



## 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](http://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 discrimination due to colorism and/or classism. This contributes to low political prioritization and support of South Asian Americans (known also as Desi\*).

“Hollywood frequently depicts South Asians in an extremely narrow range of identities and roles.”

## SOUTH ASIANS

### 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 telemarketers) 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 ineptitude, 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).

\*Denotes a term in the glossary

## QUICK FACTS

➔ 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.

➔ India's film industry (including but not limited to Bollywood) produces 1,000+ films/year, watched by 3 billion people globally; Hollywood's 500 movies/year are watched by 2.6 billion.

### ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- Brown Girl Magazine: "[Curls, Curves, and Confidence: a Story of Fighting Through Body Shame](#)"
- 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](#)"
- The New York Times: "[Confronting Asian-American Stereotypes](#)"
- 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](#)"

## GLOSSARY

### Desi:

A person of South Asian descent. The term once referred to South Asians living abroad but now refers to any South Asian. It's also used as a description—Desi food, Desi music, etc.

### Hijra:

Officially recognized as a third gender in South Asia. Hijra are transgender people, intersex people, and eunuchs who are considered neither male nor female. In some cultures, they are considered divine demi-gods.

### Hindu:

A subscriber to Hinduism, which is one of the world's oldest religions originating in India and comprising religious, cultural, and philosophical concepts such as Karma, Dharma, and reincarnation. Hinduism is the world's 3rd-largest organized religion after Islam and Christianity, and India's most practiced religion. *Hindi* is the *language* spoken by 45% of India.

### Religions:

South Asians practice a wide variety of religions including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. Many are also atheists and agnostics.

### Sikh (Sikhism):

A subscriber to the world's 5th-largest organized religion Sikhism and a word meaning "Seeker of Truth." Sikhism teaches all paths lead to one God, *all* people are equal, and all can experience freedom through loving and serving others. More than .5 million Sikhs live in the U.S. and 99% of those wearing turbans in America are Sikhs. Sikhs have lived in the U.S. for 150+ years, helping to build the Transcontinental Railroad, serving in every major world war, standing at the forefront of civil rights, and were among the first responders on 9/11.

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**.

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A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website:

[WriteInclusion.org/factsheets](http://WriteInclusion.org/factsheets)

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