



Community Resilience

A South Asian American Perspective on the Ten-Year Anniversary of September 11th

saalt
SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS LEADING TOGETHER
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FOREWORD

On the morning of September 11th, the nation was stunned as we witnessed the images of the terrorist attacks on our soil. This palpable sense of shock and grief was shared by all Americans – regardless of where we lived, where we leaned on the political spectrum, or what faith we practiced. As we grappled with the tragedy and profound loss of life that resulted, the country was united in an unprecedented way; it seemed that no matter who we were or where we came from, we were all American.

For community members, September 11th marked a watershed moment. As South Asians were mourning the loss of fellow Americans in the attacks, we began to experience a compounded sense of grief as reports of backlash, hate crimes, and discrimination began to emerge. Many South Asians, especially those of Sikh and Muslim faiths, endured bigotry and harassment at workplaces, in schools, and at airports. Still others became ensnared in never-ending government investigations that scrutinized their personal and professional lives for any traces of terrorist activity or affiliations. It is still unclear how many South Asians were detained and deported over the past decade in connection to immigration and national security investigations. Unfortunately, the impact of the post-September 11th backlash continues today as a wave of Islamophobia and xenophobia manifests in the form of opposition to the construction of mosques, racist rhetoric in political discourse, the spread of anti-Sharia laws and anti-immigrant sentiment.

With this context in mind, the ten-year anniversary of September 11th offers the opportunity to remember, reflect, and renew our country's commitment to fundamental values of inclusion, equality, and diversity. In order to provide a vehicle and forum for community members and organizations to share their perspectives, emotions, and recommendations on this anniversary, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) launched a campaign in April 2011 called *An America For All of Us*. The campaign is rooted in a racial justice

framework, with an analysis of how post-September 11th policies have uniquely affected immigrants (documented and undocumented); women; members of LGBTQ communities; youth; and low-income South Asians. Through the campaign, we have documented a wide array of experiences and memories with blog posts and multimedia; coordinated community hearings and forums; helped to pass anti-bias resolutions; developed strong bridges with social change organizations; and advocated with policymakers to take positions against xenophobia and Islamophobia.

This retrospective report presents a record of major themes that have emerged in the post-September 11th world over the past decade, as they pertain to South Asians in America. In particular, we have chosen to highlight the positive examples of individual and community resiliency; interfaith, intergenerational, and cross-cultural collaborations; and local and civic and political engagement that have emerged over the past ten years. We have reflected in particular the work of members of the **National Coalition of South Asian Organizations**, a network of 42 community-based organizations in over 12 regions of the United States. While it is neither comprehensive nor the final word on the South Asian American experience, through this publication, SAALT seeks to contribute to and influence the narrative around September 11th and the post-September 11th world.

SAALT titled this publication *Community Resilience*, and in that spirit, we dedicate it to the organizations, advocates, and community members who have stepped in to address the post-September 11th crisis and its impact on the Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian communities. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously taught us, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” We stand in support of all those who are committed to peace, unity, and inclusion in our country and our world.

WHAT WORDS AND IMAGES CANNOT CAPTURE: LOSS AND GRIEF ON SEPTEMBER 11

On the ten-year anniversary of September 11, 2001, our country remembers the victims who lost their lives on that fateful day in New York City, Arlington, Virginia, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Here, we recount the stories of some of those victims, whose deaths have left gaping holes in the lives of their families and loved ones. Behind these stories are glimmers of hope that the tragedy of September 11th can also lead us to a better country and world.

One of the victims of the September 11th attacks was **Salman Hamdani**. Born in Pakistan, Salman grew up in Brooklyn, New York where he was a member of his high school debate and football teams. After graduating from Queens College with a degree in chemistry, he aspired to become a doctor. He began working as a lab technician at Rockefeller University in Manhattan and was both a cadet with the New York Police Department (NYPD) and an emergency medical technician. On the eve of September 11th, he was working on medical school applications and reassuring his father who was worried about a heart condition. The next day, he took the Number 7 train downtown when he saw the devastation of the attacks. True to his nature, he rushed in to rescue any potential survivors and never returned. He was 23 years old.



Salman Hamdani, while he was an NYPD cadet

Courtesy: Talat Hamdani

Since then, Salman's mother, **Talat Hamdani**, has become a tireless voice for healing and unity. As a steering committee member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, an organization founded by family members of the victims killed during the attacks and who develop and advocate for nonviolent actions in the pursuit of justice, Ms. Hamdani has rallied against the PATRIOT Act and racial and religious profiling, and supported civil rights and civil liberties for all Americans.

At a Congressional briefing coordinated by SAALT in April 2011, Ms. Hamdani said,

“People died on 9/11, and they died ... not [because] of their faith or their ethnicity, but because they were American. That’s who w[ere] targeted by the terrorists. America was targeted. And Salman went to rescue his fellow Americans – he did not stop to ponder, ‘Who am I going to rescue? Am I going to rescue a Christian person or a Jewish person or a Hindu or a person of no faith?’ [Yet], since 9/11, American Muslims have carried the cross. We are at the frontlines fighting terrorism ... [yet] many American Muslims are still detained.”

Nine years ago I lost my son, I lost my faith because of those hijackers. And now we all are threatened to lose our nationality, our identity as Americans. And that’s what we are fighting for.”

All the people that died that day on 9/11, they died because they believed in the American values of democracy, liberty, and freedom ... and that is what is needed now in order for us to come together and move forward as a united nation.”



Talat Hamdani, mother of Salman Hamdani and Steering Committee Member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, speaking at a Congressional briefing coordinated by SAALT in April 2011.

Credit: Les Talusan; Courtesy: SAALT

On September 11, 2001, the restaurant figuratively named for being at the top of the world – Windows on the World – was completely destroyed. Situated on the 106th and 107th floors of the North Tower of the World Trade Center, the restaurant was serving breakfast patrons when American Airlines Flight 11 struck the building. Without any hope of escaping, all of the individuals in the restaurant, including 73 staff members, died. Many of them were of South Asian descent.

Immediately after the attacks, **Fekkah Mamdouh**, a former Windows on the World employee, grappled with not only the loss of colleagues but also the loss of his livelihood. When the owners of Windows on the World opened a new restaurant in Manhattan, many former workers, including Mr. Mamdouh, applied but were rejected.



A former employee of Windows on the World holds a plaque with the names of the 73 fellow restaurant workers who died in the September 11th attacks.

Credit and courtesy: Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York

Mr. Mamdouh joined forces with South Asian labor organizer, Saru Jayaraman, to start Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York (ROC-NY). Their first campaign was focused on the new restaurant opened by Windows on the World's former owners. ROC-NY's protests led to Windows on the World offering 15 additional positions to former employees. In January 2006, Mr. Mamdouh and several former Windows on the World employees opened a staff-run cooperative called Colors, in remembrance of those they had lost.

Born out of the tragedy and loss that occurred a decade ago, ROC-NY now has nearly 2,500 restaurant workers from across the city as part of its membership and engages in campaigns and initiatives to improve conditions for those toiling in one of the nation's fastest growing industries.



Members of the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York, many of whom formerly worked at the Windows on the World restaurant located atop the World Trade Center.

Credit and courtesy: Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York



Rajinder Singh Khalsa, a survivor from a hate crime in Queens, New York, testifying at a SAALT community hearing in New Jersey in July 2011.

Credit: William Hollingsworth; Courtesy of SAALT

While the tenor of the backlash lessened in the years following September 11th, hate crimes continue to be reported, especially near anniversaries of the attacks and when anti-Muslim rhetoric heightens. This happened during the summer of 2010, when the Park51 Community Center controversy in Manhattan gained national attention. Elected officials and the media fanned the flames of xenophobia and Islamophobia.

In the wake of the controversy, several hate crimes occurred, including the vicious assault of a Bangladeshi taxicab driver in New York City. **Ahmed Sharif**, who had been driving a cab for 15 years, had picked up a passenger on the night of August 24, 2010. The passenger demanded to know if Mr. Sharif was Muslim and then tried to slash his throat.

Mr. Sharif turned to the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), the largest taxi driver union in the country with over 15,000 members. NYTWA's work has included ensuring that cab drivers – who generally face tremendous dangers in their jobs – were not at risk for greater violence in the wake of September 11th.

Individuals like Mr. Sharif were brave enough to step forward and raise awareness about the experiences they endured. Especially since September 11th, South Asian, Muslim, Sikh and Arab American organizations have been instrumental in developing resources, creating safe spaces for survivors of bias incidents, generating interest within media, and garnering support from mainstream organizations and government agencies. Community members also mobilized quickly to respond to incidents of violence. When the murders of Mr. Sodhi, Mr. Hasan and Mr. Patel occurred, community-based organizations and individuals sprung into action. In Mesa, Arizona, the family of Mr. Sodhi received support from local law enforcement, elected officials, and individuals of all faiths and communities. In places such as Washington DC, press conferences were held to send the message that scapegoating others for the September 11th attacks was un-American. Organizations such as The Sikh Coalition were born the night of September 11th as reports of hate crimes and violence began to emerge.

At policymaking levels, efforts to protect the rights of hate crime victims and survivors began to take on additional steam. The passage of federal hate crimes legislation in 2010 was seen as a huge victory due to its breadth and scope in covering various types of crimes and providing expanded tools to law enforcement authorities investigating them. In addition, the federal government began to investigate hate crimes and bias incidents following September 11th through an initiative housed out of the Civil Rights Division of the DOJ. At the state and local level, anti-bias ordinances have also been adopted to address and prevent post-September 11th related bias incidents.



New York Taxiworkers Alliance members hold up signs to protest hate crimes and the culture of fear. Driving a cab is one of the most dangerous occupations in the U.S., according to the Department of Labor.

Credit and courtesy: New York Taxiworkers Alliance



New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) member and victim of hate crime, Ahmed Sharif, speaks at a press conference outside City Hall in New York City in August 2010, as Bhairavi Desai, Director of the New York Taxiworkers Alliance, looks on.

Credit and courtesy: New York Taxiworkers Alliance

Within a week after September 11th, community leaders from African American, Arab, Asian, Latino, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian communities gathered at the National Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism in Washington DC to send a message of unity and diversity. Similar vigils and gatherings occurred around the country over the weeks to come.

Credit and courtesy: SAALT



SAFETY IN SCHOOLS

All students should enjoy the right to a safe and nurturing learning environment in the classroom. Yet, according to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly one-third of students between the ages of 12 and 18 have been bullied at school and 65% of teenagers have faced harassment or assault. In the post-September 11th world, South Asian children often encounter bias-based bullying and mistreatment because of their ethnicity, national origin, or religion. Bullying can range from taunting and harassment to actual physical violence,



Elementary school graduation picture of Gurwinder Singh, a Sikh student from Richmond Hill, Queens affected by bias-based bullying.

Courtesy: Gurwinder Singh

One such student is **Gurwinder Singh**, a young Sikh man from Richmond Hill, Queens in New York. Consistent with his Sikh faith, Gurwinder grew his hair long and wore a turban. Yet, even when he was in elementary school, he noticed that he was treated differently by other students because of his religious attire. After September 11th, he says:

often occurring at the hands of fellow classmates. Teachers and administrators can also perpetuate this mistreatment by either engaging in it themselves or not following through on complaints when filed.

Since September 11th, South Asian students have faced mistreatment because of their faith or religious attire. In particular, due to stereotypes existing within the general public that those with turbans or headscarves are terrorists, Sikh and Muslim students who wear these articles of faith are often the subjects of harassment. According to surveys conducted by The Sikh Coalition in 2007 and 2010, 62% of turban-wearing Sikh students in Queens, New York experienced bullying and 74% of turban-wearing Sikhs in the San Francisco Bay Area suffered bias-based bullying and harassment. In 2009, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported 153 school-related civil rights complaints involving Muslim students across the country, an increase of 31% from the previous year.

Things got worse. Kids called me names ... they would call me Bin Laden. [O]ne time, on the bus ride home, a kid pulled my turban, he removed the cloth off my hair. I couldn't do anything – I was helpless at the time. I thought if I cut my hair they wouldn't call me a terrorist and I would be able to fit into their groups.

In middle school, he decided to cut his hair to avoid abuse by his classmates. But he later became more active and enthusiastic about his faith and began to grow his hair long again.

One day, Gurwinder was told by a classmate, "Watch your back." He later recounted the incident that followed:

I ran as fast as I [could] towards the subway just to get home safe, and I was about three minutes away from school when I turned around there was a group of five to six people running after me. I got really scared, and then they caught up to me. I told them, "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to do this," even though it wasn't my fault. There were people around me. I even asked them for help, "If you can help me, because I'm going to be attacked." [T]he kid, he banged my head into a pole, a metal pole, and I just fell to the ground. When I got up they all escaped and my head was bleeding and no one helped. I really thought something should have been done because what if they had pulled out a knife or gun, they would just stand there? Someone should have helped."

Situations like this, affecting the health, well-being and safety of students, have spurred a range of advocates and communities into action. South Asians have worked in partnership with ally communities in the Asian American, African-American, Latino, and LGBTQ communities to ensure school safety. These efforts have led to the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education engaging in serious efforts to address this crucial issue, such as developing resources for students, parents, and schools, and instituting more robust complaint mechanisms. In New York City, a broad-based campaign led to an annual diversity training program, *Respect for All*, and procedures to prevent and address bias-based bullying within public schools. When studies showed that this policy was not being properly implemented, students, parents, advocates, and policymakers rallied to put pressure on the local education system to ensure that its measures became a reality.



REGULATION
MINUS
IMPLEMENTATION
EQUALS
HARASSMENT
IN
SCHOOLS

Department
of
Education:
STOP
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Harassment

REGULATION
minus
IMPLEMENTATION
equals
HARASSMENT
IN
SCHOOLS

A Regulation
Without
Implementation
Equals
Harassment
in
Schools

Students participating in rally in New York City urging the city's Department of Education to implement its existing anti-bullying policies.
Credit and courtesy: The Sikh Coalition

Youth have also engaged in efforts to promote tolerance and common understanding across communities. The Japanese American Citizens League and CAIR established a joint program, *Bridging Communities*, with Muslim and Japanese American youth. These students embarked upon a pilgrimage to the Manzanar Concentration Camp Site and other locations where Japanese Americans had been interned during World War II. Commonalities between Japanese Americans and Muslims, in terms of how both groups have been treated as outsiders within their own home, served as a nexus to build solidarity and create a shared community.

It is when students themselves speak out against bias-based bullying that meaningful change can occur. As Gurwinder himself said at a Congressional briefing organized by SAALT in Washington, DC in April 2011:

“Now that I’m older, I want to help Sikh kids. I don’t want them to go through what I went through in my childhood. I want to tell other kids that they shouldn’t be afraid. That if they are afraid, they should tell people ... we shouldn’t give up. Everyone should live in peace whether they are Sikh or any other religion. I want bullying to end.”



Gurwinder Singh, student advocate on bias-based bullying issues, in front of Capitol Hill before speaking at a Congressional briefing coordinated by SAALT on post-September 11th discrimination, April 2011.

Courtesy: Gurwinder Singh

Japanese American and Muslim youth participating in the *Bridging Communities* program in California.

Courtesy: Japanese Americans Citizens League – Pacific Southwest District



MY JOB OR MY FAITH

South Asians can be found in virtually every sector of the American workforce – from taxi drivers, to doctors, to retail workers, to members of the armed services. Yet, whether due to ignorance or intolerance, many South Asians have been denied the opportunity to pursue their livelihood free from harassment because of their national origin or religion. Discrimination has taken various forms, including slurs and verbal taunting, denial of prayer breaks, and termination from or assignment to jobs hidden from public view. In 2003, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the federal agency that investigates complaints of workplace discrimination, reported receiving over 800 complaints of backlash discrimination since September 11th. More recently, a record 800 complaints were lodged by Muslims with the EEOC in 2009 alone, making up nearly a quarter of all religious discrimination complaints filed.

Often, workplace discrimination involves discharge or hostility based on racial or religious bias from fellow workers or supervisors. For example, soon after September 11th, managers and coworkers at the Plaza Hotel and Fairmont Hotel and Resorts in New York City called South Asian, Muslim, and Arab employees epithets such as “Taliban” and “Osama.” They also accused employees of being terrorists who perpetrated the attacks on the World Trade Center. As a result, the EEOC filed a lawsuit on behalf of a class of these employees against the hotel companies, which was later settled.

Discrimination also results from violations of community members’ right to freely practice their religion at the workplace. This happened to **Hani Khan**, a 20-year-old Muslim woman who wears a *hijab* and was a stockroom clerk at Abercrombie & Fitch. When she was hired at a Northern California store in 2009, her supervisor told her she could wear the religious headscarf, so long as it matched the company colors. Though she complied with this policy, she was later told by management that she could only keep her job if she removed her headscarf entirely, as it violated their “look policy.” After refusing to remove her *hijab*, she was suspended and subsequently fired. The EEOC found she had been wrongfully terminated, and, with the assistance of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, San Francisco Bay Area and the Legal Aid Society Employment Law Center, she filed a lawsuit in federal court against the company. She has spoken publicly about her experience and why she knew it was necessary to assert her rights:

When I was asked to remove my scarf after being hired with it on, I was demoralized and felt unwanted. Growing up in this country where the Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of religion, I felt let down. This case is about principles, the right to be able to express your religion freely and be able to work in this country.

Even in instances where individuals have been able to wear religious attire, selective enforcement of dress code policies that violate civil rights have still occurred. Soon after September



Hani Khan (center) at a press conference with Zahra Billoo, Executive Director of the Council of American Islamic Relations, San Francisco Bay Area (right) and Araceli Martinez-Olguin of the Legal Aid Society Employment Law Center (left). Ms. Khan sued Abercrombie & Fitch in 2011 after the clothing retailer fired her because she refused to remove her *hijab*.

Credit and courtesy: Council on American-Islamic Relations, San Francisco Bay Area

11th, New York City’s Metropolitan Transit Agency (MTA), which runs the city’s public transportation system, mandated that only its Muslim and Sikh employees brand their headgear, such as turbans and *hijabs*, with its logo. While MTA has since changed its policy to require all its employees wearing any type of headgear to wear the logo, it continues to be selectively enforced primarily against those who are Muslim or Sikh. The rationale presented by MTA for its initial policy was supposedly to ensure that the general riding public could “recognize” its employees. The unjust nature of this requirement and its enforcement led to the U.S. Department of Justice to file a discrimination lawsuit and the advocacy organization, The Sikh Coalition, to file discrimination charges. MTA train operator **Sat Hari Singh** (also known as Kevin Harrington), a practicing Sikh, explained why the policy should not stand:

The MTA honored me for driving my train in reverse away from the towers on 9/11 and leading passengers to safety. They called me a hero of 9/11. I didn't have a corporate logo on my turban on 9/11. I see MTA workers wearing Yankees caps, fashion headwear, and yarmulkes. Why are they only picking only on Sikhs and Muslims?

Despite a climate where intolerance against South Asians is continuing to spill over into workplace, over the past ten years, several government agencies have recognized the importance of this issue and engaged communities on how to provide needed resources. For example, partnering with South Asian advocacy organizations, the EEOC issued a “know your rights” brochure tailored to situations commonly faced by South Asian, Muslim, Sikh, and Arab employees.



Sikh station agents who work for the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) challenge the MTA's policy, implemented after September 11th, which requires individuals wearing headgear have it branded with an MTA logo. Employees assert that the policy is discriminatory as its impact is primarily on those who wear religious head coverings, particularly Muslims and Sikhs.

Credit and courtesy: The Sikh Coalition

The South Asian community, in collaboration with a diverse array of minority and faith communities, has also made strides in molding policy that would protect all Americans against employment discrimination. In August 2011, the New York City Council enacted legislation that would permit employers to deny religious accommodations only if they could prove it would cause significant difficulty or expense. Due to the advocacy of a coalition of a range of faith-based communities, including the leadership of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF), Oregon passed a similar law and the state's governor also reversed an 87-year-old law, with roots in the anti-Catholic sentiments of the Ku Klux Klan, prohibiting public school teachers from wearing religious attire.



In April 2010, the Governor of Oregon reversed an 87-year-old law that prohibited public school teachers from wearing religious attire.

Credit and courtesy: Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund



Cartoon from Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's "Employment Discrimination and the Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Sikh Communities" pamphlet.

Credit and courtesy: Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

TARGETS OF SUSPICION

Americans of all backgrounds were stunned and devastated by the attacks of September 11th. Over the past decade, however, South Asians, along with Arabs and Muslims, have become the singular face of terrorism. Beyond merely existing in the minds of certain private citizens, these stereotypes have also served as the basis for shaping our government's national security strategies. Whether through airport screening of Muslims and Sikhs by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), surveillance and infiltration of mosques by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and local police, or tracking of charitable giving



by the U.S. Department of Treasury, South Asians have joined the list of other minority communities affected by racial and religious profiling.

Following a search by the Transportation Security Administration, Sikh passenger Daljeet Singh Mann was told to remove his turban and place it into a bin for additional screening. Wearing a turban is required by those who practice Sikhism; touching or removing a turban in public is considered a deep offense.

Credit: Daljeet Singh Mann; Courtesy: The Sikh Coalition

I run to my flight and I sit down. And at that point, I look around and I say to myself, 'What all these individuals have gone through to be here is nothing compared to what I just went through.' And that is, in itself, a discrimination. And the pain of discrimination which is to feel that you're less than a human being.

In some instances, the experience is nothing less than degrading, as it was for **Daljeet Singh Mann**, who was required to remove his turban by TSA officials on two separate trips within three days. During the second incident, he asked to leave the airport and cancel his trip because he did not want to be humiliated again. But TSA officials told him

that he could not exit at all unless his turban was screened and that if he did not like the policy, he should not fly. Then, local law enforcement forced him to place his turban into a bin for screening; he underwent a full-body patdown and was questioned by police before boarding his plane.

South Asian travelers coming to the United States from abroad are also often interrogated, searched, and detained by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials despite lacking any evidence of wrongdoing. Individuals are often questioned about activities protected by the First Amendment, such as their political views and religious beliefs; personal belongings and electronics are also often searched and copied for no reason. This happened to **Amir Khan**, a U.S. citizen originally from Pakistan. He has been interrogated by CBP agents for nearly 20 hours following trips abroad after September 11th. When faced by immigration agents, he was asked about his religion, whether he hated the U.S. government, and if he had visited any mosques.

One of the most visible and widespread forms of post-September 11th profiling occurs at the airport. For example, despite the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) various incarnations of airport security procedures over the past decade, many Sikh passengers wearing turbans and Muslim passengers wearing headscarves continue to face heightened screening automatically because of their religious attire. In fact, one survey shows that there was a 100% additional screening rate for those wearing turbans at certain airports. The experience is often humiliating and unjust, as conveyed by **Prabhjit Singh** at a Congressional briefing convened by SAALT in April 2011:



A U.S. citizen originally from Pakistan, Amir Khan was frequently interrogated by immigration authorities when returning from trips abroad and questioned about his religious beliefs and his loyalty to the United States.

Credit: Amal Mongia; Courtesy: Asian Law Caucus

Advocates and law enforcement alike have demonstrated that profiling is ineffective, diverts limited police resources, and undermines the public trust. Yet, a number of elected officials and political candidates over the past ten years have expressed vocal support for targeting South Asians, Muslims, Arabs, and Sikhs.

I believe in racial and ethnic profiling ... all terrorists are Muslims or Middle Easterners between the age of 20 and 35, that's by and large true. – Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma

Unfortunately, we have too many mosques in this country ... We should be looking at them more carefully. We should be finding how we can infiltrate. – Congressman Peter King of New York

If I see someone [who] comes in that's got a diaper on his head and a fan belt wrapped around the diaper on his head, that guy needs to be pulled over. – Congressman John Cooksey of Louisiana

In response to the spate of profiling against South Asians, advocates and community members have worked hand-in-hand with other communities of color to elevate concerns to Congress and federal government agencies. At the federal agency level, the U.S. Department of Justice, in collaboration with Sikh and Muslim organizations, developed posters with pictures of common religious head coverings and tips for law enforcement when searching them. Following advocacy from Sikh, Muslim, South Asian and Arab American organizations, TSA issued directives for conducting airport screening in a manner that ensures safety and protects civil rights, though implementation of these policies still remains inconsistent. Advocacy by privacy and civil rights organizations led to the release of at least some previously undisclosed information about the FBI's practices related to surveillance.

In changing the discourse with legislators, Sikh and Muslim civil rights leaders have been invited to provide testimony on the practice of profiling. Champions within Congress worked with a broad range of Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian communities to counter Congressman Peter King's series of hearings during 2011 focused on radicalization within the Muslim community. Through coalitions with a range of constituency groups – including African American, Arab American, Asian American, Latino, Native American, drug policy reform, privacy rights, and civil liberties advocacy organizations – South Asian, Muslim, and Sikh advocates were able to ensure that post-September 11th forms of discrimination were prohibited in proposed federal legislation to eliminate profiling.

As Congressman Keith Ellison remarked during his testimony before the one of Congressman King's hearings in March 2011:

“Ascribing the evil acts of a few individuals to an entire community is wrong; it is ineffective; and it risks making our country less secure ... Targeting the Muslim American community for the actions of a few is unjust ... Singling out one community focuses our analysis in the wrong direction.”

IMMIGRANT LIVES AND NEIGHBORHOODS IN FLUX

From the first settlers who founded what became America to the communities who enriched this country in the following centuries, the United States has long been a nation of immigrants. One of the most emblematic landmarks of this country has been the Statue of Liberty – a welcoming beacon to our shores for many across the world. After September 11th, however, an era emerged where immigrants of all backgrounds were turned away or ferreted out by the government as never before. In 2002, the government signaled its approach of equating the immigration enforcement with counterterrorism by charging



Makki Masjid in Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York has a significant Pakistani congregation. Due to immigration and counterterrorism operations conducted by federal and local law enforcement agencies, often focused on places of worship, South Asian neighborhoods and places became deserted and community members became fearful of law enforcement.

Credit and courtesy: Hena Ashraf

the newly created agency, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with authority over both arenas of policy. Immediately after September 11th, immigration authorities focused their efforts on South Asian, Muslim, and Arab immigrants: nearly 800 individuals were placed in immigration custody without charge on the basis of “suspicious activity” and more than 600 secret immigration hearings occurred. Over the ensuing decade, all immigrants felt the repercussions as detentions and deportations increased, restrictions on asylum-seekers tightened, background checks delayed naturalization applications, and local police began enforcing immigration laws.

One telling example of how South Asian communities have been affected by post-September 11th immigration policies was the “special registration” program. Instituted in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Justice as part of the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), certain male nationals from 25 predominantly

Muslim- and Arab-majority countries, including Bangladesh and Pakistan, were forced to register with the government. Over 83,000 men across the country appeared before immigration officials to be fingerprinted, photographed, and questioned at local government offices and at ports of entry. Those who did not comply or were found to be undocumented faced fines, detention, and deportation.

Mass confusion and fear rippled throughout South Asian, Arab, and Muslim communities across the country. Many were completely unaware that they had to register because it was inadequately publicized. Some registered because of rumors that this was a way to legalize and were rudely awakened when they were instead locked up. Children lost fathers, wives lost husbands, and sisters lost brothers. Victims of crimes – including domestic violence survivors – became scared to call police out of fear their partners would be deported. In the wake of this program, one undocumented individual was stabbed in Midwood, Brooklyn but was too scared to report the crime. Neighborhoods, such as Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York, that were once bustling with South Asian shops, restaurants, and places of worship were virtually decimated. In the end, over 13,000 men were placed in deportation proceedings and large swaths of the community fled abroad.

One such individual was **Harun Ur Rasheed**. Mr. Rasheed moved to New York from Bangladesh in 1997 to seek medical care for advanced glaucoma. He spent thousands of his hard-earned dollars on treatments which failed to cure his condition and decided to stay in the country. In order to support his family back home, he got a job as a construction worker. Due to the rampant misinformation circulating about special registration, Mr. Rasheed thought by complying he could legalize his status. To his surprise, after he voluntarily showed up at the immigration offices at 26 Federal Plaza, he was placed into deportation proceedings. Ultimately, he chose to leave the country voluntarily rather than endure the ordeal of immigration court.

South Asian community members, such as Mr. Rasheed, have courageously stepped forward to speak out against unjust enforcement. During a press conference, coordinated by the organization Families for Freedom, he said:

I honored your law, Mr. Ashcroft, and [you] gave me deportation. You say this is a human rights country? You should have given me a way to fix my immigration status. I have no other option, but I will not leave quietly.

Organizations like Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) along with the Immigrant Justice Solidarity Project and the Prison Moratorium Project, launched the *Stop the Disappearances* campaign. Through the campaign, community members rallied to urge government agencies to process backlogged immigration applications, particularly of those who had pending petitions disrupted by special registration. Mobilization and advocacy



Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) leader Moni Alam chants at the Queens Drivers' License rally in 2005. Moni is the wife of a special registrant deported later that year. Moni founded DRUM's sister organization in Canada, South Asian Women's Human Rights Organization, after leaving the United States with her husband and children.

Credit and courtesy: Desis Rising Up and Moving



Harun Ur Rasheed speaking at press conference organized by Families for Freedom, hours before he left the United States as a result of the federal government's special registration program. Families for Freedom former co-directors, Aarti Shahani (left) and Subhash Kateel (center right), and Sam Quiah (far right), formerly with the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, look on.

Credit: Families for Freedom; Courtesy: Subhash Kateel



Harun Ur Rasheed, bidding goodbye to supporters and loved ones at JFK Airport before returning to Bangladesh. Mr. Rasheed left the United States as a result of the special registration program.

Credit: Families for Freedom; Courtesy: Subhash Kateel

occurred alongside Latino communities suffering from increased border enforcement and immigration raids since September 11th.

The local and national efforts undertaken by community members and organizations have borne some fruit over the past ten years. In April 2011, after over eight years of mobilizations and advocacy, DHS modified the special registration program so that individuals from the 25 listed countries were no longer subject to its requirements. While the fate of those placed in deportation proceedings still remains in question, the call for fairness and justice within the immigration system was heard. Challenges persist for all immigrants in the post-September 11th era, but the diversity of voices urging for policies that reaffirm our country's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and fairness continue as well.



YouthPower members of Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) marching in New York City's India Day Parade in 2002 while carrying a banner for the *Stop the Disappearances* campaign. The campaign focused on releasing September 11th detainees and ending mass arrests. It included DRUM, the Immigrant Justice Solidarity Project, and the Prison Moratorium Project.

Credit and courtesy: Desis Rising Up and Moving

FAITH UNDER FIRE

Deep in our country's roots is the dearly held notion of religious pluralism. While the road towards fulfilling this promise has been rocky at times in our nation's history, it is still one that many Americans carry with pride. Yet, since September 11th, bigotry aimed specifically at Muslims has skyrocketed. What occurred in the aftermath of the Park51 Muslim Community Center controversy in lower Manhattan during the summer of 2010 served as a microcosm of sentiments around the country over the past ten years. In addition to violence and harassment against Muslims, Islamophobia has manifested itself in various forms, from challenges against mosque construction and expansion projects, to legislative efforts to pass anti-Sharia laws, to political rhetoric targeting Muslims.



Graffiti saying “Not Welcome” on a sign for the future site of the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro in Tennessee.

Courtesy: Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition

Places of worship serve as a spiritual home and a vibrant community space for virtually all faiths. For Muslim religious leaders, as their congregations grow, they naturally seek to build mosques or expand existing ones. Yet, such efforts have become targets for those harboring anti-Muslim sentiment. In 2009, the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro in Tennessee had obtained permission from county officials to construct a new mosque to accommodate its flourishing membership, but community members and politicians alike staged massive protests in vocal opposition. A sign indicating the mosque's future location was emblazoned with “Not Welcome” in graffiti and another was smashed into two.

In some cases, communities found their local governments caving into such sentiments and actively attempting to push mosques out of neighborhoods. This happened to the alFalah Center in Bridgewater, New Jersey, as recounted by Yasser Abdelkader at a community hearing coordinated by SAALT in July 2011:

In the Bridgewater community, we've been looking for a mosque, a masjid, for a very, very long time. Finally ... a banquet hall was offered for sale. It was absolutely magnificent, perfect for the use. And, based on the zoning laws at the time, a house of worship was permitted use for that location. We actually went to the township ... told them this is a property on sale [and] our purpose is to use it for an Islamic Center. [T]hey gave us the green light.

The first hearing to discuss the application, we had expected to be a routine hearing – a rubber stamp and an approval. [But] somewhere between 300 and 400 people showed up – very hostile, very much in opposition. After everyone left the meeting, the mayor suggested, “I think it's time to revisit our zoning ordinance and our master plan regarding houses of worship.”

They [then] changed the zoning laws basically to make our application nonconforming and we have to go to a zoning board and get a variance and exception to the rule. We requested meetings to work this out, but they refused our meetings. They passed the law in six weeks.

Fueling this atmosphere, numerous elected officials and political candidates have made statements that run counter to ideals of religious diversity and inclusion. In fact, SAALT documented at least 23 remarks made by members of Congress, governors, local officials, and candidates objecting to Park51 alone.

After the Muslims conquered Jerusalem, and Cordoba, and Constantinople, they built victory mosques. And now they want to build a mosque by Ground Zero. – Ad from Congresswoman Renee Ellmer's campaign in 2010

I'm all about freedom of religion ... But you cross a line when they start trying to bring Sharia law into the United States ... You could even argue whether being a Muslim is actually a religion or is it a nationality, way of life or cult, whatever you want to call it. – Tennessee Lieutenant Governor Ron Ramsey, when asked about proposed mosque construction in 2010

We not only have a Hindu prayer being offered in the Senate, we have a Muslim member of the House of Representatives now, Keith Ellison of Minnesota. Those are changes and they not what was envisioned by the Founding Fathers. – Congressman Bill Sali of Idaho in 2007

As an affirmation of tolerance and inclusion, individuals practicing various faiths and representing diverse backgrounds have stood up against this rising tide of Islamophobia. After the Al Farooq Mosque in Nashville was vandalized with graffiti saying “Muslims – Go Home”, local community members and organizations like the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition got law enforcement to investigate the incident and the mayor made statements that such hatred would not be tolerated. An interfaith response was set into motion, including joint cleanup of the graffiti and a panel discussion at the center.

Anti-Muslim graffiti on the Al Farooq Mosque in Nashville, Tennessee.

Courtesy: Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition



Interfaith cleanup of hate graffiti at Al Farooq Mosque in Nashville, Tennessee.

Courtesy: Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition



CONCLUSION

This year, on the ten-year anniversary of September 11, Americans of all faiths and backgrounds have the opportunity to chart a path for the future and commit ourselves to once again return to an inclusive vision of the American dream.

From SAALT's standpoint, that vision must include a few key components. The acknowledgment of the backlash after September 11th is a critical starting point. While it took Congress 50 years after the implementation of Executive Order 9066 – which led to the internment of over 100,000 Japanese Americans – to recognize the grave injustices that had been perpetrated in the name of national security, such a declaration was an important part of the healing process for the Japanese American community and the country as a whole.

It is time for our country's leaders and policymakers to move away from misguided policies that lead to the targeting of communities, and embrace ones that affirm our fundamental ideals. These include federal legislation such as the *End Racial Profiling Act* (ERPA), anti-bias ordinances at state and local levels, and the rollback of policies and laws that have harmed community members over the past ten years.

Next, we must invest in the infrastructure of community-based organizations that are on the frontlines. Many South Asian organizations were born on the night of September 11th,

or were shaped by that moment and the ensuing backlash. Other organizations that had previously existed before September 11th altered their work to respond to the pressing needs for information, mental health, legal, and social service referrals. While South Asian organizations have grown and expanded since September 11th, they are still in the fledgling stages of institutional development. Responding to crisis situations while simultaneously engaging in the process of organizational development has been a difficult balancing act for many. Within the **National Coalition of South Asian Organizations (NCSO)**, a national network of 42 organizations in 12 regions around the country, which SAALT coordinates, many organizational members are facing the impact of today's economic crisis, the evolving impact of the "War on Terror" on South Asian communities, changing priorities of philanthropic and government funders, and staff turnover and burnout. Sustaining community-based organizations and leadership is a vital component in the struggle for racial justice today.

Lastly, we hope that this publication and the *America For All of Us* campaign will generate opportunities for coalition building and collaborations across racial, ethnic, and faith boundaries. As many of the examples of such coalition building within this publication illustrate, we must each play a role to create neighborhoods, workplaces and schools where everyone feels safe and welcome.



Strands of a thousand paper cranes symbolizing peace at the National Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism in Washington DC, where the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans held a vigil on September 11, 2011 marking the ten-year anniversary of the attacks.

Credit: Leslie Toy; Courtesy: Japanese American Citizens League



Community members lighting candles in memory of the victims of September 11th at the National Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism in Washington DC on September 11, 2011.

Credit: Leslie Toy; Courtesy: Japanese American Citizens League

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Cover photo descriptions and credits (clockwise from top left): Harun Ur Rasheed bidding farewell to friends and supporters before leaving the country as a result of special registration (Credit: Families for Freedom; Courtesy: Subhash Kateel); Condolence sign for Balbir Singh Sodhi, killed as a result of a post-September 11th hate crime, at his gas station in Arizona (Credit: Hari Nam Singh Khalsa; Courtesy: Gururoop Kaur Khalsa); Students participating in a rally in New York City urging the city's Department of Education to implement existing anti-bullying policies (Credit and courtesy: The Sikh Coalition); Welcome message from Christ Presbyterian Church to alFalah Center congregants in New Jersey (Credit and courtesy: alFalah Center); Pin worn by Talat Hamdani of her son, Salman Hamdani, who died at Ground Zero on September 11th after rushing in to save fellow Americans (Credit: Les Talusan; Courtesy: SAALT).



Strengthening South Asian
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