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OPINION Why do we call ourselves South Asian?

Adopting the label "South Asian" has practical benefits, particularly for professional and political advocacy

Sital Kalantry Mon, 30, Dec 2024 13:59 EST 377



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Many people from India identify as "South Asian American." South Asia is a geographically defined region that includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

The term "South Asia" likely originated in the late 1950s, when Western policymakers adopted it following the emergence of independent states after British colonial rule.

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In 1965, U.S. immigration laws were liberalized, sparking a boom in South Asian immigration. Eighty percent of South Asians in the United States are from India.

For example, in 1995, as a law student at the University of Pennsylvania, I co-founded the "South Asian Law Students Association" because we felt a stronger connection with each other than with individuals from the Asian American Law Students Association who were primarily from East Asia.

Generational Differences in Identity

Today, generational differences play a significant role in how people from the region identify. First-generation immigrants often tie their identities to their countries of origin.

Second-generation immigrants, however, tend to identify as "South Asian American." Having grown up in the United States, they may feel less tied to a specific South Asian country.

Even so, second-generation immigrants may not feel entirely "American" either. Many of us, as brown people, have experienced subtle—and sometimes overt—forms of discrimination.

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This shared experience of isolation and prejudice fostered a sense of unity among people from South Asian countries. It also led to new alliances with individuals from Middle Eastern backgrounds.

The Benefits of a Unified Identity

Adopting the label "South Asian" has practical benefits, particularly for professional and political advocacy. By uniting under a shared identity, South Asians can amplify their collective voice.

These coalitions remind us that more unites us than divides us. Coming together as South Asians also keeps alive the hope of peace and harmony within the region.

At the same time, it can be useful to organize into country-specific groups, particularly for cultural or community-focused purposes.

Choosing an Identity

While umbrella terms like "South Asian" offer opportunities for unity, they don't necessarily dictate how individuals should identify. Whether you choose to call yourself "South Asian American" or "Indian American," the decision should reflect what feels authentic to you.

Unfortunately, some people adopt the term "South Asian American" reflexively, without considering what best represents their identity. Ultimately, how we identify is a personal choice.

The author is the Associate Dean, Professor of Law, and Founding Director of the Roundglass India Center at Seattle University. She has authored two books and over 40 articles on India & law.

(The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of New India Abroad.)

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