

Black like me
On being post-South Asian

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September 11 cast a much unwanted light on the South Asian community in this country. From the initial hysteria, which included the cold-blooded murder of members of the Sikh community and other South Asians, to the continued insistence by some South Asians that "No, we are not Arabs," the backlash from last year's terrorist attacks has directly affected Americans of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi descent. For a community that long believed it could remain silent, integrated, and wealthy in America, this recent attention has been somewhat of a curse.

I tend to look at it somewhat differently. I believe the negative publicity that the South Asian community is currently receiving has the potential to bring about some positive change. For a group that has always been more certain about what it is not rather than what it actually is, this may be just what is needed to push South Asians toward a greater awareness of their own identity.

Let me introduce myself to help explain what I mean. I am a South Indian male of strong Dravidian stock, which essentially means that my skin is more dark chocolate than milk or white and my hair is curly and thick rather than thin and fine. As my own face proves, South Asians range in appearance across the racial spectrum. Nevertheless, the dominant and chosen image of the South Asian in this country is that of the light-skinned, straight-haired South Asian of Aryan origin. Add to this the assumption that South Asians as a group are a professional community with high education rates, and you have the preferred view that the community likes to project.

The problem with this approach is that it has always been defined in opposition to the black community. As much any other ethnic group, we have accepted the model-minority paradigm, and have thrived under it.

For some within the community, myself included, the model-minority skin never fit quite right. I was never accepted by the white community, and have always thought of myself and been thought of as closer to black than white. Although I have had minor encounters with racism throughout my life, it never occurred to me to claim, "I am sorry, sir, but you see, you have it quite wrong--I am not black ... I am Indian." But this is what the mainstream South Asian community strived to do. In spite of the many instances of racism it experienced, the community largely was able to delude itself into thinking it really was white.

September 11 changed this entire paradigm. All of a sudden, South Asians went from being the only acceptable minority face in a crowd of white, to a character of suspicion. Granted, the antagonism from the mainstream was geared mostly toward the Arab community. But the fair skin that the South Asian community had prided itself in suddenly became the same characteristic that made many Americans confuse South Asians with Arabs. For those for whom "sand nigger" is the preferred term for people who look like Arabs, it apparently wasn't worth the effort to make the distinction.

What's worse, even blacks, the one group South Asians always knew that they were above, have professed their overwhelming support for the use of racial profiling against Arab-looking people. A recent comic by syndicated cartoonist Aaron McGruder in *The Boondocks* captured this crabs-in-the-barrel mentality perfectly. In the comic, one of his characters celebrates the fact that African Americans in the United States have moved up from being the most discriminated group in the country to number three, presumably after Arabs and South Asians.

The issue really is that South Asians have bought into the notion that our distinct ethnicity protects us from racial discrimination. Even if many South Asians have a darker complexion than their black counterparts, it is culture that makes us somehow different. As a result, South Asian cab drivers have built a reputation for ignoring black passengers (a racist practice that is only now being seriously addressed by the South Asian-led Taxi Workers Alliance). This unwillingness to confront the reality of race has been promoted by the U.S. government, which seems to define new and essentially meaningless "racial" categories in order to prevent the

emergence of any identities based on a commonality of experience. As a result, South Asians get thrown into the generic "Asian" category even though many of us are more often thought of as black than East Asian.

I am not arguing against a consideration of cultural practices, but if we are to effectively analyze the notion of skin-color discrimination in this country, does it not make sense to look at skin color? Isn't that what the South Asian community is now coming up against, in spite of their consistent claims that they have a cultural history distinct from that of Arabs or even blacks?

Post-September 11, South Asians are finally being forced to think of themselves as people of color. They are being judged by the color of their skin and not the content of their character. If this is what it takes for the community to accept this notion, then I for one am glad.