

Who are Asian Americans?

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Picking up on Moustafa Bayoumi's call urging Asian American Studies scholars to rethink who gets included and who gets excluded within Asian America, and the purpose of Asian American Studies, I could not agree more that these issues need to be examined, particularly in light of recent developments.¹ However, I come at this from a slightly different perspective than Bayoumi does.

Having worked in Asian American Studies (focusing on research on Indian Americans) for a long time, both on the East and West Coasts, I have noticed a tendency within Asian American programs on both coasts, to primarily, and sometimes exclusively, focus on East Asian Americans. I have frequently come across scholars in this field describing Asian Americans as a racial ('yellow') group with cultural commonalities based on Confucianism, whose families have an obsessive focus on their children attending elite colleges to obtain professional degrees. However, this framing masks the racial, cultural, religious, and economic diversity within Asian America, and even within the East Asian American community itself.

East Asians are actually a minority of Asian Americans, comprising less than 40 percent of the Asian American population.² Asian Americans (both documented and undocumented) are the fastest growing group in the United States, and are expected to surpass Hispanics as the largest immigrant group in the United States by around the middle of the century. However, the groups that are responsible for the recent growth of the Asian American population are not East Asian, they are South Asian.³ Consequently, we are faced with this strange dilemma/phenomenon of many Asian American programs across the country excluding a majority of Asian Americans from the definition of Asian America, and from their curriculum!

In this essay, I will focus on how the meaning and content of Asian American Studies changes when South Asian Americans are included in the curriculum. I also encourage readers to please watch the passionate presentation by Kelvin Ng, a Columbia University undergraduate student, during the Asian American and Asian Research Institute's 2016 annual conference, *Resurgent Realities: East Coast Asian American Studies*, on the importance of including the diversity of South East Asian Americans within Asian American Studies as well.⁴

South Asians actually played a key role in the development of the Asian American category and identity in the United States. Asian exclusionists in California first created the umbrella term "Asiatic" when they wanted to include immigrants from British India (comprising present day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) among the groups that they opposed. Chinese immigration to the United States had been greatly curtailed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In 1905, the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League formed in San Francisco. In 1907, the League renamed itself the "Asiatic Exclusion League" to include Indians among the groups that it opposed. Indian immigrants from the subcontinent began to be viewed as a bigger threat than other Asian groups. In 1910, a Senate Immigration Commission declared that Indians (then called "Hindus") were "universally regarded as the least desirable race of immigrants thus far admitted to the United States."⁵

Between 1913 and 1914, Congress attempted to come up with a way to exclude Indians from the United States without specifically using race, ethnicity, or national origin, for fear that overt discrimination would cause unrest in British India. By this time, Australia, Canada, and other British colonies had already started excluding Indian immigrants using indirect criteria. In a letter to the Speaker of the House, Secretary of Labor William Wilson asked, "Can we, who are not connected by governmental ties or obligations with the Hindus, afford to do less for our people and country than those who are bound by a common citizenship under the Imperial [British] government?"⁶ A series of Congressional hearings on

“Hindu Immigration” were held in 1914, and Denver S. Church, a congressman from California, suggested a bill defining Asia based on geography rather than race.⁷

The Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 (Immigration Act of 1917) developed out of this bill, excluding laborers from a wide area from Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula in the east, to some of the Pacific Islands in the west, from entering the United States. Since there was little migration from other parts of the region except for India (Chinese and Japanese were already excluded under separate laws and agreements), the law mainly targeted British Indians. In other words, South Asians were central to the development of the concept of the “Asiatic Barred Zone” in the United States, a profoundly significant event in Asian American history.

In 1970 however, the U.S. Census reclassified people “having origins in the Indian subcontinent” as white. By this time, the civil rights laws had come into effect and census data was used to measure and track discrimination against groups. A 1975 report by the Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions of the U.S. Federal Interagency Committee on Education, describes how people from the Indian subcontinent presented a problem to the committee as it deliberated on how to classify groups for the 1970 Census. The committee had to decide whether or not Indians were a “discriminated minority.” The full summary of their discussion is as follows:

The question at issue was whether to include them in the minority category “Asian” because they came from Asia and some are victims of discrimination in this country, or to include them in this category [Caucasian/White] because they are Caucasians, though frequently of darker skin than other Caucasians. The final decision favored the latter. While evidence of discrimination against Asian Indians exists, it appears to be concentrated in specific geographical and occupational areas. Such persons can be identified in these areas through the use of a subcategory for their ethnic subgroup.⁸

In other words, it appears that Indians were the earliest Asian group to be considered a successful ethnic group, foreshadowing the later designation of a wider group of Asian Americans as “model minorities.” Upon learning of this decision, however, the Association of Indians in America (AIA), formed in 1967, mobilized to make the argument that Indians in the United States did experience discrimination, and should be included under the category of “Asian” as they had been in the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Exclusion Act.⁹ Through its efforts, AIA helped to introduce a new census category, “Asian Indian,” for the 1980 Census, and obtain minority status for Indian Americans as “Asians.”

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There are often two common explanations for the exclusion of South Asian Americans within Asian American Studies. The first is that Asian American Studies was formed by the mobilization of Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino activists, and should therefore focus on these three groups. However, it would seem strange to have an academic field that is static and is not informed by changes in the Asian American community today!

Another more common justification is that many students who self-identify as “Asian American,” and who take Asian American Studies courses to learn about their histories and communities, tend to be East Asian. However, this is because South and South East Asian Americans have also internalized this common American view that “Asian” means East Asian—one of the shibboleths that Asian American Studies should demolish, rather than reinforce.

An important justification for Asian American Studies (and other types of Ethnic Studies programs) is the need to focus on the histories, and contributions of groups, that have been ignored or marginalized by American society. Surely it is very problematic if Asian American Studies perpetuates the problem by ignoring a majority of groups that comprise Asian America.

In this post-9/11 period, brown-skinned individuals including South Asian Americans from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds, Arabs, and Muslims have often been bracketed together, becoming hyper-visible targets of religio-racial profiling and harassment, which has greatly escalated over the past few months. While some Asian American leaders and organizations such as South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) view this as a central issue of concern for Asian American groups to deal with, others do not consider this to be an “Asian” problem, or view it as a distraction from addressing concerns that affect larger groups of Asian Americans. Consequently, the cleavage between South and East Asians has only widened in the recent period.

It is unfortunate that many faculty and students in Asian American Studies do not consider religion to be an issue that should be included in the curriculum, and also do not view Islam as an Asian religion (even though 62.7 percent of the world’s Muslims are in Asia, and Muslims comprise 24 percent of the Asian population).¹⁰ The Pew Research Center’s 2012 study of Asian American religions indicates that a surprisingly small minority of Asian Americans, only four percent, are of Muslim background.¹¹ This is probably one of the reasons that Muslim Americans are viewed as being of Arab background, even though most Arab Americans are Christian.

While Arab Americans do comprise the largest single category, they only make up 26 percent of Muslim Americans. The South Asian region is the second largest source of immigrant Muslims in the United States, and South Asian American Muslims comprise 16 percent of Muslim Americans.¹² Consequently, including the experiences of South Asian Americans within the curriculum can provide a window through which larger Muslim American and Muslim Asian issues can be examined.

As defined by the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” a large part of the region that we now consider as the “Middle East” was considered as being part of Asia (“West Asia”). Since then though, economic, political, and social political developments in the region, as well as self-recognized solidarities on the part of Americans of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent, have led to the creation of Middle Eastern Studies programs in universities around the country. There has also been a demand for a MENA category, which may be included in the 2020 Census.

Even if Arab Americans are able to obtain recognition as a separate group, Asian Americans should unite with them to protest racial and religious profiling and other issues. As I have previously discussed in *CUNY FORUM, Volume 3:1*, it is important for Asian American Studies to make it possible for Asian Americans to perceive the commonalities they have with other racial and ethnic groups, and forge solidarities, instead of forming an insular silo.¹³ Rather than rejecting geography as the basis for group formation, I prefer to embrace it, and recognize that consequently, Asian Americans cannot be defined on the basis of race, religion, language, or culture but have instead been shaped by historical developments driven by labor needs like many other groups in the United States.

Asian Americans are not just yellow—they are also black, brown, white and everything in between. All the major religions of the world are found in Asia, and among Asian Americans. Asian Americans hail from very different linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds—meaning that Asian Americans have a stake in the varied social justice mobilizations that have been developing in this country, particularly recently. If Asian American Studies programs can display the full range of groups comprising Asian America, students and faculty in Asian American Studies will realize that they are uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of the “fundamental politics of transformation that seeks to create a more just and equitable society for everyone” that Bayoumi calls for.¹⁴

Notes

- 1 Moustafa Bayoumi, “Asian American Studies, the War on Terror, and the Changing University: A Call to Respond” *Asian American Matters: A New York Anthology* (AAARI-CUNY, 2017): 21-24.
- 2 “American Community Survey (ACS),” *United States Census Bureau* (2015), <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/news/data-releases/2015/release.html>

- 3 “A Demographic Snapshot of South Asians in the United States,” *South Asian Americans Leading Together* (2015), http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Demographic-Snapshot-updated_Dec-2015.pdf
- 4 AAARI-CUNY, “South Asia, South East Asia, the Middle East and More: A Part or Apart of the AA Syllabus?,” *CUNY Conference on Resurgent Realities: East Coast Asian American Studies* (May 13, 2016), <https://is.gd/E9BY24>
- 5 Joan M. Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988): 141.
- 6 *Ibid.*: 154.
- 7 *Ibid.*: 152.
- 8 Virginia Y. Trotter and Bernard Michael, *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions of the Federal Interagency Committee on Education* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Interagency Committee on Education, 1975).
- 9 Manoranjan Dutta, “Statement of Manoranjan Dutta, On Behalf of the Association of Indians in America, Inc.,” (1976): 33–37 in *1980 Census: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives, Ninety-fourth Congress, Second Session, June 1 and 2, 1976. No. 94-80*. Some other Indian organizations at the time did not support this effort and wanted Indians to remain in the “White” category.
- 10 “World’s Muslim Population More Widespread Than You Might Think,” *Pew Research Center* (January 31, 2017), <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/31/worlds-muslim-population-more-widespread-than-you-might-think/>
- 11 “Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths,” *Pew Research Center* (July 19, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/>
- 12 “A Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans,” *Pew Research Center* (August 20, 2011), <http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/section-1-a-demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>
- 13 Russell C. Leong, “Prema Ann Kurien: An Interview with CUNY FORUM,” *CUNY FORUM* 3:1 (2015): 91.
- 14 Bayoumi, *Asian American Matters*: 23.

Commentary

Seize the Moment: A Time for Asian American Activism

Rajini Srikanth

In two waves of resignations—one before and one after the inauguration of Donald Trump and the pronouncement of his executive orders—sixteen (of the twenty) members of the President’s Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders stepped down from their positions. Dr. Paul Watanabe (University of Massachusetts Boston), among those who resigned before the inauguration, said that he had heard enough from Trump during the presidential campaign and the post-election transition period for him to decide that it would be “untenable for me to serve as his advisor.”¹ Those who resigned post-inauguration, wrote in their letter to President Trump, dated February 15, 2017:

[W]e object to your portrayal of immigrants, refugees, people of color and people of various faiths as untrustworthy, threatening, and a drain on our nation. The fact is that Native Peoples, immigrants from all parts of the world, and people of color have built this country. Among the commissioners there are immigrants, refugees, and descendants of those who have experienced systematic discrimination. We, and the communities that we represent, have worked diligently to make America great and have fought to keep it free. We have and will always strive to ensure that America, our America, will never go back to the days of exclusion, segregation, and internment.²

The commissioners, even though representing Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, underscored their commitment to uphold the principles of justice for all Americans—specifically, “protecting the civil rights of all Americans” and “access to health care and economic and educational opportunities for all.”³ This emphasis on the intersections between AAPI priorities and those of other vulnerable communities is an evocation of the founding principles of the Asian American Movement of the late 1960s—a movement that drew its inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement within the United States and the anti-imperial and decolonization movements in Asia and Africa.