CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF SOUTH ASIANS IN THE UNITED STATES

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In my teaching and interaction with social work students as well as the general American population, I have come to realize that people have very little knowledge about South Asians in the United States; and in most cases it is limited to saag paneer and naan* at the Indian restaurant or the Indian physician they may have interacted with. They may recognize famous personalities and TV sitcoms, such as Priyanka Chopra Jonas, the lead actress in the *Quantico* drama series on the ABC TV network; Vice President Kamala Harris (whose mother, Shyamala Gopalan, was an Indian immigrant and cancer specialist); Swati Mohan, an Indian-origin scientist charged with overseeing the highly anticipated landing of the *Perseverance* Mars rover for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration; Sundar Pichai, the chief executive officer of Google; Hasan Minhaj, who hosted the White House correspondents' dinner in 2017 and 2020 as well as the Netflix series *Patriot Act*; *The Office* star Mindy Kaling; and Kumail Nanjiani, who played Dinesh in the HBO series *Silicon Valley*. But who actually are South Asians, and why should social workers and other helping professionals know more about them?

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* In this book, the authors have made a conscious decision to not italicize words in languages other than English because, for years, these words have been watered down and overexplained. They need to be a part of the dialogue and education, thus they cannot be replaced.

SOUTH ASIAN LINEAGE

South Asians trace their lineage to countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. The community also includes members of the South Asian diaspora who originally settled in other parts of the world, including the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, Canada, the Middle East, parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands, and the United States. This group is called *twice migrants* because their ancestors emigrated from the South Asian subcontinent to different regions in the world (Bhachu, 1985). In the United States, it is estimated that by 2060, 46 million Asian Americans will live in the country, making Asian Americans the nation's fastest growing racial or ethnic group (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). This can be attributed partially to the exponential growth of South Asian immigration, which increased 40 percent from 2010 to 2017. Currently, about 5.4 million South Asians live in the United States, and of this population, about 80 percent are of Indian origin, followed by Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan (South Asian Americans Leading Together [SAALT], 2019). Thus, social workers and other helping professionals need to know more about this population to whom they may render services in some form or the other.

For the purposes of this book, I have used the most inclusive definition of *South Asia*, which includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives as well as the group of twice migrants. I need to emphasize that the term "South Asian" is a constructed and contested term that is not used by all people from the countries just listed. In addition, the construct of "South Asian" has been critiqued as a term that collapses the diversity and power issues within this regional grouping, particularly in regard to nationality, language, and religion (Islam, 1993). Prashad (2012) pointed out that the first-generation South Asian immigrants in the United States might still identify as Gujarati or Punjabi (different regions or states in India), or even as Pakistani American, Bangladeshi American, or Indian American. Another term used with ethnic pride is "desi," which is from the word *desh* that originates from Sanskrit and means "own country"; hence, anyone with a heritage in South Asia may identify members of their diaspora and themselves as desi (Zimmer, 2013).

The second generation born in the United States to parents of South Asian origin often find an intuitive sense of belongingness with other South Asians and may be more comfortable with the term

"South Asian Americans" (Bhatia & Ram, 2018). Hegemonic constructions of South Asians generally center around Indian, Hindu, middle-class, upper caste, and heterosexual identity (Mehrotra, 2012). It is also worthwhile to state that although most research and documentation on South Asians have been conducted mainly with Indian Americans, this book will inevitably bring to light the experiences of South Asians in general.

In this chapter, I first examine the history of immigration of South Asians to the United States. I then deconstruct the concept of *model minority*, a term that describes minority groups that have supposedly achieved a high level of success in contemporary American society (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2011). "Model minority" is commonly used to describe Asian Americans in general—which automatically includes South Asians. I describe the reasons why the concept of model minority is a myth.

IMMIGRATION TRENDS

Immigration Trends: 1700s to 1965

Although a comprehensive review of immigration of South Asians to the United States is beyond the scope of this book, it is important to understand the different trends that underscore the current experiences of South Asians in this nation. South Asian immigration to the United States can be divided into four waves. The first South Asians—men—arrived in late 1700s as workers on the Yankee clipper ships that traded between New England and India. There is not much documentation available about these South Asians, who frequently married Black women (Prashad, 2001). With the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the United States turned its attention to the Indian subcontinent for labor needs in lumber and farming. The Indian subcontinent at that time was under British colonial rule and included the present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh (Shah & Tewari, 2019).

The first wave of South Asians arrived in the United States between 1897 and 1924 and consisted primarily of Sikh farmers from Punjab, India, and some Bengali Muslims. Specifically, between 1905 and 1912, thousands of male laborers from South Asia made their way to North America (Rangaswamy, 2000). These were mainly uneducated men who worked for half the wages of European workers in agriculture, lumber, and other labor-intensive industries (Chowdhury

& Okazaki, 2020). The Punjabi men were either young farmers or soldiers who had served in the British military. Instead of returning to India, which was under the British colonial rule and was rampant with rural indebtedness along with epidemics of cholera, plague, and famines, the young Punjabi men sought better lives for themselves on the West Coast of the United States (Sohi, 2014). A number of them settled between Vancouver (Washington State) and San Francisco and were followed by direct migration of more Punjabi farmers from India to California. With rising anti-Asian sentiment leading to laws preventing miscegenation along with the social milieu to protect White women from "non-Whites," many Punjabi farmers married Mexican women. The Punjabi–Mexican alliance worked at farms and formed the basis of shared familial values as well as cultural and language differences (Mahmud, 2001).

Due to the ongoing growth of the anti-Asian sentiment in the United States at the time, especially on the West Coast, a number of Asians, including South Asians, were treated as undesirable immigrants and labeled "enslaved, effeminate, caste-ridden and degraded" (Maira, 2002, p. 7). The local people cautioned about the "tide of turbans." South Asians were also termed as "dusky peril," and the "Hindu invasion" was blamed for taking away American jobs (Chowdhury & Okazaki, 2020). Even though most immigrants in the first wave were Sikhs, the American media homogenized them as "Hindoos." The rising hostility against Asians fostered the first anti–South Asian riots, first in Washington (in 1907) and then in California (in 1910). The victims were largely workers in the lumber and railroad construction industries, and the few South Asians who were professionals and businessmen did not face riots in a similar manner (Mazumdar, 1989). The restrictive immigration policies that started in 1917 with the Asiatic Barred Zone Act later continued in other forms too. According to the restrictions in the Immigration Act of 1924, South Asians did not meet the standards of Whiteness and hence were not allowed to own land or property or to bring their spouses from their home countries. South Asians were not allowed to naturalize because they were not considered to be White.

A few South Asian court cases were highly publicized during that period. One was *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*. Bhagat Singh served in the British army in World War I and tried to advocate for citizenship, stating that he belonged to the Aryan race (upper caste); however, he was still denied citizenship by the federal Bureau of

Naturalization (now the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service; Chowdhury & Okazaki, 2020). This case brought to light that the United States did not want South Asians to gain citizenship, and it also highlighted deep-rooted issues of caste that are still embedded in the Indian social milieu, which I explain later in the chapter (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2013b; Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018).

Another court case involved Vaishno Das Bagai, the son of a wealthy landowner in Peshawar (in present-day Pakistan) who arrived in United States with his family (wife and three sons) and $25,000 in gold. He was granted naturalized citizenship in 1921; however, his citizenship was revoked in 1923, and his store was liquidated. Before Vaishno Das took his own life in 1928, he wrote a letter that was published in the newspaper with the title "Here's Letter to the World from Suicide." In his letter, he raised the question, "Now what am I? What have I made of myself and my children?" as he was stripped of his U.S. citizenship and not even given a passport to travel back to India or buy his own home in United States (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2013a).

A case that represented a beacon of hope was that of Dalip Singh Saund. Saund had come to the United States in 1920, received a doctorate in mathematics but worked as a farmer and advocate of peace. He was the first Indian American elected to Congress, beating Jacqueline Cochran Odlum in California in 1956. Odlum, an aviation pioneer and former cosmetics manufacturer, never came to terms to losing to a Hindu (notably, Saund was a Sikh). The House Foreign Affairs Committee sent Saund on tours to a number of Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Singapore, and Hong Kong, to showcase that the United States did not discriminate against its minorities, especially Asians (Venugopal, 2021).

In the meantime, on the East Coast, several Bengali Muslims came via Ellis Island to respond to the demand of "silk" in the West. Not much has been documented about the difficult journey of this group (Bald, 2013). Later, a number of indentured laborers who were working on the British ships freed themselves when the ships docked in the U.S. ports. The Bengali men were mainly traders who sold perfumes, rugs, silk, and more, and settled in the port cities of Charleston, New York City, and New Orleans, or they moved into the Midwest. These men often married women who were African American, Puerto Rican, or Creole.

The Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 denied naturalization and citizenship to Asians in general from 1924 to 1943. As a result, South Asian immigration practically halted. By the 1930s, the South Asians in the United States consisted of about 3,000 farmers on the West Coast, 1,000 traders, 500 students, and approximately 30 holy men scattered all over the country (Bhatia & Ram, 2018; Midlarsky et al., 2006; Williams, 2019). It was not until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Act) of 1965 that doors opened again for South Asians to immigrate to the United States. The admittance formula that supported White European immigrants was restructured for the South Asians, partly due to the Cold War–era pressure from the newly formed nations of Asia and Africa.

Immigration Trends: 1965 and After

Although it is important to shed light on South Asians who came to the United States before 1965, for many South Asians, their story in the United States started post-1965—they consider 1965 as "ground zero" for their foundational American experience. The post-1965 immigration can be divided into three waves: (1) early movers (from 1965 to late 1970s), (2) family cohorts (1980s and 1990s), and (3) the recent migrants (2000 onward).

Due to India's vast caste-based discrimination, the majority of immigrants who came to the United States were upper caste, upper class, privileged, and well suited with their qualifications and skills to meet the needs of the American economy of professionals and technology. The first wave, therefore, was *triple selected* (upper caste, upper class, and skilled) from the home country. A few lower caste professionals who were the products of affirmative action in India also came along. However, the upper caste group outnumbered the lower caste individuals. As a result, the lower castes felt the brunt of caste-based discrimination in the United States and hence stayed away. Therefore, the various civic, religious, and cultural organizations formed during this period were heavily influenced by the upper caste South Asians (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). The other group that arrived was that of taxi drivers and motel owners who belonged to the merchant class but were fewer in number.

The post-1965 group was well educated and consisted mainly of physicians, engineers, and lawyers who arrived in the United States as students. They gained educational and financial success and settled in suburban neighborhoods. It was here that the South Asian community

garnered the image of model minority due to the rapid financial and social success they achieved (Abraham, 1995; Prashad, 2001). To provide a numerical perspective, between 1966 and 1977, 20,000 scientists with PhDs, 40,000 engineers, and 25,000 doctors came from India alone (Prashad, 2001).

The second wave that began in the 1980s continued to be dominated by students and working professionals but also included large numbers of immigrants who were family members of South Asians who had entered the United States in the 1960s and 1970s and blue-collar workers who came mainly through the diversity immigrant visa program. The passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 made it easier for the family members and blue-collar workers to immigrate to the United States (Midlarsky et al., 2006). Between 1990 and 2000, the number of South Asian older adults (primarily parents of immigrants) increased by 169 percent (i.e., from 23,004 to 62,089). These older adults immigrated mostly as part of family reunification and were parents of South Asians already in the United States (Bhattacharya & Shibusawa, 2009). See chapter 7 on South Asian older adults for further elaboration on the unique health care and social issues emanating from this sudden increase.

The diversity visa was added to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990 to increase the diversity of immigrants in the United States by offering 50,000 visas every year from countries where admissions have been 50,000 or fewer for the past five years combined. Due to the high number of applicants, immigrants are selected through a lottery system. The eligibility criterion to apply for a diversity visa is for the foreign national from the approved country to have a high school education or equivalent, or two years of experience in an occupation that requires at least two years of training or experience (Congressional Research Service, 2019). The diversity visa program led to an increase in the number of people from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal in the United States (Baluja, 2002). For example, in the 1990s, the number of Bangladeshi immigrants in the United States skyrocketed, settling in the larger cities of Dallas, Houston, and New York (Rahman, 2010). Most of the Bangladeshi immigrants were blue-collar workers who worked low-wage jobs in restaurants, hotels, and convenience stores (Dutta & Jamil, 2013). Thus, this South Asian group worked in blue-collar jobs, such as taxi drivers; owned small businesses like motels; and were part of the family reunification or diversity and immigrant visa programs. This South Asian group was

less fluent in English and less educated compared with the ones who came before (Bhattacharya & Schoppelrey, 2004).

The most recent group of South Asian immigrants, the third wave, work in information technology (IT) both as professionals and international students. Specifically, a review of the number of immigrants from India reveals that most work in science, technology, or medicine. The rate of immigration of this group in IT has been five times the rate of the early movers and twice the rate of families who reunited (Williams, 2019). Thus, the South Asian diaspora in the United States consists of both the upwardly mobile professional class as well as the working class described earlier.

RELIGION AND LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

South Asia is varied both in terms of religion and language. The major religions followed in South Asia are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. A detailed description of each of these religions is beyond the scope of this chapter and book, but here is a basic description of some of the major religions (more in chapter 2) that dominate the Indian subcontinent. *Hinduism* is a polytheistic religion in which people worship multiple gods and goddesses. Hindus usually worship the idols at home by chanting mantras, saying shlokas (prayers in Sanskrit), and singing bhajans (devotional songs). Hindus believe in karma (destiny) and have an innate belief that everything happens for a reason and that God resides in everybody. *Islam*, on the other hand, like Christianity and Judaism, is a monotheistic religion—that is, people believe in one God. The followers of Islam abide by the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, whom they believe was the last prophet. Muslims usually pray five times a day and fast from dawn to dusk during the holy month of Ramadan. *Sikhism* was started by Guru Nanak Dev to create a casteless society with mutual cooperation and coexistence (Singh, 2008). Practicing Sikhs do not worship any idol and have a formless concept of God. Sikh men and women do not cut their hair because they believe it interferes with nature; hence, Sikh men tie their hair in a turban. A religious breakdown in India will help provide a broader context: Hindus make up 80 percent of India's population, and about 94 percent of the Hindus live in Nepal and India. In India alone Muslims account for 14.2 percent; while Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Zoroastrians account for most of the remaining 6 percent (Kramer, 2021).

As stated earlier, when India was under British colonial rule, it included the present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh. Pakistan was established in 1947, and in 1971, Bangladesh became a separate country. Hindi is the primary language spoken in India; Urdu, in Pakistan; Bengali, in Bangladesh; Singhalese, in Sri Lanka; Nepali, in Nepal; and Dhivehi, in the Maldives. Further, British colonial rule led to establishing a number of English medium schools, which made use of the English language more common, especially within the elite class. Each state in India has its own language; hence, most Indians in the United States are fluent in at least two languages, including English (Shah & Tewari, 2019). For a description of religion of South Asians as an intersection, see chapter 2.

THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH

The term "model minority" was originally coined by sociologist William Petersen in 1966 in a *New York Times* article titled "Success Story, Japanese-American Style" (Petersen, 1966). The article characterized Japanese Americans as a success in the United States and stated that despite the discrimination that Japanese Americans experienced after World War II, they were able to progress in the United States. After that, several other newspaper articles appeared, highlighting the educational and financial successes of different Asian groups in the United States. The articles talked about the strong cultural and familial values, good work ethic, collectivism, and interdependence along with attainment of high levels of professional education that led to financial success among the different Asian groups. However, these articles failed to disclose that the U.S. immigration system only allowed immigrants with certain backgrounds to come to this country, specifically those with science and technology backgrounds as well as professionals like doctors and lawyers.

False Comparisons

The term "model minority" is problematic for several reasons and is also a misrepresentation of Asians, which automatically includes South Asians (Chou & Feagin, 2008). Some South Asians think that they can succeed with hard work and "good values"; however, a group that belonged to the elite and educated class back in the home country and has been cherry-picked to come to the United States cannot be

compared with groups like African Americans, Latinx Americans, and Native Americans that have been oppressed for centuries (Igelhart & Becerra, 2011). With inequalities that have continued throughout history, many African Americans, Latinx Americans, and Native Americans still do not have access to the same levels of education and income at baseline as South Asians in the United States.

After a halt, immigration for South Asians resumed post-1965 with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. It was also at this time that the U.S. Congress enacted comprehensive legislation to tackle Jim Crow–era segregation and racial discrimination with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 enabled African Americans to vote freely in the United States without the barriers of poll taxes, literacy tests, and so on (Marsiglia et al., 2021). South Asians who immigrated to the United States around 1965 and later, on the other hand, did not have any reason to build solidarity with other minority groups because most did not face the racial segregation of the Jim Crow era (Mahmud, 2001). They took advantage of the subsidized and sometimes "free" university education that gave them a head start with white-collar jobs. In turn, the well-paid jobs provided the South Asians with access to homes in safe suburbs with low rates of crime, fancy cars, and education for their children in good public school districts (Williams, 2019). This trend continues today. The features of the ideal "American dream" should be the norm, but it is unavailable or inaccessible to other minorities, including African Americans, Latinx Americans, and Native Americans.

It is therefore inaccurate to compare the two groups—a group of elite professionals of South Asians who had a head start with university education that led to white-collar, well-paid jobs and groups that have been oppressed for centuries in this country and only in recent times have achieved their basic constitutional right to vote (Bhatia & Ram, 2018). This rhetoric can be particularly dangerous as well as divisive and create conflict between Asian Americans and other minorities. Further, it can also be used as an excuse to not support and/or fund programs for Asian Americans because the label of model minority implies that they do not need resources. Pitting one minority group against another has actually increased the number of hate crimes against Asian Americans because it is assumed that an individual with "Asian features" is from a foreign country and is more loyal to the Asian country rather than the United States (Maddux et al., 2008).

For South Asians, specifically, the number of hate crimes has increased post-9/11 (Cainkar & Maira, 2005). The 2012 shooting at the Sikh gurdwara (temple) in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, highlights two crucial themes: (1) the level of ignorance among Americans about the different South Asian cultural and religious groups (the shooter shot six members of the Sikh community in their place of worship, thinking that they were Muslims), and (2) the larger Islamophobia in this country (Bhatia & Ram, 2018). In a Kansas bar in 2017, two software engineers from India were shot—one of them died—as the shooter shouted, "Get out of my country" (Berman & Schmidt, 2017). And, in April 2021, during a mass shooting at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis, Indiana, four out of the eight victims were Sikh. The FedEx facility was overwhelmingly staffed by members of the Sikh community, and although we may never know the motives of the shooter, who killed himself, the Sikh community felt targeted (Holcombe & Kaur, 2021).

A year following the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, 213 incidents of hate crimes were documented by SAALT (n.d.). This was a 45 percent increase over the previous year (2015 to 2016). Since March 2020, SAALT has expanded its self-reported hate crime tracking to include COVID-19-related hate violence targeting Asian Americans. From March 2020 to September 21, 2021, SAALT and its partners have tracked 310 incidents of xenophobic or Islamophobic rhetoric and 612 incidents of hate violence victimizing Muslims and Asian Americans and those perceived as Muslim or Asian American.

A Misconception about Education and Income

Further delving into the concept of model minority, as outlined in the waves of South Asian immigration, not all Asians or South Asians belong to the upper class nor are they all highly educated. Many South Asians work in motels, grocery stores, and restaurants, and others have jobs, such as taxi drivers.

Further, from 2008 to 2011, between 5,000 and 15,000 Bhutanese refugees arrived annually in the United States, and very few hold college degrees (Division of Global Migration and Quarantine, 2014). For example, about 75 percent of Indian Americans age 25 and older have a bachelor's degree, and only about 15 percent of Bhutanese Americans in the same age group have a bachelor's degree

(Budiman, 2021). Since 2008, about 95,449 Bhutanese refugees have been resettled in the United States (according to the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System [more commonly known as WRAPS]; Refugee Processing Center, 2022) and have a poverty rate of 13 percent, which is above the Asian average of 10 percent (Budiman, 2021). Suicide rates among Bhutanese refugees resettled in the United States is twice the national average at 24.4 per 100,000 (Ao et al., 2012; Meyerhoof et al., 2018). The experience of Bhutanese refugees provides ample data that not all South Asian subgroups fare well economically and socially.

Denial of Social Problems

Another model minority myth implies that overall South Asians in the United States fare well financially and are well educated, and thus are free of social problems. Therefore, the South Asian community denies a number of social issues—for example, domestic violence, delinquency, unemployment, or mental health–related issues to be able to maintain their immaculate image (Bhattacharjee, 1992; Hurwitz et al., 2006; Jordan & Bhandari, 2016). It is difficult for the South Asian community to acknowledge that these social issues exist in their own community due to the stigmatization of "failure" and the shame associated with it.

Moreover, the mainstream providers also deny that social problems exist in the South Asian community due to dearth of research, knowledge, and skills of working with this community, and the mainstream image of a model minority (Preisser, 1999). The work done with South Asians in the United States on social issues is fragmented: Although individual researchers are working on each of these issues, no compilation exists that examines all the social issues with which the South Asian community grapples in the United States. Moreover, there is a lack of culturally responsive interventions to address these social issues. The authors in chapters 2 to 8, using intersectionality theory, provide case studies that include strategies for culturally responsive assessment and intervention with this group.

CONCLUSION

Social workers and other helping professionals come in contact with South Asians in a variety of settings, including but not limited to

hospitals, clinics, schools, community events, and other human services agencies. When considering the growing South Asian population in the United States and their innate diversity, it is important to have pertinent information and knowledge about this group in terms of their values, culture, and belief systems to be able to better assist them with their needs.

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