The recent controversy over cab drivers in New York refusing to stop for black customers, including Danny Glover, has exposed an interesting phenomenon with the potential to fundamentally alter the debate about race in America. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's approach – to fine offending cab drivers – may be lauded as an attempt to punish racists in New York City. But the real problem is not racism as most Americans traditionally understand it, because the cab drivers in question are not, for the most part, white. Rather, the issue can be seen as the tip of the iceberg of the vastly understudied issue of relations between African Americans and new immigrants – in this case, the rapidly growing and as yet quiet South Asian community, comprising people whose origins lie in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, who make up nearly two-thirds of New York's cab drivers.

Although South Asians often share physical similarities with the black population, there is a widespread perception that they have avoided being considered black. "I think subconsciously it was put in my head that they [South Asians] were well off financially and very intelligent academically," says Kendra Blackett, a former president of the Black Student Alliance at Georgetown University. "But despite the fact that they may have darker skin and could in all reality identify with the black population, they always did seem to be separated." And indeed, on such issues as immigration, welfare, affirmative action and South Asian ownership of businesses in black neighborhoods, South Asians and African Americans increasingly find themselves on different sides. Jessy Fernandez, a South Indian currently studying at Yale Law School, recalls the ranting of an African American homeless man whose attitudes towards South Asians perhaps reflected more widely held sentiments among African Americans. "Indian people are f—ing up the hood, owning everything, disrespecting their customers, and taking over the neighborhood," he had said, angrily confronting the law student.
Considering the histories of the African American and South Asian communities, one might imagine they would be natural allies in the U.S. All Americans know the story of Mahatma Gandhi, and most also understand his impact and influence on the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who first studied Gandhi's works while a student at Morehouse College. Morehouse president Benjamin Mays, an early King mentor, had traveled to India to meet with Gandhi, a pilgrimage that King himself would undertake in 1959 in order to further understand Gandhi's principle of *Satyagraha* (literally truth-force, essentially Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence). King decided that this would be his method for achieving equal rights for African Americans in the U.S., and even brought in a Gandhi disciple, James Lawson, to teach his followers the principles of *Satyagraha*.

At the same time that King was exploring the Indian world of Mahatma Gandhi, John Coltrane was exploring classical Indian music and philosophy. On albums such as *A Love Supreme* and the more obscure *Om*, Coltrane drew directly from his Indian studies. He acknowledged that the modal style of playing that made his music unique in jazz was influenced by the Indian classical *shennai* (a type of Indian horn) player, Bismillah Khan. On other albums, such as *Stellar Regions* and *Sunship*, one can hear the progression from dissonance to harmony that typifies the Indian *raag* musical system. Coltrane even named his son Ravi after the great Indian sitarist Ravi Shankar.

These interactions were by no means a one-way affair. From the 1960's on, many Indian musicians traveled to the US to play with and learn from African American jazz musicians. For example, Sun Ra had an Indian percussionist named Leah Ananda as part of his famed Arkestra, and today the hip hop duo Outkast travels with a South Asian percussionist. And in the 1970's when a group of Dalits (untouchables) formed a revolutionary movement, they adopted the name "Dalit Panthers" in homage to their African American counterparts, the Black Panther Party. More importantly, in the 1960's those South Asians who emigrated during the beginning of large-scale migrations to the U.S. benefited from the achievements of the American Civil Rights movement, although most did not actively participate. So what has
gone wrong? Shouldn't these two groups be natural allies in the U.S. and not at odds with each other?

The answer is multifold and requires a look at the history of the South Asian community in the U.S. Most South Asians in this country arrived during the 1960's, just as America opened up its borders to a very specific type of immigrant: educated professionals. Most of the South Asians who were able to take advantage of this opportunity came from middle class to upper class, well-educated families in India. Another small group of South Asians came from Uganda after being expelled by the Idi Amin regime. Since the 1980's a new group of South Asians, less privileged educationally and economically, has been allowed into the U.S. Less assimilated, these new immigrants mostly live in big cities and work as cab drivers, newspaper vendors, gas station attendants and other low-paying jobs.

It is important to understand these distinctions, because they help explain relations between blacks and South Asians across the full economic spectrum. After their arrival, the upper-class/ caste South Asians eagerly grabbed opportunities for which they had sufficiently been trained in their native lands; in particular, jobs as doctors and engineers. Moving into mostly white suburbs put even more distance between themselves and the black community. Although upwardly mobile in economic terms, South Asian professionals have often confronted limits to their capacity to assimilate into white society. "The new Asian immigrants cannot become ‘white,'" says Professor Amritjit Singh of Rhode Island College, "so they seek overcompensation in real estate and material goods…Many Asian Americans make up for their lack of whiteness by acquiring a consciousness that is often as ‘white' and assimilationist and ‘mainstream' as that of most whites."

The other, less wealthy South Asian community has only been in the U.S. since the 1980's. Disdained by the more established South Asian community, these newer immigrants have often absorbed prejudice towards African Americans from their new (and old) countrymen. But they also share a common identity as urban people of color and are in much closer contact with African Americans. For many first-generation American children from
upper-class South Asian families, years of attendance at mostly white suburban schools has given them a minority awareness their parents may have tried to shelter them from. For the newer South Asian communities, life in multi-racial urban communities carries the same lesson. Either way, and perhaps not by their own choice, many South Asians are coming to realize they are people of color, and closer to black than they could have ever imagined or wanted.

"I think a lot of [South Asian] youth have adopted a black culture in terms of music, dress, speech, and interaction," says Jessy Fernandez. "At the same time, the communities remain really separate, stereotypes and racism remains between us. Youth, I think, must bridge this gap."

Bridging the gap romantically was the subject of the film *Mississippi Masala*, directed by the South Indian Mira Nair. In the film, Denzel Washington plays a black man who falls in love with a dark-skinned Indian beauty (played by Sarita Choudhury) whose family fled Uganda in the early 1970's and run a motel in Mississippi. The film sensitively explores the generation gap between South Asian parents and their American-raised progeny. For many South Asians of the younger generation, many of whom grew up as the only colored kid in class, their interactions with the black community are the first time they are appreciated for physical qualities – for example, darker skin and fuller lips – that are discredited by both the majority white culture and the highly color-oriented South Asian caste structure. As one African American student says, "Indians are only blacks with good hair."

In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin explains the historical contempt felt by the American white community towards African Americans by pointing to the primal interconnectedness between the two groups. For Baldwin, there could be no white superiority without black inferiority. The two communities were reliant on each other for definition. Most black thinkers and activists of today conform to Baldwin's thesis with their sole focus on black/white relations in the U.S. (with the exception of scholars like Cornel West and Ishmael Reed, whose anthology *MultiAmerica* examines relations between various ethnic communities). It's not surprising that many South Asians feel left
out of the discussion. "Black and white America are so consumed with each other," says Nitin Puri, a U.S.-born and raised South Asian, "that relating to them is sometimes very difficult, if not impossible."

The need for dialogue and exchange is evident. "Indian people who own newsstands and stores are struggling in some of the same ways, but it's true that they don't invest in the communities they profit from, and it's true that they are scared of, hate, and follow around their customers---the people they are making money from," Fernandez says. "So I think we need to have discussion, talk about stereotypes, talk about common concerns -- like safety in the neighborhoods that we work in and black people live in."

Young African Americans and South Asians, particularly on college campuses, are starting to open the dialogue. But it remains to be seen whether a growing awareness of similarities as well as differences can propel the black and South Asian communities into a new understanding.