Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Those with an ethnic background or ancestry from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives (thousands of tiny coral islands), Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This community also includes a South Asian diaspora settled all across the world including large populations in Canada, the Caribbean, East Africa, Europe, the Fiji islands, the Middle East and North African region, and the U.S.

NOTE: Find factsheets for other Asian Pacific communities (East Asians, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, and Southeast Asians) at WriteInclusion.org/factsheets.

HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Hollywood frequently depicts South Asians in an extremely narrow range of identities and roles and fails to acknowledge the myriad positive "firsts" the vast community has made and continues to make in the world. Many of these misrepresentations falsely cast South Asians as terrorists to be hated or feared. Since 9/11, this has resulted in ongoing anti-brown, anti-Sikh*, and anti-Muslim hate crimes. Also, constant portrayals of darker-skinned and poorer South Asians as ridiculous and unintelligent promote stereotypes of darker-skinned and poorer South Asians as ridiculous and unintelligent..

*Denotes a term in the glossary

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OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Foreign “Other”:** South Asians shown as new to/naive about America, fueling fear of the “other.” Millions are born in the U.S. and those coming for jobs or college today are typically acclimated to Western culture.
- **Terrorists:** Stories perpetuating the lie that all South Asians are violent and enemies of the West.
- **“Thank You, Come Again”:** Benevolent/servile characters (e.g., convenience store/motel owners, cab drivers, foreign tele-marketers) who oblige white characters and don’t drive their own stories.
- **Timid Women:** Demure women without agency, inciting the attitude of “be seen, not heard.”
- **Clichéd Jokes:** South Asians and their cultures as punchlines: accents as ridiculous, hard-to-pronounce names, dating inaptitude, digestive-challenging cuisines, and non-South Asians mocking religious practices (e.g., holding cows sacred, believing in reincarnation, wearing bindis).
- **Exotic Appeal:** Reducing all culture to spectacle such as Bollywood dancing, elaborate weddings, and foreign-looking women deemed “exotic beauties” for reflecting European standards (e.g., light skin; slender figures; long, straight hair).
- **Tech/Science Experts:** “I.T. guy,” engineers, and doctors. Though inoffensive to depict these educated professionals, the constant portrayals ignore South Asians’ varied experiences.
- **Spiritual Guru:** Having mystical powers, giving spiritual advice, wearing “guru” clothes, and being enlightened due only to ethnicity. These depictions reinforce the idea of South Asians as exotic and “other.”
- **Domineering Parents:** Portraying strict families forcing or arranging marriages or mandating specific career tracks. These out-of-date stories ignore how modern-day South Asian families act.

THINGS WE’D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Reframed POV:** Frame stories through South Asian POVs. Show leading characters with agency, driving storylines instead of as nerdy or subservient sidekicks. Explore three-dimensional, nuanced immigrant stories, as well as first and second+ generation Desis.
- **Varied Jobs:** Characters in a wider range of occupations (e.g., politicians, journalists, factory workers, farmers), and depict women with jobs/careers and as caring mothers.
- **Cultural Specificity:** Stories and characters reflecting myriad differences across South Asian countries, regions, and communities (e.g., languages, idioms, religions*, cultural customs, food, clothing, traditions). India has 28 states, each as different as European countries are to one another, with specific customs that influence character behavior.
- **Multiracial Specificity:** Characters with distinct multiracial backgrounds (e.g., having one South Asian and one non-South Asian parent).
- **Body Positivity:** Varied depictions of South Asian beauty to include often erased, mocked, and demonized body types (e.g., large, curvy women, and/or with darker skin/curly hair; men of various physiques with body/facial hair).
- **Modern Marriages:** Updated, nuanced takes on arranged marriages, which are often voluntary, as well as “love matches” where South Asian couples fall in love and are affectionate. Also, romantic relationships outside of marriage.
- **LGBTQIA+:** Stories depicting varied identities and orientations, especially non-binary and transgender characters. Show South Asians reflecting on being queer through a South Asian POV, not a Western lens (e.g., hijra*).
- **Global Contributions:** Depict South Asian influences on the U.S. and world culture (e.g., health, religion, technology, arts).

*#WRITEINCLUSION: TIPS FOR ACCURATE REPRESENTATION

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Nearly 5.4 million people of South Asian descent live in the U.S. (nearly 35% are native-born) and are one of the nation’s fastest-growing groups. U.S. diaspora per 2017 American Community Survey: Indians (4,402,362), Pakistanis (700,000), Bangladeshis (185,622), Nepalese (182,385), Sri Lankans (52,448), Bhutanese (26,845), Maldivian (127).

A wide variety of languages are spoken such as Bengali, English, Hindi, Gujarati, Malayalam, Punjabi, Sinhala, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu.

By May 2021, India—which is where the vast majority of COVID-19 vaccines were made—surpassed the daily global COVID-19 death toll.

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Quick Facts

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Online References & Resources:

- Christina Marouda, Executive Director, Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles
- Culture Trip: “11 Great Inventions We Can Thank India For”
- Expert By Experience: “Body Image & Me: A South Asian Male Perspective”
- Hindu* American Foundation
- HuffPost: “Here’s What You Get Wrong When You Culturally Appropriate Asian Fashion”
- NBC News: “How queer South Asian American representation helps reduce community’s stigma”
- LGBT South Asian Americans Remain ‘Hidden’ Post Supreme Court Ruling”
- South Asian Americans Leading Together: “Demographic Information”
- “Demographic Snapshot of South Asians in the United States April 2019”
- “Communities on Fire”
- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
- Stop AAPI Hate
- US History: “Ancient Civilizations, South Asia: India and Beyond”

Please visit our Expanded Glossary for in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms: bindi, Buddhism, colorism, Dalit, diaspora, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism.