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HOSTILE TIMES: DESI COLLEGE STUDENTS COPE WITH HATE

Hilal Nakiboglu Isler

Background and Literature

The attacks of terror carried out on September 11, 2001[1] gave rise to waves of hate-fueled violence across the country. It has been argued that the attacks and the subsequent, current context of war have resulted in a heightened sense of American intolerance. They have led to discernable shifts in how certain minorities are perceived and treated in the United States. Since the attacks, an alarming number of Arab, Iranian, and other Muslim Americans have been targeted and hurt, becoming victims of a vicious brand of 'patriotism.' The FBI reports that the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes filed has spiked from twenty-eight in the year 2000, to 481 in 2001 – representing a seventeen-fold increase.[2] Backlash continues to take on the form of verbal taunting, airport profiling, and even physical violence. The group hardest hit by hate crimes post 9-11 has been the South Asian Americans.[3]

Today, young desi[4] Americans find themselves – perhaps for the first time – in the shaky, undesirable position of standing out for the 'wrong' reasons. Listening to reports of hate crimes directed at South Asian and Muslim Americans after the events of September 11th, they must now contend with the understanding that their position in this country is more tenuous than they perhaps realized. In this paper, I discuss what growing up during a time of rising confusion and xenophobia has meant for the children of Indian immigrants.

The Early Immigrants

Historically, Asian immigration to North America has been frowned upon, discouraged, and even strongly opposed. Yet in spite of this, when famine and land shortages threatened the livelihood of farmers in the Indian province of Punjab, thousands boarded ships heading for territories of promised economic opportunity: Canada and the western United States (Bandon, 1995; Leonard, 1997). It is estimated that between the years 1904 and 1920, about seven thousand Indians immigrated to the United States alone. Nearly all Sikh men, the immigrants worked on the railroads, in lumber mills, mines, fruit orchards, citrus and sugar beet farms in British Columbia, Canada, Washington State and California (Khandelwal, 2002).

The arrival of the Sikhs was preceded by that of other Asian workers. At the turn of the century, immigrating to North America was dangerous, as on arrival one could expect an environment already deeply "inflamed by white hatred for the Chinese and Japanese" (Rangaswamy, 2000). In 1907, when a group of 901 Sikh men arrived on the Canadian Pacific ship *The Monteagle*, they were met with race riots that filled the streets of Vancouver soon after. That same year, British Columbian legislature declared that all "natives of India not of Anglo-Saxon parents" were to be barred from entering the logging, legal, accounting and medical professions. They were not allowed to run for public office or serve on a jury (Ward, 1978).

Tensions continued to climb when, seven years later, the Japanese ship *Komagata Maru* entered Vancouver's port near Burrard Inlet. When it was discovered that the freighter had 376 Indian nationals on board, the passengers were turned away, forced by armed members of the Canadian Navy to return to Hong Kong—from whence they had sailed.[5] *Komagata Maru*'s story ended as it returned to the shores of Calcutta. In Indian waters, a British ship cornered the freighter, eventually massacring everyone on board. Today, a simple plaque at Vancouver's Ross Street Gurdwara (Sikh temple) is all that exists in commemoration of these lost lives.

Like other Asian immigrants at the time, Indians were poorly paid, exploited and discriminated against. The Alien Land Acts of California (1913)[6] for instance, outright prohibited the Punjabis from owning land up until the mid-1900s (Rangaswamy, 2000). Public distaste for Asian Indian immigration was made apparent in 1907, when the city of Bellingham, Washington was overwhelmed by mass riots. Indian Americans were forcibly pulled out of their homes, places of work and even off of streetcars to be brutally beaten and stoned. Major newspapers in the area, including Seattle's *Morning Times* and Bellingham's *Herald* applauded the riots as a necessary means of protection against the "Hindu invasion" and the "Tide of Turbans (Prasad, 1999)." As a 1911 U.S Immigration Commission document verified shortly thereafter: "the East Indians…are almost universally regarded as the least desirable race of immigrants thus far admitted to the United States" (as cited in Daniels, 1989).

American public sentiment and policies toward Indian Americans were clear in their desire for distance from the newly-arrived. Groups of white Americans, uneasy at the prospect of sharing the country with those of an "alien culture" carried out numerous acts of violence and campaigned to prevent Indian immigration (Rangaswamy, 2000). They were successful as, in 1917, the Immigration Act was forged in response, wholly prohibiting Indian entrée to the U.S. by instituting the Pacific Barred Zone

(Prasad, 1999). Applied retroactively, the law not only banned the admittance of new Indian immigrants, but also resulted in the revoking of American citizenship from Indian Americans already living in the United States. Almost a half-century would pass before this ban would be lifted.

1965: The Watershed Year

It wasn't until the late 1960s that the number of Indians moving to the United States saw a significant spike, and immigration gained a new sort of momentum. The exclusionary approach to Asian immigration was finally reversed in 1965 when the Immigration and Nationality Act, also called the Hart-Cellar Act, became law.7 In line with a swelling awareness around civil and women's rights issues that helped define the sixties, existing immigration laws were recognized as being discriminatory. Prior to Hart-Celler, the National Origins-Quota Law had successfully placed firm thresholds on the numbers of immigrants Asian, southern and eastern European countries could send to the United States. The Statue of Liberty might have declared open welcome to the world's tired, poor, and huddled masses, but really she had only been interested in those of northern European ancestry.

The reason for this change of heart had less to do with the nation's interests in diversity, and much more to do with its panic regarding the USSR's growing dominance over the final frontier. When the Russians launched Sputniks I and II in 1957, they sent the United States into an acute state of panic. The satellites—the first of their kind to be put in orbit—very publicly demonstrated the Russians' mounting levels of technological progress. Sputnik surprised the U.S., and would directly instigate not only the Space Race, but an arms race between the two countries. Closing "the missile gap" was announced a national priority by John F. Kennedy (initially during his 1960 Presidential Campaign) and winning the War soon became essential—not only for the government, but for American public morale as well.

It was July of the same year (1965) that saw President Johnson signing the Medicare and Medicaid programs into law. In its first year, about nineteen million people enrolled in Medicare alone.8 The need for physicians and nurses, laboratory workers, clinical technicians and dentists suddenly skyrocketed. America had committed to offering comprehensive health care to its elderly and poor in a way it had never done before. Once again, the nation was in need of human capital. Unfortunately, not only were America's students not becoming engineers in sufficient numbers, they weren't entering the medical professions either.

Between the years 1931 and 1960 eighty percent of all immigrants to the United States came from Europe or Canada. After 1965's passing of Hart-Celler, that number would drop off precipitously. Soon (during the 1970s) one out of every five immigrants entering the U.S. was leaving an Asian or Latin American nation (Daniels, 1989). By 1988, Asians accounted for 41% of all new American immigrants. Indians were fifth on the list, after Mexico, the Philippines, Haiti and Korea.9 Indian immigration must have taken the American government by surprise. When Secretary of State Dean Rusk was specifically asked to foretell how many Indians might immigrate under this new law, he had predicted about 8,000 in the five years following 1965. "I don't think we have a particular picture of a world situation where everybody is just straining to move to the United States," he had said.10 He was wrong, as America managed to attract the best and the brightest India had to offer.11 Between the years 1965 and 1977 alone, about 25,000 Indian doctors immigrated to the U.S., as did 40,000 Indian engineers and 20,000 with Ph.D.'s in science.12

Resentment in New Jersey: The Rise of Dotbusters

By the 1980s, the South Asian population—most concentrated on the east and west coasts of the country—was substantial. Journalist Gaiutra Bahadur (1998) describes the Jersey City of 1987 as a place of much diversity:

> The Jersey City I knew was a place where many of the people had that look of being from someplace else…A great number...were recently arrived South Asians, mainly Indians from Gujarat…
>
> … The Indians comprised not only the largest group of immigrants, but also the most visibly different. It wasn't just the color of their skin. It was their saris; their bindis…their Mahatma Gandhi Square with its *paan*13 booth, its Bollywood posters plastering the windows of video shops, its canopied storefronts...and tattered row of saffron, green and white flapping from the lampposts.14

The Indian Americans living in Jersey City, although constituting a sizable, visible part of the immigrant population, were often resented and not fully accepted by others. Throughout the 1980s, several gang members from Jersey City and nearby Hoboken, New Jersey became well-known for their routine harassment of local Indian immigrant populations. In 1987, the consequences of their hatred reached a sad climax.

It was in September of that year that an Indian American doctor was brutally beaten with a baseball bat, and left to suffer with the consequence: permanent, irreversible brain damage. A few weeks later, a gang of eleven teenagers attacked young

businessman Navroz Mody; pummeling him with bricks until he died. The teens, calling themselves the “Dotbusters” in reference to the bindi,15 claimed responsibility for the assault. In a letter published by the *Jersey Journal*, they explained:

> We will go to any extreme to get Indians to move out of Jersey City. If I am walking down the street and I see a Hindu and the setting is right, I will just hit him or her…We use the phonebook and look up the name Patel. Have you seen how many there are?16

Ten years after the killing of Navroz Mody, 20-year old Rishi Maharaj of Queens, New York, was beaten down by three white men—apparently just for being a "f---ing Indian" (Harkavy, 2000). The men admitted to kicking and punching Maharaj—a man they did not know at all—telling him, “This is never going to be a neighborhood until you leave.” The police also indicated that Maharaj—a second generation American—had apologized repeatedly to the perpetrators while being beaten; apologized until he lost consciousness. The men left Maharaj with a fractured face and broken jaw.

September 11, 2001 and its Aftermath

Since the events of September 11, 2001, there has been considerable resurgence in acts of hate against desi Americans, and while intolerance towards Indian immigrants is nothing new, this particular chapter in history was an especially “unexpected” one. Since the late 1960s, Indians in this country have been presented as being the “good” minority group—well-behaved, able to doggedly work toward and silently live out the American Dream. Desis are seen as being the essential workhorses of American society, and Asian Americans in general are often held up as being the model minority17--passive, compliant and able to succeed where other groups continue to fail. [High SAT scores and GPA’s are paraded by politicos like Dinesh D’Szouza (1992) as proof-positive that Indian Americans are superior somehow (culturally, genetically etc.) to other minority groups who are said to “under perform.”]

Up until now, Indian Americans have enjoyed their comfortable position at the top of the minority food chain. Led to believe their contributions are valued, they’ve been under the impression that, like other ethnic groups of immigrants, they have more or less been accepted into the folds of American society. It is in the ugly aftermath of September 11 that the temporary, conditional nature of this (thinly veiled) acceptance has become exposed. And this has caught many second generation Indian Americans in particular, off guard.

In the weeks after the acts of terror, South Asian communities across the country were pinned by waves of violence. Many victims were neither Muslim nor Arab. Five men were killed, including a Coptic Christian Los Angelino, two Sikhs, a Gujarati Hindu, and a Pakistani grocer from Dallas (Ahmad, 2002). Being seen as “Middle Eastern looking” was a sudden and great liability and, in an odd case of mistaken identity, Sikh men in particular became targets of an especially ignorant round of attacks. The first victim to die as a result of post 9-11-induced hatred was a forty-nine-year-old Sikh man: Balbir Singh Sodhi. A few days after the Twin Towers fell, Sodhi, from Arizona, was fatally shot. Sikh community activist Valarie Kaur reflects:

> The morning Balbir Singh was killed, he had bought pots of flowers from Costco and made a donation to the September 11 Relief Fund in the checkout line. The shots came as he was kneeling down planting the flowers in front of his gas station. He was killed because he wore a turban…

He was killed because he was taken for a Muslim, and therefore, according to his killer, a terrorist.18

Police officials reported that before the crime, Sodhi’s alleged killer, Frank Roque, had bragged at a local bar of his intention to “kill the ragheads responsible for September 11.”19 Earlier, while attempting to run over a Pakistani American woman, Roque had yelled that this was due punishment for “destroying (his) country”--no doubt voicing the sentiments of many Americans (Ahmad, 2002). This shift in portrayal (from a model minority to suspect foreigners) was abrupt and alarming.

The immediate aftermath of September 11, saw a coming together of the American public—forming what has been described as a "therapeutic community" (Barton, 1970; Quarantelli and Dynes, 1976). Money poured into relief organizations, volunteers gathered in New York City to help with recovery efforts, and interfaith, candlelight vigils served as forums for assembly and healing. None of these responses were necessarily ‘unique,’ as, historically, disasters are usually followed by a keen, active sense of cohesion between people, and a heightened, shared sense of purpose (Tierney, Lindell, & Perry, 2001). What is perhaps more clearly *pronounced* in this case, however, is that the formation of such a therapeutic community was not a process inclusive of all Americans. Groups of people had been left out, and even scapegoated. Desis were among them.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the post-September 11 experiences of Indian American college students.20 All youths who have been included in this work were undergraduates at the time of the attacks. All were between the ages of 17 and 22,

and in good academic standing at the University of Pennsylvania. The core research question motivating this study is one that examines how Indian American college students at one urban university coped with, and made sense of, September 11 2001, and its aftermath.

Methods

This work is based on findings derived from three descriptive fieldwork techniques: participant observation, interviewing, and focus group-based interviewing. All formalized research activities were carried out in the academic years 2003 and 2004. In addition, as a member of the University of Pennsylvania's student community between the years 2001 and 2005, I draw from my own personal experiences – and the sensibilities of my Indian American student-peers – in writing what follows. Such 'familiar' data has served to inform the general narrative of, what is ultimately, an ethnographic case study.

Qualitative research methods have been used (exclusively) in the conducting of this research; as a "means to uncover and understand what lies behind (a) phenomenon about which little is yet known (Strauss and Corbin, 1990)." Such methods are desirable when one hopes to make sense of human experience and behavior. All data collected has been coded and analyzed in line with Maxwell's standards and procedure for qualitative methodologies (1996). Among others, Maxwell calls for the use of multiple data sources and methods through *triangulation*. It is through the triangulation of data, that a (social) scientist is better-equipped to ensure the validity of her/his arguments. Incorporating findings from more than one data source serves to minimize the likelihood of error based upon the problems specific to or inherent in one particular method. Given this, the present study wraps in findings from ten interviews, two focus group sessions (with a total of 24 attendees) and 12 participant observation sessions.

The Interviews

Ten University of Pennsylvania (henceforth 'Penn') students: five women, five men—were interviewed. All were selected through, what Maxwell describes as, a "purposeful sampling strategy." All participants are American citizens with at least one parent having been born in India. Each interview was carried out on-site and lasted between one and four hours. Subject anonymity was promised, and continues to be protected here through the use of pseudonyms.

Participant Observations

Maxwell advises the use of contextualization strategies--such as analyses through narrative, case study and ethnography when interpreting data. Participant observation allows a researcher insight into the dynamics, internal relationships and community values that help define a group (Spradley, 1980). Findings from 12 campus events inform this study. All events were attended for their duration. All had some political, civic, religious or social relation to September 11, 2001 and its aftermath. Events attended include political lectures, Muslim Jummah[21] prayers, Hindu pooja[22] sessions, and student-moderated discussions regarding the implications of 9-11.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were conducted during the 2003-2004 academic year: one, with an all female group of eleven women and another with thirteen young men. The work of Krueger (1994) has served as a touchstone for the process surrounding the facilitation of these sessions.

Findings

In the weeks following September 11, many of Penn's desi students were left feeling bewildered and vulnerable. These feelings would persist, lingering well beyond the immediate aftermath of the Attacks. During the spring of 2003, I sat down with junior English and international relations major Jaya. As we looked out onto Locust Walk – the bustling, main artery of the University – I asked her about Penn's campus climate since 9-11. She said:

> Obviously on this campus it's very easy to be sheltered and immerse yourself into something. Whether it's like studying or friends or whatever. So it's very easy to feel not touched by anything. (But) a couple of weeks ago, I went to New York and that's the only time I was actually… harassed. It wasn't a huge deal but, I guess, I was standing at a vendor's stand; I was literally just standing there, hadn't said a word, and he said, 'what the f--- are you doing here? F------ India is that way' and he points away and I was like 'are you kidding me?' and he was like, 'yea, I'm talking to you, f------Indo.' It was shocking because I was like 'that's never going to happen to me.' I mean you hear about it…but you hear about it happening elsewhere.

Like Jaya, most desi students at Penn grew up tucked away in the sheltered, upper middleclass neighborhoods of suburban America. Since the events of 9-11, many mention feeling uncomfortable or, as one student put it, "guilty…like we've done something wrong" off campus and, to a lesser extent, within its protective borders as well. As a group, the tumble from model minority to suspected terrorist has been fast and furious – proof that, as Vijay Prashad has suggested, Asian Americans are really "whites on probation (Prashad, 2001)."

"Probational" and consigned to the outskirts of an often hostile, exclusionary sort of American culture (one that has been feverishly erected and quickly spread – thanks to corporate medias, patriotic bumper stickers, flags, evangelists, politicos etc.) desi students must come to terms with a new reality – one where their claims to be American are not always accepted and they must defend, in the words of one student, "being brown." The Penn youths included in this study often seemed conflicted about the events of September 11 and the subsequent war on Iraq. Two clear themes emerge when considering their strategies of response to violence and intolerance. I discuss both here.

The Activist Response

Out of emergency, comes emergence, Homi Bhabha has said, and in the week immediately after the Attacks, this was the case at the University of Pennsylvania. Some of the campus' Indian American students began reacting publicly (in an organized, uncharacteristically vocal manner) to the backlash that trailed 9-11. As Ami from the Mid-West explained at the time, "we are shocked and angry, not just about the attacks against brown people, but that we are not *hearing* about the attacks on the news." Collaborating with minority groups on campus such as the Penn Arab American Students' Society, United Minorities Council, the Muslim Students' Association and the Asian Pacific Students' Coalition, a group of desis including Ami, took a vocal stand against not only the hate crimes themselves, but the lack of their full media coverage.

A group of seniors—who cannot be described as "activists" prior to 9-11--gathered information, some of it firsthand, on the occurrence of hate crimes, and published it themselves in the form of a newsletter. Taking turns standing out on Locust Walk, they distributed copies of the publication to passersby. Devan, a freshman at the time, explained:

> They put (*the newsletter*) out to publicize the fact that it was happening. Not even to try to make them into some fantastic stories or whatever, but just to counter the fact that they weren't even being covered in the news or anything when they were playing things about war threats instead. Publishing the newsletter was…our outlet for bringing the situation to light.

Much of what was shown on the television networks right after September 11th perpetuated an environment of tension and uncertainty for people of color. Importantly, the stories that remained *untold* also contributed to the tension. Some students picked up on this and felt the need to respond. As a junior in the Engineering School explained, "A friend of ours here found out that his temple had been burned down in Matawan, New Jersey, and the way he found out was not through the media, but that he actually had to go there" (Melamed, 2001). A Wharton student from New Jersey told me, "(the friend) felt totally compelled to be a part of the newsletter project just *because* of that. (We think) people should hear about what's going on…they have no idea."

Many of the students I spoke with acknowledged that they felt "lucky" to be attending Penn. Kiran, an outspoken member of the campus' Asian Pacific Students' Coalition told me that regardless of what was happening off campus, she felt "invincible" within its gates, saying:

> I'm on this tiny little bubble of a college campus. [I am] assuming that people here are just intelligent enough that they shouldn't take their anger out on [Muslims].

Sharing a campus with thousands of young, relatively open-minded people means these students have a perhaps misleading sense of security. Being in an environment where one quarter of the undergraduate student body is Asian American can certainly affect the climate of a campus in ways favorable for them. It is when these students leave the sometime-sanctuary of college that they can feel exceptionally vulnerable and targeted.

Many of the students I spoke with mentioned feeling--since the events of 9-11-- "different" and uncomfortable, especially while traveling. For Anand, a tall, charismatic Wharton senior from Tennessee, being Indian American became something of a liability for him in the Aftermath. A member of a respected fraternity, Anand described the "teasing" he was subjected to by his (mostly white) brothers before a spring break trip:

> A common joke in an e-mail will be like, "Since we're flying with Anand, Anand, first of all make sure you shave on the day of our flight. It'd probably be good not to stand next to Anand in line for the plane since we'll probably be (*expletive, meaning searched in a degrading way*)."

Although he didn't tell his friends as much, the comments both angered and hurt him. September 11th quickly became a motivating force for Anand and drove him – a person who previously had been well-entrenched within Penn's mainstream Greek Life community – to seek out fellow desi Americans. Anand explained to me that he had felt "incredibly removed" from the

minority students at Penn, but 9-11 made him much more aware of his "identity as a South Asian":

> It made me conscious of things that P.A.A.C.H.(*Penn's Pan-Asian American Community House*) was doing. Like, I'd come to Sangam tea lectures and I got involved with the South Asia Society (cultural) show last spring.

Even more so than the women, the young men included in this study reported feeling particularly exposed after the Attacks. Hema, a South Indian woman from the West Coast described to me the difficulties her brother continues to face when flying:

> My brother definitely has a lot more problems than me. He gets searched every time he flies. That happened to me a couple of times where my suitcase would be "randomly selected" *(in a sarcastic tone). Every time*, somehow, my brother is the one: the 'male, suspicious-looking type.'

In fact, *all* of the young American men included in my focus group conducted in the spring of 2004, indicated being searched exhaustively (at least once since 9-11) before engaging in air travel. All brought up their uneasiness, and even anger, at being stopped and singled out in airports.

Some have felt more targeted than others. Hema, for instance, told me her "darker skin" coupled with the fact that she "doesn't look North Indian" has exempted her from being subjected to profiling – both on campus and off it. Prior to 9-11 it might have seemed *disadvantageous* to be mistaken for a black woman, but Hema now expressed relief that "at least" she does not look Middle Eastern/North Indian. It seems the politics of appearance are fickle, complicated, and easy to abuse.

Sitting down with Hema's classmate, Wahid, I remember broaching the subject of September 11th with timidity. A Muslim Indian American young man from New York State, Wahid had a sternness about him. He spoke to me about his "rediscovery" of Islam, a process that, perhaps not surprisingly, began right after the Attacks. Wahid explained:

> It's really strange for me to say, but my eyes kind of opened (after 9-11). You know, the world's not that pretty and everybody is not that nice. And so, it kind of opened up my eyes and I started thinking about issues like Palestine and thinking about that, and thinking about what America is doing in the rest of the world and really trying to grapple with those issues.
>
> I think during that time, I mean, I would get upset with the way that they're portraying Islam, 'why do you keep showing a screaming person with a gun on the covers of magazines?' *(slightly raised voice*). You know, things like that. I was…offended in terms of 'why are you giving negative publicity to my religion?'

Wahid told me that, prior to the Attacks, he "wasn't that deep in to Islam" and had actually tried the "party thing, going to a frat house and that sort of thing." Although he did not express this to me in explicit terms, my impression is that his gravitation towards religion was a defensive one – carried out in reaction to the current local and global political contexts he suddenly found himself in. Wahid told me the "work that (he has) done at Penn and with the Muslim Students' Association" has been motivated primarily by the need to "tear down the…propaganda that has been put up against us." During his senior year in 2004, Wahid served as leader of the Islamic student group on Penn's campus. His association with non-Muslim students was becoming increasingly limited. "Now," he told me, "it is Islam all the way."

The last time we spoke, Wahid had been taken under the wing of a fairly conservative local Muslim leader. "Now my beliefs are stronger than ever… I was continually faced with the images of screaming person(s) on the cover of magazines," he explained to me. Instead of "turning (his) back on Islam," Wahid embraced it, in a clear attempt to counter misrepresentation and hostility--both real and imagined.

The Fear and Submission Response

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, several students at the University of Pennsylvania were victimized by violent acts of hate. Senior English major Nina from Westchester County, New York, expressed feelings of discomfort and marginality post 9-11. Quietly, she told me of her sadness, compassion, and fear upon hearing that a desi American Penn undergraduate had been brutally attacked on campus by a group of white male students—an assault understood to be a hate crime.

> When I heard that Indian guy was walking by 36th and Chestnut and someone just smashed his head against a flowerpot (I felt terrible)… every time I walk by that spot I always look at the flowerpot and feel strange.

> First, after September 11th, it was just kind of…unbelievable. But then, after a week passed, I remember sitting (on campus) with my friends—my Indian girlfriends—and we just did not feel safe in this country. I never felt that way before, in this country; unsafe because of my skin color. But I really did feel that for the first time. And it was a very strange feeling, not to feel secure.

Much like the 'flowerpot incident' itself, Nina's fear and sense of vulnerability are realities that remain unknown to most of the campus community—students and administrators alike. This can be partly attributed to the lack of aggressive, radical action taken on the part of Penn's Arab, South Asian, and Muslim Americans in the Aftermath of 9-11.23 With the exception of a handful of desi students, responsible for the newsletter (and others who organized a modest lecture series on racism/hate thereafter) almost all of the Indian American students I spoke with were exceedingly reluctant about openly discussing the effects of September 11. Although acknowledged by members of Penn's desi communities as being terrible and fear-inducing, the flowerpot incident did not push these students to organize, protest, or even request a campus forum to address the issue. The fact that no action was taken is perhaps surprising – especially given social activism is a formative, critical part of the college process for so many students. But silently hanging onto threads of a shared model minority image seems to have been more important than drawing attention to an injustice. Almost all were hesitant to speak about this incident (and other, similar yet less physically violent ones) publicly. Conversations about "the flowerpot incident" were strictly reserved for the closed-door privacy of the dorm room. The matter was not addressed at all by the leaders of the primary social/political student group on campus: the South Asia Society (SAS) and to this day few people outside of Penn's desi student community know about the attack.

During an April 2004 focus group, I brought up the events of September 11th with a group of thirteen young men – students, many of whom I had enjoyed a friendly, close relationship with for over two years. When I asked them to share their personal experiences, and interpretations of the backlash, I was met with a prolonged silence. I almost mistook this to mean there was nothing to say.

It wasn't until I relayed my own experience as a campus hate crime victim that slowly, hesitantly, the young men began. George, a Christian Indian American was the first to volunteer:

> I had one experience in particular…I was crossing the street. It was probably a couple of weeks after 9-11 and this car was coming from the other side. He was driving pretty fast and then he braked right in front of me. I got sh-t scared then and I just backed up. And then he (*gestures*) "no, no, go through." I go again, and he speeds up again and I'm thinking, "What the hell is wrong?" And as I walk by he yells, "That's for f---ing up my country!" I was like, "Woah. He's going to try and kill me."

A number of the focus group participants then recounted the defensive steps their families took as protection against being seen as "un-American" and alien. Vinay, whose father was once a taxi cab driver and now owns a small restaurant in New Jersey, described how he came home after September 11th to find an enormous American flag erected in front of the family establishment. It is still there today. He explained:

> My parents put an American flag in front of our restaurant just because they were afraid. They were genuinely afraid that they'd be attacked or they'd at least lose customers.

Others spoke of how their families and friends had felt the need to put flags up in the front yard of their homes. Samir, whose father used to work at, and now owns, a 7-11 convenience store in New Jersey, told me displaying a symbol of American patriotism was now "essential" for all Indian American businessmen/women. The young men in the focus group discussed Indian taxi cab drivers and their strategic use of patriotic bumper stickers. With declarations like, "I am proud to be a Sikh American" and "I love the United States" these stickers are understood to be necessary, protective branding—meek insurance against been pegged as a suspicious foreigner. As Vijay Prashad documents,

> In many neighborhoods in New York City, white men with small US flags make the rounds of the immigrant owned small grocery stores. They bang these flags, which retail at about $1 each, on the counter and say things like "aren't you going to be a patriot and buy this flag?" The flag will cost the immigrant workers $5, but they'll be far too scared to refuse. The test of loyalty, the agni-pariksha of the US, has begun for all of us again (2001).24

The events of September 11th seem to have left many subjects, like Wahid, with a heightened realization that their acceptance as Americans is neither guaranteed nor unconditional. In spite of this, the reluctance of many Indian Americans--to support and align with other minority groups (that have lengthy, difficult histories of being marginalized/victimized) – is worth noting. Collaborative associations between Indian American students and groups dominated by Muslim Americans – the Penn Pakistan Society, Penn Arab American Student Society and the Muslim Students' Association – were (and today remain) incredibly few

and far between. Instead of banding together in the face of adversity, the individual minority groups tend to self-associate, unwilling to form broad coalitions of friendship and support. As Kiran, the current leader of Penn's Asian Pacific Students' Coalition (A.P.S.C.) told me one afternoon:

> The Muslim Students' Association wants to join the A.P.S.C. next year. *I* want them to join the Coalition. But the fact that their organization's title contains the word 'Muslim'--and because people are so uneducated and so impacted by social understandings of Islam that they have demonized Muslim students and Muslim people—means they are scared to associate with them and scared to be in a coalition with them. This makes me very upset, you know? I think it is a responsibility of the school (to fix this).

Many of the Indian American students I spoke with equated "survival" on campus with this practice of strategic distancing. It is unbeneficial to align oneself with other minority populations, they told me, especially Muslims. Instead, most desis at Penn seemed eager to emphasize what differentiates them from "the bad guys." The students I interviewed for this project spoke to me more of their anger at being *misidentified* as "terrorist Muslims" than anything else. Kiran, the campus activist spoke with no small amount of sarcasm about tensions plaguing the desi student body on campus, telling me that after September 11th, things quickly "became an issue of appearance. It was like, people were saying, 'we should wear bindis so that people can identify us as being Indian' and others were like, 'no, people don't know the difference.' "

Sorely absent from the conversations I had with students was a sense of alarm and responsibility; the need to speak out against marginalization and targeting of any/all people of color seemed of minimal importance to these children of immigrants. The Penn Asian Pacific Students' Coalition, after considerable debate, opted *not* to allow the Muslim Students' Association in to their campus alliance. Many Coalition members felt strongly that doing so would jeopardize their location of privilege and safety on campus. In times of uncertainty and fear, it seems it is each man (minority group) for himself.

Conclusion

It is useful to consider what it means to come of age – as a minority of color on a predominantly white American college campus – especially given the current political climate and context. Studies suggest that each year nearly one million college students in the U.S. are victims of ethnically or racially motivated violence (Ehrlich, 1990, 1992). Roughly one quarter of minority college students in this country will have experienced some form of ethnically/racially motivated harassment or assault by the time they graduate. Most of these crimes will go unreported.

Five years after the Attacks and with the nation still at war, students at Penn today continue to find themselves vulnerable to hurtful remarks and, as one student described them, "terrorist jokes." As Paul Gilroy (1992) warned us in the early 1990s, "we increasingly face a racism which avoids being recognized as such because it is able to line up 'race' with nationhood, patriotism and nationalism." Many of the students included in this study seem aware of the subtle, deep connections that tie the recent revivals of American "patriotism" to an exclusionary, racist form of nationalism.

Individual strategies for coping with such feelings (namely the feeling of being pushed out of an "American national culture") vary. For a few of the students, including Anand and Kiran, events both globally and locally have motivated them to step into positions where they might help or at least draw attention to issues adversely affecting minority communities. Wahid, for instance, responded to feeling increasingly "demonized," as a Muslim American, by turning to Islam with an intensity unusual for him. His emotional "return to Islam" and emphasis on "being a Muslim Indian American" can't be seen as unexpected. As Stuart Hall reminds us given a context of 'threat' – from the forces of globalization or war, for instance – "local or particularistic identities" can ultimately become quite "strengthened" (1996).

While a few students like Anand, Kiran, and Wahid have attempted to counter the brand of damaging propaganda they see as negatively affecting their "people," most students have preferred to stay under the radar, distancing themselves from any one or group that will compromise their position of security on campus. For the most part, it seems that once placed in a context of considerable crisis, these students have responded by self-segregating, and by becoming exceedingly reluctant to form broad minority-coalitions of support and friendship. Interestingly enough, although the desi youths at Penn are hesitant in uniting with others under a banner of minority student-ship, they, for the most part, continue to exercise select (loosely: cultural) parts of their Indian-ness in public, proud ways.

Recent global, national events of upheaval have not angered these students enough to motivate any significant, mass activisms. This reluctance to dwell on and speak-out against marginalization stems perhaps from a desire these youths share to continue living within the safe confines established for them through the model minority myth vehicle. Students remain hesitant to draw 'negative' attention to themselves having been carefully socialized--by their parents, ethnic communities, schools and even society at large – to what is considered 'acceptable' behavior and practice for Indian Americans.

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1 The attacks of September 11, 2001 (also referred to as 9/11) represent a coordinated sequence of suicide missions carried out upon the United States. Four planes were hijacked, resulting in the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York City, and a total of 2,986 deaths.

2 Human Rights Watch (2002). *September 11: One Year On*. Retrieved August 29, 2006 from http://www.hrw.org/press/2002/09/sept11.htm.

3 National Conference for Community and Justice (2002). Community through unity. Retrieved August 29, 2006 from http://www.nccj.org/documents/UW_NCCJ_RFP.pdf.

4 Desi is a term of affection that describes a fraternal bond existing between people of South Asian descent. It is pronounced .day-see. and loosely translates to .countrymen. or people of the desh or land.

5 Johnston, Hugh J.M. (1979). *The voyage of the Komagata Maru: the Sikh challenge to Canada's colour bar.* Delhi: Oxford University Press. Also see the Asian North American History Timeline Project. See: http://www.explorasian.org/history_sikhcdn.html

6 The Acts prohibited Indian land-ownership on the basis that these immigrants were not white. The question of Indian race—and thus citizenship—was brought to a head perhaps most importantly when a veteran of the U.S. army, Mr. Bhagat Singh Thind was denied naturalization rights. Refused in Oregon, Thind stayed with the case for two years when it found its way to the Supreme Court. There, as Joan Jensen writes in *Passage from India*, Thind's lawyers contended that as Aryans, "Indians…were Caucasians…and the courts had accepted the term Caucasian as an equivalent of white." Importantly, the federal government rejected this line of reasoning and argued that "white should be interpreted according the usage of the common man, and in that usage Indians were not white." Thind was denied citizenship, Indians were seen as being "unworthy" of naturalization rights, and the Californian courts wasted no time in ending the "menacing spread of Hindus" owning, leasing, and operating West Coast lands.

7 In addition to allowing small numbers of immigrants from Asia to immigrate, Hart-Cellar also established set criteria for entry: the existence of family ties to American citizens and having scarce skills needed by the U.S. In *Ethnic Los Angeles*, Waldinger and Bozorgmehr suggest that it was initially thought the primary beneficiaries of Hart-Cellar would be the Europeans (specifically those from the south and north). Instead, the loosening of the federal stronghold on immigration laws predominantly brought in immigrants from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean islands.

8 Figure from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Also see: http://www.emaxhealth.com/72/1272.html

9 From the *1988 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*.

10 U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on Immigration and Naturalization of the Committee on the Judiciary, Washington D.C., Feb. 10, 1965, p.65

11 For an excellent analysis of why this was the case, please see Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk* (2000).

12 Ibid

13 *Paan* is a snack food popular in many South Asian countries. It is made of various spices, sugar, and pieces of fruit all wrapped up in the leaf of a Betel plant.

14 Little India Magazine (1998). *Indian looking*. Retrieved August 29, 2006 from http://www.littleindia.com/archive/Nov98/looking.htm

15 The Hindi word bindi is a derivation of the Sanskrit word bindu, or 'drop.' Observant Hindus (both women and men) can chose wear a bindi on their foreheads as it is believed to be representative of the third eye (or Ajna chakra) and of spiritual/physiological importance. Usually made with tikka powder and vermillion, the bindi is worn by women of northern Indian provinces who are married—and is, as such, compared to the western wedding band. Over time, the mark has become something of a fashion accessory and now can be seen (on women especially) in different designs and colors.

16 Ibid

17 Asian Americans are often held up as being the model minority—smart, successful, and eager to please. This patronizing patting-on-the-head of Indian Americans has dangerous consequences. Writes Prashad (2000):

> …the South Asian Americans provide a role model of success, and too many of us uncritically adopt that role without conscious reflection on the political and racial project to which it is hitched…
>
> …we wend our way in the United States, unaware of how we are used as a weapon by those whom we ourselves fear and yet emulate.

18 Sikh Americans after September 11 (2002). *Turbans and terror: Racism after September 11*. Retrieved on August 29, 2006 from http://911prejudice.stanford.edu/editorial.htm.

19 Human Rights Watch (2002). *September 11: One Year On*. Retrieved August 29, 2006 from http://www.hrw.org/press/2002/09/sept11.htm.

20 Initially I had hoped to include South Asian American college students in this study (i.e.: not just Indian American). Since the desi student groups I had access to at Penn were dominated by Indian Americans, I decided by limiting the work to include their experiences alone, I could be more focused and thorough in my analyses. The term "South Asian" includes the nations Bangladesh, Bhutan, Tibet, the Maldives, and Nepal among others. Since the University did not have a sample size of South Asian Americans sufficient for me to consider what 9-11 has meant to them, I thought it wise to concentrate on Indian American students alone. This study makes no attempts to describe the experiences and sensibilities of non-Indian American South Asian students at Penn.

21 Jummah—Arabic for the word 'Friday'—is a part of the daily ritual of prayer for practicing Muslims across the world. The prayer is performed in congregation. At Penn, the second floor of a (modest) student activities building is used for this purpose. The prayer takes place around lunchtime each Friday and-- although open to all members of Penn and its surrounding communities--is almost exclusively attended by Muslim American students of the University.

22 Hindu puja (sometimes spelled 'pooja') is a session of prayer. Typically, it contains elements of meditation (dhyana), chanting (mantra), scripture reading (svadhyaya), the symbolic offering of food to the gods (thaal) and prostrations (panchanga or ashtanga pranama, dandavat). At Penn, pujas are organized by the campus chapter of the Hindu Students Council/Young Jains of America. They take place on Sundays in the main student union, and are open to all.

23The creation and distribution of the aforementioned newsletter was the only significant example of organized activism against perceived (post-9-11) injustice.

24 It is important to point out that many of my informants occupy positions of considerable class-privilege. Most come from homes tucked away in upper-middleclass suburbia. Many tell me that their parents will be paying for their entire college education out-of-pocket (upwards of $120,000). These students live lives that are not typical for all second generation Indian

Americans across the nation. One is left to wonder what sort of marks September 11th and its Aftermath have left on the working class desi children of New York City.

Hilal Nakiboglu Isler

Dr. Hilal Nakiboglu Isler lives and teaches in upstate New York. She is a graduate of Penn GSE and can be reached at: hilaln@alumni.upenn.edu.
