

Teacher Resource

Teaching U.S. Immigration Series:
South Asian Immigration
to the United States, 1899-1923
Resource Roundup





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Cover image: Valentina Alarez and Rullia Singh posing for their wedding photo in 1917. They were among the thousands of Punjabi-Mexican unions that sprouted up in the Southwest of the United States.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punjabi_Mexican_Americans#/media/File:SinghYubaCity.jpg

Introduction

South Asian Americans, a broad term encompassing people with ancestry from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, are one of the fastest growing groups in the United States. South Asian American history, including their experiences, struggles and contributions, is an important yet often overlooked part of U.S. history curricula. With this resource, we aim to give teachers the tools to correct this imbalance.

The essay, *South Asian Immigration to the United States, 1899-1923*, gives an overview of South Asian immigration during a critical time period and brings up questions of welcome, integration and advocacy. The primary source exploration invites students to examine more deeply the heritage, daily experiences and contributions of Indian Americans, one of the earliest and largest ethnic immigrant groups from South Asia. Finally, the lesson plans and more resources sections give recommendations to extend students' learning.

Essay

South Asian Immigration to the United States, 1899-1923

by Jessica Man, March 2024

Punjabi Immigration

Some of the first South Asian Americans to permanently settle in the United States were Sikh, Hindu and Muslim men from the Punjab, the northernmost region of India. Punjabi families often sent male family members abroad in order to secure multiple lines of income for the sake of financial stability. Because of India's status at that time as a British colony and a long history of military service among Punjabi men, they could serve abroad and find geographical mobility through the British army. Canada was a popular destination in the 1890s, especially because it was a former British colony.¹

When they began to arrive in the United States in 1899, however, they faced many challenges, including a new system of racial categorization. By and large, Americans referred to all South Asians as "Hindus" or "Muslims," regardless of actual differences in religion or places of origin. Due to their backgrounds in agricultural industries in the Punjab, many of these men were able to find employment in California's Central Valley, where they worked in both hard labor and management positions on farms, and they eventually owned property in many cases. There, they built ethnic networks that helped them to find employment, negotiate labor contracts, buy land and protect each other from financial exploitation. They also came into extensive contact with other racialized minorities in the Central Valley, including their Japanese, Native American, Black and Mexican co-laborers and neighbors.²

Building Multi-Ethnic Families

Like Chinese immigrants in the 1840s, the initial wave of Indian immigration to the United States was composed of men, with heavy restrictions placed on the immigration of Asian women in general. However, unlike the Chinese at the time, Punjabis were by and large open to interracial marriage. Although legally prohibited from pursuing romantic relationships with white women, socially cautioned against pursuing romantic relationships with Black women and discriminated against as foreigners, many men intermarried freely with Mexican

^[1] Karen Leonard Isaksen, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), Chapter 2.

^[2] Isaksen, *Making Ethnic Choices*, Chapter 2.

American immigrant women and formed multi-ethnic, multi-religious families that were embedded within larger ethnic and religious communities. Marriage between Punjabis and Mexicans sometimes involved the man's religious conversion to Catholicism, although this was not always the case, and some who had nominally converted also maintained their original religious identities, creating interfaith families with mixed cultural practices. Mexican wives learned to cook Indian food, and Punjabi husbands often fit themselves into Mexican Catholic community structures.³

Belonging in America and India

Integration into American society at large was not an easy process. Although less than 10,000 South Asians entered the United States to work during the period of 1899 to 1917, they still faced xenophobia. Legal persecution compounded white supremacist violence that targeted Sikhs in particular. California's Alien Land Law, passed in 1913, meant that "aliens ineligible for citizenship," terminology specifically targeting first-generation Asian immigrants, could no longer purchase land. The 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Act set devastating quotas for Asian immigration to America. Although some South Asians had managed to naturalize [become U.S. citizens], their citizenship was retroactively revoked by the Supreme Court decision on the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, a United States WWI veteran and Punjabi Sikh immigrant who sued for his citizenship in 1923 after it was revoked on the grounds that he was not white. Thind argued that his Indian ancestry meant that he was Aryan, a term commonly invoked to indicate whiteness, but this argument was ultimately thrown out on the grounds that he did not fit the "common man's" definition of a white person.⁴

This did not mean that South Asians found it impossible to influence the country in which they lived. South Asian Americans tirelessly advocated for their right to become American citizens for decades, and they influenced the passage of the Luce-Celler Act, which restored the right of naturalization to South Asian Americans in 1946. Dalip Singh Saund, who immigrated to the U.S. in 1920 and received a doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley, successfully campaigned for a seat in the House of Representatives in 1956, becoming the first Asian American, non-Christian delegate to represent the American people.

Conclusion

The racism faced by South Asians in the early 1900s did not vanish with the Luce-Celler Act or the lifting of immigration restrictions. For example, anti-Hindu attacks against Indian

³ Isaksen, *Making Ethnic Choices*, Chapter 4.

⁴ Ian Haney López, *White by Law 10th Anniversary Edition: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

Americans in New Jersey by a group called the “Dotbusters” (referencing the bindi, a traditional women’s adornment worn on the forehead) occurred from the 1970s to the 1990s. Most infamously, the events of September 11th, 2001, led to outbreaks of violence against South Asian Muslims as well as Sikhs whom Islamophobic vigilantes identified as Muslims. One of the most devastating attacks on Sikhs occurred in 2012 when a white supremacist gunman opened fire in a gurdwara, a Sikh house of community and worship, in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

South Asian American identity is not solely defined by violence. It also comes out of a long history of successful community organizing, transnational and domestic political activism, vibrant religious traditions, interfaith solidarity, and inter-ethnic coalition building in every region of the United States. Groups such as SAALT (South Asian Americans Leading Together), DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving), and SALDEF (Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund) continue to advocate for the protection of vulnerable populations within the South Asian American community, and they demand just and equal treatment for South Asians in America, just as the first Punjabi immigrants did over a century ago.

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Activities

Terms to Define:

Individually, in small groups or as a whole class, have students reread the essay and create definitions and/or short descriptions for the following terms and people.

- Asiatic Barred Zone Act
- Luce-Celler Act
- Bhagat Singh Thind
- Dalip Singh Saund

Discussion or Response Questions:

Use these questions to spark discussion.

1. Would you describe the United States as welcoming to South Asian immigrants in the early 20th century? Why or why not?
2. What was immigration and integration like for South Asians in this time period? What were some factors that supported integration into American society? What made it harder?
3. How did South Asian immigrants advocate for equal treatment and a better life for themselves and others?

Primary Source Exploration:



Have students navigate to the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center's digital exhibition, "[Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation.](#)" Give students time to browse through the images, documents and quotations, asking them ultimately to choose three to analyze using the following prompts:

1. **Observe:** Examine the image or text and read the caption. Describe what you notice.
2. **Reflect:** How does this source connect with what you learned in the text or anything else you know about this topic? Why do you think the exhibition curators chose this piece to include?
3. **Question:** What else do you wonder about the context, the time period, the people in the picture or the people who created this source?

Terms to Define, South Asian Immigration to the United States

1. Asiatic Barred Zone Act

2. Luce-Celler Act

3. Bhagat Singh Thind

4. Dalip Singh Saund

Discussion Questions, South Asian Immigration to the United States

- 1.** Would you describe the United States as welcoming to South Asian immigrants in the early 20th century? Why or why not?

- 2.** What was immigration and integration like for South Asians in this time period? What were some factors that supported integration into American society? What made it harder?

- 3.** How did South Asian immigrants advocate for equal treatment and a better life for themselves and others?

Primary Source Exploration, South Asian Immigration to the United States



Go to the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center’s digital exhibition, “[Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation](#)”. Browse through the primary sources (images, documents and quotations). Choose three to analyze.

Primary Source 1: _____

- 1. Observe:** Examine the image or text and read the caption. Describe what you notice.

- 2. Reflect:** How does this source connect with what you learned in the text, or anything else you know about this topic? Why do you think the exhibition curators chose this piece to include?

- 3. Question:** What else do you wonder about the context, the time period, the people in the picture or the people who created this source?

Primary Source 2: _____

- 1. Observe:** Examine the image or text and read the caption. Describe what you notice.
- 2. Reflect:** How does this source connect with what you learned in text, or anything else you know about this topic? Why do you think the exhibition curators chose this piece to include?
- 3. Question:** What else do you wonder about the context, the time period, the people in the picture or the people who created this source?

Primary Source 3: _____

- 1. Observe:** Examine the image or text and read the caption. Describe what you notice.
- 2. Reflect:** How does this source connect with what you learned in text, or anything else you know about this topic? Why do you think the exhibition curators chose this piece to include?
- 3. Question:** What else do you wonder about the context, the time period, the people in the picture or the people who created this source?

Recommended Lesson Plans

Use one or more of these recommended lesson plans to extend your students' learning.



Racial Identity and American Citizenship in the Court (PBS Learning Media)

Grade level:
6-12

Time frame:
One or more class periods

This is a five-minute, thought-provoking video about racial hierarchies in the United States and the critical Supreme Court case of Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian immigrant who forced the United States to consider the definition of “whiteness.” Thind lost his case for citizenship, and about 50 other Indian Americans lost their U.S. citizenship as a result. (Note: The video ends by discussing the suicide of a denaturalized citizen. Teachers may opt to stop the video at 3:30.)

What we love: The “Teaching Tips” section linked next to the video has several ideas for engaging a class in this material, including:

- Before, while and after viewing questions
- Discussion questions
- Classroom activity in which students research court cases to compare and contrast
- Student roleplay as 1870 census takers who must categorize three fictional profiles, thinking about racial categories and how they have changed over time.



Early South Asian Immigration (PBS Learning Media)

Grade level:
6-12

Time frame:
One to two class periods

This seven-minute video centers on the life and legacy of Moksad Ali, a South Asian Muslim trader who married a Black woman in the late 19th century and started a family in New Orleans that remains an established part of the community.

The document-based inquiry activity that accompanies it asks students to locate, categorize and discuss primary sources related to the video. (Note: Early in the video, the phrase “Sikh men” is improperly transcribed as “sick men,” which may be confusing to students.)

What we love: The video about this man and his family, including interviews with living descendants, is an accessible entry point into thinking about the often-overlooked history of South Asian immigration. Students are given the opportunity to examine racial hierarchies throughout our history and to consider how segregation in the Jim Crow era affected other minorities and multiracial relationships.



South Asian Pioneers **(The Asian American Education Project)**

Grade level:

4-6, although many materials could work for upper grades

Time frame:

One class period or up to two weeks

Early South Asian immigrants played a significant role in the nation's economic and agricultural development, especially in California. They formed their own communities and created unique connections with other marginalized communities around them, such as Black, Mexican and Puerto Rican communities. This lesson focuses on the experiences and impact of these early South Asian Americans.

Note that the map hyperlinked in step c of activity 1/part 1 shows the route that South Asian immigrants traveled to California. The route is inaccurately displayed as going west on a standard Mercator projection of the Earth, while in reality the immigrants traveled east, across the Pacific Ocean. It would be worth pointing this out, and even showing students on a globe, to avoid any misconceptions.

What we love: This lesson plan comprises four activities and 13 extension ideas, spanning a wide range of related content. Any teacher can find a class period's or even a mini-unit's worth of activities that get students researching and thinking about South Asian immigrant history.



Early American Immigration Unit: South Asia and the Middle East (North Carolina Consortium for Middle East Studies)

This curriculum module is available on the [North Carolina Consortium for Middle East Studies Resource Links page](#) under Islam/Muslim Americans.

Grade level:

9-12

Time frame:

Two class periods

This two-day unit focuses on early South Asian and Middle Eastern immigration to the United States prior to 1965. Exploring these groups helps teach the complex history of immigration to the United States. The unit highlights the cultural backgrounds of Punjabi Sikh immigrants, Muslim Bengali immigrants and Arab immigrants. Students will review American immigration law and consider the complicated connection between race and citizenship during the late 1800s to early 1900s.

By engaging with primary sources, students will learn about the experiences of these immigrant groups in the U.S. The unit demonstrates that immigrants' religious and cultural beliefs both adapted to and changed in the American context, influencing the larger fabric of life in the United States.

What we love: These two lesson plans, with homework, are creative, informative and well-organized. It's complete with a detailed teacher guide, handouts and articles, ready to print and use in the classroom.



The Sikh-American Community in California (The Sikh Coalition and the Jakara Movement)

This lesson is available on the [Sikh Coalition Middle and High School Resources page](#) under "Ethnic Studies Lesson Plan."

Grade level:
9-12

Time frame:
Four to five class periods

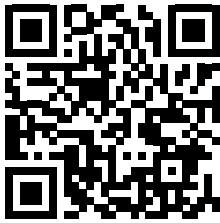
This lesson introduces students to the history of Sikh immigration to the United States West Coast, patterns of settlement and how the Sikh community has responded to the challenges and opportunities they have encountered in California over time. This lesson plan can be used at any time immigration is being discussed, but it is designed to explore the history of Sikh contributions to California.

Note: This lesson plan contains links to a map that shows the route that South Asian immigrants traveled to California; the route is inaccurately displayed as going west on a standard Mercator projection of the Earth, while in reality the immigrants traveled east, across the Pacific Ocean. It would be worth pointing this out, and even showing students on a globe, to avoid any misconceptions. Read "[Chapter 2: Passage to California](#)" in the Berkeley Library's Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965 exhibit for a detailed description of the routes South Asian immigrants took from India to California.



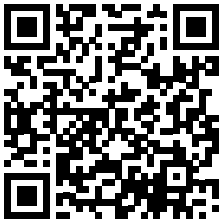
What we love: This lesson plan uses many multimedia sources including several clips from CNN's United Shades of America with W. Kamau Bell, which are both informative and entertaining. Each segment has an essential question (What is Sikhism? How did Sikhs immigrate to California? How did Sikhs shape Californian history?), a collection of featured sources and a performance task idea. The segments go together but could also be used independently.

More Resources



[Interview with Karen Leonard on the Punjabi Mexican Community](#)
(South Asian American Digital Archive)

Professor Karen Leonard from the University of California discusses the formation of the Punjabi Mexican community.



[The South Asian Americans by Karen Leonard](#)
(Holtzbrinck Publishing Group)

This book includes a section that details community dialogues between second- and 1.5-generation Indian Americans and their parents, including how some voiced their frustrations at community events, how they tried to resolve specific intra-community issues, and more. Students may feel empowered by engaging with the work that immigrant and second-generation youth have done as community organizers and leaders in their own right.



[Unexpected Unions: The Punjabi-Mexican Families of California](#)
(Re-Imagining Migration)

This resource has a short description, photos, a video and reflection questions about Punjabi-Mexican families in California in the early 20th century. A free login is needed to view this resource.



[Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965](#)
(The Regents of the University of California)

Detailed online exhibit about South Asians in California from 1899-1965.

Handout

Primary Source Exploration

Print-Friendly Guide to Resources

Essay: Primary Source Exploration (page 5)

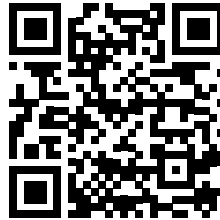


[Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation](#)

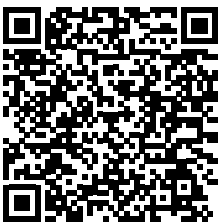
Recommended Lesson Plans (pages 10-14)



[Racial Identity and American Citizenship in the Court](#)



[North Carolina Consortium for Middle East Studies Resource Links page](#)



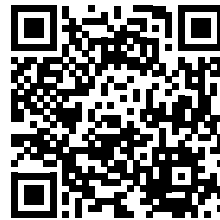
[Early South Asian Immigration](#)



[Sikh Coalition Middle and High School Resources page](#)



[South Asian Pioneers](#)



[Chapter 2: Passage to California](#)



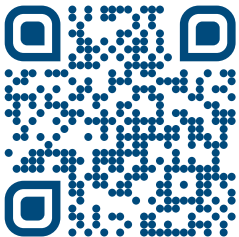
About The Immigrant Learning Center

The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. of Malden, MA, is a not-for-profit organization that gives immigrants a voice in three ways. The English Language Program provides free, year-round ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes to help immigrant and refugee adults in Greater Boston become successful workers, parents and community members. The Public Education Institute informs Americans about immigrants and immigration in the United States, and the Institute for Immigration Research, a joint venture with George Mason University, produces valid, reliable and objective multidisciplinary research on immigrants and immigration to the United States. For more information, visit the website <http://www.ilctr.org>.

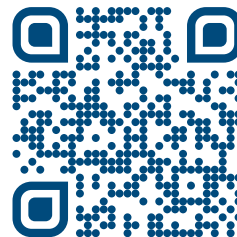
About the Writer Meghan Rosenberg

Meghan Rosenberg wrote and provided guidance for this resource. She is an instructional coach, curriculum developer and educational consultant. Her teaching experience includes being the founding middle school humanities teacher at a Boston K-12 charter school. Meghan holds a Bachelor of Arts in education and linguistics from Brown University and a Master's in teaching secondary English from Tufts University.

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