Exploring South Asian America: A 50-minute Tour

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Student Activity: Use the primary sources available in The South Asian American Digital Archive ([www.saadigitalarchive.org](http://www.saadigitalarchive.org)) to conduct an in-class research project on the South Asian American community in the United States.

Time Needed: 50 minutes

Objectives:

1. Students will use the archive to develop an understanding of the chronology and geography of South Asian Migration to the United States.
2. They will use sources to understand the problems South Asian migrants have faced and how they may have solved them.
3. They will work with primary source material to develop their own research project by asking and answering research questions using available sources.

Supplies for this activity:

1. Internet access.
2. A sufficient number of laptops for students to work in pairs or small groups
3. [www.saadigitalarchive.org](http://www.saadigitalarchive.org)
4. Projector and computer for instructor use.

Activity:

1. The instructor should project the website [www.saadigitalarchive.org](http://www.saadigitalarchive.org) and demonstrate the purpose of the site and its organization. [5-10 minutes]
2. Have students work in pairs or small groups, sharing a computer. They should navigate to [www.saadigitalarchive.org](http://www.saadigitalarchive.org). Using the sources available on the site, students should develop a research question and use the sources on the site to develop an argument to answer it. [20-30 minutes]
3. Near the end of class, come back to together and pairs/groups can share their question and how they answered it. Have students hand in notes on the three pieces of evidence they found to answer their question. [10-15 minutes]
4. Using the students’ research questions push their thinking on the limits and possibilities of the archive, what these sources tell us about the South Asian American Diaspora, what surprises they uncovered, etc.

Instructor’s Notes on the Activity:

The online archive [www.saadigitalarchive.org](http://www.saadigitalarchive.org) houses over a thousand records pertinent to the history of South Asians in the United States dating to the early twentieth century when communities of South Asians were established in California and New York. These sources document a rich history that reveals tremendous diversity within the community that is sometimes masked by stereotypes of the “model minority,” the Indian Doctor or convenience store owner. The South Asian American community comprises vast linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity and reflects a broad range of gender and sexual preferences, professions, levels of educational attainment and identities. SAADA introduces students to this diversity through first hand research.

It is helpful to start the lesson by guiding students through the organization of the records: users can search for records using a variety of criteria including: theme, subject, creator, time period, language or type. Users can browse these search criteria to begin to get a sense of the sources available. With little other introduction than this, students are ready to start exploring the archive!

In this brief lesson students have come up with rich questions. For example:

* How has the South Asian American Community handled questions of sexuality and sexual orientation?
* What role do South Asian American community organizations play in forging a sense of identity?
* How do national origins affect community building?
* Have South Asian Americans . . . been involved in American politics? . . . faced racial discrimination?

Challenges:

* Many students are unfamiliar with the existence of South Asian Americans. This activity helps to make South Asian Americans visible. It may be necessary to describe the geography and diversity of South Asia and to introduce students to which countries are included: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, The Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
* At first, some students struggle with what it means to “develop a research question.” It can be helpful to suggest some examples, such as those above. Also, if they start with a simple question, push them to develop another one that requires a bit of analysis, or deepens their engagement.
* If a lot of introduction is needed for students to develop a working knowledge of South Asia and its diasporas, then it might be better to expand this lesson into two class meetings. The substantive exploration can easily be completed in one 50-minute meeting.

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