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## **Emerging Considerations for Diversity Education of South Asian American Students**

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## **Emerging Considerations for Diversity Education of South Asian American Students**

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One of the tenets taught to diversity and inclusion (D & I) practitioners is the need to meet students where they are. As we reflect upon our own engagements with D & I work, as well as the current literature on engagement with students outside the Black/White racial binary, we recognize several gaps related to South Asian American students (Ching & Agbayani, 2012; Patel, 2010; Schuh, Jones, Harper & Associates, 2011). Our entrance into diversity work is informed by our own identities as two second-generation Gujarati American women who grew up in the Midwest and the South. We are also informed by our professional roles in higher education student affairs. Purvi, raised in the South, attended a private, Jesuit university in the Midwest, and went on to graduate school at a mid-sized public institution in the Midwest. Since then, she has worked at a selective liberal arts college, a private Jesuit university, and a private, selective research-intensive university. She currently works in D & I work in the Midwest. Viraj, born and raised in the Midwest, attended a large, public land-grant institution, and went to graduate school at a public land-grant institution in New England. Since then, she has worked at elite, private institutions in the Mid-Atlantic and East Coast regions and currently is in multicultural affairs.

Our perspectives are shaped by our identities which include two diverse immigration narratives, our Hindu identity, and the privilege we experience based on caste identity, as well as our socialization into student affairs and social justice movements. In our lived experience, students in the South Asian diaspora are cast as “apolitical” or unwilling to engage in D & I work, falling victim to the model minority myth—a problematic narrative of Asian American identity (Prashad, 2000). However, our experience, both personally and professionally, challenges this typical narrative.

In a post-9/11 higher education landscape, we see the emergence of consciousness around the South Asian diaspora as one that is racialized and having experiences connected to institutional and interpersonal violence. This piece offers a context for working with South Asian students in a D & I setting while introducing new frameworks to speak to the unique needs of this student population. Our lived experiences as students engaged in D & I work, and now as full-time practitioners, inform the recommendations set forth.

### **Context**

South Asian Diaspora refers to:

Individuals with ancestry from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The community also includes members of the South Asian diaspora – past generations of South Asians who originally settled in many areas around the world, including the Caribbean (Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad & Tobago), Africa (Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda), Canada, Europe, the Middle East, and other parts of

Asia and the Pacific Islands (Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore). (South Asian Americans Leading Together [SAALT], 2017)

The diversity of South Asian identity also includes multiple diverse religions, socioeconomic status, and language. As SAALT notes, “South Asians practice Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. The most common languages other than English spoken by South Asians in the United States include Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu” (SAALT, 2017). South Asians are also diverse in terms of immigration history and socioeconomic status (Vaghul & Edlagan, 2016). The majority of South Asians who live in the United States are foreign-born, with over 75% of the population born outside of the United States. South Asians occupy a range of immigration status as undocumented immigrants, student and worker visa holders and their dependents, legal permanent residents, and naturalized citizens (SAALT, 2017).

South Asian Americans are uniquely positioned within the broader Asian American diaspora with regard to the model minority myth (Saran, 2016). The model South Asian is often perceived in a dual role, “one, of being inherently hard-working high achievers; and two, of being spiritual and pliant” (Mahmud, 2001, p. 658). This framework obscures the need for South Asian students to be centered in D & I discourses on campuses. For example, as practitioners we have seen these assumptions manifest in limiting our colleagues approach to the South Asian diaspora. Examples may include “university-wide” celebrations of Holi (but not Eid or Gurpurab) and Diwali (relying only on North Indian linguistic representations of the holiday, instead of Deepavali). Administrators often rely on supporting the South Asian diaspora by attending cultural shows but not engaging the students in the process of developing and curating the show and critiquing, with compassion, what it means to represent “their culture.” As a result, these approaches are often rooted in Orientalism (Said, 1978) and a process whereby the other’s culture is consumed, but never engaged. These practices fail to depict the South Asian diaspora as a dynamic, multifaceted, and complex community.

When administrators only attend cultural performance events, students learn that their value and contribution to the university is through cultural aesthetics and performance of culture versus engaging in the nuance of lived cultural experiences. As Maira (2002) states, [the] creation of South Asian organizations is...a politicized strategy [which] is a response to the partitioning of ethnic identity politics in academic institutions ....[and] also constitute a site for students’ socialization into the fabric of U.S. society as ethnic subjects. (p. 127)

For example, on predominantly White campuses, South Asian cultural shows function as a mechanism for students to explore their ethnic, racial, and political identity. Often, institutions have co-opted these programs and organizations to become consumptive cultural immersion experiences where passive audience members can bear witness to the arts of the “East.” Examples can include campus wide “Holi” or “India Day” events branded as a ‘campus tradition’ or utilized in university-wide marketing. Support of South Asian students often defaults as support of cultural performance through Orientalism. These assumptions and narratives essentialize the South Asian diasporic experience in higher education and perpetuate college and administrators’ institutional violence.

We posit that college and university administrators can incorporate and utilize emerging frameworks and practices to subvert the dominant model minority perception of the South Asian Diaspora. To move towards authentic engagement, we present emerging frameworks for

practitioners to center their work with South Asian students including diaspora cultures, casteism and Hindu nationalism, and Islamophobia.

### **Diaspora Cultures**

South Asian diaspora covers hundreds of separate language traditions, cultures, national identities, regional culture, and migration histories. Ultimately, the way privilege operates in terms of diaspora cultures is the centering of North Indian (specifically, people who trace heritage to the states of Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, Chandigarh, Haryana, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh) experiences. This privileging occurs in the way the vast majority of Indian restaurants serve only one region's cuisine (generally Punjabi) or a focus on Indo-Aryan language traditions, like Hindi, which is used in Bollywood.

On college and university campuses in the United States we have observed an essentializing of the South Asian diaspora that focuses on the North Indian and Hindu experience. Doing so fails to recognize the nuances of experience and traditions that center subordinated communities, such as Indo-Caribbean students, Muslim students, South Indian students, as well as students with transnational migration stories, those who do not claim heritage to India but rather other countries in the diaspora, and many others. Essentializing one particular experience ultimately makes our attempt at engaging this complex and diverse student population shallow and ill-informed. By participating in the essentializing of South Asian diaspora culture to North Indian and Hindu culture, we perpetuate the erasure of hundreds of cultural and religious traditions while simultaneously upholding mechanisms of dominance that have, and continue to, subjugate communities that are often already minoritized politically and socially.

### **Diaspora Cultures: Applications for Practice**

It is imperative that practitioners challenge their assumptions about the South Asian diaspora to prioritize the narratives of students that are often lost. Practitioners can do this by learning students' immigration narratives, as well as religious and cultural affiliations. This will in turn strengthen the institution's ability to support students. As practitioners, we must also center the narratives of those within the community that have been most marginalized by de-centering North Indian, upper-caste, upper-class, and Hindu experiences. A few suggestions for higher education practitioners to engage students whose diaspora narratives are not often recognized include:

- a. Inviting speakers to campus with heritage from other regions in the South Asian Diaspora, including Indo-Caribbean folks, Nepali, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, South Indian, Sri Lankan etc.;
- b. Recognizing and naming South Asian traditions specifically by the region that they come from for example South Asian food might more accurately be called Punjabi food;
- c. Considering ways to provide multiple linguistic and regional differences for large holidays; for example, Diwali is also called Deepavali in South Indian languages.

These are just a few examples of the ways that we can problematize the notion that North Indian culture is representative of the entire South Asian diaspora. Utilizing this more complex and nuanced diasporic lens will ultimately lead to more effective engagement of the students within

the South Asian diaspora and a greater sense of belonging for those students who have not seen themselves recognized in the diaspora.

### **Casteism & Hindu Nationalism**

It is impossible to have a conversation on engaging students in the South Asian diaspora around D & I work without recognizing the influence of caste and Hindu nationalism. The caste system is “one of the oldest surviving forms of social stratification” (BBC, 2016). The caste system is based on Hindu constructs regarding role and social order and has a very complex history that intersects with British colonialism. The system has shaped how people identify, what their societal position is, and how they navigate systems.

There is a common misconception that caste no longer impacts South Asian diasporic experiences. As two upper-caste women, the authors recognize our limited perspective on this incredibly complex and layered identity that has had significant impact on our experiences within the diaspora, especially in ways that were not always conscious to us due to our positionality and privilege within this identity. We posit that caste-blindness is akin to color-blindness and perpetuates a myth that caste does not matter anymore when it was likely a determining factor in accessing opportunities for migration to the United States.

In the case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), the Supreme Court of the United States unanimously decided that Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian Sikh man who identified himself as a “high caste Hindu, of full Indian blood” was racially ineligible for naturalized citizenship in the United States. In 1919, Thind filed a petition for naturalization under the Naturalization Act of 1906 which allowed only “free white persons” and “aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent” to become United States citizens by naturalization.

After his petition was granted, Government attorneys initiated a proceeding to cancel Thind’s naturalization and a trial followed in which the Government presented evidence of Thind’s political activities as a founding member of the Ghadr Party. Thind did not challenge the constitutionality of the racial restrictions. Instead, he attempted to have “high-caste Hindus of full Indian blood” classified as “free white persons” within the meaning of the Naturalization Act based on the fact that both northern Indians and most Europeans are Indo-European peoples. Often cited in Asian American Studies courses as one of the foundational cases that laid a path for citizenship for Asian Americans, a closer analysis of Thind’s legal argument reveals the layered and coded language around caste, making an argument for citizenship based on caste privilege and proximity to whiteness.

Thind, as a Sikh man, also demonstrates that casteism and caste identity are not exclusively tied to Hinduism, though the two are related. Caste continues to be relevant in contemporary society. In terms of access to education, caste plays a role with international student communities in terms of who can attend institutions of higher education. Many universities in India hold positions for students of lower caste or “scheduled caste” backgrounds but do not provide adequate support for these students, and their opportunities to attend graduate school abroad significantly decrease as a result of caste identity. Caste is also ever present when students build relationships: Matrimonial advertisements are filled with preferences for partners from similar caste backgrounds, and students build relationships with peers on experiences with religion, which is often determined by caste. Caste is still ever-present for our students and is often a place of not only family identity but also tied to religious practice (e.g., vegetarianism is linked to caste for many) and hegemony. As we have shown in this section, caste not only has

had a profound impact on our legacy to obtain legal status as immigrants, it also is still present in many cultural spaces and is a site of unlearning and unpacking for many upper caste South Asian students.

### **Casteism: Applications for Practice**

When engaging South Asian students in a D&I framework, we cannot exclude caste from the dialogue. A few suggestions for implementing and centering a framework of caste include:

- a. Centering experiences about and impacting Dalit<sup>1</sup> communities even if they are not necessarily represented in the community, such as sharing news articles and encouraging dialogue about political movements happening globally around caste;
- b. Encouraging students to engage in discomfort and learning around caste by connecting students to resources, such as articles, coursework, books, and community groups;
- c. Affirming the existence of caste and how it plays out in conscious and latent diasporic experiences and histories, as well as in our own student communities

### **Hindu Nationalism**

Hindu Nationalism is derived from “Hindutva, or “Hinduness”—a term popularized by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923—is the predominant form of Hindu nationalism in India (A.T., 2014). This ideology was formally adopted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 1980s and has become the ruling party in India. The foundation of Hindutva rests on the notion that to be Indian one must accept that “Hinduism [is] not a religion, but a way of life” (A.T., 2014).

The basic ideology of Hindu Nationalism acts as a gatekeeper of who gets to be considered authentically Indian and even how to be Hindu. Hindu Nationalism serves as an ideology that is used to justify violence against communities seen as inauthentic, including Muslims, queer folks, women who challenge traditional patriarchal gender roles, and individuals who consume meat, particularly beef. Its tenets have also been transported with connections to funders and advocates worldwide, including in the United States (A.T., 2014). As part of the diaspora, students are impacted by this political movement. Many experience the ramifications of these ideologies but have never been given the tools and space to critically reflect upon and define how they experience these moments. Some examples of how this ideology may be present on college and university campuses include:

- a. South Asian students being presumed to be Hindu; alternatively, South Asian students who identify as Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Atheist, etc. experiencing microaggressions as non-Hindus;
- b. Students experiencing invalidation of ‘not being Hindu enough [or] South Asian enough’ on the basis of Hindu Nationalist categorizations of identity;
- c. Disconnection between South Asian student organizations and Muslim student organizations in terms of crossover leadership, observance of holidays, and shared programming

In addition to these examples, there are many other ways that this ideology continues to insidiously affect the lived experience of students in the South Asian diaspora. While the Hindu Nationalist ideology may affect college student communities in subtle or overt ways, the

following section provides applications for practice to acknowledge the existence of the ideology while supporting students of the South Asian diaspora in an inclusive way.

### **Hindu Nationalism: Applications for Practice**

With regard to adopting a framework that acknowledges the existence of Hindu Nationalism, and those who have been impacted by its effects, student affairs practitioners can:

- a. Build, support, and facilitate space for students to learn more about the Hindu Nationalist diaspora movement and reflect upon their experience;
- b. Offer an understanding that Hindu Nationalism impacts members of the diaspora in disparate ways, and does threaten the physical and psychological safety of many with minoritized identities within the diaspora

As D & I practitioners looking to engage South Asian students, we advocate for the development of safe and engaging spaces to critically analyze the links between Hindu Nationalism and its manifestations on campuses and in society. Additionally, we support work that seeks to understand how promotion of a Hindu Nationalist ideology directly supports Islamophobia, another major point of entry for practitioners looking to engage South Asian students in D & I work.

### **Islamophobia**

It is impossible to have a conversation about engaging South Asian students on D & I work without recognizing the great impact of Islamophobia on their lived experience. Muslim or not, Islamophobia has played a role in the lives of South Asians. Whether this is experiencing the impacts of Islamophobia on or off campus, learning anti-Muslim rhetoric at home, or experiencing the impacts of structural and realized Islamophobia personally, Islamophobia has had a multidirectional impact on the lives of diasporic South Asians. This is particularly relevant in the way that South Asians, Muslim and otherwise, have made meaning of our identities in the post-9/11 era (Maira, 2016). Recognizing the reality of South Asian diasporic tension in a post-Partition era (when the Indian subcontinent split into Pakistan, West Pakistan, and India in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971), practitioners must develop a lens to understand how Islamophobia impacts the lives of South Asian students. The nuances of Islamophobia in the South Asian diaspora are living and complex and have filled libraries of texts (Ahmad, 2003; Kundnani, 2014; Therwath, 2007). As practitioners who work to unpack our own experiences with learning Islamophobia, as well as striving to advocate for the rights of Muslims in the U.S., we recognize our own capacity to engage fully on this topic.

In an extreme attempt to distance from Islamophobia, some campuses may encourage development of programs that perpetuate a form of respectability or “Good Muslim Politics” (Kazi, 2016). These “Good Muslim Politics” are often demonstrated through programming like “Hijab Solidarity Days or interfaith Ramadan dinners” (Kazi, 2017). These programming efforts are aimed at changing people’s opinions and attitudes and fail to position Islamophobia as a systemic injustice. This dynamic inadvertently pits members of a minoritized group against themselves, similar to the way the Model Minority stereotype divides people of color in the United States (Saran, 2016). Juxtaposed with Islamophobia, these narratives about “good Muslims” perpetuate a rhetoric that assumes Islamophobia is not systemic. Furthermore, this dynamic of emphasizing one’s goodness and respectability also exacerbates the notion that

individuals who experience Islamophobia have control over their experience of being othered—that is, if they simply emphasize their patriotism and morality.

### **Islamophobia: Applications for Practice**

We encourage student affairs practitioners to employ a nuanced awareness about Islamophobia through engaging in some of the strategies outlined below:

- a. Create learning spaces for students to reflect on Islamophobia, including when they have experienced it and when they have been complicit in it within South Asian communities;
- b. Recognize the need to create distinct learning spaces about identity based on relationship to Islamophobia. Non-Muslim students may need a different learning environment than students who identify as Muslim. Be cognizant of the dynamic that Muslim students are often asked to be teachers regarding Islamophobia; this can be taxing labor that can affect the wellbeing and sense of belonging for students;
- c. Recognize the impact of mass media coverage and policy surrounding Muslims on your student communities. Form nurturing community spaces to process social events;
- d. Encourage non-Muslim South Asian students to build relationships across religious identity and to employ an advocacy lens in programming and leadership development;
- e. Consider teaching bystander intervention techniques to disrupt Islamophobia especially to non-Muslim students.

### **Conclusion**

As higher education practitioners and South Asian identified women, we have shared challenges and opportunities for engaging students across the South Asian diaspora. The acknowledgment of diaspora cultures, Hindu Nationalism, and Islamophobia are a small, though critical, selection of entry points to discuss the South Asian experience. Though not an exhaustive list, we also believe an intersectional approach that acknowledges class, sexual orientation, and ability are additional points for discussion to engage South Asian students in relevant and dynamic ways.

We encourage practitioners to integrate various theoretical and practical frameworks of identity in their practice. For practitioners looking for further resources, we suggest the resources section of the SAALT website ([www.saalt.org](http://www.saalt.org)), the Dalit History Month Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/dalithistorymonth/>), and any of the number of resources listed in the references section of this piece.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dalit*, literally meaning “oppressed” in the Sanskrit language, represents the lower castes of India; literature may sometimes note the Dalit community as “untouchables.”