

## A COMMUNITY OF CONTRASTS: SOUTH ASIANS IN NEW JERSEY

New Jersey's Asian community is the third largest in the United States by percentage of general statewide population. Of the nearly 2.5 million South Asians living in the United States, about 185,000 live in New Jersey. From the billboards advertising South Asian restaurants, clothing stores, and professional services that greet travelers at the Metropark and Edison stops on the New Jersey Transit to the established commercial corridors of Oak Tree Road and Newark Avenue and the places of worship dotting New Jersey suburbs, the presence of the South Asian community cannot be ignored.

### *South Asian Growth In New Jersey*



The community's growth in New Jersey increased dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s, when students and professionals moved here. In the 1980s and 1990s, the families of the earlier wave of immigrants, as well as working class South Asians, made their homes in New Jersey townships. The boom of the technology industry in the 1990s brought professionals to the area at the same time that the numbers of working class South Asians in retail and service industries began to increase.

In Middlesex, Hudson, and Bergen counties, the community's population size and demographic diversity are clearly evident. South Asian restaurants, grocery stores, jewelers, and small salons line streets and strip malls in Iselin/Edison and Jersey City. South Asian-owned travel agencies, law offices, medical practices, and accounting companies offer an array of services. For example, the Indus American Bank employs individuals speaking half a dozen languages including Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, and Malayalam. On the commercial corridors of Edison and Jersey City, South Asians can also pick up dozens of ethnic newspapers written in English and in South Asian languages. *DesiNJ* magazine, a quarterly publication of the *Home News Tribune*, a mainstream newspaper serving the Middlesex County area, caters specifically to South Asian community news.

South Asian immigrants have established places of worship serving the Christian, Jain, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim communities, such as the Love of Jesus Family Indian Church in Jersey City, Siddhachalam/International Mahavir Jain Mission Temple in Blairstown, Shree Dwarkadish Temple in Parlin, Sri Guru Singh Sabria in Glen Rock, and the Muslim Center of Middlesex County in Piscataway.

South Asians are also becoming visible in the civic and political life of New Jersey. Notable South Asians include Upendra P. Chivukula, the four-term Assemblyman for District 17 and former Mayor of Franklin Township; Seema Singh, the former New Jersey Ratepayer Advocate; and newly-appointed Kris Kolluri, Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Transportation. South Asian small business owners and entrepreneurs have created numerous organizations such as the Asian American Retailers Association, Indian Business Association, and the Jersey City Asian Indian Merchant's Association.

### *Needs and Challenges Facing South Asians in New Jersey*

Despite the growing visibility and infrastructure of the South Asian community in New Jersey, significant segments of the community confront a range of challenges that are related to socioeconomic status, linguistic and cultural barriers, immigration status, lack of access to resources and information, and bias related to national origin, ethnicity, and religious affiliation.

In addition, anti-immigrant sentiment and stereotyping in New Jersey and around the country have taken a toll on South Asians. Community members confront issues ranging from negative interactions with law enforcement to workplace and school-based discrimination to hostile public perceptions.



For example, many South Asians have experienced bias, hate, violence, and discrimination as a result of anti-immigrant sentiment that can be traced to the 1980s; bias incidents have increased significantly since September 11<sup>th</sup>. South Asian workers struggle with low wages and inadequate information about their rights in the workplace. Sikh and Muslim students complain of harassment at school

while South Asian limited-English proficient students struggle to keep up academically. Many South Asians are unable to access basic benefits and services, from education to job training to legal and health services; ill-equipped to manage discrimination and disparate treatment; and wary of becoming civically engaged in their neighborhoods. Community-based organizations in New Jersey continue to address issues such as gender violence, mental health, and legal services.

### *Highlighting Community Experiences and Needs*

As SAALT began our work in New Jersey in May 2006, we realized that sufficient information about the experiences and needs of South Asians in the state did not exist. We embarked on a six-month project to collect and analyze demographic data; conduct a needs assessment survey; and engage in research and documentation related to services and resources for South Asian immigrants. The result of the project is a range of issue briefs about the community that includes demographic information; documentation of emerging needs and concerns; and an analysis of the linguistic and cultural barriers facing some South Asians, as well as the history of bias and discrimination that confront the New Jersey South Asian community.

The information, data, and analysis presented in the issue briefs have been gathered through a variety of methods including, but not limited to, consultations with community organizations to obtain their input and opinions about issues covered; research via academic and news articles; and interviews with community experts. In addition, SAALT conducted a community needs assessment of 190 South Asians over the course of three months in 2007. The needs assessment was developed through discussions with community leaders who highlighted areas where additional information would be helpful to guide the scope of their work. SAALT staff and volunteers administered the needs assessment in English and in five South Asian languages (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu) at Newark Avenue (Jersey City); Oak Tree Road (Edison and Iselin); Van Hutton Street (Paterson); and at religious centers including the Sunni Rizvi Masjid (Jersey City); Masjid Al-Islah (Teaneck); Gurdwara Sahib (Bridgewater); and the Govinda Sanskar Mandir (Jersey City).

With the release of issue briefs focused on New Jersey's South Asian community, SAALT seeks to achieve the following goals:

- To broaden the scope of information and resources that currently exist about the experiences, needs, and challenges facing South Asians in New Jersey;
- To identify best practices, as well as areas for improvement, regarding the scope and extent of services and outreach currently provided to the South Asian community;
- To provide recommendations to stakeholders and community advocates with an interest in improving the quality and scope of information, services, and resources for South Asians, and;
- To serve as a resource for South Asian community groups who continue much needed service provision and advocacy work in New Jersey.

## Highlights and Recommendations

New Jersey's South Asian community is clearly one of contrasts. While the South Asian community's presence grows and plays a role in the state in many ways, increasing numbers of South Asians face daunting challenges and obstacles in everyday life that prevent access to basic services and benefits and lead to marginalization and isolation.

Nearly 185,000 South Asians reside in New Jersey. Between 1990 and 2000, the Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan populations have more than doubled in size. South Asians are concentrated in five New Jersey counties: Middlesex, Hudson, Bergen, Morris, and Somerset.

Three-quarters of the South Asian community in New Jersey is foreign-born. As a large immigrant community, South Asians face obstacles and challenges in accessing services and benefits due to immigration eligibility requirements. While many South Asians have obtained high levels of education, a fifth of Pakistanis and a third of Bangladeshis do not possess high school diplomas. More than half of all South Asian seniors possess limited English ability.

Interesting patterns began to emerge from the surveying of South Asians that SAALT conducted in Hudson, Bergen, Somerset, and Middlesex counties:

- About a fifth of respondents surveyed reported difficulty with a range of needs, from understanding immigration issues to managing racial tensions at work/school.
- About a third of respondents surveyed reported difficulties in finding senior citizen services.
- Of those who have problems finding information to deal with mental health issues, 70% are women.
- Nearly one-fifth of individuals surveyed reported having difficulties finding help to learn English.
- Over one-quarter of individuals surveyed have problems finding lawyers or legal help.
- Nearly one-quarter of individuals surveyed have problems managing racial tensions with non-South Asians living in their towns.
- Over one-quarter of individuals surveyed believe that they have problems related to bias because they do not understand what their rights are.
- Only two-fifths of individuals surveyed said that they were active in their community.
- Sixty percent of those surveyed support the creation of a government office to serve immigrants in New Jersey.

### ***I would feel more comfortable as an immigrant living in New Jersey if...***

SAALT's community needs assessment asked South Asians the following question: "***I would feel more comfortable as an immigrant living in New Jersey if...***" Responses to this question included the following:

- *We had affordable health care and health insurance*
- *More English as a Second Language classes were offered*
- *It were a friendlier environment – "I would like the towns and their officers [to] make the environment friendlier to the outsider"*
- *A government office is formed to serve immigrants*
- *Seniors receive culturally-specific food and accommodations*
- *I had help to find a safe work environment*
- *There were help for victims of domestic violence*
- *Job discrimination was eliminated*
- *The undocumented could get legal status*
- *Minorities had more voice, and were intricate part of government and political process*
- *People accepted us for who we are*
- *People knew more about our culture*
- *There were more groups to help immigrants*
- *There could be a group of people solely helping to understand rights and responsibilities*
- *People understood my religion*
- *There was some place where I could go for help for my problems, and people understood the language I speak*

## *Needs and Recommendations*

South Asians in New Jersey have been affected by xenophobic sentiment, immigration policies, and post September 11<sup>th</sup> backlash. In fact, issues such as racial tensions, discrimination, and immigration concerns are among the most pressing concerns for South Asians in New Jersey. The following recommendations are made in order to increase awareness and the scope of services provided to eliminate bias and hate crimes:

- Provide translated materials and information regarding resources for victims of bias incidents, profiling, and discrimination in South Asian languages.
- Increase officer trainings on religions including Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and on the experiences and cultural responses of South Asians.
- Hold quarterly meetings with South Asian organizational and community leaders.
- Increase services provided by county and municipal governments for the South Asian community.
- Utilize local ethnic media to reach the South Asian community on issues related to bias incidents and discrimination.
- Publish and disseminate statistics and complaints of incidents of bias-related crimes and discrimination specifically related to South Asians.

The following recommendations are made in order to increase access to services and benefits by limited-English proficient individuals to basic services, information, and benefits:

- Consider the characteristics and needs of LEP students when developing educational policies and procedures.
- Provide additional funding to school districts with increasing South Asian populations.
- Train teacher and staff in properly assessing LEP students and understanding cultural barriers.
- Ensure employment of qualified South Asian bilingual and ESL teachers.
- Collect and disaggregate data related to South Asian LEP students by school district.
- South Asian community organizations and members should provide assistance and resources to school districts and teachers.
- Provide more funding to conduct outreach about Limited English Proficiency, health and legal services, and other benefits and resources available in the South Asian community.
- Develop a program to monitor the interpretation services of health care providers.
- Increase the South Asian staff at agencies, hospitals, and health centers.
- Provide translated materials and information about healthcare services and benefits in South Asian languages.
- Use the same standard for all interpreters, and develop court interpretation screening exams for all languages.
- Utilize South Asian ethnic media and religious/cultural centers to raise awareness and education on the court system and interpretation employment opportunities.
- Report incidences of unqualified medical and legal interpretation and provide feedback on experiences.