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The Pitfalls of Desi Consciousness

Recently, while teaching a class on American Politics, I asked my students if they could name any prominent Arab-Americans. Hoping for an answer such as Ralph Nader or Spencer Abraham, I called on one of my brightest students, who happens to be of Latino descent. His answer, Ben Kingsley, caught me off guard for two reasons. First, that he actually knew that Kingsley was not just some white actor, and second, that he confused the South Asian community with the Arab community. The next student I called on, an African-American female interested in film, offered Mira Nair. This got me wondering about the relationship between South Asians' perception of ourselves and the perception of our community by other Americans. I can say three related things. One, that South Asians as a community have barely cracked the surface of American public consciousness in any meaningful way. Two, despite the growth of South Asian political and cultural organizations, South Asians are still in the process of defining ourselves in this country. And three, that our internal divisions are of little concern to the broader American community, who apparently cannot tell us apart from our Arab friends. The question remains, what are we to make of the proliferation of organizations that are actively engaged in the process of defining what it means to be desi in America today?

Grasping the contours of the "South Asian" nation in the US is like the tale of the blind men and the elephant. Unable to fathom the complex totality of the pachyderm, the blind men speak authoritatively, and with comic falsity, on the peculiar nature of the beast according to their own, limited perceptions. The proliferation of South Asian political and cultural organizations that have cropped up in recent times claiming to represent the desi nation face a similar dilemma. Faced with the challenge of representing a South Asian identity that is inherently conflictual and complex, they seek to assert varying and often reductive conceptions of what it means to be desi in America, frequently inline with their own particular agendas.

At the same time, it is neither very useful nor is it my own personal agenda to merely critique the current crop of South Asian focused organizations that now exist. Rather, it is important to understand the different strands that have emerged, and how they relate to and shape the conception of the South Asian community in this country.

This question becomes especially important in the post-9/11 era because of what may be the greatest opportunity for progressive development our community has ever faced in this country. As it stands the gap between how we are perceived and who we really are remains wide. Reduced to a generic Arab/Muslim/brown person category in the aftermath of 9/11, this historical moment presents members of the community with an important opportunity to define how we are viewed in this country in the future. The

challenge is whether or not we take this moment and use it to define our community in a politically progressive manner that acknowledges our position as representatives of the developing world and importantly, the colored world.

From this viewpoint, we have far to go. Four types of identity-centric organizations have emerged that battle for legitimacy amongst South Asian America. First, linguistic/cultural organizations that are the oldest, most extensive, and strongest of all four types continue to dominate the affiliations of most South Asians in this country. Concerned primarily with replicating the culture of a far away homeland, and, to a lesser degree, the well being of its representatives in the US, this sort of organization has little capacity for political action, except in the most narrow sense. Second, professional associations, especially within the medical, technology and financial fields, but also including such fields as journalism and law, have their own specific portrait of the South Asian community: college educated, professional, financially comfortable, and integral to the progress of the American nation. Caught up in their own vision of living the American Dream, these organizations have minimal concern for the lives of those billed not quite up to the high standards of South Asian-ness that they seek to establish. Third, we have social welfare organizations that identify marginalized elements of the community, whether victims of domestic abuse, recent immigrants, or taxi drivers, and seek to provide redress. While these groups serve a crucial function with admirable commitment, few South Asians are comfortable with being represented or even associating with them due to the challenge they pose to the preferred idealized vision of the community.

Finally, we have artistic groups such as our own Artwallah organization. Unlike the other three types discussed above, artistic organizations have the potential to genuinely grapple with the intricacy of the desi identity in America. This can only happen when South Asian artists break out of their myopic tendency to assume that their own peculiar identity conflict represents the position of all South Asians in this country. While it was easy to laugh at the cultural contradictions commented on in numerous movies, plays, stories, songs, and culture shows, further considerations of this theme have the tendency to sound like a scratched CD. Especially in the aftermath of 9/11, South Asian artists have a responsibility to explore with greater depth the steady tension between the Eastern and Western worlds. This requires moving away from a binary depiction and recognizing the global forces that can shape identities here in the US and in our former homelands. It also requires branching out and questioning the tensions within our own South Asian community on issues such as race/skin color, gender, sexuality, nationalism, religion, and class. Finally, it requires that we seek to forge coalitions and move past our own prejudices about other American minority groups that have often trod similar paths from which we can learn. It is the responsibility of groups like Artwallah to forge new roles and definitions of the South Asian community. The task is not an easy one, but the stakes are too high to not try.

Biography

Zachariah Mampilly is Ph.D. Candidate at UCLA working on comparative rebel governance in Congo, Sri Lanka and Sudan. He is the founder of the Venice Beach Free Ron Artest Society.