Using Digital Archives to Teach Early South Asian American Histories

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In this article, I consider the use of Asian American digital archives as sources of critical inquiry for the elementary social studies classroom. First, I provide a brief overview of early South Asian American history, focusing on Punjabi and Bengali migrations. Then, I orient educators to two noteworthy community archives, the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) and the Pioneering Punjabis Digital Archive. A sample lesson on Bhagat Singh Thind, a South Asian pioneer who challenged exclusionary citizenship laws in the twentieth century, is provided, demonstrating one possible way to incorporate the primary sources from digital archives for elementary social studies. Community archives provide essential resources for learning the histories of Asian Americans, the fastest growing demographic group in the United States.

Digital Archives: Democratizing Community Histories

While most teachers are familiar with sourcing historical documents from well-known repositories like the National Archives, they might be less familiar with archival collections curated and kept by universities and non-profit organizations. Community-based archives seek to democratize the practice of preserving oral histories and other artifacts in order to make them available to the general public. For scholars of Asian American history, community archives have been indispensable to the writing and analysis of history through critical, intersectional lenses. In the past three decades, there have been dozens of local and national archival projects that not only digitize documents from the past, but also instruct individual and community organizations to record living histories.

For example, the archivists from **Densho.org** have collected and curated oral histories and other artifacts related to the experience of Japanese Americans during WWII.[1] The National Pinoy Archives were initiated in 1987 by the Filipino American National Historic Society with the objective of gathering records related to the Filipino American experience.[2] Several Asian American archival collections such as the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California, Irvine,[3] and the Korean American Archive at the University of Southern California[4] are housed within university libraries. All of these grassroots efforts were motivated by the lack of inclusion of Asian American histories in mainstream collections. Today these repositories inform new generations of scholars in Asian American history with oral histories, newspaper clippings, family records and other primary sources that lend themselves to the interpretation histories that have been marginalized from dominant narratives.

Later in this article, I highlight two community-driven archives that document the diverse experiences of South Asians, one of the fastest growing groups of Asian Americans. After providing an overview of early South Asian American history, I discuss the genesis of these two projects and their application to the elementary classroom.

Who are South Asian Americans?

South Asian Americans include individuals with ethnic backgrounds from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as well as South Asian diasporas from Kenya, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Suriname, and elsewhere.[5] The largest of these subgroups is made up of Indian Americans, who account for an estimated 4.9 million people.[6] Unsurprisingly, the largest Asian American group in 19 states including Texas, Illinois, Florida, Kansas and Arizona is Indian American.[7] Because Indian Americans are the most sizable majority, South Asian American identity becomes conflated with the Hindu religion and Hindi speaking communities.[8] In reality, and like other Asian American groups, South Asian Americans are a highly heterogeneous population, representing vast linguistic and religious diversity. South Asian Americans speak at least twenty distinct languages and practice various forms of Christianity, Islam,

In 1906, *The San Francisco Call* publishes an article decrying the "invasion" of Punjabi Sikh, Muslim and Hindu migrants.

Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism. In terms of economic and education indicators, Indian Americans have the highest mean income and educational attainment of South Asian groups, while Bhutanese and Nepali Americans have the lowest.[9]

The high economic and education indicators of Indian Americans, the majority of whom are immigrants in the past 20 years, is due in part to U.S. immigration policy, which continues to grant H1-B visas to certain categories of individuals working in technology and health care industries.

As historian Erika Lee notes, there were only 12,000 Indian Americans in the United States in 1960. Between 1980 and 2010, the population of Indian Americans grew from approximately 200,000 to more than 2 million. As noted above, the population has doubled in the last decade.[10] The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, created preferential categories for immigrants based on education and professional status.[11] These selective conditions on U.S. immigration coupled with the surplus of highly skilled workers in India led to the growth of Indian American communities. These same preferential immigration categories, together with refugee resettlement policies, visa lotteries, and family reunification spurred the growth of Pakistani and Bangladeshi American communities. In the

past decade, Bhutanese and Nepali American communities have seen the fastest growth.[12]

Many readers may not know that the first South Asian Americans arrived in the United States long before the twentieth century. The migration of the first South Asian arrivals intersects with global patterns of labor and displacement resulting from British colonial projects. Coolies, or indentured laborers from South Asia, were recruited and sometimes forcibly captured to work on British sugar plantations in Jamaica, Trinidad, Fiji, and elsewhere. Although coolie labor was prohibited in the United States in 1862, some Indian laborers made their way to the United States aboard British and American ships. James Dunn, an Indian from Kolkata, was indentured at age eight. His petition for abolition in the 1790s was denied on the grounds of ambiguous racial status.[13] Later, in the early twentieth century, and before racist immigration laws banned the entry of most Asian migrants, several thousand Punjabi migrants and hundreds of Bengali sailors and merchants came to the United States as part of imperial British routes of trade and labor.

Punjabi Migration

In the early twentieth century in the United States, there were about 8,000 migrants from the Punjab region of colonial

India (present day India and Pakistan and the birthplace of the Sikh religion). Land reform, famine, and familiarity with British overseas migration routes compelled Punjabi men to migrate to Australia, Canada, and the Western United States.[14] Upon arrival to the United States and Canada, Punjabi men were recruited to work in agriculture, railroad and highway construction, and the lumber industries. Stockton, California became an epicenter of Punjabi life in the early twentieth century, and the first gurdwara or Sikh Temple was established by the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society in 1912.[15] The Sikh Temple also become a gathering place for Muslim and Hindu Punjabi immigrants. The religious center provided a source of community and collective organization for anti-colonial efforts through the Ghadar Party, which had been established in 1913 by international students from South Asia studying at the University of California, Berkeley. It had its headquarters in San Francisco, California. *Ghadar* is an Urdu word that means *rebellion*. The party believed in armed revolution against colonial rule and had members throughout several cities in the United States, Panama, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and elsewhere.[16]

Organizing to overthrow the British empire was not the only concern of the Punjabi farmers in California in the early twentieth century or of the intellectuals at the Ghadar Party headquarters. The racial violence faced by other Asian migrants including the Chinese was also aimed towards Punjabis. The Asiatic Exclusion League incited violence against Korean, Chinese, Japanese and South Asian migrants. Local newspapers often described the Punjabi migrants as "Hindoo hordes," a "public nuisance," and "undesirable citizens."[17] The xenophobia directed at the Punjabi immigrants erupted in 1907, when white mobs in Bellingham, Washington, a center of the lumber industry in the Pacific Northwest, used violence and intimidation to force hundreds of Punjabi lumber workers out of the city.[18] The Asiatic Exclusion League and other anti-Asian organizations succeeded in lobbying Congress to pass the Immigration Act of 1917, which established the Asiatic Barred Zone, prohibiting further immigration from South Asia alongside other Asian countries.[19] This restrictive, race-based immigration system remained in place until 1952, when a national quota system was put into place. The quota system was a signature part of the U.S. immigration system until the Hart-Celler Act of 1965.

Because entry to the United States was barred for South Asians starting in 1917, and because of anti-miscegenation laws in states like California, several hundred Punjabi men married Mexican American and Mexican immigrant women, especially in the Imperial Valley of Southern California.[20] There were also many stories of love. There were at least 300 documented Punjabi-Mexican unions, and children of these marriages often grew up negotiating their cultural and religious identities in between the Catholic Church and Sikh Gurdwara, belonging to multiple communities simultaneously.
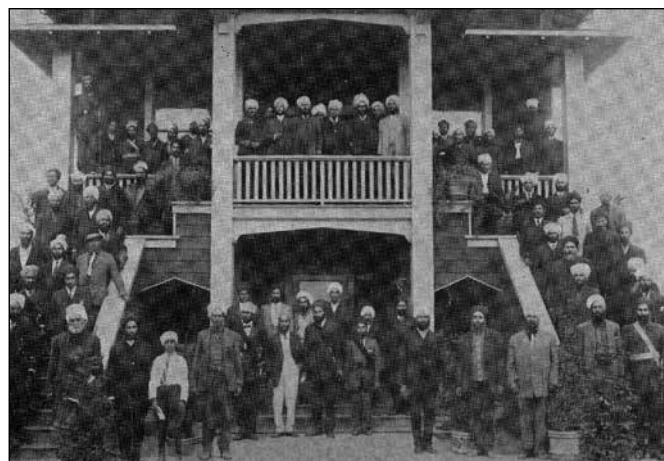
The Stockton Gurdwara was established in 1912 in Stockton, California, and was the epicenter of Sikh American life for rural Punjabi communities. This exterior photograph of the Stockton Gurdwara was printed in the January 1916 issue of *The Hindusthanee Student*.

The longevity of Sikh Americans in the United States, and their political, cultural, and economic contributions are of particular importance given the hate crimes perpetrated against the Sikh community in the United States since 9/11. Certainly, a community's storied history in the country should not be the primary reason by which hate crimes are condemned. Even still, teachers might take up the important task of teaching about Sikh Americans, part of U.S. history since the nineteenth century, thereby disrupting mainstream misconceptions and positionings of Sikh Americans as relative newcomers.

Sidebar A: Literature Connections: *Step Up to the Plate, Maria Singh*

Step Up to the Plate, María Singh (Uma Krishnaswami, 2017) is a historical fiction chapter book that tells the story of María Singh, a first-generation American with a Punjabi father and Mexican mother. Maria grows up in Yuba City in the 1940s and navigates culture and identity in an era of discriminatory laws and gendered expectations for young women. This middle grade novel allows students to make vital connections to early South Asian American history.

Bengali Americans

Another network of migration was concentrated in the eastern United States and was made up by male Bengali merchants who crisscrossed the seaports of New York, Baltimore, Charleston, and New Orleans, responding to the cosmopolitan desire of middle-class Americans to consume products from "the Orient." The histories of these Bengali merchants have been documented by historian and filmmaker Vivek Bald in *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Stories of South Asian America*.[21] Bald's groundbreaking book and upcoming documentary based on the same research reveal the hidden histories of a group of migrants from the Hooghly region of Kolkata who, like the Punjabi migrants, mobilized colonial British networks of migration to arrive in the United States for commerce. Most Bengali merchants were Muslim and intermarried with Black, Creole, and Puerto Rican women in Harlem, New Orleans, and elsewhere, later disappearing into communities of color. The merchants were connected through an elaborate transnational network that spanned several cities in the United States, India, and Panama. This "hidden history" of early South Asian migration underscores the importance of ongoing research, documentation, and preservation of community histories through grassroots efforts.

In the next section, I will detail two digital archival projects, the South Asian American Digital Archive and the Pioneering Punjabi Archive, as platforms of primary sources that can be used to teach early South Asian American histories.

South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA)

In 2008, Samip Mallick and Michelle Caswell founded the South Asia American Digital Archive (SAADA) with multiple goals in mind. One was to respond to the alienation of South Asian Americans from the mainstream histories presented in U.S. history textbooks.[22] Another was the desire to make archives accessible to the general public, free of cost. A third goal was to engage South Asian Americans to understand the importance of collecting contemporary histories. SAADA operates with a "post-custodial model," which means that the non-profit organization scans and digitizes documents and other artifacts given by community organizations and individual families before returning them to the original owners.[23] The organization operates through the generous donations of individuals, as well as foundation and government grants, and other revenue streams. SAADA used crowdfunding to fund the publication of *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America*, the first print compendium of South Asian history by scholars, activists, and community leaders. Today, SAADA is the largest collection of South Asian American archives in the world.

Pioneering Punjabi Digital Archives

Another important source of archival resources that documents the history of the Punjabi migrants to the western United States during the early twentieth century is the Pioneering Punjabi Digital Archives hosted by the University of California, Davis, in collaboration with the Punjabi American Heritage Society in Yuba City.[24] Here we can find primary resources organized by time period, by area of geographic concentration, and by historic figure. For example, we can use the historic photographs and video interview of Tuly Singh Johl, a Punjabi immigrant from Jalandhar, Punjab and early pioneer to Yuba City, California, to teach about ways that Asian immigrants contributed to the transformation of agriculture in California. Johl and other migrants developed new techniques for irrigation, the cultivation of fruit crops and cotton farming. They were subject to anti-miscegenation laws and alien land laws that prevented their ability to own the land they worked on. Furthermore, like Bhagat Singh Thind, these early settlers were denied naturalization and land ownership until the passage of the Luce-Celler Act of 1946.

Sample Lesson: Using SAADA to Teach about Bhagat Singh Thind

SAADA has an ample collection of primary source documents that chronicle the history of Bhagat Singh Thind through photographs, letters, and immigration records. Bhagat Singh Thind immigrated to the United States in 1913 from Amritsar, Punjab, where he studied American history and literature at Khalsa College.[25] Before enlisting in the U.S. Army in 1918 for six months at Camp Lewis, Thind worked in the Hammond Lumber Company in St. John's, Oregon, where he became an organizer for the Ghadar Party.

Thind petitioned for naturalization in 1919 and was granted citizenship in 1920. His citizenship was later revoked, and Thind appealed. Thind's case was heard by the Supreme Court in 1923 in *Bhagat Singh Thind v. United States*. At the time, naturalized citizenship was only available to white men, and Thind's argument that he was Caucasian was dismissed by the court. Associate Supreme Court Justice George Sutherland argued, "It may be true that the blond Scandinavia and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today."[26]

Teaching about Bhagat Singh Thind provides an entry point for students to understand the complex ways South Asians have been racialized in U.S. society. Furthermore, Thind demonstrates the continuous presence of Sikh Americans in the United States. The Bhagat Singh Thind materials can be accessed from the SAADA website (**https://www.saada.org/browse/collection/bhagat-singh-thind-materials**). There, we can find seventy-one pieces of archival materials. The following sequence of activities is suggested for students in the upper elementary grades.

On the first day, we can use the multiple photographs of Bhagat Singh Thind at different stages of his life to engage

Image 3. Portrait photograph of Bhagat Singh Thind donated to the South Asian American Digital Archive by his son, David.

in critical inquiry. One thing that students will notice is that Thind used the articles of his Sikh faith throughout his life. These include the *dastaar*, turban, and *kesh* or uncut hair. This is an opportune moment to teach about the articles of faith used by many followers of the Sikh faith. The Sikh Coalition, a non-profit organization that was formed as a response to the racial violence directed at Sikh Americans after 9/11,[27] provides multiple education resources that are aligned with the C3 framework. The photographs of Thind can be used in concert with one lesson in particular developed by the Sikh Coalition and directed for teachers of Grades 3–6. The inquiry lesson, "What do the things I wear say about me" can be found on the C3 Teachers website: **https://c3teachers. org/inquiries/cultural-diversity-2/**.

As specified above, Bhagat Singh Thind served in the U.S. Army. SAADA includes several iconic photos that show Thind in his Army uniform. We can use these photos to continue our critical inquiry by engaging in meaningful discussion about identity, belonging, and citizenship: Was Bhagat Singh Thind an American? What articles of clothing and behaviors determine American citizenship? Doing so might challenge some student misconceptions about American citizenship, race, and religion.

On the second day, we begin by explaining Bhagat Singh Thind's petition for naturalized citizenship. We explain the difference between citizenship and naturalization and explain

that foreign-born individuals could not obtain naturalized citizenship unless they were white men. This law changed for different groups at different times. Using the Supreme Court case *Bhagat Singh Thind v. The United States* (1923), we can inquire into the difference between cultural and political citizenship. Thind studied American history and literature before arriving in the U.S., voluntarily enrolled in the U.S. army, completed a PhD in metaphysics, and contributed to the United States in multiple ways. At the same time, he remained loyal to the cause for Indian independence from British colonialism. We can conclude that he achieved cultural citizenship but was denied political citizenship through naturalization on the grounds of race. The primary sources from SAADA that we can use for critical inquiry include Thind's certificate of honorable discharge from the U.S. Army[28] and the transcript of his enlistment.[29] In using Thind's fight for political citizenship, students are able to inquire into the question: What does it mean to be a good citizen?

Conclusion

In this article, I have given suggestions for the use of two digital archives that chronicle early and contemporary histories of South Asian Americans. These repositories are helpful tools for educators who are curious about learning more about South Asian American history. Together with publications like *Bengali Harlem, Making Ethnic Choices*, and *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America*, the SAADA and Pioneering Punjabis Digital Archive provide a meaningful entry point to understand early South Asian Americans.

The ambitious project of gathering archives representative of the breadth of South Asian American experiences is an important undertaking, but not without the challenge of controversies. Before 1947, the year Pakistan and India gained independence from British colonialism, and 1967, when East Pakistan became Bangladesh, the boundaries of religious, ethnic, and cultural identities were more fluid. Using the term *South Asian American* reflects an intentional effort to recognize pan-national solidarities, while recognizing that any efforts to capture the experiences of more than five million individuals will present challenges and contradictions. SAADA has been proactive in gathering materials from diverse South Asian communities, but more work needs to be done to learn the experiences of groups that are marginalized from the collective South Asian umbrella. These include Nepali and Bhutanese Americans, LGBTQ+ South Asians, and Indo-Caribbean Americans. Educators should be cautioned that the early histories of South Asian Americans presented here are certainly not indicative of the breadth of experiences of 5.4 million Americans of South Asian descent. Even still, they provide foundational tools for the inquiry into South Asian American histories.

For social studies educators interested in learning more about teaching South Asian American history in the class-

room, SAADA has a small collection of lesson plans[30] that can be used in the K-12 classroom. I hope that by exploring these two digital archives and using them in the elementary social studies classroom, educators are able to appreciate the importance of freely available, digital archive collections. The sidebar below offers suggestions for other notable archival projects in Asian American history. As Asian American historians have noted, Asian American history is currently being written. These digital archives are essential in building the narratives that tell our collective and individual experiences. 🌐

Notes

1. Brian Niya, Tom Ikeda and Roger Daniels, "Japanese American Incarceration-Densho.org," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no.4 (2014): 49–55.
2. "National Pinoy Archives," Filipino American National Historic Society, http://fanhs-national.org/filam/national-pinoy-archives/.
3. The Southeast Asian Archive, https://seaa.lib.uci.edu/.
4. Korean American Digital Archive, https://libguides.usc.edu/KADA.
5. "About SAALT," South Asian Americans Leading Together, https://saalt.org/about/about-saalt/.
6. Abby Budiman, "Indians in the U.S. Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, April 29, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/asian-americans-indians-in-the-u-s/.
7. Abby Budiman and Neil Ruíz, "Key facts about Asian origin groups in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, April 29, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/.
8. Shilpa Davé, Pawan Dhingra, Sunaina Maira, Partha Mazumdar, Lavina Dhingra Shankar, Jaideep Singh, and Rajini Srikanth, "De-Privileging Positions: Indian-Americans, South Asian Americans, and the Politics of Asian American Studies." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3, no. 1 (February 2000): 67–100.
9. Budiman and Ruíz, "Key facts about Asian origin groups in the U.S."
10. Erika Lee, "Legacies of the 1965 Immigration Act," South Asian American Digital Archive, October 1, 2015, https://www.saada.org/tides/article/legacies-of-the-1965-immigration-act.
11. Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).
12. Budiman and Ruíz, "Key facts about Asian origin groups in the U.S."
13. Joan Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), cited in Shelly Sang-Hee Lee, *A New History of Asian America* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
14. Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992).
15. "Stockton Gurudwara," Pioneering Punjabis Digital Archive, 2016, https://pioneeringpunjabis.ucdavis.edu/contributions/religion/stockton-temple/.
16. Seema Sohi, "Ghadar Party," in Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America (Philadelphia, PA: South Asian American Digital Archive, 2021), 36–40.
17. Paul Englesberg, "The Bellingham 'Anti-Hindu' Riot," in Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America (Philadelphia, PA: South Asian American Digital Archive, 2021), 28–34.
18. Englesberg, "The Bellingham 'Anti-Hindu' Riot."
19. Lee, *The Making of Asian America*.
20. Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*.
21. Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2013).
22. Michelle Caswell. "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation." *The Public Historian* 3, no 4 (2014): 26–37.
23. Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History," 33.
24. Pioneering Punjabis Digital Archive, https://pioneeringpunjabis.ucdavis.edu/.
25. Kritika Agarwal, "Bhagat Singh Thind," in *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America* (Philadelphia, PA: South Asian American Digital Archive, 2021), 52–57.
26. Agarwal, "Bhagat Singh Thind," 55.
27. "About Us," The Sikh Coalition, https://www.sikhcoalition.org/about-us/.
28. Certificate of Honorable Discharge for Bhagat Singh Thind, 16 December 1918, South Asian American Digital Archive, https://www.saada.org/item/20160807-4602.
29. Transcript from Enlisted Record for Bhagat Singh Thind, South Asian American Digital Archive, https://www.saada.org/item/20160807-4603.
30. "In the Classroom," South Asian American Digital Archive, https://www.saada.org/in-the-classroom.

Sidebar B: Other Notable Asian American Digital Archives

Densho.org: The Japanese American Legacy Project: digital archives documenting the experience of Japanese Americans before, during, and after WWII incarceration, **www.densho.org**

The Southeast Asian Archive: a collection of primary sources documenting the experiences of Vietnamese, Lao, Mien, Hmong, Khmer, and Cambodian Americans, **https://seaa.lib.uci.edu/**

Korean American Digital Archive: oral histories, photography, and other primary sources centering the experience of Korean Americans, **https://libguides.usc.edu/KADA**

Welga Digital Archive: housed at the Carlos Bulosan Center for Filipino Studies at UC Davis, includes images of the agricultural tools used by Filipinx/o manongs (laborers), oral histories, and printable posters, **https://welgadigitalarchive.omeka.net/**

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