

Asian Indian Americans in King County and Washington State

Introduction: Who Are We Talking About?

Americans whose family heritage is from India are one of the groups among South Asian Americans. The region of South Asia includes the nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. All too often, the term South Asia is confused with Southeast Asia, an entirely distinct region bordering South Asia that stretches from Burma through Indonesia. (Check your map!)

Although it is now over 500 years since Columbus made his famous mistake, terms for people from India still seem to need some clarification. The designation Indian-American works reasonably well, but for official purposes, the designation is Asian Indian American, to avoid confusion with Native American peoples. These terms have replaced earlier usage of “East Indian” to refer to a person from India, distinguishing them from a person from the Caribbean, or ‘West Indian.’

Actually, quite a few Asian Indian Americans immigrated to the U.S. not from India, but from South Africa, East Africa, Fiji, Surinam, the Caribbean, Great Britain, and other nations with significant Asian Indian populations.

Census Information and More Numbers

The U.S. Census, taken every ten years by the federal government to count the population according to different characteristics, changes its list of racial and ethnic categories each time. In attempting to update the less-than-rational common designations for race and ethnicity, existing terms are changed or redefined (redefining ‘Caucasian/white’ as well as others) and new terms are added. In the early 1920’s, the Supreme Court made a decision that people from India and Japan were not ‘white’ and therefore not eligible for U.S. citizenship, while people from Armenia and Syria were declared ‘white.’ Then in 1978, the federal Office of Management and Budget issued a directive declaring that Asian Indians were in fact white. The Association of Indians in America objected, and was successful in having Indian Americans added to the ‘Asian/Pacific Islander’ category of the 1980 census.

[See Barringer, Felicity, “Ethnic Pride Confounds the Census.” New York Times, May 9, 1993. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0CE5D8163FF93AA35756C0A965958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>)]

	U.S. Census 1990: National population	U.S. Census 2000: National population	U.S. Census 2000: Washington State population	U.S. Community Survey 2005: Washington State population	U.S. Census 2000: King County population	U.S. Community Survey 2005: King County population
Indian Americans	815,447	1,645,501	23,992	41,583	15,827	28,350
South Asian Americans	919,626	1,901,791	25,651	Not available	16,718	Not available

Data available using FactFinder on the website with U.S. census information. Figures used are for ‘Asian only’ and do not include people of mixed heritage including South Asian. When people of mixed heritage are included, totals are larger.

According to the 2000 Census information, South Asian Americans were the fastest growing regional ethnic group during the 1990s. See the table above for recent population growth nationally, within Washington State, and within King County.

Asian Indian Americans were the third-largest of all Asian-American groups nationally (after Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans), and the sixth-largest Asian American group in Washington state. While East Asian American populations (with Chinese, Japanese and Korean heritage) are significantly larger on the west coast than in other regions of the country, Asian Indian Americans have settled more evenly throughout the U.S. They are the largest Asian American group in the Midwest and in the South. A great majority of Indian Americans (90%) live in metropolitan areas, with the Seattle-Tacoma area ranking 13th in the U.S. for its Indian American population.

With the rapid growth in the Asian Indian American population, a majority were born in India. In Washington State, 69.9% of Asian Indian American residents in 2005 were born in India.

In King County, large Indian American communities are based in eastside communities such as Kirkland, Redmond, and Bellevue, where one can find Indian groceries, film showings, and other amenities. There are also significant South Asian American communities in north and south King County.

History of Asian Indian Americans

As there has been such a big wave of immigration from India to the U.S. in the past 25 years, it is easy to lose sight of earlier Asian Indian Americans. The first wave was actually from 1899-1913, when

about 7000 people from South Asia came to do agricultural work in California and the Pacific Northwest. Farm laborers had already come to work from China, Japan and Korea, but a backlash against them prevented more peoples of East Asia from arriving. However the desire for labor did not go away. Many Sikh farmers from the Punjab region (now in northwestern India and Pakistan) came to work, and were successful in eventually buying land for their own farms. Then they too were subjected to hostility from other Americans, many left, and by 1940, only 2400 South Asians remained in the U.S.

A second wave of immigration from India began in 1946, when the ban on South Asian immigration was rescinded. This wave was also on a small scale, and by 1965, the population of all South Asian Americans was approximately 12,000—not many more than in 1913. With the 1965 Immigration Act, the quota system limiting the number of immigrants allowed into the U.S. was reformed to allow 20,000 people from each country annually. This was the first time that immigrants from Asian nations had access equal to European immigrants, and the third wave of immigration from India began. By 2000, the Indian American population had grown to 1,645,501 people.

Cultural Background

Diversity among peoples of India and among Indian Americans is enormous; not surprisingly for a huge nation with a population of over a billion people. The national census of India does not count people as members of racial and ethnic groups, but there are estimates of over 2000 ethnic groups in India, who speak hundreds of languages and dialects. The government of India considers Hindi, English and 16 other languages to be official languages.

With so many languages, it is not surprising that Indian American immigrants often form groups and associations with others from their region of India, even though they do speak English. In King County, with large Indian American populations on the east side, there are at least seven organizations of individuals from a common state in India, based in communities such as Bellevue, Woodinville, Issaquah, and Sammamish. Although associations by region of India may be less important to subsequent generations of Indian Americans, dozens of Indian American organizations in King County represent various cultural, professional and religious interests, including many that are active in raising donations for needs in India. Of course a number of on-line communities have also formed among Indian Americans, with portals such as SeattleIndian.com.

Indian Americans and other South Asian Americans in King County have been active in supporting South Asian performing arts. Several cultural organizations bring well-known musicians and dancers from South Asia to give performances, present local performers and support study of South Asian performing arts. Classical music and dance traditions of North India (such as *kathak* dance, concerts for sitar, voice, *tabla* drums and other instruments) are popular, as are classical traditions of South India (*Bharatanatyam* dance, Carnatic music concerts for violin, voice, *mridangam* percussion and other instruments), ‘light classical’ singing, various regional and popular styles (including Bollywood film songs, *bhangra* dance), and hybrid forms of jazz and electronica. [[links to database](#)]

Asian Indian Americans tend to continue preparing and enjoying Indian cuisine at home, featuring rice, lentils and beans, vegetables and meats in spicy preparations. Although a full meal is traditionally very time-consuming to prepare, people find shortcuts and some prepared ingredients, as in so much of

contemporary cooking. Traditionally Hindu people do not eat beef, and Muslim people do not eat pork, but these dietary traditions aren't necessarily observed by Indian Americans.

Indian Americans who practice religion are primarily Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, with a few Christians and others. Indian American Muslims worship in mosques along with Muslims from many other parts of the world, while growing communities of Hindus and Sikhs establish their own temples and *gurudwaras*. King County has many centers for these religions, including mosques in Seattle and Bellevue; Hindu temples in Bellevue, Bothell and South King County; *gurudwaras* in Renton, Kent and Seattle, and many more. Sikhs have the longest history in the U.S. of Indian American religious communities, and organize regular services in temples known as *gurudwaras*. Sikh religious practice for men includes wearing a turban, and not cutting one's hair or beard. Many, but not all, Sikh Americans observe these traditions of their religion.

Challenges for the Community

Indian Americans are known for professional, academic and technical accomplishments, although there are also certainly Indian Americans who struggle with language and economic difficulties. Indian Americans have been energetic, active and effective in organizing to address community issues that are priorities for them, including discrimination and hate crime, domestic violence and access to health care.

Indian Americans faced hostility during the first wave of immigration early in the 20th century. In 1907, a racist organization known as the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League of San Francisco responded to the arrival of South Asians by renaming itself the Asian Exclusion League. "Later that year, the AEL played a key role in attacks on the South Asians in Bellingham and Everett, Washington."

[See Pavri, Tinaz. "Asian Indian Americans" Multicultural America.
[http://www.everyculture.com/multi/A-Br/South Asian Americans.html](http://www.everyculture.com/multi/A-Br/South%20Asian%20Americans.html)]

Sadly, hate crimes against South Asian Americans are not all in the past. A large increase in these crimes was reported in 1999 by the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium [National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, 1998 Audit of Anti-Asian Violence], and there was a spike in these attacks after September 11, 2001. One King County organization has received national attention for its work in addressing hate crime, Hate-Free Zone, founded by Indian American Pramila Jayapal.

Domestic violence is another priority issue among Indian Americans. Support groups and organizations have formed to assist victims of physical and emotional abuse in the home. South Asian American women who are less proficient in English, and those who are ineligible for jobs due to their visa status, are particularly vulnerable. A King County organization, Chaya, is recognized for its work to assist families facing domestic violence, and receives broad support from the South Asian American community.

Sources

Minato, Ryan. "South Asian Americans" Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs Newsletter Volume 1, Issue 4, November 2000.

National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, 1998 Audit of Anti-Asian Violence

Pavri, Tinaz. "Asian Indian Americans" Multicultural America. <http://www.everyculture.com/multi/A-Br/SouthAsianAmericans.html>

US Census FactFinder

A Few King County Community and Media Organizations

Chaya: <http://www.chayaseattle.org/>

Hate-Free Zone: <http://www.hatefreezone.org/>

Indian Association of Western Washington: <http://www.iaww.org>

Music and Cultural Society of India, PO Box 25075, Seattle, WA 98125

Ragamala [South Asian music and dance performances]: <http://www.ragamala.org>

SeattleIndian.com: <http://www.seattleindian.com>

Further Resources

Roseth, Robert **Nov. 29, 2007**

A librarian's gift: Oral history project preserves memories of South Asian immigrants. Uweek.org, <http://uwnews.org/uweek/uweekarticle.asp?articleID=38243>

Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Penguin Books U.S.A., 1989.

The following Asian Indian American traditional artists in King County can be found on the searchable database, *Folk & Traditional Artists in Washington State*:

- 1) Raman Iyer
- 2) Urmila Nagar
- 3) Vishal Nagar
- 4) Rajan Raman