categorization.¹² “For several reasons, South Asians in the United States present an ideal group to examine the dynamics of racial ambiguity...[in spite of their] increasing visibility and prominence in American society...there is no dominant theme to South Asian American media presentation...Additionally, South Asian Americans’ diverse physical features and their variety of cultural and religion practices contribute to their racial ambiguity...”¹³ Brettell and Nibbs note that second-generation South Asian Americans formulate identity by

selectively choos[ing] defining characteristics from social domains in which they operate— their families, social networks, school environments, media images, popular culture, and the broader dominant culture. These new and varied spheres of action and collaboration have led some scholars to predict the emergence of pan-ethnic identities. Thus, second-generation regionally grouped children of immigrants, such as “Asians,” would be expected to develop a pan Asian-American identity.¹⁴

Reducing identity to “a simple sameness, in a postcolonial and transnational context, functions as a result of European colonialism,”¹⁵ but one might argue that the conflation of disparate groups under the pan-ethnic category of “South Asian American” can facilitate broader political representation and mobilization of resources.¹⁶

12 Vinay Harpalani, “DesiCrit: Theorizing the Racial Ambiguity of South Asian Americans,” *NYU Annual Survey of American Law* 69, no. 1 (2013): 137, accessed December 20, 2017, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2308892.

13 Harpalani, “DesiCrit,” 104.

14 Caroline B. Brettell and Faith Nibbs, “Lived Hybridity: Second-Generation Identity Construction Through College Festival,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 16, no. 6 (2009): 679, accessed December 20, 2017, doi: 10.1080/10702890903307142.

15 Chih-Yun Chiang, “Diasporic Theorizing Paradigm on Cultural Identity,” *Intercultural Communication Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010): 31, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/03Chih-YunChiang.pdf>.

16 Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993): 162.

It is critical to note that the South Asian American librarians in this roundtable do not share identities with all regions, languages, dialects, and religions represented in South Asia. We are also aware that our group does not include Muslim perspectives, which have been historically underrepresented and continue to be marginalized through global Islamophobia. Post 9/11 conflated Arab and Middle Eastern Americans with religious extremism and terrorist activity and racialized South Asian Americans (Muslim or not), ordering them “by categories of national belonging into a type of apolitical, ahistorical, and racially ambiguous citizenship”¹⁷ As Deepa Iyer explains about Islamophobia, “It targets Muslims and anyone thought to be Muslim, including Sikhs, Arabs, Hindus, and South Asians.”¹⁸ Racialization on the basis of physical features has the harmful effect of reducing group(s)¹⁹ where brownness becomes a visible marker against which Islamophobia and hate crimes are perpetrated. Furthermore, brownness takes on a whole new dimension when it is “constructed in the context of specific issues such as war, terrorism, Islamophobia, and, notably, immigration.”²⁰ Though none of us are members of the South Asian Muslim American community— and therefore unable to offer any authentic perspectives pertaining to this group— we stand in solidarity with

17 Sue Brennan, “Time, Space, and National Belonging in *The Namesake*: Redrawing South Asian American Citizenship in the Shadow of 9/11,” *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3, no. 1 (2011): 3, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6cm9z5hd>.

18 Deepa Iyer, “Standing Up to Islamophobia,” *School Library Journal*, October 10, 2017, <http://www.slj.com/2017/10/industry-news/standing-up-to-islamophobia#>.

19 Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006): 261.

20 Anjana Mudambi, “The Construction of Brownness: Latino/a and South Asian Bloggers’ Responses to SB 1070,” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 8, no. 1 (2015): 47, accessed December 20, 2017, doi: 10.1080/17513057.2015.991079.

them as South Asian Americans because of shared experiences of marginalization and discrimination grounded in xenophobia.

Further complicating our identities is the fact that South Asians are not always considered Asian American. The 2016 National Asian American Survey took the systematic approach to answering the question who is Asian American, and their data revealed “that Americans — including Asian Americans — draw a sharp boundary between Asian and non-Asian that separates East Asians (Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) from South Asians (Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis) and, to a lesser extent, Southeast Asians like Filipinos.”²¹ The South Asians who were surveyed included themselves in the Asian American category.²² Therefore, how does falling into the “other Asian” category impact South Asian Americans in libraryland? This, among many other questions, was discussed in the roundtable conversation, which was informed by our self-described personal and multiple, social and cultural identities. According to South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), a nonprofit national advocacy organization for South Asian Americans, our demographic is the “fastest growing population (10%), among all major ethnic groups, in the country.”²³ However, little statistical data exists for the number of employed South Asian American librarians from this group (the Bureau of

21 Jennifer Lee and Karthick Ramakrishnan, “Opinion: In the Outrage Over Discrimination, How Do We Define ‘Asian American’?”, *NBC News*, May 16, 2017, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/news/opinion-outrage-over-discrimination-how-do-we-define-asian-american-ncna757586>.

22 Karthick Ramakrishnan, “Are Indians also Asian American? Q&A thanks to Judge Srinivasan,” *Data Bits - A Blog for AAPI Data*, accessed December 20, 2017, <http://aapidata.com/blog/indian-ams-asian/>.

23 South Asian Americans Leading Together, “A Demographic Snapshot of South Asians in the United States,” *SAALT*.

Labor Statistics estimates that 5.4% of employed librarians identify as Asian American).²⁴ By drawing on and documenting our experiences as the often sole South Asian American librarians at an institution, we explore what that label means. We also examine how our individual experiences can encourage other South Asian Americans to join and contribute to the profession.

Q&A Section:

Q. What made you choose to be a librarian/archivist?

NM: While I certainly have my elevator speech about why I came into librarianship, it doesn't include a narrative relating to my South Asian identity. However, I often wonder if my experiences as a daughter of Indian immigrants influenced why I did *not* become a librarian sooner. This is my third career after working in the IT world and speech-language pathology. Both of these careers had certain desired features of being a successful South Asian American: technology and healthcare. I distinctly remember feeling safe telling my own parents and others within my community that I considered (and later, ended up choosing) these professions. However, I did not feel this way when I decided to return to receive my MLIS. I think this is partially because of the stereotypes many people had about librarians. However, I also feel that it is not viewed as a profession that our parents worked hard for us to achieve or, frankly, that they even knew existed. Speech-language pathology is also a predominantly white and feminized profession, similar to librarianship. However, the health aspect, along with the earning

²⁴ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "2016 Household Data Annual Averages: Employed Persons by Detailed Industry, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity," accessed December 20, 2017, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18.htm>.

potential and flexibility afforded to women who wanted to raise families, contributed to a higher perceived respect within the community. Other South Asians have asked in disbelief why I no longer wanted to be a speech-language pathologist. I highly doubt I would have received such a question if I were a librarian transitioning to become a medical professional. Because of this expectation and a lack of role models within the profession, I didn't even consider it to be a future profession.

AW: I never considered a career in libraries/archives until *after* I moved to the U.S. from India in 2007. It wasn't as if I actively disregarded a career in this field. I just didn't know a single person who was a librarian in New Delhi. Unlike media or journalism, it's not a popular career choice for a young, educated, middle-class woman interested in the humanities. So, like Nisha, I had different careers (print media and television production) well into my 30s before discovering the world of archives.

I spent a lot of time at the library after moving here, both as a user and a volunteer. It was a place where I could see other people like me, who were new to the culture, figuring our way around. As a volunteer, it simultaneously offered an opportunity to contribute so that, in a way, I felt as if I did indeed belong. Once I was able to work, I produced video biographies for families who wished to preserve their unique history for future generations. This particularly appealed to first- and second-generation Americans and members of different communities who wanted to document stories and memories for their children and grandchildren. But a fee-based business model is exclusionary because only those who could afford it had their stories heard and recorded. I returned

to school to get my Master's in Information Studies degree with the idea of creating or managing a community archive because I just didn't find enough mention of members of my community in official versions of history or beyond the broad stereotypes of gas-station owners, techies, doctors, etc. It's hard to address issues of visibility (or invisibility for that matter), identity, and belonging in isolation of events in the past. And when that "past" renders entire communities mute and to the sidelines, then it's time to look beyond what already exists in cultural memory and make space for new vantage points to history. That's what drew me to archives - the platform it can provide for cultural representation.

I hadn't thought of this before but really, my decision to specialize in archives coincided with my move from being in the majority (in India) to suddenly finding myself a member of an underrepresented group in the minority (in the U.S.), trying to make sense of why people were now commenting on how good my English was. I think just as how I was trying to "fit in," others were trying to accommodate me within their narrative of who someone from India should look or sound like. There was a disconnect on both sides and the social justice aspect of archives started to look particularly appealing at that point.

GS: I am one of many academic librarians who had to figure out what to do with a history degree. People in my life questioned that decision more than the one to become a librarian. Unlike Aditi, I had family friends who had worked in libraries, so it was a known career path. After completing my undergraduate studies, I was working as a

temp in an office. The decision to go to graduate school for a degree in library science was acceptable because it was practical in a way that my history degree was not. It was easy to envision what type of job I would be able to get.

In thinking about recruiting South Asians into the field, just as in other underrepresented groups, we have to consider that many of us have never thought about librarianship as a career due to lack of awareness. Recruitment outreach needs to be targeted toward South Asian communities. But also, as the other authors have mentioned, parental expectations (both actual and perceived) must be taken into account. How much do South Asians police their own behavior to fit these expectations? My uncle wanted to be an English major, which freaked my grandfather out, so of course he got a degree in the sciences. Even after I was working as a librarian, I had family friends tell me I should apply for jobs at Google, because libraries won't exist in the near future. I don't think that the lack of faith in libraries as a viable career path is particular to South Asian people.

All the same, because I had worked as a page in my high school library, I knew there was something about librarianship that appealed to me, but I never considered it a viable career path until after college. In high school, I remember going to the career center for an assignment, and when I explored librarianship, the staff told me, "Libraries are dying." If we want to get more South Asians into the field, I think we have to counter that myth, but also find a way to demonstrate that a library career has the traits they're looking for in a successful profession.

LN: As part of the typical South Asian immigrant narrative, there was definitely an unspoken requirement that my sister and I had to pursue white-collar professions in health- or science-related fields. Our parents expected us to follow through on these filial expectations without necessarily fostering our potential for success in those fields. But both my sister and I benefited from early literacy storytimes and programming at the local library. We became strong readers and writers and also felt welcomed in the library, a sentiment that endures. I specifically mention these educational tools because, as a public librarian, I view the library as a critical space to nurture and develop its community's knowledge. However, in my family—and, I would argue, within the broader South Asian community—there was this insular, static perception that success comes from within. That is, we essentially know what we have to do and we don't rely on others to help us. Yet being a librarian/archivist means emphasizing a collective responsibility, whether it's raising readers or preserving the heritage of marginalized groups.

I started in the profession as a student assistant at my college library; after graduation, I accepted a paraprofessional position at another academic library. I looked at the job as a temporary situation because I planned on eventually going to law school. That first post-undergrad year was eye opening; I learned that a career in librarianship/archives was varied and complex. I was also fascinated by my colleagues' involvement in teaching, scholarly communication, budgeting and infrastructure, and campus governance. The social-justice aspect of librarianship especially appealed to me. But most importantly, I was inspired by having an Asian American female supervisor who

happened to hold a high position in the library's administration. This gave me hope for what I could achieve in the field. I applied to graduate school the following year, fully intending to pursue a career as an academic librarian.

Despite the prestige attached to being a lawyer, I think my parents preferred my shift to librarianship because they appreciated the stereotypes attached to this career—quiet, meek, unassuming, stable, etc.—and felt that a good Indian daughter should embody those qualities. They also viewed the academic library as a sterile, elevated employer. But when I became a public librarian, they expressed reservations related to my personal safety and the potential obsolescence of the profession. While I doubt they gave it much thought, my parents' sentiments echo the desire for upward mobility that pervades the South Asian American community. Working as a public servant isn't considered financially lucrative.

Q. What is it like to be a female librarian or archivist who also happens to be South Asian American? From this intersectional perspective, do you believe that your professional experience is distinct?

NM: When an individual looks at me, they are fairly confident that I am Indian. The reason I know is because I am told or asked by patrons and colleagues within libraries. While the assumption is accurate, I often wonder how someone from another South Asian country or a non-South Asian country would feel if they were assumed to be Indian. What does this mean for other South Asian countries that are less recognized?

They should not be Othered or considered any less, which ultimately occurs through these generalizations. Also, some people who may appear to be from a South Asian country are not. This not only puts a patron or colleague in a communication quandary, but it also requires a response from said librarian. Often, my default is to make that person feel better. However, in doing so, I question if I am doing this for self-preservation, to protect their feelings, or to remain “professional.”

Would I be asked about where I was “really” from or about my ethnicity if I was a man? A patron assuming something in their head and voicing it are two different things. Also, many South Asian men in the information sciences are often working in corporate jobs with more income potential and financial stability in information technology or the like. I don’t think it’s a secret that there is rampant sexism within the IT and science-related fields.

GS: With my name, I’ve seen everything from emails that are addressed to Gary (I’m assuming autocorrect was involved) to questions like: “*Where is it from? How do you spell it? What does it mean? Is it your surname? Did you name yourself?*” Twice, when I was wearing a nametag, people just started reciting the Gayatri Mantra! Once I answer some of their questions, I usually receive a response along the lines of how pretty or exotic my name is, and some folks feel compelled to share some information they know about India or an Indian they know. Over time, I’ve become less patient. At times, I experience tension when I’m wearing my “librarian” hat. I feel like I censor myself or let these interactions go on longer than they need to if I’m at a service desk, in a classroom, or doing outreach. Do I do this because I’m in a service profession,

because I'm a woman, or because I'm South Asian American? It's hard for me to separate my identities to answer that. I know that my "difference" is visible and people are making assumptions about me before we even have an interaction. I agree with Aditi, that I'm not opposed to have conversations about my culture or background, but that isn't necessarily a conversation I expect to have at work while interacting with our users.

AW: My background is a little different from Nisha, Gayatri, and Lalitha's; the three of them grew up here in America and this is where home is. And I totally get how frustrating it is for people to assume otherwise just because of the color of their skin or that they somehow look different from what a typical American "should" look like. I, on the other hand, was born and raised in New Delhi, India, and moved here when I was 26. This is home *now* but India will always be a part of who I am. So my response to "Where are you from?" is something I struggle with personally. I have felt like a poser when I say I am American because 10 years after moving here, I am still learning new things, new words, new -isms that my 3-year-old takes for granted. And yet paradoxically, America *is* where I "grew" up in terms of finding myself and coming into my own. To my parents, who live in India, I am American now. I align with their version of American, even if I am not 100% clear on mine. That's the thing, isn't it? There are so many versions of identity and nationhood. What does it mean to be American? Or Indian? Does it have to be one or the other? Who decides? And then who decides which version trumps another?

It's an engaging discussion, one that I reserve for my personal life. I don't expect it at work. Work is about professionalism, competence, and carrying out the responsibilities that I have been trained and hired to do. So when a patron interrupts me during a reference question to inquire where I am from (and it happens often), it is a constant reminder that I am a distraction to their worldview...an anomaly. Not necessarily in a hostile or mean way, but when they walked into the archive to learn more about a particular subject, they did not expect a South Asian American woman archivist to be the one helping out. So yes, my appearance and cultural background do influence the way people perceive me as a professional. And so does my gender. Like Nisha, I can't help but question if someone would feel as comfortable asking a man about his cultural heritage in the workplace. Come to think of it, I would be so curious to hear about the male perspective in this profession, which is traditionally perceived as female-dominated.

But it's not all negative! I have received a lot of opportunities too because of these same reasons. I received multiple graduate scholarships to encourage members from underrepresented communities in the profession and was also offered the opportunity to be a library residency fellow as part of diversity recruitment. So there's that.

LN: As a public librarian who works face-to-face daily with our patrons, I have a professional responsibility to provide outstanding customer service. Often, that means handling microaggressions with a smile on my face. Most public librarians will say that no matter how many times a question is asked, you must answer it as though it's the

first time you're hearing it. But when it comes to responding to, "Where are you *really* from?" or "What is your nationality?" over and over again, I struggle. Once, a white patron tried to engage me in a conversation about Indian politics and was surprised to hear that I had little knowledge and opinion on the matter. The confusion over ethnicity vs. nationality isn't just limited to white Americans; immigrant communities perpetuate it by conflating Americanness with race. My own parents would tell people that their daughter was married to an American (read: white dude), disregarding the fact that I identify as one, too!

I think many tend to view librarians as meek and passive, making it easy to lob offensive remarks with little fear of repercussions. And being an ethnic minority further underscores the insensitivity of people's comments. It's a double bind for sure, because my sense of professionalism precludes me from speaking my mind, and as a person of color, I feel silenced. As wonderfully supportive as my non-Asian colleagues are, I don't think they fully understand the emotional labor that goes into having to constantly justify your American identity.

Q. How can we be critical in our work as South Asian American librarians/archivists and also be allies for other marginalized groups?

NM: The model-minority rhetoric is rampant among members of the South Asian culture and outside of it. "If we can achieve success, why can't 'they' [African-Americans, Latinos]?" It really hurts me to hear this type of language from other South Asians. South Asians have, and continue, to be on the receiving end of ignorance and

discrimination. However, I think it is important that our histories of acceptance into this country be recognized. Ultimately, South Asians were not brought into this country on slave ships. The majority of South Asians were not sought for low-wage labor. The 1965 Immigration Act²⁵ allowed an influx of South Asians immigrants (and other nationalities) into the United States for specialized skills. My father was an engineer, and he came to the United States to study engineering. We were given opportunities during a time of extreme civil unrest for African Americans in this country. I think this also demonstrates how classism contributes to the idea of the model minority. When certain groups of people are sought for certain skills, they are perceived as “better” than laborers, when in fact, this was a targeted strategy by the United States.

What does this mean? While this can be an extended political discussion, I think that South Asians were given opportunities that, unfortunately, were not available to African Americans and Latinos who already lived in the United States (which is often still the case). It is our duty to recognize these histories and be allies for these marginalized groups. We cannot clump all minorities together when there are varied sociopolitical motivations for our arrival/recruitment (forced or policy-driven) into this country. That means we need to advocate for the representation of these voices within collections, archives, reference services, programming, and outreach. Additionally, we need these perspectives to be represented as the face of libraries through hiring initiatives.

25 Erika Lee, “Legacies of the 1965 Immigration Act,” *SAADA*, October 1, 2015, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://www.saada.org/tides/article/20151001-4458>.

LN: I agree with Nisha: Many South Asians have a problematic pride in the model-minority label. This categorization has reinforced institutionalized racism and has historically been seen as a device to divide and conquer minority groups.²⁶ This type of stratification isn't new to South Asians when you consider India's caste system, which was reified and exploited by the British to maintain colonial power. Many South Asians, including my engineer father, were well-educated and afforded access to special programs that allowed them to seamlessly immigrate to the U.S. These opportunities were not widely available to all immigrants or even minority groups already in this country for generations. When South Asian community members position themselves as so-called exemplars compared to other marginalized and disenfranchised groups in the U.S., we're not doing ourselves any favors. Espousing the model-minority title means willingly accepting a second-class status; it's also done on the backs of others. Before South Asians can properly ally ourselves with other people of color, we have to acknowledge our own oppressed status and willing acceptance of a social system that ultimately privileges the dominant white culture. As a public librarian, I am focused on making sure our collections are balanced, providing a mirror in which everyone sees themselves. As a professional reviewer for middle-grade and young adult literature, I rely on my expertise and, frankly, my own Person of Color (POC) experience to critique titles that fall short of accurately representing cultures outside the mainstream.

GS: Learning about South Asian American history and experiences that Nisha and Lalitha refer to are topics that I think many of us had to learn on our own. So part of my

²⁶ Nicholas D. Hartlep, "Reconsidering the Model Minority and Black Mormon Discourses" (paper, Northeastern Educational Research Association Conference Proceedings, Rocky Hill, CT, October 17 -19, 2012).

activism is ongoing education through reading, watching films, attending lectures, etc. When I work as a South Asian American librarian, my South Asian identity helps me be aware of my privilege even though I am part of an underrepresented group. And as much as I try to bring that into my professional work, I think we also need to have these conversations within our own community. By sharing information and engaging in difficult conversations with other South Asian Americans, I feel like I can almost be a more effective ally for other marginalized groups than in library-land.

AW: You know, the one question I was always asked during trips back to India was whether I had ever experienced racism in the U.S. My answer was always “no.” Did my husband’s childhood friend make an “Apu” joke (from *The Simpsons*) at our first meeting? Yes. Did someone in my writer’s club ask if my dark Indian hair ever turned white? Yes. Did a friend and colleague at work mention how she doesn’t like the smell of curry in the lunchroom? Yes. All of these moments made me cringe then and now. And I’m sure there’s an argument for all of these interactions to be considered racist. I interpret them coming from a place of ignorance and awkwardness, rather than acts of discrimination or assertions of racial superiority. I may be wrong but that has been my perspective.

However recent events have compelled me to think about this a little deeper. Have I been complacent in my worldview simply because as a South Asian American, I have been accorded a certain (dubious) privilege? The South Asian community has traditionally been a fairly non-threatening, financially prosperous immigrant group that has been slow to express political opinion or action. In return for being a “model

minority,” we have been “bestowed” a protection of sorts against the overt racism that members of the Hispanic or Black population may experience.²⁷ This precarious veneer slipped (for me) in February 2017 when an Indian engineer, Srinivas Kuchibhotla, was murdered in a Kansas bar by a white man in what was termed as a “hate crime.” Suddenly “racism” was now something I needed to be vigilant about. And it drove home the point that this is how most marginalized groups must feel on a daily basis. As an individual, I am becoming more sensitive to this reality, and as a professional, I hope that this sensitivity will inform decisions about collection development, representation, and balance. Not just in terms of white and nonwhite, but more about the plurality of existence.

Q. Is the South Asian American experience adequately represented in libraries and archives?

GS: Wearing my public-services hat, I’m impressed by the programming and outreach activities related to South Asia that I’ve seen. Public libraries and academic libraries are hosting programs related to Diwali, Eid, and more. Growing up in Southern California, where there was a sizeable South Asian community, I didn’t notice any of that. The community definitely came together to fill in the gap, but I never saw anything in public institutions to assist that endeavor.

²⁷ Anuhya Bobba, “The Murder of Srinivas Kuchibhotla: Beyond the Model Minority Label of the Indian American Community,” *Feminism in India*, March 2, 2017, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/03/02/model-minority/>.

Working on a campus, there is a little bit of *it's your month* programming. African Americans get February. Women get March. Latinx get April for Cesar Chavez. And then, when May rolls around, it's time for Asians and Pacific Islanders. This is where the label of Asian American can be problematic. There is power in numbers and solidarity, but there are drawbacks, as well. There have been Mays with an entire month of campus-wide programming that doesn't include any events related to South Asia. It might be because my campus doesn't have a South Asian Studies program, but there is a South Asian student population. Groups on campus, from student organizations to faculty initiatives, are trying to fill the need for representation. My experience with the library is that if you initiate a project, they seem to be open to it. I was able to host an exhibit and event related to Indian cinema. That's the *other duties as needed* part of the job description for every librarian from an underrepresented group; you are expected to be the expert and advocate for your people and culture. Oftentimes under-represented librarians take on this work in addition to their jobs, and don't get compensated for it.

AW: From an archival perspective, there's still a lot to be done to include and showcase historical narratives from a non-white perspective. When I worked at the state archives in Texas, I learned a lot about the history of the state and the events and people who contributed to the shaping of its personality. But information about minority communities was sparse. This is not to say that there was an active effort to exclude that perspective. But there just wasn't much about Asian or South Asian communities, even though members of these communities have been around for a while.

In California, the South Asian community has historically played an integral role in the development of the state—contributing to road, irrigation, and railroad construction; the sawmills of the Pacific Northwest; peach farms; vineyards; and sharecropping. But we don't learn about any of this in school. Smaller community archives attempt to address this gap and present a more balanced representation of history (for instance, the Austin History Center appoints community liaison officers to reach out to the African American, Mexican American, and Asian American communities for collection development), but they inevitably tend to be separate and distinct from the official archives.

The South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) is another independent organization trying to demonstrate that South Asian American history is not different from or contrary to American history. It is creating a dialogue and a historical narrative with pictures, stories, personal experiences, and anecdotes from real, everyday South Asian Americans...presenting an additional vantage point to official versions of history. There's an unspoken understanding that it is up to the members of underrepresented communities to document their own histories, and that's why it is so crucial to have role models from these communities—our own communities—in the profession.

NM: Representation of South Asian Americans is quite precarious. As Gayatri mentions, there are more celebrations for holidays in public library spaces. However, I feel that while this is considered inclusive, it can also be a way of tokenizing South Asian culture. I would love to imagine alternative programming that highlights the diverse historical contexts, similar to what Aditi discusses, in which many of us arrived here as opposed

being defined solely by a holiday or costume. I definitely agree that it can be dangerous to clump Asian Americans together. It is such a varied population with so many different histories. This truly speaks to how race is socially constructed and how this classification itself can be problematic.

I was rummaging through some of my parents' things shortly after my father passed away, and I found letters from one of my father's friends who had immigrated to the U.S. before my family. He was telling my father about how there are so many opportunities for a better life in America, and he was encouraging my father to come. It really struck me, and it made me realize how that letter was in fact a part of *my* story and mere existence. These are the missing non-white narratives that can be represented in libraries.

LN: I understand Nisha's point about tokenization. It's a fine line because, on one hand, we desire inclusiveness, but on the other, the representation isn't always accurate and can be insensitive. In planning events at public libraries, I've noted that programming tends to favor mainstream cultural traditions; libraries are more likely to highlight Christmas rather than Eid, Navaratri, or Rosh Hashanah. I recall one library planning a Diwali *diya* craft in July; this Hindu observance is typically celebrated in mid-autumn. Despite an ethical charge to maintain balanced collections, public librarians face budget constraints and, as a result, prioritize purchases of mainstream, popular titles (most of which are predominantly white with few POC characters). I can't tell you how disheartening it is to read professional children's book reviews praising characterization,

plotting, and artwork, but because the book is about South Asian culture, it might need additional handselling in order to circulate. Why invest that extra time in a non-mainstream title when there are dozens of others that will check out like hot cakes with little to no promotion? Librarians are not only stewards of the collections; we also help to shape the reading tastes of our service populations. I approach my work critically and with intentionality; when I buy books about the South Asian experience, I commit to promoting these titles through readers' advisory and programming.

Q. How can we encourage other members of the South Asian American community to consider entering this field?

NM: For me, the biggest deterrent to becoming a librarian was that I didn't realize the profession existed. Yes, I knew that librarians worked in libraries, but unfortunately, it wasn't something that felt professionalized. I think this goes back to the idea of having a strong work ethic to be what is deemed as "professional" and "profitable" within the South Asian culture. Had I known the strategy, service, and opportunities within the profession, I would have jumped at the chance right after college. I think the hardest thing is explaining what librarians do to others. It is our duty to educate those within our culture about the value of our work. Perhaps we can associate it with the work that other South Asians are more inclined to choose such as other helping professions like medicine, advocacy in law, or information provision, organization, and access in the information technology arena. Most of us can agree that the South Asian experience with respect to immigration and being first or second generation has shared struggles

and nuances. I can see librarians building upon these commonalities through work we have done in librarianship and archives.

GS: I'm of two minds about this. We can look at the professions South Asians are drawn to, as well as their motivation for selecting those fields. Making very broad generalizations, the following factors might be considered: status, income potential, stability, and flexible work schedule. We won't attract anyone with our salaries! But I think we can make a case for the other factors (perhaps academic libraries more so than the other types since income tends to be higher). At the same time, I wonder if this is the right approach. Are we falling into the stereotype of acceptable professions? Will everyone who isn't a doctor, engineer, lawyer, or computer-science major be considered a failure? I think the major hurdle is to get South Asians to realize that librarianship/archives present a viable career option. If the profession is serious about recruiting from underrepresented groups, they also need to utilize current South Asian librarians/archivists in their efforts.

AW: We need to demystify the profession in order to encourage members from underrepresented communities to consider it. I agree with Nisha that it can be quite a challenge to try and explain what it is that we do in a manner that adequately represents the excitement, potential, importance, and relevance of our work. When I tell people about my work, it's not uncommon for them to adopt a concerned look and ask (well-meaningly), "But do you enjoy it?" and then look suitably confused when I nod excitedly!

It's not "just" about books, or paper, or cataloging. It's about critical thinking, life skills, data sets, information literacy, technology, and understanding who we are and how we got here. Had I known this, I would have opted in much earlier. Scholarships, internships, and diversity recruitments are useful and important ways to assist people already interested in the profession. But we need to do more to make the profession mainstream. Perhaps we need a leading lady or man from the profession on a TV show or as the protagonist of a popular book. If we can demystify the world of archaeology, medicine, and the justice system with high ratings, there's hope for libraries and archives. This might be an oversimplification of the problem, but we're going to have to get creative in our approach.

On a less romantic note, money is an important consideration. If this profession were to suddenly become as financially lucrative as going into medicine or law, it would be a more attractive career choice.

LN: It's ironic how one of the most notable figures in our profession, S. R. Ranganathan, is Indian, and yet librarianship/archives is rarely acknowledged as a viable career option for South Asians. But to be fair, LIS has a perception problem in mainstream America, and once that's resolved, I believe we'll make serious headway with demystifying and promoting the profession to the South Asian community. Additionally, we need to consider the roles and influence of South Asians currently engaged in the profession. The onus is really on us to raise our voices and demand representation. This means building strong networks; critiquing programming ideas

around South Asian culture to ensure accuracy; and emphasizing balance in our programs, services, and library/archival collections.

Conclusion

As we wind down our conversation, we attempt to take stock of the questions that originally prompted it. Questions about individual, community, and racial identities intersecting with gender and professional identities. Did we find commonalities in our daily lives working behind the reference desk or in the archives that could be attributed to a shared ethnicity? Dare we speak for all South Asian American information professionals when, by sheer coincidence, all four of us happen to have cultural roots in India and do not really reflect the diversity of religion, gender, or even sexuality that a more representative roundtable would have?

While we feel solidarity as South Asian American librarians, the nuances in our individual experiences, perceptions, and histories provide just a sample of what it is like to be women who also happen to be South Asian American *and* librarians. For some of us, this profession was accepted, no questions asked, by our families and community, while for others that wasn't the case. The big takeaway then, for us, was to acknowledge that our individual experiences have something to add to the conversation about representation in libraries and archives, expanding the scope beyond the books and collections to include representation in programming, outreach, advocacy and recruitment initiatives. We hope that this discussion, which originally arose from a need to explore "why" there is a dearth of literature on the experiences of South Asian

Americans in the field of libraries and archives, can evolve into “how” we can amplify our collective voices and perspectives. That can only happen once enough members of our community articulate and share stories with the confidence that they are being listened to.

As our dialogue demonstrates, our individual and collective identities are often at odds in various contexts. Additionally, this is a subset of the myriad of identities in South Asia. We are eager to continue this dialogue and include other voices that we do not represent. We hope that including more of these stories will help address the lack of commonality and cohesion that inherently exists when you’re tagged Asian - and in our case, the “other” Asian - without due consultation.

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