

OUR FEET WALK THE SKY

WOMEN OF THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA



EDITED BY
THE WOMEN OF
SOUTH ASIAN DESCENT COLLECTIVE

aunt lute books
SAN FRANCISCO

1993

In The Belly Of The Multicultural Beast I Am Named South Asian

NAHEED ISLAM

South Asian is a category fast catching on in academic and literary arenas. However, some of us have remained invisible in the new name, devoured by the multicultural zeal.¹ The ideal of multiculturalism assumes that everyone placed in these categories has equal space and voice within and between them. But a new hierarchy has emerged in which certain voices have been privileged and have developed their own hegemonic power. Multiculturalism participates in this process by its uncritical approach to the positioning of subjects and groups within the new categories.

Living on the margins of marginality, I first welcomed this term that hinted at recognizing my origins. It was like being at a neighborhood mela—and getting a sense of belonging to a larger community. But why would I be South Asian when I could be Bangladeshi? And the Tripuras, Shantals and Chakmas living within the borders of Bangladesh, brutally suppressed by the military, may choose to distinguish their identity from that nation-state. Why have we created this quagmire? We are trying to create a single space while ignoring the politics of positioning and our fluid positions within a complicated nexus of gender, class, race, religious, cultural, sexual and national positioning. And who is making this new box for me in the governmental mis-interest in my racial and ethnic naming? Who does it make visible and who does it negate?

South Asia consists of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. While we use this term with some ease even within the region, what ties these nations together? It is a region of vast cultural, linguistic and religious diversity within and between national boundaries. These nation-states were created by the somewhat arbitrary wills of colonial powers and the specific interests of local elite (shrouded in nationalistic or religious rhetoric). These South Asian nations have developed their own nexus of power based on the imagined divisions of the West in addition to, and in interaction with, the local political and economic and social divisions. India and Pakistan are the regional superpowers and play an active role in the struggle over distribution of resources and territory. We must examine how these regional political dynamics transplant and transform themselves in the American context.

The very name India has retained the aura of the undivided empire that was the "jewel in the (British) crown." The colonialist nostalgia for the glamour of the raj has always kept India visible in the West. It is seen as the "memorable" moment of direct Western rule of Asia. Despite the divisions into national boundaries, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India are in some

ways perceived as larger (undivided) India. And Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka are either made invisible or seen in the context of their political and economic connections to India. For example, South Asia Studies departments in the U.S. focus their courses and research on India while claiming to "study" the whole region. They are taught by predominantly white and male faculty.² My own review of the South Asia Studies departments in the U.S. shows an emphasis on Ancient India Studies. Moreover, the recent addition of the India Chair to South Asian departments, first initiated at U.C. Berkeley, best illuminates the positioning of India in the South Asian context. The India Chair is created from donations by the well-to-do in the Indian American community, with support from the Indian Embassy. It is presented by the department as creating a connection between the academic community and the Indian American community. The India Chair position shows clearly which community within the South Asian countries has the economic power and infrastructure to purchase visibility. It is visibility defined by the privileged of the First and Third world.

The "Other" South Asian countries are invisible even within Indian political organizations. When a massive cyclone hit Bangladesh in 1991, killing hundreds of thousands of people, I frantically contacted many South Asian organizations for help. One offered their sponsorship but no active help. A few individuals volunteered their services. But for the most part my calls were never returned. Silence also followed from many Indian American political activists that I had worked with to form a South Asian coalition. I don't remember a single one of them asking me about what was going on in Bangladesh despite the relatively heavy news coverage of the events. However, these very same people have long spoken of the need for regional cooperation as well as showing interest in acknowledging the interlinked fates of all the nations in the region.

An Indian American community organizer once told me how she had thoughtfully used South Asian, instead of Indian, in the title of her presentation. Another gesture of "inclusive" politics. I vented my anger on my well-meaning friend. I pointed out that her presentation was on the Indian community and did not warrant being called South Asian, that the noble gesture claiming to include and represent the region made me and other non-Indians invisible. I wanted to know why Indian Americans wanted to claim the term South Asian when they were speaking only of themselves. The term is not even used by members of the different communities for self-reference. People within the communities refer to themselves as Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Sri Lankan, etc. It is only within political organizations and academic circles that the term has found currency. She was offended and made defensive by my angry response. While she conceded to some of my points, it was with a "will you never be satisfied!" note.

Similarly, a student-organized conference titled "South Asian Perspectives on Development" focused almost entirely on India, with one paper from Nepal. A white male professor and myself were the only other non-Indians on the panels. The forum should have been called "Indian Perspectives on Development" or "Development in India and Nepal." If Indian Americans want to speak of India they should do so, rather than presenting themselves as legitimately speaking for our collective interests and experiences.

In the U.S. the Indian American community has been developing its own politics. It is not a homogeneous community and many of its segments are struggling with the hegemony

within it. But Indian Americans are the numerical majority (with the largest immigration compared to other individual "South Asian" countries) with a large professional class trying to transform their economic power into power in the U.S. political system. They have accepted the term South Asian and are trying to shape it to their interest. There are a number of problems with this category. I wonder at the politics of an "ethnic" rather than "racial" category. According to the legal history of the U.S., people from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan were considered white/Caucasian until it was used by a Sikh American to contest his denial of citizenship.³ The courts repealed the status stating that while people from India were Caucasian, they were not white and therefore were ineligible for citizenship. Indian Americans⁴ had struggled to be labeled white in order to claim the privilege and protection provided by that racial category. Since the court's decision, as well as the eventual gaining of citizenship through other changes in immigration and naturalization laws, Indian American community leaders have lobbied for an ethnic category.⁵ Ethnic categories give the illusion of parity between all ethnic groups such as Irish American, African American and Asian American. It tries to neutralize the reality of racial politics and recreate the imagined ladder to success.

The use of the term "South Asia" has become interchangeable with the term "India." Some Indian American groups have made a deliberate policy statement to acknowledge the inclusive nature of the term. But the easy shift of the tongue between the terms makes one wonder at the commitment to ensure all of our visibility and interests. I have worked with numerous political organizations claiming a South Asian membership. The majority of the participants tend to be Indian American with some Bangladeshi and Pakistani members. The rest of the region is almost never represented and there are disturbingly few questions raised about this absence. Despite many discussions on the use of the term in sweeping generalizations and its interchangeability with India, these problems resurface in old frustrating ways. And this experience is shared by many other people and organizers from the region.

My own experiences so far have left me skeptical of the community we are trying to build. We must recognize at present there isn't an existing South Asian coalition or community. While I continue to work with others of South Asian descent on certain issues, I also emphasize the need for our different communities to organize themselves. In the complex political web, there are possibilities for collaboration. Ultimately, the fate of a coalition depends on the struggle of each community to voice their issues and on the commitment of Indian Americans to examine their own hegemonic role in the region and in the U.S.

1. Multiculturalism is an institutionalized liberal discourse and a part of the postmodern philosophical genre. It claims to displace the master narrative and respond to the political pressure of the civil rights struggle, feminism and decolonization by equally dividing the academic curriculum and social benefits between newly codified cultural/political groups.

Here I agree with Cornell West's argument that multiculturalism pacifies the middle class and is consumed without critical engagement. Cornell West, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*, vol. 2 (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993).

2. Often, non-white faculty members are either visiting professors or regional language instructors. Those who teach the languages are hired as lecturers and usually on a contract basis. Therefore almost all the tenured positions are held by white faculty members.

3. *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1922).

4. While the legal battles for this categorization were made by Indian Americans, the interests were possibly shared by Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants. But due to smaller numbers and lack of developed political and community organizations, they were unable to represent those interests. Therefore, when I say that Indian Americans wanted to be labeled white, I am only referring to the legal and recorded history. I am not aware of the position held by Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lankan communities.

5. The 1986 U.S. Census created "Asian Indian" as a new category. So now the choices for me are between the "nearest to home" (i.e. Asian Indian) or "other" category. And this is not so much a criticism of the Indian American community efforts to create a box for themselves as the problem of the taxonomy of racial and ethnic categories in general.